

I had planned to share what my wife and I went through during the past few weeks, and I will do that. It does relate to the Newtown tragedy. It's the question of why. Or as some have put it, where was God? The loss of the lives of children seems to stir us more deeply than other situations. First responders have a difficult time dealing with the death of children, more so than adults. We see their innocence and potential and grieve at it being so heinously cut short. But we hear next to nothing about the hundreds just as innocent and with just as great a potential destroyed the same day even before their birth.

Where is the loving God that Christians proclaim in these tragedies? He is right in the midst of them, grieving with us. But why didn't He stop the perpetrator? God has given us the awful and glorious liberty of freedom. We do wonderful things with that freedom. And we do the ugliest things. Rarely does God intervene and force our hand.

In fact, this brutality and deplorable hardness toward others is just what the Bible declares our condition to be. The first crime outside the Eden was fratricide, Cain murdered his brother Abel. The Fall affects us from birth. The most empirically verifiable truth about man is this condition of a fallen nature. We are selfish. The kind of evil witnessed at Newtown and the same week in China is shows that we are not only evil but capable of being spurred on by an even greater evil.

When children are the targets of murderers, there is more than meets the eye. The cosmic battle of good and evil, of God and Satan is evident. You can't explain it any other way. We have banned the Bible, prayer, and morality from our schools. Our children are taught that there are no absolutes. More emphasis is placed on accepting sinful behavior as normal than on faith in our Creator. And we wonder why these types of crimes have been on the increase. Does anyone dare to say that we are reaping what we have sown?

It has been interesting to hear the world's solutions. Get rid of guns. Connecticut has the strictest gun laws in the nation. The China attack was with a knife. Shall we get rid of knives as well? Greater school security! This school had a security system in place. Learn to spot the psychotic behavior before it ends in these crimes. And do what? Lock them up because they are loners? The one answer that will make a difference is being ignored and would be ridiculed if it was raised. Get back to the Bible. That won't stop evil, but the nation was quite different when the Bible was the accepted standard of our culture. No matter what you do, man still has the freedom to sin, to rebel against God, and there will always be innocent people hurt by those who are selfishly evil.

Where is God when these tragedies strike? You'll notice that instead of running from God, people run to prayer. The very night of the tragedy a prayer vigil was held packing out the local church. God is our refuge when evil seems to reign. Our hope is that somehow, He can work through the ugliness of man's actions and bring some good, some hope. That is the only way we can endure these things.

The atheist's response is to question a loving God's existence. But they have no answer to the existence of evil. Would they have God limit our freedoms? Then they would complain that God does not allow us to be free. In times of tragedy it is the church that steps in and offers comfort and hope.

I went through my own crisis in the past weeks. Mariko was diagnosed as having a severely damaged heart valve. We scheduled the surgery as it was fairly urgent. Many of you are doing the read through the Bible schedule. A few days before the surgery, in that reading schedule, I read that Ezekiel heard the Lord say that He was going to take away the delight of his eyes. Ezekiel's wife died that evening. (Ezekiel 24:16) There was a message for the people of Israel in how Ezekiel was told to respond to her death. That got my attention. Nevertheless, Mariko and I both had perfect peace about the operation.

The elders and others of you prayed for Mariko. **We know God can heal. We also know for His own purposes He doesn't always choose to heal.** (Psalm 119:71) Servants of God in the New Testament had severe illnesses including the Apostle Paul, the very one God used to heal others. (2Corinthians 12:7-9; Philippians 2:27) In many cases, healing is a sign for unbelievers to know the message of the Gospel is true. But for God's children, illness can be discipline (Hebrews 12:6), or a growing experience causing us to rely more fully on the Lord. That was the case with Paul. God wanted to keep him humble and know that the grace of God could help him deal with anything.

We felt that discovering this situation with Mariko's heart was a blessing from God. If she had gone on another six months or so, she probably would have died from heart failure. Once she recovers, she is supposed to feel 20 years younger. That's great!

Our kids were there for the surgery and Pastor Ken from Crestview came to sit it out with us. Perhaps we had a bit of a preview of what was coming when the man that came to put in an IV popped the first vein he tried to hit.

After the surgery, we went to see Mariko in CVICU. They had prepared us ahead of time for what she would look like with all the tubes and wires and IVs. I'll skip all the little bumps in the road on the way to the next big issues, as everything went pretty much according to schedule.

One of the last things to do is to take out the pacer wires. That is usually uneventful. I was packing up to finally go home. Then Mariko started to feel bad, really bad! Her blood pressure was dropping.

I had been reading Tozer on how we plead to God for mercy as if He was not merciful by nature. Instead, we should praise Him for His continued mercy that is a part of His nature. Well, Mariko was fading fast. The docs were trying to figure out what was wrong. She was whispering that she loved me and asking for the Lord for mercy. I called our kids to come.

Commented [notes1]: Ezekiel 24:16 (ESV)

¹⁶ "Son of man, behold, I am about to take the delight of your eyes away from you at a stroke; yet you shall not mourn or weep, nor shall your tears run down.

Commented [notes2]: Psalm 119:71 (ESV)

⁷¹ It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.

Commented [notes3]: 2 Corinthians 12:7-9 (ESV)

⁷ So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.

⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Commented [notes4]: Philippians 2:27 (ESV)

²⁷ Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow.

Commented [notes5]: Hebrews 12:6 (ESV)

⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

I thought the Ezekiel warning was coming to pass. This was much worse than recovery from open heart surgery.

They took her to do a CT scan on her abdomen as that is where the pain seemed to be. The wire had somehow clipped and abdominal artery. She was bleeding to death internally. I was sobbing. It was either another surgery or the bleeding would stop from natural clotting. Her stomach was distended from all the blood. That is when I got to the point of a **believer's last resort, trust**.

I know God loves her. I know He loves me. He proved it on the cross. (1John 4:9-10) Why should He protect us from the effects of this fallen world? We know we have to graduate from this life sometime. I often have wondered if God wasn't sparing people that die from things they may have had to face had they survived their accident or illness. He didn't have to heal her because of her faithful and sacrificial life. He knows best. He didn't have to do what I want. He will do what will be best in the long run and what will bring Him glory. Just trust! It's hard, but then what else can you do? I knew I must no longer plead for my will, but to trust God that He would do what was right.

Whatever He does, He will be with me through it. It may not be easy, but God will see us all through. (Psalm 42:11) How could I be so selfish to keep Mariko from enjoying the presence of Jesus?

The other thing the Lord had put into my life just before this surgery is the devotional series *Waiting on God* by Andrew Murray. The life of the believer is to be one of waiting on God. We should not be running ahead with good ideas, but waiting on Him, like a servant waits upon his master. We should wait for His direction and instructions. While we wait, we can go about doing what we know His will is, but with a heart that is listening for the next instruction. Then there are times of being still in God's presence. We'll talk about this more in the New Year. **The believer is blessed when they hear the Lord's instruction and serve Him.** (Psalm 37:34)

That was what I had to do now. As they strung up unit after unit of blood to go into Mariko's veins, it was time to just wait on God and continue to trust. If He wanted me to pray differently or specifically, He could prompt me. So we waited to see what God would do or instruct.

The bleeding stopped on its own, or maybe we should say God stopped it. But now we had a new problem. She looked like she was 5 months pregnant because of all the blood in her abdomen. She kept telling the nurse she was going to pop. Well, it would be five more days of ups and downs. MSG in the food set her back a day. Arrhythmia started on the eighth night, and each day we thought we might go home, some new problem set us back another day. It was test after test of our willingness to trust God.

Commented [notes6]: 1 John 4:9-10 (ESV)

⁹In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.

¹⁰In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Commented [notes7]: Psalm 42:11 (ESV)

¹¹Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.

Commented [notes8]: Psalm 37:34 (ESV)

³⁴Wait for the LORD and keep his way, and he will exalt you to inherit the land; you will look on when the wicked are cut off.

This was when we felt like God was silent. It was a very discouraging time. She had survived, but problems kept coming up. It was so discouraging to keep thinking each day we were finally going home and then have to hear "not yet". Why? Hadn't she been through enough? But then we went back to trust. We had to trust that God would have us go home in the right time. We had to consider, what if these things happened at home? Better to go through them with help on hand.

I think the nurses began to feel sorry for us as they moved us to a private room so Mariko could rest. We called it the Penthouse Suite. That provided a lot more rest as there were no groans or nurse visits to the adjacent patient. God knows when you are at your limit.

In the midst of it all, we began to count our blessings. That always helps to put things in perspective. If they had followed through on an additional blood thinner they were thinking of, she might have bled to death or at least had a second surgery.

Now we were really in the homestretch, but arrhythmia had to stop for 24 hours before we could go. Then Karen Richards called. The moment Mariko heard her voice her heart went into rhythm. Now Karen immediately said it was the Lord and not her. But once again, we had just been reading *In His Likeness* by Paul Brand. He was writing about how cells call out for help from other local cells to heal a wound even without the signal going to the head. Leprosy patients that he observed would experience healing to injuries even when there were no nerves that told the head of the injury.

Lately we have had a string of illness in the church, and the body reaches out and helps and encourages just like the local cells come running to the aid of a wound or infection. Even as I was working on this one of the deaconesses came in on her way to visit someone that wasn't having a good day. As the Apostle wrote, *²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.* 1 Corinthians 12:26 (ESV)

So what did we learn, or perhaps it is better to say what are we learning? I'm sure the lessons from the trial will continue to be revealed. This is the main reason I'm sharing our experience with you, so you can learn from them too.

First, things don't always go like we think the Lord should make them go. Your will and God's don't always coincide. It doesn't matter how godly you are. If Paul prayed to be healed three times and didn't receive healing, it wasn't because he was being disciplined. God had other purposes for his affliction. If Jesus asked three times if there was some other way, he didn't desire to go through what the Father had planned either. (Matthew 26:44) Yet, in both cases they came to a place of trust and surrender knowing that it served a greater purpose.

Since we walk by faith and not by sight (2Corinthians 5:7), we often don't have to know what that purpose is. We know that all things work together for good to those who love

Commented [notes9]: Matthew 26:44 (ESV)

⁴¹ So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again.

Commented [notes10]: 2 Corinthians 5:7 (ESV)

⁷ for we walk by faith, not by sight.

God and are called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28) We know that He is a merciful and loving God. (Psalm 51:1) It is His very nature. It's not something He works up or suddenly decides to extend, but rather it is who He is.

Because we are convinced of these things by Scripture and the cross of Jesus, then we can trust Him to do what is best in times of difficulty, even when we don't understand. And if the worse happens, if we are called to go through what Ezekiel did, as some of you have, that does not change any of these truths of which we are convinced. The only thing we can do is trust and lean on the Lord to see us through. It is when we lose the trust in God and lean to our own understanding that we forsake faith.

How can we walk by sight alone when the reasons for so much of what we experience are hidden from us? James McDonald expressed how limited our understanding is regarding the works of God. He wrote:

"It is a glorious phrase – 'He led captivity captive.' The very triumphs of his foes, it means, he used for their defeat. He compelled their dark achievements to subserve his ends not theirs. They nailed him to a tree, not knowing that by that very act they were bringing the world to his feet. They gave him a cross, not guessing that he would make it a throne. They flung him outside the city gates to die, not knowing that in that very moment they were lifting up the gates of the universe, to let the king come in. They thought to root out his doctrines, not understanding that they were implanting imperishably in the hearts of men the very name they intended to destroy. They thought they had God with his back to the wall, pinned helpless and defeated; they did not know it was God himself who had tracked them down. He did not conquer *in spite* of the dark mystery of evil. He conquered *through it*.¹⁴

If you were standing on Golgatha that day, the sanest thing you could have done was to trust that Almighty God knew what He was doing even if it tore your heart to pieces. Could it be that the greater the injustice and apparent evil toward the godly, the greater the victory that God works, not in spite of it, but as McDonald wrote, *through it*? Should that not teach us that the most reasonable thing to do is to trust God to be who He declares Himself to be in His word? And does that not declare to us the greatness of God, that evil can do its worst and yet God be glorified through the final outcome? Does this not increase our faith in the greatness of God and encourage absolute trust in Him, regardless of our experience?

The people of faith in Hebrews chapter 11 died not receiving the promises they trusted. (Hebrews 11:39) They walked by faith and in many cases died a horrible death. (Hebrews 11:37) They did not say that God had failed them, but rather trusted Him to work through the evil to bring about a greater good.

A secondary lesson is that God is in the details. We've seen it so many times before. Connie testified to it in every expert he met along his journey. God put the right people in

Commented [notes11]: Romans 8:28 (ESV)

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Commented [notes12]: Psalm 51:1 (ESV)

¹ Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Commented [notes13]: James Stewart, *The Strong Name*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1972), 55 – italics by Ravi Zacharias

Commented [notes14]: Hebrews 11:39 (ESV)

³⁹ And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised,

Commented [notes15]: Hebrews 11:37 (ESV)

³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated-

his path to bring him through. We can say the same. Through all the difficulties, God was working and orchestrating things for our good.

Finally, **God works through the body of believers, like the individual cells in our body.** A note of encouragement, a letter, a gift, meals, all show that Christ is there and that He cares. After all, it is the body of Christ, the church that did all these encouraging and helpful things. What do people do without the Lord to look to and the body of Christ that encourages and comes along side us in these times?

At any point along the way either of us could have focused on what appeared to be going wrong instead of the nature and character of God. We were tempted to many times, but what good would that have done us? In fact, it would have done great harm. But when by faith we trust God and surrender to His plan, we stay in that place of perfect peace. (Psalm 119:165) Are you trusting Him with everything, with your life, your spouse, your finances, your all? Jesus is the only place to find perfect peace in the chaos of this fallen world.

Commented [notes16]: Psalm 119:165 (ESV)

¹⁶⁵ Great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble.

Questions

- 1 Have you experienced a similar time of testing?
- 2 How did you respond?
- 3 Do we need to plead with God to get Him to be merciful?
- 4 What does it mean to wait on God?
- 5 Do cells have to hear from the head to help a need? What's the analogy?
- 6 Can the will of the godly be at odds with God's will?
- 7 Review the James McDonald quote.
- 8 What is the most reasonable thing to do in times of trial?
- 9 What does that do for us?
- 10 What are the other two lessons?