

As For Me And My House: I Will Not Fear

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Tears streamed down the woman's face as she embraced me. "I'm so sorry about your daughter" were the only words I could muster. I was standing in a crowded parking lot on a very hot June morning. I was working as a consultant for homicide detectives who were investigating the rape and murder of a young girl and the violent rape of another. We had convened in that place for a coordinated neighborhood canvass in an attempt to stir up new evidence as to who committed the two crimes. This woman's daughter had been brutally murdered in broad daylight, just a few hundred yards from her high school. Like most teens, at the time of her death this young girl's mind was undoubtedly occupied with homework, boys, and the routine business of the day. She believed she would live forever and her mother, like most of us parents, assumed she would see her daughter grow up, marry, and have her own children. None of these things matched reality.

I've witnessed many such cases in my work both as a counselor and as a homicide profiler/investigator. Over three decades I've seen enough tears to fill the ocean and felt enough emotional weight to crush a diamond. It never gets easier. My heart is not jaded and I still share the pain of these hurting souls just like I did when I started my career so very long ago.

In so many of these cases, I heard similar words. "Why me?" "Why did God allow this?" "What is the world coming to?" I often have no answers and my silence sometimes convicts me.

When my son was quite young and he saw me on the news at a homicide scene, with tentativeness in his voice he asked me, "Will the bad man get you?" Even though I knew the answer was probably "no," I could make him no promises. Over the years as I raised my children I often wondered how I could teach them to have faith in God's provision when I knew that there was no promise that tragedies couldn't befall them.

WE CAN'T ESCAPE TRAGEDY

Loss isn't limited to sudden death, family tragedy, or personal pain. Sometimes tragedy is global, like war, natural disaster, and acts of terrorism. But regardless of the scope, all of these events shake the foundation of our worlds. We cope with the potential for tragedy by believing it can't happen to us. Other people die in car accidents. Other families lose their loved ones to cancer and strangers are killed by earthquakes or car bombs. Our voluntary obliviousness allows us to cope, but when we face disaster head-on this coping skill ceases to work for us.

In H.G. Wells's novel *The Time Machine*, a character called the Time Traveler finds himself in a seeming paradise thousands of years into the future. The Eloi, the people who inhabit the lush, fertile community seem to have no problems or stress. Their days are filled with food, recreation, and rest, but it isn't long before the Time Traveler discovers that a breed of creatures that the Eloi call Morlocks live underground and come out at night to feast on the Eloi. Like cows in a pasture, the Eloi bumble through their days thinking they live in paradise when in actuality they are being systematically farmed by the Morlocks. The Eloi are aware of the Morlocks, but they rarely speak of them. The loss of a member of their group is met with a sort of indifference - as if to say, "At least it wasn't me." They prefer to pretend the Morlocks don't exist rather than to admit the fate that ultimately awaits them all.

In a way, we do the same thing. "Life is a terminal affair" - I've heard more than once. Yet like the Eloi, we live our daily lives pretending that pain and suffering happens to other people in other places. That works well until it comes knocking upon our door and we can no longer ignore it. That is when we, like the Eloi, seem surprised that tragedy happens. In a way it is astonishing that we can be so naïve as to ask, "How could this happen?" Shouldn't we expect it?

But the amazing truth of our faith is that tragedy isn't the end of the story. In Wells's novel, the Time Traveler escapes the land of the Eloi by the skin of his teeth, leaving the reader relieved that the fate that awaited the Eloi wouldn't befall him. But even though Wells's novel ends before the eventual death of the Time Traveler, the fact is, he would eventually die. Death catches us all. I've seen many a scary movie where a character tries to escape a specter only to see the ghost in front of him no matter which way he turns. How tragic it would be if that was our final moment. But for the Christian, we know that death is not the end. Something better awaits us beyond this world.

DID GOD MEAN WHAT HE SAID?

A cursory reading of scripture makes it seem that we just need to sit back and relax and everything will be fine. In Psalms 55:22 we are told to "cast all of our cares on the Lord because he will sustain" us. In Matthew 6:25ff, we are told that the birds of the air don't sow or reap, but God takes care of them. In Luke 12:24ff we read a similar thing and also how the lilies of the fields are cared for by God even though they don't do anything. In Matthew 11:28 Jesus tells us to let him carry our burdens.

But I'm not convinced this means that our faith will keep tragedy at bay. In Philippians 4:6 we are told to present our requests to God, but many times I have done so and God seemingly didn't hear me.

Some years ago I was teaching a college counseling course in Chile. One of my students was a Christian man who had taken several of my courses over the years and he knew of my Christian faith. "I have a question," he said to me. "I know God will provide for me, but sometimes I worry. I have been out of a job for almost a year. But God will find me a job, won't he?"

What could I say? Could I promise him a job? Could I speak for God? Platitudes might help perpetuate the myth that "all will be fine," but they also ignore the truth that things don't always work out the way we want.

"Let me be honest with you," I told him. "I know our scriptures teach us that God sees the sparrow and the flowers of the field, but the truth is that people die of starvation every day. People lose their jobs, and tragedy sometimes finds us. But this doesn't mean that God doesn't care for us."

I tried, hopefully not in vain, to impress on him that the comfort of God's care goes well beyond this world. At Gethsemane, God's own son prayed for his burden to be taken from him, but God said no. Tradition teaches that well over half of the apostles met tragic, unnatural deaths. Why would things be any different for us? The lesson is that our home is elsewhere and what happens in this hour is irrelevant in the context of eternity. It just seems relevant when we are standing in the midst of sadness.

WHAT IS OUR PROMISE?

As a young boy, I was walking one morning with my grandmother through the forest around her home picking blackberries for breakfast. The sun was warm on my shoulders and the weeds were dewy on my bare feet. Ever the leader, I was fifteen feet in front of my grandmother and my cousin, scampering toward the next bramble I could see, when my grandmother yelled at me to stop. Just in front of me was a huge copperhead that lay hiding among the weeds. My grandmother told me not to move and she sent my cousin to fetch a shotgun. I stood stock still for nearly ten minutes, trusting my grandmother.

I couldn't see the snake, but I wasn't the least bit afraid. I assumed she knew what to do. After the snake was shot and killed, she led me over to where its headless body lay. It was so cleverly disguised that we were nearly on top of it before I could see the five foot long serpent.

I could easily have lost my life that day, but I didn't. I didn't have to know the snake was there or even how to look for a snake. Even though I eventually learned this skill, my grandmother did that for me when I was a child. I trusted her and she took care of me.

What a great analogy. We don't have to be afraid, even when the world seems to be collapsing around us. Proverbs 3:5-6 teaches us not to lean on our own understanding. Thank goodness. If I had to do that, even in this temporal world, I very likely would have died of a snake bite on a summer morning when I was eight years old. How much more so can we find comfort in this truth when we face things of an eternal nature? Terrorists with car bombs, IED's, or airplanes can't change the fact that in the end, God walks with us. Over our shoulders, when we think we are leading, he whispers to us like my grandmother - I'll take care of you. Our walk in the woods is part of a bigger plan. I don't have to know the plan because I know The Way.

BE NOT AFRAID

When my children were growing up, I regularly felt the urge to make sure they didn't face any pain or difficulties, but I knew in my heart that I would be cheating them if I did that. They didn't need a life that was pain-free. They needed me to teach them the skills they would require when inevitable pain arose before them. Teaching those skills was a much better gift to them.

Teaching our children to manage fear begins with managing it ourselves. Children watch us and how we handle fear and anxiety. We have to live our faith as we face our troubles. Our conversations and our behavior should portray a solid belief that nothing in this world can threaten us. Matthew 18:28 says, "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." (NAS) As Jesus knelt before the Father on the night of his betrayal, he faced exhaustion, humiliation, and brutal pain. But his example shows us as parents how to manage our fear. Not our will, but thine, our Father.

FEAR DOESN'T HAVE TO CONTROL YOU

Children have many fears. Some children have imaginary fears - monsters, the boogey man, and shadows. Some fear adult-like, realistic things - financial crisis, nuclear war, and plague. Either way, through television, movies, music, and other media, there is no shortage of fodder for the anxiety mill. It is especially evident after a sensational disaster. Tsunamis, tornados, and earthquakes provide media outlets with all the photographs and videos they need to keep us on the edge of our seats. Schools like Columbine and Sandy Hook, once obscure little schools in far away little towns, are now synonymous in our national vocabulary for tragedy. Thanks to a very small number of troubled boys, there are very few children who are unaware of the risk of a school shooting. After a school shooting, for days or sometimes weeks the story leads the news. While it is statistically unlikely that our children will experience a school shooting, the media give the impression that the next perpetrator is just down the hall from your own child's locker or cubby. In sociological terms, this is called the "scary world" phenomenon. But even though we are unlikely to be victims of these events, we perceive them to be much more likely than they really are.

Our faith teaches us that even though the world can be scary, our fear does not have to command us. Fear can debilitate us. One boy who faced a school shooter felt the barrel of the gun against his head. Fortunately the gun misfired and he survived an attack that claimed the lives of several of his classmates. Later he talked about the incident and said he was so afraid he just "closed his eyes and waited for the gunshot." His fear kept him from taking the initiative to save his own life.

I studied traumatized individuals for nearly a decade, looking for the things that helped people cope with serious events ranging from sexual assault and ritualistic child abuse to genocide. One of my discoveries was the amazing resilience of the human spirit in both children and adults when there was a will to face one's fear.

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT FEAR

In recent years I've been asked numerous times to publish suggestions for parents who need to talk to their children about events like Sandy Hook. Here is the short list that shows up in most of those articles.

First, don't avoid talking about hard subjects if children bring them up. Be willing to candidly and calmly answer their questions. One common reaction that parents often have is that they suppose if they don't bring it up, their children will forget about it. They won't forget. And don't suppose they don't know about what goes on around the world. If you don't talk to them, they will be left to either get their information and interpretations from their grade school buddies or be stuck working it out on their own.

Second, respond to their questions in short, simple sentences. Let their subsequent questions determine how much detail you give them. Sometimes all they may need is a short simple answer, which shows them you are there if they have other questions later.

Third, you don't have to have all the answers. It is OK to say, "I don't know."

Finally, reassure them. Communicate to them that you are there and will take care of them. Sometimes, having a confident, caring adult who appears to be in control, like my grandmother in the woods, is all that a child needs. It never occurred to me that my grandmother could have been afraid of that snake as well.

CONCLUSION

The grieving woman whose daughter was murdered continues to grieve. Her perpetrator is still at large and may never be caught. She faces old age alone with unrealized dreams for her daughter. That is a bitter truth. But I don't despair. Jeremiah 29:11 teaches us that God has plans for us. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 shows us that the tragedies we face today are "momentary afflictions." What a wonderful thought.

In the classic tale *The Wizard of Oz*, the "Great and Mighty Oz" maintained his control over Dorothy and her companions through fear. But In spite of all the flames, smoke, and scary façade, he was nothing more than a meek and harmless little man behind a curtain. The scary façade of terrorism, homicide, natural disaster, or illness is in many ways nothing more than a meek and harmless little man behind a curtain. It holds no power over us unless we allow it. As for me and my house, we will choose to trust in him who has engraved each of us on the palm of his hand (Isaiah 49:16) rather than fear the little old man behind the curtain.