

The Newtown Massacre and the Pain of God

In the aftermath of the Newtown massacre, as family members and friends of the slain and wounded suffer unspeakable agony, people around the world are asking, "Where was God?" But very few are asking, "Is God hurting too?"

According to Basilea Schlink (1904-2001), a German Christian leader who stood up to the Nazis, "Anyone who loves as much as God does, cannot help suffering. And anyone who really loves God will sense that He is suffering." She found support for this view in the writings of the Japanese Lutheran theologian Kazoh Kitamori in his book "Theology of the Pain of God."

God suffering? God in pain? How can this be?

If he is the Almighty Creator and Ruler, and if he has infinite knowledge of the future, why would he even create a world in which there would be so much suffering and pain on a daily basis? And if the scripture is true that not even a sparrow falls to the ground without the knowledge (or care) of the Heavenly Father (Matthew 10:29), how could he allow 20 innocent children—not to mention the adults—to be cut down in cold blood?

Questions like these are raised in the Bible itself, including cynical observations about the state of the world (see Ecc. 7:15) and even harsh accusations against God uttered in the midst of extreme suffering (see Job 9:22-23). As one Old Testament scholar put it, if you'd like to voice your complaint to God, the Bible provides you with forms with the words already filled in for you.

Of course, as I noted in my Ohio State University debate with Prof. Bart Ehrman, a noted New Testament scholar and agnostic, if you remove God from the picture, there's really no *problem*

of suffering and evil. A spider kills a fly; a lion kills a zebra; a mugger kills his victim ... this is what the random products of unguided evolution do! What's wrong with the survival of the fittest? Why doesn't might make right?

But if you believe that there is a loving Creator, then you recognize that suffering and evil really do present a problem.

How then do we respond to a mind-numbing tragedy like the Newtown massacre, and how does the concept of God's pain help us process this tragedy?

First, we affirm that it was right for God to create the world, without which we would not exist, and we affirm that it was right for him to give us free will. But these are gifts with consequences, and the things we cherish most—our existence and our ability to make choices for our lives—are the very things for which we fault God at times like this.

C. S. Lewis sagely observed, "Try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the order of nature and the existence of free-wills involve, and you find that you have excluded life itself ... Free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata—of creatures that work like machines—would hardly be worth creating."

Put another way, love cannot be coerced; it must be freely chosen.

Second, we recognize that God created a world that would also cost him dearly, to the point that he had to send his Son to suffer and die that we might live. That was a consequence of his choice to give us freedom of choice.

In the words of Pastor Timothy Keller, "If we again ask the question: 'Why does God allow evil and suffering to continue?' and we look at the cross of Jesus, we still do not know what the answer is. However, we know what the answer isn't. It

can't be that he doesn't love us. It can't be that he is indifferent or detached from our condition. God takes our misery and suffering so seriously that he was willing to take it on himself."

That's why Anglican leader John Stott stated, "I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross."

Third, we understand that God is not a distant bystander but is himself in agony because of his creation's agony.

The Scriptures teach that he is hurt by tragedy and suffering, and Jesus was even angered by it. In the words of Isaiah, "In all Israel's affliction, he was afflicted" (Isaiah 63:9). He may not explain to us all the reasons for our suffering or tell us why he apparently doesn't intervene more. But this much is sure: He cares deeply and he is suffering with us.

You don't like the way this world is? God doesn't either. In fact, he hates certain things that take place, but he is at work for good in the midst of it and, in the end, he will bring something beautiful out of it.

As expressed by quadriplegic Joni Erickson Tada, "God permits what he hates to achieve what he loves."

Fourth, we realize that only God can bring good out of evil and light out of darkness. He who hurts with us will help us, and the one who understands the depth of human evil is the one who can bring healing and hope.

According to Kitamori, "Those who have beheld the pain of God cease to be loquacious, and open their mouths only by the passion to bear witness to it."

And so, in the end, we stop talking and we stop writing, and we pray for God to bring beauty out of ashes and life out of death, in this world and in the world to come. Right now, the agony is great.

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