

Anniversary of Colorado Theater Shooting: Praying for Mercy for Victims and Shooter

I texted a friend, "Want to go see *Dark Knight Rises*?" It was opening night, and I was in a mood to celebrate because earlier that day I put the finishing touches on the manuscript for my new book, *The Mercy Prayer*, and it was ready to send to my editor at Thomas Nelson. Though the Century 16 theater was an option, thankfully we chose a different theater that fateful evening.

On the way home that night, shortly after 3 a.m., I received a call.

"Are you aware of what is happening? Turn on the radio." The call was from a man whose son was at Century 16 and escaped unharmed.

Immediately, I drove to the theater and parked across the street. Amid the yellow tape, flashing lights of emergency vehicles and the hustle of news trucks with reporters setting up, one word came to mind: *Again*.

Again in Colorado. First, Columbine. Then Platte Canyon High School. Then YWAM and New Life Church. Then New Destiny Church. Now it was happening again less than two miles from the church I serve. Again in the city in which I was raised. Again in the city I love.

Kneeling in the grass, with tears flooding my eyes, I prayed the only prayer that made sense: *Lord, have mercy*.

I moved from hospital to hospital, praying for and comforting anyone I could. Then, as the sun rose over Aurora, I went home to process with my wife and be with our six children as they

awoke to the news: 82 wounded. 12 dead.

Later that morning, I gathered with my pastoral staff to rethink our weekend worship services and how we would shepherd our congregation through this tragedy, grief and loss. We discovered that some of our own were in the theater. There was a flood of media calls.

Back home later that day, sitting at my desk, I clicked *send* on an email. Attached was my finished manuscript about the most-prayed prayer in the Bible: *Lord, have mercy*. The one prayer Jesus always answers.

Do I really believe that? Will God be merciful to those injured and the families that lost loved ones? What about James Holmes, the perpetrator—is God’s mercy for him too?

We worshipped as a church that weekend, and in each of our services we prayed for victims and first responders and specifically for the family of Gordon Cowden, the oldest victim that night—the father of four who took two of his daughters to the movies that night. Gordon was a good man and a loving father. A true Texas gentleman. Later, at his funeral, one of his daughters would tell us that as the shooting began, he immediately ushered them toward safety and that as they ran out of the theater, they did so with the sound of his voice calling to them, “I love you! I love you both!”

In one of our services, there was a reporter present with a video camera. He captured us also praying for the perpetrator and his family. Yahoo News and *Good Morning America* would later post the video with a story titled, “Colorado Church Prays for Suspected Gunman Who Killed One of Their Own.” (See video below.)

I believed it then, and I believe it now: Everybody needs mercy! We all sin. We all suffer. We all suffer because of sin. We all sin to alleviate our suffering.

A.W. Tozer was right: "Were there no guilt in the world, no pain and no tears, God would yet be infinitely merciful; but His mercy might well remain hidden in His heart, unknown to the created universe. No voice would be raised to celebrate the mercy of which none felt the need. It is human misery and sin that call forth the divine mercy."

God's compassion is real and available to us during difficult times. His lovingkindness bandages our hearts and restores.

That Sunday evening, thousands gathered for a community memorial service. We sang, prayed and released heart-shaped balloons representing the victims. In the crowd, I saw a man wearing a red shirt that said, "God is love." I took his picture.

A year has passed. The theater is open again. James Holmes has yet to go to trial. Families remember and mourn. Victims continue to rehabilitate their bodies and lives.

And we still pray, *Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy on us.*

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