

When We Don't Have the Words to Pray

When tragedy strikes like it did last week in Connecticut, it's OK if you are speechless

Some members of my church gathered near the altar last Sunday to pray for those affected by the recent school massacre in Connecticut. Our pastor had a list of the victims, and he asked that we mention each of the families by name.

It wasn't easy to read that list. It included Daniel Barden, age 7; Charlotte Bacon, 6; Olivia Engel, 6; Chase Kowalski, 7; and Jack Pinto, 6. A total of 20 children died in the shootings, plus six adults, including Victoria Soto, the brave first-grade teacher who herded her students into a closet when the gunman approached her classroom. She was 27, the same age as my oldest daughter.

Some people in my church found it too difficult to pray out loud. That's understandable. But how exactly do we pray when tragedy strikes?

How do we frame a prayer for the families of little boys and girls who were pumped with bullets in their suburban school? How do we go back to a normal routine when it seems all that is innocent in our nation has been shattered?

Prayer formulas just don't work in times like these. I believe it's OK to feel helpless in heavy moments. God has already made supernatural provision for us.

Romans 8:26-27 says: "In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints

according to the will of God. (NASB)”

This is one of the greatest miracles of our new life in Christ. The Holy Spirit prays continually inside of us, and He always has the perfect prayer—especially when we feel helpless to articulate the problem or to ask for a solution. The Spirit is praying the perfect will of God. And He does it 24/7. This is amazing!

Often we reduce God to formulas. We charismatics excel in telling everyone exactly how to pray in every situation, how to bind demons, how to break curses, how to command money into our bank accounts and how to discern the enemy’s strategy behind every problem so it will go away automatically. But life does not always follow the points in *Six Steps to a Victorious Life*. (Read the book of Job for proof of that!) We are not robots, and we can’t just recite programmed “faith confessions” when hard times hit.

It’s OK to feel the pain. It’s OK to weep or groan or sit in silence before God. And sometimes one of the most therapeutic things we can do is speak in an unintelligible prayer language—which we don’t understand. The Bible says the Spirit—who is called “the Comforter” (John 14:16)—prays inside of us even when our emotions are raw and our thoughts are muddled. And He can rekindle hope when we are at our lowest point.

The tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School happened just 11 days before Christmas. As soon as I heard about the shootings I was reminded of the darkest chapter of the Christmas story, a gruesome scene that is never depicted on holiday greeting cards. After Jesus’ birth, King Herod sent his henchmen to Bethlehem and massacred every Jewish boy age 2 and under because he feared the coming Messiah (see Matt. 2:16-18).

The first Christmas was not a festive occasion. Yes, there were glorious angels, a bright star and gifts of frankincense

and myrrh. But the story also included an enraged tyrant who massacred innocent babies. Bethlehem's angelic chorus was mixed with the uncontrollable sobbing of mothers and fathers whose children had been murdered.

Evil and good exist side by side in this fallen world. As long as we are on this side of eternity, we will be engaged in a spiritual war. Until Christ returns there will be tragedies like what happened in Connecticut. But our greatest hope is that the baby who was born in Bethlehem's manger will soon crush Satan under our feet and wipe every tear from our eyes.

As you mourn over this loss, or struggle with your own pain and disappointment, give God your feeblest groan and let Him make it a perfect prayer.

J. Lee Grady *is the former editor of Charisma and the director of The Mordecai Project (). You can follow him on Twitter at leegrady. His latest book is Fearless Daughters of the Bible.*