

Facing the darkness

A sermon on worship amid tragedy

Eugene Harder

We all know people who face incredible physical, emotional, and spiritual pain. Our hearts cry out to God, “Why, Lord? What have these good people done to deserve such pain?”

Question: How do you face the darkness of death or disappointment, the searing pain of spousal betrayal, the gut-wrenching emptiness left when a child runs away? How do you face the darkness?

The nurse closed the door, and my friends and I were alone in the cardiac intensive care unit of the children’s hospital. Before us in this holy of holies of the temple of technology, a tiny premature baby lay naked in a plastic crib on an altar-like stand. I cringed at the sight of all the wires and tubes attached to this little girl. Beside the crib was an array of electronic boxes with blinking lights and messages. In fifteen minutes the tubes would be removed, the wires disconnected, and the electronic equipment switched off. Then this child would be wrapped in a blanket and placed in her mother’s arms to breathe her last.

I was bothered by that fifteen-minute limit. My head said Yes to the reasoned medical decision, but my heart screamed No. I touched the miniature feet and hands, looked at the precious little face, and then I lifted my gaze toward heaven and asked, “God, why don’t you visit this room right now? My friends need you, because in fifteen minutes their baby’s life-support will be disconnected and she will die. It’s a small thing for you to speak the word and heal her. That small act on your part would be momentous for my friends.”

I seemed to hear Jesus say, “I’m in this room in the person of the Holy Spirit. I’m sorry that your heart doesn’t feel my presence.

“I have a few questions for you, Eugene. The first question: Did you notice anything special about your friends’ faces?”

“Yes, Lord. Now that you mention it, I was surprised by their peace in the midst of pain. To be honest with you, I expected to see only pain.”

“That’s right,” I sensed his response. “I could take you to scores of other rooms in this hospital where the parents’ faces would show lines of pain, anguish, and bitterness. Remember the words of Isaiah, ‘Thou wilt keep [them] in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee’ (Isa. 26:3; KJV).

“My second question, Eugene: You wondered why I don’t heal this precious little baby. Eugene, given your limited perspective, you’re not capable of comprehending the answer. And if you want peace, don’t try to imagine all the possible answers to your questions. Why torture yourself and exchange your peace for anxiety?”

“My third question, Eugene: Do you believe my love for your friends is so deep that I will never, never, never leave them or forsake them?”

“Oh Lord, I know that your Holy Spirit enfolds them no matter where they go, even to the utter ends of the universe.”

“My fourth question, Eugene: Do you believe that I am the resurrection and the life? Do you believe that one day the graves will open and that I will wipe all tears from their eyes?”

“My Lord and my God, I believe.”

“My fifth question, Eugene: Can you worship me as your sovereign God and not question my wisdom? If you can, then go and comfort your friends with these great truths about my steadfast love.”

I left the room and went to pray with my friends. After our prayer, they entered the intensive care nursery for the last time. The tubes and wires were disconnected, little Halley was wrapped in a blanket and placed her in her mother’s arms. In five minutes, she was in heaven.

How do you face the darkness of sickness, sorrow, disappointment, and death? I’ve discovered a biblical response that offers hope. Instead of asking why God doesn’t come and heal our friends, we can follow the exhortation of the psalmist: “Come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his

voice! Do not harden your hearts . . .” (Ps. 95:6–8). Worship beams light into our darkness. Worship soothes the pain, heals the broken hearts, and saves us from the grip of bitterness.

I learned this lesson in the summer of 1989. I remember saying, “Ben, I have terrible news for you. Danny committed suicide.” With tears in his eyes, Ben lifted his hands, heart, and eyes heavenward and said, “Lord Jesus, I worship you. I worship you. I worship you.”

News of sudden tragedy provokes various reactions. Some people descend into a stoic silence. Others experience emotional collapse. A spirit of bitterness and anger grabs still others, and they shake their fists at God. I had never before witnessed a response to death like Ben’s.

I don’t know why the Lord wanted me to give this message to you today. I assume that someone is walking through a deep dark valley. Perhaps your child is living on the streets, squandering

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years in drug addiction and prostitution. Maybe financial failure has wasted away your substance. Possibly a doctor said, “There is nothing we can do.” Maybe you sat with a friend while he died.

My question to you is, How are you facing your darkness? The psalmist gives us this gracious invitation: “Come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his

hand. O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts . . .”

The psalmist seems to suggest that only two options are open to us when we face the darkness. We can bow down and worship, or we can grow bitter and turn our backs on God.

The children of Israel faced the darkness at Rephidim. You’ll remember that there was no water there, and they were in danger of death. If you saw your children’s lips swollen and cracked because of thirst, what would you do? Would you worship or would you complain bitterly? The children of Israel chose bitterness.

When the people of Israel came to the border of the Promised Land, they heard the report that giants in the land were so big they made the people look like grasshoppers. The Israelites faced a choice: to worship the Lord because of promised deliverance or to descend into the pit of bitterness and self-pity. Once again they chose bitterness. The path of bitterness is a costly, dark road to travel.

We have a friend whose husband abandoned her to move in with their mutual friend. Our friend was left with four teens to raise on a limited income. This man has been the classic jerk; his actions have made his wife's life a living hell. He undermines her authority with the children and does everything in his power to make them hate her. He refuses to comply with court orders until the last second. His wickedness has wasted tens of thousands of dollars.

For four years I worked to build faith in this woman's life. I hoped she would heed the psalmist's gracious invitation: "Come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts . . ." She was in and out of the mire of bitterness, but she discovered that bitterness is a costly, lonely road to travel. No one wants to walk with a bitter person. It drives your family away from you; it's a lose-lose road.

Satan entices us into the bog of bitterness so that he can destroy us. When the darkness strikes, the first question on our lips is, *Why me?* This question is the first step into the bog of bitterness. When the darkness strikes, nobody feels like worship. How can we possibly worship in the face of tragedy? But if we will our hearts to worship, despite our anger and despair, we will find that it is in the act of worship that our feelings begin to soften and our heart becomes tender before the Lord. Worship gives us the strength we need to endure the pain. It is in worship that we sense God taking us by the hand and leading us through the darkness.

About the author

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