

Death at New Life

Part II

In last month's meditation, I discussed a little about the tragic event of December 9 when a crazed gunman entered our church parking lot and sanctuary intent upon slaughtering Christians. The aftermath of the melee that followed found two teenage sisters and the gunman dead. After reciting some of the events from this story, I tried to answer the question of why such a horrible event could possibly happen to godly people--and especially to these innocent young girls. The focus of the teaching was the fact that the devil hates God and all He is doing in the world. Just as Matthew Murray (the gunman) had no personal hatred toward the Works family (the family who lost their two daughters), the devil has no particular hatred for any one specific Christian. He simply hates God and the redemptive plan He is working in the world. In his attempt to attack God and His work, the enemy inflicts much collateral damage upon the Body of Christ. This is what we know of as the persecution of the church--the theme of last month's meditation.

This month, I'd like to share some further details of the story and use them to answer another question that arose from the event, "Why didn't God protect the victims? What about all those Bible promises about a shield of faith, treading on scorpions with nothing being able to harm you, and the angels bearing you up so that you don't even stub your toe?"

It wasn't until some weeks after all the dust from the assault had settled that I learned some of the important details of the day. It was widely reported that one of the victims in the shooting had been driven directly to the hospital before any emergency vehicles arrived at the scene; however, in all the media coverage of the victim's treatment and release, I didn't realize that I had a connection with a passenger in the car with this victim. It turned out that the victim was the mother of the host family for one of my students (in fact, the girl who house-sat for us while we were on our most recent mission trip) and that my student was in the car at the time that the gunman attacked. When she shared her story with me, I could think of only one thing--the divine protection of the Lord upon her and the others in the car. The family were all buckled into their seatbelts ready to head home after the service. As they waited in line for their turn to pull into the exit lane, they noticed the gunman walking toward their car. When one of the children pointed out that there was a man with a gun, someone else suggested that it must be one of the children's church leaders who had used the gun as a prop for an illustrated sermon that morning. In fact,

they even discussed who they thought it might be. At about that point, he approached the car even more closely and leveled the gun toward them. Still thinking that it was one of the children's workers, the thought that they were in danger never even crossed their minds. At this point, they thought that it was certainly one of their friends coming from the children's service and that he had recognized their car and was simply playing a joke on them. They had decided that it was a paintball gun that he held aimed at them. Expecting a splat of some day-glow color to smear across their windshield, they were terrified when the glass shattered under the impact from the assault rifle's bullet. In rapid-fire succession, another half dozen cartridges were pumped into their vehicle. The car stalled when the panicking father tried to pull it into gear to speed away. As everyone ducked for cover, the gunman turned his attention toward his target, the church itself. Wondering why he left the car with all its passengers still alive, they could come to only one conclusion--the stalled car and all the slumped-over bodies had led him to believe that he had finished his mission as far as this one vehicle was concerned. In reality, everyone had escaped injury except the mother who suffered a flesh wound to her upper arm. When the bullet-ridden vehicle was examined, a hole in the headrest of the driver's seat testified to the fact that a bullet had missed the father's head by only inches--if that much!

In one of those ironic twists that occur in stories like this, Chelsea (my student who was trapped in the back seat of the ill-fated vehicle at the beginning of the trauma-filled afternoon) is close friends and a coworker with Jean Assam (the volunteer security guard who brought an heroic end to the horror of the day). Although this kind of random connectedness occurs on a regular basis in movies and television shows, the probability of its happening in real life in a fourteen-thousand-member congregation are too small to calculate. In addition, the probability that Jean would walk by just when Chelsea was telling us her story adds even more exponents to the improbability. But it happened that just as Chelsea was giving me the first-hand report of her encounter, she stopped and introduced me to Jean who was able to pick up the story. From that conversation and a subsequent meeting at the Bible college where I teach, I learned some amazing aspects of the story which have never been told in any of the media reports.

The first point to ponder has to do with the fact that Jean was even there that morning. To lay the ground work for this part of the story, we have to go back about six months in Jean's life to when she was born again in July of 2007. After fourteen years of law enforcement work, she found herself at a place of transition and discontentment. After receiving the Lord into her life, Jean really

felt drawn to John Bevere's ministry and eventually applied and was accepted to work in his office. Yet within a few months, a strong desire to get back into law enforcement began to resurface. Questioning whether this desire might be the Lord's direction, she decided to ask John and his wife Lisa for counsel on the matter. Their advice was that she go on a three-day fast to seek clarity from the Lord. Miraculously, the specific days she chose for her fast were to be the exact days that the world as she knew it would suddenly come to an end and she would be propelled into another chapter of her life. When she told the supervisor over the security team at the church about her plans for the fast, he suggested that she might want to take Sunday off rather than to feel that she had to perform security duties when she was not at her physical peak. After going with no solid food for all of Friday and Saturday, she was feeling rather weak by Sunday morning and had decided to take his advice. She slept in and skipped the first service and had all intentions of sitting out her security duties during the second service. However, when she got up and turned on her computer to check her emails, Jean noticed a small news bulletin about the attack at the YWAM base near Denver just hours prior. When she read the article and realized that the gunman who had left two dead in that rampage was still on the loose, she was overwhelmed with an urgency to get to the church. Even though the other attack was some seventy miles away, she somehow felt that the New Life security team needed to be especially on guard that day. Calling in to the security team captain, Jean was assured that they knew about the incident and were keenly patrolling the building and grounds. As she hurriedly showered and dressed, her mind was focused on the necessity of getting to her post at the church--a position that she had been excused from and had originally planned not to fill that day!

Upon arriving at the church, she met with the other members of the security team and was briefed as to what they knew of the gunman on the lam. The description they had of him was very vague and rather general; however, they were determined to act if any suspicious individual remotely resembling the description appeared on the premises. They did, in fact, call one young man out of the service for questioning but immediately realized that he was a one of the congregates and apologized to him for their actions. He thanked them for their precautions and returned to the service, not knowing that it would only be a matter of hours until the whole world would echo his appreciation. The service went by as normal, and it seemed that the day was going to end without incident. The service ended and a large portion of the congregation headed for their cars and home. The three uniformed policeman who serve as traffic directors and crowd control each Sunday had finished their duties and left with their squad cars. Jean mentioned that it seemed as if an exceptionally large

number of people were still hanging around the building fellowshiping and sipping coffee at the café. Suddenly a smoke bomb went off, causing quite a stir. Then the gunshots began to ring out! Jean responded immediately by running toward the sound since she was in close proximity--something that can only be seen as part of a divine orchestration. Jean's assignment would have normally placed her on the far side of the building since she is commissioned to walk near the pastor while he is on the property. His usual practice is to go to a reception area on the west side of the building after service to talk with newcomers and visitors; however, we had a guest speaker on this particular Sunday, and the pastor decided to go with him directly to the study when the service ended. This change of plans took Jean to the east side of the building--directly at the end of the corridor the gunman was to enter!

Jean's description of her face off with the attacker is horrifying. As the people dove for cover and ran for their lives, Jean bravely rushed down the hallway, constantly praying, "Holy Spirit, help me!" Although she had only a small hand gun with one cylinder full of bullets while he yielded an assault rifle and more than a thousand rounds of ammunition, she fearlessly approached him and eventually took him down. But before we applaud the miraculous moment which left Matthew Murray in a pool of his own blood, I want to back up the scene of the people in the corridor diving for cover and running for their lives. You see, this untold part of the story may actually be the most powerful part of the whole day. That particular Sunday had originally been slated as the date for a holiday banquet for our special needs ministry. Had that banquet been held as scheduled, approximately two hundred physically and mentally challenged individuals would have been gathered in that hallway at exactly the time that the attacker burst through the doors. Imagine the carnage that would have resulted had Matthew Murray found the area filled with patients in wheelchairs and on walkers! Imagine the tragic results had he broken in on the hallway filled with individuals who couldn't manage to run away or were not able to reason quickly enough to figure out how to hide themselves! The miracle of the story is that the lady in charge of this event canceled it without real reason except that she simply felt led to call it off!!

I asked Jean about her years of service as an active police officer because I wanted to know if she had ever been involved in a shootout during her secular career. Her response was that she had served in a very high crime area and had been involved in face-to-face confrontations with armed suspects but had never had to face active fire because all her suspects had surrendered their weapons when she identified herself as an officer. To me, it seemed that this was another special blessing in the testimony of the day--in fourteen years of secular police

duty she had been protected by her badge and firearm, but in these few short months of volunteer work at the church she walked into a new divine protection. Her testimony is that as the assault rifle bullets whizzed by her, she never even thought about them because she was engulfed in the presence of the Lord. Nothing was able to harm her because her shield of faith was quenching all the fiery darts of the wicked as she was treading on serpents and scorpions and marching over all the power of the enemy. (Luke 10:19, Ephesians 6:16)

Yes, all those Bible verses about divine protection for believers are real and they do work. December 9 is living proof in case after case!

Above all, taking the He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust. Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence. He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler. Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day; Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday. A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee. Only with thine eyes shalt thou behold and see the reward of the wicked. Because thou hast made the LORD, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation; There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling. For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone. Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder: the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet. (Psalm 91:1-13)

As wonderful as all these testimonies may be, we are still left with one seemingly insurmountable question, "What about the Works family? Why did they lose two daughters? Why weren't they protected?" Honestly I can't presume to even be able to begin to answer such questions. However, I'd like to make just a couple observations. First, I think that it is amazing that Matthew Murray's attack took only two lives. In keeping with the proclamation he had posted on the internet before heading for the church, he was "armed to the teeth." With over fourteen hundred rounds of ammunition, it is a miracle that there were only two fatalities. As tragic as it was that the lives of eighteen-year-old Stephanie and her sixteen-year-old sister Rachel were cut short that day, we must remember that both these girls were exemplary Christians.

Imagine the agony the family would have gone through wondering about the girls' eternal destiny had these girls been non-believers, lukewarm Christians, or backsliders! No matter how sad and lonely the family must be, they are comforted by knowing that their precious daughters are unquestionably in heaven. My second observation is that even though the family might seem to be the target for multiplied grief with the loss of not just one but two daughters, the truth of the matter is that they are actually the target of God's inexplicable grace. Perhaps there was some hidden strength in them that only God saw, and He allowed this to happen to them because He knew that no other family could demonstrate His amazing grace the way that they would. A few weeks after the incident, our pastor felt the prompting of the Holy Spirit to contact Matthew Murray's parents and ask them if they would like to visit the church campus and walk through the corridors to see where their son had died. When Ron and Loretta Murray accepted his invitation, he asked if they would also be open to meeting with David and Marie Works, the parents of the two girls who also died that day. They accepted that invitation as well, as did the Works family. It was, of course, a tearful encounter--but a colossal manifestation of the grace of God in which the two families embraced and expressed their sorrow for the other's loss. The Works family showed that they genuinely cared for the Murray family as they had to face the loss of their son plus the invasion of their privacy and harsh media exposure brought on by the incident. Pastor Brady Boyd summed up the meeting, "As Christians, we can talk philosophically about forgiveness and redemption, but I saw it modeled in a way I've never seen it this week...It makes me know that what I preach on Sundays is true." This amazing story of the grace of God manifest in the lives of the Works family was picked up by the press and broadcast around the world--a global testimony to the miraculous love of God. Yes, in the natural we can question if somehow the adder that Psalm 91 declares will not be able to stripe had found a loophole; but when we see the overall results, we are assured that rest of the Psalm is proven unquestionably sure:

Because he hath set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him:
I will set him on high, because he hath known my name. He shall
call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble;
I will deliver him, and honour him. With long life will I satisfy
him, and shew him my salvation. (Psalm 91:14-16)