

The Voice in My Head

I love my husband's recent Christmas gift to me: a hearing aid. (Actually, he appreciates it about as much as I do, since I'm not daily asking, "Excuse me?" and "What?") A number of years ago I had been diagnosed with a 25% hearing loss in one ear, but it had grown to 45%. That's a lot of missed words in conversations, sermons, and TV shows.

Mine is a little device that sits in my ear canal, pretty much invisible. Because it's so small, the battery is teeny tiny and needs to be replaced every five days or so. I know it's time to swap it out when a little metallic voice suddenly says "Battery" in my ear. That means I have maybe two minutes before a final, second "Battery"—then a small click that means my wonderful restored hearing is gone and I'm back to the world's sounds being muffled till I put a new battery in.

I am grateful for that little voice because it tells me something very important about something I need to do, and fast.

And every time, I am reminded of Isaiah 30:21—"And thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left." My immediate prayer is, "Lord, please teach me to hear you as clearly as I hear that little voice in my ear!"

Hearing God's voice is a realistic part of being in relationship with him. In the Old Testament, Jeremiah 33:3 records God's invitation: "Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known." In the New Testament, Jesus promises, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27).

So how do we hear God's voice?

1. **Choose to listen.** It starts with being intentional. We need

to believe that God speaks to His children, and act on that belief by putting ourselves in "listening mode." That's not about sitting down with a demanding spirit that says, "OK, Lord, you have five minutes to talk to me or I'm outta here." In my experience, the God of the universe does not respond to self-centered demands like that. It's more like turning on a baby monitor and leaving it in the "always on" position. And keeping one ear "open" for any sounds coming from the monitor.

The primary way God speaks to us is through his word. Sometimes as we read the scriptures, a verse seems to leap off the page, right into our hearts, and burn with a personal application. Even as a new believer in college, I knew that when I read Isaiah 55:2, the context was God speaking to his people Israel: "Why do you spend your money on that which is not bread, and your wages on that which does not satisfy?" But in 1973, struggling with a holy discontent about my college degree plan, God spoke to me through this verse, giving me the freedom to stop college at the end of my junior year. And sure enough, in the 43 years since, I have never once regretted not earning a degree in elementary education because being a classroom teacher was never God's plan for my life. Teaching, yes, but not in a school classroom.

But God also speaks to us in our spirit. My friend Bob was a pastor. One morning he felt impressed to drive to a nearby lake to meet with God. He sat there on a picnic bench waiting to hear from God (and, frankly, expecting some direction on what to preach the following Sunday). After 45 minutes of just quietness, hearing nothing, he sensed God say to him, "OK, Bob, you can go to your office now."

Eyebrows raised, he said, "I thought maybe you were going to give me some instruction on what you want me to preach this Sunday . . .? What's the point of sitting here for almost an hour, Lord?"

In his spirit, Bob heard, "I just wanted to spend some time

with you.”

It takes time and practice to learn to hear God like Bob does (and he learned over time and by practicing). But that’s what friends do. They talk with each other.

2. Expect God to speak. Who knows how many things in life we miss simply because we weren’t expecting them, so they blow right by? When we live with an attitude of expectancy, it’s a lot easier to hear that “still small voice” (1 Kings 19:12) when God does speak to us.

I learned this while at a conference a number of years ago. So many of the conference attendees lived with this attitude of expectancy that it was common mealtime conversation to share what people had heard and experienced from the Lord that day. I wanted that for myself! I went from one session to the next “with my ears on” (in old CB-radio lingo), hopeful to hear from God.

I was in one breakout session about fifteen minutes when I suddenly became aware of a strong impression—a pressure on my heart—that I was supposed to call my husband. Right then. It came out of the blue, connecting to nothing I was hearing in the breakout, so I left the session and walked to my dorm room to get to a phone (oh, how things have changed with the invention of the cell phone!) When my husband answered, I learned that he was very sick and was feeling even worse because there was no way to contact me and he was feeling not just miserable, but *alone* and miserable. He was quite surprised to learn that God had told me to call him. There wasn’t anything I could do from the other side of the country, but it was comforting to both of us that God intervened so that we could talk to each other.

3. Predecide to focus on God’s voice despite what other voices you’re hearing. It takes time and experience to learn to recognize his voice, but I can promise you this: it will never

contradict his word, and his peace will be attached. We hear the “voice” or sounds of what matters to us. I once read a story about a native American who accompanied a city dweller to New York City. As they walked down the sidewalk, the native suddenly stopped in the midst of all that concrete and said, “I hear a cricket!” His city dwelling friend scoffed: “Are you kidding? How can you hear such a small sound with all this racket?” At that, the native pointed to the soil surrounding a small tree growing out of a concrete planter in the sidewalk; sure enough, there was a cricket rubbing its legs together. His friend shook his head, amazed. The native said, “It’s not so amazing. We hear what’s important to us. Watch this.” He reached into his pocket, pulled out a handful of coins, and threw them on the sidewalk. Instantly, scores of people around them stopped, swiveling their heads at the sound of money hitting the ground. “See? What’s important is money to them, and nature to me. We hear what’s important to us.”

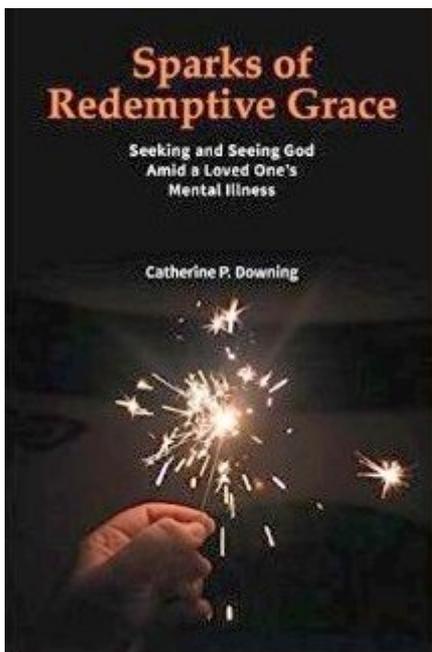
We need to filter out the sounds and voices of the world, which would call us away from intimacy with God, and “keep the first thing, the first thing.” When God speaks, we want to be found listening.

Because when he speaks, it’s something far more important than “Battery.”

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Mental Illness and the Family

The January 2017 shooting at the Ft. Lauderdale airport is still being investigated, but what surfaced immediately in seeking a motive for Esteban Santiago's deadly action was his family's observations that he appeared to be fighting a mental health challenge. When he returned from military service in Iraq, he reported hearing voices and his family reported that "his mind was not right."



Totally apart from the issues Mr. Santiago is dealing with, both psychologically and legally, my heart goes out to his family. The family members of a person struggling with mental health issues carry a heavy load, often in isolation and silence, because of the stigma of shame often associated with mental illness.

I am more sensitive to this after recently reading a different kind of book. *Sparks of Redemptive Grace – Seeking and Seeing God Amid a Loved One's Mental Illness* is a short but powerful book written by the mother of a young man in a battle with bipolar disorder.

Catherine P. Downing offers grace-drenched perspective that can and should change the way we think about this struggle. I

learned a lot from her. For example, she writes,

It is a heartbreaking truth that I had to learn to say, “Douglas has bipolar disorder,” instead of, “Douglas is bipolar.” A minor wording difference. A monumental identity distinction. To have a disease, rather than to be one, is a defining stance of dignity.

But it’s not just the family members dealing with mental illness who need to be educated on how to think and respond and love well. We the *church family* also need to be better equipped to love “the least of these” with the compassion of Jesus. That is going to mean loving the family members staggering under the weight of their loved ones’ illness as well. We are often quick to arrange meals for new mommies or families where someone has had surgery, but what about the families trudging through the exhausting day-in-day-out invisible battle when it’s the brain or the mind that is diseased?

One of the ways we can love families dealing with mental illness is by adjusting our unrealistic expectations. Mental illness isn’t something people “get over” quickly . . . and sometimes not even on this side of eternity.

And then there is the ongoing grieving for the should-have-beens of lost dreams and hopes, and even the loss of the “normal” kind of life most of us assume we will live. The first sentence of the introduction reads, “My husband, Nelson, once said that if we ever write a book the title should be, *It Wasn’t Supposed to Be Like This.*” Those living with this kind of unrelenting grief need friends who will support them, never give up praying for them, being “Jesus with skin on” for them. (Check out this really excellent list of how to pray for families impacted by mental illness: sparksofredemptivegrace.com/31days31ways2pray4families/)

I was blessed to read this short list of suggestions for how the church can support the families of those dealing with mental illness in the Bible.org article "[Mental Health and the Church](#)":

1. Make your church a safe place for those who suffer. To do that, a church body needs to be transparent about brokenness and acknowledge that all of us struggle with weak areas in our lives.

2. Equip your church with the tools it needs to serve those with mental illnesses and their families. Develop or identify your congregation's theology of suffering. Train clergy and staff. Offer support groups. Create alliances with local mental health professionals.

3. Treat hurting people like people. Be a friend. Include them in gatherings. Invite them when groups are going to lunch. As needed, refer them on to professional help, but don't pass them on. At the same time, set healthy boundaries in your relationships. Don't expect them to be able to do that.

4. Address the stigma of mental illness by talking about it openly. Include general prayers for the mentally ill in congregational praying. Highlight and financially support local ministries who serve the homeless, the incarcerated and indigent mentally ill populations.

5. Treat those with mental illnesses and their families as you would any who have chronic pain in their lives or are lifelong caregivers. Pray for and with them. Give them space to talk about what is going on in their lives. Attend to practical needs such as transportation to medical appointments, assist, when appropriate, with extraordinary expenses.

I have committed to make hearing new news about the Ft. Lauderdale shootings a reminder to pray for the family members

of the troubled shooter. At the same time, I want to be “Jesus with skin on” for those in my world who need comfort for the same kind of pain in their family.

Also check out the website for this helpful little book, www.sparksofredemptivegrace.com

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/mental-illness-and-the-family/ on January 10, 2017.

Well Educated

On more than one occasion, Joseph Pearce has written an essay based on a bumper sticker he has seen. Sitting in traffic he saw one that declared: “What you call the Liberal Elite, we call being well educated.”

The woman in the car in front of him obviously wanted to teach him and us a lesson. She is well educated, and we presumably are poorly educated if we don't agree with her politics and perspective. After all, we know that well-educated people tend to vote for Democrats. The less educated tend to vote for Republicans. She and many of her liberal friends probably believe they know better how to run your life than you do.

Joseph Pearce writes that her problem is that “her education is not as good as she thinks it is.” She is educated in our secular system. That means she probably learned nothing about theology. She may know next to nothing about God. She may not even believe there is a God, but probably couldn't defend her atheism or agnosticism anyway.

“If she was educated in our secular system, she will know nothing of philosophy.” If she does know something about philosophy, she probably concluded that there is no philosophy worth taking seriously before René Descartes.” She won’t know anything about the philosophy of the Greeks or of any Christian philosopher.

“If she was educated in our secular system, she will know nothing of history.” If she does know anything, it will be viewed from her own twenty-first century perspective or from the perspective of those who taught it to her.

“If she was educated in our secular system, she will know nothing of great literature.” Once again, if she does know anything about literature, it will be from her own twenty-first century pride and prejudice or from those who taught it to her.

In summary, we should see that to be “well-educated” today means to be ignorant of theology, philosophy, history, and the Great Books of the world. Joseph Pearce rightly calls this the arrogance of ignorance.

This blog post originally appeared at pointofview.net/viewpoints/well-educated/ on Dec. 27, 2016.

Leaning Hard

I wondered when it would happen, when the pain and weakness from post-polio, exacerbated by hip arthritis, would set me up for a fall. And now I know. The other day I took a tumble.

I forgot to have my husband put my walker in the back of my mini-van. At some point this year I discovered that leaning on a cane for stability wasn't enough, and I need a walker for literally every step. But this level of loss and disability is still new to me; sometimes I forget that my "new normal" demands things like taking a walker with me. When I got to my destination, all I had was my cane, and I thought, "It's okay, I'll have the cane in my right hand and I can lean on the car with my left to make my way to the back of the van to get my scooter."

But it was a drizzly day, and when I leaned hard on the bumper my hand slipped, and I went down HARD. Fortunately, it was also a cold day and my padded coat helped cushion my shoulder and hip as I hit the ground. I instantly had a new appreciation for that old commercial, "I've fallen and I can't get up!" Yep. That was me.

My cell phone was in my pocket, praise God, and I was able to call for help. It took two aides to lift me to a vertical position and then get my scooter out of the van, shaken and feeling very fragile but basically okay.

The doctor I was there to see also came out, and when she spoke I knew it was the Lord's voice through her: "Sue, you're trying to do too much on your own." Yep. That was me too.

I've thought a lot about how things have changed for me in the past couple of years as I've lost so much of my mobility and ability to do even the simplest things around the house. And since there is often a strong correlation between the physical world and spiritual reality, each one teaching us something about the other, I've become especially aware of my dependence on my walker and my scooter.

So it deeply blessed me when a friend dealing with stage-four renal cancer was featured in a video where she quoted from J.I. Packer in Joni Eareckson Tada's book *A Lifetime of Wisdom*:

"God uses chronic pain and weakness, along with other afflictions, as his chisel for sculpting our lives. Felt weakness deepens dependence on Christ for strength each day. The weaker we feel, the harder we lean. And the harder we lean, the stronger we grow spiritually, even while our bodies waste away. To live with your 'thorn' uncomplainingly – that is, sweet, patient, and free in heart to love and help others, even though every day you feel weak – is true sanctification. It is true healing for the spirit. It is a supreme victory of grace."

The weaker we feel, the harder we lean. And the harder we lean, the stronger we grow spiritually, even while our bodies waste away. Whoa.

"Leaning hard" is the opposite of our American, self-sufficient, can-do independence. But it's the secret to spiritual vitality and power because "leaning hard" means we access Christ's strength instead of our own puny efforts.

"Leaning hard" is my new way of understanding "abiding." And abiding is where stability comes from, just as I am far more stable when I'm "leaning hard" on my walker when I have to walk and on my scooter when I get to ride.

The memory of leaning hard on my slippery car bumper, only to discover it was not a reliable place to support myself so I landed hard on the ground, was also a powerful lesson in the

futility of leaning hard on myself or anything other than Jesus Christ Himself. I now have a kinesthetic memory of that spiritual truth!

It stinks to fall, of course, but I sure do love the insight that came from it.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/leaning_hard on December 27, 2016.

Flying the W Flag



I'm not a baseball fan. I'm not even a sports fan. But I *am* originally from the northern suburbs of Chicago, which makes me a de facto Cubs fan. And in case you (like me) aren't really a sports fan either, you might not know about the drama unfolding in the 2016 World Series.

The Cubs haven't made it to the World Series since 1945. That's before I was born! (Long time, friends. Long time.) They finished among the worst teams in their league year after year, becoming something of a joke in the sports world.

So it was A BIG DEAL that the Cubs won the pennant and made it to the World Series this year.

When that happened, there was great rejoicing in the land. The packed-out Wrigley Field, the Cubbies' home ball park, broke out in the "Go Cubs Go" song, and it was a transcendent experience for those who were there.



But what grabbed me by the throat was seeing all the Cubs' "W" flags. One of the losing-est teams in all of sports, with some of the most incredibly loyal fans in all of sports, finally got to really celebrate the W in Win. They didn't even need to go all the way to win the World Series for people to go nuts with joy.

It wasn't the Cubs' Win, though, that gave me goosebumps. The blue W on the white field reminded me that we are assured of the ultimate Win for the ultimate cosmic battle that lies ahead. The Bible provides a look into the future when good vs. evil, and Satan vs. Jesus Christ, will battle it out, and *good will win*.

But the Cubs' W flag represents nothing more than hope that they just might win the World Series for the first time since 1908. There is no certainty. On the other hand, the cosmic

battle between good and evil has already been determined, the book has been written, and we know the ending. In the end, **GOD WINS**. It's a done deal. And we who are in Christ win with Him.

There was never any better reason to fly a W flag!

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/flying_the_w_flag on November 2, 2016.

Updated on the morning of November 4: The Cubs won the World Series! Must be a great time to be in Chicagoland! My family is very VERY excited. My White Sox fan husband, who grew up on the South Side of Chicago, not so much. Oh well.

When a Church Tells a Member, “It’s Not OK to be Gay”

Watermark Community Church in Dallas (where my husband and I are members) was recently dragged into the media when a former member published a letter to the church on the one-year anniversary of his membership being revoked. After several years of fighting his unwanted same-sex attractions, the young man got weary of the battle and embraced a gay identity—and a boyfriend. The church pleaded with him to repent (turn 180 degrees) and submit to the Bible’s commands to sexual purity, but he would not. So the church sent him a letter which the young man made public.

Within hours, a firestorm erupted on social media, TV media, and print media.

Predictably, the church’s counter-cultural beliefs and stance

were misrepresented out of people's inability (or refusal) to understand biblical values and truths. It would be easy to come away with a very skewed perception of this situation, which is why it's important to use discernment in reading or hearing anything about this controversial subject.

Recall the wisdom of Proverbs 18:17: "The first to plead his case seems right, until another comes and examines him." It's important to remember there's another side of every story, and to hold judgment until one's discernment kicks in.

It started when the former member's Facebook post was picked up by the *Dallas Morning News*. His title was "Watermark Church Dismissed Me for Being Gay," and the paper chose the title "[Watermark Asks Homosexual Member to Leave Church](#)." It sure sounds like the church kicked him out, doesn't it? But that's not what happened. The church responded, "Watermark makes a distinction between attending our church [*Sue's note: which the former member was welcome to do*] and being a formal member of our church. We don't remove someone's formal status as a member for struggling with sin—whether that sin is pride, materialism or sexual sin. Every member of Watermark needs God's grace to stand firm in the midst of temptation and His forgiveness for the times we fall short."

Jacqueline Floyd, a *Dallas Morning News* columnist, wrote a scathing [column](#) criticizing Watermark.

Ms. Floyd:

"A lot of people are upset that an institution that professes love for all its members would exile someone because of his sexual orientation."

And they should be! But that's not what happened. Pastor Todd Wagner's [response](#):

"Following the example of Jesus, Watermark loves and welcomes people of all backgrounds, economic statuses, ethnicities and sexual struggles. Also following his

example, we encourage people to turn away from sin and to follow Jesus. We have *many members* and *several staff* who struggle with same-sex attraction or for whom same-sex sexual activity is a part of their past. We count it a privilege to labor with them in their desire to resist temptation, and we rejoice with them as they experience forgiveness and new life in Christ. Their stories are powerful and serve as beautiful testimonies to the transforming power of Jesus Christ.” [Emphasis his]

Ms. Floyd:

“He tried for years to conform to church requirements that he alter his essential nature, ‘repent’ his sexual orientation, undergo a form of ‘conversion therapy’ that research as well as mainstream psychology and counselors have denounced as harmful and pointless.”

This makes sense if you believe the culture’s sexual mythology that says being gay is one’s “essential nature,” as if a gay identity were the most important thing about an individual. (Consider how unbalanced it would be if we switched out the standard for how well someone can sing, declaring that one’s “essential nature” was one’s ability to carry a tune—or not. How awfully narrow and unnecessarily limiting that would be, as if every other aspect of one’s giftings and temperament, interests and abilities paled in comparison to their singing voice!)

The church does not require that anyone “alter their essential nature,” but it does align itself with scripture, acknowledging that we are all born sinful and broken, with a tendency to rebel and disobey against God:

“There is no one righteous, not even one;
there is no one who understands;
there is no one who seeks God.
All have turned away,
they have together become worthless;

there is no one who does good,
not even one.” (Romans 3:10b-12)

Our true “essential nature” is that we are both infinitely precious and valuable because we are made in God’s image, but also fallen and sinful. That “essential nature” can’t be altered by ourselves, but it can be transformed by God. That is the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I don’t know if anyone at Watermark mistakenly urged this brother to repent of his sexual orientation as if he had chosen to be same-sex attracted, but we certainly do exhort everyone to renounce and repent of all sexual sin (which means anything outside of marriage between one man and one woman). Concerning “conversion therapy,” Watermark doesn’t have that. What we do have is a call to discipleship, asking people to be “all in” with Jesus, obeying His word and pursuing intimacy with Christ. That intimacy usually produces heart change, which means transformation from the inside out, where therapy is an attempt to bring about change from the outside in.

Ms. Floyd:

“Trying to ‘change’ someone’s sexual orientation is about as useful as trying turn a turtle into a duck. When this witch-doctor alchemy predictably failed to work, the church blamed him—and revoked his membership. Not in person. They mailed him a letter.”

Lots of people believe that sexual orientation is fixed and unchangeable. That’s because if a lie is repeated loud enough and long enough, people will accept it as truth. Change is possible, and feelings (because that’s what we’re talking about here) are fluid. We see change happening in the first-century church; 1 Corinthians 6:11 says to former homosexuals, “And such were some of you.” I have seen change happen before my own eyes, for 18 years of involvement at [Living Hope Ministries](#). And if that’s not enough, google “Lisa Diamond Sexual Fluidity” for some intriguing academic [research](#) that

cites that change happens.

But then it sure sounds cold to mail someone a letter revoking his membership. And it would be—if it had happened like that. The letter was just the final formal communication, the period at the end of a series of anguished, face-to-face conversations.

See why it's so important to remember that "The first to plead his case seems right, until another comes and examines him"?

The letter from our own former member needs to be read with discernment as well:

"I spent years battling against my own homosexuality. When I wasn't able to change, you turned your back on me."

I'm sure there were some people mistakenly thinking and hoping that his same-sex attractions were a matter of choice that could be changed on demand. "Everstraights," especially men, have a hard time imagining what it's like to be drawn to the same sex, and can easily burden those who are, with unrealistic expectations.

Battling one's homosexuality is incredibly difficult, and I can appreciate that many, many people pray hundreds of times, "God, I beg You, take this away!" That prayer is like mine growing up: "God, please! [Heal me!](#)" It's like the apostle Paul's prayer, recorded in 2 Corinthians 7b-9:

"I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."

Paul pleaded with God to remove his thorn in the flesh, but God had something better. I pleaded with God to remove my thorn in the flesh, but He had [something better](#). My same-sex

attracted brother, our former member, pleaded with God to remove his thorn in the flesh, and He had something better for him as well, but my brother decided to embrace his flesh instead. He wrote,

“I am who God made me to be. I cannot change my sexual orientation, and nor would I want to. I now have internal peace and happiness unlike ever before.”

No, God did not make anyone same-sex attracted. Based on the thousands of men who have come through Living Hope, I would say God probably made him to be sensitive, artistic, creative, relational, and gifted. But not gay.

It's not surprising that he now senses “internal peace and happiness unlike ever before.” He quit battling his flesh, the part of us that lives independently from God. The relief that comes from giving into temptation can feel like peace and happiness, for a while. It can feel like freedom. But it comes at a cost. There is no true intimacy with Jesus when we are indulging our flesh. There can be a faux intimacy, the echoes of having walked with Him in obedience and abiding trust. But true intimacy can only happen in the light:

“God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” (1 John 1:5-7)

So I pray for my brother, and I pray for all of us to develop discernment as we process the war of worldviews about sexual ethics. It won't be easy.

[Note: If you want a blessing and strong but grace-filled instruction about church discipline, please watch Todd Wagner's response to this issue from the Watermark platform, “Why Good Leaders Have Always Written Letters to the Church

They Love”: <http://www.watermark.org/plano/message/4320>]

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Dealing with Disappointment



There seemed to be a gigantic collective gasp at the 2016 Rio Olympics when American gymnast Simone Biles bobbled on the balance beam and had to steady herself with her hands. Instantly, the girl expected to win five gold medals lost the gold, even before finishing her otherwise excellent routine. She still won a bronze, but Simone (and the entire media machine) knew she was capable of a gold.

How disappointing!



Simone handled her letdown with grace and realism, limiting her disappointment to the one missed skill rather than globalizing—as we so often do—by saying things like, “I am such an idiot! I can’t *believe* I did that!” Then, quickly moving beyond her setback, she delivered an almost perfect floor exercise the next day, earning her fourth gold medal and propelling her into gymnastics history.

What is the wise, biblical, God-honoring way to handle disappointment?

Fortunately, we have lots of examples of people in the Bible who wrestled with disappointment:

- Women carrying the pain of years and years of infertility (measured month by month)—Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Samson’s mother, the Shunammite woman, Elizabeth.
- Joseph served for years with faithfulness and integrity inside a prison for a crime he did not commit; after correctly interpreting the dreams of fellow prisoners with access to the pharaoh, his hopes of being freed were dashed when the cupbearer forgot him.
- David was anointed as future king, but the years dragged

on as he was chased by a mentally ill king consumed by paranoia.

- The Psalmists anguished numerous times: “How long, O Lord?”

Solomon, with his wisdom super-power, wrote in Proverbs that “hope deferred makes the heart sick” (Prov. 13:12). The distance between our hopes/expectations and reality—“hope deferred”—constitutes disappointment.

The way to handle disappointment doesn’t change, because **the key is re-focusing on God**, and He doesn’t change. He is good, and He is faithful, all the time. No matter what.

I have found two “power tools” for dealing with the pain of when our hopes and expectations are deferred or, worse, obliterated.

First, take a firm hold on the comforting truth of the sovereignty of God: **a good and loving God is in control**.

He permits nothing to touch our lives without His express permission, with a perfect purpose. If God allows disappointment to darken our days, it is His good gift of a “something better” later. (Please see my post “[Rejection is Protection](#).”) Disappointment may be preparation for something in the future. It may be a [just-right tool](#) for producing Christlikeness—spiritual maturity—in us. It may prevent something bad we couldn’t possibly foresee.

The other power tool is **God’s command to give thanks** for all things (Ephesians 5:20), *in* all things (1 Thessalonians 5:18). We don’t have to *feel* goose-bumpy, warm-and-fuzzy thankful; giving thanks is a choice of the will. When we give thanks for something God has chosen to allow into our lives, we are acknowledging He is Lord, that He is “large and in charge.” We are acknowledging that He has the right to allow disappointment to cast its shadow on our lives, and it keeps us connected rightly to our Creator, as His creature. “Lord, I

thank You for allowing this deep disappointment into my life, even though I don't understand how You could possibly redeem it and make it okay." That's what trust looks like, and it pleases the Lord. It also helps us maintain an eternal perspective, that everything—*everything*—is part of a much bigger picture we cannot see.

Olympic athletes aren't the only ones to encounter disappointment. It is inevitable in a fallen world. How will *you* respond?

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The Horrible Choice in Dallas

The recent ambush and murder of Dallas (Texas) police officers has been consuming and draining for many of us who live here. David Brown, Dallas' Chief of Police, has responded incredibly well to an unthinkable horror. During the standoff with the shooter who had already taken the lives of five officers and wounded seven more, plus two civilians, Chief Brown stayed on top of negotiations between the Dallas Police Department (DPD) and the shooter.

But those negotiations only revealed that Micah Johnson, well-protected and heavily armed in a parking garage, remained adamant about his agenda: to hurt and kill as many white people, and white police officers specifically, as he could. In an interview with CNN the next morning, Chief Brown reported that over a two-hour period of negotiations, he

characterized the shooter as “basically lying to us, playing games, laughing, singing, asking how many did he get and that he wanted to kill some more, and there were bombs there, so there was no progress on the negotiation.”[\[1\]](#)

Dallas’ mayor Mike Rawlings reported that “We gave him choices. We said, ‘You can come out and not be hurt, or you can stay there and be hurt.’”[\[2\]](#) Mr. Johnson chose to refuse to surrender.

Chief Brown made the difficult decision to end the standoff before any more lives were lost by arming a remote-controlled robot with explosives that killed the shooter.

As this story unfolded, it struck me that Chief Brown, a Christ-follower who worships at Dr. Tony Evans’ church Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship, is now peculiarly equipped to understand one of the most difficult aspects of the Old Testament: God’s commands to kill large numbers of people. In fact, just two days after the shootings, I sat in my church answering this very question by a friend who is wrestling with whether God is good. How could a good God order the killing of men, women and children in Canaan? How could a good police chief order the killing of a man holed up in a parking garage?

After hours of negotiation that included 45 minutes of exchanging gunfire with the shooter, Dallas police determined that Micah Johnson had a hard heart. And, in that situation, an apparently unredeemably hard heart that would not allow for a good outcome (which would mean surrender at the least, and confession and repentance eventually for the sin—and the crime—of multiple murders).

God faced something similar on a much, much larger scale: wholesale cultural evil. Genesis 6:5 says, “Yahweh saw how

great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time." For 120 years Noah served as a "preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5), but only eight people entered the ark to be saved. God wiped out all the evil in every other human being alive on the whole planet. What a horrible, and drastic-but necessary-choice.

Then, we see wholesale cultural evil again in Canaan, the inhabitants of the land that God promised to Abraham and his descendants. The whole culture engaged in idolatry and even child sacrifice. The Canaanites' rampant sexual sin was so bad it even defiled the land. The Canaanites' lifestyle was like cultural cancer. And just as an oncology surgeon has to slice into what may appear to be a healthy body to cut out deadly tissue that will kill a person if not removed, God acted to remove spiritual cancer in the pre-flood world and again in Canaan.

We see God's heart about this revealed in Ezekiel 33:11—"As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?" It broke God's heart to have to take out the wicked people on the earth. Just as our brother in Christ, Chief Brown knows that Micah Johnson was made in the image of God, and was a soul so dearly loved that Jesus died for him. There is no pleasure in having to deal with a man so insistent on destruction that the only way to keep him from taking more lives is to take his. Chief Brown says it was a good call, but that doesn't mean it gave him pleasure.

Just as, I believe, our good God stopped the growth of moral cancer on His planet and in His land, but it gave Him no pleasure.

Discipline, especially the most drastic kind, is a horrible choice to have to make. But it is right. And good. Even as it breaks the heart of the discipliner.

1. theconservativetreehouse.com/2016/07/10/dallas-police-chief-david-brown-extensive-interview-explaining-attack-videos/
2. beta.dallasnews.com/news/news/2016/07/09/dallas-policedecided-use-bomb-end-standoff-lone-gunman?_ga=1.39744103.531856088.1465668815

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Orlando's Coincidence?

Bizarre

My phone dinged Sunday morning, June 12, with Facebook's notification that three of my friends were safe in regard to the Orlando shooting. I had no idea what that meant, but fortunately social media makes it easy to find out what's happening in the world within seconds. My heart sank when I learned of the largest mass shooting in American history at a gay nightclub, with 49 dead and 53 injured. I couldn't even begin to wrap my mind around the pain and horror inflicted on the victims and their families and friends.

Then I learned about the very different kind of pain and

horror that also happened in Orlando two days later, when an alligator snatched a two-year-old boy and won the wrestling match with the boy's father, pulling the toddler under the water and drowning him—in preparation, one might assume, to make a meal of him later.

I shared the horrifying news with students at Probe's Mind Games camp, where we were teaching that week. Three of the campers are from Orlando, and I learned that Floridians just *know* that alligators are everywhere, and they take precautions. When Aimee heard that the incident had happened on one of the Disney World properties, she asked, "Where's the family from? I bet not Florida. [It was Nebraska.] We *know* about alligators. You can't see them, but they can see you. Even in four inches of water."

It is certainly possible that the back-to-back nightclub shooting and the alligator snatching both happening in Orlando was just a bizarre coincidence. But I wonder if one is a physical representation of a spiritual reality about very real warfare that happens in the unseen spirit realm.

Alligators are predators. They're always looking for something to kill and eat. I couldn't help but be reminded of 1 Peter 5:8, "Be sober and alert. Your enemy the devil, like a roaring lion, is on the prowl looking for someone to devour."

I am absolutely sure that our enemy the devil was actively prowling at the Pulse nightclub. Jesus said that the devil comes to "steal, kill and destroy" (John 10:10), and he was successful at all three the morning of June 12. As I looked at pictures of all the people who died that day, I saw young men and women who were someone's sons and daughters, someone's nieces and nephews and grandchildren, someone's friends and co-workers, their lives snatched by a horrible predator.

I thought about the parents and loved ones of gay-identifying people who faithfully pray that God will open the eyes of their beloveds in “the far country” of sin and self-indulgence (Luke 15) to see the destructive path they are on and repent. I thought about the parents and loved ones I know personally, with whom I join my prayers for God to protect their children in the far country before the heartless, evil predator snatches them like the alligator grabbed little Lane Graves.

Disney has been changing their signs, from the polite request “No Swimming Please” to the explicit “Danger: Alligators and Snakes in Area.” People need to know when they are exposed to dangerous predators, right?

It’s true in the spiritual realm as well. Sexual and relational brokenness often leads to sin that opens people to attacks of our enemy the devil, like a roaring lion, always on the prowl looking for someone to devour. Just as real as the alligators in what’s supposed to be “The Happiest Place on Earth.” Celebrating and encouraging what God calls sin—especially any kind of sexual behavior outside of marriage between a husband and wife—is like erecting a sign at the Seven Seas Lagoon that says, “Come on in, the water’s fine.”

But it’s not. Whether people wade into the shallows or dive into the deep, they are making themselves an offering to the predator, right in his territory.

Like a lion or alligator, the enemy of our souls is on the prowl, seeking to steal, kill and destroy.

Just ask the parents of the ones who died at the Pulse nightclub. Or the parents of little Lane Graves.

This blog post originally appeared at

Pain: God's Just-Right Tool

I wrote this blog post on May 7, 2012. When I ran it again almost five years later, I added this introduction:

Not quite five years ago, when I originally wrote this, I had no idea that by this point, I would hardly be walking, using a scooter 95% of the time and unable to move without a walker for the rest. Pain and serious weakness are my daily companions. As I noticed the counts on my most popular blog posts and discovered this one among the top, I am grateful that the wisdom God gave me five years ago is even more true today. And I am grateful that I can even minister to myself.

It's now almost ten years later, and I certainly had no idea that by THIS point, the Lord would have so incredibly graciously allowed me to have had both hips replaced so that I live free from pain. Never, ever saw that coming. But I also know that this is a sweet but temporary season, as I keep getting older and the late effects of polio continue to threaten. So I live with a deep sense of gratitude for this season of respite, knowing that any point I may be forced to re-enter the place of pain.

"You know, you're like the Martha Stewart of kitchen gadgets and tools," my friend observed as she unloaded our dishwasher. "You've got stuff I never knew existed."



I really do like having just-right tools. I only use my cherry pitter during cherry season, but it's perfect for the job. I don't use my electric knife sharpener every day, but when I do pull it out to put a finely honed edge on a knife, it brings joy to my culinary tasks. I love being able to chop up nuts in my food chopper in no time flat—and no mess. Tools like these are a reason I enjoy cooking and baking.

Once as I was using a razor blade holder to scrape paint off the windows on our garage door, I said, "Thanks, Lord, for the blessing of a just-right tool." I sensed Him say, "Do you think it's any different for Me? I enjoy having the just-right tool in My hand as well." At the time I got the impression He was talking about using us as instruments of grace and blessing in His hand, but lately I've become aware of a different kind of just-right tool in God's hand.

Pain.

Physical pain, emotional pain, the pain of trials and suffering of all kinds. Pain is an incredibly effective tool to achieve God's purposes in our lives: transforming His children into the image of His Son Jesus, tearing down strongholds that keep us from being all that He made us to be, restoring what was lost in the Fall.



Since God has no magic wand and no Easy button (that's only for Staples commercials), He has to use other means to accomplish the considerable task of changing people who are far more broken and messy and less than we were created to be, into the people He intended us to be from the beginning.

Some of the just-right tools I have personally seen in God's hands:

George and Pam (not their real names) found the wheels coming off their lives when they learned their middle-schooler was doing drugs, followed shortly by dealing them. Though they were faithful church attenders, neither of them actually knew Jesus. They were directed to a grace-drenched, gospel-preaching church where they both trusted Christ and everything changed. George told me recently that as he had learned, "Suffering keeps us from the delusion of self-sufficiency. This delusion was my main problem. When the sufferings of my failure as a husband, father and man became crushing, I surrendered." They are now leaders in several ministries at their church.

Jennifer Clouse's second battle with cancer, which she shares generously via her [blog](#) and her friendships with about a gazillion people. Jen is teaching many people what the grace of humor looks like from inside a cancer diagnosis that moves her closer to heaven every day. Her ability to see God in everything is as instructive as when she stood before women teaching the Word. (Note: Jennifer has been with the Lord since 2016.)

Barbara Baker is a missionary in Mexico whose desire to minister to people is far greater than her body's ability to support it. As her frailty and weakness grows, so do her limitations. When Ray and I visited Barbara and Jonathan in Puebla last year, I saw what happens when the diameter of a spotlight is reduced; it becomes like a laser! Barbara's physical limitations mean that the things she *is* able to

participate in are that much more valuable, that much more grace-filled. Her light is that much more concentrated.

Holly Loughlin has been fighting Cystic Fibrosis her whole life, which has now reached what used to be the upper limit for CF patients. On her most recent hospitalization, she started daily [blogging](#) what life was like for her, and I absolutely loved what she wrote on Day 10:

“The Lord is always in the business of redeeming. Sometimes I see that so clearly here. Everyone gushes about what a great CF patient I am and they are all eager to introduce me other CFers who are struggling because of my hope and outlook and work ethic. But, I wasn’t always like this. I went through 3 really rough years where I refused to do anything that had anything to do with CF. I didn’t take any pills, do any treatments, or even eat the way I was supposed to. All of those things felt like chains that held me at the mercy of CF. I suffered needlessly and went in the hospital many more times than was actually necessary during those years, but the Lord was gracious and allowed me to survive it. Somewhere around the time I went off to UNT at 18 I realized that CF wasn’t something I was going to be able to escape, no matter how I lived and that I had been given a specific set of tools that, if anything could, would help me achieve the goals and dreams I had for my life. I realized that eating, sleeping, doing my treatments and taking my pills were the things that were going to give me the best shot at having a great life.

“I had no idea then how great my life was going to be one day. Some of my dreams didn’t come true. I had to give them up because my body just wouldn’t accomplish them no matter what I did, but the Lord was so gracious to give me new dreams, better dreams. And here I am 20 years later with the best husband anyone could dream up, a daughter more amazing than I could ever have imagined, and a lot of life still ahead of me. That’s our God. He loves to give His children

good gifts. He loves to be called upon. He loves to surprise us when we least expect it. And I'm thankful that He is even now using the folly of those years so long ago to reach out and give hope and encouragement to others.

"I could never have imagined that I would be sitting up in the hospital at this age being the go-to person for giving hope, love, and light to people who are as lost in the weeds of CF now as I was then. I'm so thankful that the Lord has let me live to see this, to be this. I know how much I would've given to have had someone for me like I am able to be for these folks."

Daniel and Kelly Crawford received the devastating news that their unborn son Abel had Trisomy18, a genetic condition incompatible with life. Shortly after he was born, they wrote on their [blog](#),

"[W]e've been living in this challenging tension since last July... a total inability to control or manipulate an outcome, which forces you to make a decision: we can fall headlong into depression & despair, or we can return to the promises of the Faithful One.

"So just as we've tried to do all along, we want to live out Psalm 143:8 and remind ourselves of God's steadfast trustworthiness every morning. We want to cling to 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, setting our gaze on our great eternal Hope amidst affliction. And we want to remember James 4:14-15, seizing every precious hour of every precious day and knowing that even you & I are never guaranteed tomorrow.

"God's sovereignty is something I have subscribed to wholeheartedly for a good long while, but you really 'put your money where your mouth is' in these scenarios that truly are out of your hands."

Their precious little boy lived for 15 days before slipping out of his mama's arms into Jesus' arms. The just-right tool

of Trisomy18 was what God used to fulfill what the Crawfords confidently told the thousands of people who prayed and wept and followed their story: "The ultimate plan and purpose for Abel's life (and our life) is to glorify the Glorious One." And he did.

And then there's me.

Advanced arthritis on top of Post-Polio Syndrome means I now need a walker instead of just a cane to walk and stand. Most steps hurt. Two ortho docs have said I will need both hips replaced, but post-surgery rehabbing is questionable when one of my legs is basically worthless. Could this be a just-right tool in God's hand?

I choose to believe it is. Every day I have the choice to remember and give thanks that ***a good and loving God is in control.*** I've always lived with a lot on my plate, but He has allowed my "plate" to get smaller. As I upgraded to a walker, I downgraded from a dinner plate to a bread plate. Like Barbara, limitations abound and I have to check with the Lord: what do *You* want me to do?

I have seen God do some marvelous things in my family through this new challenge. He is good. I may be falling apart on the outside, but my "inner man" is more vibrant than ever, as long as I cling to the truth that God is good.

My new life verse is 2 Corinthians 4:16-18-

Therefore we do not despair, but even if our physical body is wearing way, our inner person is being renewed day by day. For our momentary, light suffering is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison because we are not looking at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen. For what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

That's my story and I'm sticking with it.

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