

The Darkness Has Not Overcome It



A Note for Parents of Young Children

This morning, as I hugged my kids and released them to the open door of the school bus, my heart quickened for a second. There were several moments as we engaged in ordinary getting-ready-for-school tasks when a lump caught in my throat as I thought of another parent, halfway across the country, wanting more than anything for the normalcy of helping their second grader locate lost shoes and then to reach out with helping hands to fix the lopsided bunny ear ties atop them. As a parent to children of similar ages as those who lost their lives in the Texas school shooting yesterday, we are in a unique place to bear a stranger's burden and to be burdened by a stranger's passion.

My first note to parents of young children who face the very real question of, *"What, if anything, should I share with my preschool or early elementary schooler about this horrible event?"* is to weep with those who weep. You don't have to make excuses or feel guilt for sensing real shock and devastation. Nor is there a punishment coming down the pike for feeling a very real sense of relief that, at least this time, this horrid manifestation of evil did not locate itself in our hometown. We do not trade evils. There is not a measured allotment of them. The enemy of humanity is the same across the globe and the mitigation of evil in one space does not reallocate the pain onto another group of people. Deep breaths, long sighs, heavy tears, bigger hugs, extra tickle attacks, longer bedtime cuddles, one more "I love you" at the bus stop. To share in these things in your home and with your children does not rob them from the parent in Texas—our common enemy did that. So, pray for that parent as you rejoice in the mundane.

Second, if you have very young children (those Kindergarten, maybe even third grade, and younger), relish the assurance that, for this moment, your child will probably learn about these events in a history lesson years down the road. Even if an extra lockdown drill takes place in these last few days of school, teachers and administrators are well trained in how to communicate such plans without stirring up anxiety in students. Recently, I heard one school administrator frame the lockdown drill to young students like this: "This drill simply means everyone needs to stay in their space because the common areas need to be available for other adults to move about the building. We practice these drills so that we know what to do." Simple. No fear. Not panic-inducing.

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What if you're the exception? You have a child who incessantly overhears adult conversation or is a fourth/fifth grader who is leaning into the liminal space of knowing more deeply the groanings of this world. In this case, how might you engage your child in this difficult conversation? Lucky (or unlucky) for you, your Kids' Ministry Director fits this category. My first grader leaves no adult conversation off limits for eaves dropping. Yesterday afternoon, the timid question emerged from the kitchen doorway, "Mom, *what* happened in Texas? Did a kid get hurt?" Few things will knock the wind out of you as a parent like a loaded question. I can't prescribe an answer for each family when those gut-wrenching questions come, but here is what we did at our house:

When my elementary school child asks, I might say:

Start with a broad telling and allow the child to gauge how far they want to press in. My husband's and my reply went something like this:

"Yes, something really terrible happened at a school in Texas yesterday. Someone who could not hear God's good voice started listening to Satan's evil plans instead. That person got their thoughts stuck in a really, really dark place and forgot how much God loves the people he made. Because of that, several people died yesterday."

It will probably come, but allow the child time to ask questions like, "Does that mean this person killed people?" "How old were the people who died?" "Were the people who died my age?" "Did the person who killed those people die?"

There isn't a script for the questions that come next, but there are a few principles to keep in mind as you courageously engage in this conversation.

First, kids are theologians. They are piecing together an understanding of who God is every second of every day. There are topics that we perceive as "off limits" to them but their minds know no boundaries. I heard questions, just yesterday, like, "If God knows everything, why did he even make this person who did this terrible thing?" "Why doesn't God make all the evil things stop?" "If God is so powerful, why didn't he send someone to stop this kid before the police arrived? Why did he wait for the police to be the ones to stop this bad person, after so many children had died?" In my opinion, it's ok to let the answer live in the tension of "Honestly, I don't fully know. God does know everything, but I don't even fully understand what it means for God to know everything," and "That feeling you have that something is wrong with the world, that evil should not be able to accomplish awful plans like this, that

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tells us deep inside that God is real, that we desperately need the New Creation Jesus offers, that more than anything we could ever long for, we are longing for 'God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'" The problem of pain and evil reveals, *not* that God is powerless, but that God is real, his justice is good, and his compassion meets us in the broken chasm sin has wrought.

Lastly, invite your child to respond in prayer. Yesterday, I offered my oldest a scripted prayer, because words are hard to come by when we are shocked. We, in our house, often turn to what is known as the Compline Prayer. It goes like this: "Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night. And give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ. Give rest to the weary. Bless the dying, sooth the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous. And all for your love's sake, Amen." As we turned to this prayer just before sleep last night, I could see on my son's face, for the very first time, that he knew exactly who he was praying for as he whispered, "bless the dying, sooth the suffering." In a movement that can only be explained by the Holy Spirit's personal relationship with my son, we began singing his "bedtime song," *How Deep the Father's Love for Us* and he changed the lyrics in response to The Spirit. May the words of my seven-year-old be of comfort to you as you process and pray about how (or if) you ought to enter into this conversation with your own children:

*How deep the Father's love for kids
How vast beyond all measure
That He would give his only Son
To save the kids who died [yester]day
How great the pain of searing loss
The Father hears their cry of pain
As wounds which mar the Chosen One
Bring many kids to glory*

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