

COMMON OBJECTION

Where is God When Tragedy Strikes?

Some years ago I was asked to make a pastoral call to counsel a woman who was dying of cancer. She was a young mother in her middle thirties, with three small children. Her husband was in denial of her illness; he would not discuss it with her and even avoided coming into her bedroom where she lay, too weak to get up. As we talked she raged in anger over the fact that God was allowing this to happen to her. "How can God let me die with these small children to care for," she demanded. "I have prayed, but my prayers go unanswered. Why has God abandoned me?"

I attempted to enter into her feelings of anger and agreed that what happened to her was a terrible injustice and a great tragedy. I asked if she was afraid to die, and she replied, "Yes, because I don't know who will take care of my kids, and I have lost my faith in God." Then, looking directly at me, she demanded again, "Tell me, pastor, how do you explain God's absence and His failure to heal me and prevent this terrible thing from happening?"

I felt my formal theological training melt away like a sand castle washed with a cresting wave. To give a defense of God at that moment was beyond my competence. The enormity of the reality of her situation exposed my carefully prepared "textbook" responses as superficial and inane. Venturing into unexplored territory, led only by the flickering light of her own desperate honesty, I replied: "I don't think that God can do anything about it. I think that He feels as helpless and perhaps as angry as you do."

"You can't say that," she protested. "Don't we believe that God is in control and has the power to do anything He wants?" She had been instructed as to what one should believe about God, as it turned out. She knew what one was expected to say about God, but had little idea of what God had to say about her.

"The God that I know was present when His own child was suffering and dying on the cross," I replied. "He was powerless to intervene and remove Him from the cross, for His love is His power, and it took a powerful love to enter into sickness and death in order to provide a way through it for us."

I went on to talk about the reality of God as present in the pain and suffering of His Son, Jesus Christ. I suggested that our concept of power as absolute control over everything from outside was really very superficial and empty of real meaning. She was quiet for a long time. Then she said, quietly and with deep feeling, "I can believe that. I just had to have some point of contact. I couldn't reach Him when I thought of Him being powerful and distant. But I can trust Him if He is willing to die with me."

After a prayer with shared tears, I asked her, "Are you afraid?" And she replied, "Not so much now. When I think of God's love as His power to go through this with me, I don't feel so alone."

As I later reflected upon what had happened in that room, permeated with pain and shadowed by suffering, I realized that a concept of a God who is viewed as omnipotent and all powerful places him outside our perceptions of reality and beyond the reach of our powerless faith. Instead of destroying her faith in God by suggesting that God was not the all-powerful figure she had in her mind, God was made more real to her and, in a paradoxical kind of way, more powerful in relationship to her own suffering than she had ever experienced before.

What she came to realize is that the power of God is not an abstract kind of power as control over everything, but a power of personal presence even in a time of suffering and dying.