

The God of Tight Places

by Thom Gardner

God is our refuge and strength, A very present help in trouble. Psalm 46:1-3 NASU

It is every parent's worst nightmare. I got the call as I was beginning a ministry session at about 10:00 in the morning. (I am a pastor) I was told that our youngest daughter had been in an accident but that she was OK. She had some kind of injury and was being taken to the local hospital emergency room. I left the appointment with apologies and drove the short distance to the hospital where I was joined by my wife Carol in a few minutes. She was the one first called after the accident by someone at the scene. In fact our daughter herself talked to her over the cell phone though she was very confused about what happened. Carol and I, like most parents, had to wait. It seems as though parents spend a large percentage of time waiting.

We stood in the driveway of the emergency entrance waiting for an ambulance to arrive; it never arrived. We strained to see each time an ambulance arrived to see if Coco was on board expecting to see her little Coco expressing something like, *"This is no big deal."* Coco is our youngest—our baby. She is an impressive young woman with a desire to help and heal people in the community.

As we waited it became apparent that Coco was not coming there. We went inside the Emergency waiting room and asked what they knew. All they could tell us was that they were not going to be receiving anyone from the accident but that two people had been life-lined by helicopter to the Trauma unit at the Hershey Medical Center. The very words *"Trauma Unit"* shook us to the core. Our hearts fell and our pulses began to increase. By law, they could give us no other information because Coco is over 18 years of age. We were both frantic and anger began to rise up in me. I began to

insist on some kind of information. Eventually I was given the number of the local State Police station and an understanding trooper told us that indeed Coco was one of those airlifted to the Trauma Unit.

We were given the number of the Medical Center called there. When we called and told them who we were they asked us to hold and put us on the phone with the Chaplain who also was unable to tell us Coco's condition other than he has talked to her and that the doctors were hard at work on her. So Carol and I drove the one and a half hour drive to Hershey, which seemed like about eight hours, in almost total ignorance. I wish I could say that our hearts were encouraged by the fact that the Lord was in control and that everything would work out for good. I did not feel that. I was afraid and could hardly hold it together. As we drove the interminable distance to the hospital many flashbacks replayed of times when this little one had been hurt or traumatized in some way. I remembered when Coco was a newborn and they had to keep her in the hospital for an extra day after Carol was released for some reason. I remember crying in the hallway when they told us. Then the scene jumped to when Coco was about a toddler and fell against the hot glass window of an oven door. Her little hand and face were badly burned and became one giant blister. All she could do was to cry. I remembered other times when I felt helpless as a parent and a father to do anything for the *"Bean"* as we came to call her. But at no time in my life or hers did I feel as helpless and weak as today. My faith was wavering and my mind was *wondering*, *"God, how could You allow this to happen to this baby of ours? You gave her to us...why...how?"*

All of this was overwhelming to me and my impulse was to cry. But someone had to be the Dad and I guess it was me, though I felt more like a

helpless little boy. All Carol and I could do was to pray, “*Lord, have mercy on our daughter.*”

When we arrived at Hershey we were taken to a little room adjacent to the Trauma wing. In a few minutes a delightful man, Chaplain Herb, met us and prayed with us. He could not tell us anything about Coco but waited with us until one of the many doctors attending our baby could come and talk to us. The doctor came in and began to describe what seemed like an incredible array of injuries Coco had suffered. It was far more than the few bumps and bruises we first expected. She had a broken pelvis, a dislocated hip, two broken feet, a fractured left wrist, a long gash on her forehead along with a broken cheek bone. This entire horrific inventory stunned us but they were mere words.

After the description of her injuries we were told that we could see her in the Surgical Intensive Care Unit or SICU. We were taken to the unit and were greeted by the sights and sounds of medical high technology. The people were very friendly and accommodating. Coco 's was the room in the corner. We walked into the room through a sliding glass panel and caught sight of our daughter who was lying in a bed surrounded by lights and beeps and gauges indicating the various functions of her physical being. I walked around to the left side of the bed and caught sight of our bruised and bloody girl with a respirator tube down her throat, her hair matted with blood and a long sutured cut on her pretty forehead. Then as I looked at her I spoke her name, “*Coco.*” Her left eyelid rose revealing one of those big brown eyes of hers. Though Coco's body was battered there was still a Coco alive and unaltered in there somewhere.

I did not know what to say to this baby of ours. She was experiencing pain beyond my imagination. Her little broken body lay helplessly on that sterile bed and there was nothing I would do about it. I wish I could say that the Spirit of God rose up in me and that I uttered great and faithful prayers. I could not pray; I was paralyzed and weak. The mother of Coco 's boyfriend came into the room and stood by her. She asked me, “*Did you pray for Coco ?*” I could not even muster a response as my eyes welled up with tears. I could not pray or say a word. All I could do was look at the various

machinations of high tech medicine and wonder to myself how all of us could get through this time. I was especially focused on myself and feeling sorry and sad.

Coco had something like sixteen hours of surgery over the next few days. We pretty much lived at the Trauma waiting room. I met a few interesting folks who were going through some of the same kinds of pain we were experiencing.

Everyone seemed to have more faith than I did. I could not yet pray as the breath had been knocked out of me. I was far separated from all the sermons I had preached on the goodness of God. This was my child! Where was the faithfulness of God now? Where was His protective hand? This substantial young lady had pointed her life in the direction of helping others and our family was dedicated and had gone without many times for the sake of ministry. None of this was fair. None of it made sense. Where was the faithfulness of God?

A few days after the surgery I felt that I needed to find some kind of closure, to make some kind of sense of all that was happening to Coco and to our family. We humans are always trying to make sense of things to gain some kind of control over life. I am convinced that all of us waste much energy trying to understand things that are not meant to be understood—to make sense out of the nonsensical.

The way I could get some closure was to go and see what was left of her car. I drove to the wrecking yard where they towed the car and asked to see it. They knew immediately which one it was and led me to it. I saw only the back end of the car and was not sure I wanted to see the front end. I came around to the front of the car and was amazed by what I saw. The front of her car and the passenger compartment were crushed and compressed into a tiny space. How could she have survived this impact? The airbag was deployed and it looked as if the steering wheel was bent over from the impact of her upper body. How did she not get crushed? As the emotion and fears of what might have been began to crowd my mind, an odd peace began to settle in my mind as I heard God speaking these words to my heart: “*I am abundantly available in tight places...*” It was an interpretation of Psalm

46:1 that I had preached on a few years before. The NASU translates this Ps 46:1-7

God is our refuge and strength, A very present help in trouble . 2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change And though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; 3 Though its waters roar and foam, Though the mountains quake at its swelling pride....7 The LORD of hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our stronghold.

My interpretation of this scripture came from the notes in the margins of my Bible. The Hebrew of the text could be simply and literally interpreted that God was “abundantly available in tight places.” I looked again at the car and saw that it was indeed a “tight place.” God was telling me that He was there in that “tight place” with Coco and in fact had been with her in every tight place she had ever experienced.

We have a tendency to see the presence of God as some kind of mysterious and impersonal force, like something out of *Star Wars*. But this was not some impersonal and mysterious force that was with her, but the very Person of Christ who was full of compassion for Coco .

As the Lord continued to speak to my heart I could see Him in and around that crunched car in so many ways. I envisioned Him sitting beside Coco immediately before the crash and at the moment of impact. It was as though His hand slipped between her and that airbag. Then I remembered that one of Coco's friends whom she had gone through most of her Jr. High and High School was driving by within a minute or so of the accident and saw the aftermath of the wreck. The Lord told her to pull over and help as she had some medical training. She heard a voice from the car asking for someone to call Carol, her mother. Coco 's friend stayed with her the whole time, praying with her and trying to stop the bleeding on her head. Her friend, Larissa, was the “ present help ”, the abundant availability of God for that moment.

In addition to Larissa, a nurse who was behind Coco had a cell phone with which to call Carol. It was the comforting hand of God already beginning to assure us of His care, though at the time we did

not hear Him through the din of trauma and worry. The scene switched to the EMTs on the scene. They were the hand of God all over Coco as she was taken on the wing to a place of help by the Life-line flight. A place prepared by the love and compassion of God.

When Coco arrived at the Trauma Unit there were as many as ten people working on her at one time. There were plastic surgeons, neurosurgeons, orthopedic surgeons and many other technicians. Though all of this looked like a high tech medical wonder, it was in fact the “*very present help*” of God in that tight place. Chaplain Herb was the still small voice of God speaking to us about our daughter. It was miraculous! It was the abundant availability of God on the scene.

The Lord had never taken His eyes off of Coco or withdrawn His hand from her. He reminded me that before Coco was ours she was His. He reminded of the other times when Coco or her sister Amy Jo had been injured or sick, that He was fully involved and abundant in those tight places. I began to see Coco 's history and mine in a more accurate way. When she had to stay at the hospital I now saw her cradled in the arms of one of the OB staff. (By the way, she was born at Hershey Medical Center as well.) When she got burned as a toddler it was a kindly older doctor who ministered to her little face and hand so calmly and gently. On and on it went until I would see the Lord's Person involved at every stage of her life and ours.

Many of us have convicted God of apathy by circumstantial evidence. We believe that if we catch a cold or a cancer that Somehow God is disinterested in us, that He does not love us. We fail to see the faithfulness of God. The reality is that we live in a world filled from the fall with colds and cancers and crashes. They are not God's fault nor are they His will. They are just life.

The Lord is faithful to us in the midst of the inevitable trials we face. He did not tell us that we would never face trials but that He we would be with us in trouble. He said “... *I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. With a long life I will satisfy him and let him see My salvation.*” (Psalm 91:15-16) To see His salvation is to see

Him in the midst of the difficulty. The word salvation and Jesus come from the same root. Jesus is the Person of God in the world of man. He is the fullness of God's mercy and faithfulness.

Again, God promised that He would be with us "in the fire." He promised, "*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, Nor will the flame burn you. For I am the LORD your God..*" (Isaiah 43:2-3)

Now that I have seen the faithful hand of God, I am fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. (Rom 4:21 KJV) God was never scared about what was happening to Coco in that accident; His heart did not go one beat faster through this. It was all in His hand and Coco was hidden under His wings. And even if things had turned out far worse for us, that Coco had been taken from us, we know that in some way

it would have been is loving hand that led her to Himself. With Job was can say, "*Though He slay me, yet with I trust Him !*" (Job 13:15)

The mercy of God does not rest upon our understanding or faith, because my human faith and understanding are both puny weaklings. I cannot make sense of why something like this kind of pain should happen to Coco or to us. It does not make and I am convinced that God did plan for this to happen. God's personal presence came to show mercy to our family, not because we deserved it but because He is good and His mercy is everlasting. He is *abundantly available for help in tight places. The tighter the place the more abundant He becomes. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change And though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; Though its waters roar and foam, Though the mountains quake at its swelling pride.* Psalm 46:2-3)