

## Where Is God?

By Shon Pernice

It is the most common question asked when tragedy and despair affects our lives. When everything around us deals with pain, torment, and suffering, we demand, "*Where is God?*" This is the age-old question of the centuries, moreover, an important one. This is the subject that can impact a person's hope, faith, courage, and love, forever.

I have been in the most trying places that have challenged my faith: war and a state prison. I have witnessed human beings at their worst. I have seen the evil that can dominate a single person, or falsely motivate a group. And, I too, have asked God *why? Where are you?* Being of the flesh really makes blind faith difficult. We want a sign or some empirical evidence as proof that God exists. Perhaps we are not seeing what is in front of us. There are opportunities that happen every day and that includes those precious moments that go unrecognized. What if God is in us? I am not inferring that we have super powers or omnipotent authority, but strength, love, forgiveness, and courageous responses. You know, those things that we would expect from our maker. Let me open your eyes into my world and see what you think.

First, let's do a bit of history. According to Genesis 1:27, "So God created man in His own image....male and female He created them". Ok, yes it is a Bible verse. Then you have the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. All three are one in the same, however, God the Son is whom I am going to focus on. We know the story of Jesus' suffering, torture, humiliation, and then His death on the cross. It was pretty bad stuff if you have read the story in the Bible or seen the Hollywood version. How does this pertain to us? We suffer too. Some more than others. Now I will walk you through the rest.

The war in Iraq was a horrible experience. I saw my friends get blown into pieces by roadside bombs and then had to send their body parts home over a period several days. I have seen the results of torture, children burned by their parents because of intimidation, and females used as human shields. I have been to the place where men hunt other men as if Americans were in season that year. *Where was God?* Let me tell you.

The doctors and medics that volunteered to leave their families, and risked their lives, to try and make the world a better place. How about the soldier that had lost so much blood, the operating room is out of plasma, and the soldier should not live. A young man whose whole life is ahead of him, and is surely going to die. *Where is God?* God is in the 60 to 70 soldiers, who did not even know the wounded man, as they lined up to donate their blood in the combat zone. His chances of living did not matter. These Godly United States troops rolling up their sleeves with no questions asked. In the U.S., when a patient requires six to twelve units of blood, that is considered a massive transfusion with a high mortality rate. That young warrior received 207 units of blood and lived (Balad, Iraq, 2005, 86<sup>th</sup> Combat Support Hospital) <sup>1</sup>. Was it God in those donors, a miracle of survival, or just luck?

Self-sacrifice would be considered an unnatural event among us mortals, however, is God inside those who forfeit their life so that their brothers can live? Take for instance Navy SEAL Petty Officer Second Class Mike Monsoor, who jumped onto a grenade in Iraq, saving the lives of forty-five SEALs that were walking by. Was this warrior who received the Congressional Medal of Honor posthumously, suicidal, crazy, or deranged? LCpl Kyle Carpenter, U.S. Marine Corps veteran and living Medal of Honor recipient, used his body to shield a grenade blast in Afghanistan and protected a fellow Marine from harm. What would motivate a person to perform an action that could result in his or her own death or serious injury? Jesus did say that, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends". (John 15:13)

Let me walk you through some instances in a men's prison. The place is filled with lions and lambs. Predators are always searching for prey and they are good at it. There are murderers, rapists, and others who have committed heinous crimes against humanity. *Where is God?* I see it in the man convicted of a second-degree murder who finds another inmate pulseless and nonbreathing, due to a heroin overdose. Prison mentality, and policy, is to walk away and to stay out of it or you might get into trouble for being an accessory. This "convicted murderer" initiates CPR and the individual that overdosed—lived. How about the gang member. He's brute in size, tattoo's everywhere, and has an intimidating appearance. He has been a bully in the past and has extorted other inmates, but today, he carries a heavy canteen bag for an elderly inmate and asks for nothing in return. Or, how about the men who have victimized their communities, stole, vandalized, assaulted, and hurt a lot of people. Now they have flipped those distorted principles

into strengths by educating the younger offenders about life, morals, and values. Do they have to do this? Are they mandated by the prison or get time off their sentence? No. Is it God working in these men? Or, perhaps through these men?

Where was God on December 14, 2012, at Sandy Hook Elementary, in Newtown, Connecticut, when a deranged shooter, whose name does not deserve mention, senselessly killed twenty-eight in their place of learning and forever altered the lives of thousands? If we look narrowly at that horrible day, we will only find devastation and evil. God was there. God was in Victoria Soto, the teacher who told the shooter that the children were in the auditorium, at the other end of the school. She tried to misdirect the killer, but the frightened children burst through the closet door from where they were hiding. Soto's body was found on top of the dead children that she was trying to protect, along with another teacher<sup>2</sup>.

Is God's work of strength, courage, and love, only in adults? The answer is no. I will start out small and work my way up. These are only the events that I witnessed on the news. There are many more if you look deeper into current and past events. At the mass shooting during the Garlic Festival in Gilroy, California, on July 28, 2019, the Associated Press (AP) reported that a ten-year-old girl saved a three-year-old boy from harm after the gunman wounded the boy's parents. Candice Marquez was working at a nearby stand and told the AP that her young niece helped the boy to safety by hiding him under a table, and then she made eye contact with the gunman. What did the shooter see in the eyes of this ten-year-old girl that made him retreat? *Where was God?* In August 2020, six-year-old Bridger steps in front of his younger sister when an aggressive dog charged at her. He thwarted the attack on the toddler and his mauled face required 90 stitches<sup>3</sup>. What would compel a six-year-old child to face off with a vicious animal and not run away terrified?

What do most American teenagers spend their time doing? The common responses would be hanging out with friends, playing video games, and countless hours on social media. So where was God in early May 2019, at the STEM School Highlands Ranch, in Colorado? When a gunman burst into a high school classroom with the intent of mass murder, eighteen-year-old Kendrick Castillo, with complete disregard for his own safety, pinned the attacker to the wall. Castillo was fatally shot protecting his classmates, however, his bravery helped to minimize the bloodshed. According to Castillo's friends, he "had an infectious smile and gentle sense of

humor”<sup>4</sup>. What would motivate an eighteen year old to take such action? His entire life was ahead of him to include a job offer at a local manufacturing company. Castillo’s actions speak louder than any words that I can assemble.

Forgiveness is the key point spread by Jesus. All throughout history in the Bible, Jesus spreads this message and its importance. Take Jeanne Bishop for example. Her pregnant sister, and her sister’s husband, were brutally murdered on April 7, 1990. The murderer broke into the couple’s home and waited for them. The husband was handcuffed as the perpetrator put the gun to the back of his head and fired as his young wife watched. Then, the killer pointed the gun at her, shot her in the stomach, and left her to bleed to death on the floor. The coroner’s report estimated that she lived another ten to fifteen minutes as she left a simple message using her own blood. Jeanne refused to say the murderer’s name for twenty years. Now, Bishop has visited her sister’s killer many times, advocates for gun violence prevention, ending the death penalty, and releasing the innocent. She wrote a book about her experience called, “**Change of Heart: Justice, Mercy, and Making Peace with My Sister’s Killer**”. On top of that, despite being a crime victim survivor, she left her corporate job to become a public defender in Cook County, IL. Bishop’s life was forever altered by an evil act. Her pain was indisputable and she could have chosen vengeance. Why did she decide to forgive? *Where was God?* The authority to pardon another human being from a personal offense can only come from a place of love and compassion.

Most of us look, but we do not see. We want something extravagant, tangible, and a miraculous event to prove God’s existence. If God is so good, why do bad things happen? The hardships of life have been debated for thousands of years. My focus is to see through the pain and expose those acts that can reflect on God’s spirit. God is in the hearts of those men and women on the battlefield that conduct their duties into eternity. He is in the face of the inmate that makes peace when violence is an option. God is in our children when their actions overpower their innocence. God is in the humanity of a survivor that chooses forgiveness over retribution. God’s essence is all around us in the actions of others. Trials can be occasions for the works of grace, by wakening dormant reserves of courage, love, and compassion that we may not have been aware of. So then, *where is God?* The answer is inside us.

## References

1. Carroll, A. (2007) *Grace Under Fire-Letters of Faith in Times of War*. pg. 136.
2. Yancey, P. (2013). *The Question That Never Goes Away*. Zondervan. pg. 110-111.
3. ABC News. (2021 January 26).
4. ST. Louis Post-Dispatch. (2020 May 9). pg. A13.