

HE ONLY IS MY ROCK AND MY SALVATION (Psalm 62:6)

April 6, 2014

As we have a number of visitors here this morning, I begin with a little self introduction. I am Dan Hendley, for five years, Sr. Pastor of North Park Church and I have never been more pleased to be that than I am today. I have been in pastoral ministry more than thirty years. I have been in roles that were comfortable and some that were profoundly stretching. I evangelize, I counsel, I lead a staff, I show up in hospitals or police stations during life crises. Like most lead pastors, I do all these things. But you know what I am at the core, when you really drill down into Dan Hendley? I am a simple Bible teacher. That's it. As a college student, I fell in love with this book and the One of whom it tells me. And I have wanted more than anything for the last 38 years, just to help people find in here, what and who I have found in here. The author, John White expressed my feelings so well when he wrote about what his discovery of God's word did for him. He writes: *Foundations cemented themselves to an other-worldly rock beyond the reach of time and space, and I became strong and more alive...there are no expressions majestic enough to tell of the glory I have seen or the wonder of finding that I, a neurotic, unstable, middle-aged man have my feet firmly planted in eternity and breathe the air of heaven. And all this has come to me through a careful study of Scripture.*

That said, one of the things I discovered from my study of Scripture is that it does not explain everything. That which I most need to know it trumpets forth with brilliant clarity. But this book also says in Deuteronomy 29:29 that although the revealed things belong to us, the hidden things belong to God and we must reach a place, as Job did, when we stop demanding total intellectual clarity and simply say, *God is God and I am clearly not.* No world view, secular or religious, can explain every aspect of life on this planet. Paul said we see as in a mirror dimly. So, what does the Bible teacher say when a member of his church confesses to trying to kill her two sons? This Bible teacher says there are things I just don't understand. And I want to share some of those with you, along with a few things the Scriptures have helped me to understand.

I don't understand what possessed Michelle to drown her sons. She says there were crazy voices. I don't know what that is like. I don't know for sure what that is about. But, because of the Scriptures, I am not clueless. The Bible explains that man rebelled against God and things have been very wrong ever since. We live in a horribly broken world. Your Bible says so, but so does your newspaper every single day. And we can run to the suburbs in hopes of escaping it, but we

can't. The effects of the curse are all around us. We aren't going to paint over that here. We are not going to pretend. What we will do is grieve the brokenness of our world, of our families, of our hearts. Brokenness is all around. In Genesis 3 there is the eating of forbidden fruit, the subsequent curse, and chapter four follows with what? Fratricide. Not a mother killing a son, but a brother killing a brother. God's word tells us we are fallen, corrupted, sinful, prone to evil. Society doesn't mess us up, we mess up society. Even our minds, our thinking is fallen and gets twisted. Part of the explanation of Luke Schlemmer's death is simply sin. Michelle is a fallen woman; and whatever else contributed to her terrible choice, the sinful lost condition of one woman and the human race was a part of it.

But there was something else we read about in Genesis 3. Or should I say someone else. There were four characters in the garden and one of them was the serpent. I have been preaching for three weeks from Revelation 20 that the devil is bound and if you listened closely you understand that he was bound with regard to a particular purpose. He cannot keep gospel light from the nations any longer. But, he can certainly speak to, deceive and tempt individuals. We read in the New Testament of demonic influences that often took over personalities and led them to do bizarre, inexplicable things. The Old Testament doesn't mention demons so much but we see their influence through pagan religions such as the worship of Molech. And what did the worship of Molech involve? Child Sacrifice. The killing of one's offspring to please the god. Interestingly, Christians worship a God who sacrifices His Son on our behalf. That's the good news of Christianity. It is a message of extreme grace. Molech worship was extreme in a different way. What bothers us about a parent killing a child is that it does not just violate grace, it violates nature. We are hard-wired to protect and care for our children. For the most part, common grace has preserved that, but sometimes the delusions of the enemy become so powerful that he achieves the ultimate triumph of child killing. And God had to warn ancient Israel about such a practice. Leviticus 18:**21** *You shall not give any of your offspring to offer them to Molech, nor shall you profane the name of your God.* Every day in our city, women are making the choice to offer their babies, through abortion, to the gods of money, reputation and career. As much as I disapprove I understand the temptation in that direction. I don't understand the appeal of Molech. Nor can I grasp an evil force so powerful as to extinguish common maternal affections. Michelle referred to crazy voices. Crazy, evil, demonic voices indeed.

Woah! Did the Schlemmer's pastor just say that Michelle was demon possessed? No. He just said that the devil is real, that he is a murderer -- that's John 8:44 - that he is into deceiving those he can and he loves the killing of children. Did he play a role in this story? Oh yes, I believe he did. Exactly what that is, I don't pretend to know. But, with respect to the deceiver, knowing this book means I am not clueless. Evil that is beyond human comprehension is real and powerful. Paul said that we are not ignorant of the devil's schemes.

But then what about mental illness? Well, that is the third factor that plays into something like this tragedy. Sin, Satan, mental illness. Of these three the Bible says very little about mental illness. We see examples of it in Scripture, but very little teaching. Again, I am a Bible teacher. I don't regard myself as an expert on mental illness, but my experience with the experts is that they are often just guessing themselves. That our friend had some kind of psychotic breakdown involving the hearing of voices appears to be the case. What caused it? What could have prevented it? What can be done now about it? I do not know. Mental Health treatment can be an instrument by which God brings about some measure of healing to a broken brain, but there is no magic wand and it is possible that this is just one of the hidden things and we can only weep and call on the God to whom nothing is hidden.

One other thought on this before I move on. I not only don't understand why Michelle made her fatal choice, I don't understand why I have not made such a choice, or you. What I mean to say is that maybe you too have crazy ideas that float through your head from time to time, about jumping off a building or driving into the river. But such thoughts come & they go. They have never possessed you. Something mercifully has kept you tethered to reality & me too but I am not sure why & I expect that the line between sanity and insanity is much thinner than we want to think. Here I am making the old point about *there but for the grace of God, go I*. The reality of human weakness and corruption is such that none of us should ever think we could never, ever, do something so terrible. We can't view what Michelle has done with anything but grief, horror and disapproval, but we must view it as well from a place of humility.

Okay, so there is a second thing this Bible teacher does not understand and that is how God can endure the suffering of his children to the extent He does. We believe in a sovereign God. He didn't step off his throne when two precious boys were drowned by their mother. And now a father's heart is in agony. Mark Schlemmer is in a place of grief so deep we can hardly imagine as he mourns his loss of two sons, his practical loss of a wife. He finds comfort in the hope of heaven

for those now gone, but there is Joshua, his oldest, who has lost brothers and a mom. The pain here is not widespread like you get in a natural disaster or a war, but the depth of it for one family is deep. And our hearts cry, "WHY?!" The classic answers are either that God doesn't really care, or, on the other hand, God really isn't powerful. But Scripture affirms both His love and power. More than that it tells us of a sovereign, suffering, Savior who died that we might be forgiven. My mind is blown. Luke 19, verse 41. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday and this is from the account of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, five days before the crucifixion. Luke 19:41-44 *When He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it, 42 saying, "If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. 43 For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, 44 and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation."* What Jesus is describing here occurred about forty years later in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. With prophetic vision He was able to see the calamity that was coming and He wept! Well now, that is a third thing I don't understand. A weeping God? Really? The sentimentalists rob him of his power, the cynics rob him of his love, the Biblical Christian says, *Lord, your ways are higher than my ways and your thoughts higher than my thoughts. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord.* There is a God in the heavens, glorious and gracious beyond my comprehension and I will worship Him.

There is a fourth thing I should tell you that I don't understand. I don't understand how those who are not connected with a local church get through major trials. As painful as these last few days have been, it has provided again a glimpse of how powerful and beautiful is the body of Christ. From those sitting in the hospital with Daniel, to those who came alongside Mark, to those who sat with Joshua and brought meals and wrote letters and prayed and wept and prayed some more. I saw this most personally in 1989 when our daughter was diagnosed with leukemia and our newborn needed surgery and my wife's back was out, all at the same time. Folks sent cards, held babies, cooked meals, did housework, watched our children and prayed. It was as if God sent down a legion of angels to bear our burdens and that is the way it is supposed to be. God provides for us through His people. Listen, if you aren't part of the church, if all you do is attend worship somewhere you are missing out. God has enormous provision stored up for those He loves but if you are detached from God's people you are gonna miss out. The Lord is providing for Mark and

Joshua Schlemmer, and for many of you, through His people and He is doing that in impressive fashion.

A fifth thing I don't understand is how those who don't know God manage to move on past the tragedies of life. Here I think particularly of the capacity for us to talk with the Almighty. There is nothing most concerned people can do directly for the Schlemmers but pray. And if you can't pray - you really are powerless. I have been a peripheral party to the story this last week but dozens of people have told me that they are praying for me, not to mention the Schlemmers, and that really does mean something. But I am always interested to hear what unbelievers say to those going through tough times. They really have nothing they can say that might comfort. They can't say, "I'll pray" so many say this: "our thoughts are with you."® as if thinking about us is going to help. I thank God that I can express my love for people by praying.

And then too, I thank God that I can unburden myself to Him in prayer. It is no mere cliché for me to say that during hard times prayer is my strength and peace. I can lose interest in food and sports, but worship is always sweetness to my soul. And then there is the praying that goes beyond words. Look at Romans 8. I'm not talking about praying in tongues, there is a prayer that goes deeper than that. Romans 8:26 *the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.* If you think I'm misapplying this text think again. Romans 8 is found in the context of suffering in a fallen world. 8:22-23 *we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. 23 And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.* But until that day the sufferings of this world leave us crying out to God, and in my private moments this is what I have done, in my office, in my bed, on my walks. Those times of weeping bring peace and healing. Now is that a distinctly Christian experience? I doubt it. I mean, I'm sure that unbelievers groan and wail in times of great stress but what is distinctly Christian is that our groaning is before God. It is groaning in prayer to a God who hears. Look at Exodus 2. As you will recall at this point in the history of Israel the Hebrews were in Egypt and had been put to forced labor by the Egyptians. This is a precious passage 2:23-25 *the sons of Israel sighed because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry for help because of their bondage rose up to God. 24 So God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. 25 God saw the sons of Israel, and God took notice of them.* Do you see what that means?

The cries of God's people do not bounce off the ceiling. They rise up to God who hears and takes notice! That is glorious! And friends, the Lord does move in answer to prayer. In Exodus 3:7 *The Lord said, "I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings.* And God responded by raising up Moses. David wrote in Psalm 18:6 *In my distress I called upon the Lord, And cried to my God for help; He heard my voice out of His temple, And my cry for help before Him came into His ears.* And in Psalm 116 he wrote 116:1-2 *I love the Lord, because He hears My voice and my supplications. 2 Because He has inclined His ear to me, Therefore I shall call upon Him as long as I live.* Coming to my Father in prayer is such a gift. I just don't understand how folks get by without it.

It is interesting to me how people react to terrible trials and deep pain -whether observed or experienced first hand. For some, the trial drives them away from God. *Oh, I don't want to worship a God who would let this happen to a little child. How can you people still say you believe in a God of love?* I don't pretend that the Bible makes everything understandable. There was a time I thought that maybe with enough time to study and reflect I would get to where all my questions were answered. That was way way back. Now, I know that no matter how well I know the Book, no matter how well I know the Author of it, I won't have all the answers. And yes, I get bothered by that! But here is what I find. If I run away from Biblical faith, if I pull back from following Jesus, I am left with far fewer answers to the mysteries of life. Then I am unable to explain a mother's love at all, much less the breakdown of that love. Secularism can't explain anything. Maybe I can't give you a satisfactory answer to the problem of evil, but secularism can't even make sense of the concept of evil. That is why I so appreciate John chapter 6 where we read Jesus saying many things hard to understand and dozens of people withdrew and quit the Jesus movement. So Jesus turns to his twelve and says, "You guys leaving too?" John 6:68-69 *Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. 69 We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God."* I get that. There are things I hear and see that challenge my faith, that stretch my belief, that make me think about bailing -- but then I see what my alternatives are. I realize again that, at times, we have to surrender what we don't understand to those things we have found to be true, and I remember that it is through Christ and His precious word that I have found life - life abundant and life eternal.

Among the precious words of Jesus is a story of two builders. Each built a house and moved in. Both were happy. Both felt secure. Until the storms came. May I suggest that there is a whole lot of shallow, phony security that we feel in middle class suburban America. We think we are protected because we have insurance and alarm systems and 401ks. All that is nice until a big storm comes. We got a big storm blowing in the North Hills this week. And storms test you. Specifically, they test your foundation. Upon what is your life built? In the story Jesus told, one man built his house on the sand, another on the rock. The house on the sand was wiped out when the storm came, but here is what Jesus said about the other house Matthew 7:25 *the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock.* In that parable Jesus said that the rock is the hearing and doing of His word. Throughout the Bible, our God Himself is called a Rock. Psalm 62:6-8 *He only is my rock and my salvation, My stronghold; I shall not be shaken. 7 On God my salvation and my glory rest; The rock of my strength, my refuge is in God. 8 Trust in Him at all times, O people; Pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us.* On Wednesday of this last week when I was asked by reporters what I say to a Mark Schlemmer, what I say to a hurting church, and this is what I told them. Unsettling, disturbing events blow away our false securities and remind us that ultimately there is only One who is worthy of our total trust, whom we can trust fully today and whom we can trust fully tomorrow who will be there to support us no matter what, even into and beyond the valley of the shadow of death. Corrie Ten Boom said, *There is no pit so deep that God's love isn't deeper.* And His love is the biggest, greatest, most important reality of this day or any other day.

Steven Curtis Chapman is a Christian musician who knows about family crises. His teenage son accidentally ran over and killed his little sister in their driveway. Years before that Chapman wrote a song that has ministered to me in my darkest moments. The song says, "*Tomorrow morning if you wake up and the sun does not appear. I will be here. If in the dark we lose sight of love, hold my hand and have no fear, cause I, I will be here.*" For eight years I have heard that as God's promise to me. It just restates Psalm 23 which reminds us to fear no evil for *Thou are with me.* And that is why I say to you my dear brothers and sisters and our friends from the community. Trust in the Lord at all times; Pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us. He only is our Rock. And, as Jesus said, to know Him is life eternal. The Scriptures set forth that message with brilliant clarity and life-giving power even in the darkest days of our lives.