



THE COMMAND

learning to love like Jesus

BRUCE MANNERS

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PREFACE

As a pastor, only once did I want to punch one of my parishioners. And I wanted to punch him in the mouth. Hard! I was sitting across from him in his office, and I was frustrated. I was angry!

If you happen to be one of my former parishioners reading this, it wasn't you. This former parishioner died a few years ago.

I had confronted him about something he was involved in that gave the “appearance of evil” to use the King James Version of 1 Thessalonians 5:22. I was not alone in making the observation and he was well aware of that.

His response? “Prove it!”

I'm a fairly laid-back kind of person, but this really got under my skin. In my naivety, I expected him to recognise the problem and plan to do something about it. Or defend himself. The conversation continued for 20 minutes or so, but no matter how I expressed the problem it came back to: “Prove it!”

I didn't punch him, thankfully.

However, it still reminds me that loving a fellow Adventist is not always easy, particularly when there are disagreements. This is not about liking but about the principled *agape* love, the love Jesus demonstrated and spoke of.

After the supper in the Upper Room, Jesus said to His disciples, “Now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other, just as I have loved you, you should love each other” (John 13:34). I confess, I failed this command that day in that parishioner's office.

We Seventh-day Adventists have a vital interest in the Ten Commandments handed to Moses on Mount Sinai—and particularly the fourth, the seventh-day Sabbath command. So we should because the Ten are a template for putting God first and how we relate to each other.

Unfortunately, we focus less on the four commands to love that Jesus gives in the gospels. Or to put it another way—as suggested by the title of this book—one command that has four parts. The overall command is

to love.

Like Jesus did.

Like Jesus does.

People-centred God

One of the most horrendous episodes of death and horror in recent history occurred over a 100-day period in Rwanda in 1994. Romeo Dallaire was the Canadian force commander in charge of the United Nations Mission to Rwanda at the time, but with such a small staff and few resources, he could do nothing to stop the genocide that saw an estimated 800,000 Rwandans die in 100 days.

That's 800,000 men, women and children murdered in 100 days.

That averages out at 8000 a day.

333 an hour.

Six a minute.

One every 10 seconds.

For *100 days!*

A few weeks after the ethnic killings began, a group of bureaucrats came to assess the situation and decide whether their government should attempt to intervene. Their report was staggering, Dallaire was told: "We will recommend to our government not to intervene as the risks are high and all that is here are humans."¹

Excuse me? What kind of priorities are involved here? If it had been an oil-rich nation would that make a difference? Are people less important? That's what "all that is here are humans" sounds like.

Can you imagine the God-head in a three-way conversation in about 10 BC, Earth time, discussing the plan for the Son to come to earth: to be born of a human hand-maid; to be restricted to live life as a human; only being able to communicate in gibberish for several months; being teased by other children; living a peasant-like existence; taking up a trade; being hated and facing continuing criticism by many of those who should have known better; dying the most painful, cruel and demeaning death Romans could find.

Not One of the Three would have asked, "Why are we doing this? All that is there are humans." They wouldn't have asked, because that was

the point. It was *for* humans because God loved—God loves—the people of the world so much.

God’s way is to put humans first. God, the Trinity, is love. We humans are the beloved. And that never stops for God *is* love. That’s who He is.

The challenge for Jesus followers is to demonstrate that same love to others. To love like Jesus.

One of the other major tragedies in Rwanda was that it was, at the time, one of the most Christian nations in Africa. Now, before we Adventists get into blaming-those-other-Christians mode, four years before the Rwandan blood bath, in 1990, the Rwandan census reported that almost two million of the eight million population claimed to be Seventh-day Adventists. They—we—were involved more than we’d want to admit.² That two million figure is way above the official membership,³ but this was the number of Rwandans who claimed to be part of our church.

The problem is this: “When push came to shove, the Jesus who taught His disciples to love your neighbour went missing when young men were hacking old men, women and children to death simply because these neighbours were ethnically different.”⁴

In the Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 5–7), Jesus gave His followers the call to radical love. A love that extends even to our enemies. This is not an anything-goes love, or a sappy, doe-eyed love that doesn’t see reality. It’s a principled recognition of the value and worth of the other.

It’s much bigger than being right

We Adventist like to be right. We think we have the best arguments about such things as the Saturday Sabbath being the right day for worship; being right about what happens when we die; and about the soon coming of Jesus. We can biblically defend these, and other positions, and that’s important, but . . .

Read again Matthew 23 where Jesus tears shreds off the Pharisees and teachers of the religious law. Note, though, that this comes after He tells his listeners to “practice and obey whatever they tell you” because they are “the official interpreters of the law of Moses.” But please “don’t follow their example.” Why? “They don’t practice what they teach”

(Matthew 23:2, 3).

Think of it this way: these Pharisees and teachers of the law may have had the law right, but they hadn't got the living right. Jesus says they're hypocrites and calls them back to "justice, mercy and faithfulness" (Matthew 23:23). He's telling them that living for God is more than being right, it's also about doing right.

Being right is important, but without the connection to doing right, it can merely be head knowledge that doesn't impact on our lives—and arguably—anybody else's.

Jesus' John 3:16 proclamation is based on the fact that "God loved the world so much." This is a relational God who invites us into a relationship with Him. Jesus tells us to then love others—even our enemies—and to show it by doing "good to them." Going further, He adds, "You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate" (Luke 6:35, 36).

We're to love like the Father. And to love like the Son. To impact for God on our planet.

That's the command.

The Command has a simple structure. The first three chapters consider God's love, particularly as it is revealed in Jesus, with the fourth chapter demonstrating the dramatic love-shift found in the Bible that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus brought. The following chapters discuss and illustrate what loving like Jesus might look like in different circumstances.

My hope is that you are as blessed and challenged as you read *The Command*. Loving like Jesus is a challenge.

1. Romeo Dallaire, *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda*, Carroll and Graf Publishers, New York, 2005, page 7.

2. Claude Richli, "Rwanda—20 years later," *Adventist Review*, March 31, 2014, <https://www.adventistreview.org/remembering-rwanda/2014-03-31-rwanda-20-years-later>.

3. Official Seventh-day Adventist membership for Rwanda was: 1990, 209,316; 1995, 190,316; 2000, 324,021. Source: Ngabo Birikunzira Jerome, *Implantation and Growth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Rwanda*, Master of Theology degree in Church History, University of South Africa, 2008, page 107. <<http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/2322/dissertation.pdf;sequence=1>>.

4. Lee C Camp, *Mere Discipleship: Radical Christianity in a Rebellious World*, Brazos Press, 2008, pages 19-21.

1

GOD IS . . .

“God is the King of the World,” says Kelly, aged nine. “I think God is a big hug that goes all around the world,” adds Liam, aged five. Piper, also aged five, reckons “Grandma is God.”

What does He look like? Or is it She, as Piper suggests? We have answers for that, as well. Kamran, aged eight, says, “He has an invisible head and he floats in the garden. One side is night and the other side is day and God sees the owls and bunnies and butterflies. God also rides a motorcycle, but he’s playing hockey in Pasadena right now. He can do everything.” Rebecca, aged six, adds, “God is so beautiful you can’t see him.” And Emily, aged five, lets us in on a styling secret, “God had white hair, but he dyes it brown.”

So, what does He wear? “God wears a cloak that takes away people’s sins,” says Dillon, aged nine. It’s a “purple robe with a blue trimming,” says an unidentified child. Nick, aged nine, gives a fuller picture when he says, “God always wears a shiny dinner plate behind his head as well as a wrinkled sheet.”²

How do you see God?

Imagine if the only thing we knew about God was that He exists. That God is. And we were left to add the descriptors of God. God is . . . what? Of course, we could try God is omnipotent (all powerful), God is omniscient (all knowing) and God is omnipresent (everywhere).

Take omniscience, for example. If we don’t know anything else about God’s character, His omniscience might become *I’m watching you, I know all about you*. We would probably assume He was watching us to see what we were doing wrong—to judge us. That would be scary.

But what if, as the Bible says, God is love? That takes away the scary because He’s watching us out of love. In a sense, He loves us so much He just can’t take His eyes off us.

If God is love, He loves you.

No matter what you’ve done, no matter what you’re doing, no matter

what you will do, God loves you. He can't stop loving because He is love. It's who He is. God loves you and God loves me, and there's nothing we can do to change that, for God is love (see 1 John 4:8, 16).

God *is* love. Not God *has* love. Not God *shows* love. Not God *gives* love. God *is* love. Those other love markers are also true because it's at the core of His being. It's how He reveals Himself, and how He identifies Himself.

God is love.

It shows. A kiss brought Adam to life. Love sent Abraham to a distant land. Love brought Moses back to Egypt. The commandments and the Scriptures—one handwritten, the other Spirit-breathed—are love letters.

The second book of the law, Deuteronomy, has 34 chapters with love mentioned 27 times. It's where God declares that Israel was chosen not because of ability, performance or size, "it was simply that the Lord loves you" (Deuteronomy 7:7–9).

In the Psalms, there are 73 references to God's unfailing love and 36 to God's faithful love (26 times in Psalm 136).⁶ The Old Testament ends, in Malachi, with strong words of condemnation for Israel. But Malachi begins, "I have always loved you," says the Lord" (Malachi 1:2).

God is love.

Jesus is the ultimate demonstration of love. God had spoken through His prophets, but come the New Testament and He speaks through His Son. No longer content with words, He sends the Word—Jesus (see John 1:1).

The Gospels tell the story. Paul's letters help give the story theology and meaning. The cross demonstrates the heart of God for His creation. Jesus' sense of forsakenness means we never need be forsaken. The cry of "It is finished!" (John 19:30) signals the defeat of the enemy.

"This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins" (1 John 4:10). But there's more, Jesus' promise hangs in the air: "I will come again." What a time of joy. What a time of sorrow. God rejoices as He comes for His own. His heart breaks as He's forced to deal with those who reject Him, for God is love.

God *really is* love.

This made no sense in the first century when newly minted Christians began to spread the message: “The simple phrase ‘For God so loved the world . . .’ would have puzzled an educated pagan. And the notion that the gods care how we treat one another would be dismissed as patently absurd.”⁷

The pagan world would never say of their pantheon of gods, “The gods are love.” Any way you look at it, their gods simply didn’t care about humans. The discovery of the one-and-only capital “g” God changed the world.

That God is love makes little sense to so many in our century. In the West, we live in a time when religion is disparaged, when it’s considered sophisticated to be an atheist, and yet there are many who follow rule-bound religions in their attempt to reach God. Other beliefs seek to find an inner god. Discovering the God who is love will change their world.

God is love.

This is good Adventist teaching. Ellen White wrote her five-book Conflict of the Ages series with the first book, *Patriarch and Prophets*, beginning with “God is love.” The last book, *The Great Controversy*, ends with “God is love.” God’s weapon, His driving force in the cosmic conflict is love, because He *is* love. Her book, *Steps to Christ*, begins: “Nature and revelation alike testify of God’s love.”

God is love.

It’s revealed in, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). That was said out of love for the soldiers at the cross, for the priests who turned the crowd into a frenzy of hate, for the members of the Sanhedrin who bent the law to murder their Messiah. But it echoes through the ages whenever evil is personified.

God is every prodigal’s Father, no matter how far they are away from home. His love is given without measure and it never stops. Never has. Never will. God loves them—whoever “them” is. God loves you. God loves me. And there’s nothing, absolutely nothing, we can do to change that, for God is love.⁸

To put it another way, “In Christianity the most important storyline is this idea of grace, that there is nothing we can do to earn the love of God or to save ourselves, nor remarkably is there anything we can do to make

God love us less.”⁹

In the Bible,

the central truth of all other truths is that God is love. All heaven—in fact, all of the universe—is based on one truth—God is love. If not based on this truth, items meant to be blessings often misrepresent God and even damage His work. . . . We need to make sure that what we believe, think, and how we act is centred on, depends on, and is tested by this main truth (see 1 Corinthians 13). Otherwise, it has no power (verse 1).¹⁰

Unconditional love—really?

God’s love is unconditional, right? And unconditional has a sense that there are . . . well, no conditions. It’s true that there are no conditions in the love God extends to us. Grace offered through Christ is absolutely free—no conditions attached. If there were, it would no longer be grace. In this sense, God’s love is unconditional.

“But!” That’s the word God uses after working on an act of unconditional love in creating Adam and providing him a wife. There’s a brief description of the beauty and purpose of the garden—and their role “to tend and watch over it.” The “but” added a condition, not of love, but of life expectancy. “But the Lord God warned [Adam], ‘You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden—except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die’” (Genesis 2:16, 17).

Adam and Eve had been shown grace. God had provided a planet and a garden as a gift. He had personally sculpted Adam with His own hands and formed Eve from one of Adam’s ribs. They didn’t ask for it. They couldn’t ask for it. That makes it a gift. That’s grace. However, with the gift came an expectation: “Don’t eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”

Is “unconditional” the right word to describe God’s love? Howard A Snyder suggests that to rely on God’s love apart from Jesus, or even in Him, but without personal faith and discipleship, “is to trust in mushy sentiment.” He adds that there are “two essential conditions for experiencing God’s love: Jesus’ death on the cross (costly grace) and our

self-committing trust (genuine faith).”¹¹

God’s love is given unconditionally, no question. In fact, it seems that “God loves the world in a kind of reverse relationship to its moral unfitness.”¹² Biblically speaking, God sent “Christ to die for us while we were still sinners” (Romans 5:8). And Christ’s death, adds the apostle Paul, makes us “friends of God” through “God’s wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness” and gives us “right standing with God” and “eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 5:11, 21).

Several Bible versions have come up with a term we can use to replace the often used “unconditional.” They use “unfailing,” which is a better way of thinking about God’s love. “So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of *unfailing love* and faithfulness” (John 1:14, emphasis added). Understanding and accepting God’s unfailing love makes a difference—it changes us. We become friends of God, and friends of God *act* like friends of God.

What about the “Old Testament God”?

In one of his *The Far Side* cartoons, Gary Larson has God sitting at His computer, which displays an image of a man walking along the footpath with a grand piano hanging over him. It’s held up by a few thin ropes. God has his hand over the keyboard and is about to hit the “smite” key.¹³ Too often this is how some picture God—and particularly how they see Him in the Old Testament.

Outspoken atheist, Richard Dawkins writes, in *The God Delusion*:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.¹⁴

It’s an overstatement, but some sense of what Dawkins is saying can be found in the Old Testament and we have to admit that we don’t always see what we understand as loving actions from God in the First Testament. We should also admit that we don’t always know God’s purpose in what He does.

Many Christians have struggled to relate to the Old Testament God after being introduced to Jesus. Marcion (85–160 AD) was among the first. He rejected the Old Testament God completely, calling Him a “sub-deity at best, but not the supreme God.”¹⁵

In *God Behaving Badly*, David T Lamb tells of how the “God of the Old Testament” fascinated him:

He became really angry, but was extraordinarily patient. He seemed to view women and wives as property, but he also selected women as spiritual and political leaders over the nation of Israel. He commanded Israel to vanquish the Canaanites, but also to care for the poor, the widows, the orphans and the foreigners. God in the Old Testament was complex.¹⁶

We need to admit that complexity. What we do have is evidence of God working to a plan when He tells Abraham that the Promised Land will not be given to him or his descendants for 400 years because the “sins of the Amorites do not yet warrant their destruction” (Genesis 15:16). They have time to change—if they choose.

Moses warns that there will be times of exile for Israel if they turn away from God. However, He “will have mercy on you and gather you back from all the nations where he has scattered you” (Deuteronomy 30:3). God is a forgiving God.

In the argument about the God of the Old Testament, we also need to give the people of the Old Testament a voice to allow them a chance to explain how they saw Him. One occasion is recorded in the prayer of confession in Nehemiah 9, led by eight Levite leaders.

They begin by recognising God as merciful and worthy of praise because He is the everlasting, creator God. They then emphasise God’s worthiness from His leading in the past and particularly during the Exodus. There was rebellion, “But you are a God of forgiveness, gracious and merciful, slow to become angry, and rich in unfailing love. You did not abandon them” (verse 17).

They recognised that in the Promised Land they had turned their backs on God’s Law; killed God’s prophets; and committed blasphemies. God handed them over to their enemies for *just* punishment (verse 33, italics added). “But in your great mercy, you did not destroy them completely

or abandon them forever. What a gracious and merciful God you are!” (verse 31).

These Levites picture a God of unfailing love, not a tyrant. There’s a strong sense that they have let God down, not that God has let them down. He was always with them, whatever their situation: “Although the prophets speak constantly of Yahweh’s anger and judgment, they also picture Him as a loving and faithful husband.”¹⁷

When Ryan Butler, author of *The Skeletons in God’s Closet*, was interviewed about difficult “God passages” in the Old Testament, he told the following story:

My daughter was in the hospital recently with some serious symptoms. She’s five, and the nurses are holding her down, putting needles in her arm. She’s confused, scared. Of course I’m there with her, holding her hand. She’s looking up at me, as if to say, “What the heck is going on?”

She’s raging. She wants out. But she knows me. My hope is that she trusts me in that moment, that she sees the rest of our story, our life together, and trusts that I’m doing what’s best for her. If you just isolated that moment, where I’m allowing people to hold her down and put needles in her arm, it looks bad. But there’s a broader story. We’ve developed trust. She knows I love her.

When we hit those passages that seem strange and disturbing, and that’s all you have, it’s like looking at a stranger holding you down to put needles in your arm. You won’t understand because you don’t know what’s going on.

But if you have that broader narrative, the bigger picture, a history with God, then you can hit those tough spots and say, I don’t know, but I trust the Person at work. And it’s okay. My end game is not to figure it all out. It’s to know God.¹⁸

God doesn’t do destruction lightly (as some, such as Richard Dawkins, want to suggest). With the Genesis flood, God looks down upon the earth and sees wickedness everywhere—consistent and total evil. It was so bad that “the Lord was sorry he had ever made them and put them on the earth” (Genesis 6:6).

But this is not a dispassionate God checking on the planet with a clipboard in hand doing a SWOT analysis.¹⁹ This is a passionate God who had big plans for the planet and its people. Not only was He sorry He had made them but, using love language:

“It broke his heart” (Genesis 6:6).

“It grieved him at his heart” (KJV).

“His heart was deeply troubled” (NIV).

The Flood should not be looked at as a vengeful God trying to punish, but as a cleansing needed to keep humans from destroying themselves and, possibly, the planet.

The calling of Abraham is another let’s-start-again moment. God is saying, *I need a people*. Why was Abraham chosen? Why were his descendants chosen? Love. Moses explains it this way: “The Lord did not set his heart on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other nations, for you were the smallest of all nations! Rather, it was simply that the Lord loves you, and he was keeping the oath he had sworn to your ancestors” (Deuteronomy 7:7, 8).

The God of the Old Testament is also the God of the New, revealing Himself in a new way—through Jesus. God is love. That has never changed—Old or New Testament. God is One. What the New Testament does is give us a greater revelation of God and helps us understand His ways better. And it also helps us gain a better picture of the heart of the One we can incorrectly mis-label as the “Old Testament God.”

The compassionate God

God is love, and love needs an “other” to love. Love does not, cannot work if there’s no-one else to love. That’s why it’s important to see the God of Creation as a three-in-one God—the Trinity. It’s found in the creation story: “God said, ‘Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us’” (Genesis 1:26).

“Let *us* make . . .”? Here’s a hint of the Trinity, something that is fleshed out (literally) with the coming of Jesus (see John 1:1–14). On this Genesis passage, one commentary says: “Although the Christian Trinity cannot be derived solely from the use of the plural, a plurality within the unity of the Godhead may be derived from the passage.”²⁰ *The*

Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary also finds the Trinity in this passage and adds that the “three persons of the Godhead” are “fully and clearly revealed in the New Testament, where we are told in unmistakable terms that Christ, the second person in the Godhead, [is] called God by the Father (Hebrews 1:8).”²¹

Just as important, the “let us make” places the creation of Adam in a different category from the rest of creation. There’s no “let there be” command here. This is where God becomes intimately involved—on His knees crafting Adam out of the soil. Breathing His breath into Adam’s nostrils to make him a “living person” (Genesis 2:7). God is love and it shows with Him getting His hands dirty to create the first human. Then God created Eve because it was “not good for the man to be left alone” (Genesis 2:18). Adam also needed an “other” to love. An “other” who loves in return.

God made humans in His image, “to be like us.” In two ways. First, Creation was for Adam and Eve—and for us. God gave them, and us, rulership over the earth. We remain the earth’s stewards. Second, God self-identifies as love. God created us for positive relationships. For love. That’s love to Him and to love like Him.

In Exodus 34, God meets Moses on Mount Sinai and introduces Himself:

The Lord passed in front of Moses, calling out, “Yahweh! The Lord! The God of compassion and mercy! I am slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness. I lavish unfailing love to a thousand generations. I forgive iniquity, rebellion and sin. But I do not excuse the guilty. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children and grandchildren; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations” (Exodus 34:6, 7).

The question is, what must it take for God, “the God of compassion and mercy,” the God who is “filled with unfailing love and faithfulness,” the God who lavishes “unfailing love to a thousand generations” and forgives “iniquity, rebellion and sin” to actually become the judgment God—to the third and fourth generation?

This is one of those questions where we can find tension between the compassion of God and the judgment and His justice or judgment. This

is where we step back in faith and remind ourselves of His declaration that He is love.

In the context above, Moses understood God to be talking about the then-current situation of the Israelites in the wilderness. He threw himself on the ground and said, “O Lord, if it is true that I have found favour with you, then please travel with us. Yes, this is a stubborn and rebellious people, but please forgive our iniquity and our sins. Claim us as your own special possession.” God shows His compassion and mercy by making a covenant, through Moses, with the people (see Exodus 34:8–10).

Second, the big picture of our planet today says there’s a need for judgment and for cleansing again to make things right. Who would you want to make those kinds of decisions? What kind of God? Compassionate or ruthless? “Particularly important in this statement [Exodus 34:6, 7] is the virtue listed first among the others: God is compassionate. The Hebrew word behind our English word compassion is richer because, as Beth Tanner notes in her co-authored commentary *The Book of Psalms*, it can also mean womb. So a better translation might be ‘motherly compassion.’”²²

The God of motherly compassion? This is a warm, protective compassion. This fits our God who wants to protect, lead and save. God is love, and once you recognise Him for who He is, there’s a sense of security in Him. Even in the face of death.

During World War II, the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camps were places of extreme horror. An estimated 1.1 million people, mostly Jews, were executed by gassing or died of starvation.

One day three rabbis in Auschwitz put God on trial for the death and suffering they saw around them. They argued the case from both sides, prosecuting and defending Him. God was found guilty. After the verdict was given, “one of them said, ‘The court case is concluded; now it is time for the evening prayers.’ And they prayed.”²³

Their faith and confidence in God was bigger than their situation. Their logic and argument may have found God guilty, but their hearts still recognised a need to connect with God and that He was still with them.

The advantage we Christians have is in the life and teachings of Jesus

to help us understand God. “In the face of the [human] tendency to produce an idolatrous representation of God, [believers] have instead His own true image, Jesus Christ. He is the one who not only demonstrates true identity but, through the power of His death and resurrection, frees them from false god substitutes.”²⁴

God’s unfailing love, His “motherly compassion” is revealed in its fullness in Jesus. And He proves conclusively that God is love.

Case study

The last Sue Klebold heard from her youngest son, Dylan, was a “Bye” as he walked out the front door on his way to school. That was on April 20, 1999. She had no knowledge that he and his friend Eric were about to place bombs in the cafeteria of Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. They were set to go off at 11.17 am, during the first lunch period, and the boys planned to shoot anyone who tried to flee the building.

Fortunately, they hadn’t set the detonators correctly and there was no explosion. When nothing happened, they went on a shooting spree, killing 12 students and a teacher before turning their guns on themselves.

Sue’s husband, Tom, received a phone call from the school about the shooting and was told that Dylan was a suspect. He phoned Sue.

“I had a sudden vision of what he might be doing,” she says. “And so, while every other mother in Littleton was praying that her child was safe, I had to pray that mine would die before he hurt anyone else. I thought that if this was really happening and he survived, he would go into the criminal justice system and be executed, and I couldn’t bear to lose him twice. I gave the hardest prayer I ever made, that he would kill himself, because then at least I would know that he wanted to die and wouldn’t be left with all the questions I’d have if he got caught by a police bullet.

“Maybe I was right, but I’ve spent so many hours regretting that prayer: I wished for my son to kill himself, and he did.”²⁵

A couple of years later, an interviewer said to her that it must have been hard to keep loving Dylan through the aftermath of the shooting.

“No, it never was,” she replied. “That was the easy part. Trying to understand was hard, coping with the loss was hard, reconciling myself

to the consequences of his actions was hard, but loving him—no, that was easy for me.”

“When it happened, I used to wish that I had never had children, that I had never married. If Tom and I hadn’t crossed paths at Ohio State, Dylan wouldn’t have existed and this terrible thing wouldn’t have happened. But over time, I’ve come to feel that, for myself, I am glad I had kids and glad to have the kids I did, because the love for them—even at the price of this pain—has been the single greatest joy of my life.

“When I say that, I am speaking of my own pain, and not the pain of other people. But I accept my own pain; life is full of suffering, and this is mine. I know it would have been better for the world if Dylan had never been born. But I believe it would not have been better for me.”

That’s motherly compassion. That’s unfailing love.

Questions

1. What is it that makes you say God is love—or not? What makes your answer believable to you? Do you think it would convince someone else?
2. How would you respond to someone who shared with you Richard Dawkins’ comment about the God of the Old Testament?
3. Does it help to hear the voice of God’s people in the Old Testament about their understanding of God? Explain.
4. “Adam also needed an ‘other’ to love. An ‘other’ who loves in return.” What does this say about God and about humans? List who are the “others” in your life who demonstrate love to you.
5. What do the life and teachings of Jesus reveal about God? What specific examples come to mind?
6. What does the term “motherly compassion” say to you? In what ways does it help describe God’s love?
7. What caught your attention in Sue Klebold’s story? What signals of unfailing love did you find in her story?

5. <<https://www.themindfulword.org/2016/omg-how-children-see-god>>

6. Counting is from a search of the New Living Translation using BibleGateway

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