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## **GUNS AND I**

As I have boasted before, I was born and raised in the Holy

Land (Texas) where, to paraphrase Garrison Keiller, “All the men are good looking, all the women are beautiful, and all the children are above average.” One of the many weird things about Texans is their affinity for guns. It’s in their DNA. To ask, “Does that Texan carry a gun in his pickup?” would be as redundant as asking, “Does he drink Lone Star Beer or iced tea in the summer?” (which lasts from March through November).

My dad loved guns and taught me to handle them safely. I shot BB guns, .22 rifles, pistols, rifles, and shotguns from an early age. Is it sexist for me to observe that little girls normally love dolls and little boys love guns? Anyhow, I will interpret my innate love of guns as an aspect of my Texanness and machoness. Starting in my teens, my friends and I went out in the wild and shot anything that moved, and we practiced shooting cans and small bottles thrown into the air with our .22 rifles. When I moved to Colorado I immediately started hunting deer and elk.

I gave up hunting over 30 years ago because while I loved hunting and shooting, I gradually changed so that I did not like to shoot those animals. But in my opinion there is absolutely nothing wrong with hunting, and most of us eat hamburger and bacon and chicken without compunction. You cannot make a case for vegetarianism from the Bible. *He (Peter) saw the sky open, and something like a large sheet was let down by its four corners. In the sheet were all sorts of animals, reptiles, and birds. Then a voice said to him, “Get up, Peter, kill and eat them.”* (Acts 10:11-13) The vision, of course, had more in mind than our carnivorous diet, but still. Paul makes it clear in the book of Romans that God is not legalistic about our diet but that it is a matter of conscience for each individual: *Accept other believers who are weak in faith, and don’t argue with them about what they think is right or wrong. For instance, one person believes it’s all right to eat anything, but another believer with a sensitive conscience will eat only vegetables. Those who feel free to eat anything must not look down on those who don’t. And those who don’t eat certain foods must not condemn those who do, for God has accepted them. Who are you to condemn someone else’s servants? Their own master will judge whether they stand or fall.* (Ro. 14:1-4, NLT) This principle also applies to drinking alcohol (but getting drunk is listed as a sin), and, I believe, hunting, owning guns, etc.

Paul expands this teaching in Romans 14:20-23. He writes: *Remember, all foods are acceptable, but it is wrong if it makes another person stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or anything else if it might cause another believer to stumble. You may believe there is nothing wrong with what you are doing, but keep it between yourself and God.*

I believe that it is wrong for Christians in our society to drink alcohol or smoke pot or to go to casinos or buy lottery tickets for this very reason. We’re having a plague of destruction and deaths from these addictions in our society, and I think it is irresponsible for Christians, and especially Christian leaders, to set an example that can destroy their brothers and sisters. Of course, for me personally, I don’t have the freedom to drink alcohol because I had a little problem with alcohol in the past. If God hadn’t delivered me from alcohol in 1973, when I was a Christian pastor, the addiction would unquestionably have destroyed me.

Three years ago at my grandson’s wedding, they served champagne to the guests. Those tall, skinny glasses with the bubbly looked enchanting. I thought, “It’s been 40 years since I had a little drink, there’s nothing wrong with me taking a little sip of champagne.” So I took a little sip. Man, it was tasty. So I took another sip. Someone had left their glass about half full, so I felt it should not go to waste. Someone else had left their glass, and I sipped it. The table next to me had some half-full glasses, so I sipped them, too. Pretty soon I had a little buzz. I got that old familiar feeling: warm and secure and full of love and good will. (How can it be wrong when it feels so good?) My daughter was watching from across the room. She said to me later, “Dad, what were you doing!” (Some busy-body is always watching.) I had a little talk with myself. I said, “Don’t lie to yourself, old guy. That evil worm still lives inside, and it is just as ready now as it was 40 years

ago to take over your life.” (The same thing is true about pornography.) So I am going on another alcohol fast for the next 40 years.

A number of years ago, in what I later came to believe was overzealousness, I felt that God wanted me to get rid of my guns. I immediately obeyed by breaking up all of my guns with a hammer. (I believe that Christians are supposed to obey God whether they feel good about it or not.) Some time after that, my friend Lynn Cumming, who lived on a small ranch in the mountains, was attacked by a large dog that had escaped from her neighbor’s yard. It mangled her leg and then, when it lunged for her throat, it mangled her shoulder. If her neighbors had not intervened she would surely have been killed. About the same time, there was a much publicized church shooting. In view of those two events, I reevaluated my “guidance” and my decision to give up guns and decided I had probably been misguided.

As a new Christian, one of the things I studied was pacifism, because the Bible says, “Thou shalt not kill.” Actually, the Bible does not say that. The sixth commandment says, *Thou shalt not murder*, which is not the same. And following Exodus 20, where the Ten Commandments were first listed, are a number of laws where God prescribed the death penalty. For instance, Exodus 21:12 – *Anyone who assaults and kills another person must be put to death*. Whether the death penalty is justified in our present society is another question. We realize that Jesus gave us another parodym for looking at the “law” and for looking at justice and mercy. Also, the rate of incarcerations and executions of minorities, and especially African-Americans, in our nation is terribly skewed. While blacks comprise about 13% of our population, they comprise about 37% of the prison population and about the same rate of executions.

My conclusion about pacifism was that it was not Scriptural or reasonable in this fallen world. In Romans 13, the Holy Spirit tells us through St. Paul that, *They (Earthly rulers) are God’s ministers to you for good....and they do not bear the sword in vain but are called to execute wrath on him who practices evil*. 1 Peter 2:13-14 makes the same point. Also, Jesus and John the Baptist had encounters with soldiers and Roman Centurions and never told those men that there was anything inherently wrong with their calling. Since early church history, the Roman Catholic Church has had a profound teaching regarding “Just War,” mainly credited to Augustine, who drew his insights on this subject from the Greek philosopher Plato as much as from the Bible, but needless to say nations and churches can twist this teaching to prove that all their wars are just wars. For instance, during the Civil War the Christian churches in the South almost unanimously agreed, and proved from Scripture, that slavery was approved by God.

It is obvious from Scripture and from recent events in our nation that God does not supernaturally protect His people from madmen, tyrants, and terrorists. The “slaughter of the innocents” in Bethlehem by King Herod, and the modern slaughter of the innocents in the church in Sutherland, Texas, underline that point. I believe God expects churches to provide security for their flocks, and I don’t know of any realistic way to do that except to have approved people, armed and trained, strategically placed in every gathering. In 2007, if Jeanne Assam, the woman on the security team at New Life Church in Colorado Springs, had not shot the madman in their church who had already killed two people and wounded three, his rampage would have continued.

At the same time, I believe that our government must do a better job of background checks, and we must use some common sense when it comes to the types of weapons we sell to the public. Five years ago I had a neighbor who showed me his gun collection. He could have outfitted a Seal team. One of his guns was a military machine gun, with a tripod and armor-piercing bullets. I live in a mobile-home park, and our walls are about as substantial as pressed paper. You could shoot a BB through my house, not to mention armor-piercing bullets. While that neighbor was extremely paranoid, the good thing was that he had a 10X20 foot fenced area in his back yard where he grew that leafy product that keeps people relaxed, so I felt perfectly safe.

Ironically, while I was preparing this message, I received a reverse 911 call telling me to stay in my house because a swat team had a dangerous man with a rifle cornered in a house a block away from me. (It is an adventure living here in Detroit, I mean Grand Junction.)

All of which explains why I have re-armed. If I found it hard to shoot a deer or an elk, it would surely be much harder to shoot a person unless a loved one was threatened. But in this increasingly lawless society in which we live, where a lot of people are unhinged by their out-of-control use of heroin or meth or ecstasy, or by their fanatical and fantastical beliefs, I feel a personal obligation to provide a small measure of protection for myself, my family, and my neighbors, by owning some guns. I believe that I am not outside the will of God in making this decision. I will not personally carry a weapon into church, but I do not feel that any church is being responsible for the safety of its flock if it does not provide a trained security team. You may disagree with my conclusions, and you are certainly free to let your conscience be your guide.

## **A GRACE DISGUISED – (4)**

I am continuing a synopsis of Gerald Sittser's book, [A Grace Disguised, How the Soul Grows Through Loss](#), about the sudden death in an auto accident caused by a drunk driver of his wife, 4-year old daughter, and mother.

### **THE TERROR OF RANDOMNESS**

“For the last few years my predominant emotion has been a nervous bewilderment. Why, I have repeatedly asked myself, did it happen to us? Why were we at just that place, at just that time, under just those circumstances? Even a pause at a stop sign, a last-minute switch of seats before departure, a slower or faster rate of acceleration after a turn would have spared us all unspeakable suffering.

I have talked with Vietnam veterans who mention this same nervousness in the face of random suffering. One of them described walking on patrol with a fellow soldier who suddenly stepped on a landmine and was killed instantly. Another puzzled over the arbitrariness of death on the battlefield. The soldier to your right is wounded, the one to your left is killed, and you come out without a scratch.

There is, of course, an orderliness to life and to nature. Drop an object and it will fall toward earth at a constant rate of speed, as Newton discovered. Humans also impose order on the world through clocks, schedules, and city planning. But order does not always prevail. A family lives comfortably for forty years in a Midwestern town. Suddenly a tornado blows through and destroys their home, but leaves every other house on the block untouched. A middle-aged man eats a proper diet and exercises regularly for many years, but a lump in his neck prompts him to visit his doctor, who tells him that he has lymphoma. A woman enjoys years of a career, marriage, and motherhood. Then one day while jogging in a park she is raped by a stranger. Suddenly her world turns ugly and she turns bitter. She wonders with regret why she was running through the park at just that time and why God did not whisper some sort of warning to her.

Loss makes the universe seem like a cold and unfriendly place, with no predictability, no design, and no reason to it. Life just happens, whether good or bad. We simply live as best we can, but in the end we realize that what happens is often arbitrary.

A sense of randomness has been one of the worst aspects of my experience of loss and has made it almost unbearable to me. The event was completely outside my control – an “accident,” as we say. For months after the accident I kept reliving the day, changing the schedule in some way so that the accident would not occur. I also searched for reasons. I blamed myself for being a selfish husband, an inattentive father, or an aloof son. I wondered if my family had been cursed or if the accident was a demonic attack. I looked with cynicism on the absurdity of life. Maybe, I thought, there really is no God and no meaning to life. I resigned myself to misery and death, thereby yielding to its inexorability. These recycling thoughts tormented me because I could not discover any explanation that made sense of the tragedy.

The memory of one brief encounter right after the accident has stayed with me these several years. After emergency crews arrived at the scene, I withdrew and tried to find my children who were being cared for by strangers. John was hysterical, and we did not discover until later that he had broken his femur, and we understood then that his hysteria was caused by pain as well as fear. I took him in my arms and began to walk away from the scene of chaos to calm him down. I had walked maybe fifty feet when I met a man with an obvious head injury staggering toward me. I sensed immediately that he was the driver of the other car. Our eyes met briefly but intensely. Then he lay down and someone covered him with a blanket. I looked down at him and he looked up at me. Though John was screaming, sirens were blaring, and lights were flashing, our eyes remained locked on each other. At that moment I thought to myself, I don't even know this man. I may never see him again. Yet he has changed my life forever. What power he has over me and my children. He has killed three members of my family. How can this be?

When I shared with my brother-in-law Jack my wishes that I had the power to alter what had happened, he said that maybe I really wanted to be God-like. So if I really wanted to protect myself from accidents, I should lock myself inside an antiseptic bubble and live there for the rest of my life. But who would want that? Better, he said, to brace myself for accidents and endure them as best I can. Better to give up my quest for control and live in hope.

Most people do learn to live in hope and in trust. It is a wonder, considering the suffering that awaits us all, how few of us live in constant dread, utterly immobilized by what may happen to us. Somehow we manage to live reasonably well, expecting the best and when the worst happens, accepting it as part of the bargain of living in a fallen world. We are remarkably resilient creatures. When knocked down, most of us get up, like weeds bouncing back after being trampled. We love again, work again, and hope again. We think it is worth the risk and trouble to live in the world and consider that life is worth living.

I was helped along the way by two stories in the Bible that gave me a new perspective on the terror of randomness. Both show how events that seem random may not be as capricious as we think. The first story, about Job, explores the power we have to choose for God, though God appears distant and chaos seems to rule. The second story, about Joseph, demonstrates that God is in control even when it is not obvious in our immediate experience.

At first the story of Job repulsed me. The story begins by describing his prosperity and virtue. He is rich, has many children and a faithful wife, and is kind and generous. Then the story changes scenes. In the heavenly court Satan approaches God and challenges Him, arguing that Job is a good and God-fearing man because God has made life easy for him. If God were to make life miserable for Job, God would see another side to him. So Satan proposed a contest to see if Job will remain a righteous man in suffering. God accepts the challenge. Satan first takes away Job's wealth, then his children and servants, and finally his health. Job is left with nothing. All he knows is his pain, loss, and misery.

Job's three "friends" try to convince him that he is an evil person and deserves all that has happened to him. Job does not accept their explanation, but he can't make sense of what has happened to him. Finally, God appears to Job in a whirlwind and shows him that He is transcendent, powerful and wise, far superior to puny Job.

When I first read this story, I was bothered by God's apparent injustice. Job's story became more understandable to me when I tried to stand inside his experience, which is possible for anyone who has suffered severe loss. I trembled before the power of Job's freedom to decide how he was going to respond to his suffering. How he exercised that freedom had repercussions even in God's heavenly court, where the hosts of heaven, including Almighty God, watched to see how Job's life would turn out. Job's choices really mattered to them. He had no idea how far his power reached, but he was not, as he was tempted to think, a solitary figure whose decisions counted for nothing.

I also realize that Job stopped asking questions not because God was a bully but because Job finally beheld God's unfathomable greatness; then he came to know God. On meeting the real God, he simply had no more questions to ask. He discovered that God is the answer to all his questions. Job learned that behind the apparent randomness of life is the existence of God, whose greatness transcended Job but did not nullify the importance of Job's choices. Job finally found meaning in the ineffable presence of God, which he could not fully comprehend with his intellect but could only experience in the depths of his being.

The second story, about Joseph's experience of suffering, runs along two lines that eventually meet. You know the story: He is a favored and spoiled son. In a jealous rage his brothers betray him and sell him into slavery in Egypt. There he is betrayed by his master's wife and thrown into prison. Eventually he interprets the dreams of two of Pharaoh's officials and rises to be made the chief administrator of Egypt. After many years, Joseph's brothers travel to Egypt to buy grain, Joseph reveals himself to them, and then moves his family and his father to Egypt, where they settle and prosper. That is the first story line.

But there is a second story line. It involves God's transcendent purpose, which makes Joseph's personal story a part of a much bigger story. Although Joseph suffers at the hands of his brothers, all the while God is planning to use Joseph's experience to move his family to Egypt, where they will live and eventually become slaves. Then, many years later, they will be led to freedom by Moses. Joseph has no idea that his story fits into this larger plot involving thousands of people and centuries of history. As it turns out, his life does not consist of a succession of isolated events randomly strung together but rather of a story with a purpose that he does not see and will never entirely understand.

Still, even within the limits of his lifetime, Joseph understands enough to say to his brothers, 'You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good...' Joseph acknowledges that great evil was done against him; but he also believes in the face of that evil that God's grace has triumphed over it. He recognizes in the unfolding of his life that God is good in ways that he could not see earlier. The Joseph story helps us to see that our own tragedies can be a very bad chapter in a very good book. The terror of randomness is enveloped by the mysterious purposes of God. In the end, life turns out to be good, although the journey to get there may be circuitous and difficult.

I have often imagined my own story fitting into some greater scheme, the half of which I may never imagine. I simply do not see the bigger picture, but I choose to believe that there is a bigger picture and that my loss is part of some wonderful story authored by God himself. Sometimes I wonder about how my own experience of loss will someday serve a greater purpose that I do not yet see or understand.

Loss may appear to be random, but that does not mean it is. It may fit into a scheme that surpasses even what our imaginations dare to think."

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## **CHRISTMAS DEPRESSION?**

Last night our cell group had its Christmas party and pot-luck. After we ate too much, I asked for everyone to share a Christmas story from their lives. A lady (whom I will call Mary) said that she has suffered with depression in the Christmas season for the past 50 years, but she felt that the depression had been largely lifted because of a Scripture that Pastor Gabe read during his message a couple of weeks ago. PTL! We asked her to share her story.

Mary said that when she was eight years old she told her mom and dad that she wanted a certain doll set. It was a specific set that was popular with all the girls in her school. On Christmas morning she opened her big gift. It was a doll set, but it was the wrong set! She was bitterly disappointed, but she did not want to hurt her parents' feelings so she pretended to love her gift. Very soon she put it away and never played with it. Then some thoughts started coming into her mind: "You will never get what you really want in life. All the other girls get wonderful gifts but you. You don't deserve to get what you want. You are a bad, evil person. Don't tell anybody what you want because you will be disappointed." She started being depressed at Christmas time, on her birthday, etc.

((Do you know where all those negative thoughts came from? According to the Bible, there is a devil, an evil entity with great power, and he is called the "Accuser." He is the enemy of God and of the creatures made in God's image. His goal is to tempt, to deceive, to destroy, and to kill. He attacks everyone, especially those most vulnerable like children. Those thoughts were not Mary's thoughts, they were from her enemy, the enemy, Satan. Of course, you don't have to believe any of this. You may regard it as the most preposterous nonsense and ignorance. That is the way I thought of it even after I spent three years going through a seminary....until that awful experience I had in 1973 when demons were cast out of me and my eyes were opened to understand that what had happened to me was exactly what the Bible described as being one of the foundational ministries of Jesus. (See Matthew 4:24, 10:1; Mark 1:23, 1:32, 5:8, 9:25; Luke 4:41, 6:18, etc. It is also a ministry He gave to His followers: Mark 3:15, 16:17; Luke 9:1, 10:1-20; John 14:12; etc.) Obviously, you don't have to know all of this information or to believe it in order to minister to someone or to be ministered to, and a time of ministry is not the time to start teaching people about it. According to surveys, most people, even in the church, don't even believe in a literal devil or that people can be demonized. But, my Christian friends, I believe that you and I need to know it and believe it because it is revealed in the Bible as the truth about reality, and whether we believe it or not is our loss or gain.)))

I led Mary to forgive her parents and to renounce all the lies that she had believed. I led her to say, "I gather up all those lies I have believed, that I will never get what I want in life, that I don't deserve to get them because I am a bad person, etc., and I give them to you, Jesus. Now, what do you give me in return?" In the silence Mary heard Jesus say, "I give you my peace, I give you the truth that I love you and will give you good gifts."

Two other women, and later a man, reported that they had had similar experiences regarding gifts when they were children and had always struggled with depression in this wonderful season.

Does this ring any Christmas bells with you?

God bless you at Christmas time,

Glenn

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