

I suspect that January 25, 2014 will be long remembered as “The Day the Bubble Burst” over Columbia, Maryland. Whatever may have been true in the past, we can no longer act as though the troubles of the world are far, far away from us in our little pocket of paradise.

As of this writing, the authorities appear to know very little about what may have led to Saturday's shootings at the Mall of Columbia. It seems likely that there will be calls for even more restrictive gun laws in the state, even though Maryland is already in the top handful of most restrictive states.



Such conversations are famous for generating far more heat than light, and our nation is deeply divided about what would improve the situation. I read an opinion piece in *Baptists Today* about a year ago that I thought offered an interesting starting point for such debate. The column was written by Bob Ballance, a pastor in Colorado, and a former editor of *Baptists Today*. Here are Bob's questions:

1. Can we at least agree that gun violence is growing?
2. Can we at least agree that a gun in the hands of someone who is not well emotionally and/or mentally is a dangerous and unwanted thing?
3. Can we at least agree that we've done a poor job as a society and culture of paving the way for people who feel emotionally/mentally distressed to find meaningful, accessible, professional assistance?
4. Can we at least agree that sometimes when a family member or friend feels someone else is not well emotionally/mentally—to the point of possibly harming himself/herself or others—we do not have a meaningful, suitable process for initiating a conversation and getting help if needed?
5. Can we at least agree that too often in our society—whether in video games, movies, or other forms of media—acts of violence are glorified and are demanded in increasing numbers?
6. Can we at least agree that too often guns do end up in the hands of those who should not have access to them?
7. Can we at least agree that we all need to give serious and intentional thought as to how we should address these issues?¹

I myself am a gun owner who supports both the principle of 2nd Amendment Rights on the one hand and sensible guidelines for gun ownership on the other. At the same time, I don't think legislation, as important as it is, is the real solution to our problem.

The real solution to violence of every kind is to be found in human hearts, transformed by the grace of God through personal relationship with Jesus, God's Messiah, in the power of God's Holy Spirit. And that, happily enough, is the province of the Church, the Body of Christ in the world. The real solution to last Saturday's killings is for every one of us to become involved in meaningful ways in “pushing back the Darkness,” one life at a time.

¹ Bob Ballance, “Healthy Conversations about Hard Things,” *Baptists Today*, April 2013, 30.

On Saturday evening, just a few hours after the shootings, I heard the story of a man who, some years ago, was playing the “ain’t it awful” card in response to something in the news. His wife challenged him to do something about it, and he decided to become a mentor to a young man through his church, building his own life and character into the life of a youth, with wonderful effects in both of their lives.

“Ain’t it awful” fixes nothing. What might God be calling you—me—to do now?

One of the things we can do now is to pray with greater intent and commitment. I’ve found the following structure, written by Steven Loots, a pastor friend in South Africa, to be helpful:

Strategic Missional Praying²

“Something happens when you pray that would not have happened if you had not prayed.”

MONDAY: Praying down God’s Power—Godly Intervention

“Your ministry partner needs to *live* in the power and presence of God, so first of all we need to pray *down* the power of God into and onto your partner. Missionary activity is serious spiritual work . . . so, responding to both the prompting of the Holy Spirit and whatever knowledge or information you may have through your contact and communication with your partner, pray God’s power down on his life, her family, and their ministry” (pp. 112-113).

“Your missionary partner also needs to *function* in the power of God. His or her work needs to carry the seal of godly authority. Strongholds need tearing down, darkness needs to be pushed back, and unbelief must be challenged. . . . Ask God to powerfully confirm His Word, supernaturally bless your partner’s evangelistic efforts, and divinely save the lost. . . . Pray that the power of God may be the hallmark of your partner’s ministry and that it would become evident to all around him” (pp. 113-114).

TUESDAY: Praying away Spiritual Darkness (Ephesians 6:12-13)

“The devil hates all missionary endeavors. He hates any action that will draw people out of darkness and into the light. He will use whatever means he can to frustrate missionary efforts. He will fight dirty; he will lie and deceive and kill. . . . He will break down trust, confuse communications, cause equipment malfunction or failure, bring illness, attempt to kill, sow enmity, emphasize tradition, criticize unfairly, and waste resources. He will do anything to slow down the progress of the gospel and speed up the destruction of God’s servants. . . . Pray back forces of evil. Pray through attacks, pray in deliverance, and pray down strongholds” (pp. 114-115).

WEDNESDAY: Praying open Closed Doors (Colossians 4:2)

“Your missionary partner needs to make the most of every opportunity. Pray that God will show him open doors and that God would open closed doors. Pray that her sphere of influence will expand, that he would meet the right people, and that God would provide her with divine appointments. Pray for invitations, access to the right institutions, and entry into formerly closed areas. . . . Pray that every hindrance will turn into an opportunity” (pp. 116-117).

² Excerpted from Steven Loots, *Personal Missionary Partnerships* (Greenwood, VA: World Christian Press, 2008), pp. 109-126.

“Be aware of what is happening in the country where your partner works. Use the Internet, read books, stay up-to-date with the news. In many places civil wars still rage, blocking off huge areas from the gospel. Pray for peace, free entry and safe passage. In some places organized religion is the main opposition. Whether it is a state church, Islam, voodoo or animism, all enslave the people and make it difficult to share salvation. Pray for cultural keys—those well-known stories, histories, practices or myths that could be used to explain the gospel in a way that locals will understand” (p. 117).

“On a personal level, your partners also need you to pray for opportunities to educate their children, for visas, for support, for permits and other documentation, for housing and amenities, for the opportunity to shop, travel, and spend time together as a family” (p. 117).

THURSDAY: Praying in Resources

“Pray for your partner’s continued fundraising efforts. Many missionary partners gifted for work on the field are not necessarily gifted for soliciting funds. . . . Pray for more partners (and help find them). Pray for open doors to trusts, foundations, and grants. Pray for introductions to those who can give. Pray for churches to get involved. Ask the Lord what you can do to help bring in the resources. Allow the Holy Spirit to prompt *you*” (p. 119).

“Not only do we need to pray resources in, but we need to pray for God to protect, preserve, and help us use well what we have. Pray for the protection of current ministry assets, equipment, finances and resources. . . . Ministry involves an intricate web of people, actions and relationships. Many things can and do go wrong. Family troubles and responsibilities, illness, lack of infrastructure, staff resources, projects, poverty, nature and the environment, a dynamic global economy, and a multitude of other things all present daily challenges to your partner.

“Each of these things needs our prayers. Whether it’s a lack of clean water or a pregnant wife, a dreaded disease or a toothache, a new staff member or a hurricane, aging parents back home or adventuresome teens on the field—all of these require God’s help, guidance, provision or intervention. Losing a cell phone in New York is easily remedied; losing one in Angola is a major setback. Breaking a tooth in London may be painful and even expensive, but doing so in Honduras or Zimbabwe could be a nightmare” (pp. 120-121).

FRIDAY: Praying a Spiritual Covering over your Partner (Colossian 4:2)

“One area of prayer that is often neglected is that of watchful praying—being alert to possible dangers and standing in the gap as a watchman for others. Being watchful requires an awareness of what’s happening in the world and sensitivity to spiritual forces—especially to the whispering of the Holy Spirit.

“You may become aware of a worsening political situation in the area where your partner works, or, watching a weather forecast, you realize that a hurricane is headed directly toward them, or you read of new legislation that will directly impact your partner. All of these could be merely interesting, but for someone sensitive to the Holy Spirit, they can be powerful warning signs that urgent prayer is needed.

“Praying watchfully requires a sentry’s vigilance—always on the lookout for possible threat or opportunity. Become a watchman for your partner. Read, listen, and look. Get your spiritual antennae out and get on your knees” (p. 122).

SATURDAY: Offering up Glorious Praise

“Breathe in the Holy Spirit. Reflect on the glory of God. Tell Jesus that you love Him. Adore your Heavenly Father, who answers prayer. Rejoice alongside your mission partner for every success, every breakthrough, every victory, and every advance of the kingdom.

“Whether you read of three people coming to Jesus in Albania or 10,000 in Zambia, our response should be equally enthusiastic: Praise God! Every soul saved is a miracle, a work of God, a victory over death and Satan. Every soul won is a step closer to winning the world for our Lord. And thank Him each time He provides for you so that you can bless the ministry more” (p. 124).

SUNDAY: Praying out Workers into the Harvest (Matthew 9:37-38).

“In all likelihood your partner needs help. There is a chronic shortage of workers to help bring in the harvest. Pray that God would supply human resources, that people with a calling would become aware of the work your partner is doing, and that they would pray about joining him or her. Perhaps you should be spreading the news, telling others and seeking help—with your partner’s concurrence, of course” (p. 125).

Finally, here’s the preaching schedule for the next few months:

February 2	Black History #1: <i>The Bible Story: Let My People Go</i>
February 9	Black History #2: <i>Times of Trouble: There Is a Balm in Gilead</i>
February 16	Black History #3: <i>True Testimony: Give Me Jesus</i>
February 23	Black History #4: <i>Heaven Bound: My Lord, What a Morning</i>
March 2	<i>The Journey of Life: Preschoolers & Children</i>
March 9	<i>The Journey of Life: Youth</i>
March 16	<i>The Journey of Life: Young Adults</i>
March 23	<i>The Journey of Life: Middle Adults</i>
March 30	Pastor Neville
April 6	<i>The Journey of Life: Senior Adults</i>
April 13 PALM SUNDAY	<i>The Idea of a Miracle</i>
April 18 GOOD FRIDAY	<i>Miracles in the Bible</i>
April 20 SonRise	<i>The Grand Miracle</i>
April 20 RESURRECTION	<i>Miracles Today</i>

Dave

The Joshua Code: Fifty-Two Verses Every Believer Should Know **O.S. Hawkins (Thomas Nelson, 2012)**

Week Four: A Psalm for the Ages

*The LORD is my shepherd; I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me to water in places of repose; He renews my life;
He guides me in right paths as befits His name.
Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness,
I fear no harm, for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me.*

*You spread a table for me in full view of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil; my drink is abundant.
Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue me all the days of my life,
And I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for many long years.*

If persons know any Scripture at all, they know John 3:16 and the 23rd Psalm; and even for those who know the entire Book well, these verses remain favorites, because they speak to the deepest places in our lives.

The verses above are likely worded differently from those to which you're accustomed, because they come from the Jewish Publication Society version of the TANAKH. I suspect most of us are most familiar with the King James Version of this psalm. Whatever version you choose, these six verses are worth committing to memory.

Dr. Hawkins's commentary on the psalm in *The Joshua Code* includes the following:

One should read slowly these first five words of the psalm: "The . . . LORD . . . is . . . my . . . shepherd." Those five words hold the key and form the foundation of the entire psalm. Once sealed in our own hearts, these words tell us much about our relationship with this good and great Shepherd:

HE IS PREEMINENT: "**THE** LORD is my shepherd."

HE IS PRESENT: "The LORD **IS** my shepherd."

HE IS PERSONAL: "The LORD is **MY** shepherd."

HE IS PROTECTIVE: "The LORD is my **SHEPHERD**."

