

## Regent University's School of Psychology and Counseling Faith and Therapy Magazine

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### On the Road Toward Restoration: Faith in the Midst of Trauma and Tragedy

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*"Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion on you (Isaiah 54: 10 NIV).*

I walked down the dusty road, noticing small but intact houses neighboring the scarce remains of simple adobe homes, which had crumbled in the massive earthquake that had shaken Chile two months earlier. It didn't take long to strike up a conversation with someone, who would soon invite me in to share a cup of tea as I listened to a story of awakening in the middle of the night to a rumble, followed by the entire house being violently shaken, first up and down, then side to side. During the three minutes that seemed to last forever, huge cracks ripped across the ceiling, meaningful memorabilia crashed to the floor, and a parent clinging to the bed could not reach a crying child. Once the original quake ended, the search for safety in the pitch black night ensued, followed by days of ambiguity, trying to meet basic needs and contact relatives in the midst of violent aftershocks. Since then it has been a struggle to rebuild every component in their lives. Here in this town I had the incredible opportunity of walking beside some survivors in the midst of emotional and spiritual struggles stemming from recent trauma and loss. Now I also have the chance to share my experience of offering both psychological support and God's comfort in a setting of loss and trauma from the tragedy of the earthquake.

#### THE AUTHOR



Emily Hervey, MA

#### The Earth was Shaken



My first reaction to the news about the earthquake in February was to start looking for possible means of doing trauma work in Chile. Eventually, I connected with a pastor whose church was reaching out to help rebuild the small town of Putú on the weekends. I joined the group going down that Friday to help construct houses and provide activities for women and children, and accompanied the one therapist present to visit some of the individuals she had met on an earlier weekend. As the group returned to the capital city on Sunday, I stayed through the week with a local family, in a setting with no mental health care services, providing basic trauma therapy and psychological first aid. It was a place where multiple components of my life converged: my background of spending my first eight years in Chile as a missionary kid, my interest and specialized training in trauma work, and my heart for sharing the comfort overflowing from Christ's sufferings into our lives. Although I was still considered a foreigner, I felt welcomed back into the culture, and at times I was amazed at how openly many individuals affected by the earthquake were in sharing their stories.

Most descriptions from quake survivors did not end with the event; not only had the material world quaked, but emotions and faith were often shaken. As I heard story after story, many were accompanied with an account of the current anxiety sparked when another tremor rippled through, or the flashback triggered by the rumble of a passing truck. Time and time again, God came into the topic of conversation, with many comments stemming from the Catholic background prevalent in the area. There were a wide variety of conclusions drawn by the individuals who shared their stories with me. "God did this because he is angry. I believe another one is coming and I am afraid. I think he is still angry with us." "I don't understand why he allowed this to happen." "Maybe he is trying to teach us something. I see this has brought out the good in many people as they help each other rebuild." "God does not exist. If he did, he would not allow this."

Even the town's single church building seemed to reflect the precarious state of the faith of many. Upon arrival I noticed the prominent fractures on the outside walls, with the steeple perched hazardously on top. On my second day there, machinery arrived to harness the steeple and bring it crashing down to avoid an involuntary collapse. How many individuals felt their religious beliefs fractured, as they

questioned the reason for such suffering? Or perhaps some speculated on their eternal fate if they had been one of the many casualties. On a different note, how many felt their priorities in life reframed as concern for loved ones superceded their value of material possessions? It is often a drastic event that leads to re-evaluating one's beliefs, values, priorities, and principles, key components of one's very identity.

## Steps toward Restoration



But in the midst of questions a period of adjustment and re-growth had already begun. An incredible amount of resilience was so often evident. Though 80% of the houses had collapsed, life went on, and the focus shifted to what was necessary in preparation for the onset of winter. I was particularly struck by the resilience evident in many of the children. One of my days was spent at a school in a nearby village, with 90 minutes of group therapy for each age group. The younger children were engaged in interactive story-telling, processing what to do when feeling afraid and recounting their own experiences. In the oldest group, the 7th and 8th graders took turns telling their stories and more than once the tears would overflow. The way the other students gathered around and supported one another was incredibly meaningful. This was the first chance they had had to express and process their feelings of grief and loss. Yet they were also able to identify areas of growth and learning from the experience. Stronger bonds formed as they looked to each other

for empathy and encouragement.

One afternoon I spent some time with one of the employees at the local school, who was dealing with the ongoing symptoms of PTSD intermingled with the fundamental questions of faith. As we ended the session, another woman who had been waiting outside the door approached me. "Is there any way you can go to Contí and see my aunt and her daughter before you leave?" She emphasized their need to talk with someone, suggesting I stay with them. I told her I would take their information and see if there was a way I could go there before returning to the capital. I was able to shift my schedule and spend my last day in Constitución, a nearby city on the ocean front which had not only been shaken by the earthquake, but subsequently had more casualties than any other city hit by the tsunami.

Upon arrival, this kind woman graciously welcomed me and showed me the room I would stay in upstairs, while also mentioning that she and her daughter no longer slept up there, still in fear of another earthquake occurring. She expressed disappointment that I would only be there one day, creating almost a sense of urgency to use what time we had so she could share her heart. Over tea she began her description of all that had happened and the ongoing fears present, yet her gratefulness that the house was still standing. I then walked down to what had previously been a popular beach, and saw the damage from both the earthquake and the tsunami, yet the beauty of nature ignored the devastation as the sun starting descending to the horizon. In the evening she also showed me around the central part of town, describing how beautiful it had been compared to the current damage.

That night I heard more of her personal history, particularly the shock and pain when being suddenly abandoned by her husband after over 30 years of happy marriage. Since then she's had times of depression in dealing with the many difficulties that followed. In the midst of our conversation, she stated she had a question for me. She noted that she had been a faithful member of a Catholic church, yet when in a time of need they had not reached out to help her. In contrast, she had observed a Christian church sending members each weekend to help people they did not even know. Why? I let her know that I couldn't answer for her church, but those coming from the church were following Christ's command to show love to all. At the same time, I was reminded of how often we fall short of fulfilling that calling, even when all that is needed is someone who will listen.

Her daughter arrived home from work at around 9:30 PM and after more tea I listened to her pour out her heart for several hours (past 1AM), from the abandonment of her father, the loss of a child, the pain of separation from her husband, the current overwhelming fears, and the overall struggle of why God could allow such suffering. She and many others have expressed the suffering is a trying time in their faith, yet paradoxically, turning to him more on a daily basis when unable to move forward on one's own strength. We talked about what hope was still present, even though from our limited perspective it is impossible to fully understand what is happening on an eternal scale. After a long, tearful embrace at the end, she thanked me and expressed that she wished I would stay with them longer. A piece of me felt the same way- the desire to stay in a place where the need was so blatant and the welcoming spirit refreshing, even if bittersweet. But my time there was coming to a close, and just as we as therapists have to do in a variety of circumstances, I had to put all the lives I'd seen and stories I'd heard back into God's hands, trusting in His ultimately perfect plan.

## Final Thoughts

My time in Chile put me in a very distinct role, a unique culture, and a specific set of circumstances where our modern therapy norms and boundaries were almost irrelevant. Yet the struggle to comprehend or rationalize the presence of God in the midst of suffering appears to cut across all cultures and appear throughout history. From the devastation Job faced, to the psalmist's cries, to the persecution Paul endured, suffering is a theme throughout the Bible. In today's world it ranges from natural disasters to wars, and in our backyards from abuse to loss of loved ones. But in all circumstances, we find hope in Christ, knowing that he too endured suffering, and faith in God, trusting that his Sovereignty surpasses all of our "why" questions. As therapists there may be some occasions where we can directly share these promises with clients who face their own sufferings, and other situations where our role is simply to offer the listening ear, the empathy, and the comfort needed. But as we are exposed on a regular basis to the lives of individuals who are in emotional and spiritual sorrow, we may also be struggling with the questions of why God allows all that happens around us. I have found repeatedly that seeking an easy explanation has little merit; instead I believe it is a process of surrendering to God's will, and by faith rejoicing that his plan is perfect on an eternal scale. For "the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast" (1 Peter 5:10, NIV). In Chile I had the chance to walk next to some who were on that lonely road through suffering and toward restoration, sharing the love and hope found through faith in Christ. Such opportunities are always available, both in the daily interactions in and outside of therapy and in disastrous circumstances worldwide. Are you willing to walk that road wherever God calls you?



## About the Author

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