

**Be Still, My Soul:**  
*Finding Faith and Hope After The Death of a Son*  
by K. Rex Butts

It was a Friday afternoon, August 2, 2002. A typical hot summer day in Arkansas, but I was ecstatic, to say the least. Three days earlier my wife Laura had given birth to our first child, a healthy boy we named Kenneth James Butts.

I was sitting in my living room watching a baseball game with my son. Did I mention how happy I was?

Like any newborn, Kenny was more interested in eating than watching baseball, so Laura took our son back to the room to feed him. Approximately twenty minutes or so later I heard a commotion. Suddenly my mother-in-law came rushing into the living room with Kenny.

“He’s not breathing! Laura’s calling 911!”

We rushed Kenny to a trauma center where doctors and nurses attempted to save his life. As this nightmare began unfolding, word got out to our friends and fellow church members who began showing up at the emergency room to support us and pray for Kenny.

A doctor came out. I remember his exact eight words.

“I’m sorry but we’ve pronounced your son dead.”

Then soon a nurse let me hold my son one more time, his body at least. I cried so hard that my stomach felt like it was rupturing. This can’t be happening, I thought.

So there I begged God to please breathe life back into my son.

He didn’t. For whatever reason God didn’t.

Kenny died.

As a minister I’ve spent time with enough grieving families to know that no two deaths are the same. Comparison is pointless and people grieve differently.

I initially leaned into my faith as a Christian. I recalled the story of Jesus healing Lazarus in John 11, where Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die” (v. 25, NIV). Jesus is making a promise that death will not get the last word. By believing in Jesus we are assured of eternal life.

My son, Kenny, would not be dead forever.

I would see him again one day because of Jesus.

That faith helped me survive the next few weeks as we had a memorial service for Kenny and then tried returning to a normal life.

Tried.

I started seminary at Harding School of Theology (HST) in Memphis and Laura returned to work.

But nothing was normal.

I remember times when I would go driving around looking for my son, thinking that he’s lost and I needed to find him. That’s what every good father would do. But at some point I would come back to myself and remember that Kenny was dead.

My son was not lost.

Yet I felt like a failure as a father for not protecting Kenny when he needed me the most.

Of course, there wasn’t anything I could have done. Kenny’s autopsy never determined the actual cause of death. Our son just stopped breathing.

But I still felt like a failure because my son needed help and I couldn’t help him.

So began the questions. A lot of them. The more agonizing the loss of my son became, the more I questioned where God was and what he was doing.

When things go bad, it seems natural to wonder why. And I did. But I also believed in a good God, a benevolent God, who hears and answers prayers. After all, I grew up going to church. I’d heard all the prayers.

Dear God, thank you for watching over sister Gertrude through her bypass surgery. Bless the hands that care for her and give her a speedy recovery!

Dear God, please be with the Bueller's son, who was injured in a car accident last night. Help him to heal from his injuries.

Good and honest prayers.

But I never heard any prayers of lament. Sad prayers when things didn't turn out the way we asked. In the absence of ever acknowledging suffering as a church through lament in worship, I learned that God would favorably answer those good and honest prayers. I was unprepared for the moment when God went silent.

For nine months that Laura and I and our friends prayed for our son to be healthy and grow up to be a servant of God.

For an hour at the trauma center people begged God to heal our Kenny.

Then came baby dedication Sunday at church.

Kenny was supposed to be there.

Where was he? Was he lost? Was I lost?

There was another baby there who nearly didn't make it. Having swallowed meconium during birth, a toxic condition that can cause brain damage and even death, he had been immediately air-lifted to Arkansas Children's Hospital in Little Rock and admitted to NICU.

Just like with Kenny, people prayed for God to save this boy. I prayed!

And he did! Praise God, not only did this child survive but he did so without any brain damage!

Parents brought their newborns before the congregation. Shepherds prayed over them. Laura and I looked on and listened. There were praises for answered prayers, over the healing of this particular child.

For my wife and I, we looked at each other. Words were not necessary. Why God didn't hear our prayers? Why didn't he heal our son? Or did God hear but was incapable of healing? Or did God just not care?

Why was *my* son lost?

It didn't matter anymore. Whatever faith I had left vanished. I didn't stop believing in the existence of God. But like a glass window shattered, my belief in a good God was shattered into a million pieces.

I stopped praying. I didn't have any more prayers to pray. I no longer trusted God.

And let me tell you, when the levy breaks and you're caught up in the floodwaters of rising darkness, you risk drowning.

And I was drowning.

I was lost in swirling eddies and rushing waters filled with debris.

Just when it seemed the shore was in sight, my younger brother John died unexpectedly. At the age of twenty-nine, he left behind a wife and two children.

John's death ripped open a barely stitched-up wound. The grief, the pain,, the crying so hard that it felt like my stomach was rupturing. How could this happen? Why was this happening? I no longer even knew what to say. I just hurt. Every part of me hurt.<sup>1</sup>

And that was it!

Done with seminary, never would I serve as a minister of this God I could not trust. I would finish the semester then and do something else.

I would stop being lost and find my own way.

Then I met a friend. A professor speaking at a seminar at HST. He spoke of his own grief and suffering and lostness. But he spoke with faith.

After I listened I asked him one question.

With all you have suffered, how can you still pray?

He tried to say something like, “Well Romans 8:28 says...”

I just wanted to lay the smack-down on him.

Everyone who has suffered, has heard far too many well-intentioned people proof-text Bible verses like Romans 8:28 as though that will comfort. It doesn't! Honestly, that's like trying to put a band-aid on a shotgun wound.

But he anticipated my reaction, ducked fast, and then assured me that he wasn't being dismissive.

He challenged me to go home and read Romans. See why Paul believes “that God works all things for the good of those who love him” (8:28).<sup>2</sup> If I didn't understand, then read Romans again and keep reading Romans until I did understand.

I sat up most of that night reading Romans.

Reading and rereading and rereading.

Somewhere after the tenth reading of Romans that God finally spoke.

God whispered, “Don't you get it Rex? My good for you is your redemption and if you'll trust me, I'll get that done. You won't always understand how I am working, but if you'll hang on and not give up, I will get this done.”

That was like a two-ton elephant being lifted off of my shoulders. Suddenly, I no longer needed to know why Kenny had died, why God let my son die, and how exactly God--as the Sovereign Lord--works. I learned to trust God again even though so much of him was beyond my.

I was no longer so lost.

I don't understand how God conforms his children to the likeness of Jesus, as believers who are justified and glorified (Rom 8:29-30), but I trust that God is.

Soon after this I heard the hymn *Be Still, My Soul* for the first time. It was sung at the end of a chapel service in seminary. I listened and cried. But the tears were different.

No longer tears of anguish, but also tears of hope. For the first time I heard a song that gave voice to my faith, speaking of both the grief my newfound trust in God and his assurance of salvation.

There is a line in this hymn that is often edited out of the hymnals:

*Be still, my soul: when dearest friends depart,  
and all is darkened in the vale of tears,  
then shalt thou better know His love, His heart,  
who comes to soothe thy sorrow and thy fears.*

These words capture the mystery of faith in the midst of suffering. I don't understand why bad things happen. Why children die. Why marriages fall apart. Why terrible disasters happen. Even when we can point to human sin, what theologians speak of as moral-evil, as at least part of the problem, I still don't understand.

But I have learned to trust, or at least I'm trying to trust God in the darkened vale of tears.

And in that trust I have found God and no longer am lost.

In the fifteen years since Laura and I lost Kenny, I I've learned something of God's heart that I didn't know before. With all the brokenness that has marred God's creation, I see how God is filled with loving mercy and compassion for those who suffer. So much so that he sent his very own Son, Jesus Christ. And I am more full of grace and mercy towards others, for I know not all the ways they may be suffering nor do I understand why. Rather than trying to understand such mysteries. I just try reaching out in hope as we journey the road suffering together.

As I was writing this chapter in a local coffee shop, I struck up a conversation with an employee. As it turns out, her infant son passed away seven years ago. My heart hurts for her because I know the pain she lives with and I trust that by listening to her story and affirming her grief, that God is somehow working.

I trust God is working... redeeming. Some days are harder than others but I believe what God is doing in Jesus Christ and it is the hope I live with. So I look forward to the day when the voice from the throne says "I am making everything new!" (Rev 21:5). Until then, I will continue telling myself, "Be still, my soul!"

### **Questions**

1. What stories and passages of scripture have helped you deal with traumatic events and suffering in life?
2. Can you describe a time or experience where you prayed but God seemingly remained silent? How did you deal with the silence of God?
3. How do you learn to trust in God and his work when you don't fully understand him?
4. How has suffering and hope shaped the way you minister to others who suffer?

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Like many other stories of suffering, the culmination of both the death of my son and then my younger brother was catastrophic or as Billman and Miglior describe it as “acute suffering.” See Kathleen D. Billman and Daniel L. Migliore, *Rachel's Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1999), 105.

<sup>2</sup> Romans 8:28 is a notoriously difficult passage to translate as reflected by the three different renderings found in the *New Revised Standard Version*, *New International Version*, and *English Standard Version*. My own translation is reflect of what I believe is grammatically correct as well as consistent with what I believe the text is theologically claiming about God. Grammatical arguments aside, which are certainly open for debate, the verse doesn't claim that everything is good or that God is the cause of everything that happens but that God is able to work everything — good and bad — for our good.