



PTSD: Understanding PTSD

Tim: We're living in a world that seems to always be at war any more. Somewhere in the world there's some type of a conflict, and war has an incredible impact on the human soul. A lot of terms we hear thrown around nowadays. We hear about IED's and all kinds of terminology, and one of those terms is PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder.

I have two friends here with me this morning. Phil Downer, you were a machine gunner with the Marines in Vietnam.

Phil: Yes.

Tim: And Dan you were a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force, but you served as a chaplain for 26 years and you just recently retired.

Dan: Yep.

Tim: Both of you gentlemen have been to war. You've seen war. You've experienced war, and you have been struggling with PTSD; and you worked with a lot of people who struggled with PTSD and have counseled them. Tell me . . . define for us: What is PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder? How would you explain that?

Phil: Well, I think post-traumatic stress is the residue of war. It's a scarred heart. It's what happens in war that carries on for many

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watching today may not have war trauma, they may have family/divorce trauma. I have war trauma on top of family trauma, and so I went in as a wounded individual and then the wounds of war left me with a vivid impact on my heart. I remember more vividly to this day moments that happened to me in Vietnam more vividly than my wedding day or the day I witnessed my children being born. They just scar your heart; and we'll talk more about how to heal some of that, which I've experienced a great deal of healing too. I'm excited about that and I'm thankful for that, but I'm never going to be over the war completely, I fear.

Tim: And Dan, you spent 26 years in the Air Force as a chaplain ministering to men and women in the armed forces.

Dan: Yeah, in those 26 years of ministry it was an honor and a privilege to be able to minister in that arena. There's no place that pushes people closer to their limits and therefore closer to their reception of God than war. You might have a normal 19-year-old kid who's concerned about the prom and the next Nintendo game back here in the states, but that same 19-year-old kid in Afghanistan or Iraq is concerned about whether he's going to come out alive or not. He's concerned whether he's going to come out with all his limbs. He's going to be concerned whether he's going to come out able to function at all.

Tim: And that does something to the human soul, doesn't it?

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Dan: Oh, tremendously and . . .

Tim: What did you witness? What did you see that did that?

Dan: Oddly enough, there's good and bad about it. The good part about it is the fact that post-traumatic stress disorder leads to your being hyper-vigilant, hyper-reactive. It leads to your having really light sleep that's easily interrupted. It leads to your having memories and things that sometimes at war serve you because it helps to keep you alive. I mean let's face it, you don't want to go into combat half asleep. You want to be awake. If the missiles come over at night, you don't want to be too dead asleep in your cot to be able to react. You need to react quickly, and so post-traumatic stress disorder in some ways tends to be the body and mind's adjustment to the horror of war. War is not natural to human beings. I don't believe it's what God intended for us, and yet it's something that, as you said, is common to human experience. We survive war by developing those characteristics that we later call post-traumatic stress disorder. Now when you come home, that anger that you've developed, that hyper-reactivity that you've developed . . .

Tim: That kept you alive.

Dan: Kept you alive at war, does not serve you well at home. My son was 7 1/2 months in Baghdad. He was stationed at the base where they were forming the Iraqi government at the time, and

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for every night of those 7 1/2 months, his base was bombed or missile attacked or mortar attacked.

Tim: Every night?

Dan: Every night. Every night.

Tim: Don't sleep too well then.

Dan: No, you sleep on the floor. You sleep below the 4-foot sandbag level because it keeps you alive. And so he came home to Fairbanks, Alaska, Elmendorf Air Force Base where he was stationed at the time, and he's driving down the road in Fairbanks, Alaska, like he would have driven in Baghdad. Not stopping for stop signs, stoplights. Not worrying about the road going up over the sidewalk, you know, cutting corners, going the wrong way on a one-way . . . any of this. This is force protection. This is how you normally drive in Kabul or Baghdad or anyplace where there are bad guys.

Tim: So you never stop. You stay alive. Otherwise you become a target.

Dan: The cardinal rule is never stop and never let any separation get between you and the vehicle you're following, because you're in convoys typically of at least three. Well, his wife in the car with him is looking at this man and saying, "Who is this? This is

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not the man I married.”

Tim: He didn’t drive on the sidewalk beforehand?

Dan: No. And the fact is that’s what I hear from my wife and from many other wives. Who is this who’s come home? This is not the same man. This is not the same person who went off to war. PTSD makes permanent and sometimes tremendously drastic changes, and you will never be the same. I will never be the same.

Tim: Dan, you said from comments you’ve heard “from your wife.” I mean, you’re a chaplain. And yet you struggle with PTSD. When you went to retire, you got some news that you weren’t expecting.

Dan: One of the procedures you go through when you retire is to take all your medical records and have them looked over by someone, because it will then be turned into the Veteran’s Administration because they then will take responsibility for some of your medical care. And so I went to this man, and my wife and I are together and we’re sitting in front of him talking and I’m going through my history—the deployments and the wars and shot down in an airplane, blown up in a convoy, all this other stuff that has happened over these years—and he looks at me and he says, “You know what? You really ought to go get assessed for PTSD.” And I said, “I’m a chaplain. I counsel people

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cared most about: my wife and friends and others. And so I really had a problem, and we knew it early on in our marriage, as Susy wanted to begin thinking about divorcing me very early in our marriage.

Tim: Okay, so when you talk about one of the symptoms, so to speak, effects of PTSD, is you're talking about anger. That's pretty prominent. Are there other things that . . .

Phil: Like hyper-vigilance. You know, we fought over who got the chair at the end of the table two nights in a row, and since he outranks me, he got them both times.

Tim: He's a lieutenant colonel and you were a corporal, okay.

Phil: But, you know, where you want to sit. You're always vigilant of who's in the area. Who might be at risk? Who's too close for comfort? What are they carrying?

Tim: And you're talking about where you were sitting at a table just two nights ago?

Phil: Yeah, and that's something you go through.

Tim: So this is still active?

Phil: I don't think you ever—I don't think I'll ever lose that.

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Now there are times to overcome it. When I'm on a date with my wife, I want her to be in the corner so I'm focused on her. So I intentionally sit with my back to the door, which takes me two or three minutes to get accustomed to. And I pray about it and say, "Lord, I want to sit here and honor you and honor my wife," and so I can accomplish that, but it is something I need to step through.

Tim: So other . . . but otherwise that hyper-vigilance would be, "I'm going to sit where I can keep my eyes on everything."

Phil: Right. Right, and I think there's a lack of trust. It's difficult to trust other people, to trust situations. The fear factor, hate and anger, being very sensitive to sounds and smells, smells that take you back. Things that happened were so vivid, so life-impacting that there're vestiges of the odor or the place. Here you come, and you feel like, "Yeah I've been here before." Flashbacks, I know you and I told—both of us have, you know, flashbacks, where suddenly we're just there. And there are ways to work through that, which I've had a chance for many years to work through many of this, and for Dan this is real fresh because he is just returned from war, and so it's a continuing process. And some of our listeners or viewers are in the middle of it, or the end of it, or the front of it, and we kind of represent two examples. I've been home 40 years, and you've been home . . .

Dan: A year.

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Phil: A year.

Tim: This is a journey through this. I mean there's a process going on here. You're at a different stage in the journey than what you are, Dan. You're still walking through today.

Dan: I want today, to survive. I want today, not to destroy something with my wife or my friends or my family. I want today here and now. I have a master's. I have a doctorate. I have two post-doctoral degrees. I want today. That's all I care about, and when somebody asks me about theology, about what I believe of God: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." That's the sum total of my theology today, and I'm not inclined to go any deeper. I'm not inclined to expand that into, oh, prevenient grace and all those other esoteric theological issues that I discussed and enjoyed so much years ago. I haven't got the capacity for that any longer. I need to clutch with a desperate grip to the coattails of Jesus, because He will carry me through today. Tomorrow, I'm not worried about it.

Tim: Yeah. Having something to hang on to, something that's solid and substantial in the middle of the chaos of war is something that you desperately need, but you also need that when you come home too, don't you? And that's something I think we're going to have to spend a little bit more time talking about, unpacking a little bit in one of our other conversations.

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But, gentlemen, I also say thanks for your service to our country.
Appreciate you so much.

Dan: Brother here.

Tim: And thanks for sharing with us.

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