

TAYLOR S. SCHUMANN

WHEN  
THOUGHTS  
AND  
PRAYERS  
AREN'T  
ENOUGH

A SHOOTING SURVIVOR'S  
JOURNEY INTO THE REALITIES  
of GUN VIOLENCE

EXCERPT



## ***When Thoughts and Prayers Aren't Enough***

A Shooting Survivor's Journey into the Realities of Gun Violence

July 20, 2021 | \$25, 248 pages, hardcover | 978-0-8308-3170-8

In *When Thoughts and Prayers Aren't Enough*, Taylor invites us to see what it means to be a survivor after the news vehicles drive away and the media moves on. Healing is slow and complicated. As she suffered through surgeries, grueling rehabilitation, and counseling to repair the physical injuries and emotional trauma, she came face-to-face with the deep and lasting impact of gun violence.

## Silent No More

After I got shot on April 12, 2013, as I was hiding out in a closet praying for rescue, I remember thinking, *This happened to me. A shooting happened to me, and now it will never have not happened to me.* I knew that my life would forever be divided by that moment—before the shooting and after—and on the other side of surviving it, everything would be different.

Despite the fact of growing up in a post-Columbine world—the 1999 high school shooting took place when I was eight years old—I never imagined something like it would happen to me. I never imagined turning around to see a person point a gun at me. I never imagined getting shot. I certainly couldn't have foreseen becoming an activist for gun reform. And while I always hoped I would write a book someday, I never imagined a world in which it would be about this.

My life took an unexpected turn that day and everything changed. On a beautiful spring morning in April, a student decided to walk into his school with a gun, and I was forced into a world I only saw from the comfort of my living room with the television screen separating me from tragedy. After that day, I understood what it was like to see the worst experience of your life on the national news and the front of the newspaper. I felt the physical pain of a bullet ripping my body apart. I woke up from nightmares constantly through the night and started sobbing at sudden noises. Contending with physical and emotional trauma resulting from the attack became my life. I found myself joining a club of shooting survivors who lived all of their days like this long before I did. Despite the fact we strongly oppose adding new members—since none of us want to be in this club in the first place—our membership number goes up every day.

Before it happened to me, it was easy to see shootings in the news, feel sad, offer my thoughts and prayers, maybe add one of those little ribbons to my Facebook profile picture, and then move on with my day. I didn't have to stare at the suffering. I didn't have to think about it if I didn't want to. It wasn't my problem. I didn't have to acknowledge the fact that in America, more than 36,000 people die every year because of gun violence. Or that the gun suicide rate in America is ten times higher than other high-income countries. Or that for children and teens in America, firearms are the second leading cause of death. None of this affected me. Until it did.

Maybe this is you too. Perhaps gun violence hasn't impacted you in a direct way. It makes you sad, of course, and after mass shootings you sincerely offer your thoughts and your prayers, and hope that it doesn't keep happening. But beyond that, you don't think about it. Maybe you even feel a little guilty about it, but what can you do? You wouldn't know where to start.

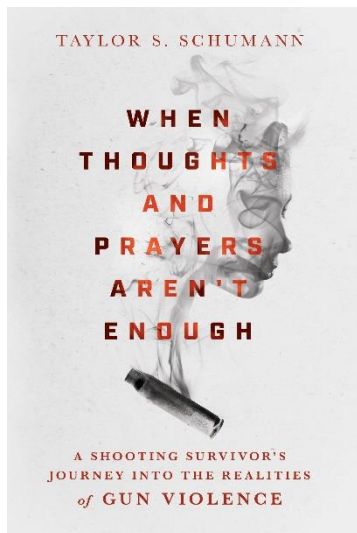


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Christians have largely been absent from this issue. Gun violence undercuts God's vision of abundant life and community—and the silence of the church rings loudly in the ears of survivors and families of victims. Taylor weaves her own incredible story of survival and recovery into a larger conversation about gun violence in our country. With compassion and honesty, she encourages readers to reconsider their own engagement with the issue and to join her in envisioning a more hopeful, safer future for our nation. Move beyond thoughts and prayers and enter into grace-filled dialogue and action.

I get it, I really do. I lived it. Can I let you in on a little secret? I don't really want to think about it either. I would love to be able to go through a day without a memory trying to take me down, or panicking when I hear an ambulance siren, or feeling tears collect in the bottom of my eyes when I hear news of an active shooter. I would love to live my life that way, but I can't. I don't have the option anymore. And in some ways, I'm actually thankful for that. Because here's the thing: People are hurting and suffering. Survivors are retraumatized daily as more and more people become victims themselves. Gun violence is wreaking havoc on our country and the effects ripple out farther than we can possibly know or imagine. We, all of us, have to look at it head on. We have to stop turning away.

I spent a lot of days feeling forgotten. In the weeks and months after the shooting, most of my friends and people in my life were able to move on with their lives. Things went back to normal for them, but I was drowning, trying to figure out what my life was supposed to look like. Surviving a shooting is a whole thing. Getting shot is a whole other thing. Living in the aftermath of the trauma and trying to make a life for yourself in the midst of the surviving is, for lack of a better term, messy. It baffled me how every morning people got up and had their coffee and went to work like nothing ever happened, while I laid in my bed struggling to find a reason to get out of it.

Most painful of all was the realization that those who turned away, who remained silent, were the ones I most expected to see on the frontlines—leaning into my pain, joining with me to call out for healing, justice, reform. I expected to see my fellow Christians, the church body as a whole, rally around the issue of gun violence and fight for a better, more peaceful, more loving vision for our nation. I expected to see the church loudly proclaim that lives of our fellow human beings are worth more than guns. I had been following Jesus almost my whole life, and everything I knew and believed about him told me that as believers, we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, plead the cause of the hurting, and defend the least among us. We are even instructed to only seek the good of others, instead of our own good. Yet as I became more involved in advocating for gun reform, I saw very little of that, sometimes none at all, and the greater the silence from the church rang in my ears. Seeing my fellow Christians remain silent as violence ripped at the fabric of our communities and survivors were wielded as political footballs increased my pain exponentially. To those who should have seen me most deeply, I felt invisible.

That's why I don't want to look away from the pain of other victims, survivors, and families. This pain deserves to be seen. Someone has to look and really see. Someone has to remember, because no one should feel forgotten. Someone has to decide that enough is enough. This pain has to be used to propel us to a better future.

—Taken from the introduction



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Q & A



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*"On my thirty-fifth birthday I witnessed the close-range shooting of a police officer by a felon. My story is not the same as Taylor's, not as tragic for me nor as potent to tell, but it became a story that changed my life in more ways than I can count. In the months and years after my experience, I wanted to find comfort and solace in the church, and I couldn't. Most church folks I knew had only thoughts and prayers for survivors but no plans, personally or politically, to reconsider any Second Amendment reform."*

**Lore Ferguson Wilbert**, author of *Handle with Care: How Jesus Redeems the Power of Touch in Life and Ministry*

## Humanizing and Creating a Spiritual View of Gun Violence, Before Addressing It as a Political Issue

**What inspired you to write this book?**

**Taylor Shumann:** After I began to speak out about gun reform and share my own story, I heard from a lot of people about how they had never really thought about it before, but hearing my story helped them understand. I realized that for an issue like gun violence, where most people might not know someone who has been personally affected, it's easy to ignore it unless you have a face to put with it—someone to think about when you hear about a shooting in the news. I began seeing the people around me and those who read my story begin to experience a shift in their thinking. If making the issue of gun violence more accessible and personal will help create meaningful change in the world, then that is an easy choice to make.

**If this book and the powerful messages you share within it could do just one thing, as it relates to your advocacy work for gun control, what would that one thing be?**

**Taylor:** My desire for anyone reading this book would be to help them be able to see gun violence and reform first from a humanized and spiritual perspective rather than a political one. Our faith in Jesus and our knowledge of him and his teaching should inform how we see our role in politics and not the other way around. As long as we see gun reform solely as a political issue, we will fail to really advocate for our neighbors.

**As an advocate, what do you feel the gun violence argument is really about, at its core?**

**Taylor:** The argument about gun reform is, at its core, about individual rights versus the collective good. We live in a country—the United States—where individual rights and personal freedoms are elevated above all else. We have a really hard time understanding that to ensure the good of all of us, we may have to make personal sacrifices. And yet, if we are followers of Jesus, we know that is a central tenet of what we believe—laying down our lives for our neighbors and counting others as more important than ourselves. We will never be able to enact meaningful change if we don't begin to think of the safety of others as more important than our personal rights. It can't just be about laws, it has to be about a cultural shift in our thinking.

**In your book, you talk about the ripple effect of gun violence. Why is it so important to go beyond the reported statistics and understand the bigger effect?**

**Taylor Schumann:** It is easy to read a statistic like "40,000 people die as a result of gun violence each year" and leave it at forty thousand people being affected. When in reality that is forty thousand families affected, people who have children and parents and siblings—now they have all experienced a trauma as well. That is forty thousand people with friends who are now at a greater risk of poverty. Maybe they were their family's sole wage earner and now their family is



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at a greater risk of experiencing poverty or homelessness. Maybe they were a single parent and now their children must enter the foster care system. Maybe they were a business owner and now a community loses an important part of their economy. Now, there are forty thousand of those ripples extended far into our communities each year, and we can never possibly know just how much gun violence has affected us. It's never just a statistic, and it is never just a number.

**Which part of the book was harder for you to write: Retelling your personal experience with gun violence, or sharing all of the wisdom and insight that has come from the experience and your hope for change for our nation?**

**Taylor:** Retelling my personal experience was the hardest part of writing this book. I can recite statistics, summarize data, and make a factual argument about gun violence without having to necessarily be vulnerable with my story. But when I share the personal details of what I experienced and how gun violence has affected my life, there is always the possibility that it won't be enough, and that people will be able to discount my personal pain and suffering without a second thought. That is much harder to cope with than not being able to change someone's mind with statistics.

**You outline that a common statement people made to you in the hospital after you survived the shooting was "God must have big plans for you." How have you seen God's plans for your life unfold in the years that followed? How have you been leaning into or pushing back on that idea?**

**Taylor:** I think my understanding of the word *big* in the statement "God must have big plans for you" has changed. *Big* doesn't always have to mean writing books and speaking and becoming a public figure—though I am extremely grateful I get to do those things. I spent years after the shooting experiencing *big* as taking care of myself, healing, supporting, and loving the people around me, and learning to be faithful with the unseen and seemingly small parts of our everyday life. I am hopeful that my work can help bring change on a large scale, but I now understand that most of the world-changing work happens in our own homes and our local communities. When we look at this that way, we remember that God has big plans for all of us.



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*"One cannot keep the grim reality of gun violence at arm's length after reading this book. Taylor brings it close. She writes about trauma with honesty and compassion. Regardless of one's political views or personal stance on gun ownership, Taylor's research provides a practical and compelling case for gun reform. This book is for any Christian concerned with our biblical call toward neighbor love."*

—**Rachel Joy Welcher**, author of *Talking Back to Purity Culture: Rediscovering Faithful Christian Sexuality*

## **A Survivor Actively Advocating for Change**

"I've learned a lot in the past few years. I've learned about trauma and grief. I've learned about the ways that the body stores trauma and memories and how PTSD and anxiety can take over a life. I've learned what it's like to walk in contradicting emotions—grateful to be alive yet struggling with the pain of living; feeling hopeless yet knowing new mercies come as surely as the sun. I have experienced deep suffering, the kind that makes you wonder how all those cracks you feel could ever possibly be glued back together again. And yet, through all of it, I have known the joy that is found in feeling God's guiding hand as you take one step after the one before it, trusting that you'll one day find healing and redemption."—Taylor Schumann

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**Taylor Schumann** is a survivor of the April 2013 shooting at a college in Christiansburg, Virginia. She is a writer and activist whose work has appeared in *Christianity Today*, *Sojourners*, and *Fathom*. She is a contributor to *If I Don't Make It, I Love You: Survivors in the Aftermath of School Shootings*.

In the split-second moment of the shooting that forever altered her left hand, and the long work of healing and trauma recovery that followed, Taylor's beliefs about gun reform, thoughts and prayers, and the role of the church in this nation's historic and future violence were irreversibly altered. Alive in the gratitude of the aftermath, she writes to implore others to join her in meeting all suffering with wholehearted attention.

Now as a passionate advocate for gun control, she works to effect positive change. It is her hope that apathy turns into action and that distance between people of differing viewpoints can turn into common ground. She writes and works to create a better future for her own son, Henry, and the children of his generation.



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