9/11 and You

My sister had a 9:00 a.m. appointment at the World Trade Center.

On September 12.

Since September 11, 2001, I've often wondered what might have happened had her appointment been a day earlier or the terrorist attacks a day later. I could have been walking the streets of New York City with her picture.

What were your feelings that tragic day? Shock? Fear? Anger? Confusion? Sadness? How do you process those feelings now, as reminders of the attacks come in anniversary commemorations and media coverage? Nearly two-thirds of American Red Cross 9/11 adult counselees still grieve, according to a study of those directly affected by the attacks{1}.

"I Hate You!"

In the immediate aftermath, my feelings of sadness blended with intense hostility. Once when Osama Bin Laden's face appeared on television, I spontaneously shouted, "I hate you!"

I was and am a follower of Jesus. He taught his followers to "love your enemies."{2} Why was I yelling "I hate you!" to a picture on a TV screen?

I wondered why this guy hated my sister. If Deborah Wright had been among the victims, her death would have been included among those he applauded. If I had been a victim, he would have applauded mine. I wrote a radio series on "Why Radical Muslims Hate You" to discover historical, socio-cultural, political, religious, and psychological roots of such anger. It helped me to connect with Muslims who shared similar concerns but disavowed the radical methods.

Dust of Death

Deborah's experience as a corporate chaplain took her back to New York to help WTC-based companies and their employees who suffered loss on 9/11 cope with the emotional and spiritual whirlwinds their worlds had become. Many suffered from survivor guilt. Failure to process grief could lead to serious consequences. Some firemen, for instance, were assigned to look after widows of fallen comrades. "There can be enormous intimacy and bonding in shared grief," Deborah notes. "Some of the firemen and widows ended up in bed together."

Some competitive, driven businesspersons re-examined their rat race—making big bucks and accumulating the most toys—and asked, "Is that all there is?". Long looks at corporate culture prompted many to consider spiritual realities.

Part of helping survivors process their experiences involved taking them to Ground Zero. Deborah comments, "As I stood at Ground Zero and picked up the dust, I could not help but think that we were standing in a giant crematorium. The ground seemed hallowed to me."

Personal Lessons from 9/11

What personal 9/11 lessons persist? Perhaps you can relate to these that seem poignant to me:

We live in a contingent universe. Human decisions and actions have consequences, often for good or evil.

Life is temporary. One early spiritual leader wrote of our lives' fleeting nature, "You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away."{3}

Link with the eternal. Jesus of Nazareth, whom people of diverse spiritual persuasions respect as a great teacher, told a friend grieving her brother's death, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die

like everyone else, will live again. They are given eternal life for believing in me and will never perish."{4}

Cherish your friends. In the aftermath of 9/11, many friendships were deepened as people linked with each other for encouragement, solace and support.

Understand and love your enemies and intellectual adversaries. Support national defense, but learning about state enemies can help communication with moderates who share some of their convictions. Getting to know neighbors or associates with whom you differ politically, philosophically or spiritually can help build bridges that foster civility in public discourse.

Notes

1. Amy Westfeldt, "Study: Sept. 11 Survivors Still Grieving," Associated Press, May 26, 2006, on AOL News. Also see full Red Cross report, http://www.redcross.org/images/pdfs/SRPClientSurvey.pdf, p. v.

2. Matthew 5:44 NASB.

3. James 4:14 NASB.

4. John 11:25 NLT.

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Fear and Its Remedies

All set for the next terrorist attack? Got your biohazard suit? How 'bout your gas mask, radiation detector and potassium iodide pills? A new store opened in Manhattan recently, only a few blocks from Ground Zero. "Safer America" markets personal safety products for a post-9/11 world.

Work in a high-rise? Have you considered a personal parachute? It comes in two models: the streamlined Executive Chute and the deluxe “HOPE” system (High Office Parachute Escape; opens automatically, good from heights over 100 feet, accommodates persons up to 300 pounds).

Safer America President Harvey Kushner takes a pragmatic approach to homeland security: “These products are no different than safety devices already commonplace in most homes, such as fire extinguishers, smoke detectors, and first-aid kits. We are enabling people to alleviate their fears by doing something smart and productive: preparing to overcome that which they most fear.”

Fears abound these days. CIA director George Tenet recently warned Congress that al-Qaida could attack at any time here or abroad. A sampler, from a guy who is privy to more intelligence data than most of us: “Based on what we have learned about the 11 September [attacks], an attempt to conduct another attack on U.S. soil is certain.

“You must make the analytical judgment that the possibility exists that people are planning to attack you inside the United States—multiple simultaneous attacks. We are the enemy, we’re the people they want to hurt inside this country,” Tenet said.

As Tenet spoke, the nation was still on alert code yellow—”significant risk of terrorist attacks”—because officials had no specific details about time and location of possible attacks. Frightening times. How should we deal with fear?

We trust military and law enforcement to keep us safe from harm. But we can never completely prepare for every risk in life. And eventually life will end for each of us. What then?

Besides taking reasonable precautions, might it also be worth considering something deeper as an ultimate solution to fear?

An Israeli shepherd who became a king knew dangers from wild beasts and wild political enemies who sought his life.

“The Lord is my shepherd,” he wrote. “I have everything I need. Even when I walk through the dark valley of death, I will not be afraid, for you [God] are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.”

A descendant of this king, Jesus of Nazareth, offered similar advice to His friends: “Don’t be afraid of those who want to kill you. They can only kill your body; they cannot touch your soul. Fear only God,” He taught. God loves people, values them and saves a spot in eternity for those who trust Him.

It’s hard to turn on the news these days without finding cause for fear: terrorism, snipers and financial woes augment personal concerns about relationships, family and job future. Maybe it’s time to look more closely toward One who can calm fears and who holds the future in His hands.

Where Was God on Sept. 11? The Problem of Evil

Dr. Ray Bohlin explores the problem of evil in light of the terrorist attacks on the U.S. on Sept. 11, 2001.

Why Didn’t God Prevent the Terrible Attacks?

The events of September 11th are indelibly etched in our hearts and minds. The horrible memories of personal tragedy and suffering will never really go away. As well they shouldn’t. As Christians we were all gratified to see so many

of our national, state, and local leaders openly participate in prayer services and calling upon people of faith to pray for victims' families and injured survivors.

What was lost underneath the appearance of a religious revival was the clear cry of many that wondered if our prayers were justified. After all, if we pray to God in the aftermath and expect God to answer, where was He as countless individuals cried out to Him from the planes, the World Trade Center and the Pentagon? The skeptical voices were drowned out because of the fervent religious outcry seeking comfort and relief. But make no mistake; the question was there all the time. Where was God on September 11th? Surely He could have diverted those planes from their appointed destinations. Why couldn't the hijackers have been intercepted at the airports or their plots discovered long before their designed execution?

Why so many innocent people? Why should so many suffer so much? It all seems so senseless. How could a loving God allow it?

It is important to realize also that the suffering of those initial weeks is only the tip of the iceberg. There will be military deaths and casualties. The war on terrorism will be a long one with mounting personal and economic costs. The clean up will also continue to take its ever-mounting toll in dollars, lives, and emotional breakdowns.

Former pastor Gordon MacDonald spent time with the Salvation Army in caring for people and removing debris and bodies from the rubble of the World Trade Center. He relates this encounter from his journal of September 21 in *Christianity Today:*{1}

> "Later in the night, I wandered over to the first-line medical tent, which is staffed by military personnel who are schooled in battlefield casualties. The head of the team, a physician, and I got into a conversation.

> "He was scared for the men in the pit, he said, because he knew what was coming 'downstream.' He predicted an unusual spike in the suicide rate and a serious outbreak of manic depression. . . . Many of the men will be unable to live with these losses at the WTC. It's going to take an unspeakable toll on them."

So why would God allow so much suffering? This is an ancient question. The problem of reconciling an all-powerful, all-loving God with evil is the number one reason that people reject God. I will try to clarify the question, provide some understanding, and make some comparisons of other explanations.

Psalm 73 and Asaph's Answer

The Bible answers the question of where God was on September 11 in many passages, but I would like to begin with the answer from Asaph in Psalm 73. My discussion will flow from the excellent discussion of the problem of evil found in Dr Robert Pyne's 1999 book, *Humanity and Sin: The Creation, Fall and Redemption of Humanity.*{2}

In Psalm 73, Asaph begins by declaring that God is good. Without that assumption, nothing more need be said. He goes on in verses 2-12 to lament the excess and success of the wicked. In verses six and seven he says, "Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits." (Psalm 73:6-7). From this point Asaph lets his feelings be known by crying out that this isn't fair when he says in verse 13, "Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence."

The wicked seem to snub their noses at God with no apparent judgment, while Asaph strives to follow the Lord to no benefit. We have all experienced this in one form or another. Some things in this world simply aren't fair. In the last ten

verses of the psalm, Asaph recognizes that the wicked will indeed realize their punishment in the future. God's judgment will come. He also realizes that God is always with him and that is sufficient.

18th century philosopher David Hume stated the classical problem of evil by saying that if God were indeed all powerful He would do something about evil, and that if He were all-loving He would want to do something about evil. Since evil exists, God must either not be able or not want to do anything about it. This makes God either malevolent or impotent or both. But Hume chooses to leave out the option, as Asaph resolves, that God is patient. Hume, like many before him and after him, grows weary with a God who is patient towards evil.

We long for immediate justice. But before we pray too earnestly for immediate justice, we'd better reflect on what that would be like. What would instant justice look like? Immediate justice would have to be applied across the board. That means that every sin would be proportionately and immediately punished. We soon realize that immediate justice is fine if applied to everybody else. Dr. Pyne quotes D. A. Carson as saying, "The world would become a searing pain; the world would become hell. Do you really want nothing but totally effective, instantaneous justice? Then go to hell."{3} I think we're all quite comfortable with a God that does not apply immediate justice.

Evil and the Sovereignty of God

Next, I want to focus on God's sovereignty. We understand that God knew what He was doing in creating people with the ability to choose to love Him or hate Him. In order for our love for Him to be real, our choice needed to be real and that means creating creatures that could turn from Him as well as love Him. In order to have creatures with moral freedom, God risked evil choices.

Some would go so far as to say that God couldn't intervene in our evil choices. But in Psalm 155:3, Psalm 135:6, and in Nebuchadnezzar's words of praise in Daniel 4:34-37 we're told it is God who does whatever He pleases. However, God does perform acts of deliverance and sometimes He chooses not to. We are still left with the question "Why?" In the book of Job, Job basically proclaims his innocence and essentially asks why? God doesn't really give Job an answer, but simply reminds him who is in charge. (Job 38:2-4) "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" the Lord asks Job.

The parameters are clearly set. God in His power is always capable of intervening in human affairs, but sometimes He doesn't and we aren't always given a reason why. There is tension here that we must learn to accept, because the alternative is to blaspheme by assigning to God evil or malevolent actions. As Asaph declared, God is good!

This brings us to the hidden purposes of God. For although we can't always see God's purpose, we believe He has one in everything that occurs, even seemingly senseless acts of cruelty and evil. Here is where Jesus' sufferings serve as a model. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before Him. (Hebrews 12:1-3) So then, we should bear our cross for the eternal joy set before us. (Hebrews 12:11, 2 Corinthians 4:16-18) But knowing this doesn't always make us feel better.

When Jesus was dying on the cross all His disciples but John deserted Him. From their perspective, all that they had learned and prepared for over the last three years was over, finished. How could Jesus let them crucify Him? It didn't make any sense at all. Yet as we well know now, the most important work in history was being accomplished and the disciples thought God was absent. How shortsighted our perspective can be.

The Danger of a Nice Explanation

But with this truth comes the danger of a nice explanation. Even though we know and trust that there is a purpose to God's discipline and His patience towards ultimate judgment, that doesn't mean we should somehow regard evil as an expression of God's goodness. In addition, we can be tempted to think that if God has a purpose to evil and suffering, then my own sin can be assigned not to me but to someone else, namely God Himself because He had a purpose in it.

Dr. Robert Pyne puts it this way.

> We may not be able to fully resolve the problem of evil, and we may not be able to explain the origin of sin, but we can see the boundaries that must be maintained when addressing these issues. We share in Adam's guilt, but we cannot blame Him for our sin. God is sovereign, and He exercises His providential control over all things, but we cannot blame Him either. God permits injustice to continue, but He neither causes it nor delights in it.{4}

Another danger lies in becoming too comfortable with evil. When we trust in God's ultimate purpose and patience with evil we shouldn't think that we have somehow solved the problem and therefore grow comfortable in its presence. We should never be at peace with sin, suffering, and evil.

The prophet Habakkuk sparred with God in the first few verses of chapter 1 of the book bearing his name by recounting all the evil in Israel. The Lord responds in verses 6-11 that indeed the Babylonians are coming and sin will be judged. Habakkuk further complains about God's choice of the godless Babylonians, to which God reminds him that they too will receive judgment. Yet the coming judgment still left Habakkuk with fear and dread. "I heard and my inward parts trembled: at the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, and in my place I tremble. . . . Yet, I will exult in the Lord."

(Habakkuk 3:16-19.) Habakkuk believes that God knows what He is doing. That does not bring a smile to his face. But he can face the day.

“We are not supposed to live at peace with evil and sin, but we are supposed to live at peace with God. We continue to trust in His goodness, His sovereignty, His mercy, and we continue to confess our own responsibility for sin.”{5}

He Was There!

Though we have come to a better understanding of the problem of evil, we are still left with our original question. Where was God on September 11th?

While the Christian answer may not seem a perfect answer, it is the only one which offers truth, hope, and comfort. Naturalism or deism offers no real answers. Things just happen. There is no good and no evil. Make the best of it! Pantheism says the physical world is irrelevant or an illusion. It doesn’t really matter. Good and evil are the same.

To answer the question we need to understand that God does, in fact, notice when every sparrow falls and grieve over every evil and every suffering. Jesus is with us in all of our suffering, feeling all of our pain. That’s what compassion means, to suffer with another. So the suffering that Christ endured on the cross is literally unimaginable.

> “The answer is, how could you not love this being who went the extra mile, who practiced more than He preached, who entered into our world, who suffered our pains, who offers Himself to us in the midst of our sorrows?”{6}

We must remember that Jesus’ entire time on earth was a time of sacrifice and suffering, not just His trial and crucifixion. Jesus was tempted in the manner of all men and He bore upon Himself all our sin and suffering. So the answer is

quite simple. He was there!

He was on the 110th floor as one called home. He was at the other end of the line as his wife realized her husband was not coming home. He was on the planes, at the Pentagon, in the stairwells answering those who called out to Him and calling to those who didn't.

He saw every face, knew every name, even though some did not know Him. Some met Him for the first time, some ignored Him for the last time. He is there now.

Let me share with you one more story from Gordon MacDonald's experience with the Salvation Army during the initial clean up at the World Trade Center.

> "There is a man whose job it is to record the trucks as they leave the pit with their load of rubble. He is from Jamaica, and he has one of the most radiant smiles I've ever seen. He brings a kind of spiritual sunshine to the entire intersection. "I watch him—with his red, white, and blue hard hat—talking to each truck driver as they wait their turn to go in and get a load. He brightens men up. In the midst of those smells, the dust, the clashing sounds, he brings a civilizing influence to the moment.
>
> "Occasionally I go out to where he stands and bring him some water. At other times, he comes over and chats with us. We always laugh when we engage. "I said to him last night, 'You're a follower of the Lord, aren't you?' He gave me an enthusiastic 'Yes! Jesus is with me all the time!' "Somehow this guy represents to me the quintessential picture of the ideal follower of Christ: out in the middle of the chaos, doing his job, pressing a bit of joy into a wild situation." {7}

Notes

1. "Blood Sweat and Prayers," *Christianity Today,* Nov.

12,2001, p. 76.
2. Robert Pyne, *Humanity and Sin: The Creation, Fall and Redemption of Humanity,* pp. 193-209.
3. Pyne, p. 197.
4. Pyne, p. 204.
5. Pyne, p. 206.
6. Peter Kreeft, quoted in *The Case for Faith* by Lee Strobel, 2000, p. 45-46.
7. "Blood Sweat and Prayers," *Christianity Today*, p. 76.

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The Wonderful Rise of Masculinity

October 2001

Recently, I was sitting at an airport terminal waiting to board a plane when a man dropped into the seat next to mine. He nodded to me and said, "How're you doing?" I looked at him and said, "Well, that depends on whether you're a bad guy or a hero. Those are your two choices." He smiled; he understood. As we boarded, everybody on that plane was looking at everybody else, scanning their faces, wondering the same thing—are you a bad guy or a hero?

One of the best things to come out of the Sept. 11 attack on America is that masculinity has been restored to its rightful place of honor. After a generation of merciless male-bashing in the wake of feminism's contempt of men, it's a good and fine thing to be a man again, and I for one love it. It seems that men are walking taller and more proudly, more confident in themselves. Young men flooded to the armed forces, ready to

defend their country and grateful to be able to DO SOMETHING about such a heinous attack on America.

We have been reminded what true heroes look like: not sports figures, not entertainers, but the men of Flight 93 who controlled their fear to overtake terrorists and crash a plane into a field instead of a building. True heroes look like the firefighters who ran up the stairwells of doomed, burning buildings to rescue people going down. True heroes look like the police officers who helped people get away from the World Trade Center as they deliberately put themselves in harm's way. And now that we remember what a true hero is, we're seeing long overdue displays of gratitude for the public servants who risk their lives so the rest of us can be safe. Recently a local elementary school invited firemen to a school assembly where they had festooned the auditorium with banners, balloons and posters thanking them for their service. When the group of men entered the room, the kids went absolutely wild with cheers and applause. You'd have thought it was an N'Sync concert!

I'm thankful for the perspective my husband provided on this: he observed that men are able to be men because women are letting them. It seems that unless we women show men the respect and honor due them in their masculinity, they won't fight for it and many will retreat into a most unmanly passivity. But in the attacks on our country, many women have lost our sense of security and we're more in touch with how much we need to be protected. Thank the Lord for His plan that men be strong and self-sacrificing as they rise to the occasion in protecting us! Masculinity is a beautiful strength. God knew what He was doing when He made men men. It's one more way He's bringing glory to Himself in the aftermath of 9/11.

A Picture of Our Vulnerability

On the afternoon of Sept. 11, I was talking to a friend on the phone who said, “I’m afraid to leave my house. I’m afraid to drive down the street; I have these images of airplanes falling out of the sky and crashing into my car. I don’t feel safe anymore.” She’s not alone. People are scared and angry at feeling like they’re living in a war zone where their world could blow up at any minute. Just about the time that fears of hijacked planes slamming into buildings started to subside, new fears of anthrax have caused waves of anxious phone calls to FBI offices and police stations.

Many people resent the loss of our innocence and security, and that’s completely understandable. But for the Christian, this is a poignant reminder that in actuality, we DO live in a spiritual war zone. We are in far greater danger of being attacked in spiritual warfare than we are of hijacked planes slamming into buildings. Scripture tells us we have a personal adversary who prowls around looking for whom he may devour. Satan’s spiritual terrorism is every bit as real as earthly terrorism.

The president tells us to remain vigilant and alert. That’s a good policy for dealing with spiritual warfare as well. We make it easy for the devil when we get lazy and complacent. Our political and philosophical enemies know how to generate “disinformation” to confuse intelligence agencies and mislead the American public. The problem is, we can’t tell the difference between actual threats and false ones. Disinformation is just a fancy word for lying. And we need to be alert for the lies of our spiritual enemy as well. But in

the spiritual arena, we are in a much more powerful position because we can recognize Satan's lies if we know the truth, and God has already given us all the truth we need to know in the Bible. We have to read and study God's truth in order to recognize the lies of the enemy.

God has given every believer a supernaturally powerful set of defensive and offensive weapons we can read about in Ephesians 6. We have his assurance that it's not flesh and blood enemies we fight against, but spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. And God has given us everything we need to fight back; we need not be defenseless! Most importantly, we need to remember that we have God's Spirit within us to help us fight, even when we are up to our eyeballs in the enemy's flaming darts and scud missiles.

Whether we are facing the threats of terrorists within our own country, or the threats of invisible terrorists fighting us in the spirit realm, the same comforting assurance of God's word can help us stay secure: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear." Put on your armor, pick up your sword, and fight back!

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