



A Christ-like Response to September 11th

By Daryl Wingerd

“God had nothing to do with September 11th.”

Those words were reportedly spoken by a pastor who was responding to a question about God’s involvement in the infamous terrorist attack on the Twin Towers.

Whether they were actually spoken as reported or not, I do not know. But they raise some good questions: What should we say about God in the aftermath of a tragedy? How should we explain His involvement when evil men commit heinous acts of brutality?

Jesus was once approached by certain Jews who informed him of a shocking scene of brutality. Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, had ordered the murder of certain Galilean Jews while they were in the temple offering their sacrifices to God (cf. Luke 13:1-5). Historically, we know little about Pilate’s reasons for this atrocious act. Even so, Jesus’ response is what is most important. Those who came to Jesus were seeking answers to the question, “Why did this happen?” Perhaps they were hoping to hear Jesus say that the ones murdered by Pilate were more sinful than other Jews and that God had arranged for their untimely death. But instead of grieving openly at the news, condemning Pilate for his brutality, or focusing on the sins of the dead, Jesus replied:

Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish (Luke 13:2-3).

Jesus then related another tragedy, one that was publicly known in Jerusalem. A stone tower had somehow fallen, killing eighteen people. In reminding these Jews of this accident, Jesus said:

Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent you will all likewise perish (vv. 4-5).

Jesus’ response to a brutal act of violence and a tragic accident was not to philosophize, speculate, or defend God’s existence and character. Instead, He confronted these people with their own mortality, sinfulness, and guilt, and called them to repentance.

There should be no question that when a tragedy occurs or even when mass-killings dominate the headlines, God is in complete control. Even in these disturbing ways, God “works all things according to the counsel of His will”

(Eph. 1:11). As God said through the prophet Isaiah, “I am the Lord, and there is no other; I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the Lord, do all these things (Is. 45:6-7). And as Jeremiah asked rhetorically, “Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that woe and well-being proceed?” (Lam. 3:38).

In more recent history, tens of thousands were killed by a devastating tsunami in the Indian Ocean. Many Christians went there to help, often at great personal sacrifice. They distributed food, cleared debris, rebuilt homes, provided medical care, offered comfort and counsel, etc. These brothers and sisters are to be commended for their Christ-like response. But how many of them faithfully informed the multitudes of survivors that in the earthquake and tsunami, God had spoken, and in the process, had caused thousands of guilty sinners to perish? How many of these compassionate Christians were secretly uncomfortable with the thought that a loving God would not merely *permit*, but actually *create* such calamity? How many of them responded like Christ when asked the question, “Why did your God allow this to happen?”

What did God have to do with September 11th? God had *everything* to do with September 11th. After all, “If a calamity occurs in a city, has not the Lord done it?” (Amos 3:6). Just as God gave His unmistakable call to repentance through Pilate’s brutality and through the fall of the tower of Siloam, He gave it on that infamous day in New York City as two towers fell and thousands were killed. Considering Jesus’ response to the collapse of the tower in Jerusalem, one can only wonder how He might have responded to the collapse of the Twin Towers in New York City.

Death is the universal consequence of sin. It is also God’s providential call to repentance for those whose lives are spared for a time. But eventually, everyone will die, and God repeats this sober warning at every funeral. Sadly though, more time is often spent preparing words to eulogize the dead than to appeal to the living. While it is right to pay our respects, especially when the deceased has lived an exemplary life of faithful service to Jesus Christ, it is wrong to forget that dead people cannot hear, nor do they care that we praise them. And it is wrong to neglect the opportunity to remind the survivors that God has spoken, and that if they do not repent, they will all likewise perish.

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