

Where is God in all of this?

The World Trade Center and the Word of God

Steve Hixon, September 11, 2001

A Tragedy Beyond Comprehension

Sometimes an event takes place, usually once or twice in every person's life, that is so cataclysmic that it defies description. It is almost beyond our imagination, and we realize we have no category for it, no place to put it in our thinking. It stands there by itself, and our lives are shaken until we can get some understanding.

As one expert in search-and-rescue was being interviewed Wednesday morning, Sept. 12, the day after, they repeatedly asked him to rate the magnitude of what he had seen. "There is no way to describe this", he said, "It's off the charts. The only thing close would be a volcano erupting downtown."

Most people I've talked with feel exhausted. They can't focus on what they're doing. They find themselves overcome with emotion at odd hours. They go through many of the well-documented stages of grief over and over: denial, anger, depression, vengeance, frustration, compassion, sadness, fear.

Being a Christian does not exempt us from any of this. God wants us to be fully alive, to experience life abundantly – but part of experiencing life is knowing its extremes in our emotions. Sometimes being a mature, healthy Christian means acknowledging those feelings, not denying them or stuffing them. We might as well grieve now; it will only come back later if we don't.

Part of handling grief is talking, saying aloud the terrible things that lurk inside. For many, choosing to be with friends rather than isolating is the best choice. Talking with God, expressing everything – pouring our hearts out to Him – is what He wants us to do. Some do that best by writing, journaling, poetry. God welcomes it all. Even the tough questions.

"Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge."

Psalm 62:8

What are your tough questions at a time like this? What questions do your co-workers ask - that nagging one at the end of the day that you had no answer for? Here are some that have come to my mind lately:

- ✓ *Are people really that evil? Or is it just a few of us? Is some of that evil in me?*
- ✓ *Is God really good? And if so, how – and why – could He let this happen?*
- ✓ *How does God feel when He sees this? Is He cold and distant, or does He cry?*
- ✓ *Is this the beginning of the end? Is this the fulfillment of some prophecy?*
- ✓ *What do I pray for? I can't even think straight! How does God want me to live?*

What are People Really Like?

Secular writer Roger Rosenblatt recently wrote an article in TIME magazine in which he described his observations about the nature of man:

"What I do know is that the world is a pitiless and dangerous place. In 20 years of observing portions of it, I have seen children blown apart by car bombs in Israel; hunted young men dying of starvation in Sudan; other young men and women hacked to death with machetes in Rwanda; still others decapitated in Cambodia.

This is what people will do to one another. Given who they are and their individual circumstances, they will do absolutely anything to one another. The accumulation of this knowledge leaves one revulsed, heartbroken and, in some dark way, amazed. But it does not leave one with much to say."

"Why I Won't Write About Chandra Levy",
TIME, August 6, 2001.

However, God has a lot to say about it. When God says the world is fallen, He really means it. We are sinners. Romans 3:10-12 reads:

"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away..."

That's us. Once we're cut off from God, the sky's the limit. Don't ever say, "I could never do that." Instead, say, "There, but for God's grace, go I." We do not realize how terrible sin is, until we see the contrast. When Peter looked at Jesus, he said, "Get away from me, for I am a sinful man."

After World War II, a Jewish man was asked to testify against Adolf Eichmann, one of the architects of the Nazi's "final solution" to exterminate the Jews. The man broke down. When asked if it was the mere sight of the former tormenter, he said, "No. It is because he is just like me."

But none of us are as bad as we could be. God graciously restrains evil. It is those times when He does not that we wonder, what went wrong? But He is good. He is the author of goodness Himself.

"Every desirable and beneficial gift comes out of heaven. There is nothing deceitful in God, nothing two-faced, nothing fickle."

James 1:17, The Message

Does God Really Care?

One observer on the streets of New York exclaimed, "I can't deal with this. I'm traumatized for life." When we feel tremendous loss, we get numb, and we begin to

wonder where God is and if He even cares. I always force myself to think of Jesus at those times: how did He deal with grief? Jesus knew a lot of people, and a lot of people knew who He was, but He also had “best friends”, people He spent more time with than others. One of them was Lazarus (John 11), who got sick and died, and some wondered if Jesus even cared, because He didn’t exactly run to get there. “If you had been here my brother would not have died”, Martha exclaimed in frustration, barely masking her accusation.

How did Jesus respond? Was He offended by her rebuke? Did He say, “Hey, don’t worry, Lazarus’ll be good as new in ten minutes.”? Instead, Jesus quietly looked around at His friends and the devastation on their faces, the pain inflicted by death, a human condition that was NOT a part of the original human condition that Jesus had himself created.

And He wept.

That’s how God feels. Jesus taught His followers that seeing Him was like seeing the Father. If the Son weeps, the Father weeps. When Jesus looked at what we would see as a massive crowd, He saw individuals, each with their own story. He knew every one, and “filled with compassion, He knew they were like sheep without a shepherd.” He looked at Jerusalem, which we would see as a city made of stone, and He wept again, for He wanted to gather and protect its people like a hen gathers its chicks – but they resisted His loving embrace. God cares more than we will ever know. (Revelation 21:4)

Am I a Christian or an American?

The Scriptures instruct believers to be model citizens, praying for our leaders (1 Timothy 2:2) and obeying the laws of the land, with the one caveat that we cannot obey a law that goes directly against the Word of God – that causes us to sin. As Paul states in Philippians 3:20, “our citizenship is in heaven”, meaning that our primary allegiance is always to the Kingdom of God, not an earthly nation.

It’s hard not to feel attached to our country, and it’s not wrong to love it, as long as we understand these spiritual priorities. There’s a lot to love about the U.S., especially when compared to some of history’s abusive, totalitarian regimes. When the Roman Empire began to fall, many Christians experienced the tension and fear of this same dual-citizenship. In light of that struggle, St. Augustine wrote a book in A.D. 413 called The City of God, in which he reminded believers that, while human cities may fail, their true home was to be found in God’s eternal city. Hebrews 11:13-16 puts it well,

“All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been

thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country--a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”

Is This the Beginning of the End?

Prophecy? We know from books like Daniel that God is in control of history. However, he does not give prophecy simply to satisfy our curiosity, but to teach us about Himself and to encourage us to trust Him. Most end-time prophecies were given to believers during very difficult times of persecution.

The United States does not appear in the Bible, as far as we know. It wasn’t even on the map when the Bible was written, and it is not clear whether we play some major part in the future. To label us as either an evil nation or a messianic one would be mere speculation. Sometimes Christians mistakenly portray America as the new Israel, the Promised Land, and apply Old Testament promises directly to our situation, but that’s misguided thinking. What we are is a nation with a rich spiritual heritage. We are trendsetters and influencers (for good or bad) in today’s global culture, and a people with a tremendous opportunity for ministry every day.

One thing is sure: God has not forgotten us. Some may say that He is waiting too long to bring history to a close, but perhaps He is waiting for you. The Apostle Peter addressed this in 2 Peter 3:8-13:

“The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

How Should We Then Live?

Finally, how does God want us to live? Peter, nearing the end of his life, gave this advice about how to live in times that feel like they can’t get any worse:

“Everything in the world is about to be wrapped up, so take nothing for granted. Stay wide-awake in prayer. Most of all, love each other as if your life depended on it. Love makes up for practically anything. Be quick to give a meal to the hungry, a bed to the homeless—cheerfully. Be generous with the different things God gave you, passing them around so all get in on it: if words, let it be God’s words; if help, let it be God’s hearty help. That way, God’s bright presence will be evident in everything through Jesus, and *he’ll* get all the credit as the One mighty in everything—encores to the end of time. Oh, yes!”

1 Peter 4:7-11 (The Message)

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