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Lessons from the Rubble

By Wayne Jacobsen

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Last Saturday I stood with my wife and son at the place in Manhattan now known as Ground Zero. The massive buildings that had been the World Trade Center lie in a heap, shredded and charred. Nearly six weeks after the atrocities of September 11 the smoke and smell of destruction still hung heavy in the afternoon air. The fences were lined with flowers, posters and pictures paying tribute to those who are dead or still missing in the rubble.

I found it as difficult to process that scene as I had the unfolding stories on television that September 11. Having just flown in from Buffalo, NY the day before I was still asleep when my wife turned on the TV and told me I had to see what was happening. Two airplanes had crashed into the World Trade Center. Just as I rolled over to focus on the screen the first tower started to crumble.

Who will ever forget that day? Another plane had crashed into the Pentagon and one in the countryside of Pennsylvania. Throughout the day the pictures and stories unfolded the disaster. Suicide hijackers had taken command of jumbo jets with the most rudimentary weapons because no one could conceive of them using those planes as guided missiles. Phone calls from aircraft and offices from people who were staring death in the face sought to affirm their love to those closest to them. People leapt from the upper floors of the towers in a desperate attempt to escape the encroaching flames. Heroic rescue workers were trapped and killed when the buildings finally crumbled to the ground.

All of that and more rushed through my mind as I stood with hundreds of others who gazed upon the carnage and destruction of Ground Zero. There the lives of 5,000 husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters had been crushed in the rubble caused by an evil almost impossible to comprehend. This was no accident or natural disaster, but the intentional act of those who thought they were doing God's will.

Such climactic events are watershed moments. Though our leaders tell us to go back to life as normal, those words fall empty. Our sense of vulnerability and our restructured priorities will create a new normal. That can either destroy us with fear or despair, or help us lean in closer to the only security we've ever really had anyway--the love and care of an awesome Father.

The Day our Illusions Died

Many have said that the world changed on September 11, but I don't agree. The world has since the fall been filled with this kind of evil and we have never been as invulnerable to it as we would like to think. It's

just that many of us in America have been insulated by our prosperity from seeing the world as it really is.

On September 11 any illusion we had that God's blessing means we aren't at risk from evil was exposed for the lie it was. No doubt, there were precious believers on those flights and in those buildings who didn't go home that evening. Whatever grace they needed in those moments, God freely gave them. Whatever grace their family and friends will need to get through their grief and go on with life will also be given to them. Being blessed doesn't mean we escape the evil in the world, only that the evil will not prevail over us.

Though we rarely see acts of evil on such a huge scale, we don't have to look any further than many of our inner city neighborhoods to find people who grow up in fear of violence and suffer from incredible need. Most of the world lives in great risk. In my own county more people have been murdered since September 11 than have died from anthrax on the East Coast.

While one may seem random and the other calculated, the reality is that evil is alive and well in our world and it causes incredible pain, suffering and destruction. That needn't lead us to despair, however, only repentance. At moments like this we see sin for what it is, the destroyer of everything good God has made. It is also in moments like these that we get to see God perform his greatest miracles. He is able to work incredible good even out of the most despicable acts of evil. As he did with Joseph, who had been betrayed and sold into slavery by his brothers, God is able to work out his purpose in the world and in you even in this time of risk and threat.

Where Was God that Morning?

The media asked that question as well as many believers I know. Somehow we wonder if God was somewhere else in the world that morning and didn't see the events that were happening on our eastern seaboard. Nothing could be further from the truth.

He saw it. Even as it unfolded it grieved his heart. And yes, though this is hard to hear, he did not stop it. Some people find that incompatible with the image of a loving Father. Wouldn't his love compel him to ensure that such atrocious evil not succeed?

The Bible makes clear that God does not circumvent all evil in this world. He has given dominion of the earth to humanity and though he often intervenes to reveal himself in history and to move it to its divinely appointed end, he rarely spares us the consequences of evil. Rather, he redeems us out of it and through those consequences he invites us to refocus our lives on him and his will for us.

The idea that God won't let bad things happen to good people misunderstands the nature of the world he created for us. It also is blind to the realities of the world in which we live. Six million Jews died in concentration camps in Germany during World War II. Thousands of Africans have been killed in the last

decade by tribal warfare and by the AIDS virus. Atrocities in the former Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland and throughout the Middle East have filled our media for years. Isn't it arrogant of us to say that our suffering in the U.S. calls God's character into question and not share the same pain when it happens in distant lands?

I met with church leaders in Nepal in the late 80's all of whom had been imprisoned and many beaten for their faith. There are believers and unbelievers alike who put their children to bed hungry around the world.

Suffering is a daily reality in this world that is out of synch with the Creator's plans and priorities. Certainly this is on a much grander scale, but is no more devastating for those impacted by it than other acts of violence in our world. If we only feel compassion when it is our fellow-countrymen, then we might want to reconsider just how deep our compassion runs.

Thoughts from the Sidelines

So much has been written and said in the aftermath of these events. The heroic acts of rescue workers at the crash sites and passengers on the fourth jetliner, the generosity of people for those in need, and the resurgence of kindness and community in our culture have been an inspiration. On the other hand, it has troubled me that so many would also seek to exploit this tragedy to advance their personal agendas.

I have been deeply concerned that the media has played into the hands of the terrorists and exacerbated this atrocity. While they were most useful in the first 48 hours in helping us understand what was happening, their need to fill round-the-clock programming and compete with each other has brought out the worst. Glorifying Osama bin Laden by putting his photo on magazine covers, playing his videotapes unedited, highlighting our vulnerabilities and helping incubate an atmosphere of terror by overemphasizing specific threats to our society has demonstrated that they care far more about their own profits than serving the public interest. While I agree that a free press is essential to a free society, we also need a responsible press that refuses to become the story it seeks to report.

Be wary of those who interpret these events in apocalyptic terms. Is this the beginning of the end of the age? Are we now in the final battle between the West and Muslim extremists? Is the antichrist at hand? I don't know, and I don't suspect others do either. It is easy to rework catastrophic events into our agenda for the world, and many believers in the past have been wrong in doing so. Many thought Hitler was the antichrist, that the founding of the state of Israel signaled the last generation, and that Jesus would come in 1988. All proved wrong and demonstrate the danger of presuming to interpret the apocalyptic language of Scripture with human reasoning.

If God has clearly spoken to you regarding these matters by all means speak out, but be careful of those

who exploit this atrocity to sell their books or fill in their prophetic charts. We might well be at the threshold of the last days, and we might yet be a ways out from them. The geo-political arrangement in my view is still not in line with many of the prophecies of Scripture. Knowing whether it is or isn't shouldn't even be a factor for us. Jesus told his disciples that simply following him every day and occupying until he comes would be all we'd need to do.

Don't fall for those who blame others. The shame of the fall compels us to blame the victims in times of crisis as a way to make us feel less vulnerable ourselves. Those who sought to use this crisis to advance their political agenda against only certain kinds of sins in our culture saw it blow up in their faces, and rightfully so. Those who blamed society's moral laxity, its increased secularity or its approval of abortion as reasons for God to punish the U.S., exemplified arrogance not discernment. In times of trouble God's prophets joined in the repentance owning their own failures, not pointing fingers of blame at others. The abuses and excesses of Christianity in America are well known and humility in the face of such calamity will serve God's work far more. Jesus warned those in his day who thought the victims of calamity were more deserving than those who did not that they were wrong and missing the point entirely. (Luke 13:1-5)

And don't make the mistake of thinking Godliness and patriotism are the same thing. Yes I think the resurgent unity of our country and care for each other during this time is a refreshing change from our otherwise indulgent society. I too sing God Bless America and The Star Spangled Banner with renewed meaning. If we think the feelings associated with these moments are the anointing of the Spirit, then we have certainly misunderstood God's life and power.

I support the actions of our government to root out those responsible for terrorism and bring them to justice, but we cannot give in to perpetuating the cycle of hatred that spawned these acts in the first place. Our cause must be justice not vengeance or we will find ourselves playing the terrorists' games.

God is not American. Participation in his kingdom need not exclude us from patriotism, but don't forget that patriotism will never fulfill the glories of his kingdom. We are citizens of a greater kingdom, with priorities that go beyond our own personal safety and desire to punish evil--and our trust must go beyond it as well.

The Party Is Over

In the early 80's, Tom Sine in his book, Mustard Seed Conspiracy, warned us that we could not just enjoy our irresponsible materialism and not create animosity in the rest of the world. Though we are the most generous society in history as far as feeding and caring for the needs of the world, the disparity between their need and our waste cannot be ignored.

Though nothing would ever justify terrorism, we dare not ignore the dynamics that breed people who see

suicide attacks as a noble act. To be sure those who twist religion to evil ends manipulate these young men, but they wouldn't be able to do so if they did not exist in such desperate circumstances. Many were drawn from refugee camps and Palestinian lands on the West Bank or those who sympathize with their plight. They blame our politics for propping up oppressive regimes that put them at risk and keep them in need. They watch their babies die from hunger or lack of simple antibiotics while they hear of the billions of dollars spent in the U.S. on cosmetic surgery or decadent amusements. If our war against terrorism does not include reaching out to such people, we will only breed a future generation of terrorists.

But for all of us the most powerful response is personal not political. Paul's words reverberate in my ears with new meaning: "The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light... Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature." (Rom. 13:11-14)

Whether or not the end of the age is upon us, it is a lot closer than when Paul penned these words. Notice he doesn't consider the tensions at the end of the age to be night overcoming the day, but night giving way to the daylight. His focus was not on the trauma we would witness in the world, but on God's purpose that would come to light through it.

Now more than ever, hear the Father inviting you to draw nearer to him than you ever have before. Don't do that by redoubling your efforts to prove your love to God by good works or increased religious activity. Rather, come to the quiet and cultivate a transforming relationship with the Lord of Glory. Paul knew that only as we grew to know him better would his presence become more real and more satisfying than our own sins, appetites and distractions.

Getting back to normal doesn't mean we spend our money and live our lives as we did before. Hopefully the priorities of many will change dramatically. What would it be like if we found more joy and fulfillment in the unfolding purpose of God than the costly amusements Madison Avenue keeps shoving down our throats?

How Shall We Now Live?

Times of tragedy and vulnerability offer us an incredible opportunity to find out where our security really lies. If it was placed in the illusions of our prosperous culture, you would have pretty quickly have found your stomach churning and sleep difficult to find.

As much as our government must mitigate this threat however they can, our security does not lie in jet fighters, hazmat suits, or airport screeners any more than ancient Israel could rely on horses and chariots. This is a great time to discover just how much I entrust myself to the Lord's care and direction or how

much I'm shaped by the age in which I live.

One of my favorite phrases in the book of Revelation, describes those followers who endure the trauma of the last days and overcame the power of sin and the terror of the antiChrist's reign. "They follow the Lamb wherever he goes." I love the simplicity of that and can think of no better words to describe life at its best. What's even better is that we don't have to wait until the end of the age to live that way.

He invites us every day to focus on his presence and simply do what he puts before us each and every day. While I'll be the first to admit that doing so isn't easy, there is no better time to let him teach you. As you learn the simple joy of following the Lamb wherever he goes, you will find that fear will have no place in your heart. While we certainly will all live with greater awareness of potential risks in our mailboxes or on our airplanes, we don't have to let fear control our lives. Whatever God calls you to do, he will more than equip you with the grace and peace to see it through.

Paul is an excellent example here. Following Jesus led him to be locked into prison, stoned by those who opposed him, even to be robbed by bandits and shipwrecked on the high seas. Paul never saw these as proof that God had abandoned him, but part of the challenge of walking with Jesus in a fallen world. Though circumstances would at times press him on every side, or strike him down, he said it never crushed him or led him to despair or loneliness. (2 Cor. 4:7-10)

He drew a real distinction between events on the outside and the joy and freedom he treasured on the inside. Even in calamity that treasure would only be even more refined and through it find new ways to reach out and touch others in the process. Learning to live with a practical, daily dependence on Jesus is what spiritual maturity is really all about.

Elsewhere Paul said his "life was hidden with Christ in God." (Col. 3:3) What an incredible picture! He did not see himself as the victim of circumstance but secure with Christ in God. Regardless of what swirled around him he knew that God was his safety. Of course you can't live there if you're still trying to force God to fulfill what you want for your life. If you only trust him when life is easy, then you will not only miss him, but also miss the most valuable purpose of trust.

But when you set your mind on God's things and know how safe you are in his awesome love, you can awaken to each new day not buffeted by fear, but free to see what he will do in the unfolding events of your life. Nothing can touch you there, not the most painful tragedy or alluring temptation.

Nothing will bring greater joy to his heart and more freedom to yours than to learn how to live there. He will teach you if you ask him. With your eyes more focused on him than the events of this world, you'll be able to face anything with the confidence that comes from knowing him.

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