



# FINDING GOD IN THE MIDST OF AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

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Psalm 46

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On September 11th, America suffered one of the greatest wounds in its national history, and over seven thousand people tragically lost their lives. As a result, we are now on the verge of fighting a war with an enemy we cannot see. Fear, grief and rage have swept across the land. It is therefore imperative that as Christians we understand how to think Christianly about these events. Tragic circumstances such as these bring many issues to the surface: Where is God in the midst of evil? Do nations have the right under God to wage war? Can Christians participate in defending the state? Will evil always prevail? Is there any certain hope that we can lay hold of in a world gone mad?

The day after this tragedy I drove to San Diego to take my daughter to college. It was surreal to be in another place, separated from home and church, watching what was occurring from a distance. When I returned home, we discussed these events at our staff meeting, asking how we ought to respond. Bernard Bell came up with the best quote of the day. He remembered the words of a missionary in response to a tragic accident that had claimed the lives of several of his missionary friends. He said, "Don't allow questions you can't understand to detract you from the glorious certainties you already know."

We decided it is best not to speculate on what we don't know, but to remind ourselves of the certainties we do know. What follows are seven truths to anchor our souls in the midst of this dark hour.

## 1. God is absolutely sovereign

The first thing is that God is absolutely sovereign. To keep myself centered on this truth, I have been meditating on Psalm 46.

**God is our refuge and strength,  
A very present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change  
And though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea;  
Though its waters roar and foam,  
Though the mountains quake at its swelling pride. Selah.**

**There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
The holy dwelling places of the Most High.  
God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved;  
God will help her when morning dawns.  
The nations made an uproar, the kingdoms tottered;  
He raised His voice, the earth melted.  
The LORD of hosts is with us;  
The God of Jacob is our stronghold. Selah.**

**Come, behold the works of the LORD,  
Who has wrought desolations in the earth.  
He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth;  
He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two;  
He burns the chariots with fire.  
"Cease striving and know that I am God;  
I will be exalted among the nations,  
I will be exalted in the earth."  
The LORD of hosts is with us;  
The God of Jacob is our stronghold. Selah. (Psalm 46, NASB)**

This was the psalm that inspired Martin Luther's hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. The historical background that best fits these verses is 2 Kings 18-19. The Assyrian army had just in-

vaded Israel. They were one of the first national powers to dream of world domination. They had a well trained military machine of fierce and relentless mercenaries. The Assyrians didn't just defeat their enemies, they impaled them and flayed them alive. Any population that survived the initial onslaught was uprooted from their homeland and exiled to foreign soil, broken and disoriented. The process was so effective it was adopted by Adolph Hitler to carry out his dreaded Final Solution.

This was the terrible instrument that God allowed to invade and conquer Israel in the north. The Assyrian army then turned south through Judah, destroying cities and taking captives, until they finally surrounded the holy city of Jerusalem. At that dark hour God had in place a righteous king, Hezekiah, who fell on his face before God and prayed for deliverance (2 Kgs 19:14-19). In response to his prayer the prophet Isaiah came to him and said, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Because you have prayed to Me about Sennacherib king of Assyria, I have heard you'" (2 Kgs 19:20). That night, an angel of the LORD went through the enemy camp and destroyed 185,000 Assyrians. The psalmist wrote, "The nations made an uproar, the kingdoms tottered; He raised His voice, the earth melted" (46:6). In the aftermath of victory the poet concludes, "Cease striving and know that I am God, I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth" (46:10).

"The LORD of hosts is with us," becomes the psalmist's refrain (46:7,11). This is one of the most common titles used for the Lord in the Old Testament (repeated 239 times). It affirms that the God of Abraham is the unrivaled king of the world. The term "hosts" means literally "armies" (the verb means to "wage war"). It signifies that the Lord has at his disposal all the armies of the earth to accomplish his ends. This includes all the armies of the gentile nations, even those who do not confess him (Isa 10:5-34), all the angelic armies (2 Kgs 6:16-17), plus all the resources of creation (Job 38:22,23; Amos 4:13). Every opponent in heaven and on earth will be subject to his rule (Isa 13:4; 24:21-23; 29:5-8; 31:4-5; 34:1-12).

In the aftermath of September 11th, 2001, in the smoldering ruin of two towers and the partial destruction of the Pentagon, in the hijacking of four airplanes and the death of over 7000 innocent victims, I want to reaffirm with the psalmist that God is absolutely sovereign. This confession is spoken through gaping sorrow and inconsolable tears, but it is still sung with the piercing clarity of the shophar.

Because God is the "LORD of hosts," I know that the events that occurred on September 11th were well known to God long before the terrorists carried them out. He was not surprised by the ghastly horror. I am convinced that because of his sovereign intervention we were mercifully spared from even greater horrors. Things could have been much worse.

And yet we are forced to ask, Why didn't God intervene? Why did he allow any of these horrors to occur? We can grow so accustomed to this sense of divine protection that when God does lift his hand of protection we feel dismayed. David felt these emotions acutely, as we observe in Psalm 30.

**Now as for me, I said in my prosperity,  
"I will never be moved,"  
O Lord, by your favor you made my mountain to stand**

**strong;  
You hid your face, I was dismayed.  
To you, O LORD, I called,  
And to the LORD I made supplication:  
"What profit is there in my blood, if I go down to the pit?  
Will the dust praise You? Will it declare your faithfulness?"**  
(Ps 30:6-9)

God had protected and intervened so often in David's life that David made the mistake of thinking he was secure in his own strength. All it took was for God to hide his face but for a moment and David cried out, "I was dismayed!" That very dismay caused David to pray again for God to intervene. And so today we find our nation united, on its knees, feeling a deeper awareness of our vulnerability.

And yet, even in our prayers for intervention, a question still plagues us: Why do some live and others die? This summer I flew on that same United Airlines leg from San Francisco to Newark, New Jersey. I was with ten other friends, united in grief for two other close friends, a father and a son, who were killed in a automobile accident. The son was like my own son, and his father a dear friend. As I was sitting at the funeral, consumed with sorrow, I wondered, Why Tom and David? Why now, in the prime of David's life, and just when Tom has retired and completed his new home in Maine? Why did they die and the driver of the car that hit them walk away with no injuries? Last week, Billy Graham told our leaders at the National Cathedral, "I'm an old man and I cannot explain the mystery of evil, or why God allows things to happen the way they do."

Yes, this is a mystery we cannot probe. But we do know this: God is sovereign, so we can plead for him to intervene. If God is not sovereign, then I must conclude that the Psalms have no relevance and we might as well not bother to pray. But because he is sovereign we have a God we can connect with. Therefore, in the face of tragedy we can weep, we can complain, we can protest and we can plead with him to intervene.

Psalm 44 is a model prayer for us at this hour. It was written as a national lament, probably during Israel's exile. Israel's leaders were trying to recover from a terrible national defeat. They had been studying the book of Joshua and carefully observed that whenever Israel waged a battle by faith, the nation was victorious. But when they went out in their own strength, they were defeated (44:1-3). So just prior to their battle they reaffirmed their faith in the God that fought with Joshua (44:4-8). But to their amazement, when they marched into battle they were disastrously defeated. Many were exiled, and the gentile nations mocked them (44:9-16). In the aftermath Israel felt humiliated by the enemy and abandoned and betrayed by God. God had previously told them that if there was idolatry in their midst, he would send a prophet to expose it (44:17-21). But in this case there was no prophet, and thus they didn't know why they were defeated. In light of this, the only conclusion they could come to was that, "for your sake we are killed all day long." Then they gathered their courage to ask God to intervene once again.

**Arouse yourself, why do you sleep, O LORD ?  
Awake, do not reject us forever.  
Why do you hide your face,  
And forget our affliction and our oppression?  
For our soul has sunk down into the dust;  
Our body cleaves to the earth.  
Rise up, be our help,  
And redeem us for the sake of your loyal-love."** (Ps 44:23-26)

Today I am crying out to that same sovereign God to intervene.

## **2. Without God man is desperately sick.**

The events of September 11th unmask the depravity of the human heart. Jeremiah wrote,

**"The heart is more deceitful above all else.**

**It is desperately sick.  
Who can understand it?"** (Jer 17:9)

In terrible times such as this, when God allows the unveiling of raw evil, we see a painful reminder of how wicked we all are apart from God's grace. For "as it is written, There is none righteous, not even one" (Rom 3:10). In times of evil, righteous men and women in the Bible do not point their condemning fingers at others in self-righteousness, but treat such times as an occasion to examine their own hearts. Our response to the events last Tuesday should be a holy mixture of grief and humility.

We see this spirit in David when Saul persecuted him. For years, David was forced to wander in the wilderness, hunted by a demonized king who wanted to kill him. David was in the right and Saul was in the wrong. Yet we find in many of David's psalms that although he was unjustly persecuted, he used such occasions to heighten his awareness of his own sin and to plead with God not only to intervene on his behalf but to forgive to him of his iniquities. We find these themes blending beautifully in Psalm 40.

**You, O LORD, will not withhold Your compassion from me;  
Your loyal-love and Your truth will continually preserve me.  
For evils beyond number have surrounded me;  
My iniquities have overtaken me, so that I am not able to see;  
They are more numerous than the hairs of my head,  
And my heart has failed me.  
Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me;  
Make haste, O LORD, to help me.  
Let those be ashamed and humiliated together  
Who seek my life to destroy it;  
Let those be turned back and dishonored  
Who delight in my hurt.** (Ps 40:11-14)

So first, remember that God is sovereign; and second, remember that without God man is sick.

This brings us to the third great truth.

## **3. The state has the right to bear the sword for issues of justice**

When evil occurs, God has given the state the right to bear the sword for issues of justice. As Paul said in Romans,

**Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.** (Rom 13:1-4)

So Paul encourages Christians to be subject to the governing authorities because God has granted them the right to exercise "the sword" to punish evil. The state has the right to bear arms. The sword is a metaphor for death, and therefore I believe the state has the right to carry out capital punishment for the sake of justice (Gen 9:6). (In my opinion, mercy can and should be granted to those who repent; but in doing so we should never forget that the innocent blood of Christ was shed to atone for their sins.) So Paul is saying, as a Christian if you don't want to fear the state, then do what's right, for the state doesn't bear the sword for nothing.

It would seem then that if governments have the right to bear the sword in their own realm, they may also bear the sword to protect themselves from international tyranny. John Calvin said:

But kings and people must sometimes take up arms to execute such public vengeance. On this basis we may judge wars law-

ful which are so undertaken. For if power has been given them to preserve the tranquility of their dominion, to restrain the seditious stirrings of restless men, to help those forcibly oppressed, to punish evil deeds - can they use it more opportunely than to check the fury of one who disturbs both the repose of private individuals and the common tranquility of all, who raises seditious tumults, and by whom violent oppressions and vile misdeeds are perpetrated? If they ought to be the guardians and defenders of the laws, they should also overthrow the efforts of all whose offenses corrupt the discipline of the laws. Indeed, if they rightly punish those robbers whose harmful acts have affected only a few, will they allow a whole country to be afflicted and devastated by robberies with impunity? For it makes no difference whether it be a king or the lowest of the common folk who invades a foreign country in which he has no right, and harries it as an enemy. All such must, equally, be considered as robbers and punished accordingly.<sup>1</sup>

This being true, the question arises, Can a Christian be involved with the state's use of the sword? The answer is, yes.

#### 4. Can a Christian participate with the state in issues of justice?

I'm a pacifist when it comes to implementing the Kingdom of God on earth, but not when it comes to issues of justice. When Roman soldiers came to John the Baptist for spiritual advice, he did not say, in effect, "Lay down your arms," but rather, "be righteous soldiers." Again, as Calvin said,

For if Christian doctrine concerning salvation condemned all wars, the soldiers asking counsel concerning salvation should rather have been advised to cast away their weapons and withdraw completely from military service. But they were told: 'Strike no man, do no man wrong, be content with your wages' (Luke 3:14). When he taught them to be content with their wages, he certainly did not forbid them to bear arms.<sup>2</sup>

Using worldly weapons to advance God's rule in the church is always wrong. If we are persecuted for being Christians, then we are to turn the other cheek. We are to show love. We are to take the blows and love our enemies. On the other hand, as citizens of this world, it is not wrong for Christians to be part of the military, the police, the CIA or the FBI. If someone raped and murdered my family, I would fall on my knees and pray, and then I would pick up the phone and dial 911 to seek the help of the state.

In our studies in the life of Abraham we found this same principle at work. When conflicts arose concerning the promises of God, whether the "land" or "seed," Abraham was to be passive and learn to inherit them through faith and patience. So when Lot contested him for the land, Abraham refused to fight. He gave Lot first choice and walked away from the conflict. When Abraham was promised a son, it was not to be born in his own strength, but rather "life from the dead." This is how Abraham learned to walk in respect to the promises of God. In similar manner Jesus clearly forbid his disciples to use the sword for the kingdom of God.

On the other hand, when Lot, Abraham's nephew, was kidnapped by tyrannical kings (Gen 14), Abraham roused an army of three hundred men, hunted the enemy down, defeated them by faith, and restored his nephew and other captives to their rightful homes. In like manner it is not wrong for Christians to be involved with the state to combat injustice either on a local or international level. As Christians, we must remember that we are citizens of two worlds.

Therefore I think it is appropriate for the United States to work with other nations to prevent, punish and root out worldwide terrorism. We may or may not be successful as an instrument of justice, but the anchor of my faith rests in the fact that we live in a moral universe, and justice will be done.

But there is still another dimension to evil which these tragic

events force us to consider.

#### 5. Behind the face of evil is the devil

**For you art not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness;  
No evil dwells with Thee. (Ps 5:4)**

Behind the face of evil is the devil, not God, for God alone is the source of all goodness. Thus all evil has its roots in a terrible enemy that we cannot see. Paul writes that he is so powerful we are not even in his league.

**For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Eph 6:12)**

The devil is a murderer and liar from the beginning. He is highly organized, he has agents everywhere, and he is bent on our destruction. When we turned on the television on Tuesday and saw those horrific scenes of two jets exploding into the World Trade Towers, we saw the devil at work, unmasked. Today we feel a keen sense of vulnerability. We feel that we are targeted for death merely because we are Americans. At this hour we need to be reminded that Jesus prepared his disciples for a similar kind of hatred for bearing the name *Christian*. "An hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God" (John 16:2). We need to think carefully about our response to this. Perhaps, like those early disciples, we need to say, "If God should choose to slay me, I will still trust in him." If you can come to that kind of faith, then you need not live in fear.

This brings me to my final point. Many are asking, Will evil always prevail in this life?

#### 6. Will evil always prevail?

The answer is a resounding "No!" But it takes the eye of faith to see this. The very first prophecy in the Bible concerns the devil's doom. Just after he had mastered the deception of mankind, God said to him:

**The LORD God said to the serpent,  
"Because you have done this,  
Cursed are you more than all cattle,  
And more than every beast of the field;  
On your belly you will go,  
And dust you will eat  
All the days of your life;  
And I will put enmity  
Between you and the woman,  
And between your seed and her seed;  
He shall bruise you on the head,  
And you shall bruise him on the heel." (Gen 3:14-15)**

From this text we learn that though the devil has freedom to exercise his will and to bring about evil and mass destruction, he will be constantly subjected to futility. Every evil act he commits will backfire and he will eat dust. Secondly, we learn that he would spend the rest of his life wondering which "boy" born of the woman would be the one that would issue the fatal blow ("he will bruise you on the head"), in response to his vicious attack ("you shall bruise him on the heel"). We see the history of this enmity played out throughout the Old Testament, but it is in the coming of Christ that the light of this prophecy becomes fully clear.

If we ask, What was the darkest day in human history? When did the sky turn black from the evil that was done on the earth? the answer is, when the devil had free rein to do every imaginable evil to the holy Son. He spit on him. He slapped his face. He beat him. He plucked out his beard. Then he had him flogged with a leather whip laced with nails and metal until he was so bloody and raw he was unrecognizable. It was a scene so horrible that the Father in Heaven could not look down, so he covered the sky with an eerie, dark canopy so thick that no one could hear his weeping. For the Son, the moment was so horrific he lost under-

standing and cried out, "My God! My God! Why have You forsaken me?" Jesus could not comprehend the mystery of the raw evil unleashed upon him and cried out for God to intervene.

Now what do we see when we look at that terrible event? I see my sin. My sin placed the Son in the hands of the devil. That's a terrible thing to contemplate. But that's not all I see. In Jesus' outstretched palms, I see God's love that is greater than my sin, beckoning me to come home. And on that day we learned that death is not the end, it is only the beginning. Now we see that we may not be spared *from* death, but we will be spared *through* death.

Last week I had to do something in my own heart. I said, "God, since you are sovereign, if you choose to kill me, I choose to walk by faith. I'm not going to live in fear." That was a hard thing for me to do. But if you do the same, you will be free. Millions of Christians throughout history have done this. Finally, it's time for Americans to do the same. God, if you choose to kill me, I will live by faith.

## 7. The Goodness of a Sovereign God

The final thing I want to say is that our sovereign God is extremely good. Earlier this summer, I was reflecting on the state of our nation and the spiritual climate of this valley. In our prosperity we have forgotten God. Hollywood, which is completely devoid of conscience, seems to be leading our country morally. The movies have become the most influential moral force, promoting every form of violence, pleasure and sexual deviation. I fear the Internet is going to turn every young man in America into a sexual addict. In our valley, young professionals were making so much money so quickly that the very notion of what work meant, and the value of wages, had disappeared. Where is it all going to end? I wondered.

Then came September 11th. This was the day the devil was allowed free rein. But God was also there that day. Our whole nation was there. The whole world was there. And the devil will eat dust.

I never thought in my lifetime I would see all of America taking a week-long Sabbath to mourn. I never thought there would be a week in America when no planes would fly and no one would care; or that all NFL games would be cancelled and no one would object. I never thought I would hear Jay Leno admit, "My show is stupid." I never dreamed that even Hollywood would cancel shows it felt might not be appropriate at this hour. I never thought I would hear leaders of our news stations telling us to pray.

I never thought I'd walk in shopping malls and gaze into the eyes of every American and see a broken heart. I never thought I could drive from San Jose to San Diego and everybody on the road would be my friend. I never thought I would see our nation-

al leaders flock to the National Cathedral, not out of duty or for a perfunctory service, but to weep and pray and hear authentic, godly spiritual leaders telling them the truth.

I never thought the petty arguments of separation of church and state would evaporate under the keen awareness that without God there is no state. Now we hear *Amazing Grace* sung at baseball games prior to the national anthem.

I never thought I would see all the layers of our nation's preoccupation with greed, idolatry and sex stripped away to expose the deepest layers of a nation's heart of love and heroism. I thought, how can I continue in my ease and complacency while I watch hundreds of firefighters going into that inferno to save lives? When you see images like that, you know there's a higher calling that defies even death. When the devastation is finally removed, perhaps America will remain better for the scars it will eternally bear in the palms of its hands.

I never thought I would drive 110 miles from San Diego to Los Angeles and see a flag hanging from every overpass. Now the flag is imbued with new meaning. I never used to be much of a flag-waver, because for my generation it was less a symbol of freedom and more a symbol of our arrogance, wealth and power. It hung as a symbol that as Americans we can do as we please. September 11th changed all that. Now it has become a symbol of suffering. And for those who display it, it symbolizes the desire to be united with all who suffered. Today I have two flags flying outside my home.

Finally, I never thought that in my lifetime America would be so hated by an enemy and yet so loved by the world. I never thought I'd hear the *Star-Spangled Banner* sung at Buckingham Palace, or see the flag flying at half-mast over the Kremlin because of something that happened in America.

This is a rare, tender moment in the history of our nation. But it will not last forever. Perhaps it is a foretaste of that great day when, as Zechariah says,

**"I am going to pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, and they will look on Me whom they pierced; and they will weep, and they will weep with mourning as if they lost their firstborn."** (Zech 12:10)

So do not fear, little children. In the darkest tragedy God is very near, even in death.

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1. John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Book IV; XX 11.
2. Calvin, *Institutes*.