

# Where Was God on September 11<sup>th</sup>?

**Preached by:** Matthew S. Black

**Text:** Luke 13:1-5

**Date:** September 11, 2011, 10:30am

**Luke 13:1–5** (ESV) — “There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? 3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. 4 Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? 5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.””

**Introduction:** “When the dead are counted, the number will be more than we can bear;” so said Mayor Giuliani on September 11, 2001, exactly one decade ago today. And so it is, the number of 2,977 *is* more than we can bear. *Where was God on 9–11?* Why did God not protect Washington and New York City?

## **Rome Adopts the Christian God**

The same question was asked back in A.D. 410, when Aleric the Goth overpowered the guards at the Salarian Gate, and trashed the City of Rome. The citizens were angry, and blamed the disaster on the God of the Christians. The Roman Emperor had commanded every one to worship the God of the Christians, and now the people were sorry he had done that. They insisted that their own pagan gods would have done a better job of defending the city; but now the Empire had mandated belief in the Christian God who watched the barbarians ram the gate and did nothing. Could a God like that be trusted? If He was all-powerful why did He not intervene to defend the city?

## **Augustine Writes “The City of God”**

In order to defend the God of the Bible, Augustine wrote a book titled, *The City of God*. He suggested that God had a different agenda than the people of the city. He had an eternal purpose revealed in Scripture. Specifically, Augustine said there are two cities: the city of God and the city of man. The city of man was built by man, and reflects his dreams, hopes and pride. This city is earthly, temporal and capable of being destroyed. In fact, it will some day be *totally obliterated*.

There is, however, another city: the city of God. This city endures forever; this is the kingdom of God that gives meaning to the world. This is the city of the patriarchs and prophets, the city of the apostles and the church. This is the city “which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” This city cannot be destroyed.

Augustine’s message was in harmony with the writers of Scripture: Those who belong to the city of man lost everything when Rome was destroyed. But, although those who belonged to the city of God found the attack devastating, they were not thereby destroyed.

Death and destruction could not deprive them from anything of eternal value, for they knew that, come what may, God's presence in heaven awaited them.

The people of Augustine's day asked, "Where was God when Rome was trashed?" People today are asking a similar question.

- Where was God when terrorists devastated the World Trade Center and the Pentagon?
- Where was God when children learned that their father was not coming back home?
- When mothers, brothers, sisters and spouses were destroyed by evil men?
- Where was He?

God did not have a breakdown in His intelligence system. He was there when the hijackings were being planned; He was there when their plans were executed. He was there when New York burned. And like the people of Augustine's time, that disturbs us.

The people of Jesus day were equally disturbed by tragedies and atrocities, and they had come up with an answer. They wrongly surmised that when extraordinarily bad things happen, it must be because the people that suffer them are extraordinarily bad. They were trying to defend God's sovereignty.

**Luke 13:1–5 (ESV)** — “There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? 3 No, I tell you; **but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.** 4 Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? 5 No, I tell you; **but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.**”

The message of Jesus is simple. Atrocities and tragedies carry a message – whether they be the murders that occurred in Jesus' day or the atrocities of 9–11, we must remember *how fragile life is*.

When great tragedies occur, God wants us to remember that regardless of how we die, we are all going to die. We are all going to meet Him. And we are all going to give an account for every action we've ever committed. And if we do not repent, not only will our body perish one day in death, but our soul will perish eternally.

So as we come to our message, "Where was God on 9–11? You remember where you were. But where was God? How could He let this happen?"

As we glean truth from Luke 13, let us remember four things. First...

**I. God was there sovereignly ruling over His creation,**  
“unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (vs. 3, 5).

The most striking word in what Jesus' said is "all". All mankind was created by Christ, and all will stand before Him. God is in absolute control of the universe. He rules over all. The Jews understood that God who created us sovereignly rules over His creation. This begs a question that is often asked – If God is good, and if He is all powerful, then why do bad things happen? How could 9-11 happen, since God is good and He had the power to stop it?

First let's remember that...

A. God presides over the universe, but He is not tempted with evil, and He tempts no one (Jms. 1:13; Job 15:15; Hab. 1:13).

**James 1:13**, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one."

Catastrophes happen constantly. Wars occur. People murder and lie and steal. Profoundly evil things happen in the broken world. But God never changes. He is perfectly holy and untouched by evil.

- **Job** put it this way: **Job 15:15** (ESV) — "Behold, God puts no trust in his holy ones, and the heavens are not pure in his sight". Job was a righteous man, but he was undergoing profound calamity and suffering. Yet Job defended God's holiness and purity! God is absolutely pure and without sin.
- **Habakkuk** had a similar difficulty. When the wicked Babylonians were bringing great atrocities against the less wicked nation of Israel, the prophet lamented in **Habakkuk 1:13** (ESV) — "You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?"

So when we see atrocities occur, we must remember that God is untouched by sin. He does not cause sin. There is a second thing we need to remember. When we ask how could 9-11 happen, since God is good and He had the power to stop it?

B. God allows sin to occur in order to demonstrate His justice and **mercy** (Heb. 9:27; Rom. 9:22-24; 3:23; 5:8).

Every action of every moral being will be taken into account and God will judge each one of us. Hebrews 9:27 (ESV) — "... it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment".

Look at Romans 9. The question asked is – why does God even allow the wicked to be created? Isn't He the potter and we are the clay? The apostle Paul gives us the answer.

Consider **Romans 9:22-24**, “22 What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, 23 in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— 24 even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?”

So God allowed sin into the world to demonstrate His mercy. We all deserve to perish. You see we have “ALL sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (**Romans 3:23**). We all deserve to perish. But God has given us a way to prepare for death. There is mercy with God. We all have transgressed God’s perfect holiness and goodness. All mankind are sinners and we are in desperate need of God’s mercy. Yes God allowed sin so that He could demonstrate His hatred against by putting those who will not repent in hell. Consider **Romans 5:8**, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

### **The Greatest Atrocity: The Murder of Jesus**

When we consider the atrocity of 9-11, we must consider another atrocity—the murder of the Son of God!

- C. God allows catastrophic events to occur in order to show us how **fragile** life is (Jms. 4:14; Isa. 64:6; Ps. 103:15-17).

Death is sure; life is uncertain. Hebrews 9:27 (ESV) — “... it is appointed for man to die once...” The day of our death is appointed.

I’ve done many funerals. Wise King Solomon says in **Ecclesiastes 7:2** (ESV) — “It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart.” It’s better to be at a funeral than at a party, because it helps us put into perspective what is important. Am I ready to meet God?

Jesus told the story of a rich man in **Luke 12:16-21** who said, “I have much goods for many years, I will eat, drink and be merry...” Jesus said he was a fool because, that night his soul was demanded of him. The souls of almost three thousand people were unexpectedly demanded on September 11.

God allows us at times to see extraordinary tragedies so that we will consider that any one of us could be taken out of this world at any time.

Jesus warns us in 9-11 and in all other tragedies and atrocities and calamities: “unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (vs. 3, 5). One day, we will all die. 9-11 makes us consider how FRAIL and FRAGILE life is. Anyone of us could die at any time. The truth is our bodies will die, but where will our soul dwell for eternity?

The truth is, just as in Jesus' day, we live in a very broken, fallen world of sin, and unspeakable evil occurs as well as unimaginable tragedy. It is amazing how very fragile life is.

In fact we all know 9/11 is not an isolated atrocity. Because we live in a world of vast access to electronic media, we see the atrocities and tragedies of the world constantly. In fact, we are not isolated from almost **anything** that happens anywhere in the world.

Every catastrophe, every calamity, every cataclysmic event, every disaster, every tragedy everywhere eventually comes to us through the media and we vicariously experience so much of the pain, sorrow, and death in the world.

When 9/11 shocked the world, the entire world began to call out to God. In our country there was a realization that this world is not all there is. All that we know and love could end abruptly at any time!

Life is frail!

The apostle James tells us in **James 4:14**: “you do not know what tomorrow will bring” and then he asks the question – “What is your life? For you are a mist [vapor] that appears for a little time and then vanishes.”

The prophet Isaiah tells us in **Isaiah 64:6** (ESV) — “We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.”

King David says in **Psalms 103:15–17** (ESV) — “As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; 16 for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. 17 But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children”.

Life is frail, and when sudden tragedies come, we awaken to an urgency and seriousness about eternal life. We are all going to live forever somewhere. One day we are all going to leave this world and face God.

D. Despite the Jews' theology, suffering and calamity do not represent God's **final** judgment (Mat. 10:28).

The Jews had a theology about suffering. Their theology was sort of the ancient version of the prosperity gospel. They believed that if you were righteous, then you were superior to everyone. They believed that out of all the people in the world, they were God's favorites. They believed that God blessed them and protected them and kept calamity from them. And, in fact, if calamity did fall, it was a good indication that God was judging you, and that you must be very evil and very bad at heart

because God is going to bring calamity to fall only upon those people who are evil. They were completely wrong.

Even though the Jews were right that God is absolutely sovereign, they were wrong about the most important thing.

1. The worst calamities of this earth are not the worst thing that can happen. If we suffer the worst calamities and atrocities of this earth, they are but for a moment. But there is something far worse than anything on this earth. The worst thing imaginable is that a person would eternally lose His soul and perish forever. The worst thing imaginable is that a human being would be separated from Christ forever.

Jesus said in **Matthew 10:28** (ESV) — “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

2. The horrific events of September 11<sup>th</sup> force us to sharply distinguish between that which is temporal and that which is eternal. The temporal and the eternal collided in New York. When you saw the towers fall—those were temporal. But when you saw people jump from the rubble; those were eternal human beings, who entered the gates of eternity.

**2 Peter 3:10–13** (ESV) — “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. 11 Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, 12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! 13 But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.”

E. God often uses tragedies and even atrocities in His people’s lives to **conform** them to the image of Jesus Christ (Gen. 50:20; book of Job; Jn. 9; Rom. 8:28-29).

- Remember what **Joseph** said to his brothers in **Genesis 50:20** (ESV) — “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”
- Remember, God gave **Job** deep tragedy, but Job was a righteous man.
- The **man born blind**, recorded in John 9, had done nothing inherently wicked above others to deserve blindness – and in fact God said he was experienced that tragedy for the glory of God.

- Consider that God’s own Son Jesus Christ was crucified, and that all the apostles except one (John) were martyred – all to demonstrate the love of God!

The key passage to remember when you are suffering is **Romans 8:28–29** (ESV) — “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son...” God’s greatest plan for your life is to conform you to Christ.

If you are God’s child, God will use tragedies and wrongs done to you in your life to conform you to Christ’s image!

## II. God was **warning** us of the judgment to come, “unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (vs. 3, 5; Jn. 3:16-18; 1 Jn. 5:12).

Another striking word in what Jesus says is the word “perish”. **John 3:16–18** (ESV) — “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

When we consider 9-11, and all catastrophic events, God is reminding us that judgment is coming. Interestingly, the terrorists inflicted damage on the two symbols of our greatness: our **wealth** and our **military power**. New York and Washington represent us all—our values, our hopes, our dreams, our security, our investments. Yet what happened there on September 11 is a preview of final judgment. Read about the future Judgment of Babylon, and you will think you are reading about New York, Chicago and Los Angeles (Rev. 18:9-17).

The human heart is capable of great evil. We like to think that there is an invisible line that runs through the human race; on the one side are the good people, on the other the bad or evil people. The line does not run through the human race, but as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (who suffered for Christ in the Russian Gulag) said that **“Sin runs through every human heart**. Yes, it is true that we have been touched by the heroism and sacrifice of the firefighters, many of whom gave their lives to save others. But, incredible though it might seem, at birth the human heart is about the same in all of us. The only thing that prevents us from great evil is God’s grace, our different cultures, our home life and, of course the choices we make. The tragedy in New York revealed the human heart for what it is.

Two categories of people died in these tragedies; those who personally trusted Christ as Savior were taken immediately to heaven. They are even now in the presence of God, beholding the beauty of the Savior. They miss their families, but they would not return even if they could. And if their families have come to trust Christ, there will be a reunion in heaven, the likes of which we cannot imagine. Then there are those who trusted in

themselves; those who saw no need for a Savior. They entered a place called Hades; a place of great suffering.

The apostle John says it very simply: **1 John 5:12** (ESV) — “Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.”

### III. **God was there mercifully welcoming some people into eternal life**, “unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (vs. 3, 5).

Just as in the atrocities of Jesus’ day, there is a way out of death. It is repentance. As the terrorists flew into the twin towers, as the plane crashed into the Pentagon, and as Flight 93 fell out of the sky and crashed to the ground, something sacred was happening. Those who had already prepared for eternal life, were ready, and as those who had put their trust in Christ died, they were welcomed into heaven by Jesus Christ.

No one who died on September 11<sup>th</sup> was without sin. But Jesus says to those who put their trust in Him, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (**John 11:25**). Those who died that fateful day of September 11<sup>th</sup> who had put their trust in Jesus did not ultimately die. They are more alive than ever before.

### IV. **God was getting the attention of a nation** (Hab. 1:5-6)

Why would God use wicked people to get our attention? God gave Habakkuk a message that startled him in **Habakkuk 1:5–6** (ESV) — “Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told. 6 For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans [Babylonians], that bitter and hasty [impetuous] nation”. God raised up people more evil than Israel to judge Israel. Just so, God may use people more evil than we to judge us.

No nation on earth has had as many blessings as the United States. **We have more wealth than other nations; we have more Christian radio programs; more television programs, more books, more churches, more seminars, more counseling centers. And yet, we have more violence, more immorality and more false religion than almost any nation on earth.**

We have given expansive rights to pornographers, but have outlawed prayer. We have forgotten God. Since all the sins in the world are in the church, let us point our fingers only at ourselves, for judgment must begin in the house of God. We’ve noticed that people who have not prayed for years have been praying since the disaster. Indeed, members of Congress actually attended a prayer service—on government property, no less! Where was God when New York was burning?



Elie Wiesel, Nobel Prize winner and Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, tells of a time when he was in a concentration camp and was compelled, along with a few others, to witness the hanging of two Jewish men and one Jewish boy. The two men died instantly, but the boy struggled for perhaps a half hour on the gallows. "Where is God, where is He?" someone behind Wiesel muttered. Wiesel also felt the question springing to his heart. "Where is God, where is He?" Then it was as if he heard a voice saying, "He is hanging there on the gallows."

Yes, God was with that child on the gallows. But as Christians we also believe that God's Son died on other gallows—a cross—so that we might never doubt the love of God. And to all who believe, no matter what tragedy or atrocity comes to you, there is one promise that can never be taken away from you: "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (**Heb. 13:5**).

**Conclusion:** Augustine was right. He said this:

**"Whatever men build, men will destroy, so let's get on with the business of building the kingdom of God."**

Are you trusting in the city of man or the city of God? As we consider the great tragedies of the human race, let us remember that there is a catastrophic day of death coming for all of us. In that day we shall meet God, our Maker. Unless each of us repents and puts our faith in Christ, we shall perish. All shall perish who have not Christ. All. Don't be a part of that group. Put your faith in Christ today.