

Where Was God on September 11th?

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Acts 4:27, 28

...for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place (Acts 4:27, 28).

Introduction

On September eleventh, 2001, an event took place that, in one way or another, affected everyone in the free world. Nineteen terrorists in four jets managed to kill thousands of civilians on American soil. On this twenty-first anniversary of that infamous event, I would like to revisit the much-asked question, *Where was God on September 11th?*

I have no expertise in foreign policy. I am not a politician or military strategist so I will not discuss what our military response should or should not have been. As a pastor, however, I am quite concerned with the theological implications attached to the way Christians view an event like this; for an event like 9/11 can serve as a macrocosm for the way we might view tragedies which find their way into our individual lives.

And, at the risk of sounding uncharitable, I found myself mystified at the way western, high-profile clergymen responded to this tragic event. I cannot think of an event in my lifetime which ferreted out what people, pastors, actually think about God more the 9/11.

Some, no doubt seeking to protect the character of God, said, "God didn't want it to happen, but He will turn it into something good." The daughter of a famous evangelist said, "We asked God to leave our country by eliminating things like prayer in schools. And God, being the gentleman that He is did not stay where He was unwelcome. How can we complain now that He did not protect us?" Others went so far as to say "God simply couldn't stop it from happening without violating man's free will."

How are people who believe in the God of the Bible to view an event like 9/11? How can a good God allow such an awful thing to happen? And if I may expand my question bit...how can *humanity* make sense of a catastrophic event like 9/11? Liberals and conservatives – theists and atheists were all incensed that fateful morning. But when the

conversations began, the dust of the World Trade Center transitioned into philosophical and intellectual fog. Although what I will speak of this morning is 9/11, the implications of this discussion apply to any event, tragic or joyous, which find its way into our lives.

Potential Views

What are some ways men settle themselves in this type of storm. Let us take a moment to examine our options.

Atheist

First consider the atheist. We must acknowledge that atheists were among those infuriated by 9/11; it would be foolish and insulting to suggest otherwise. Of course, the atheist doesn't have a problem with how a good God could allow such an awful thing to happen, for he doesn't believe in God at all.

But the atheist has a bigger problem. The problem the atheist has is giving any *authoritative* account for why he thinks the attack was in fact evil. The people dancing in the streets of Afghanistan didn't think it was so evil. The terrorists didn't think it was so evil. Why should the atheist think his opinion is superior to theirs?

Don't misunderstand me. I am not saying the atheist is less moral than other people. What I am saying is that the atheist has no grounds to declare that anything is *objectively* and *absolutely* evil. It is simply their opinion. In this instance I agree with their opinion. But the atheist is hard-pressed to come up with any sound argument as to what makes evil things evil. Their last line of authority is their own opinion. And there is no absolute (I highlight *absolute*) reason to think their opinion is any better than Osama Bin Laden's opinion.

The Nazis tried at Nuremburg sought to justify their actions by stating that they were submitting to the highest authority they had, Hitler. He was their head of state, their king. How could anyone fault someone for submitting to their highest authority?

Unless you believe in a God who transcends all authority – unless you believe in a King of all kings (an absolute standard-maker who has revealed that standard to mankind) you have no absolute grounds to accuse even the most evil despot of inappropriate behavior, for you both

have the same standard – your own opinion. All you can really say is you don't like it.

Polytheism

Perhaps polytheism (many gods) is the answer. Perhaps there are good and bad gods. Sometimes the good gods win, other times the bad gods win. On September 11th the bad gods won. There aren't too many polytheists around, so I'll give this subject a brief treatment. One major flaw in the good god – bad god hypothesis is who gets to decide which are good and which are bad? Again, the terrorists thought the good god won on 9/11. Man must put himself in the seat of judging the gods thus making himself god and we're back to our original atheistic problem.

Impotent Monotheism

Perhaps there is one God, but He is incapable stopping this kind of event. We must ask then, what qualifies a being to be God? If the being is incapable of stopping nineteen men from running amuck on an airline, should we really consider him a deity? Is this the kind of God in whom we are to entrust our eternal soul? Can this God defeat the devil? This god would be inferior to the polytheistic god for he is not merely losing battles to other gods; he is losing battles to mere men.

The Negligent God

Let us take a step closer to the God of the Scriptures. What appeared to be the most popular view was that there is one God who had the power to do something but chose not to. It was not His will that this should take place, but He will make the most of it. This is the gentlemanly God who politely dismissed Himself from a society who rudely asked Him to leave.

He stood with his hands gently clasped behind His back while planes crashed into buildings. But He will work it out for good. God now becomes the god of damage control. Tragic events are not something God decrees to take place, but He is fully capable of fixing the mess afterwards. This God did not want the eggs scrambled but, since they are scrambled, He will produce an omelet.

But there are problems with this view as well. For one, how do we know when the bad event ends and the fixing begins? Is God now making the omelet or are the terrorists still scrambling the eggs? How do we know that the omelet is not laced with strychnine?

If God is sitting on His hands during certain events in history, how can we possibly know when He is actually involving Himself? How good does the event have to be before we acknowledge that God is now in the act reparation? Remember, **“Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14)**. It becomes impossible to discern when or if God is working at all.

This view is popular because it seemingly relieves God of responsibility for the tragic event. But does it? Does not God’s own law teach us that if we are capable of helping and refuse to help, we are guilty? Is not the indictment against the goats (unbelievers) that they were negligent in giving food and water to the hungry and thirsty (Matthew 25:42)?

If your child is about to fall off the roof and you know it, and are capable of doing something about, but allow him to fall, there is not a court in the land who will not charge you with criminal negligence. We learn in Proverbs,

Deliver *those who* are drawn toward death, And hold back *those stumbling* to the slaughter. ¹² If you say, “Surely we did not know this,” Does not He who weighs the hearts consider *it*? He who keeps your soul, does He *not* know *it*? And will He *not* render to *each* man according to his deeds (Proverbs 24:11, 12)?

If we’re capable of doing something and don’t, we’re guilty. According to God’s own law, negligence is incriminating. If the offered answer is that God could have stopped a tragic event but merely chose not to, would He not be guilty of negligence according to His own law? So, unless we go back to the impotent god who couldn’t stop the event, this view doesn’t exonerate God (as if God needs to be exonerated).

Habakkuk

I have spent a good deal of time seeking to refute positions. So, what is the answer? There are numerous examples in Scripture where the

answer to this apparent dilemma is addressed and solved (Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 37-50, the king of Assyria in Isaiah 10, where God ordained an evil event through evil people toward a glorious end) This morning we will take a brief look at a very short book found in the Old Testament called Habakkuk.

In this book we see a dialogue which reveals what is really happening behind the curtain of perceived events. This might be called biblical metaphysics. What is really happening? Allow me to preface this portion of the sermon by stating that I have found no greater comfort for the Christian in toil than to know and embrace the lesson found in Habakkuk.

Habakkuk to help us make sense of how God works in history. It also addresses a thing called theodicy (If God is all good and all powerful, why is there evil in the world?). The book opens with a prayer.

Habakkuk's Prayer

The burden which the prophet Habakkuk saw. O Lord, how long shall I cry, And You will not hear? Even cry out to You, "Violence!" And You will not save.³ Why do You show me iniquity, And cause *me* to see trouble? For plundering and violence *are* before me; There is strife, and contention arises.⁴ Therefore the law is powerless, And justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; Therefore perverse judgment proceeds (Habakkuk 1:1-4).

The cry of Habakkuk is similar to the cry from many in our own land. How long will God allow the evil in our land to continue? We appear to be drowning in a sea of adultery, fornication, sexual confusion and misconduct, corruption, violence, idolatry and severely unbiblical economics. The law seems powerless to do anything about it and the wicked seem to be winning, and our children are on the altars. When will God ever do anything about it?

The Lord Replies to Habakkuk.

Look among the nations and watch – Be utterly astounded! For I will work a work in your days Which you would not believe, though it were told you (Habakkuk 1:5).

The force of these words gives the impression that the answer God will offer Habakkuk will be both astonishing and perplexing. I have found this very much to be the case; so much so that many who say they believe in the Bible have a difficult time believing what it says here.

For indeed I am raising up the Chaldeans, A bitter and hasty nation Which marches through the breadth of the earth, To possess dwelling places *that are not theirs*.⁷ They are terrible and dreadful; Their judgment and their dignity proceed from themselves.⁸ Their horses also are swifter than leopards, And more fierce than evening wolves (Habakkuk 1:6-8a).

Habakkuk asked, “how long.” God’s answer is ‘not long.’ But what is striking is the means by which God will exact His judgments. *He is raising up* the Chaldeans – people God describes in the most vicious terms possible. The axe of God’s judgment will be a bitter and hasty nation full of terrible, dreadful, self-centered people who ascribe power to a false god. It almost sounds as if God is impressed with the ferocious nature of the Chaldeans.

The Chaldeans appear to be God’s bloodthirsty junkyard dogs. They’re cruel and enjoy their malicious and vicious attacks. And yet God has ordained and uses these wicked barbarians for His own just and holy designs; He raised them up! Could not the same be said of the nineteen terrorists? Could it not be said of any difficulty we encounter? It is certainly no easy lesson, hence the prophets second question; a question which is on the tip of all our tongues!

...O Lord, You have appointed them for judgment; O Rock, You have marked them for correction. *You are* of purer eyes than to behold evil, And cannot look on wickedness. Why do You look on those who deal treacherously, *And* hold Your tongue when the wicked devours A *person* more righteous than he (Habakkuk 1:12b, 13).

In short, Habakkuk wonders how a righteous God can have anything to do with such evil people as the Chaldeans; let alone use them as an instrument of judgment. Israel might have been evil, but this judgment is coming from people who are more evil!!

Habakkuk's first prayer concerned itself with zeal for God's glory. Now he questions the means by which God answers his prayer. "Certainly, Lord we desire you be glorified and judge evil in our land, but this is a bit much." How can God associate Himself with such corruption? God answers Habakkuk's question with something truly astonishing. Speaking in regard to the Chaldeans, He says,

**The cup of the Lord's right hand *will be* turned against you,
And utter shame will be on your glory (Habakkuk 2:16).**

Habakkuk wondered how the pure eyes of God could look upon, let alone use, the Chaldeans for His purpose. God answers that the Chaldeans will be judged. The cup of His right hand will be turned against them. All of men's efforts and rebellion against God will be of no avail, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.

God has now answered both of Habakkuk's questions. God will judge His people by raising up a more evil people to sack them, and then judge the more evil people for what they did. God will draw a straight line with a crooked stick, and then break the stick. At first glance it appears paradoxical – some might even say contradictory.

How can God not be held responsible for using the Chaldeans as His puppets? But there is a monumental difference between men and puppets. Puppets don't desire to do evil – men do. It is incomprehensible – at least to me – how ordains the free choices of men? But it does not violate truth. It is the teaching of Scripture.

Conclusion

How are Christians to view the events of September 11th? How are Christians to view any event? Is it the hand of God? Are not God's fingerprints on all things? To say 'no' is to defy the God of Scripture and cast ourselves into a pool of despair and irrational thinking.

But did God do this as a rash, capricious and vicious dictator? No! I cannot tell you specifically what purposes God has for the tragic events He ordains. But I know His purposes are divine. I know that from heaven we will see more clearly the purpose for every stitch of His tapestry of history and it will be glorious indeed – even our darkest hour. Calvin states,

Except then we be fully persuaded, that God by his secret providence regulates all these confusions, Satan will a hundred times a day, yea every moment, shake that confidence which ought to repose in God.¹

We've been asking where God was in 9/11. But there was an event much more evil than 9/11 that we read of in Scripture. We might ask, 'where was God during the cross?' The only innocent person since the fall of man was the special target of Satan. He was the victim of religious and political conspiracy and the mockery of a trial. He was betrayed and abandoned by His closest friends. Where was God? We are not left to guess.

...for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel,²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place (Acts 4:27, 28).

The darkest event in human history was, at the same time, the most glorious event in human history. It was through the hands of evil men that God accomplished that for which we will worship Him forever.

How consistent with Scripture does the Westminster Confession proclaim.

God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass:²

There is a God in heaven who ordains whatsoever comes to pass. And if we are among those who love God, those called according to His purpose, we can know that it is for our ultimate good. In all of this He is conforming us to the image of His Son, which finds itself to eternal glory.

¹ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Volume XV*, (Baker Book House, 1993), p. 42

²*The Westminster confession of faith*. 1996 (Chapter III, 1). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

