

# A Theological Response to Terrorism

By Jim Ehrhard

Events like those that we witnessed on September 11, 2001 in the destruction of the World Trade Center Towers in New York can raise a number of important theological issues for believers. It is important that we not make wrong conclusions about events like these, but biblical conclusions that will result in biblical actions and attitudes.

In considering these, we must first recognize that, in spite of how terrible this event was, it is not the most tragic event in human history. In fact, many of the events in the Bible were equally significant and devastating to the people of Israel. One example would be the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. In that event, the entire city of Jerusalem was destroyed, including the temple, and most of the inhabitants were carried off into captivity. While we rightly grieve over the losses related to the WTC destruction, it would be hard to imagine the grief of the people of Israel in that event. Fortunately, the testimony of Scripture includes the Lamentations of Jeremiah who, though grieving over the loss of his beloved city, continues to put his hope and trust in God. He says,

This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. *It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him (Lam. 3:21-24).*

His response serves as a model for our response to this and any other tragedy that we might encounter in this life. No matter what the circumstances, one thing remains constant ... God is faithful and worthy of our continued trust.

In this response, I want to provide you with four responses that we should not make, followed by a number of ways we can pray in this situation.

## Theological Responses to Terrorism

### **1. We should not say that God has done this.**

In crises like this, I often hear believers (especially those who hold to the doctrine of God's sovereign control over all things) say that this is the judgment of God and that God has brought such things on us. Such statements are neither biblical nor helpful. First, while it is true that God may use such events as a judgment (He did so in the destruction of Jerusalem), it is presumptuous to make such statements where we have no biblical revelation. We simply do not know if these actions have anything to do with God's judgment or not. To make such a response is similar to telling a sick person that his sickness is God's judgment. The truth is, we do not know that to be true, and believers ought to refrain from making such statements.

Second, such statements tend to mislead people regarding the actions of God. While it is clear that nothing can take place apart from the sovereign permission of God, God Himself does not do evil (James 1:13), even though He may use evil or allow it for His own purposes. A perfect example of this is found in the book of Job where Satan tries to show God that Job only serves Him for the benefits he gets. God grants Satan permission to afflict Job severely. His cattle and donkeys are taken away by the Sabeans; his sheep and servants are destroyed by fire from heaven; his camels are stolen by the Chaldeans; and his children are killed by a great wind. Notice we would attribute two of the events to human agents, and the other two we would normally attribute to "acts of God." Yet behind all this evil destruction was the person of Satan.

In the current situation, we cannot say if this is a judgment of God. But we can say that God never does evil, though He may allow it for His own purposes. Thus, we should be especially careful that we not say that God has done this.

### **2. We should not question God's sovereign control.**

In times like these, there is a great temptation to question God's sovereignty. Many will ask, "Where was God when this happened? If God is sovereign, then why didn't He prevent this?"

When these types of things happen, we must continue to acknowledge what the Bible affirms ... that God in His sovereignty often allows evil to run its course for His own purposes. All of us, when we think about disasters like these, want God to act as a cosmic policeman, preventing people from exercising their free will to do evil deeds. However, when we bring the same concept down to our own personal lives, we recognize that God often allows us to exercise our free will and do evil (even on a small, personal scale) that is contrary to His will. God in His sovereignty has chosen to allow us our acts of personal sin. When we consider the destruction of the WTC, we must acknowledge *that it was done by acts of personal sin on a grand scale*. God has sovereignly allowed these as He has allowed ours.

### **3. We should not think that such things will not happen.**

I have heard many Christians in recent days say, that if we had prayed more, or if we had stopped abortion, these things would not have happened to us. Again, like I noted in the first point, it is presumptuous to make such statements because God has not given us revelation as to the reasons He has allowed this. But more than this, such statements are based on the false assumption that, if we did x, we would never have such problems. Instead, the Scriptures caution against such thinking in general, warning us that even those who live godly lives are not immune to persecution and acts of evil (1 Thessalonians 3:3-4; 2 Timothy 3:12, etc.). Even Jesus warned his disciples in Matthew 24:12 that, in the last days

“lawlessness shall abound.” We should pray more, and we should call our nation to repentance from its immoral actions, but we should not say that such things will not happen if we do ... in fact, they may increase, because the godly are truly hated and because lawlessness will increase as we move toward the last days.

#### 4. We should not think that God is not involved.

God is involved. He is sovereign and in control. As I read through many passages, Psalm 10 stood out to me and reminded me of the proper response to a situation like this one. While our situation may not be the same as that of the psalmist, the parallels are strikingly similar and our response ought to also be similar. As you read through this Psalm, note the similarities to our situation and then I will note five (5) clear ways that God is involved.

Why do you stand afar off, O LORD? *Why* do You hide thyself in times of trouble? <sup>2</sup>The wicked in *his* pride persecutes the poor: let them be caught in the plots that they have devised. <sup>3</sup>For the wicked boasts of his heart's desire; He blesses the greedy, and renounces the Lord. <sup>4</sup>The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God: God *is* in none of his thoughts. <sup>5</sup>His ways are always prospering; Your judgments *are* far above, out of his sight: As *for* all his enemies, he sneers at them. <sup>6</sup>He hath said in his heart, “I shall not be moved: *I shall* never *be* in adversity.” <sup>7</sup>His mouth is full of cursing and deceit and oppression: Under his tongue *is* trouble and iniquity. <sup>8</sup>He sits in the lurking places of the villages: In the secret places, he murders the innocent: His eyes are secretly fixed on the helpless. <sup>9</sup>He lies in wait secretly, as a lion in his den: he lies in wait to catch the poor: He catches the poor when he draws him into his net. <sup>10</sup>So he crouches, he lies low, that the helpless may fall by his strength. <sup>11</sup>He has said in his heart, “God hath forgotten: He hides his face; He will never see.”

<sup>12</sup>Arise, O LORD! O God, lift up Your hand; Do not forget the humble. <sup>13</sup>Why do the wicked renounce God? He hath said in his heart, “You will not require *an account*.” <sup>14</sup>But you have seen; for you observe trouble and grief, To repay *it* by your hand. The helpless commits himself to You: You are the helper of the fatherless. <sup>15</sup>Break thou the arm of the wicked and the evil *man*: seek out his wickedness *until* You find none. <sup>16</sup>The LORD *is* King forever and ever: the nations have perished out of His land. <sup>17</sup>LORD, You hast heard the desire of the humble: You will prepare their heart, You will cause Your ear to hear: <sup>18</sup>To do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, That the man of the earth may no more oppress.

Aren't the similarities in this passage striking? Notice especially what the psalmist says about the evil man: “He has said in his heart, ‘God has forgotten ... He will never see... You will not require an account.’” But, beginning in verse 14, the psalmist notes five things about God's involvement:

1. ***He has seen.*** We may never know all the people who were involved in this terrorist plot. *But God has seen.* He knows every person who was connected with it in any way. The wicked think they can hide from our justice system; but they can never hide from God. *He has seen.*
2. ***He will repay.*** Interestingly, the terrorists themselves are often told that, if they die in one of these suicide attacks, they will immediately go to Paradise and be attended by 70 virgins. The opposite is true. The minute they died, they were ushered into an eternal torment that will be far more painful than all of the pain and suffering they inflicted on the thousands of innocent victims in the WTC. Many of these terrorists will be caught and punished by our government. But the worst punishment we can inflict will pale before the punishment measured out by God. *He will repay.*
3. ***He will help the helpless.*** The anguish suffered by all many in this attack is difficult to imagine. The Bible tells about comfort and peace that God brings even in the midst of unbelievable suffering. *He will help the helpless.*
4. ***He will break the arm of the evil man.*** God allows evil to flourish for a time, but He always brings the evildoers down. It will happen again this time, whether through our efforts, or through the efforts of others. Ultimately, the very presence of evil will be eradicated from this earth when the Prince of Peace comes to reign and rule. One day soon, *He will break the arm of the evil man.*
5. ***He is King Forever!*** While it may appear that evil is reigning, God is still seated on the throne and will be throughout all eternity. He remains the sovereign Lord of the Universe. *He is king forever!*

#### In light of all this, how shall we pray?

✍ That God will provide comfort and healing for those who have lost loved ones and friends.

✍ That He will provide wisdom and direction as our leaders make decisions.

✍ That our country would seek justice and not vengeance.

✍ That our citizens would not be dominated by hatred, but by love and justice.

✍ That Christian workers would find an open door for the gospel in this time of crisis.

✍ That our nation might be healed.

✍ That people everywhere would recognize the brevity of life and seek to be prepared for eternity.