

THE EVENTS OF 9/11 – AN ACT OF GOD’S JUDGMENT?

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The terrible events of 9/11 have led many to ask the question, “Why did this happen?” Specifically, was it simply the evil acts of people full of deep hate for America, or was it also an act of God’s judgment on America for its many sins—a “wake up call” warning us to repent?

Jerry Falwell raised this issue on the “700 Club ” on September 13, 2001. Falwell stated his belief that God had lifted His curtain of protection allowing this to happen because of His displeasure with the evil in our nation. He said, “The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, the abortionists, the feminists and the gays and lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, people for the American Way . . . all of them who have tried to secularize America . . . I point the finger in their face and say, ‘You helped this happen.’”

There was an immediate firestorm of criticism from the left. Many compared Falwell to the Taliban, and Islamic “fundamentalists.” Most critics made the point that “their” God was not a God of vengeance or judgment but instead a God of love. Their God would never allow, much less instigate, such a terrible thing as 9/11 just to send a message to America. Of course, most of the critics see nothing wrong with the behaviors denounced by Falwell and Pat Robertson. Their God is tolerant, like them, not intolerant like Falwell. In addition to secular media critics many Christians considered the remarks unwise, ill timed and somewhat misguided. Subsequently Falwell apologized admitting the timing was bad and that the terrorists were primarily to blame for the events. He subsequently included typical, “common” sins in his revised sin list but he did not reject the idea of God’s temporal judgment.

A Doonesbury cartoon of October 6, 2001, sums up the attitude of most in the liberal media towards the idea of God’s judgments in connection with the 9/11 events. Clergyman Scot assures Boopsie that “God doesn’t condone suffering and loss any more than He causes it, as Falwell claimed.” In Trudeau’s opinion, Falwell was wrong. God doesn’t cause or condone suffering. In typical post-modern fashion, Clergyman Scot adds that God (who is as tolerant as Trudeau) will have no problem with Boopsie including the New Age nostrums of Oprah Winfrey and lots of specialty desserts in her circle of cosmic comfort.

As Christians, we have the obligation to carefully examine and test all ideas and explanations with the standard of Scripture (Isa. 8:20). I trust the following will help you think biblically as you ponder these events and share your views with others.

The Biblical Concept of Temporal Judgment

There is general acceptance among theists of all stripes that God will hold people

accountable for their actions in this life in some great day of ultimate judgment. But what about here and now as people live out their lives on earth? This concept of “temporal judgment,” i.e., judgments of God that befall people for their sins here at the present time, is what we are examining. In order for God to do this as a personal act of retribution for sin He, by necessity, must be sovereign over events as they unfold in this world. There is no sense in debating whether this is an act of God’s judgment if you do not believe God has control over events in history.

The Sovereignty of God

Not everyone who professes to be a Biblical Christian believes that God is absolutely sovereign. An anonymous Internet article entitled “Where was God?” presents the typical thinking of many Christians that God did what He could to minimize the damage of 9/11, but His control of these kind of things is very limited. According to the article “He was trying to discourage people from taking those flights.” The writer notes He was moderately successful because “Those four flights together held over 1,000 passengers but there were only 266 aboard.” The writer states further “He was busy trying to create obstacles for employees at the World Trade Center.” Again, He was moderately successful keeping 3,000 away from the building by traffic delays, etc. The premise of the writer is that God can only “try” to do what He would like to do. His hands are tied by the free will of man. He can only do so much to save people from disasters and evil. The world is out of His control. He’s a tear-filled observer of a world gone awry. He makes feeble, often fruitless, attempts to change people’s minds with some “moral” persuasion but that’s all He can do. He’s just up against too much opposition, i.e., evil people, the Devil, fate, circumstances, etc.

The Bible portrays God differently. God is a personal being with plans and purposes. However, unlike us and other moral creatures, can always accomplish what He plans because He is infinite in His knowledge and power. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* summarizes the Biblical data on God’s sovereignty with these words: “God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass” (*WCF* 3:1).

Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, describes the “King of Kings” in these words: “His dominion is an eternal dominion; his Kingdom endures from generation to generation. . . . He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth” (Dan. 4:34-35). He’s the God who “works all things according to the counsel of His will” (Eph. 1:11). Therefore, all events are in some sense guided by His sovereign hand. That includes the positive and the negative. “I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity, I the Lord, do all these things” (Isa. 45:7; cf. Lam. 3:38; 1 Sam. 2:6-8; Job 12:13ff; Dt. 32:39; Ps. 135:6; etc.).

Of course, if God is accomplishing His will in this world, He must have some kind of control over “free moral agents.” If His sovereignty only extends to the weather, plants and animals and not to people or angels then He’s not in control of much at all. The course of history is determined by the choices of men. If God can’t accomplish His will, in spite of the free moral

choices of people, He can't accomplish His will. Then He's just a "feckless wonder" like the wizard of Oz. But the Scripture assures us that He does indeed have control over the decisions and actions of men. As the *Westminster Confession* states: "God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge and the free and immutable counsel of his own will" (*WCF* 5:1).

This is clearly supported in Proverbs: "The preparations of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord." "A man's heart plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps." "There are many plans in a man's heart, nevertheless the LORD'S counsel—that will stand." "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; like the rivers of water, he turns it wherever He wishes."¹

But how could he have such sovereign control and still hold people accountable? This is a philosophical objection that Paul recognizes in Romans while presenting the doctrine of election. "You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?'" Paul bluntly rejects the objection with "But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God?" (Rom. 9:13-20). In other words, God does what He sees fit with His creatures. He is perfectly just in all He does even if we can't figure out exactly how! The bottom line is God is sovereign yet not the author of sin and He holds accountable those who do sin (e.g., the murderers of Christ [Acts 2:23,38]), the destroyers of Jerusalem [Isa. 10:5-7]).

So God does control all things in order to accomplish His good pleasure in this world. He is powerful enough to do what He deems best and wise enough to do it without "doing violence to the will of His creatures" (*WCF* 3:1) in the process.

Death and the Curse

Having established the concept of God's sovereignty we now get back to the original question, "Were the 9/11 events an act of God's judgment?" There is a sense in which every human death, violent or peaceful, timely or premature, is associated with God's judgment on human sin. Death is the result of sin; it is not "natural" to man. "The wages of sin is death," "The soul who sins shall die."² When man sinned not only was he then subject to death but God brought a curse on the earth (Gen. 3:14f). The entire world was "subjected to futility" as a result of man's sin (Rom. 8:20-23). The fall of man led to the fall of the creation. Therefore every pain, disease, problem, hassle, fear and disaster is, in a sense, connected to God's wrath for human sin. We are all "born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward" because we are born with a sinful nature in a "sin-cursed" world.³ So all of our trouble, affliction and pain is indirectly related to sin. Every day approximately 20,000 people die. Each death is the result of God's judgment on human sin.

¹ Pro. 16:1,9; 19:21; 21:1. See also Gen. 50:20; 2 Sam. 24:1; Job 5:12-13; Isa. 19:13-14; Jer. 10:23; Acts 4:27-28.

² Rom. 6:23; Ezek. 18:4; Rom. 5:12; etc.

³ Job 5:7; Ps. 51:5; Jer. 17:9.

Specific Judgment for particular sin

In addition to the general judgment of death for human rebellion there are many cases in Scripture where God brings temporal judgments on people for specific sin.

Individuals.—Cain faced the judgment of God (consisting of banishment and undefined trouble, Gen. 4:11-14) for murdering Abel. Ham's disrespect for Noah led to Canaan being cursed by God (Gen. 9:22-25). All through redemptive history we see similar cases of individuals receiving punitive judgment from God for their sin. Miriam is smitten with leprosy for rebelling against Moses (Num. 12:10); Nadab and Abihu were consumed by "fire from the Lord" for desecrating the Levitical stipulations, etc. (cf. King Saul, 1 Sam. 13:13-14; Gehazi 2 Kings 5:27, *et al.*). In all these cases it is clear that God brought temporal punishment on the individual for their sin.

The New Testament also records cases of God's judgment of individuals for sin. Ananias and Saphira both died on the spot for lying to God (Acts 5:3-10). Jesus warns a man he just healed to "sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you" (Jn. 5:14). Paul tells the Corinthians that God has brought sickness and death on some of their number for misusing and abusing one another and the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:27-34). James suggests that at times people are sick as a result of their sins (Ja. 5:15). It is clear from the Biblical data that God does bring judgment on individuals for their sin.

Groups.—There are also several cases of major cataclysmic judgments on groups of people recorded in Scripture. The most severe was the universal flood of Genesis (Gen. 6:5-7). God also destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for their sins (1 Pet. 2:6). The "ites" of Canaan, who were dispossessed and mostly destroyed by the Israelites, were being judged by God for their sins, according to Genesis 15:16.

The prophets carefully catalogued the sins that led to the destruction of both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. Idolatry, religious formalism, sacrificing of children, drunkenness, oppression, etc., are the sins that brought God's wrath on the nations of Judah and Israel (Isa. 1:4; Jer. 11:18; Ezek. 22, etc.). God, not fate or luck, brings down these judgments. "Behold, I will surely bring calamity on them, which they will not be able to escape." "For the LORD of hosts, who planted you, has pronounced doom against you for the evil of the house of Israel and the house of Judah, which they have done against themselves to provoke Me to anger in offering incense to Baal" (Jer. 11:11, 17).⁴ Notice also that they were judgments from God even though He used wicked people to accomplish them (Isa. 10:15).

The God of the Bible is described as a God of "wrath" over 200 times and as a God of "vengeance" over 35 times.⁵ Since we believe His character has not changed, we should conclude that the 9/11 event, could indeed be a result of God's judgment.

⁴ Jer. 15:2; Zeph. 1:17; Ezek. 21:2-5, etc.

⁵ Dt. 32:39-41; Ps. 76:6-10; Ezk. 7:8-9; Mic. 5:15 (also see the judgments of the "end times"; Mt. 24:27ff; 1 Pet. 3:7; Rev. 6:17ff).

Caution Against Rushing to a Conclusion

Although there are negative events that are clearly identified as acts of God's judgment in Scripture, there are times when "bad things" happen as part of the general consequences of the fall and not due to specific sins. The book of Job, which many consider the oldest book in the Bible, deals with theodicy, i.e., the justice of God's actions in the world. The book shows that Job's counselors were wrong in their opinion that Job must have sinned to have experienced such a terrible disaster—i.e., the sudden loss of loved ones, property and health (Job 8:20; 18:5ff; 22:4-11, 21-25, etc.). Jesus corrected that same kind of thinking on the part of the disciples in John 9:1-2. He tells them the man was not blind as a result of his sins. Jesus also makes clear that the tragic deaths of several in a tower collapse and others at the hands of Pilate were not because the victims were especially evil (Luke 13:1-5). Paul and the faithful saints of Hebrews 11 experienced unjust, cruel treatment due to their obedience and faithfulness to God not because they were being judged by God.⁶ God often lets the wicked prosper in this world (Ps. 73:2-12; Job 24) and He assigns special trouble to the righteous (2 Tim. 3:12; 1 Pet. 2:19-20). Without special revelation from God I think it is presumptuous to dogmatically conclude that any temporal tragedy is a judgment of God for specific sins. We should humbly admit with the "wise man" that "No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun" (Eccl. 8:17; Dt. 29:29).

Conclusion

However, in the light of the sovereignty of God, catastrophic events like 9/11 should be cause for personal and corporate soul searching. Jesus used the tower tragedy as a way to challenge people to search their hearts: "unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Lk. 13:5). James allows for the distinct possibility that life-threatening illnesses might be due to sin (Ja. 5:15). Should we not entertain the possibility that this disaster has been brought as a judgment of God for our collective sins as a nation? Abraham Lincoln concluded that the Civil War was God's judgment on slavery and because America had "forgotten God" and was "too proud to pray to the God who made us."

Although we are not a theocratic, covenant people like Israel, we are still subject to the providence of God. Although special revelation has ceased, "he who is spiritual judges all things" (1 Cor. 2:15). We can still come to conclusions based on Scripture. Is there a connection between sexual immorality and sexually transmitted diseases? Is there a connection between smoking and premature death, or drug and alcohol abuse and the slavery of addiction?

Although no one can infallibly declare the events of 9/11 as an act of God's judgment for the sins of our nation, in light of the gross immorality and growing disregard for God that we are collectively guilty of, it seems wise to me to give serious thought to the possibility.

Whether or not you conclude this event is an act of God's judgment, the bottom line is, "It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment" (Heb. 9:27). Jesus said, "Repent or perish" (Lk. 13:3). The evil we see in this world and in ourselves should lead us to

⁶ 2 Cor. 11:21-29; Heb. 11:35-40.

turn from sin to the only Savior. We must “flee the wrath to come” by coming to Him as our Savior and Lord (1 Thess. 1:10; Mt. 11:28). He’s the only one who can rescue us from this fast collapsing evil world (Acts 16:31; Mk. 16:15-16).