

# WHERE WAS GOD ON SEPTEMBER 11TH 2001?

*Martin Bleby*

## **'MY SHATTERED TOWER'**

It is now some weeks since the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York—Tuesday 11th September 2001.

After the initial shock of it, that event is beginning to take its place in our historical memory of such disasters. The things that follow from it—the assaults of President Bush's war on terrorism—are taking their course, with a strangely familiar ring to them: more 'collateral damage'—again. But it was a highly significant event in our contemporary history. It has alerted us to a changed situation in the world. None of us know what might come of it further along the track. Now that we are a bit further away from that event, it is a good time to look back and reflect on it.

## **WHERE WAS GOD ON SEPTEMBER 11TH 2001?**

I have already heard a number of different answers to that question.

### **God in the Sufferers**

One of the answers appeared on the Internet within a couple of days of the strike. It said something to the effect that God was in the tramp walking along Wall Street, or in the secretary on the 104th floor when the tower collapsed. In other words, God was in the victims who suffered and died, fully present and identifying with them in love in their suffering.

That is an attractive thing to say these days. We may wish to say something more than that. But first, let us hear what it is saying, and recognise the truth of it. Can we say that God was present by the identification of suffering love in the victims of this disaster?

In Isaiah 63:9 we read of God's relationship with His people:

*In all their affliction he was afflicted (RSV).*

Another reading is: 'In all their affliction he did not afflict'; but I am reliably informed that the first version is the better possibility:<sup>1</sup> God in His love identified with His people in their misery and distress, and bore something of their pain with them. Do we not find the same thing in the ministry of Jesus? Matthew 8:17 speaks of Jesus healing and casting out evil spirits in these terms, quoting from Isaiah 53:4:

*He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.*

Supremely on the cross, where Jesus said, 'I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself' (John 12:32), we are told:

*He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross (1 Pet. 2:24).*

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<sup>1</sup> J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1993, p. 513.

one has died for all . . . God...made him to be sin who knew no sin (2 Cor. 5:14, 20–21).

If that is not total identification with us in suffering love, I do not know what is.

Some people major on this, and this aspect alone, as a way of having God as perhaps we want Him to be: simply as a caring and compassionate presence, especially in hard times. But it is a misreading of those texts if we take it that God's ministry to victims of disaster is merely that of loving identification with us in our suffering, weakness and helplessness. Each of those passages speak of God being engaged in saving action. Jesus bore our infirmities and diseases in the action of healing them. He bore our sins on the cross to take them away (John 1:29), that 'we might live for righteousness', even 'that in him we might become the righteousness of God'. Isaiah 63:8–9:

he became their *savior*. In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence *saved* them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them.

And it goes on to say:

you, O LORD, are our Father; our Redeemer from of old is your name (v. 16).

The Redeemer is someone who actually saves; not just someone who comes alongside us in our misery to be of some comfort to us. P. T. Forsyth, nearly a hundred years ago, warned against 'a conception of God which thinks of Him chiefly as the divine consummation of all our human pity and tenderness to man's mischance, bewilderment, sorrow and sin'. He went on to say, 'a sympathy which has no help in it mocks us with an enlargement of our own sensitive impotence.'<sup>2</sup>

So simply saying that God was in the suffering victims of September 11th, and leaving it at that, is not enough. It may even be a way of avoiding face-to-face contact with God in what He was really doing with us in these happenings. Actively leaving God out of anything that is difficult or adverse to us effectively cuts God out of at least half of what happens in His universe.

### God 'Allowed' It to Happen

A second answer to where God was on 11th September is that God was there, looking on, as it were, and that He 'allowed' it to happen. This is likely to be said by those who believe in God, and want to maintain God's control over all things, but do not want to attribute to God any happenings which appear to us to be evil or calamitous. We have a concern to keep God's image 'clean', so we can make a positive and attractive presentation of God to non-believers, and, incidentally, to ourselves. So we claim that God was not directly involved—no way could we hold God responsible for such a terrible happening, because, we say, God is love—but in His sovereign control over all things, God 'allowed' it to happen.

This is certainly in line with some of what we find in the Scriptures. In the Book of Job, Satan had to ask God's permission before being able to strip Job of his possessions, and his children, and again before inflicting loathsome sores on him (see Job 1 – 2). So we could say it was Satan who did these terrible things, not God. But if God gives permission, God still has the ultimate responsibility. And as far as Job is concerned, Satan does not figure in this at all. Job goes straight to the top:

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<sup>2</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, New Creation Publications Inc., Blackwood, 1984 (1909), pp. 58–9.

the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away . . . Shall we receive the good *at the hand of God*, and not receive the bad?

—statements which are both affirmed as true (Job 1:21–22; 2:10). Note that this does not shake Job’s faith in God. It is Job’s faith in God that enables him to say these things.

For those who do not share the patience and faith of Job, the notion that God ‘allows’ such evil calamities carries no weight at all—except to make them angry. I have been told how a couple of Jehovah’s Witnesses called on a woman shortly after 11th September, and in alluding to these events told how the Bible says that it is going to get worse before it gets better. ‘Yes—’ she retorted, ‘but what if the Bible’s *wrong*?’ But then, they said, ‘God is going to bring in a whole wonderful new age!’ ‘Then He’d better hurry up!’ she snapped, and shut the door on them. This was related to me by a person who clearly endorsed her stand. God is in the dock. If God is responsible for the mess the world is in, then He had better do something about it pretty smartly!

### **Wickedness of Humanity**

Of course, there are also those who say: ‘Why bring God into it at all? Surely what happened on September 11th was another instance of the wickedness of humanity.’ And that is true. The unjust inflicting of suffering and death on innocent people is roundly condemned in the Scriptures as an instance of the depravity and sin of human beings, for which we are responsible and answerable.

But how well can we see that, and face it? We can be very selective. President Bush, on the day of the attack, said something like this: ‘We have seen today the evil of the human heart’. Yes, I said. But then he went on to say in effect, ‘And we Americans will take it on, and overcome it’. In other words, it was the evil of the terrorist human heart, not the American human heart. No way was George Bush going to say that our human hearts are no better than theirs. Who would ever be prepared to admit that, off our own bat?

Leaving God out of the action, and focussing purely on the human agency in these happenings, also carries with it the assumption that, left to ourselves, we could do something to set it right. We don’t want to admit to anything that might appear to take these matters out of our hands. We want to believe that we are still in control, and could still do something about it to set it right ourselves. Again, we are very ready to underestimate the depths we have sunk to as human beings, and our inability to get ourselves out of it. Yet, every attempt we make to set it right ourselves, it seems, only compounds the problem, and the evil that is done.

‘I am doing a work in your days’

So where is God really in this terrible happening, and others like it? The two passages of Scripture that have been coming to me over these weeks have been Habakkuk 1 – 2, and Luke 13. Let’s take Habakkuk first:

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw. O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous—therefore judgment comes forth perverted (Hab. 1:1–4).

What is Habakkuk talking about here? Where is all this happening? He is talking about what is going on in his own nation of Israel. He is seeing the wrong and violence and injustice of

his own society. As we perhaps are not unaware of the corruption and violence and divisions and injustices of our own Western society. Habakkuk is crying out to God to hear and save the nation from this evil. And what is God's reply?

Look at the nations, and see! Be astonished! Be astounded! For a work is being done in your days [RSV: I am doing a work in your days] that you would not believe if you were told. For I am rousing the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous nation, who march through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own. Dread and fearsome are they; their justice and dignity proceed from themselves. Their horses are swifter than leopards, more menacing than wolves at dusk; their horses charge. Their horsemen come from far away; they fly like an eagle swift to devour. They all come for violence, with faces pressing [meaning of Heb. Uncertain] forward; they gather captives like sand. At kings they scoff, and of rulers they make sport. They laugh at every fortress, and heap up earth to take it. Then they sweep by like the wind; they transgress and become guilty; their own might is their god! (vv. 5–11).

That comes to Habakkuk like a shock wave. Because, if you thought the Israelites were bad enough, what about the Chaldeans—the Babylonians? They are the worst of the worst! They are without scruple! They do not care who they harm—they ride roughshod over everything! It seems there is nothing that they would stop at. And they appear to be unstoppable. In other words, they are terrorists. And God—are you going to bring *them* to put a stop to the evils of Israel? Is not the cure even worse than the disease? How can you let this happen? And if this *is* what you are doing, then what are you going to do then about the Chaldeans and *their* evil?

Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrongdoing [i.e. without doing something to redress the wrong]; why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?(v. 13).

Is he then to keep on emptying his net, and destroying nations without mercy? We'll come back later to God's answer to Habakkuk here. First, listen carefully to what God is saying: 'For *I* am rousing the Chaldeans . . . *I* am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if you were told'. God is not helpless in this situation, God is not just standing by and 'allowing' it to happen, this is not just the wickedness of human beings running rampant over the earth—*God* is the one who is actively bringing these events to pass.

### **Destruction of Jerusalem, and Exile**

Immediately we are beyond the realm of our knowledgeable discussions of these things, and our dinner table conversations. God is at work in His creation, in and through the very tumults of our age! That is consistently what the Bible says. When these events that God is telling Habakkuk about actually come to pass—when the Babylonians did come and destroy Jerusalem in 586 BC—this is how the Bible reports it:

The LORD, the God of their ancestors, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place; but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD against his people became so great that there was no remedy. Therefore *he* brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their youths with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or young woman, the aged or the feeble; *he* gave them all into his hand. All the vessels of the house of God, large and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his officials, all these he brought to Babylon. They burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious vessels. He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfil the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had made up for its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfil seventy years (2 Chron. 36:15–21).

At least half the Old Testament is concerned with this worst crisis in the life of the nation of Israel, both before and after the event. It goes into it in great detail, and at a depth unequalled in the writings of any other nation. And rightly so. I do not think anyone is qualified to make any reliable pronouncement on the critical events of our own day, particularly with regard to God's involvement, if they have not first made a detailed study of the Old Testament books of Deuteronomy, Kings and Chronicles, the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel (leaving 'Nostradamus' for dead), along with Obadiah, Micah, Habakkuk and Zephaniah, followed up by Daniel and the like. We must live in these books—breathe their atmosphere, and take them to heart—if we are to know what God is doing among the nations, and in the climactic events of history.

Reading these books, we find that God is actively engaged, not just in the life of Israel, but of all the nations. Assyria, and Babylon, and the others, are no less responsible for their fierceness and brutality, and come under the wrath and judgment of God for it (see e.g. Isa. 10:12–19). But, for all that, they are no less the agents of God in His judgments upon Israel.

### **The One Old and New Testament God**

People will say, 'Isn't that just in the Old Testament?' There is a false popular notion that God is the God of wrath in the Old Testament, and the God of love in the New Testament. No—He is the God of both, in both. Let's take the central event of the New Testament: the crucifixion of Jesus. Where was God in that? Peter the Apostle, on the day of Pentecost:

*Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power (Acts 2:22–24).*

Who crucified Jesus of Nazareth? Wicked and lawless human beings. Are they responsible and answerable for what they did? You bet they are. But who handed Jesus over to them for that treatment, according to His own definite plan and foreknowledge? God did. And who raised him from death? God did. And if you don't yet know what God was doing there, and why He was doing it, you'd better keep asking until you find out.

I'll just give you one clue. This is what was said to me on the phone the other day by a friend of ours, a very practical and godly woman: 'From 11th September to the end of my days I will continue to be amazed by God's love—at what He took into Himself on that cross—the guilt, the shame, the pain of all those people'—and in that she would have included the terrorists as well as the victims.

How did the apostles and their friends pray when they came under similar persecution? Acts 4:

*Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant: 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.' For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place (vv. 24–28).*

'Sovereign Lord'—the God who actively rules over all creation and in all the events of history, and of our personal lives—that is how we should be praying in these days, and at all times.

## REPENTANCE, AND FAITH

One response that we may be tempted to make is to accept all that I have been saying about the active judgments of God in the events of history, and use it as a big stick to whack people about the head with. I gather this is what some preachers in America have been doing since September 11th: ‘See, didn’t we tell you what a shocking state America is in, and see: this is God’s judgment on us all!’—almost relishing what has happened as some kind of perverse vindication. To get up on your high horse lay and about with wrath. I think there are times when I have tried that. And I have to tell you that this too is a cop-out. It is an attempt still to retain some semblance of control ourselves. It is still an evasion of the true issues.

So where are we to be, and how are we to be, before God and with God, in these great and terrible events?

The other passage that speaks clearly to us in the events of September 11th is Luke 13:1–5:

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, ‘Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.’

The first event cited here was when Pontius Pilate had massacred some Galileans while they were in the very act of performing their religious duties. Whatever distinction we try to make in the West between political and religious issues—a distinction we have been able to invent for ourselves only over the last couple of hundred years—at a global level, religion cannot be kept out of these events. But it is the second incident that grabs our attention: the ‘tower’ that fell, and killed a number of people. Jesus makes no judgment on Pilate, or the Galileans, or the victims in the collapsed tower. But he says there is a message in it for us: repent. None of us are clean; none of us are in the clear. All of us stand deserving of the direct judgment of God in the real events of our lives. But God’s mercy in Christ is such that it is possible to repent: to change our minds and come to God in faith and love. And we’d better do that, before it is too late.

Which brings us back to Habakkuk. What did God say to Habakkuk, after Habakkuk was sent reeling by what God said He was about to be doing among the nations?

I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint. Then the LORD answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith (Hab. 2:1–4),

or, as it is quoted more that once in the New Testament: ‘those who by faith are righteous will live’.

In repentance and faith, and in all that follows from these, is where we are to be, before God and actively with God, in these terrible events of our times, and all that is to follow from them.

I began this article with the heading: ‘My Shattered Tower’. These words are from a song by Geoffrey Bingham (*New Creation Hymn Book*, vol. 2, no. 61). The whole song is pertinent to our theme. Here is the last verse:

Lord, hold me weak that I be strong,  
*My shattered tower keep pulverised.*  
Let not one giddy, heady hour  
Return, O Lord. Keep tranquillised  
This weeping spirit filled with love  
As through its heights and depths You move.

You are my Lord, and I love Thee  
Who bled me out upon Your Tree.

There is another song that I want to close with: Psalm 131. It includes the words: ‘I do not busy myself in great matters or in things too wonderful for me’. Taken wrongly, this too could be a way of coping out: ‘It’s all too much for me—I don’t want to know about it, so I’ll just feign simple faith and leave these things to everyone else’. That is not what this Psalm is saying. It is a prayer of humble and very intimate trust in God, that does not wish to evade the issues, but which does lay aside any claim to that false pride that thinks we can, of ourselves, still have some detached control over the events and issues of our times, and of our lives, apart from or over against God:

O Lord, my heart is not proud:  
nor are my eyes haughty.  
I do not busy myself in great matters:  
or in things too wonderful for me.  
But I have calmed and quieted my soul  
like a weaned child on its mother’s breast:  
like a child on its mother’s breast is my soul within me.  
O Israel, trust in the Lord:  
from this time forward and for ever.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 131, from *The Liturgical Psalter*, © English text 1976, 1977, © ‘inclusive language’ version 1995, David L. Frost, John A. Emerton, Andrew A. Macintosh, in *Anglican Church of Australia, A Prayer Book for Australia*, Broughton Books, Alexandria, 1995.