

Question: Ten years after 9/11 I've been wondering if this terrorist attack on America was God's punishment for our sins. What do you think? If it was not, then why didn't God prevent the killing of so many innocent people?

There was at least one prominent preacher in America who stated publicly that 9/11 was God's punishment of America for things like abortion and homosexuality, but I find this interpretation very difficult to accept. This does not mean that I believe America is without sin. Indeed, the Bible teaches that all humanity has sinned and fallen short of the glory God intended for us (Romans 3:23). Yet, when questioned about some Galileans who were killed while offering sacrifices, Jesus answered: "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Luke 13:2-5).

On the other hand, the Old Testament does teach that sometimes God has punished nations for their sins. For example, he completely destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by raining fire upon them (Genesis 18-19). He also sent the Assyrians against Israel and the Babylonians against Jerusalem and Judah because of their unfaithfulness to the Lord (Isaiah 7-8; 2 Kings 24). In addition to these incidents, the prophets tell how God used floods and locust invasions to discipline his people (Isaiah 8:5-8; Joel 1-2).

However, I am not a prophet or the son of a prophet (Amos 7:14). Thus, it seems a bit presumptuous for me or anyone else to claim that he can explain God's role in any specific event in our world. We can know that God created us out of his desire that we share loving fellowship with him. When sin comes between us and God, he is willing in his great love to do anything necessary to bring us back into fellowship with him even if it means someone must suffer. The gift of God's Son on the cross demonstrates how far he is willing to go to restore that loving fellowship. The writer of the book of Hebrews also says that the Lord disciplines us as a father would his children whom he loves (Hebrews 12:4-11).

Perhaps a better question would be why has God prevented America from facing even greater devastation? Think of the thousands killed in the tsunamis and earthquakes in Japan, the famines in Africa, or

those killed in the ethnic cleansing wars of Eastern Europe! In reality, Americans have greater reason to give thanks to God than to blame him for anything. We are all sinners and deserve death, but God's grace has made available forgiveness and new life through Jesus Christ. Therefore, when we face devastating attacks like 9/11, to whom shall we turn if not to God?

The question of why God did not prevent the deaths of innocent people is also difficult to answer. At least part of the answer may lie in human freedom. Giving humankind the freedom to accept or reject the loving fellowship of God involved a risk that God obviously felt was worth taking. The Lord wants us to love him, but love that is not freely given is not really love. Thus, to eliminate the freedom to do evil would by necessity eliminate the freedom to do the kind of good many people have done in reaction to the 9/11 acts of terror. As a response to our prayers, I believe that God does often offset the evil choices of some people, not in ways that deny their free choice of evil but in ways that may protect the innocent. At other times it appears that he works even through the evil choices of people to accomplish greater good. As the apostle Paul stated: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

No matter how we may interpret God's actions, we can know that he is in ultimate control of this world; and he will bring both good and evil persons before the great judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10). Justice will prevail eternally.

[Send questions or comments or request for a copy to University Church of Christ, 801 N. 12th, Murray, KY 42071, phone 270-753-1881 or email richardy@murray-ky.net] 2011/09/09