

**ST. ANDREW'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
SANTA BARBARA, CA  
SEPTEMBER 11, 2011**

**II CORINTHIANS 12: 7b-10; ROMANS 8: 28, 35-39**

**“DO ALL THINGS REALLY WORK TOGETHER FOR GOOD?”  
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Ten years ago, on the Sunday following 9/11, I stood in the pulpit of Bethany Presbyterian Church in Portland, Oregon, facing my bewildered and thunderstruck congregation. I remember vividly how I began the sermon that morning. I said, “Terrorists have hijacked my pulpit.” For never in my preaching ministry had I been forced away from a planned topic and text by world events – not by earthquakes, not by hurricanes, not by revolutions, not by presidential elections. I had always found a way to incorporate those events into the planned message of the sermon.

But that Sunday was different. I abandoned the sermon I had written earlier in the week and instead talked with my people about God’s sovereignty and God’s care.

But how can God care when God allows a tragedy of such magnitude? Indeed, how can we affirm with faith the words of Romans that we have just read: “All things work together for good for those who love God”? Where was God when those planes struck those towers? I recently encountered a first-person account of those moments. The account is from God. Listen. It goes like this:

You say you’ll never forget where you were when you heard the news on September 11, 2001. Neither will I. I was on the 110th floor in a smoke-filled room with a man who called his wife to say “Goodbye.” I held his fingers steady as he dialed. I gave him the peace to say, “Honey, I’m not going to make it. But it’s okay, I’m ready to go.”

I was with his wife when he called as she fed breakfast to their children. I held her up as she tried to understand his words and as she realized he wasn’t coming home that night. I was in the stairwell of the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor when a woman cried out to me for help. “I have been knocking on the door of your heart for fifty years,” I said. “Of course I’ll show you the way home. Believe in me now.” I was at the base of the building when the priest ministered to the injured and devastated souls. I took him home to tend his flock in heaven. He heard my voice and answered. I was on all four of those planes, in every seat, with every prayer. I was with the crew as they were overtaken. I was in the very hearts of the terrified, comforting and assuring them of my love every minute of their ordeal. I was in Texas,

Kansas, London. I was standing next to you when you heard the terrible news. Did you sense me? I want you to know that I saw every face. I knew every name. Some met me for the first time on the 86<sup>th</sup> floor. Others sought me with their last breath. Still others heard me calling to them through the smoke and flames, "Come to me. This way. Take my hand. I will lead you home." And they did. I remember. I was there.<sup>1</sup>

You see, my friends, the passage in Romans can be translated a couple of different ways other than, "All things work together for good for those who love God." It can be translated, "God works all things together for good." Or, it can be rendered, "In all things, God works for good."

I like and prefer that last translation because it leaves room for the fact that not all things that happen in this life are good! There is suicide and famine. There is child abuse and genocide. There are plagues and serial killers and Holocausts. No, all things, on their own, do not somehow "work together for good!" But God can take all those bad things and in the midst of them be working for good.

Let me give you a few examples. I don't know if you've heard of Bill Spade. On 9/11, he was a fireman with Staten Island's elite Rescue 5 Company. A 10-year veteran, he was one of twelve men on duty that day. He arrived at the firehouse at 6:30AM for a 24-hour shift. When the planes hit, Spade went into downtown Manhattan separately. For, you see, it was his turn to drive the one-man tactical truck, carrying pavement breakers, search cameras, and other special tools. He was actually in the north tower, guiding people out, when the south tower fell, immediately plunging him into darkness. He barely escaped the north tower seconds before it too fell, hurling him forty feet and burying him under wreckage. His eyes were full of pulverized glass. He used a finger to scrape debris out of his mouth so he could breathe. Still, he clawed his way free and found a stairway to the street. At the hospital, he called his wife and said, "I'm going to live!" The other eleven of his rescue company never emerged from rubble.

At first, Spade tried to walk away from it and leave it behind him. "For years," he says, "I resisted talking about 9/11. I used to say, 'Maybe God was looking out for me.' The turning point came when someone sharply replied, 'Wasn't God looking out for the others?'"

That shook Bill Spade into action! Despite the fact that it now hurts to breathe in cold weather, that he keeps getting pneumonia, and that he get nervous going over bridges, he drives into Manhattan nearly every day, plants himself squarely in front of the new Freedom Tower being built, and regales tourists and anyone who will listen with tales

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from YouTube "I Was There" 9/11 Music Video.

about his 11 firefighting friends who gave their lives that day, so that the memory of their bravery and of his gratitude for life will not fade. In all this, God is working for good.

Andy DiMizio wrote this to me when he heard what we were planning for today: "I am sorry that I won't be able to contribute directly to our service, as I will be at a large 9/11 Memorial Service at the Sunken Gardens that morning. I will be ringing the bell ten times in remembrance of the 343 firefighters who died ten years ago at the World Trade Center. We firefighters and police officers are grateful to have jobs that help our communities out. All of us and our families know that we work in dangerous conditions answering the call for help. There is no higher calling than saving someone's life, and I thank God that he has given me the talents and the strength to help others when I can. I feel blessed in my work."

Our own Alice Aspinwall was preparing for a big hike on 9/11. Here is her memory of that fateful morning:

It is Tuesday, the day after Labor Day. The summer crowds will be gone from the High Sierra, and the hiking trails quiet as I begin my fourth fall trip into King's Canyon. The first eleven miles will be by horseback, covering the steep, hot, rocky trail to Upper Paradise camp. There will be one night in Paradise to acclimate to the altitude, then the last six miles, carrying my own back-pack to the amazing suspension bridge that spans the river to Wood's Creek camp. There I will set up camp to day-hike into the high country of Rae Lakes, where the great granite bowls and basins are filled with light, and the towering crags reflecting light....

This is a ceremonial journey for me, one that I have been making every few years since my sixtieth birthday. It is my difficult "dragon-killer" challenge, a test of strength, as I grow older. And it is my inspirational pilgrimage to the magnificence of the high Sierra. Yes, it is early dawn Tuesday, the morning I break camp at Cedar Grove to drive the short half-mile to the pack station. It is on this morning that Andy, the sixty-year-old wrangler, greets me at the screen door of the cook house and announces abruptly, "We've been attacked!" I give a silent, quizzical response. He repeats, "We've been attacked."

Andy and I move into the kitchen to join the tight circle of stable workers, all with ears bent toward the newscast coming through the static of a tiny portable radio. We huddle there, five or six of us, our backs turned to a large pan of fat, browned biscuits warming on the

oven, as Peter Jennings describes the destruction of the towers in New York.

The pieces of this morning are not fitting together. There is no reconciling my anticipation of high adventure and unsurpassed beauty with the smoke, ashes, and snuffed-out lives of this tragedy. My journey, anticipated and trained for during this past year, suddenly seems indulgent and altogether out of place.

Alice captures how many of us felt that morning! How can we possibly go on with our “normal” lives? Perhaps no more so, however, than Harold and Enid England, who wrote me this email a few weeks ago:

September 11, 2001 was a special day for Harold and me. It was the 53<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of our marriage! We had planned a special luncheon date together. However, then the television brought news of the terrible bombings of the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, we sat frozen watching the screen all day. We decided to have an anniversary dinner out instead. But later that day, Pastor Dale phoned to say she was arranging for a prayer service at the church, and she requested that we be there. So, on the way to the church, we settled for a quick bite at the nearby I-HOP! Food was just not that important that day.

And surely, many of us felt that same way. And yet, in the middle of that “weakness,” we felt a “strength,” didn’t we! It was a strange thing! Which is why I included this reading from Paul in II Corinthians in our service this morning! For Paul says, “When I am weak, then I am strong! I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ, for God has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”

I think we all realized it that morning – and we shouldn’t forget it – that the magnitude of God’s grace is overwhelming in times of tragedy. And that although all things don’t always “conspire” for good – in fact, they often conspire for ill – nevertheless, God’s grace can be “sufficient” for us. It can actually be enough – and more – than we need. Especially when we are deficient or “weak” in some way.

Dayle Rinker recently loaned me the book *Thunder Dog*, about a guide dog named Roselle and her blind owner Mike, who were in Tower One when it was hit and escaped Ground Zero by working in tandem, even though you would think a “blind man” had no chance due to his deficiencies. Says Mike:

There were several moments on September 11<sup>th</sup> I didn't know if I would survive. When the building tipped and I thought we were going to fall to the street seventy eight stories below, I didn't think I was going to make it. When Tower 2 collapsed, I thought I was going to be crushed by flying debris or by the tower itself. And when the dust cloud swept over us, I felt sure I would drown. But I did not. Somewhere deep inside was a tiny fragment of faith that if Roselle and I worked together, we would be okay. And somehow we walked out of that cloud and survived. There are days I still can't believe I'm alive."<sup>2</sup>

"My power," says God, "is perfected in weakness." Does that mean we should seek weakness, "welcome" tragedies, pray for calamities? Absolutely not! There are enough of them to "go around" without us seeking them! But we are to "look for God working" in the midst of them. No, all things may not magically "work together" for good, but "in all things, God is working for good." God was in those towers. God was in those planes. God was in the hearts of those rescue workers and emergency personnel, giving them courage and grace and strength. And whenever we are weak, then we are strong.

Terrorists may take over a pulpit for one day, but just consider what pulpits throughout this country – and even throughout our world – are talking about and lifting up this day: the amazing life-giving, light-bearing grace of God – sufficient for our weaknesses, and powerful in our need.

What could possibly separate us from that heaven-sent gift?

The Lord be with you, my friends. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Hingson, *Thunder Dog* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2011), 175.