

Article

What September 11th Taught Us

Summarized by Fr. Bill McCarthy, MSA

The United States is not the same country that it was before Sept. 11th. This is self-evident to almost everyone. Our national pride as well as our economy has suffered. Air traffic is more difficult. Fewer people are traveling in general, and our lives are perceived as much more fragile. Many people have made an analysis of the events of that Tuesday never to be forgotten. This is a collection of some of their observations and thoughts, all of which come from *From the Ashes, A Spiritual Response on the Attack on America*, collected by the editors of Beliefnet/Rodale Book.

1. God glories in poor and ordinary people. “American culture glories in celebrity. People can be famous, it seems, simply for being famous, and the antics and opinions of celebrities have come to be considered legitimate news. But the events of Sept. 11th expose the shallowness of our preoccupation with fame. In a real crisis, people did not want to hear from movie stars. They were more likely to turn to the neighborhood clergy.”

Suddenly, the heroes were fire fighters, police officers and rescue workers and so many thousands of people willing to lend a hand. Suddenly, ordinary lives emerged from our cellophaned artificiality, and the real heroes were millions of infamous and ordinary people. Jesus favored ordinary people. Mary, his mother, Joseph, his foster father, and all of his apostles and disciples and followers were then, as now, ordinary people. Obviously, God glories in poor and ordinary people. Hopefully, it is a lesson we will cling to.” By Kathleen Norris, author of *The Cloister Walk* and *Amazing Grace*.

2. We all should live more simply. This lesson first preached by the prophets, by Jesus and by people like Mother Teresa and St. Francis came home to us after that fateful Tuesday. “America culture thrives on the promotion of material things. But after Sept. 11, the voices hawking current fashions, the latest prescription drugs, the top-of-the-line appliances, and technological wonders were silenced. With remarkable disregard for the bottom line, television executives shoved advertisements aside and kept the news coming. Corporate executive agreed, recognizing that commercials would seem callous under the circumstances, and for a few days, the distraction of advertising was blessedly absent from our lives. We did not have to listen to anyone exalt over a stain remover, a bathroom cleanser, or a new car, as if these products were of genuine importance in our lives. During that famous week, it was easy to remember that relationships with other people matter far more than things.” From Kathleen Norris, “God Was Where God Chose To Be,” an article from *From the Ashes, a Spiritual Response to the Attack on America*.

3. We should promote a culture of peace. “American culture promotes the imagery of violence, even as it seeks to ignore the effects of real violence on people’s lives. Action-film actors are cartoon figures, surviving gun battle, auto accidents, fire, falls, and explosions that would kill an ordinary mortal. Death is entertainment, especially when it’s mostly the bad guys who die. But now that the death of so many innocent people has been

forced into our consciousness, we will do well to recall our own mortality in a meaningful way. The suggestion St. Benedict made over 1,500 years ago, to ‘Keep death daily before your eyes,’ can be a spiritual tool that helps us to value life and those we share it with. Let petty disagreements go, kiss your wife or husband good-bye, send your kids off to school with a word of encouragement rather than complaint. It may be an ordinary Tuesday morning, but it is also precious time, because life doesn’t last forever.” By Kathleen Norris, author of *The Cloister Walk* and *Amazing Grace*.

4. Americans have a love-hate relationship with religion. “Many people explain themselves as ‘spiritual’ but not ‘religious,’ implying that institutional religion has no place in their lives. But during the week of September 11, we turned on our televisions and saw Americans at prayer, in churches and cathedrals, in mosques, synagogues, and ashrams. The old religious traditions and sacred spaces had something to offer us after all in our hour of need. The truth is that these communities of faith were there all along, and will still be there after the present crises has passed. But in the clutter of American life, the loud culture of argument, we simply could not see them, or hear their messages of good will.

“In the world revealed to us during the week of September 11, religion has a legitimate place, and recognizing this is especially important in light of the appalling distortion of Islam that led to the terrorist attacks. We need not remain mired in bitterness, assuming that God somehow caused or allowed these horrible acts to take place. ‘Where was God?’ Is a question that naturally arises whenever we are faced with terrible loss. On the morning of September 11, I believe that God was where God has chosen to be, nailed to a cross, constructed by human beings.” By Kathleen Norris, author of *The Cloister Walk* and *Amazing Grace*.

5. We love best when we are broken. “For me, the belief that God suffers with us helps explain the fact that disaster so often brings out our strengths. As I wrote in my book, *Amazing Grace*, in a chapter on the word ‘apocalypse,’ ‘We human beings learn best how to love when we’re a bit broken, when plans fall apart, when our myths of self-sufficiency and safety are shattered. Apocalypse is meant to bring us to our senses, allowing us a sober if painful glimpse of what is possible in the new life we build from the ashes of the old.’

“It is a difficult task that is set before us, but it helps to realize that in the world revealed by apocalypse, destruction does not have the last word. It is hope that emerges, inviting us to believe that, despite considerable evidence to the contrary, it is not evil that prevails, but the good. If this seems far-fetched, hopelessly pie-in-the-sky, we have only to recall the firemen, police officers, medical personnel, and chaplains of New York City, who, when confronted with unthinkable evil, chose the good. In the hope of bringing aid and comfort to people who were strangers to them, they gave up their lives. In the Christian tradition, there is no greater good than this.” By Kathleen Norris, author of *The Cloister Walk* and *Amazing Grace*.

6. God will make a way for redemption. Throughout the Scriptures, God always makes a way. He is there as our deliverer, our redeemer, our savior. Listen to Max Lucado’s prayer.

“We are sad, Father. For as the innocent are buried, our innocence is buried as well. We thought we were safe. Perhaps we should have known better. But we didn’t.

“And so we come to you. We don’t ask you for help; we beg you for it. We don’t request it; we implore it. We know that you can do. We’ve read the accounts. We’ve pondered the stories and now we plead, ‘Do it again, Lord. Do it again.’

“Remember Joseph? You rescued him from the pit. You can do the same for us. Do it again, Lord.

“Remember the Hebrews in Egypt? You protected their children from the angel of death. We have children, too, Lord. Do it again.

“And Sarah? Remember her prayers? You heard them. Joshua? Remember his fears? You inspired him. The women at the tomb? You resurrected their hope. The doubts of Thomas? You took them away. Do it again, Lord. Do it again.

“You changed Daniel from a captive into a king’s counselor. You took Peter the fisherman and made him Peter and apostle. Because of you, David went from leading sheep to leading armies. Do it again, Lord, for we need counselors today, Lord. We need apostles. We need leaders. Do it again, dear Lord.

“Most of all, do again what you did at Calvary. What we saw here that Tuesday, you saw there that Friday. Innocence slaughtered. Goodness murdered. Mothers weeping. Evil dancing. Just as the ash fell on our children, the darkness fell on your Son. Just as our towers were shattered, the very Tower of Eternity was pierced.

“And by dusk, heaven’s sweetest song was silent, buried behind a rock.

“But you did not waver, O Lord. You did not waver. After 3 days in a dark hole, you rolled the rock and rumbled the earth and turned the darkest Friday into the brightest Sunday. Do it again, lord. Grant us a September Easter.

“We thank you, dear Father, for these hours of unity. Christians are praying with Jews. Republicans are standing with Democrats. Skin colors have been covered by the ash of burning buildings. We thank you for these hours of unity.

“And we thank you for these hours of prayer. The Enemy sought to bring us to our knees and succeeded. He had no ideal, however, that we would kneel before you. And he has no idea what you can do.

“Let your mercy be upon our president, vice president, and their families. Grant to those who lead us wisdom beyond their years and experience. Have mercy upon the souls who have departed and the wounded who remain. Give us grace that we might forgive and faith that we might believe.

“And look kindly upon your church. For 2,000 years you’ve used her to heal a hurting

world.

“Do it again, Lord. Do it again.

“Through Christ, Amen.”

Written by Max Lucado, pastor of Oak Hills Church of Christ in San Antonio, Texas, and a Christian author of more than 25 books.

7. God gives us freedom to choose the good because He is a God of love. God could have created a world without freedom, a world without love, a pre-determined world where everything and everyone would react either by nature or by instinct. In fact, the world He created is, to a large extent, a predetermined world. A star must shine, a fish must swim, a dog must bark. But because God is love, He wanted to share the ability to love with some of His creation. And so He gave mankind freedom. This is the great answer to the evil in the world.

“How could a good God have allowed such massive evil? No question poses a greater stumbling block to Christian faith; no question is more difficult for Christians to answer. Yet the biblical worldview does give us a good answer.

“The simple answer to why bad things happen to so-called good people is that God loved us so much that he made us free moral agents in his image. He designed creatures with the ability to make choices, to choose either good or evil. The original humans, Adam and Eve, exercised that choice -- and chose to disobey God. In doing so, they rejected God’s good, thus creating sin and opening the door to death and evil.

“What happened last week was raw, naked evil--committed by men who made evil choices. But it was something else as well: It was merely a consequence of the fact that there is sin in the world. God could erase the consequences of sin immediately. But then we’d no longer be free moral agents; we would be robots. For without consequences, there is not real choice. God cannot simultaneously offer us free choice and then compel one choice over another--which is what would happen if he stopped all evil.

“Jesus himself was asked why bad things happen to good people. In Luke 13, we read that people asked him if the Galileans who were killed while worshipping at the altar were worse sinners than anyone else. “No,” Jesus answered. And then he added, “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” Jesus then reinforced his point. Recently, a tower in a nearby city had fallen; 18 people had been crushed to death. Jesus said, “Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” From “God Made Us Moral Agents,” by Chuck Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship Ministries, taken from *Breakpoint* www.breakpoint.org.

8. September 11th united the world with us. “There has been a tremendous international response to our tragedy. When we were seen as vulnerable, the nations of the world responded especially since citizens of many nations perished at the World Trade Center. The world wept with us. We saw our national anthem played at Buckingham Palace where

thousands prayed and wept with us. We saw school children in Asia at their desk with heads bowed in silence. We saw the crowds gathered at the Brandenburg Gate in Germany paying respects to those who had died. We saw people in Australia and Israel and France and Spain with tear-stained faces and hands lifted in prayer. We saw the crowds at St. Peter's in Rome. And we came to realize that many in the world, more perhaps than we had expected, were indeed our friends." From *From the Ashes, A Spiritual Response to the Attack on America*, pg. 262-264.

9. What good can come from this evil?

"Perhaps even more amazing has been the constant counterpoint that has often become the dominant theme: that from this evil, good will come. President Bush affirmed this truth, stating that the intended goal of the terrorists will fail; that the United States will emerge united, stronger, and better after this carnage. Again and again the belief that good will come from this evil has been repeated by public officials, commentators, rescue workers, and ordinary citizens.

"What good can come from this evil? The fact that we are asking this question is in itself a tremendous benefit. Every one of us faces problems and difficulties in our lives, some minor and some life-threatening. Because we have heard this axiom so often in the light of the tragedies of that week, people today more than ever are confronting their own life situations, asking, 'What good can come from this?' What a tremendous shift of paradigms!

"I asked a group of fifth- and sixth-grade children, 'What good has come from this evil?' 'People are more generous,' they replied. On television they had seen the professional rescue workers joined by volunteers, even though it meant they were risking their lives. The children were aware of the many ways people were working together to aid the victims and their families and the countless others whose lives were impacted in New York and Washington. But they had also told me that people around them had become more helpful and generous. Was their observation correct? Yes! Several studies by psychologists have uniformly documented that people observing someone being a good Samaritan were more likely to help another person they saw in need. A carefully crafted, groundbreaking study by psychologist Jon Haidt found that spectators were simply observed someone who helped another received feelings of 'elevation.' What we have seen in the wake of recent terrorism bears this out.

"People have had strong feelings of anger, hurt, sorrow, and grief because of the carnage. At the same time, in response to seeing the selfless acts and heroism of many, people have experienced feelings of elevation. The observation of the children was accurate. People across the nation are being both more generous and more helpful and feeling better. The cruel acts of terrorists have had the unexpected result of creating a kinder, more caring American populace.

"Suddenly things have been put in a different perspective. As we have listened to reports of the last conversations from the hijacked planes or the Twin Towers, we have been reminded of the importance of families. Not just the families of the victims. We have been jolted to a new awareness of the importance of our own families. Even when we knew our family members were not in any of the cities where the destruction had reigned,

we felt it was important to call. A teen told me he was aware that those in his home had become more sensitive, more caring. Parents were trying to find the words to explain the events to their children. For many, this was the first serious conversation families have had for a long time. Sometimes words failed, and the family members were silent--but there was a togetherness in their silence. One mother told me, 'We sat on the floor, just holding hands and praying. It's the first time we have done that.'

"A nurse in the cardiac intensive care unit observed a difference. Usually many of the heart patients are in denial about the seriousness of their condition, but as they watched the continuing coverage on television they were impressed with the suddenness of life and death. Patients with tears in their eyes began to deal honestly with their own mortality in a healthy way, speaking openly with the medical staff about their concerns, rearranging their priorities, and accepting the necessary change in regimen.

"Outside the hospital, ordinary folks in every walk of life report that they have new feelings of thanksgiving for life itself. No longer taken for granted, each day is viewed as a gift, and individuals are discovering the joy of grateful living.

"In villages and cities across America there are new feelings of community. Many people told me that neighbors are talking to neighbors with whom they never passed the time of day. In the office, people who were barely acquaintances are showing concern for each other. Neighborhoods are pulling together. There is a new sense of camaraderie. Flags are being flown from houses and on autos. Candlelight vigils are being held. Donors spend hours in line to give blood.

"There has been a new national unity. Democrats and Republicans are working together in a common cause. People at every level are pulling together. Despite frequent warnings that the war against terrorists may be long and require sacrifice, the response of people in general is that Americans do better in hard times. In the face of the prospect of fewer material advantages, they see a return to the more basic moral and spiritual values.

"Americans are a religious people, with the overwhelming majority professing faith in God. During this time of national emergency the houses of worship have been filled. Those in grief have found solace and comfort in faith. Others have found strength and courage to face an uncertain future. And it has not only been individuals and communities of faith that have turned to religion. In a real sense it has been a national response. The nation watched as the leaders of the country gathered in the National Cathedral for an ecumenical service. Billy Graham and other religious leaders sounded a call to righteousness as well as the benefits of trust in Almighty God. A national Day of Prayer was observed. Clergy of all faiths were prominent in the news coverage. Many believe this may be the beginning of the turning of a nation from materialism to a new spirituality.

By The Rev. William D. Webber, Baptist pastor for 40 years and author of *A Rustle of Angels*.

10. We are humbled and holier. From *God Still Answers Prayers* by Bruce Wilkinson: "Are goodness and hope and God to be found in the ashes? I believe so. Certainly, for those most directly affected, it may be too soon to believe any answers or to receive any

comfort. But I believe that answers and comfort will come. As a nation, we've only begun to emerge from the shock, and the grief and loss will be with us for years. Yet for every life lost, we're already seeing thousands upon thousands of acts of heroism and generosity.

"These are times that strip away the places, feelings, routines, and assumptions that had seemed most real to us and had been most often the measure of our wealth. We're left feeling impoverished, vulnerable, and perhaps abandoned by God. Feeling, in other words, utterly mortal.

These are times when we turn to prayer. And in that turning I find great hope. My friend Max Lucado wrote recently, 'This is a different country than it was a week ago. We're not as self-centered as we were. We're not as self-reliant as we were. Hands are out. Knees are bent. This is not normal. And I have to ask the question, 'Do we want to go back to normal?' Perhaps the best response to his tragedy is to refuse to go back to normal.'

"I agree with Max. In fact, these are times when 'normal' living and real prayer flourish best. Each time we sing 'God Bless America,' the nation is crying out for God's blessings and favor and help. Though we might wish them to be, God's blessings are not an insurance policy against the sufferings and tragedies that exist in our fallen world. The Apostle Peter advised, 'Do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you' (1 Peter 4:12).

"But the experience of such pain doesn't mean we aren't also able to experience God's blessings. When we're in the midst of these sufferings, our Heavenly Father longs to pour out his supernatural favor on all who are willing to ask. If ever people from all walks of life sense a need for divine aid and blessing, it is now.

"For Christians who are sensing a new readiness to live out their faith, this is a most promising moment. By God's grace and power, now is the time to step up to a larger life of ministry and impact for eternity. Jesus' passion was that his disciples would bless the whole world--people of every race and creed and circumstance. Our passion can be for nothing less.

"That's why it's so heartening to see churches, communities, and individuals rising to incredible feats of service. And as we stretch beyond our comfort zones in God's service, we discover that his hand is available to empower us. I recall an example from the Old Testament of how God works through us in desperate times. Many years after Jerusalem had been left in ruins by enemy forces, it fell to a man named Zerubbabel to lead in the effort to rebuild the city. When he balked at the task, God reminded him that he would succeed 'not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit.' Therefore, I encourage Christians everywhere to pray boldly, not only for significant ministry in Jesus' name but also for the power of the Spirit to accomplish it."

11. Life is fragile. A sermon by the Rev. Bill Hybels. "Deep inside all of us there's a subconscious awareness that our lives are quite precarious. Deep down we know disease can strike and accidents can happen, unforeseen events can interrupt our carefully planned lives. Bad things might happen to other people. We're pretty sure we're insulated...they

won't happen to us. And when we live calamity-free for long periods of time, not only do we feel a kind of invincibility, but we slowly begin to take life itself for granted. We stop thanking God for the gift of it--for the daily blessedness of it. We stop thanking God for sunrises and sunsets and for spring rains and fall colors. In a way we get too accustomed to the privilege of living, until a day like Tuesday comes.

“Joe Ditmar, a Chicago business guy, was on the 105th story of the World Trade Center when the terrorists strike began. He was fortunate enough to find his way out just before the building collapsed. In an interview with the press he kept saying, ‘I will never, ever take life for granted again.’ See, he came very close to the alternative. Each day since Tuesday he’s been looking at nature differently, people differently, his faith differently, and especially he’s been looking at his family differently. He was quoted as saying that when he was running for his life, he just had that image of his family in front of his face and he was running to them with all of his might. This guy’s pretty thankful just for life this weekend.

“Did you notice in all these cell phone calls that were made from hijacked airplanes and burning buildings in the final moments of someone’s life...I mean, when the alternate to life was near, you know what most folks did with those last gasps of breath they had? They just said, ‘I love you. I love you. Tell Dad. Tell Mom. Tell the kids.’ There’s a learning in this, friends. Life is fragile. Life is relatively brief against the backdrop of eternity. It’s a scandalously gracious gift from the hand of a good God. A gift that should be sincerely celebrated each day by those of us whose hourglass still contains some grains of sand. And what better way to celebrate this gift than by carrying out the instruction of the giver of the gift who said, ‘If you love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength...’ If you love others, family and friends, you will experience the gift of life in all its fullness. There’s a lesson in this for us. A lesson about this glorious gift of life.”

12. Life is warfare against evil. From a sermon by the Rev. Bill Hybels: “Evil is alive and well. Need we spend much time on this one, really? When times are peaceful and crime rates are falling and circumstances have been kind to us, we sometimes get lulled into forgetting that there’s a ferocious battle being fought in this cosmos; a battle between the forces of good and evil. The Bible teaches from cover to cover that this spiritual war that’s going on between the forces of good and evil is real. It’s not folklore. It’s not some religious fantasy idea. It’s real. The Bible tells us that this battle goes on, that it’s fought on the battlefields of individuals’ minds and hearts. And the Bible teaches that the outcome of these individual battles between good and evil will have enormous impact on a society.

“In recent days, we’ve all had front row seats to what happens when the tide of the battle goes in the favor of evil forces. Unimaginable deeds are done. Tuesday morning in my office, as I and my son and a few friends were watching thousands of innocent people being burned and crushed, the thought happened into my mind that quite possibly in another office somewhere on the other side of the world the instigators of this carnage are high-fiving one another, breaking out the champagne and saying, “We did it. We did it.” and when that thought came into my mind, I almost got physically ill. I remember thinking, if that happened, it’s as evil as evil can be. But the man of the station of evil is not limited to the relatively small group of people who planned this. What about all the

accomplices who have been taking money for these past few years helping these few pull this off? That's pretty evil. What about people in various parts of the world who broke out in dancing and partying in the streets when they saw the television coverage of this catastrophe, rejoicing in the bloodshed of innocent people? I'd call that evil. And what about the gas station owners right here in the U.S., right here in the state of Illinois, who doubled and tripled their gasoline prices to profiteer from the slaughter of fellow Americans? That qualifies as evil in my book. And then what about the frustrated and angry Americans whose tempers boiled over and started accosting and assaulting innocent Arab-Americans, dragging them out of cabs, beating them, throwing Molotov cocktails into their homes and places of worship?"

12. God's kingdom turns us upside down, or rather right side up. "Some scholars refer to it as the 'kingdom inversion principle.' I sometimes call it the 'winning through losing principle.' It pertains to how God manages to produce something out of good even when the most difficult circumstances are what cause you to know this activity in the first place. I want to be very clear about this -- no thinking person could attribute Tuesday's actions to the hand of a good God. God did not author what happened on Tuesday. God was repulsed by it. God stood and watched people whom he created, in whom he invested a free will; he watched them make decisions that broke his heart. But then, in the middle of this horrendous catastrophe, God moved into action in curious, behind-the-scenes ways, and he's been working and he's been creating something that we need to notice and wonder about

"Let me just come right out and say it. Last Tuesday we suffered a terrible, national defeat. We lost two times the number of lives that we did on Pearl Harbor day. We lost a collective sense of security that may never be regained in our land. We lost face before a watching world. As one newspaper put it, 'America the invincible became America the vulnerable.' But what did our loss evoke in our citizens and our people since last Tuesday? Let me ask that another way. What has God been raising up out of the rubble on the eastern seaboard? What kind of work has God been up to against the backdrop of that horrendous loss? Well, first, we've seen unforgettable acts of heroism. Friends, I will never look at a firefighter the same way the rest of my life. Hundreds of them running toward the burning inferno instead of away from it; running up the steps of the Trade Center while people are racing for their lives coming down. And they're in there trying to save people they don't even know and they're not going to get a bonus for it. They were stirred to do something that defies human logic; to overcome the fear that would be in play in each of our lives were we in their shoes. Their bravery becomes part of our collective national legacy. It lifts us up as a people. Their bravery dignifies all of us. It's God at work, friends. The same could be said of police officers and other rescue workers. And what about the airplane passengers who used their cell phones to figure out that the hijackers were probably headed for Camp David or the Capitol or the White House? As best the story can be pieced together, these passengers stormed the cockpit where the hijackers were, they drove the plane into the ground to their own deaths in order to avert a greater tragedy." From *Processing a National Tragedy*, a sermon by Rev. Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington, Illinois.

13. Forgiveness must overcome - It's God's Way. "One of those killed in Manhattan was a fellow pastor and close friend of mine. A true man of God, Father Mychal Judge

was killed while administering last rites to a fireman injured during the rescue effort. Through Father Mychal and the hundreds of police, firefighters, and other rescue workers who lost their lives while helping others, the words of Jesus have become newly alive: 'No greater service can a man do than to lay down his life for his friend.'

"Father Mychal's service was not limited to New York. Over the last years he traveled to Northern Ireland three times with me and our mutual friend, New York Police Department detective Steven McDonald, to spread a message of reconciliation there. We were planning a similar trip to Israel this October.

"In these places torn by years of violence, Steven, shot in the line of duty by a teenage and paralyzed from the neck down, would tell people, 'The only thing worse than a bullet in my spine would have been to nurture revenge in my heart. Such an attitude would only have extended my tragic injury into my soul, further hurting my wife, son, and others. It is bad enough that the physical effects are permanent, but at least I can choose to prevent spiritual injury.'

"At Steven's side, Father Mychal said, 'When peace comes to this country, and it will come some day, there will be memories, there will be families that were torn apart. Forgiveness is a tremendously long, ongoing process and it needs great grace and strength from above. I have my own problems, my own hates, my own harsh feelings; I am as human as anybody else. So I have to have this ongoing forgiveness in my heart, too.'" From *Is Forgiveness Possible*, by Johann Christopher Arnold, Bruderhof Community pastor, author of *Why Forgive*.