



# God's word to america in september of 2001

*A sermon preached at Dundalk's First Baptist Church  
on September 16, 2001*

*Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their 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. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them — do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."*

*Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'*

*"Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"*

Luke 13:1-9, NIV

American hearts ache with a relentless savagery this morning, a mere 120 hours after four teams of vicious, murderous vermin in four hijacked jetliners changed our world for the worse. Our souls are left gasping in pain and seething with anger at the bitter memory of watching senseless fools giddily celebrating the wanton destruction of thousands of our innocent countrymen.

The sheer enormity of our national debacle has prompted more than one person to ask the classic question: "How could a loving God allow things like this to happen?" Or, to get right down to it, "In light of such horrendous human suffering, and in the face of such abhorrent human wickedness, shouldn't we conclude that God is either unrighteous, unloving, unconcerned, helpless, or not even there at all?"

It's a classic question because someone asks it nearly every time a calamity happens. Philosophers call it the problem of evil. They distinguish between moral evil (outright wickedness perpetrated by human beings) and natural evil (the sometimes disastrous misfortunes that befall us in this world). Both kinds of evil present a quandary: how can a loving God allow such things to be? Many consider the problem of evil one of the hardest of all questions to answer.

We have a difficult time with the question, though, not because the answer is so hard to find, but because it's so hard to bear. Jesus Himself answered the question quite definitively.

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their 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. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them — do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." (Luke 13:1-5)

Did you hear that? Jesus never questioned the assumption that those who had suffered in two grievous calamities — a gruesome bloodbath perpetrated by a ruthless dictator, and the tragic, unexpected collapse of a public building — were being judged by God for their sins when they died. He merely pointed out that His inquirers were no less sinful themselves, and no less rife for judgment if they did not repent.

Yikes! How could gentle, compassionate, loving Jesus possibly have said that? Jesus' point was simply that a person doesn't have to be Attila the Hun to deserve judgment; every human being deserves judgment at every moment, since every human being sins against God quite routinely. It is only the loving patience of God that keeps us from being wiped out right now. And when judgment does fall in the form of some tragic disaster, we are not to suspect that the victims deserve judgment more than we do; we're no better than they. Rather, we should repent so as to avert the ultimate and eternal judgment that each of us deserves — the judgment of hell.

Well, now, where's the compassion in that? His answer is hard to bear, isn't it? But then, many of His answers threw His listeners for a loop. That was one of His specialties.

What should we do with this? We could conclude that Jesus just wasn't as compassionate as we thought, or perhaps that He was just misguided. But I suspect that those won't seem like real options to most folks who read this little piece. They certainly don't to me. That leaves us only one other conclusion to come to. It is to admit that most of our natural, commonsense notions about what we humans are like, and how our lives ought rightfully to be, are simply wrong notions. In other words, that (just like Jesus repeatedly said) we're all rebels and sinners, richly deserving immediate and calamitous judgment. Indeed, that God is so loving and merciful is exactly the only reason we haven't been incinerated yet ourselves.

Nor was Jesus introducing some newfangled idea. It's really all throughout the Bible. For example, in the Old Testament book of Lamentations, the prophet Jeremiah mourns the destruction of Jerusalem, the slaughter of most of its inhabitants, and the enslavement of most of the rest by the pitiless armies of a godless tyrant named Nebuchadnezzar. Three themes surface repeatedly in Jeremiah's lament: "God has done this to us" (not Nebuchadnezzar!); "we deserved it as punishment for our sins"; and "God is still good." In fact, it was Lamentations' third chapter that inspired the beloved hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." You see, it was not just Jeremiah and Jesus who understood the

answer to the question; it was also many of our own great-great-great-great grandparents. That's why our Pilgrim Fathers saw the chastening hand of God in every deadly crop failure and every bloody raid by Native Americans, and regularly responded to such disasters by calling for seasons of repentance, prayer, and fasting.

They also shared the now-widely-poohpoohed belief that the Bible is a reliable source of truth about God and man. Which may be why Jesus' classic answer to our classic question finds so little welcome in our American minds. Perhaps the reason we have such a hard time with Jesus' answer is that our entire culture has lost touch with its moorings. We've long ago forgotten the stern but loving God of our fathers, preferring the smarmy, effeminate godling of our own limp-wristed, effete imaginations.

Yet Jesus' answer to the problem of evil is indeed a mooring-place, an anchor for the soul. For that first generation of New Englanders, the truths of God's all-encompassing Providence and His inescapable holiness became fire in their veins, and steel in their bones. Their God was the God of the prophet Jonah, who threatened to destroy pagan Nineveh for its multifarious sins, yet relented when they repented. This bracing vision of the holy and wrathful yet faithful and forgiving God of the Bible both humbled and emboldened our earliest fathers to face daunting days with steady faith. Every day we live in America, we reap the benefits of their devotion to God.

Americans will yet face countless calamities together in the future. As I type this, a storm is threatening to become a hurricane and tear into my home state of Florida. Typhoons, terrorists, and a thousand other evils lurk in the side-streets of our destiny. Uncertainty reigns over America's future, just as it does over every American's. God may never be surprised, but we are constantly. Only this is sure: some form of disaster — perhaps crushing, perhaps merely annoying — will come into our lives soon enough.

What can anchor our souls in those evil hours? Jesus' answer to the classic question of the problem of evil: in light of our sins, anything better than hell is mercy, and any suffering we endure is no worse than we deserve. And this is true on both the personal and the national levels. But in either case, there is abundant mercy for the truly repentant.

That cannot lessen the trauma of human tragedy, I know. In fact, it's more likely to exacerbate things for rebels like us. Our willfulness and agony make us double blind to God's answers. But Jesus was and is the Son of God, and His Word cannot be wrong. Even where submissive hearts do find a solace of sorts in Jesus' answer to the problem of evil, there is still an urgent need for tangible expressions of mercy and compassion. The next thing Jesus did after warning the multitude of their need to repent (and then cementing His teaching with a bone-chilling parable) was to heal a woman who had been a paraplegic for eighteen years. Now there's the Jesus most of us are used to! We follow His example gladly when we reach out to the victims in Manhattan, in Washington, or wherever there is human suffering in the face of moral or natural evil. Doing good in defiance of evil is always required, whether or not Jesus' answer is helping you cope with your grief.

Still, if we are to react to calamity rightly and profitably, more than mere neighborliness is needed. No amount of good that I do can counterbalance the gravity of the sin that I've already committed against God. Much more than merely doing good in the wake of a disaster, I need to repent. And so do you. And so does America.

Please understand, I'm manifestly not saying that those who lost their lives on Tuesday were worse sinners than the rest of us; that would fly full in the face of what Jesus just said! What I am saying is that, behind and beneath the undeniable causes and effects of this natural world, in the infinite, inscrutable mind of our Creator and Judge, there is a moral logic that defies our ability to track, yet remains as plain and true as a granite mountainside. Every personal calamity is a judgment against personal sin; every national disaster is a judgment against national sin. Repentance is the first and best response to either. Nor is every catastrophe — personal or national — a judgment against a specific sin or set of sins. Sometimes God metes out fearful judgments for the seemingly

insignificant sins of seemingly decent people (as when David took a census). At other times, however, judgment clearly falls upon a people for heinous and highly visible sins (as when God sent the Persians to destroy the Babylonians). Regardless the particulars, though, repentance is always in order. Sometimes it can save a whole people (as when Josiah led a revival in Judah). At other times repentance is too little, too late (as in Jeremiah's case).

Furthermore, we need to face the fact that to deny the truth of our own liability to divine judgment is unChristian, ungodly, and even unAmerican. It is unChristian because it gainsays the clear Word of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is ungodly because it denies the express, repeated, and undeniably fundamental teachings of Hebrew, Christian, and Muslim orthodoxies. And it is unAmerican because all of the Pilgrim Fathers, the vast majority of the Founding Fathers, and many luminaries even into the modern age have believed that God has, does, will, and must use both natural disasters and enemy attacks to judge America for her sins.

Jesus' call to respond to tragedy by repenting is not based in His lack of compassion, but in His loving certainty that turning from sin is precisely what every person — and every nation — most needs at any given time. So now the questions are: How will we respond to Jesus, Americans? and How will we respond to Jesus, America?

If you see clearly now that repentance is called for, what's next? Before we can confess our sins and forsake them, we must identify them. And they are legion. Here, we'll mention a dozen or so.

1. *Greed* This was the perennial offense of ancient Israel, for which God repaid her in fire and blood. It was American Puritanism's downfall. It fueled our genocidal atrocities against African natives and native Americans. And it fires our every affection today. We are corrupted by a colossal covetousness, from our lowest socioeconomic levels to our highest. We must repent.

2. *Idolatry* Startlingly few of us choose to know and worship God as He has revealed Himself to us in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Instead we worship gods of our own devising — religious gods, or "spiritual" gods, or do-it-yourself gods that suit our perverse fancies. We are a nation of idolaters, and must repent.

3. *Abortion* How many World Trade Centers will it take before the Judge of the whole earth has fully repaid us for the blood of forty million babies legally slaughtered in this land? We must repent.

4. *Pornography* Considering the filth we're spewing all over the world through the print, film, and electronic media, it's no wonder people are attacking us. A few of them may just be trying to preserve some semblance of public decency in their homelands. They think we're the chamberpot of the world, leaking sewage on everybody. Quite frankly, they're right. We must repent.

5. *Homosexuality* How did that mythical little boy feel when he saw the emperor processing pompously through the streets of the city wearing only his royal boxers? That's how adherents to traditional morality feel as we watch the whole "gay rights" spectacle. Nobody will admit that everybody knows that homosexuality and lesbianism are profoundly unnatural, grossly immoral, and hence inherently dangerous practices. All it takes is a quick plumbing check to settle the question. But we don't want the question settled; we want to pretend it's open as long as possible, to afford ourselves or our neighbors a veneer of false respectability. Yet those who go after strange flesh call down wrath on themselves, according to God. We must repent.

6. *Fornication* We bed down with anybody we please, irrespective of our marital status or theirs. We have polluted God's glorious gift of sex with our profligate prurience. And we persist doggedly in our degradation, even when the STD's we've spawned sterilize us or torment us or kill us outright. We must repent.

7. *Child abuse* For more and more men in America, little girls (and boys) have become living, breathing, bleeding sex toys. Ravaged, used, beaten, humiliated, devastated, our young victims are shockingly many. Meanwhile, the psychiatric establishment idly muses that it's really not all that bad. God have mercy! We must repent.

8. *Drunkenness* So frightfully many of us live for the tawdry, transient thrills of alcohol abuse or illicit drug use that we have veritably become a nation of self-enslaved drones. We must repent.

9. *Divorce* In Malachi, God took Israel to task for their rank perfidy toward their marriages, promising calamities galore for their treachery. Yet here we are, with half of our marriages ending in divorce, usually for the flimsiest of reasons. And the divorce rate among evangelical Christians is actually slightly higher than among the general population! We must repent.

10. *Slander* Businesses and churches alike are chock full of people who'd just as soon gossip about you as look at you. We imagine this is a trifle, yet God says that no slanderer can inherit His kingdom. We must repent.

11. *Sloth* We are a nation of self-indulgent, gluttonous lazybones, and so-called "Christians" are the worst of all. We must repent.

12. *Godlessness* The Founding Fathers of this land had one supreme argument for the legitimacy of declaring our independence from England: "the laws of nature and of nature's God." Unless those laws and that God actually exist, we have no right to be here. Yet many of our brightest fools have been tirelessly, shamelessly seeking to excise God from the public record and exclude Him from the public square for the last seventy years or more. In the last couple days, our utter ignorance of the moral and religious nature of American liberty has only been highlighted by our many vapid attempts to say something inspiring without mentioning anything specific or concrete about God. And we have turned with ferocious resentment on any who've dared point out our guilt before God. We are godless fools, and we must repent.

Unless we do, the carnage has only just begun. Our enemies charge us with godlessness and obscenity, and they are right. If we hope at all to find the moral footing from which to wage war on terrorism, we'd better be prepared for jihad. We'll only win that war when it becomes plain to the enemy that our warriors are the holier, and our culture the godlier. As it stands now, we're frankly far behind. We'll begin to catch up when we repent.

For my part, I remain a proud and loyal American, ready to die if need be for the cause of liberty. With President Jefferson, I have sworn upon the altar of Almighty God eternal enmity against every form of tyranny over the minds of men. Yet our hope is not in our bravado. Our only real hope is a Third Great Awakening.

What is God's Word to America in September of 2001? Just this:

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their 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. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them — do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' "Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

Luke 13:1-9

If the prayer for America on the next page seems familiar, there's a good reason.

God of our Fathers, whose Almighty hand  
Leads forth in beauty all the starry band,  
Of shining worlds in splendor through the skies,  
Our grateful songs before Thy throne arise.

Thy love divine hath led us in the past;  
In this free land, by Thee our lot is cast.  
Be Thou our Ruler, Guardian, Guide, and Stay,  
Thy Word our law, Thy paths our chosen way.

From war's alarms, from deadly pestilence,  
Be Thy strong arm our ever-sure defense,  
Thy true religion in our hearts increase,  
Thy bounteous goodness nourish us in peace.

Refresh Thy people on their toilsome way;  
Lead us from night to never-ending day!  
Fill all our lives with love and grace divine,  
And glory, laud, and praise be ever Thine!

The prayer is so familiar because it's our national hymn. God bless America!