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All That Terror Teaches: Have We Learned Anything?

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Terror is a tragic teacher, and the memories of September 11, 2001 haunt us even now. The images of planes crashing, towers collapsing, and bodies falling will be forever seared into our memories. Just to say “9/11” is to invoke a flood of remembrance and the bitter taste of tragedy.

More than three years after 9/11, what have we learned? The immediate aftermath of the terror attacks in New York and Washington was widespread confusion. What had happened? Who was responsible? How awful is the damage? How many have died? Is more to come? The confusion gave way to the even more terrifying clarity. The carnage was just too much to imagine—but too real to deny.

We know so much more now than we knew then. But have we really learned anything? We must hope so, but lessons learned in a moment of urgency have a way of fading into memory. What lessons must remain?

First, the terror has taught us to accept reality. This is a dangerous world. Towers we thought to be sound were attacked in a nation we thought to be safe, hit by airplanes we thought were no threat. Reality has a way of interrupting our dreams, and Americans have dreamed ourselves safe from the dangers that threaten the rest of the world. Those dreams came to an end on September 11. Americans now routinely accept levels of scrutiny and screening that would have baffled previous generations. We line up for airport security checks, taking off shoes and coats, while we send our earthly goods through x-ray machines and walk through metal detectors—all the while talking with friends and family as if this were normal, for now it is. How can people who board airplanes fail to remember that we live in a dangerous world?

Second, the terror has taught us to distinguish between good and evil. Our age has grown ever more reluctant to make moral judgments. Moral cowardice has denied the inherent evil of immoral acts. Moral relativism has denied any objective judgment of right and wrong. A naive non-judgmentalism often masquerades as moral humility. A refusal to make moral judgments is not humility—it is insanity.

The American university culture has embraced this false humility as a basic worldview. Speaking of morally disarmed college students, journalist David Brooks explained: “On campus they found themselves wrapped in a haze of relativism. There were words and jargon and ideas everywhere, but nothing solid that would allow a person to climb from one idea to the next. These students were trying to form judgments, yet were blocked by the accumulated habits of nonjudgmentalism.”

These “accumulated habits of nonjudgmentalism” are very much in evidence on America’s campuses today—and in the academic world of publishing and public lectures. Why would we expect moral sanity from a campus culture that celebrates Michael Moore, Alec Baldwin, and Noam Chomsky as wise men?

These accumulated habits were of no use on September 11. The attacks on New York and Washington, carefully planned to maximize civilian casualties and terror, were unadulterated evil. These were not acts of cultural rebellion or

national liberation—they were acts of murderous terror at the hands of men rightly named as murderous terrorists. We came face to face with the undeniable reality of evil. Moral relativism was stripped of its disguise on September 11. It is evil to speak of those attacks as anything less than evil.

Third, we learned once again that God is ultimately in control, or else we are lost in a cosmos of chaos. Tragedy breeds theological tremors. Is God really in control? Could a good God allow such pain and loss? Can we really know anything about God at all?

Christians were called upon to answer with the calm confidence of biblical truth and genuine faith. God has revealed Himself in the Bible, and He has shown Himself to be both omnipotent and loving. Both truths are non-negotiable, and each complements the other. We have no choice but to affirm both truths as two sides of one great truth, and to affirm that God's sovereignty and His moral perfection are established in His own revelation and in His own terms.

Fourth, we learned that the Gospel has enemies. We should have known this all along, for the Apostle Paul described the Gospel of Christ's cross as a stumbling block and scandal. The cross has its enemies. The attacks of 9/11 were made in the name of Islam—not in the name of secularism. Moslem and non-Moslem alike argued whether Islam is at war with America, or if the terrorists were acting in violation of the Koran. Whatever the merits of those arguments, the more important truth is that Islam is at war with the cross of Christ.

Those who love the gospel learned again that Islam rejects Christ as the incarnate Son of God and the cross as the atonement for our salvation. There can be no reconciliation between the claims of Christianity and the claims of Islam. The enemies of the cross know this full well.

Secularism raised its head in the aftermath of 9/11 to warn that anyone who takes truth claims seriously is a potential terrorist—the Christian as well as the Muslim. Claims that Jesus is the only Savior and that salvation is found in His name alone were dismissed as “theological terrorism” and religious extremism. For this the early Christian martyrs gave their lives.

Fifth, we learned that spirituality is no substitute for Christian faith. Churches were filled to capacity in the weeks following September 11. Some observers predicted a period of national revival and openness to the Gospel. That did not happen. Within just a few months church attendance had fallen to pre-9/11 levels. The national trauma produced flutterings of “spirituality” but little evidence of renewed Christian conviction.

Spirituality is what is left when authentic Christianity is evacuated from the public square. It is the refuge of the faithless seeking the trappings of faith without the demands of revealed truth. Spirituality affirms us in our self-centeredness and soothingly tells us that all is well. Authentic faith in Christ calls us out of ourselves, points us to the cross, and summons us to follow Christ.

The lessons terror taught us are still fresh for those with the will to remember. The gaping hole in Manhattan's skyline and the scarred landscape of Washington point to the unspeakably greater loss measured in human life and human misery. The distance of years has not healed the wounds, but it has sharpened the memory. There are lessons we have learned. In the midst of a very different war, the indomitable G. K. Chesterton understood the same lessons.

From all that terror teaches,

From lies of tongue and pen,

From all the easy speeches

That comfort cruel men,

From sale and profanation

Of honour and the sword,

From sleep and from damnation,

Deliver us, good Lord!

G. K. Chesterton

“A Hymn”

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