

Service Of Remembrance On 9/11

By Dr. Timothy Keller

A sermon given at the five-year memorial service for family members of the victims of 9/11.

As a minister, of course, I've spent countless hours with people who are struggling and wrestling with the biggest question—the why? question in the face of relentless tragedies and injustices. And like all ministers or any spiritual guides of any sort, I scramble to try to say something to respond and I always come away feeling inadequate, and that's not going to be any different today. But we can't shrink from the task of responding to that question. Because the very best way to honor the memories of the ones we've lost and love is to live confident, productive lives, and the only way to do that is to actually be able to face that question. We have to have the strength to face a world filled with constant devastation and loss.

So where do we get that strength? How do we deal with that question? I would like to propose that, though we won't get all of what we need, we may get some of what we need in three ways: by recognizing the problem for what it is, and then by grasping both an empowering hint from the past and an empowering hope from the future.

First, we have to recognize that tragedy, injustice, and suffering is a problem for everyone no matter what their beliefs. Now, if you believe in God and for the first time experience or see horrendous evil, you believe that this is a problem for your belief in God, and you're right. You say, "How could a good and powerful God allow something like this to happen?"

But it's a mistake, though a very understandable mistake, to think that abandoning your belief in God would somehow make the problem easier to handle. Dr Martin Luther King Jr. in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" says that if there were no higher divine Law, there would be no way to tell whether a particular human law was unjust or not. Think, then: if there is no God or higher divine Law and the material universe is all there is, then violence is perfectly natural—the strong eating the weak! Yet somehow, none of us feel this is the way things ought to be. Why not? Now I'm not going to get philosophical at a time like this. My point is simply that the problem of injustice and suffering is a problem for belief in God, but it is also a problem for disbelief in God—for any set of beliefs. So abandoning belief in God does not really help in the face of violence. Then what will?

I believe, second, that we need to grasp an empowering hint from the past. We are an interfaith gathering today, and I freely acknowledge that every faith has great resources for dealing with suffering and injustice in the world.

But as a Christian minister I know my own faith's resources the best, so let me simply share with you what I've got. When people ask the big question, "Why would God allow this terrible thing to happen?" there are almost always two answers. One answer is "Don't question God! He has reasons beyond your finite little mind. Therefore just accept everything. Don't question." The other answer is "I don't know what God's up to; I have no idea why these things are happening. There's no way to make any sense of it at all." I'd like to respectfully suggest that the first of these answers is too callous and unsympathetic, and the second is too weak. The second is too weak because, though of course we don't have the full answer, we do have an idea, an incredibly powerful idea.

One of the great themes of the Hebrew Scriptures is that God identifies with those who suffer. There are many great texts that say things like this: "If you oppress the poor, you oppress me"; "I am a husband to the widow, I am father to the fatherless." I think the texts are saying God binds up his heart so closely with suffering people that he interprets any move against them as a move against himself. This is powerful stuff! But Christianity says he goes even beyond that. Christians believe that in Jesus, God's Son, divinity became vulnerable to and involved in suffering and death. He didn't come as a general or emperor; he came as a carpenter. He was born in a manger—"no room at the inn."

But it is on the cross that we see the ultimate wonder. On the cross we sufferers finally see, to our shock, that God now knows what it is to lose a loved one in an unjust attack. John Stott puts it this way: "I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?" Do you see what this means? True, we don't know the reason God allows evil and suffering to continue, but we know what the reason isn't, what it can't be. It can't be that he doesn't love us. It can't be that he doesn't care. God so loved us and hates suffering that he was willing to come down and get involved in it. And therefore the cross is an incredibly empowering hint. It's only a hint, but if you grasp it, it can transform you. It can give you strength.

Lastly, we have to grasp an empowering hope for the future. In the Hebrew Scriptures, and even more explicitly in the Christian Scriptures, we have the promise of resurrection. In Daniel 12:2–3 we read, "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake. . . . [They] . . . will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and . . . like the stars for ever and ever." And in John 11 we hear Jesus say, "I am the resurrection and the life." This is what the claim is: God is not preparing for us merely some ethereal, abstract spiritual existence that is just a kind of compensation for the life we lost. Resurrection means the restoration to us of the life we lost. "New heavens and new earth" means this body, this world! Our bodies, our homes, our loved ones—restored, returned, perfected, and beautified. Given back to us!

In the year after 9/11, I was diagnosed with cancer. I was treated successfully, but during that whole time I read about the future resurrection, and that was my real medicine.

In the last book of *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam Gamgee wakes up thinking everything is lost, and upon discovering instead that all his friends were around him, he cries out, “Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead! Is everything sad going to come untrue?” The answer is yes. And the answer of the Bible is yes. If the resurrection is true, then the answer is yes. Everything sad is going to come untrue.

I know many of you are saying, “I wish I could believe that.” Well, guess what: this idea is so potent that you can go forward with that. To even want the resurrection, to love the idea of the resurrection, to long for the promise of the resurrection even though you are unsure of it, is strengthening. 1 John 3:2–3 says, “Beloved, now we are children of God and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope purify themselves as he is pure.” Even to have a hope in this is purifying.

Listen to how Dostoyevsky puts it in *The Brothers Karamazov*: “I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the impotent and infinitely small Euclidean mind of man, that in the world’s finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood that they’ve shed; and it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify what has happened.” That is strong, and that last clause is particularly strong. But if the resurrection is true, it’s absolutely right. Amen.

*Timothy Keller was born and raised in Pennsylvania and educated at Bucknell University, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and Westminster Theological Seminary. He was first a pastor in Hopewell, Virginia. In 1989 he started Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan with his wife, Kathy and their three sons. Today, Redeemer has more than five thousand regular Sunday attendees and has helped to start nearly two hundred new churches around the world. Also the author of *Generous Justice*, *Counterfeit Gods*, *The Prodigal God*, and the New York Times bestseller, *The Reason for God*, he lives in New York City with his family.*

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