

### *Decline from 9-11*

**2 Kings 6:20-23** As soon as they entered Samaria, Elisha said, "O LORD, open the eyes of these men so that they may see." The LORD opened their eyes, and they saw that they were inside Samaria. <sup>21</sup> When the king of Israel saw them he said to Elisha, "Father, shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?" <sup>22</sup> He answered, "No! Did you capture with your sword and your bow those whom you want to kill? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink; and let them go to their master." <sup>23</sup> So he prepared for them a great feast; after they ate and drank, he sent them on their way, and they went to their master. And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel.

**Romans 12:11-21** Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. <sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup> If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>19</sup> Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." <sup>20</sup> No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

**Matthew 18:21- 22 NIV** Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

### *Decline from 9-11*

I was on the freeway, headed to work near downtown St. Louis, when the news on the radio announced that a plane had hit one of the towers of the World Trade Center. I remembered how, many decades earlier, a plane had crashed into the Empire State Building, and my first thought was that this must be a similar accident. As the hours passed at work that day, and we watched the snowy picture on a small TV with rabbit ears, our feelings went through disbelief, shock, grief, uncertainty, anxiety, fear, and rage. We had more information than we could absorb - and less information than we desperately wanted. At times, we were so drenched in raw emotion that the result was a sort of numbness. The next few days were strange. There was an eerie quiet because there were no planes in the sky. Emotionally we staggered from pillar to post.

Gradually, we had two dominant reactions. One was fear. When might another attack come? What form might it take? What could we possibly do to protect ourselves? The other reaction was anger, deep, seething anger. So many had died. We shivered every time we thought about the people who were trapped on the upper floors in the heat and smoke. We cringed when we thought about the passengers who overwhelmed the hijackers, and how their lives ended in a crater in a Pennsylvania field. And we were shaken and furious that one plane had penetrated into our capital and struck the Pentagon. When a mosquito bites, our instant reaction is to slap it and kill it. And the greater the pain, the stronger the reaction. In those first few days I was ready for us to go make some radioactive glass out of some desert sand. I'm sure that I wasn't alone, so perhaps it was just as well that we didn't know where the target was for awhile.

Our common reactions of fear and anger united us. Everybody talked about our wonderful unity as a nation. Neighbors spoke to neighbors. Strangers spoke to strangers. People flocked to church. None of that has lasted. Now, we seem to be losing the connective tissue that binds us as citizens and as human beings. Our disagreements are rupturing us apart. We turn to what is loosely called journalism today, not for knowledge, but to get confirmation of our pre-existing point of view.

We are now dividing into two parallel universes, where there is no longer any agreement of the plain facts involved. In all of this, those who think and act differently from us seem to be less and less human, more and more "other," less valuable, or even demonized. We've degenerated into a people that are more involved in throwing verbal grenades at each other, than we are in finding common ground and solutions. We've forgotten that the way that we treat people is a greater measure of Christian virtue than the things that we believe and the positions that we take.

In personal situations, victims of terrible crimes are not only victimized physically. But they are also infected with the psychological and spiritual poison of hatred and rage of the perpetrators. For this reason, even when we're the victim, we need to turn away from the reactions and emotions that infect us so that we can be free agents, in charge of our future and our lives, rather than being swept away in a flash flood of hatred and revenge. We can choose to not let the infection of the past determine our health in the present. I know a young woman who was sexually abused as a teenager. Now, years later, she carries no hatred, and has forgiven her abuser. Healthy and whole in mind and spirit, she's moving on with her life, refusing to be bound or defined by past events. If we still fester from wrong done to us, then we need to drain the abscess in our hearts. We won't be strong and capable individuals until we do. If we don't, whatever has harmed us will continue to define us. This is true for individual relationships and for relationships between groups of people.

Victims have a choice. They can fight fire with fire. They can seek punishment for the oppressors to make them pay for what they've done. In so doing, they let the victimizer set the terms under which the conflict will play out. It's so hard to resist the seductiveness of the sinful values and practices which have been used by the oppressor. But, the victim can choose not to allow the oppressors to determine the terms under which the conflict will be played out, the values around which the conflict is raging, and the means by which it is fought. By choosing not to respond in kind, the victims are empowered - and the oppressors are disempowered. The victims have the high moral ground by not mimicking their oppressor. Rather than being a sign of weakness and acquiescence, it creates a glimmer of God's kingdom in the midst of a tarnished world. As Paul put it in today's epistle lesson, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Under the Roman occupation, the Jews suffered greatly. Because of the cruel tax load, many people lost their ancestral land and became day laborers or beggars. Order was brutally maintained. Crucifixions were common. There were various ways that the Jews dealt with the evil that controlled the land. Some licked the Roman boots and served the Romans as tax collectors, or as compliant administrators, or even as high priests that would cause no trouble. Some lived in remote villages beneath the gaze and attention of the occupying forces. Others attempted to overthrow the Romans by violent means. They were usually crucified and hung on a cross until the birds had picked their bones clean. Jesus, however, taught a completely different approach: love of enemies through the practice of forgiveness. It was counter-intuitive. It was radical. It was impractical. It worked. The Christians were non-threatening. By their cruelty, the Romans looked like brutes, like frustrated old lions, trying to prove their power by beating and killing those who offered no resistance. The Romans lost all claim to being a superior civilized culture.

The same thing happened to the British colonial rule of India when confronted with a little barefoot brown man who took the Sermon on the Mount seriously. The apartheid government in South Africa crumbled before the peaceableness of Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela. In the 1960s, Bull Connors and the Birmingham police force learned that fire hoses and police dogs couldn't win over non-violent persistence by victims who refused to return evil for evil.

Any fool can destroy people and relationships. God calls us to heal them. Jesus refused to judge the perpetrators of his own arrest and death. He prayed that his torturers would be forgiven even while he was in excruciating pain hanging on the cross. Forgiveness was a major theme in the path that Jesus showed us. Jesus made it clear that forgiveness isn't an option for Christians. Forgive seventy-seven times, he said. Many cultures don't value forgiveness nearly as much as

vengeance and retribution. Forgiveness can be seen as weakness. Or it can be seen as something that only the powerful can afford to do. But Jesus showed us that forgiveness leads us away from evil. It takes greater strength to forgive than it does to fester and hate.

Over the years I've come to see that forgiveness is at the core of following Christ. I know it – but I have great trouble living it. To varying degrees, we all resist this call to be a forgiving people. We don't do a very good job of loving our neighbors, much less our enemies. We know that only light drives out darkness and only love can overcome hate. We know that. We need to work on living that way.

To love means loving the unlovable. To forgive means pardoning the unpardonable. Faith means believing the unbelievable. Hope means hoping when everything seems hopeless.”<sup>1</sup>

Let us pray:

God of all creation, our hearts are broken over the destruction and loss we remember this day. And we acknowledge, O Lord, that on that day of human carnage, yours was the first heart to break. In our remembering, may we stand with those who mourn and those who can't stop mourning. Through remembering, may we find new comfort in your care. In our remembering, may we be drawn to a new hope for the whole world, and may we receive a measure of your peace. You can turn the shadow of night into the bright promise of a new day. Empower us to shape the world by living in ways that lead to justice and peace for all peoples. Make **us** a people who are more ready to grow in understanding, than we are eager to judge those who are different from us. Form us as a people determined to heal wounds rather than inflict them. Finally, we ask that you would cultivate such love in us that we may reach out in compassion to all those who are still wounded by the events of that day; and in seeking to heal others, may we experience a love that makes **us** whole. This we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

In September of 2001, I had a 24-year-old nephew who was working for Exxon-Mobile in the Arabian Kingdom of Qatar. He described the people there as the “kindest, most considerate people you will ever have a chance to meet.” They were as shocked and saddened by the events of 9-11 as we were. The local papers had nothing but condemnation for the attacks.

“Loving people live in a loving world. Hostile people live in a hostile world. Same world.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> G.K. Chesterton

<sup>2</sup> Wayne Dyer