

**WHEN  
WORLD'S  
COLLIDE**

**WHERE IS GOD WHEN TERROR STRIKES?**

**R.C. SPROUL**

*When Worlds Collide: Where Is God?*

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# PEACE AND CALAMITY

THERE IS A WORD with a rich history in the English language that has all but disappeared from our vocabulary. It vanished long ago from the secular mind-set and is now almost completely absent from Christian discussion as well. It is the word *providence*. If we could journey back one or two hundred years and eavesdrop on the American people of those days, we would hear this word sprinkled liberally throughout their conversation. Personal letters from the past that have survived to this day attest to this fact. People used the word *providence* so often that it became not merely

a word that described the activity of God but a name for Him as well. When spelled with an initial capital letter, *Providence* clearly referred to God Himself.

#### DEISM AND THE BANISHMENT OF GOD

The eighteenth century saw the rise of a religious philosophy called deism. This “religion” never really became an organized movement, but its influence persists even today. At the heart of deism was the assumption that the “God-hypothesis” was necessary to explain the origin of the universe. God was posited as the “first cause” of all things, reflecting the ancient view of Aristotle’s “unmoved mover.” But this God who made all things stepped out of the picture once His work of creation was finished. The deists used the “clock maker” analogy as their favorite metaphor. God was like a cosmic designer who fashioned an intricate clock. The clock was framed with springs and gears. God wound up the clock, started it ticking, and then left it to run down according to its own internal mechanism. He left it to run by its own internal laws, laws that inhere within the system of nature and govern its entire behavior. The universe is a *closed* system, according to the deists, and not even God can intrude or interfere with its operation.

The God of deism was a God who *created* the universe but did not sustain it by His power nor exercise any gov-

ernment over it. He was, as Will Durant once described Aristotle's God, a "do-nothing king," who "reigns, but does not rule."<sup>2</sup>

Deism banished the idea of God's being actively engaged in the universe and in human history. The deists sent Providence into exile. And as we have noted, though deism never really became an organized religion, its central idea has persisted deeply in the American psyche. On the practical level, the view of God held by most Americans today is not the biblical view of God and His providence but is at best a deistic understanding of God. It is a view of a God who is isolated from the daily affairs of this world—a God who has no providence.

In our lifetime we have seen the banishment of God from the public square. He is not to be spoken of in the domain of public education. We have chosen what we call a religiously "neutral" education, a notion that is manifestly impossible. Every educational curriculum has a philosophical framework. A program of education is conducted either within the framework of theism or against the framework of theism. There is no neutral ground. The current situation in America is that God is not permitted in the educational arena or in the arena of government. Religion is still protected by our first amendment, of course. But in reality what gets protected today is *personal* religion, as long as it is

contained on a cultural reservation, outside the sphere of everyday life. Religion is viewed as something for the edification of the soul, for personal strength, but with no bearing on things like economics or government or education. That is deism with a vengeance. God's relevance is restricted to the private and personal sphere. He has no place in the public square.

#### BRINGING GOD BACK, TO BLESS AMERICA

But the calamity that struck our nation on September 11, 2001, has recalled God from the reservation. Instantly we saw all spheres of American culture rushing to call upon God. The group that was most silent in the initial days and weeks following the disaster was the American Civil Liberties Union. They had long been busy with their court cases in the schools, government, and public square, when suddenly the nation said no to deism and cried out once more for the reaffirmation of divine providence.

With this national change of heart came a three-word slogan that was broadcast everywhere. It appeared in signs, on bumper stickers, on windows, and was quoted by millions as our national plea: "God bless America."

"God bless America" has become a societal mantra. It is the prayer cried out by people gripped in the vise of ter-

rorism. Let us consider for a moment the assumptions contained in this three-word prayer.

“God bless America” assumes that there is such a place as “America.” There is no dispute about that. It also assumes that there is such a being as God. These two points are obvious. But the critical word in this three-word phrase is the word *bless*. A deist has no room for a God who has either the capacity or the desire to bless a nation. For God to bless a nation, He has to be involved in its affairs. For God to bless America, He has to exercise His sovereign power over what is going on in the world. What are we asking for when we get on our knees and say, “Please, God, bless America”? We are asking God to intervene. We’re asking God to intrude for our nation’s well-being. We’re asking God to step into this calamity and bring redemption out of it.

#### DOES GOD ONLY BLESS?

As a Christian and a theologian, I am delighted that the nation is calling upon God for His blessing. But there is much confusion about this. While it is now politically correct to ask God to bless America, we reject the idea that God could have been involved in any way in the tragedy itself. We allow for God’s providence as long as it is a blessing, but we have no room for God’s providence if that provi-

dence represents some kind of judgment. If we look carefully at the biblical understanding of God and construct our worldview on this basis, we see that God in His providence is a sovereign God, who not only governs nature and the laws of nature but who raises nations up and brings nations low. Within His providence come both blessing and calamity.

Let us examine a famous text that deals with this matter. In chapter 45 of Isaiah we read:

And Israel My elect,  
I have even called you by your name;  
I have named you, though you have not known Me.  
I am the LORD, and there is no other;  
There is no God besides Me.

(vv. 4-5)

I am the LORD, and there is no other;  
I form the light and create darkness,  
I make peace and create calamity;  
I, the LORD, do all these things.

(vv. 6-7)

Contrary to what this passage teaches, we in America in 2002 have allowed God to come only halfway off the reservation. We have said, “Yes, there is a place for God in nature. There is a place for God in history. There is a place for God

among the affairs of human beings.” But that place is restricted to blessing. We have no room in our thinking for God’s involvement in calamity. But we cannot have it both ways. Deism falls off one side of the horse by saying that God is not responsible for blessing. American humanism falls off the other side of the horse when it says that God may be involved in blessing but could never be involved in calamity.

#### THE SOVEREIGN GOD OF PEACE AND WAR

But if God is God, then He is sovereign over all things. I have frequently taught a seminary course on the theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith. The third chapter of the Confession always provokes a strong response from students. It begins with these words:

. . . from all eternity, God doth freely and immutably, according to His own wise counsel, ordain whatsoever comes to pass;

People are often aghast when they see or hear these words. They often dismiss them as merely the harsh teachings of Calvinism or Reformed theology. But there is nothing in the statement unique to Calvinism. Indeed the affirmation is not even unique to Christianity. It is an affir-

mation found in the tenets of Judaism and also in Islam. All three of these world religions would affirm that (at least in some sense) God ordains whatever comes to pass.

If God did not ordain all things, He would not be sovereign over all things. And if He is not sovereign over all things, then He is not God at all. Theologians argue endlessly over *how* God ordains all things. But even if this ordination is by mere “permission,” for God to let things happen that do happen He must *choose* to allow them to take place. Insofar that He lets things happen that He has the power and authority to prevent from happening, He is “ordaining” them.

#### DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY, HUMAN AGENCY

After the semicolon in the above quote from the Westminster Confession we read, “but not in such a way as to do violence to the will of the creature or to eliminate secondary causes.” God’s ordination of all things does not annihilate human decisions or the forces of nature. Yet at the same time the sovereignty of God stands over every human event. If I am asked, “Did God ordain the calamity in New York City?” I say, “Yes, He did.” Now, if I am asked *why* He ordained it, I cannot be glib in my reply. I could leap to the conclusion that He ordained it to punish America. But as possible as that may be, I cannot rush to such a

judgment. In reality, I do not know why God ordained 9/11, but I know that He did ordain it because if He did not ordain it, it would not have happened. Since it happened, I know for certain that God ordained it in some sense. That is one of the most difficult concepts even for devout Christians to deal with. Yet the concept is found on almost every page of sacred Scripture. It is at the very heart of the Christian faith.

Let us examine a passage from the second chapter of the book of Acts, where we have a record of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. In verse 22 we read:

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know—Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it” (Acts 2:22-24).

Peter is giving a severe rebuke to his contemporaries for doing what? For executing Jesus. Even though God had confirmed Christ's identity as the Messiah through His miracles, the people put Him to death. Peter by no means absolves these people of their responsibility for

the death of Christ. It was by human hands that Jesus was delivered to Pilate, it was by human hands that He was sentenced to death, and it was by human hands that He was crucified. Yet all of these things, Peter said, did not take place through accidents of human history; rather they took place according to the “determined purpose and foreknowledge” of Almighty God. Before anyone raised a finger against Jesus, when He went to the Garden of Gethsemane, He was completely aware of what was going to happen. He knew it was God’s will, not the mere will of mortals, that He must carry out.

Jesus had told His disciples only a few days earlier that He was going to go to Jerusalem to be delivered into the hands of wicked men, and that He was going to be beaten and killed (Matthew 16:21; Luke 24:7). When Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane and sweat drops of blood in prayer, He begged God to change that plan (Luke 22:41-44), because Jesus knew that these things had been appointed by His Father. From the time of His birth, Jesus’ destiny was set out. When Jesus was brought to the temple for dedication, the prophecy was announced that this One would be a sign for the rise and fall of many, and that a sword was going to pierce the soul of Mary (Luke 2:34-35).

Years before Jesus was put to death, the Word of God revealed that it was God’s plan that Jesus should die, and

that this would happen through the actions of wicked men. Here is God directing His counsel, bringing His will to pass through a divine providence that works through human agency in such a way as not to cancel out the will or the responsibility of the participants.

The clearest example of this combination of divine providence and human agency is in the story of Joseph in the Old Testament. Because of his brothers' jealousy and envy toward him, Joseph was sold into slavery. On the slave block, Joseph was purchased by Potiphar, whose wife then falsely accused him of abuse, for which Joseph was thrown into prison, where he languished for many years. Eventually, God brought a famine to the land, and because the people were starving, Jacob sent his sons down to Egypt to seek relief from the Egyptian storehouses, which ironically had been prepared through the supervision of Joseph, who had been freed from prison and elevated to the office of prime minister of Egypt.

In that poignant moment of the encounter between Joseph and his brothers, when suddenly the brothers recognized Joseph, they were terrified. They feared his vengeance upon them. Joseph, however, shocked them with his mercy. He understood that their intent had been evil. They had had a purpose in mind when they acted. They sinfully chose to deliver Joseph into the hands of those

Midianite traders, and they were responsible for that. But beyond their decision, beyond their choice stood the sovereignty of God and His providence. As Joseph explained to them, “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good” (Genesis 50:20). Even in the wicked choices of Joseph’s brothers, God was at work to bring His perfect counsel to pass in human history.

That is what we believe if we are Christians. Our world-view affirms a divine Providence who governs human history. He doesn’t just govern the orbits of the planets. He is sovereign over everything. That’s the idea that defines our whole understanding of human life, our whole understanding of economics, our whole understanding of government, our whole understanding of education. It is that concept that is on a collision course with every philosophy in human history that would deny the sovereignty of God over human life. Does that mean that God is sovereign over tragedy? Yes. Does that mean God was sovereign over the events of 9/11? Yes. And the whole question of tragedy, which seems to be a blemish on the record of God’s perfect providence, is the question that we will take up in the next chapter.



# WHERE IS GOD WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE?

Name any catastrophic event in the course of history, and it seems as if God has abandoned the human race. Where was He while the Israelites groaned in oppressive slavery for 400 years? Where was He during the Holocaust when millions of people died horrific deaths? Where was He on 9/11, when thousands lost their lives because of terrorists? It sometimes seems that God is silent, watching the horrors of life on earth without pity or concern.

R. C. Sproul presents a challenging analysis that no Christian can afford to ignore. Only when we begin to understand the nature of God can we hope to trust in His sovereignty during times of terror or sorrow. Only when we trust in His sovereignty can we confidently say, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust . . ."

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**R. C. SPROUL** is the founder and president of Ligonier Ministries and serves as senior minister of preaching and teaching at Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Florida. He is featured daily on *Renewing Your Mind*, an international radio broadcast with an estimated two million listeners per week, and has written over sixty books.