

September 11, 2001 Remembering That Day in NYC

**Where is God in this tragedy?
He is very present in lives of His people.**

Jason Pearson wrote this reflection two days after 9/11, on Sept 13, 2001 in NYC.



Photo by Jason Pearson on 9/11, New York City
Corner of Franklin and Broadway in Tribeca

NEW YORK—It was 6:50 a.m. and I stepped off a red-eye flight at New York's JFK airport, having just arrived from San Francisco. Not long after, I was standing in Manhattan at the corner of Franklin and West Broadway, just 12 blocks away from the World Trade Center. It was on fire!

As the two towers burned, I watched New Yorkers openly weeping—talking into cell phones; arms around each other. I had recently lived in New York City for eight years and I had never seen New Yorkers interacting together like this.

I was instantly moved to pray. Suddenly, the entire street shrieked as we watched bodies free fall from the top floors. I put my camera down—and then put my head down. Praying, I called my wife—still asleep in San Francisco. Unsure what to say, I just whispered, *"I want you to know I'm OK. Turn on the TV. I'm in Tribeca watching the World Trade Center. It's on fire!"*

As if in slow motion, 20 minutes later, the building burst and buckled in upon itself. The ground shook. From every direction—the only sound—people screaming. Then...the sound of concrete slamming into the street.

And in that instant—I was overcome with this great fear. Could the building be falling towards me? Everybody turned around and began running north. People poured, poured, into the street! I looked over my shoulder—as I ran—and saw a 15-story cloud of black smoke heading right up the avenue straight towards me.

I ran east, out of the crowd, and down a side street, bumping into an Indian man with a cup of coffee. He asked what was going on. Still running, I shouted, "the World Trade Center is falling over and it's heading this way."

I had no idea if the buildings around me would hold or topple like dominoes. I ran as fast as I could for two blocks to Broadway—never looking back.

There I met thousands of people, all rapidly walking up the street. The smoke cloud could be seen a good distance behind us. Sirens now filled the air as emergency vehicles raced through the narrow tunnel of people. I was hit with the realization of what just happened.

I tried calling home again, but got the busy signal. A woman next to me was walking up the hot, oily street—barefoot.

I finally got through on my cell phone and told my wife, "I'm still OK. I'm getting out of here and walking east." My wife said to walk west to avoid the Empire State Building and the United Nations. I said that I would walk 63 blocks up the West Side Highway to my hotel and promised to call her later.

I wanted to close my eyes because I didn't want to see any more tragedy. I stopped 21 blocks away from the towers at Sullivan Street and rested on some church steps. I could see the remaining tower—still burning.

The man next to me was listening to a handheld radio. He told me that the Pentagon, the White House, and the Capitol had been attacked. There was a fourth plane in the air, possibly on its way to New York.

On the church steps there were six women huddled together—praying out loud. Suddenly, with no warning, we heard a loud explosion and we watched the other tower tumble over.

One woman on the steps wailed, "My Roger!"

Another woman pointed her finger and shouted at us, "We must pray for God to stop all of this!"

The man with the radio got up and punched his fist through a car window and yelled, "That does it!"

I could no longer control my emotions either and began crying. Almost blindly, I wandered the sidewalk going west.

I passed people who seemed unaware that any of this was going on. My heart was in my stomach and I felt like I couldn't breathe. Was this really happening?

I was living in New York during the last World Trade Center bombing and recalled that over 50,000 people and 90,000 tourists were in the towers every day. I prayed silently. "God, please end this attack." I prayed that lives would be spared. My eyes were blurry and every time I crossed a street, I was terrified of being run over by an emergency vehicle.

As I walked alone in the crowd my mind raced to all of the people who I knew who worked down there. I began to pray for each of them by name out loud.

I thought of the people I went to church with at the Village Church and began to pray for them, their spouses and their children. I listened for airplanes—still worried that we were under attack and at any minute more planes might be crashing near us.

There were thousands of people streaming out of every avenue walking north, not sure where they were going, but wanting to leave. The city grew silent—other than the emergency vehicles. It was so silent and the sky was so dark—with clouds streaming up over the financial district.

FedEx and UPS trucks were forming huge single file convoys on their way downtown—called in to move injured survivors to hospitals. As everyone was walking north, an older man—wearing a

clerical collar and a backpack—bicycled past me and headed downtown towards the scene.

I counted 15 ambulances covered in ash and debris heading north. I prayed for each ambulance crew and for those inside. I then prayed for emergency workers at the scene. I was worried that I was forgetting people who worked or lived down there.

An hour later, I was at 24th Street. Everyone was hot and tired. I was wearing tennis shoes but most of the people around me were wearing leather dress shoes. There was very little chaos or panic. I don't think people could really grasp what had just happened.

As I walked up the West Side Highway, there was a sense that we were all in this together. I saw men in business suits talking to homeless people. Construction workers in hard hats were directing traffic and bringing barricades from their work sites. At Chelsea Pier they brought out tables of ice water to share with the thirsty crowds. The tour boats offered free boat shuttles to New Jersey.

Police were directing people to return home or get off the streets. I found a quiet park bench—away from the crowds—where I sat for a couple of hours and watched the grief-stricken walk by.

I talked to other family and friends on my cell phone and did the only other thing I could. I prayed. Later I joined thousands of people in line to give blood at the Red Cross. After an hour, they announced that they had run out of empty blood packs. The volunteers asked people to return tomorrow. *This was a different New York than I had ever experienced.*

PART II: The Next Day, as a Christian, How Do You Deal With This Tragedy?

By Wednesday the city had a new look to it, covered in ash, the sky still filled with smoke. As I walk down the street, I notice the lamp posts are covered with Xeroxed photos of missing people.

The island's bridges and tunnels were still closed off and the airports were still closed. I spent most of the day on the phone talking to friends in New York, hoping to find out if everyone I knew was OK. Throughout the day I heard about people who had gotten out of the area and I thanked God for their protection.

I heard about many prayer meetings that were going to meet that evening in homes. In my hotel room, I continued to watch the videos over and over on television, listening to the sounds of sirens outside.

On Wednesday evening, I took a taxi down to 15th Street to join one of the many prayer meetings. I walked by The Salvation Army headquarters on 14th Street. The Army was busy loading trucks with supplies. The building was all lit up and had a large banner hanging outside that read "Emergency Services."

The streets were blocked by police at 14th and many people stood together with candles at the barricade. About every 15 minutes, huge dump trucks would drive up 6th Avenue full of rubble from the towers. With police escorts, two large semi-trucks made their way down 14th Street from Feed the Children.

I rang the buzzer of the apartment for the prayer meeting. It was the first floor apartment of a family I had gone to church with when I lived in New York two year earlier. They welcomed me

right away—as if I have never been away from the community at all. The first thing everybody asked each other, "Have you lost anybody? Is anybody you know missing?"

We exchanged hugs and didn't need to say a whole lot to each other. It was written on our faces. Several people came in—covered in ash from serving food to rescue workers at the scene.

We were a group of about 18 people and most of us were part of the Village Church in Greenwich Village. Several people had emailed their non-religious co-workers—asking them if they wanted to take part in the prayer meeting.

David Sacks, a friend of mine, arrived with his guitar. David admitted, "This is one night when the last thing I want to do is sing and worship, but I think we should." We started by singing Psalm 121. The lyrics read:

"Oh I how I need you Lord,
You are my only hope,
You are my only prayer,
So I will wait for you to come and rescue me,
Come give life."

Our voices poured out the first floor windows into 15th Street. We began to pray for those we knew and the many people we knew were missing. We prayed for ourselves that we would have courage and be a light to those in need. We acknowledged our own fears.

This was a group that didn't know each other well but didn't need prompting to be vulnerable and authentic.

David then led the group in another hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." The words hit us deeply as we sang,

"Let goods and kindred go,
this mortal life also;
the body they may kill;
God's truth abideth still;
his kingdom is forever and ever."

Scott, the other group leader, asked if people could share praises amidst the tragedy. We named survivors. We talked about the outpouring of cooperation and support for the people of New York. Some told stories of things they had witnessed—people going out of their way to assist others. The small things—people saying they were sorry after bumping into each other. A young person helping an older person up the stairs.

The stories may seem common place to others—but they were radical for New Yorkers. One person said that we should be thankful that the fourth plane did not hit its target, and to be thankful for the courage of those on that flight.

And we realized how thankful we were that we were confident in our eternal salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—and that we were people who could have power over death.

Our list of praises numbered over 30 and I was amazed that—through our despair—we could be thankful.

We continued to pray for over an hour for everything—from the families of the lost to the children across the nation who had to witness this event. We talked about the anger and fear we still had and prayed for strength and courage. We prayed that justice would be done but with wisdom. Our prayers focused on peace and we prayed for our enemies—even as a neighbor yelled at us from outside to close our windows because the asbestos was blowing north.

We left the meeting a little stronger and less afraid. We talked about all of the people we knew who didn't have an answer for where they would be today if they were killed in this tragedy.

We left with a renewed purpose to be God's people in a city that is full of questions.

Jason Pearson

<http://crosssection.com/about>

<http://www.jasonpearson.com/bio/>

For additional 9/11 photos taken by Jason, visit:

https://www.facebook.com/pearpod/media_set?set=a.32253445808.41528.663975808&type=3&l=dd01f630e9