

Transformed After Tragedy

Did Sept. 11, 2001, spiritually change you? If the change lasted?

The anniversary of any significant loss is a somber day—the first anniversary being particularly difficult. This Sept. 11, every American will wake up and remember. For some, it will be a day of deep pain as they look across the dinner table at an empty seat.

New Yorkers will be mindful on their commutes to work. Some people will replay over and over in their minds the sight of the planes crashing into the towers of the World Trade Center. Others, like myself, will call or send a note to a friend who lost a loved one that day. And the majority of Americans will be reminded of how little control we have over our lives.

Loss is never easy, and yet it has been a part of our lives since the fall of humanity into sin. If we are healthy, we face the loss and grieve.

We allow our emotions to run the full gamut of denial, sadness, anger, bargaining and acceptance. We take comfort in knowing that even Jesus, when faced with death, felt momentarily forsaken. But as He confronted His grief, He was transformed.

Pain, though not easily embraced, is a gift that keeps us aware of our fragility and smallness in relation to God. Pain signals us that something is wrong.

It gets our attention and awakens us to God's sovereignty. If we embrace it, it can change us.

But we Americans don't like to feel pain. We have become experts at numbing it. Pleasure and satisfaction are our gods.

Last year, we grieved over the men and women who were murdered

by madmen. But how many of us allowed the pain to transform us?

A few months ago, I read a newspaper article about Las Vegas hotels. In it, the hotels announced that their experiment with a family-friendly marketing strategy was a thing of the past. They were purposely reverting to the known success formula of sex, drinking and gambling, with a renewed commitment to more strip shows and nudity. Why? Because that's what their customers want.

This small news item hardly shook the world. But it reminded me how desperately Americans want to forget pain and how quickly they turn to ungodly means of numbing it.

But what if we allowed the pain of Sept. 11 to truly transform us? Could we utter those words of Job, "'I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You'" (Job 42:5, NKJV)?

Tragedy provides an opportunity to take us to that intimate place of knowing Him. When we are grieving and crave personal comfort, a Sunday school God isn't enough. We need a very real heavenly Father who will give us His oil of joy for mourning.

This September do a "Job assessment." Ask some tough questions: Did Sept. 11, 2001, spiritually change you? If so, was it for only a short time after the event, or has the change lasted?

Have I repented and turned from my sin? Do I now know God in a more intimate way? Am I aware of Him daily and living my life to glorify Him in all I do? Am I mindful of my powerlessness and His sovereignty?

Then look around for signs of transformation in others—neighbors who now are willing to talk about God, married couples who have recommitted to a lifelong covenant, sons who have sobered up, daughters who have come back home.

Las Vegas may want to get back to the business of sex and addiction, but many people whose lives were changed as a result of our national pain have a different attitude.

This month, allow yourself to experience the pain of past losses. Remember how you felt a year ago—small and fragile.

Don't allow yourself to go back to numbing your pain and pretending you have control over your life. Go ahead and grieve. Acknowledge your place by rereading God's words in Job 38: "'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding'" (Job 38:4).

In reality, our understanding is finite, but, like Job, we don't have to understand. All we need is faith and a relationship with God. Our pain can then be transformed for His glory.