

A 9/11 Perspective From the South Tower

In 1999, the company I worked for was acquired by the world's largest insurance broker, which was based in Manhattan. I was appointed the chief information officer of one of the subsidiaries and began a 10-year period of commuting from Seattle to my office on the 50th floor in the south tower in the World Trade Center.

I was one of more than 1,700 employees from four subsidiaries that were housed in the north and south towers. We lost 376 staff and contractors the morning of 9/11. Many were my friends and colleagues.

The morning of 9/11, I was running late to a global CIO conference call scheduled for 8 a.m. Though I had a corporate apartment across the street from the World Trade Center in Battery Park, I was still short on time and made the first and most important decision that saved my life that morning: to join the call from my office.

I am convinced it was not my doing but God's hand. Ordinarily I would have taken the extra time to join the call with my good friend and colleague Gary in his office on the 95th floor of the north tower. As near as I can tell from the video, American Airlines Flight 11 struck precisely where I should have been that morning. I am convinced Gary never saw the plane coming; his office layout would have him looking inward, not out the window. He was speaking on the call when the plane hit. I'll never forget his last words: "I'll look into that." Those words were followed by an explosion and turmoil that would change my life forever.

From the chair in my office, I was convinced the explosion was immediately above me. The debris outside my window and the

rocking of the building had me convinced whatever happened was very near to me. After quickly leaving my office, I was able to see firsthand—just a few hundred feet away—the damage to the north tower.

Evacuation began immediately down one of the four stairwells. I called my wife, who was in Seattle, from inside the stairwell, waking her at 5:50 a.m. I asked her to turn on the TV and told her I was heading out of the building and would call her back soon. It was more than three hours later before I could reach her. She had to endure the pain of watching the second plane hit my tower, knowing I was somewhere near that plane. When she watched the south tower collapse, she was sure I had been called home to be the Lord.

While I was in the stairway heading out of the building, the Port Authority made an announcement that the north tower had been struck by a plane, not a bomb. Now, feeling no imminent danger, I and two of my managers decided to return to our office on the 50th floor by taking the elevators from the 44th floor to ensure everyone had left and to collect our laptops, knowing we were likely to be out of the building for some time. We had exited the elevators only a minute before the second plane hit and destroyed the elevators we had just been on. The explosion was very close and very violent.

Running to the stairwell that I believe God directed me toward, I saw a member of my staff who was trying to contact a technician via Blackberry. As I paused at the stairway door, hearing the debris falling down the adjacent elevator shaft, I yelled for him to get out immediately. Days later, he would tell me he was frozen at the moment and knows if I hadn't yelled at him, he would not have made it out. I believe it was the reason God allowed me to get off the elevator when I did and exit down the right stairwell after United Airlines Flight 175 hit the south tower.

Other pieces of my story that morning, when I reflect back,

clearly show God's plan for my life was beyond that morning. My faith in Christ and trust in His divine plan is what has helped me cope with the realities of that horrible morning. Living for Christ in the corporate world was not always easy, but without question the rewards are worth it, and it is what God expects and calls us to. I had the privilege of managing a large staff in various cities around the world, most of whom were not believers. They knew I was a Christian, and it was important for them to know and see my faith in how I managed and treated colleagues. The trust and respect I had for my staff, and they for me, was without question the most important part of what became a very long and successful recovery from the disaster.

In the months that followed, the work to rebuild our corporate headquarters and data centers was complicated and challenging. The opportunities for me to share my faith with many of my colleagues and strangers in airports, subways and media events were amazing. "Why did you survive?" and "How could God allow such a horrible event?" were common questions I was asked. Though I am not able to answer these questions with the clarity of God's plan, His Word does teach us that His plan for our lives is perfect and that He is in control. As Christians, we either believe this or we don't. I know the Holy Spirit has time after time given me the right words to share, and I ultimately give the glory to God.

In the months before 9/11, my wife of now 37 years had been diagnosed with and cured of cancer. My survival on that Tuesday morning caused us to look closely at our lives and to look forward: How could God use us for His kingdom? My wife now works for our church in family ministries. I left the New York company and spent several years with World Vision before God led me to a fantastic team of technology colleagues at CrossOlive in Colorado Springs. CrossOlive's mission is to help nonprofit organizations with their technology challenges. Today I am a part of this great organization, using our

combined experiences in all areas of technology with my focus on helping secure companies from cyber and disaster threats.

The events of 9/11 touched all of us. My experiences of that day and what has since followed continue to remind me of my many blessings and to keep His kingdom first in my professional and personal life. On this 12th anniversary of 9/11, I thank God for His mercy and pray that I remain open to be His vessel for spreading the Good News.

Paul Fox began his career in technology in Southern California more than 30 years ago and has worked in the insurance, nonprofit, manufacturing and education sectors. Through Cross0live, he provides IT consulting services for strategic planning, IT organizational development, infrastructure strategy, and security and disaster planning. He and his wife, Ceri, have two grown boys and live in Sammamish, Wash.