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# A Theological Conversation With Randy Harris and Ira Jolivet: Where Was God on September 11?

AMY BOST HENEGAR

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Amy Bost Henegar, a chaplain in New York, interviews Dr. Ira Jolivet and Dr. Randy Harris about the theological implications of September 11.

*The question on everyone's mind after September 11th is, "Where was God during that hour, during those few hours?" After Columbine, I talked to a woman who told me about a meeting of parents. At the meeting, one mother said, "I'm just so thankful that God protected my daughter." Another mother responded by saying, "So why didn't God protect my daughter?" I think the same quandary was very clear with September 11th. I heard the story of a CEO who took his child to the first day of kindergarten and was not in the office on the morning of September 11th. He survived, but his entire staff was killed. So where was God? Was God intervening and keeping him away? And if so, where was God for the people who went to work? Do you think that these questions of evil and whether or not God is are heightened after this? Do you think that people want to know the answers? Do we have any answers? Can we make any sense of this?*

RH: I think the questions are, for sure, heightened. My students, on issues like these, tend to turn into Calvinists. I am pretty thoroughly Arminian, so I do not share those views. What they start looking at and asking is, "What was God trying to do here?" I think that is the wrong question. I flirt with what is described as open theism. I want to at least entertain the possibility that, when the event happened on September 11th, what God said was, "Hmm . . . see what they've done now." Then, in ways I cannot fully describe, God enters into the event and tries to bring something good through it. But that God did it, I find unacceptable. And I am not sure how acceptable I find that God is passively allowing it—that doesn't quite get him off the hook in my opinion. I am more inclined to think that God is suffering with his creation and maybe groaning in travail as the creation itself is. I like that notion of God a lot better than I do either that he has his hand on it, or that he is watching it passively.

*So you are saying that your students go toward saying, "God is doing this."*

RH: They are so desperate to believe that God is absolutely in control. I think the world is a little more open than that. That is probably the minority opinion.

*It sounds like the emphasis is on God suffering with the pain of his children. Ira, what do you think?*

IJ: I agree that God suffers with his children. However, God did not intend human sin to result in injustice and human suffering. But God can bring good out of evil. I think this is what Paul says in Romans chapter 8. Toward the end of the chapter, he says that all things work together for good for those who love the Lord and are called according to God's purpose. So even though God suffers with his children, he can bring

good out of evil. This is the wonder and the mystery of God. There can be good. That is the message of the cross. We might want to consider what we think is good. When we look at events such as September 11th, we are horrified. It is devastating to us because we value human life as the highest good. I do not think it is. Although life is a gift from God and we are created in his image, I believe it is in a way idolatrous to value human life so highly. If it is the highest good, we have to account for the fact that life will end. We will all die.

*So if human, physical death is the ultimate defeat, or the ultimate evil then . . .*

IJ: Right, for people who do not see anything higher, then September 11th was the worse thing that can happen. But there have been other human tragedies—four hundred years of slavery and the history of death through human wars—some of which were fought in the name of God. But Paul says in Romans chapter 8 that none of these experiences, not even death, nothing in the whole creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. That would be the greatest tragedy—separation from the love of God. So if we can understand that, we can put September 11th into a larger context. It was an evil, awful thing that happened, but it is not the worse thing that can happen.

*Even in the middle of this evil, horrible thing, we are not separated from the love of God. God's love is shining through this.*

IJ: Absolutely. In all of these fears that we have—that our lives will be lost, that our children will be killed, that this way of life that we know will be ended—what gives us courage to endure the sufferings that life throws at us? How are we able to endure it, even with patience and joy at times? What gives us that courage? Well, it is the knowledge that God is greater than anything on this earth. Furthermore, as Paul says, he “gave his only son for us, how will he not give us all things?” So, what do I have to be afraid of? Is it death? I’m going to die anyway. That is not the worst thing that can happen.

RH: It might even be possible that it could give you a view on the gospel that you had not had before—if you take the view that we all have bloody hands, and I do. I think it is really hard, living in a world like ours, to claim innocence. And so our immediate reaction to the events of September 11th is not grief. I think that comes later, when you get faces—but your immediate reaction is anger. And especially when you see those people celebrating in the streets. You have that Psalm 137 kind of anger. But if you think about it, the one who really has the right to be angry is God. He is looking down and seeing what we have done to his good creation. And rather than God saying, “You know what I’m going to do? I’m going to take their babies and bash their heads against the rocks,” what God says is, “I’m going to take my baby and bash his head against the rock.” And, if you are open to see it, that can give you a new view of the gospel that you have not had before.

*So we take our anger, and understand that the appropriate anger is God's anger, and see where God's anger was when he responded to our rebellion.*

RH: Yes. It might be a model for how we ought to respond. It is hard to get there. If you are right in the middle of it, my guess is that you cannot. But for those of us who are standing a little farther away, maybe we can.

*What I think I hear you both saying is that we cannot deny the evil. The evil is real. But yet, in the middle of admitting that the evil is real and experiencing the pain of evil, we can claim that all things work together for good; that God can bring life from death.*

IJ: I would put it like this. Like Randy is saying, we all have bloody hands, but we do not see that we have bloody hands. "They" did this. But we do not need to point fingers at someone else. (Now a nation may have to do that. That is what nations have to do—protect their self-interest. I am talking about individuals who are committed Christians.) We have to look inside and honestly appraise ourselves. We have to stand at the cross and say, "How did I put Christ on the cross?"

RH: Flannery O'Connor talks about how there is nobody who ought to be able to see the darkness as penetratingly as Christians. We ought to be able to see the darkness of September 11th in a way that nobody else can because we see it all the way down. Being a Christian does not just mean being able to see the light. It also means being able to fully see and understand the darkness. Maybe that is a lesson that we can learn.

IJ: In ourselves as well.

RH: Absolutely. Name it for what it is. What happened on September 11th is not just about politics. It is about the depths of the human heart—ambition, desire, values, etc. The darkness goes deep and it is all around. If I understand Revelation, that is part of what that is about—that Christians are able to see the darkness around them. It is not enough to be able to see the good that could come out of it. Before you see that, you have to see the darkness with some depth.

*I think that we have a tendency to want to jump straight to making sense out of it, finding meaning, seeing the good.*

RH: Yes. Everyone wants to go to Easter without going through Friday.

*What is the danger in doing that?*

RH: The danger is superficiality.

*We do not know what the resurrection means.*

RH: No, you cannot. Bonhoeffer might describe the problem as "cheap grace." Grace without commitment, grace without discipleship, grace without sacrifice. I think one of the reasons why we are superficial in our appropriation of the faith is that we have been superficial in our understanding of our darkness, our depravity. If we develop a deeper understanding of that, we develop a much more full-bodied notion of God's grace and how it is operating.

IJ: That is what I was going to say. The danger is that you cannot understand God if you skip over our human and suffering. It is not just recognizing the depth of the depravity that is a part of all of us. It is also to understand pain, to embrace that pain, and to learn who God is through that pain. That is what we run from sometimes when we react in anger and revenge. Revenge is a pleasurable experience. It helps us to deal with pain, grief, and sorrow because at least we have someone to get back at. But when you have to just sit there, accept that pain, and try to learn through it, then you learn something about yourself and about

other people. You really look at the people we see on television whose homes were just bombed. You look at the mothers of those children and see them grieving and crying. If you have ever grieved the loss of a child, then you have to feel some kind of connection. You have to see that all people who are grieving have something in common—Israel, the West Bank, South Central Los Angeles after a drive-by shooting. A parent grieves. That is pain. We should be able to see that we all share human anguish in common.

*So if you let yourself experience the pain, if you do not push it away, then it brings compassion. You realize that it is the common denominator.*

IJ: Well, it brings compassion, but not just compassion. It brings you a glimpse of who God is. That is where I think Randy was right on—when he said that God suffers. I came to Christ when I was going through a very traumatic period in my life. My wife and I were about to go through a nasty divorce and I even thought about committing suicide. It was at that point that someone gave me a Bible, and I read the depths of emotions expressed in the Psalms. The psalmist says, “If someone could put my tears in a bottle . . .” There is pain in that plea, and I relate to it. And through the psalmist’s pain, I also saw that God has grieved from the very beginning.

*God grieves, so through experiencing your own pain you experience the heart of God.*

IJ: I think so. I think you learn something about who God really is, and from that point of discovery, you can start feeling compassion for other people. That is the only way it will come.

*Will God use September 11th? Does God use events like this?*

RH: I read the Romans passage slightly differently than Ira does. The reading I prefer is “God is working in all things to bring about good.” So, “use”? I am not sure what that means, but I think that in every event, God is working. He can take the negativities and the tragedies and bring about good. The analogy I give to students is of a master card player. We are playing cards. Sometimes we play a card and God’s response is, “Hey, look at that. We can use that.” But sometimes God’s response is, “What are we going to do with that?” However, he is going to keep playing cards. He is going to keep responding, participating, and moving toward his goal. I think that this can be woven into that tapestry. Now that is a long way from saying that God did it, that God wanted it to happen. It is just saying that when that card gets played, God also has some cards to play.

IJ: I think it is obvious that God purposed the death of Christ. That is what Luke says in Acts—that it was foreordained for Christ to die. But Paul says that it is a paradox. He says that human beings have free will, and yet God is still in control of this universe. God has a determined plan for this universe. So even though human beings do everything they can to thwart that purpose through sin and evil, God is still going to bring about the conclusion—the redemption of the whole creation. I think that is the way we ought to look at the problem of evil. For example, if you think about something like the evil of slavery, you might want to look back at it and deny that it existed. Some have even deleted it from the history books. Slavery certainly was a great evil. But at the same time, I think God has brought some good out of it. The people who experienced slavery, and their descendents, have a spirituality about them that has been shaped by that experience. It gives them a different insight. And I think we need the insight that suffering brings. Without it, I wonder where we would be. I see the congregation with which I labor, and the experiences of each individual help the body as a whole to see things differently—to gain new insights into human life.

RH: Which I think is the remarkable power of the Christian story. It is somehow to find a way to take our story and make it the gospel story. Largely, I suppose, that is what this is about—learning to make those connections. The question is not so much, “Do I like everything about my story?” Rather it is, “How can I come to understand this in light of the gospel story?”

*Last question: What would Jesus say to us right now?*

RH: I think the message is the same. It is always the same. The message is, “The kingdom of God is at hand. Come follow me.” The invitation is to come and participate in the unfolding kingdom. That has all sorts of implications. It implies that the kingdom is not fully here. It also implies that the church is not the kingdom in its fullness. It implies that God is still working and that the invitation is a real invitation—that people have to make a decision. “Come follow me.”

IJ: For some reason I think about the Jesus in John’s gospel who did not answer everybody’s questions. And I do not think he would answer all of our questions today. I think he would say something like, “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.” He has given us the Paraclete that comforts us and guides us through these situations, but he still does not explain everything. God is still hidden from us. All the answers are not there. We have to trust in God in the midst of all of this pain, misery, and confusion.

*“In this world you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.”*

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