

9:03

The Time When Good Triumphs Over Evil

The archway gate at the East end of the reflection pool is plain in design, with its only inscription showing the numbers 9:01 over the entrance. At the opposite end of the reflection pool is a similar archway with the numbers 9:03. In between the “Gates of Time” is Ground Zero. 9:01 represents the time of the “innocence of life” before the bomb detonated, while the 9:03 marks the time when “healing began.” In between the two gates is the reflecting pool, the site of the most devastating terrorist attack our country had experienced until that time – April 19, 1995. On one side of the reflecting pool is an open field with 168 empty chairs, one for each person who lost his life in the bombing. On the



The West gate of the Gates of Time

other side of the reflecting pool is a century old American Elm tree. The tree has a severe bend in its trunk, caused by the force of the blast when a bomb detonated inside a rental truck. The moment really hits you when you listen to an actual recording of what happened at 9:02 AM. At the time the Oklahoma Water Board was hearing a case so the tape recorder was on. The blast destroyed the 9-story Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, in Oklahoma City, and more than 1/3 of the adjacent Journal Records (newspaper) building. All in all, 312 buildings in a 20-block crime scene were also damaged by the blast.



168 empty chairs, one for each person who died

It was unbelievable devastation but there could have been many more casualties that morning. A community prayer breakfast with 1,500 community leaders had just adjourned less than an hour before.

As I toured the grounds of the Oklahoma City National Memorial Museum what struck me was the resolve of the people who faced this enormous tragedy. They had an attitude of healing, beginning at 9:03 AM. Healing began as soon as those affected looked beyond themselves and looked to God for strength. In their healing they began to look for ways to help others in distress. The building may have crumbled but the spirit of the people was rock solid. An estimated 1,600 volunteers from 114 agencies, organizations, churches and first responders rushed to the scene to lend a hand. There were

plenty of stories of courage, heroism and commitment. The 400 vendors of an annual food show redirected their efforts to feeding the rescuers, some staying the entire 16 days of the recovery effort. Survivor Raymond Washburn guided several people to safety using his enhanced senses and direction. Washburn was blind and worked in the federal building. God had placed a man who couldn't see in a place where he could rescue others in a way no one else could do. Area clergy organized around-the-clock prayer, counseling and support services for the families waiting to hear the fate of their loved ones. People buried in the rubble needed comfort until help could free them. One of the survivors, who had been buried in the rubble on the 5th floor, gave this account: “Suddenly, someone took my hand. Words cannot begin to express the comfort and peace I felt with this human touch.”

The 16-day search, rescue and recovery effort became known as the “Oklahoma Standard,” and is a model of how people can work together in unity in the face of crisis. Instead of an attitude of bitterness, hate and despair, interviews of survivors showed the resolve, strength and resilience of those who, by the Grace of God, survived the tragedy. Their focus was on helping others.



Rubble of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building

There were plenty of others in need. A reported 1/3 of Oklahoma City residents had a direct connection to the tragedy. Billy Graham recognized the extraordinary community response when he said, “A tragedy like this could have torn the city apart, but instead, it has united this city.”

Our nation has been victimized by numerous tragedies and senseless acts of violence all too often. Unfortunately, evil is part of our world. People of faith are not immune to acts of violence. The real testimony to our faith is how we react when something bad happens. We have no answer to why something like this happens. We just know that there is evil in the world, but that hope will prevail.

We all face different crisis situations, hopefully none as devastating as the Oklahoma City bombing. Regardless of the crisis our attitude determines our choices. Taking a cue from the “Oklahoma Standard,” focusing on 9:03, here are a few thoughts:

- Know that Jesus walks with you. You are not alone.
- Keep your eyes on God. His strength will give you strength at your time of weakness.
- Forgive so you can let it go. Forgiveness is about you getting on with your life instead of letting a situation haunt you forever.



The serenity of the Reflecting Pool

- Pray for God’s continued promises. God said He will never leave you or forsake you. (Deuteronomy 31:6).
- Know that hope is found in hopeless situations. (1 Peter 5:10)
- As bad as things are now, remember, God wins in the end. Jesus conquered sin on the cross. *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).*

In spite of one of the worst, senseless tragedies our country had faced to that point the healing in Oklahoma City began immediately and continues today.

Nearly a quarter century later there is a continued effort to comfort survivors, first responders and the countless

people who rallied to the cause. The disfigured American Elm tree at Ground Zero is known as The Survivor Tree. It survived the blast and the conflagration of burning vehicles all around it and still drops its seeds on the ground to this day. Those seeds are collected and given to the families of victims, survivors, first responders and other volunteers who assisted in the aftermath of the blast. The Survivor Tree is a symbol of strength and resilience going forward. The bomb detonated at 9:02 AM, shattering the relative innocence of their community. But the spirit of healing began at 9:03 AM and is alive today. God’s seeds of hope remain as “good” triumphs over “evil.” We can fulfill the role as comforter and help others during their times of trouble as we share God’s seeds of hope with them. The Oklahoma City National Memorial is a sacred place that represents comfort, strength, peace, hope and serenity.



The Survivor Tree

My wish for you is that you would experience God’s comfort, strength, peace, hope and serenity during the trials and tribulations of your life and, like the blind man, would look for unique ways to help others during theirs. It is 9:03.

Question: What do you think God wants you to do when experiencing devastation and tragedy? If you lost a loved one to a tragedy how do you think your departed loved one would want you to respond?

Prayer: Most gracious Heavenly Father. We don’t know why tragic events happen, but we know You are there with us. You are the hand that comforts us when we are buried under the rubble of tragedy. When we face assaults give us the strength, peace and hope that we need to get through the situations that confront us. Amen.