

Where Was God?

A Pastor Reflects on Lessons Learned at Ground Zero

Story by Debra Smith



Gary Malkus

“My first thought was that it looked like a nuclear bomb had gone off in Manhattan,” recalled Pastor Gary Malkus of his first sight of the World Trade Center site in New York, NY, after the terrorist attacks of September

11, 2001. “I grew up in the Cold War era, when the threat of nuclear disaster was high,” continued Gary, who leads Calvary Chapel Apple Valley, CA, and has been a police chaplain for 20 years. “It looked exactly like I had always imagined a nuclear war would.”

Along with fellow police chaplain Ron Neish, Gary arrived in New York five days after the attack. Part of a 65-member team of chaplains assembled from around the nation, the two went to help disaster responders contend with the trauma of sifting through the wreckage. “The World Trade Center was actually seven buildings, not just the Twin Towers,” Gary explained. “Ranging from 9 to 110 stories tall, they included an underground complex of shopping malls and a subway system. As the buildings fell—the force of the towers’ collapse left nothing nearby standing—there wasn’t enough space to hold it all. So

days passed, their intent became to salvage bodily remains. Into this scene, Gary and Ron sought to bring God’s comfort.

“On the plane on the way over,” Gary remembered, “I asked God, *What do I have to offer? I’ve never lost a friend in a disaster like this.* But then I realized: Many times, God has shown me great comfort in the midst of my own distress—losing family members, parenting rebellious teenagers.”

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4

“This passage is saying,” Gary continued, “that this same God can minister to these officers in their hour of need. As they dug through the debris, taking in harsh and unbelievable images, it was God who would minister to them through us. We just needed to get them talking about what they were going through.”

Each time rescuers recovered a human body, Gary said, “All work stopped for a moment while the officers stood at attention and gave respect to the person being recovered. We chaplains just

stood back and let them honor their fallen comrade.” One day a team performed a precarious rescue in which they were delighted and surprised at their success in extracting a man’s remains, intact, from beneath the steel

beams that had pinned him. As the workers drew together to honor the man while his body was carried through, Gary recalled, “The officers pulled us into their line. It was an honor to stand with them and pay respect to the man.” The event impacted Gary and Ron so deeply that they committed to pray for the man’s family every day. “We wore little arm bands to remind us,” Gary said. The man, they soon learned, was a father of three, named Clinton Davis.

In May 2002, Gary and his wife Danielle attended a Washington, D.C. event held in honor of police officers fallen during the previous year. As families of the deceased filed into a large cordoned-off field, the mass of people bottlenecked and came to a standstill. From the front row, Gary looked up—“And right in front of me was a boy holding a placard that said ‘Clinton Davis,’” he stated. “It was Clinton Davis’ son. President Bush was about to enter, moving seemed impossible, and I thought, *I can’t get out of line; the Secret Service will probably shoot me!*” At his wife’s encouragement, though, Gary stepped forward. “I told him I was there when his dad was recovered and that I was praying for him. The whole event gave me such closure,” Gary remembered. “God is amazing.”

Repeatedly throughout his two weeks at the site, Gary recalled, “People noticed my chaplain’s helmet and asked, ‘How could a loving God allow this to happen? Where was God?’” Each time he was questioned, Gary said, his answer began with acknowledging: “I don’t have God completely figured out. There are so many things my finite mind cannot comprehend.” Incomprehensibility doesn’t equal impossibility, Gary pointed out. “When faced with things we don’t understand,” he continued, “let’s fall back on what we do understand. And the Bible reveals so much



about God’s character and goodness. Relying on what we know about God can help us through those difficult times that make no sense.” Second, Gary said, “What I do comprehend about God from the Bible tells me that He did not cause those men to fly planes into a building. Certainly everything passes through His hands, but all men are given a choice. God was not the author of their actions. Evil and hatred drove them to that, and evil and hatred are against the very nature of God. John 3:16 tells us that God loves us. He demonstrated His love by allowing His own Son to die on a cross in our place—that’s how much He loves us.” God entered into our suffering through Jesus’ pain-filled death.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Psalms 46:1

Third, Gary said, “In the midst of the nightmare, God’s presence was there—revealing Himself, giving hope. How? In so many ways. One way was through ‘God’s House.’”

“At Ground Zero, we spent much of our 16-hour day circling around the pile, talking to whomever we could,” Gary continued. One day as he and Ron did so, a rescue worker asked them if they had yet seen “God’s

House.” Gary said, “We didn’t know what he was talking about.” The man enthusiastically directed them over to what had been the national customs building. As they entered the area, which was still delineated by walls but had no roof left, they saw a 20-foot steel structure—a perfect cross. “It was distinct; it stood out,” Gary said. Over the coming days, “It became a symbol of hope. Little groups would have prayer meetings or devotional times there; people saw it as a sign that God was present, in the midst of their tragedy.” The cross became such an integral part of the disaster relief, Gary said, “that nobody wanted to take it down. They eventually used a crane to move it to the front of the World Trade Center site. It stayed there for months.”

A second display of God’s working was on the 104th floor of Tower One, Gary said. After the plane hit and the heat began to escalate, Al Braca, a vice president of the Cantor Fitzgerald company and an elder at CC Four Winds, NJ, offered to pray with people to receive Christ as their Savior. People gathered around and Al led them in prayer. “So God was on the 104th floor of that building,” Gary concluded.

“Then there was Bob Rice, a policeman from New Jersey,” stated Gary. “I’ve heard all kinds of words while working with officers for 20

years; but Bob’s mouth was literally so foul, I had never heard anything like it. His group was assigned to me and Ron as his chaplains, but Bob saw no need for chaplains. He despised them, and our being assigned to him irritated him to no end.” Gary soon formed a strategy: “Every time he cursed, I offered substitute words he could use instead. I was relentless, and after several days he started using the new words.” Gary and Bob spent a great deal of time together, and Gary had opportunity to challenge Bob in other ways. While Bob drove Gary to the airport to fly home, Bob’s wife spoke to Gary on the phone—weeping and imploring him to stay to continue influencing her husband.

A few days after Gary’s return to California, his phone rang. It was Bob—announcing that he had asked a mutual acquaintance, Chaplain Rickey Hargrave, to lead him in prayer to receive Christ as Lord and Savior. “God has transformed Bob’s life,” Gary said. “He is now Chaplain Bob, serving New Jersey police.”

“So where was God on 9/11?” Gary asked. “God was there, changing lives, as people looked to Him. I don’t get it all, but He truly is our refuge and strength—a very present help in trouble (Psalm 46:1b). He is a God Who cares about us.”

