

## ***Nothing Will Ever Be The Same***

*Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away. But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only. Matthew 24:35-36*

9/11 changed me forever...not because of tragedy or loss. Not because I witnessed terrible things. Not because my life was in immediate danger. But I was in NYC that day, and through a miraculous series of seemingly random decisions I wasn't downtown working in the WTC. My personal agenda changed forever on the train tracks in Newark, NJ as I made my way home that day, not knowing exactly what was happening...or whether there would be a tomorrow. I decided that day to find God's purpose for my life. Six and a half years later, I find myself in a place I've never been before. My briefcase is gathering dust in the closet. Most of the suits have been given away. My salary is the tithe amount I used to give. I work with people who are invisible in our rural community-- the marginalized...the displaced...the homeless. I struggle daily with a corporate mentality, a culture and mindset that doesn't work here. It's like being in a foreign country without knowing or understanding the language. But I remember how my life used to be many years ago-- b.c. Before Christ. Somehow, God found me and touched my life and changed it. I know that what He did for me, He can do for them and for you, too. Life is full of changes and full of challenges...are you ready?

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God allowed the shadow of destruction to touch my life in a way that changed me forever, and caused me to seek His purpose above all else. Nothing else mattered except to be in the Master's Hands and to keep promises I made to God that other morning almost five years earlier...

My memories from that day are so clear, like it was yesterday. It was warm and sunny, the end of summer in Matawan, New Jersey. The only things unusual about it were that I woke up one hour later, almost to the minute. I had slept through the alarm clock, very unusual for me. I sat straight up in bed and looked over at the clock: it was 7:20 a.m. My usual train was pulling out of the station the same time I was trying to wipe the sleep out of my eyes and not panic over being an hour late to work.

On my way out the door an hour later, I mentally went over my day. It was Tuesday, September 11, 2001 and I was in the last two weeks of my position with a large financial services company in New York City. I had resigned the Thursday before after accepting an offer with another company based in New Jersey.

God had His Hand on my life through it all. Wait a minute, you are probably saying at this point. Tuesday, September 11, 2001. New York City. Do you mean? Yes, the day we have all come to know as 9/11. My company had offices in midtown Manhattan, and at the World Trade Centers. In fact, my group had reorganized and I was added to an existing team in 5 World Trade (known as Tower 5), and was supposed to have relocated during the summer of 2001. But some internal decisions had postponed the move. So my office was still mid town.

That was only one of the many miracles that happened that day. Some may call it a series of coincidences that allowed me to travel in and out of the city, to be smack in

the middle of chaos and get home by train four and half hours after leaving for work. But I know otherwise. It was all part of God's plan for my life. I survived for a purpose. But what purpose? What WAS God's plan for my life?

The most startling part for me was that I was in the middle of world-changing events and yet I had very little realization of what was unfolding. My mind kept making sense of things that made no sense. In fact, I kept trying to get to work.

Images in the distance of burning smoke coming from the Towers. I remember so clearly thinking how could that happen? Did the pilot have a heart attack? PATH trains not running to lower Manhattan... Mechanical or electrical failure. My cell phone dead? I must have forgotten to pay the bill?

Smoke pouring out of the top of the tallest building in the world... Wall Street shut down... Something surreal was going on, but I kept moving as if everything was normal, not aware or comprehending the signs and full extent of the horrible tragedy at the World Trade Center and Pentagon. And in Pennsylvania...

Something happened that finally got my attention. A man next to me on the subway tracks turned to me and told me he had come in from Queens and seen fire in the sky. It wasn't so much what he said, but that he spoke to me at all. You see, commuters tend not to talk to people around them. Everybody is preoccupied with cell phones, their music, or just getting to their destination. But this man spoke to me, a complete stranger.

I stopped where I was. 'Wait a minute! Something is wrong here! I RESIGNED! I don't have to BE HERE! I'm going home.'

And with that, I turned around and started quickly back to the trains. Now I heard people running by me in Penn Station, screaming and crying about something horrible downtown. I felt cut off from everyone I knew. My family was spread out and far away. What was happening, and what would happen to me? I wasn't scared or panicky at that point, more like in the middle of a strange dream growing worse by the minute. Almost to the point where you want to force yourself to wake up and find everything around you ok and normal...

Walking by a newsstand and stopping, all eyes intent on the TV suspended over our heads, and the CNN broadcast. Now I saw for the first time what had happened and came to the realization I was right in the middle of chaos. Dangerous chaos. My world was being destroyed right in front of me. OK, Lord, I need Your Help—right now!

This was serious. I remember thinking oh my God, I have to get out of here, we are surely going to war, and I don't want to get stuck in Penn Station as a bomb shelter! I want to go home!

My drama continued...no trains running, then a train to NJ. Held up from departure indefinitely, then released to go through the tunnel to NJ. Image out the left window of a black column of smoke in the distance from ground to the sky...later learning it was one of the towers falling...I thought surely this was the end.

Newark was in the process of shutting down, so there were more people on the track than I had ever seen. What was so chilling was seeing so many officials with hard hats and megaphones calling out directions to the crowd and helping people board any train they could. It didn't matter where the train was going, as long as it was away from New York City.

As trains made it through, people boarded calmly... comforted one another... Prayed together openly on the tracks... I prayed too. I clearly saw who I was and where I was headed. With my life in the balance as I thought that day, and thinking the end had surely come, I saw myself as if I stood before the Lord, going over my life.

I said three prayers there, right out in the open. Strange, but I didn't pray for my safety. The first was 'God, forgive me for my sins.' Reflecting during those moments when I thought the world was coming to an end, I saw how much was about ME and not too sure about my priorities and where God actually fit...

The second prayer was 'Father, please protect the people I love.' A profound statement for me at that time because I was so caught up with my own agenda. I realized that day how little I had invested in the people God had placed in my life. The most convicting realization was the resistance to nurture deep relationships with family and close friends. There was always a good reason. Time. Distance. They have their own families. I have to make a living and work, work, work. Excuse after excuse...

I realized in those moments if I lost my life I had done nothing to pass on the legacy of love and godly heritage in Christ that God had renewed my life with. If I survived that day, I had a lot of work to do in restoring relationships as much as I could with the time I had left on this earth. Agendas and busyness, wealth and position pale in comparison to the quality of our relationships. We were created to have fellowship and yes, friendship with God through Jesus Christ. He's always there with outstretched arms to us! Why aren't we that way towards those around us?

The saddest thing to me that day was I had held on to bitterness over what I felt was a wall that had always existed between my mother and I, while I was growing up. A deep sadness that we had never been the kind of friends I heard my friends talk about they had with their mothers growing up. I guess I felt she hadn't been there for me. All my disappointments and issues in life were heaped unfairly upon her. What if I never saw her again?

On the train tracks that day, my eyes opened wide: what had I done about it? Was I trying to be a friend? Whose fault was it that I felt I hardly knew her?

Like Helen Keller, when her teacher Annie Sullivan finally got through to her that those hand signs meant something concrete, and opened a new world to her, God got through to me a powerful understanding about forgiveness. You can't hold people hostage for hurts perceived or real. You can't change the past, and some do the best they can with who they are and what they know at the time.

Let it go. Let God take care of the matter, them and you. All of us hurt Christ with our sins, and don't deserve His forgiveness. In spite of the penalty for our sins, Christ made Himself a willing sacrifice once and for all, fulfilled His purpose and made our salvation

possible. Jesus had to die the way He did. If Christ could forgive like that, I had to as well...

And the third prayer? That was the best one and most challenging as it turned out. 'Father, forgive me for not fulfilling my purpose. Help me to find my purpose!' I couldn't discern it, couldn't define it. I just prayed for the next few years in response to the call in Isaiah 6:8b: Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us? Then I said, Here am I! Send me.'

And over the next five years, I worked on discovering, then accepting and obeying, God's purpose for my life.

What a powerful impact on my life and the quality of my relationships, especially with my mom! I began to see the treasures in her, and how much those treasures had been passed on to me! I got to know her and learn more about her life, and in the process gained yet another new friend.

Just as importantly, these God-driven discoveries shed a new light on Christ's ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation. It moved from head knowledge to heart knowledge. In the time you do have on this earth, pass on Christ's legacy of love to those around you in what you say and do. There is no greater priority than that.

September 11, 2006 marked the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the tragedy in 2001. My mom called me that night and said this: "I thank God we don't mourn today what might have been... but we can celebrate on this day and be thankful for who is still with us."

My mother--my friend--was talking about me.

**PRAYER:**

Thank you, Father, for those life-defining events that show us who we are and what truly matters in life. Help us find our purpose, and give us the strength to fulfill it in Jesus' Name.