

***Hebrews 13:1-8 Continue to show brotherly love. <sup>2</sup> Do not fail to show love to strangers, for by doing this some have welcomed angels without realizing it. <sup>3</sup> Remember those in prison, as if you were fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated, as if you yourselves were also suffering bodily. <sup>4</sup> Marriage is to be held in honor by all, and the marriage bed is to be kept undefiled, for God will judge sexually immoral people and adulterers. <sup>5</sup> Keep your life free from the love of money, and be content with what you have. For God has said: I will never leave you, and I will never forsake you. <sup>6</sup> So then we say with confidence: The Lord is my helper, and I will not be afraid. What will man do to me? <sup>7</sup> Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Carefully consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. <sup>8</sup> Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.***

Dear Christian friends:

Psychologists call them “flashbulb memories,” those images forever imprinted on the mind from a world-changing event. For some of you, your first flashbulb memory was perhaps the Kennedy assassination or the moon landing. You’ll probably never forget where you were when you heard the news or watched the footage. For others of us, along with you, the flashbulb moment of 9-11 sticks in our memories. I was on my way to Pastors Conference in Cottage Grove. On arrival, we watched on television as the carnage unfolded. We worshiped the Lord even as we pleaded for his deliverance and healing. Then we returned to our homes and congregations.

And the hits just kept coming...every twenty minutes: the Pentagon, the first collapse, the second collapse, the crash of Flight 93... We were a nation shaken to its foundation. And there was that certain feeling that was in the air: you could feel it; you could taste it: it just took a news anchor to say, what we already knew: Things would never be the same again.

And in some ways, that is very true. Over the last 18 years, we have seen the changes, losses, and lasting impact on family after family: For the families left behind after Flight 93 crashed, things

will never again be the same. For the families of the rescue heroes who perished, things will never again be the same. For the families of our soldiers who died in Afghanistan, things will never again be the same. And you could go on and on.

But is that really true for America as a whole? We all thought—we all felt—that America would never be the same again. But now, all these years later, what have we found? Remember the America that we promised to be on 9-11? We promised to be a more spiritual America—but what has happened? Churches were full for a few weeks, and then interest began to wane.

We promised to be an America who would not bow down before the god of greed anymore; we promised to realign our priorities, and tighten our belts and do whatever it takes to be a beacon of light and hope in the world. We promised to be an America who would put politics behind us. There would be no party divisions, but unity in the cause. How long did all that last?

For America, never again the same, was a catchy sound-byte...but was it the truth? Were the top stories, just a few days ago on 9-11, were they about how America has lived up to its promises, its ideals, its intentions? No, sadly, bit by bit, we have once again become the America we were, not the America we promised to be.

But what about us, personally? Remember that morning as the planes crashed and the buildings fell—remember how you thought things would never be the same again for you, too?

We watched 15,000 children lose a parent on live TV, and we promised that we’d never be the same again: we’d rearrange our priorities and make time for our kids and the things in life that don’t have to do with money or career. We wouldn’t fight with our family, we’d treasure them. We wouldn’t tear our spouse down, we’d love them. We wouldn’t let anything take precedence over our family... But now, all these years later, how has that promise held up?

In the aftermath of death and destruction, in the face of anger and hatred, we embraced and aspired to the concepts love, generosity, purity, compassion, reliance on the Lord in imitation of earlier generations in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor and World War II. In fact, in these last 18 years, we have valued, attempted and, on occasion, even modelled these very things described in our text for today in an effort to not



be the same again. We thought that this great tragedy would change us, for the better.

But how many of us took the time just a few days ago on 9-11 to remember, to reevaluate, to regroup ourselves. No, the tragedy didn't really change us at all, did it? It only left us with a better view of the people we want to be, but sadly, are not. We kept saying, never again the same. But as we take a look, we see the same poor, miserable sinners we have always been, huh?

Then again, maybe the deeper problem isn't that we aren't the people that we'd thought we'd be, but that we aren't even willing to take a look. Sure, we aren't who we thought we'd be. But that's OK. We like who we are, and don't want to think about becoming the people we are needed to be, much less the people God wants us to be. We're pretty much the same and, sadly, we're kind of good with that.

But you know what? God isn't. God isn't good with *the same*. He isn't good with good enough. God isn't OK with indifference, with stagnation, with the *status quo*. God didn't *call you out of darkness into his wonderful light* in order that you'd continue to live in darkness. No, just as we heard in last Sunday's reading from the verses just before our text for today, *you have come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God; to the heavenly Jerusalem; to tens of thousands of angels in joyful assembly; <sup>23</sup> to the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven; to God, who is the judge of all; to the spirits of righteous people who have been made perfect; <sup>24</sup> to Jesus, the mediator of a new testament; and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better message than the blood of Abel.* (12:22-24) *You have come to...Jesus Christ [who] is the same yesterday, today, and forever.*" And that makes all the difference, because Jesus is the one who showed how tragedy changes to triumph.

You see, Jesus Christ *IS* the same today as he was yesterday—in the past—when he came to earth for one reason only: to save people like you and me who know kind of people we want to be—who God has called us to be—but are not. He came and suffered the greatest tragedy that this world will ever see. Far greater than 9-11, far greater than world wars or world famines. The great tragedy was that God's perfect Son died on a cross in my place, in your place...for our sins...so that we wouldn't.

But that tragedy changed triumph for Christ was not defeated! No, death couldn't hold him. And on the third day he rose from the dead in triumphant victory over not just our sin and our death, but hell itself. Yes, Jesus changed this world's greatest tragedy into our greatest triumph. Though he was handed over to death for our sins, he was raised to life for your justification, changing the verdict of guilty as charged into a triumphant declaration of grace: you not guilty.

And this Jesus is the same Jesus who is here today, who knows each of us as the person we are by nature, who knows that we are not the people we want to be, and certainly not the people God calls us to be. And yet it is this same Jesus who declares, "My tragedy is *still* your triumph." Because even though we're not the people we promised to be, he forgives us anyway, in the same way each day declaring you righteous, made perfect in his own precious blood, changing in us hearts of rebelling and failure and despair to hearts of gratitude and comfort and peace.

And it's this same Jesus takes those changed hearts of ours and compels us with his love today, tomorrow, and the next day to aspire to be the people we want to be, the people God has called us to be in his Word—people of love, people of generosity, people of purity, people of contentment, people of respect, yes, people of *change*—until this same Jesus, who does NOT change, who is *the same yesterday and today* welcomes us to the *forever* that he has prepared for us, a place where things will never again be the same, just as he has promised, "*Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirsty; There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*" Tragedy changed to triumph, because *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Amen.*