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Reverend Billy Graham

Oklahoma Bombing Memorial Prayer Service Address

delivered 23 April 1995 in Oklahoma City, OK



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President Clinton, Mrs. Clinton, Governor Keating, Mrs. Keating, Mayor Nordick, and our visiting Governor from the great state of Texas, Governor and Mrs. Bush, and so many people that have come here from all over the country to join in this prayer service.

And for all that has been said, I don't know what I'm going to say because we've had several messages brought here. One from the President, which could be a sermon from a pulpit anywhere -- and maybe that's what he'll do someday, 10 or 20 years from now. But most important of all, all of those people that have been named from the Fire Department, the Police Department -- those people that went in the building, those people that have lost loved ones, those that have been injured in the bombing, our tears mingle with yours as we walked through the room a moment ago and shook hands with so many of you and had a little prayer with several of you.

And you're from the various agencies, like the fire, the medical, the police, the hundreds of volunteers who we've already heard about -- no matter how hard we try, words simply cannot express the horror and the shock and the revulsion we all feel over what took place in this city last Wednesday.



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That terrible and senseless tragedy runs against the grain of every standard, every belief, and every custom we hold as a civilized society in the United States. And the images of devastation and human suffering we have seen here will be indelibly imprinted on each one of our minds and hearts as long as we live. That blast was like a violent explosion ripping at the very heart of America. And long after the rubble is cleared and the rebuilding begins, the scars of this senseless and evil outrage will remain.

But we come together here today not only to pray and forgive and love, but to say to those who masterminded this cruel plot, and to those who carried it out, that the spirit of this city and this nation will not be defeated.

Someday the wounds will heal and someday those who thought they could sew chaos and discord will be brought to justice, as President Clinton has so eloquently promised. The wounds of this tragedy are deep. But the courage and faith and determination of the people of Oklahoma City are even deeper.

A part -- A part of my family lives in Oklahoma. My father had a brother, an older brother, a giant of a man, and he came to Oklahoma and he founded a business in Tahlequah, in Muskogee. I came to Oklahoma City and held two or three crusades. The first one was here in these fairgrounds many, many years ago. Some of you might have been little children at that time.

But I've known something of the strength and the courage and the character of people that live in Oklahoma. And the Bible says -- the Bible says in Psalm 147:3: He heals the broken-hearted; he binds up the wounds. And so with this service today, we stand together to say: "Let the healing begin!"

But since I have been here, I have been asked the question several times, many times, "Why does God allow it?" Why does a God of love and mercy that we read about and hear about allow such a terrible thing to happen? Over 3000 years ago, there was named Job -- struggled with the same question. He asked "why" because he was a good man. And yet, disaster struck him suddenly and swiftly. He lost seven sons, three daughters. He lost all his possessions. He even lost his health. Even his wife and his friends turned against him. His wife said, "Curse God and die!"¹ And in the midst of his suffering he asked this question, "Why?" Job didn't know. "Why did I not perish at birth?" he cried.



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Perhaps this is the way you feel. And I want to assure you that God understands those feelings. The Bible says in Isaiah 43:2: When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and when you walk through the fire, you will not be burned. The flames will not set you ablaze. And yet, Job found there were lessons to be learned from his suffering, even if he didn't fully understand it.

And that is true for all of us as well. What are some of the lessons that we can learn from what has happened? First, there's a mystery to it. I've been asked why God allows it. I don't know. I can't give a direct answer. I have to confess that I never fully understand -- even for my own satisfaction. I have to accept by faith that God is a God of love and mercy and compassion -- even in the midst of suffering. I can remember many years ago lying a dirt floor in a field hospital in Korea and looking up into the face of a soldier, suspended in a frame, who was horribly wounded. And the doctor said he'll never walk again. And I asked myself, "Why?" I can recall standing at the bedside of children who were dying, and I've asked myself, "Lord, why?"

I recall walking through the devastation left by hurricanes in Florida and South Carolina, and typhoons in India, and earthquakes in Guatemala and California, and I've asked myself, "Why?" The Bible says God is not the author of evil. And it speaks of evil in 1 Thessalonians as a mystery. There's something about evil we will never fully understand this side of eternity.

But the Bible says two other things that we sometimes are tempted to forget. It tells us that there is a devil, that Satan is very real and he has great power. It also tells us that evil is real and that the human heart is capable of almost limitless evil when it is cut off from God and from the moral law. The prophet Jeremiah said, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?"² That's your heart and my heart without God. And that's one reason we each need God in our lives. For only He can change our hearts and give us the desire and the power to do what is right and keep us from doing wrong.

Times like this will do one of two things: It will either make us hard and bitter and angry at God, or they will make us tender and open and help us to reach out in faith. And I think that's what the people of Oklahoma are doing that I've met since I've been here these past few days. I pray that you will not let bitterness and poison creep into your soul, but that you will turn in faith and trust in God, even if we cannot understand. It is better to face something like this with God than without him.



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But the lesson of this event has not only been about mystery, but we've already heard it's a lesson of a community coming together. What an -- What an example: Oklahoma City and the people of Oklahoma have given to the world, because the television has been carrying it as much as any event I can ever remember like this. And the cooperation between officials of every level of government and the community, no matter what religious group we belong to and what political views we may have.

None of us will ever forget some of those pictures on television that have already been mentioned here today; or the picture of people standing in line to give blood; the work of the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and a host of other humanitarian organizations, as well as the emergency workers. And the doctors and nurses have inspired us and humbled us.

A tragedy like this could have torn this city apart, but instead it has united you in a way that you've never been united before. Hundreds, if not thousands, of prayer groups around the world have been praying for you. And I'm sure -- as I've been told -- that you sense their prayers and their support. The forces of hate and violence must not be allowed to gain their victory -- not just in our society, but in our hearts. Nor must respond to hate with more hate. This is a time of coming together and we've seen that already.

This tragedy also gives us a lesson in comfort and compassion. We've seen an outpouring of sympathy and help, not only in Oklahoma City and Oklahoma, but throughout the United States and throughout the world. We've been reminded that a cruel event like this which so vividly demonstrates the depths of human evil also brings out the best of us, brings out the best of the human spirit -- the human compassion and sympathy and sacrifice. But this can also teach us about God's comfort and compassion.

Some of you today are going through heartache and grief so intense that you wonder if it will ever go away. I've had the privilege of meeting some of you and talking to you. But I want to tell you that our God cares for you and for your family and for your city. The Bible says that the God of all comfort who comforts us in our troubles. Jesus said, "Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted." I pray that every one of you will experience God's comfort during these days as you turn to him, for God loves you and He shares in your suffering.



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Difficult as it may be for you to see right now, this event gives us, as we've heard from the Archbishop, a message of hope. Yes, there is hope. There's hope for the present because I believe the stage is already been set for the restoration and renewal of the spirit of this city. You're a city that will always survive, and you'll never give up. Today, it's my prayer that all Americans will rededicate ourselves to a new spirit of brotherhood and compassion, working together to solve the problems and barriers that would tear us apart.

But there's also hope for the future because of God's promises. As a Christian, I have hope not just for this life but for the life to come. Someday, there will be a glorious reunion with those who have died and gone to heaven before us. And that includes all those innocent children that are lost. They're not lost from God because any child that young is automatically in heaven and in God's arms.

But this -- this event also reminds us of the brevity and uncertainty of life. It reminds us that we never know when we're going to be taken. I doubt if even one of those who went to that building to work, or to go to the children's place, ever dreamed that that was their last day on earth. That is why we each need to face our own spiritual need and commit ourselves to God.

It's ironic that this terrible event took place just three days after the churches of this city were filled with people celebrating Easter. Just one week ago today. And throughout the world, the Eastern Orthodox churches celebrate Easter on this day. And Easter always brings hope to all of us. For the Christian, the Cross tells us that God understands our suffering, for He took upon Himself at the Cross all of our sins and all of our failures and all of our sufferings. And our Lord on that Cross asked the question: "Why?" "My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?"³ And He received his answer. He knew: To redeem the world. To save you and me from our sins. To give us assurance that if we died we're going to heaven. He was saying from the Cross, "I love you!" And I know the heartaches and the sorrows and the pain that you feel.

Easter points us beyond the tragedy of the Cross to the hope of the empty tomb. It tells us that there's hope for eternal life, that Christ has conquered death. And it also tells us that God has triumphed over evil and death and hell. This is our hope, and it can be your hope as well.

I was deeply moved Friday night, while watching Larry King talk to Edye Smith, who lost her two little boys in that explosion. Her brother, a 28 year old police officer, was dispatched to the crime scene to help. And in searching the rubble, he found one of his nephews.



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The boy's grandfather is a Christian evangelist who said that conducting their funeral was the hardest thing he ever faced, and that his faith had been crucial in helping him through the tragedy. He quoted Romans 8:28: And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him -- and [the boy's grandfather] said if that were the only verse he had in the whole Bible, it would work through all of his problems, if we only believe it.

President and Mrs. Kennedy -- Mrs. Clinton will remember at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington earlier this year Ambassador Andrew Young, who'd gone through the terrible agony of losing his beloved wife whom he loved so much to cancer -- he closed his talk at your prayer breakfast with a quote from an old hymn: "How firm our [a] foundation." The 4th verse of that hymn says:

*The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose
I will not, I will not, desert to its [his] foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never, forsake!⁴*

My prayer for you today is that you will feel the loving arms of God wrapped around you and will know in your heart that he will never forsake you, as you trust Him.

God bless Oklahoma.

¹Job 2:9 (KJV)

²Jeremiah 17:9 (KJV)

³Mathew 27:46 Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? That is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? (KJV)

⁴There are several versions of this hymn, ranging perhaps from 4 to 7 verses (see, <http://www.lutheran-hymnal.com/lyrics/tlh427.htm>). Some modern renditions truncate the middle three verses and place the verse Graham cited in the 4th and last position.