

## “God is Chasing You”

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Sept 19, 2021

Today’s reading from the letter of James seems to ramble a bit, almost like he is trying to catch a tiger by the tail. And in a sense, he is. He’s addressing how we humans deal with powerful negative emotions. He describes these emotions warring within us. But instead of dealing with them and finding a way to calm them down, we tend to do something else. We take them out into the world and use them against others. James talks about how his Christians are quarrelling and fighting with each other. Not because the people around them have done anything wrong, but because of the warring emotions inside individuals.

Psychologists have a name for the process James is describing: it’s called projection. We get all riled up with feelings of anger and fear, and instead of facing them and calming them down, we project them onto other people. *You’re* the reason I feel this way. I have every right to feel angry or frightened because they are people in the world like you.

The problem with this approach is that it reduces real, live, complicated people into stick figures in our psychological drama. Other people become our enemies, or the reason the world is going to ruin. This often happens when we’re driving. Someone cuts us off, and we call them a name, as though their entire identity could be summed up by this one act. At our worst, we describe other people as monsters, inhuman, even when we know next to nothing about them. Those facile judgements are always a clue that the real monsters we fear are inside us, but are being ignored, so they show up in the outside world, bigger than ever, painted onto other people. They become the screen for our psychological projections.

James reminds us that these projections lead us to be judgemental about other people. But the right to judge people in all their complexity does not belong to us, that is God’s business. Only God is competent to do that. So, when we do it, James says, we are overstepping our bounds, and even worse, we are losing sight of how each person is made in the image of God. Our willingness to turn other people into cartoon figures is an insult to them, and to their Maker.

These psychological projections can have lasting, deadly effects. Last Sunday was the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11. The attacks were deeply traumatic for those who witnessed them. Almost 3000 people died on that day. It’s estimated that at least 400,000 people were directly affected by the collapse of the two towers in Manhattan. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/sept-11-health-1.6170363>



They breathed in a toxic soup of chemicals and metals contained in the dust that was released by the fall of the buildings. Today, many suffer from physical illnesses related to the dust.

For the 30,000<sup>2</sup> first responders who went to ground zero, there have been long term psychological consequences, too. It is now estimated that 16% suffer from mental health problems such as depression, substance abuse and post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>3</sup>

But America as a whole was traumatized, too. For the first time in decades, Americans felt vulnerable, fearful, and victimized. In the space of an hour, a self-confident nation which had won the Cold War was suddenly seething with negative emotions. Fear, worry, anger, and a sense of victimization gripped the nation. This was trauma at a collective scale. The question was what they would do about it. They did not decide to top and calm down. Instead, three days after the attack, this bill was presented to Congress and the Senate.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/sept-11-health-1.6170363>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/health-effects-of-9-11-still-plague-responders-and-survivors/>

	Public Law 107-40 107th Congress
	Joint Resolution
<small>Sept. 18, 2001 (S. Res. 251)</small>	<small>To authorize the use of United States Armed Forces against those responsible for the recent attacks launched against the United States.</small>
	<small>Whereas, on September 11, 2001, acts of treacherous violence were committed against the United States and its citizens; and Whereas, such acts render it both necessary and appropriate that the United States exercise its rights to self-defense and to protect United States citizens both at home and abroad; and Whereas, in light of the threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States posed by these grave acts of violence; and Whereas, such acts continue to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States; and Whereas, the President has authority under the Constitution to take action to deter and prevent acts of international terrorism against the United States: Now, therefore, be it</small>
<small>Authorization for Use of Military Force, 50 USC 1541 note.</small>	<small><i>Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,</i></small>
	<small><b>SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.</b></small>
	<small>This joint resolution may be cited as the "Authorization for Use of Military Force".</small>
	<small><b>SEC. 2. AUTHORIZATION FOR USE OF UNITED STATES ARMED FORCES.</b></small>
<small>President:</small>	<small>(a) <b>IN GENERAL.</b>—That the President is authorized to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons.</small>
	<small>(b) <b>WAR POWERS RESOLUTION REQUIREMENTS.</b>—</small>
	<small>(1) <b>SPECIFIC STATUTORY AUTHORIZATION.</b>—Consistent with section 8(a)(1) of the War Powers Resolution, the Congress declares that this section is intended to constitute specific statutory authorization within the meaning of section 5(b) of the War Powers Resolution.</small>
	<small>PUBLIC LAW 107-40—SEPT. 18, 2001      115 STAT. 225</small>
	<small>2. AUTHORITY OF OTHER AGENCIES.—Nothing in this resolution operates as a requirement of the War Powers Resolution.</small>
	<small>Approved September 18, 2001.</small>

It is known as The Authorization for Military Force act. It was very short. Its active section is just sixty words long. It reads:

<small>Authorization for Use of Military Force, 50 USC 1541 note.</small>	<i>Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,</i>
	<small><b>SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.</b></small>
	<small>This joint resolution may be cited as the "Authorization for Use of Military Force".</small>
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“That the President is authorized to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons.”

You’ll note that the bill does not mention al-Qaeda or Afghanistan. Instead, it asks for permission to wage a war on all terrorists, governments and individuals who might have been involved in the 9/11 attacks. It asks for permission to wage war on terror. This act was used to authorize the invasion of Afghanistan, which followed soon after. However, in the name of

fighting terrorism, it was also used to invade Iraq. This act enabled the Bush administration to detain suspects indefinitely at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. These sixty words has enabled presidents to bypass congress each time they wanted to launch attacks against terrorists. When President Obama wanted to attack Isis in Syria, he used this bill, even though ISIS did not exist in 2001. This bill became a blank cheque for using military force around the world.

The bill passed easily in Congress and the Senate. Instead of trying to calm down, the Americans took their anger and fear out into the world to wage war on enemies, real and imagined.

There is an old Buddhist story about this kind of process. Two monks are walking along one day, and they come to a river with no bridge. The only way to get across is to wade through it. Standing on the bank is a woman who is afraid to cross. Buddhist monks take vows of celibacy, and at this time, are not even supposed to touch women. Nonetheless, out of compassion, one of the monks allows her to get on his shoulders, and he wades across the river to the other side. The second monk wades over, and the two monks continue on their way, leaving behind the grateful woman.

However, two hours later, the monk who helped the woman notices that his friend is upset. He asks, "What's wrong with you?" The other monk says that he broke the rules by touching that woman and carrying her across the river. Doesn't he see how wrong that was? The monk who helped the woman replies, "I carried her for two minutes – you are still carrying her."<sup>4</sup>

The American war on terror insured that 9/11 continued long after the attack. By embracing fear and anger, the fear and anger grew. Innocent Muslims all over the world were vilified. They became the screen onto which American fear and anger was projected. 3000 people died on 9/11, but in the twenty years since Afghanistan was invaded, over 38,000 civilians have died. In Iraq, over 180,000 civilians have died.<sup>5</sup> As James predicted in his letter, when we take our negative emotions into the street, we will misjudge people, turning them into monsters. In our desire to regain control of our lives, we will even claim that we can control the future. Yet, as Afghanistan has fallen back into the hands of the Taliban, the American bid to end the existence of terrorism now looks terribly naïve.

In his letter, James argues that there is an alternative to this approach, one we must embrace for the sake of ourselves and the welfare of the world. He calls it the law of love. It is God's way. James chooses interesting words for how he describes this. He doesn't provide a list of moral does and don'ts. Instead, he likens God to a lover who is desperately pursuing us, wooing us, eager to be our partner. He argues that God is jealous and hurt when we choose the ways of the world. If we were to just stop and turn towards God, God would rush to our side. But to do that requires putting aside our pride, and adopting an attitude of humility. We have to be ready to listen, to accept that we might not have all the answers, that we might need help.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://kottke.org/20/01/the-story-of-two-monks-and-a-woman>

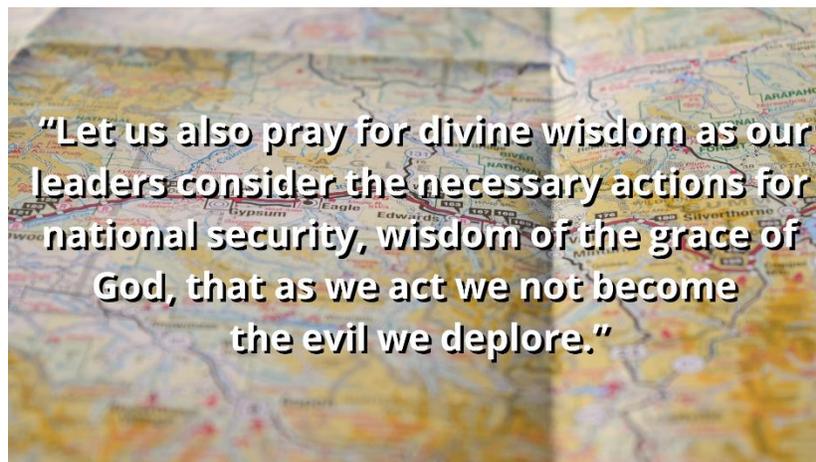
<sup>5</sup> <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2018/Human%20Costs%2C%20Nov%208%202018%20CoW.pdf>

Christianity has been torn in two directions in our ideas of how we can get close to God. The most common approach is to say that we need to earn our way into God's favour. We need to follow the moral rules, and if we get enough points for good behaviour, we will meet God in the afterlife and achieve everlasting bliss. In short, it is up to us to get close to God. That whole approach was rejected by the apostle Paul, yet it became the standard approach in Christianity for many, many centuries, and is still adopted today.

The other approach, which James is drawing on, is that God is doing all the work for us. We don't have to chase God; God is chasing us. God is right here, closer than your skin, right next to you all the time. God wants to be in relationship with us, even when we are failing, even when we are ignoring God. God wants us to wake up, to stop sleep walking. A sacred world is all around us, and God wants us to join her in that way of living, opening ourselves to forgiveness and love for all of creation, even our perceived enemies.

But God knows that the ways of the world are seductive. That our hearts are hardened, our spiritual senses dulled every day. So, God has chosen to have believers who write down what they have experienced and share it. A way of reminding us over and over again that there is a better way. The hope is that if God's way is put before us often enough, at least some of us might listen.

On September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2001, before the war on terror bill was passed, members of Congress, the Senate, and other high ranking members of government attended a church service in the Washington cathedral. It was a memorial service for those who had died on 9/11. Billy Graham provided the homily, calling for unity, and promising that 9/11 would be remembered a day of victory for the American people as they rallied together. But before Graham spoke, Rev Nathan Baker started the service with a prayer, that included the words:



Those words struck one member of Congress deeply. Her name was Barbara Lee. She was a black congresswoman from the San Francisco area. She was serving her first term in Congress. Lee was a Christian, and the daughter of a lieutenant colonel in the army. She was also a strong advocate for Black and women's rights. In college, she had insisted they change the rules so that she could become her school's first Black cheerleader.

On that morning after the memorial service, she joined the other members of Congress in returning to the Capitol building. One of their duties that day was to debate and vote on the war on terror bill. Before the vote, she stood up and declared that she was not comfortable with giving the President a blank cheque for waging war now and forever against terror. Here's part of what she said:

**<https://youtu.be/mvnLtMKzX6Y>**

When the vote was called, Barbara Lee discovered she was the only person to vote against the act. It passed, 420-1. She had listened to the law of love, to the words of God, and decided against acting out of haste and negative emotion. She fully expected that the 9/11 attack would require some kind of military response. But she did not think it should be rushed. Her father had taught her that no military action should begin without an exit strategy and clear goals. This bill lacked any of those. He was the first to congratulate her on her vote, he told her he was proud of her.

As you can imagine, others were not so kind. By the time she got back to her office, her phone was ringing off the hook. Thousands of people called and wrote to condemn her as a traitor to the nation. One letter compared her to Judas and Hitler.<sup>6</sup> She received death threats and was assigned a 24-hour security detail. She had voted no at a time when the rest of the country wanted unity in their projections. The Senate had voted unanimously for the bill. Joe Biden voted for it, so did Bernie Saunders and Nancy Pelosi.<sup>7</sup>

Where did she get the strength to say no? She says that in the days before the vote, she consulted her mentors, her pastor, and her parents. She remembered the words of Dr Martin Luther King, a hero of hers. But most of all, she said, it was the words she heard at the Memorial. Words inspired by scripture, said in a church.

At the time, people predicted she would never get re-elected. Her district includes Berkley California, once the centre of the anti-war movement in the 1960s. They were happy to re-elect her, and she is now serving her 12<sup>th</sup> term. She was a member of Joe Biden's campaign committee. Standing up to the ways of the world is possible. Barbara Lee now looks like the

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/09/the-vindication-of-barbara-lee/380084/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2021/08/17/barbara-lee-afghanistan-vote/>

only elected representative who clearly saw what was coming. She attributes her strength to her faith, and to the words she heard at church that fateful morning.

God is always chasing us, always trying to get our attention. God wants to be close to us and help us through this life. God wants to help us give up our illusions and projections so we can start living a real life. Where love can flourish. Because as Psalm 1 says, ultimately, the way of the wicked is doomed.

Amen.