

CURRENT FEATURE STORY
by the Editors of Religion Today

September 18, 2001

Surviving the 81st Floor of World Trade Tower Two

A testimony of God's hand of protection amidst tragedy

Tuesday, Sept. 11, 2001, began like any other day for Bethel Assembly of God deacon and Sunday school superintendent Stanley Praitnath of Elmont, Long Island. He got up early, took a shower, prayed, got ready and headed for work. The drive was uneventful. The train ride was the same. Yet, this day he would see the hand of God spare his life.

"For some particular reason, I gave the Lord a little extra of myself that morning [during prayer]," Stanley said. "I said, 'Lord, cover me and all my loved ones under your precious blood.' And even though I said that and believed it, I said it over and over and over."

When Stanley arrived at World Trade Center Tower Two, he took the elevator up to his office on the 81st floor. "I work for the Fuji Bank Limited," he said. "I'm an assistant vice president in the loans operations department. The company is located on the 79th through 82nd floors."

Stanley greeted Delise, a woman who had arrived before him. After talking briefly, he headed over to his desk and picked up his phone to retrieve his messages.

"As I'm standing there retrieving my messages, I'm looking out at the next building, One World Trade, and I saw fire falling through from the roof," Stanley said. "Now, this entire building is surrounded by glass, and you can stand up and from there you can see all the buildings, planes and everything flying at the same altitude."

As Stanley saw "fire balls" coming down, his first reaction was to think of his boss who works in that building. He decided to try to call him to see if he was OK. "I'm dialing his number, and getting no response. So, I say to Delise, the temp, 'Go, go, go -- let's get out.'"

Delise and Stanley got on the elevator and went down to the 78th floor. Some other people were there. The company's president, the CEO, the human resources director and two other men joined the group and headed down to the concourse level of Two World Trade Center.

If they had continued on and exited the building, all of their lives would have been spared. As it was, that's not the way it happened.

"As soon as we reached the concourse level, the security guard stopped us and said, 'Where are you going?' Stanley explained about seeing the fire in Tower One. According to Stanley, the guard said, 'Oh, that was just an accident. Two World Trade is secured. Go back to your office.'"

That turned out to be fatal advice -- aside from Stanley, Delise was the only one of that group to survive.

"We were joking, and I told [Human Resources Director] Brian Thompson, 'This is a good time to think of relocating this building -- it's not safe anymore.'" Stanley headed back to his office, but before he got there, he told Delise, that with the events of the day, she should go home and relax.

Thompson went to the 82nd floor, the president and CEO went to the 79th floor and Stanley got out on the 81st floor. When Stanley got to his office, his phone was ringing. "It was someone from Chicago calling to find out if I'm watching the news," he said. He told the caller everything "was fine."

But everything wasn't fine -- far from it. As Stanley was talking, he looked up and saw United Air Lines Flight 175 heading straight for him.

"All I can see is this big gray plane, with red letters on the wing and on the tail, bearing down on me," said Stanley. "But this thing is happening in slow motion. The plane appeared to be like 100 yards away, I said 'Lord, you take control, I can't help myself here.' "

Stanley then dove under his desk. "My Testament [Bible] was on top of my desk," explained Stanley. "I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the Lord was going to take care of me once I got there." As he curled into a fetal position under his desk, the plane tore into the side of the building and exploded.

Miraculously, Stanley was unhurt. However, he could see a flaming wing of the plane in the doorway of his department. He knew he needed to get out of his office and the building fast. But, he was trapped under debris up to his shoulders.

"Lord, you take control, this is your problem now," he recalled praying. "I don't know where I got this power from, but the good Lord, He gave me so much power and strength in my body that I was able to shake everything off. I felt like I was the strongest man alive."

All the while, Stanley was asking the Lord to spare his life. "I'm crying and I'm praying, 'Lord, I have things to do. I want to see my family, Lord, help me through.'"

Stanley's office resembled a battle zone -- walls flattened into dusty heaps, office equipment strewn violently, flames flickering about and rubble everywhere.

"Everything I'm trying to climb on [to get out] is collapsing and I'm going down," he said. "I'm getting cuts and bruises, but I'm saying, 'Lord, I have to go home to my loved ones, I have to make it, You have to help me.' "

Suddenly Stanley saw the light of a flashlight. For a moment, it stunned him. "What were the chances of someone bringing a flashlight to this floor?" he thought. "My first gut reaction was, 'This is my guardian angel -- my Lord sent somebody to save me!' "

Stanley began screaming, "I see the light, I see the light." But after clawing his way through the debris, he realized that he couldn't get out - all the exits were blocked and his "guardian angel" couldn't get to him--a wall was between him and the staircase. "He can't get to me and I can't get to him, and by this time I can't breathe," Stanley said. "I don't know if it was sulfur or what [burning jet fuel, perhaps], but I can smell this thing. I got down on my knees and said, "Lord, you've got to help me. You've brought me this far, help me to get to the staircase."

But then Stanley did something surprising. While praying on his knees, he called out to the man behind the wall, "There's one thing I got to know, do you know Jesus?" The man replied he went to church every Sunday. Then they prayed together to enable them to break through the wall.

"I got up, and I felt as if a power came over me," said Stanley. "I felt goose bumps all over my body and I'm trembling, and I said to the wall, 'You're going to be no match for me and my Lord.' " Moments later, he punched his way through the wall and, with the help of the man on the other side, was able to squirm his way through the hole in the wall. "The guy held me and embraced me and he gave me a kiss and he said, 'From today, you're my brother for life.' "

But the danger wasn't over. The man on the other side of the wall, who introduced himself as Brian, was an older man and they still had 81 floors to walk down, with the building on fire and, unknown to them, in danger of collapse. "We hobbled our way down, and at every floor we stopped to see if anybody was there, but nobody was, except a man was on the floor, and his back was gone, and he was covered in blood."

Stanley asked to be allowed to carry the man out, but a security guard told him it would be better to send somebody up. When they finally made it down to the concourse, only firefighters were there. "They were saying, 'Run! Run! Run!' They were telling us to run out, but they were not concerned about themselves," he said.

Stanley and Brian would have run from the building, but now the concourse was surrounded with fire. Wetting themselves under the building's sprinkler system, they held hands and ran through the flames to safety at Trinity Church, about two blocks away. "I wanted to go to the church to thank God," Stanley explained, "As soon as I held onto the gate of that church, the building [World Trade Center Tower Two] collapsed."

Stanley and Brian made their way safely out of the danger area. Before they parted, Stanley gave his business card to Brian in hopes of contact at a later time, and said, "If I don't see you, I'll see you in heaven."

Cut and bloodied, with clothes tattered and wearing a borrowed shirt, Stanley finally made it home hours later to his wife, Jennifer, and his two girls, Stephanie, 8, and Caitlin, 4. "I held my wife and my two children and we cried," said Stanley. After thanking God for sparing his life, Stanley told God whatever he did, it will always be for His glory. "I'm so sore, but every waking moment, I say 'Lord, had you not been in control, I would not have made it.'

"For some divine reason, I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the good Lord's mighty hand turned the plane a fraction from where I was standing," said Stanley. "Because when it crash-landed, it was just 20 feet from me. I don't care who would rationalize -- what people would say now or years from now, but I know it was the handiwork of the Lord that turned that plane. My Lord Jesus is bigger than the Trade Center and His finger can push a plane aside!"

--By Dan Van Veen, Assemblies of God News Service