

What Would Jesus Have Said in Response to the Terrorism of September 11?

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The shocking events of September 11, 2001, have stamped horrific images indelibly into our minds. But those airliners turned fireballs and towers atomizing their way to earth may also have altered the very course of human events in such a way as to plunge civilization instantly into an age of uncertainty or even chaos.

What should we do? These attacks upon the American people, and indeed upon civilization, have brought many responses from political, military, and religious leaders. Almost without exception, these responses center on expressing condolences and wishes of comfort to the grieving, gratitude to those involved in rescue and medical efforts, and resolve for revenge.

But of all the responses, of all the words that have been uttered, all the prayers that have been delivered up, all the comments of authorities, all the condolences of officials, would you not rather give up all of these to know what Jesus Christ would have said?

What kind of comfort would He have provided to loved ones? Would He have assured them beyond any doubt of the blessed state of their dead? Would He have said, "God bless America, the most righteous nation on earth"? And how priceless would be His sage words to world leaders about what to do next!

But, you say, we cannot know what Jesus Christ's response would have been to such a uniquely twenty-first-century tragedy. The best we can do is to listen to Dr. Graham, Cardinal McCarrick, Bishop Dixon, and the others who spoke at the National Cathedral. These people are in a position to know best how Jesus might have responded, and their words of comfort and resolve and unity reflect this.

I disagree. In all that I have heard (and I, of course, do not claim to have heard everyone's response), I have heard no one come close to the response I believe Jesus would have given. As far as I know, not one of our leaders, be they political, military, or religious, has said what Jesus would have said. They have spoken comfort. They have expressed anger. They have foretold revenge. They have sweetened

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our ears with lofty words, and even seasoned them with some Scripture. But I do not believe they have said what Jesus would have said. At bottom, all of their messages, besides being designed to bring comfort or to stir our hearts, were also carefully weighed to make sure they would give no offense to anyone but the enemy (the terrorists and the nations who harbor them). In other words, all that they have said is politically correct.

But Jesus did not so weigh His words. Jesus was almost always politically incorrect. If Jesus were somehow on the roster to speak at the National Cathedral, and He submitted what He was going to speak about to a prescreening, He would likely have been locked out of the building!

But, no doubt, you are wondering how anyone can know what Jesus would have said. We can know because it is in the Bible. The Gospel of Luke records Jesus' response to events that in His day were the counterpart to the horrors of 9-11.

Shocking news of two disasters had reached the people of first-century Palestine. In Luke 13:1, we read, "There were present at that season some that told him of the Galilaeans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." Although the legal authorities committed this atrocity, this could certainly be seen as a form of terrorism. Pilate, the Roman governor, probably thought to make an example of these Jews so that the rest of the population would not become so zealous for their religion that they would consider rebelling against their Roman overlords.

The people, in their quest for an answer to such a tragedy, had come to a conclusion: God had allowed the Galileans to die in such a manner because the Galileans were particularly sinful. This was a typical conclusion for the Jews of that day, who considered that suffering must be the result of particular sin, and lack of suffering a sign of personal righteousness. Nevertheless, they wanted to confirm this belief with Jesus, who immediately set them straight: "And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay" (verses 2 and 3a). These people did not so suffer because they were worse sinners than the rest of their nation.

Then Jesus gave the answer that I believe He would give today in response to the deaths in New York, Washington DC, and Pennsylvania: "But, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish"

(verse 3b). Where are the condolences, the words of comfort, the gratitude for the heroes, and the promises of revenge? Jesus would have none of it.

Instead, our Lord saw these tragedies as warnings that we are all sinners, all deserve the same fate, and will all perish unless we repent. Talk about politically incorrect! Maybe if given a chance, Jesus would retract His words and apologize. But no. To make sure no one misunderstood Him, Jesus repeated Himself by addressing another tragedy of His day: "Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (verses 4-5). These people died in the collapse of a tower and perished eternally (that is, went to eternal damnation) because they were unrepentant sinners. And, Jesus' message is clear; you will do the same, unless you repent.

Allow me to explain. Jesus' use of the term "likewise perish" had a double meaning. The natural and physical meaning had to do with the manner of their death. Just as the Galileans and those on whom the tower of Siloam fell died by the sword and in the collapse of buildings, so many of the Jews to whom Jesus spoke would, in a few short decades, die by the sword and the razing of buildings during the Roman destruction of Jerusalem circa A.D. 70. What was done on a relatively small scale as a warning was to be fulfilled on a much larger scale to those who did not repent.

Jesus also meant, however, that the Galileans and those on whom the tower fell perished eternally because they were unrepentant sinners. So, these double tragedies of Jesus' day were a warning of both physical destruction and spiritual damnation on an unrepentant nation.

Can you imagine any of our present leaders telling us to repent or perish? What kind of a stir would President Bush cause if he were to say that the recent terrorist attacks should be taken as a warning that we are sinners who will all likewise perish, both as a nation and as spiritually damned individuals, unless we repent?

Jesus, to drive His point even further, illustrated it with a parable: "He spake also this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord,

let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down" (verses 6-9).

Most Bible commentators recognize that the immediate application of this parable was to the Jewish nation. They were the fig tree. They were not producing spiritual fruit, or "fruits meet for repentance," as John the baptist put it (Matthew 3:7-8). God's wrath was upon them, but they were digged and dunged (dung was used as fertilizer) with both persecution under the Romans and with Jesus' teachings and His warnings. They remained unrepentant, bore no fruit, and God cut them down in A.D. 70, using the Romans to destroy Jerusalem and its temple.

The Jews of Jesus' day were all like those who perished by Pilate's orders or on whom the tower in Siloam fell. They were all heading for disaster spiritually. Additionally, when their national sins had reached a fullness only God could determine, they also suffered physical disaster and national collapse.

We are now like those who perished in those airliners, in the towers in New York, and in the Pentagon in Washington. While our leaders posture us as in the right and depict the terrorists as the only sinners, we are in national peril for our collective sins. I am not excusing the terrorist's crimes, despicable acts that any civilized human should consider heinous. But unlike in Afghanistan and other Muslim nations, the Bible is a common book in the United States, and we are more accountable. God treats us according to how much we know (see Luke 12:42-48). And the Bible shows that God often uses one nation to punish or chasten another. The United States has no reason to consider itself God's nation above others and is certainly in no moral position to think itself exempt from God's punishment.*

Individually also, we are in spiritual peril. There is no salvation outside of faith alone in Jesus Christ alone as our Savior. But if we are to understand our need for the Savior, we must understand our sinfulness.

Jesus' response to these tragedies may not be what we want to hear. But it is the only real message of hope, and, if followed, the only real way of comfort! "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish."

*God chastens his wayward people in love, and He judges and punishes nations and peoples who are not His chosen people. God caused the Flood of Noah's time because He "saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5). Another example among many is in Genesis 15:16, where God says, "The iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full." Obviously, God was counting up their iniquity and waiting for the right time to punish them. How, as a nation, are we in danger? Here are a few examples:

By fabricating a god who is nonjudgmental and tolerant and even a savior of unrepentant sinners and people of all religions, many have become idolaters. Others have made science and the blind chance of evolution their god, while still others have made the pursuit of material gain their idol.

In general, we serve our economy, our employers, our military, our children, ourselves, or anything else rather than God.

We vainly give lip service to God in times of tragedy, but otherwise forget Him. Certainly, we do not want to obey Him or seek to know Him through studying the Bible!

We reject His Son, Jesus Christ, as the one Way of salvation, and try to enter His rest through every false belief imaginable; or, alternatively, we try to create our own paradise through creature comforts and amusements.

We inject sin of every kind into the minds of our children through entertainment, and then we wonder why they are so rebellious.

We kill millions of babies before they are even born, and baby and feel sorry for murderers who have brought themselves to death row.

We commit such mass adultery by what we call divorce that a child raised through adolescence by both of its natural parents is a rarity. And then we wonder why they begin to have children without being married at all.

We also ask as much as possible for a product or service and give as little service or product quality as we can get away with (legally or otherwise) in return. Instead of calling this stealing, we call it maximizing profit margins.

We elect to high office people who are known liars who then so perfect their art while in office that we can never know that we have the truth about anything in government.

By continually bombarding our populace with advertising, we have made nonstop coveting a way of life.

Added in 2009:

While having about 5,400 nuclear warheads of our own (this is supposed to be reduced to 2,200 by 2012 — <http://thebulletin.metapress.com/content/pr53n270241156n6/fulltext.pdf>), we invaded in 2003, a sovereign nation on the pretense that this nation may have been making weapons of mass destruction. None were ever found. Deaths since the invasion are estimated at 1,033,000 (http://www.opinion.co.uk/Newsroom_details.aspx?NewsId=88).

While promoting ourselves as moral leaders in the world, we detained hundreds of people for months and years without formally charging or trying them, and even tortured many of these prisoners (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guantanamo_Bay_detention_camp , <http://www.nybooks.com/icrc-report.pdf>).