

When Towers Fall

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Where Were You?

9-11-2001. Where were you? Remember when you first heard the news of the World Trade Center attacks? Remember your first response—the first things you felt or said? It was a startling episode that traumatized a nation and arrested the attention of the world. The event would become a landmark comparable to Kennedy's assassination or the first lunar landing.

Thanks to the swift and sacrificial service of first responders, immediate estimates that feared 50,000 casualties were dramatically reduced to 2,996 (in all the attacks). Still, such a brazen assault within U.S. borders demanded and inspired a

multitude of analyses and reactions—the tumbling of dominoes still continues. People needed to know who to blame, who to arrest, who to attack. Eventually Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda took responsibility and suffered the

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consequences, but a wide array of other suspects and targets soon followed.

Sadly, what began in many nations as an outpouring of good will toward America was squandered quickly when hawks advising President Bush used the opportunity to invade Iraq (the absence of WMD's

notwithstanding). Meanwhile, Christian fundamentalists gleefully gave God the glory for hurling hijacked planes like javelins to punish America for its social sins.

The conspiracy theorists imagined that the White House

knew and even planned the attacks.

So it goes. When tragedy strikes and towers fall, we try to console ourselves by finding a devil, a god, a sinner or a king on whom to pin the anguish and chaos. Three previous examples come to mind:



9-11 itself was fallout of a prior backstory... of greed, violence and vengeance... Since then, we've witnessed the failed Arab Spring... dictators fell... chaos and civil war; terrorism surged... the rise of ISIS and waves of religious persecution. The common thread has been death and more death...

When Towers Fall

In Luke 13:1-5, Jesus speaks of another fallen tower:

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these

that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

We don't know exactly why the tower of Siloam fell—whether it was an earthquake, a construction accident or somehow connected to the violence of Pilate against the Galileans. We do believe the ruins of this tower were discovered inside the City of David, near the old wall and

type of pop-karma that's still in vogue today.

To paraphrase him, "It doesn't work that way. The victims weren't any worse than the survivors and the survivors weren't any more righteous. Sometimes towers just fall and tyrants kill. But look, unless you change course and adopt the *Jesus Way* of peace, every building in this city will fall and everyone will perish at the hands of the Romans."

And so it happened just one generation later.

Second Response

In the case of 9-11, we've mentioned the heroism of the first responders and the initial sympathy of many, if not most nations. But the second



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near the spring of Siloam, just south of Herod's fortress.¹

Scholars also propose that both tragedies were recent and local enough to impose a need for a public response.

But Jesus reinterprets these events. He denies this type of pop-karma that's still in vogue today.

We know from Jesus' words that popular speculation followed the same "who's to blame?" questions as on 9-11. "Common sense" said that those who died must have been culprits—punished by God and thus blameworthy of some sin. But Jesus reinterprets these events. He denies this

response—at home and abroad—is now history. And in retrospect, it's lamented far more than celebrated.

At home, the American culture of the Wild West prevailed: cowboys in white hats circled the wagons, arming themselves to the teeth to protect their "youngins." Homeland security vowed to protect the borders, but did so at the immense cost of civil liberties.

Overseas, the military industrial complex began its grand and expensive expansion of foreign military bases across the Middle East. Behind the best intentions were real questions about Halliburton and oil, arms deals with

The Tower of Siloam by James Tissot, ca. 1886-1896

Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or do you suppose

warlords, indefinite incarceration without charges, and the use of torture and humiliation of prisoners.

What had we become? How did we so lose ourselves? We reaped exactly what we had sown, down to the last seed—down to the last bullet.

Perhaps Yoda, the Jedi Master was right: “Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.” Could anyone deny it? And where would it lead?

ISIS Versus *Isa*

Fifteen years after 9-11, we see the fallout of the fallen towers. And let the reader understand: 9-11 itself was fallout of a prior backstory of fear and hatred, not just a spontaneous act of aggression. It was but a waypoint on a much longer arc of greed, violence and vengeance.

Since then, we’ve witnessed the failed Arab Spring; dictators fell only to be displaced by chaos and civil war; terrorism surged. And now, the rise of ISIS and waves of religious persecution. The common thread has been death and

In the face of falling towers, whose way will we choose? The way of ISIS: another generation of vengeance and violence—or the way of *Isa*: enemy love and, if necessary, a martyr’s crown.

more death—the multiplication of martyrs.

But not all martyrs are created equal. In the battle of ISIS versus *Isa* (Arabic: Jesus), we see two very different images. ISIS promises the glory of martyrdom to those who strap bombs to their chests and murder crowds—even in



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mosques! But terrorist suicide-bombings are never glorious and never holy. Indeed, they are not martyrdom at all.

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Most people don’t know why they were dressed in orange jumpsuits. It signified a form of payback—a vindication of the honor for their brothers (incarcerated in orange) who

experienced shame and humiliation in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay.

Eye-for-an-eye justice—the same motivation we’ve so often used to justify our vengeful crusades (ancient and modern).

Those Coptic Christians beheaded on the beach are the

true martyrs. They were our brothers in Christ whose irrepressible faith won them a martyr’s crown. They inspire courage across the persecuted

church. Indeed, one of their fellow prisoners was offered freedom since he wasn’t even a Christ-follower. Given the option, he converted to Christ on the spot and died with them.

This too has always been the case. We hear the testimonies: “I want what they have—what no one can take away.”

Perhaps it’s time we take stock ourselves.

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I can only pray for myself and my own, but pray I must: *Lord, count us worthy to give our lives for you, rather than take the lives of others. By grace alone. Amen.* □

1 George W. Buchanan, *Jesus: The King and his Kingdom* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), pp. 227–230, 238.