

Manhattan and the Book of Revelation

When the innocent perish with the guilty, do we ask why we are outside God's protection?

Jon Garvey asks for us all

Not a few times the media have described the terrorist attacks on America as “apocalyptic”. I had already made this connection when I saw the view of the sunset Manhattan skyline shrouded in smoke and dust after the collapse of the World Trade Center. The image was just so close to my mental picture of the fall of Babylon the Great in Revelation 18.

And yet could there really be a connection? This was no judgement of God, but the deliberate act of evil men – a consciously symbolic act, at that. Those destroyed were not agents of Antichrist, but mothers and children, ordinary businessmen, ambulancemen and policemen. Many of them, like the chaplain to the Fire Service, called on the name of Jesus as they died. New Yorkers are warm, generous people. My own daughter would have been sleeping two blocks from Ground Zero had she not been kindly invited into someone's family home the day before. She had had her photo taken with smiling firemen and policemen. Perhaps they later died saving others.

But is that not true of all cities? When God judged Tyre, or Babylon, were they not full of ordinary people about their business? Did not courageous people then dig amongst the rubble to find the living? The whole tragedy of disasters is that not all who suffer are equally guilty. And yet our God says,

“When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it?” (Amos 3.6).

Americans have been traumatised, and now is not the time to make sweeping condemnations under the guise of prophecy. But it behoves us, particularly as a nation which also lost so many, to recognise that even such a human atrocity cannot happen unless God withdraws his protection. As well as political and social lessons, we need to learn what God might be saying both now and in any future consequences of the event.

Godly Men

In Puritan times, either here or in America, any military reverse or natural disaster would have automatically called out a response of self-humbling and penitence. Godly men did not crow over the sins of others, but asked God to reveal how they themselves had offended, and what amends they must make. We could learn much from our ancestors.

Interpreters of the *Book of Revelation* over the last 2,000 years have often become foolish by confidently placing the fulfilment of its images in their own times. It is likely that some of what it describes are end-time events which will forewarn us of the Lord's coming. But the prophecy speaks to all generations of believers because it describes things that are true *throughout* the last days from the Lord's death until his final victory.

Revelation 18 describes the fall of Babylon, but uses Old Testament allusions to the fall of other ungodly cities: Nineveh, Tyre, Sodom. All represent God's judgement on systems of human pride and wealth operating without reference to God, epitomised in the story of the Tower of Babel (the original Babylon) in Genesis 11.

Christians have rightly seen this judgement echoed (and in its final form, foreshadowed) in the fall of Rome, of Constantinople, of London, or of Berlin. Such comparisons have led to self-examination and repentance, and to subsequent forgiveness and blessing. We, and our friends in America and throughout the free world, need such an attitude now. Otherwise the justice of our anger against satanically-inspired terrorism might lead us only into further chastisement.

Unless you repent, you too...

If we were to look, in our time, for a symbol of human pride and wealth, where else would it be but in the trading centre of the world's richest nation - Manhattan? Even the architect of the twin towers is said to have described them as symbolic of man's ability to achieve whatever he sets out to do, almost quoting Genesis 11.4-6. And at any other time but these days of shock and bereavement, would not Christians have warned of the risk of judgement on the greed of the capitalist markets, though they finance our homes and pay our pensions?

Now that symbol has crumbled, and those warnings have become reality. Americans, and Britons, need to balance their mourning for the innocent dead with mourning for their seduction by human pride. They need to put their spiritual house in order if they are to become in any way fit to pursue *Operation Infinite Justice*.

“Do you think that these were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?” said our Lord when another tower collapsed. “But unless you repent, you too will all perish.” (Luke 13:5-6)