

Grace & Truth

Youth

Number 3

A pull-out supplement for young people

Three Towers, Two Stories, One Lesson

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Speculation is rife among some Christians regarding the terrorist attack on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. Some say it is God's judgement on a nation that has turned its back on Him. Some see in it a sign of Christ's imminent return.

That God was in sovereign control of those events, I have no doubt. Whether they should be seen as an act of God's judgement or a sign of Christ's second coming, I would not like to say. But there is one biblical lesson that should be learned from this disaster. For the sad story of death in the collapse of the twin towers in Manhattan has its parallel in the New Testament, where there is a second story about a third tower which collapsed and killed people in Jerusalem.

As with the New York tragedy, talk of the Jerusalem disaster spread quickly and became headline news. It caught up with Jesus as He travelled from Galilee to Jerusalem, and like today there was speculation as to its meaning. Some said it was God's judgement on those who had died. But Jesus saw a more personal lesson in the event - the same lesson we should take to heart as New York continues its search for bodies. Jesus said, "unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:5).

Jesus wasn't affirming the idea that these people were worse sinners than others, nor was He suggesting that the unrepentant would die in the same way. Rather, He was

building on Hebrews 9:27: "it is appointed for all men to die once, but after this is the judgement."

It isn't the way we die that matters so much as whether we are prepared for what follows death. Jesus emphasized the fact that we must make our peace with God (Luke 12:57-59). If we are ready for the judgement that follows death, then we will be ready for death whenever and however it comes. If you had been at the World Trade Center on 11th September, would you have been ready to meet God? Are you ready to meet Him *now*?



Turning Winter into Spring

Spring is one of my favourite times of the year. Trees that once looked dead and lifeless erupt with an abundance of blossom. Leaves cover once bare branches and the landscape which yesterday looked drab today is bright with life. And I love the way Isaiah uses spring as an illustration of God's work in people's lives in Isaiah 61:11.

WINTER

The first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah are a warning against the winter condition of the souls of the people of Israel and Judah (read, for example, Isaiah 1:10-17). Though they gave the impression of being religious, God was displeased as their hearts were far from Him. They were not walking in God's ways but were doing their own thing. They ignored justice if it suited them, turning a blind eye to the oppressor and withholding help from those who suffered.

Things are little different now. Many people give no thought to what God expects of them. They may go to church every Sunday, but like the Israelites their prayers remain unheard and their worship unaccepted because they do not live in obedience to God. Six days a week they don't give a thought to God. There are those who do many good things; taking food to the hungry, fighting for the rights of the weak, giving time, energy and resources to those who are suffering. But this is not enough. The Lord says that people are to love God *and* their neighbour. Not either one or the other, but *both*. Jesus reiterated this in Matthew 22:37-39. Yet this is what so many people fail to do today. There are those who may appear to be religious but they do not love God. There are those who love their neighbour but do not love God. And there are those who quite clearly love neither their neighbour nor God.

What sort of person are you? Are you one of those that Isaiah would describe as being in the depths of winter - is your life cold toward God, or does it demonstrate a life and vitality in spiritual things?

SPRING

Isaiah pictures spring coming to a garden in 61:11. A transformation takes place as life becomes evident where death previously reigned. He is saying that this can happen in the lives of those who are spiritually dead. Their whole appearance can be radically transformed as God shines on them in love, grace and mercy. Those who were sinners can become righteous; those who mourned (v.3) may praise the Lord.



A change is possible which is described in Isaiah 1:18-20 as one of extremes. Though their sins may be as red as crimson or like scarlet - even if it were as though their clothes have been saturated with the blood of innocent victims so that they were impossible to be made clean - yet they would be made as white as snow or like pure clean wool. The most vile people can be completely changed - their winter of wickedness and death may be transformed into a spring of life and righteousness. This is what the Apostle Paul told Timothy: "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief" (1 Timothy 1:15). And here is the key to the change that can take place: Jesus Christ is the answer to mankind's problem of sin.

Isaiah lived some 700 years before Christ came as a man, yet here in these verses we have direct prophecy concerning Him. It is the Christ who speaks in Isaiah 61:1-3. And these words were fulfilled by Jesus through His life, death and resurrection. In verse 10 Isaiah writes of Jesus' righteousness which covers the sins of His people; it is the salvation which He purchased on the cross which they wear as a garment.

Lives can be transformed from winter to spring, from spiritual deadness to life and vitality, from indifference to God to an ardent love evidenced by devoted service. This is possible because Jesus Christ came as a substitute for sinners, paying the punishment they had earned through their sins.

CONCLUSION

This transformation can become a reality in *your* life through repentance and faith. When you acknowledge your sins to God and recognise that you are powerless to change, when you believe and trust in what Jesus has done to save sinners, then you demonstrate your true identity as one of God's people, one for whom Christ died.

There are those who will not acknowledge their sin. They think they do not need someone to purchase their peace with God. These people cannot be saved with such an attitude.

There are those who acknowledge that they are sinners but who think that God is so full of love that He will ignore their sin and accept them. But the Bible teaches that without faith in Christ sinners will not be accepted. Jesus Himself said, "He who does not believe is condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:18). God will not accept those who reject His Son.

It is only those who acknowledge their sin, repent of it and trust in Jesus who will be saved. Such people demonstrate their faith in Christ by living lives of obedience to God guided by the Bible. Is this you?

BY DAFYDD HUGHES



STAR WARS

SCIENCE FICTION OR NEW RELIGION?

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When the first three *Star Wars* movies were made in the 70s and 80s they were hugely popular. Interest has been kindled in a new generation of viewers with the release of the first in a series of three further movies which will complete the six-part saga.

Those who watch these movies could be forgiven for questioning whether they are just seeing great Science Fiction; or could this possibly be the vehicle for a New Religion as some have suggested? There are the usual aliens, of course. And there is the obligatory battle between good and evil which underlies most fiction, from ancient myths, through the old cowboy westerns to modern sci fi. But some more questionable elements are also to be found here.

'The Force' takes on divine proportions yet within it good (light) and evil (dark) co-exist. Darth Vader, the 'big bad guy' in the first *Star Wars* movies, was originally the Jedi Knight, Anakin Skywalker. Though he began well, he went over to the dark side of the Force before finally returning to the light side just before he died.

More disturbing is the revelation in the latest film, *Episode I*, that Anakin Skywalker had a kind of miraculous conception. The official *Star Wars* web site describes him as "A child born of prophecy, possibly conceived by the will of the Force itself, Anakin Skywalker has left an indelible mark on the history of the galaxy, leading it through periods of lightness and dark." In the movie he is referred to as the Chosen One spoken of in an ancient prophecy. This is all a startling corruption of the 'Messiah' or 'Christ' of the Bible.

In an interview filmed for a documentary on the making of *Star Wars*, its creator George Lucas explained that he constantly checked his story against the great legends and sagas of history to ensure it had the ingredients which would make it a success. That explains the mixture of ideas drawn from eastern religions, ancient fables and even Christianity, which have caused some people to see the series as a promoter of New Age philosophy.

Whether it is accidental, or whether there is a hidden agenda to promote a 'New (Age) Religion' is open to debate. What is certain is that Christians should not allow the ideas presented in these movies to influence their interpretation of Scripture, but vice versa. One interesting possibility is the opportunity for evangelism that might result through discussing the truth of Christianity in contrast to the fiction of *Star Wars*.

