

Judgment day? A goal of restoration: A goal of restoration

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One of the lectionary texts on the Sunday after 9/11 was Psalm 51, which traditionally has been understood as King David's plea to God to have mercy on his sins. One pastor that Sunday used the psalm to ask whether the events of 9/11 were a judgment on the United States: Was the U.S. in some way culpable for the evil actions of the terrorists? His congregation would have none of it. They were overwhelmed by pain, sorrow and anger; emotionally and intellectually they couldn't handle guilt too.

Dan O. Via, a mainline Protestant biblical scholar, argues that we shouldn't dismiss the notion of 9/11 as God's judgment. In *Divine Justice, Divine Judgment: Rethinking the Judgment of Nations* (Fortress), Via says that from a biblical perspective 9/11 might be viewed paradoxically as both a terrible act of evil and a judgment on the U.S. for its acts of injustice. Via hesitates to suggest that God intervenes directly in human affairs. Yet in a hidden manner God "sometimes finds it necessary to make use of evil agencies to carry out God's purposes. Those purposes may confer significance upon evil acts, and one such purpose may be the intention of God to enact judgment."

Via realizes that identifying particular evils with divine judgment is a very risky business. Which of us can discern the hand of God in the events of history? Human events have multiple causes and are open to multiple interpretations. Besides, it is often the innocent who suffer, not the guilty, so how can we speak of judgment? Jesus himself, when asked about a man born blind, rejected the notion that suffering is any kind of divine judgment.

We are perhaps all too ready to call the evil that befalls others a judgment on them, and to call the evil that befalls us an injustice. But that is Via's point: in the biblical perspective, the evil that happens to us may be at once unjust and a judgment on us for our acts of injustice.

There are two dimensions to national justice from a biblical perspective: internally it means working toward ensuring that everyone has sufficient resources, which means paying special attention to the needs of the poor. Externally it means not violating the land or the integrity of another nation.

Via believes that nations can respond to judgment by repenting, and repenting in a corporate sense means movement toward greater levels of justice. History has given us examples of such movements, such as the dismantling of Jim Crow laws in the United States and the overturning of apartheid in South Africa. There is a hopeful element in divine judgment—it is intended to restore justice and right relationships, not just be retributive.

If there was a word of judgment in 9/11, the U.S. has not wanted to hear it. And perhaps, in its refusal to hear that word, it has, by deciding to go to war in Iraq, sowed the seeds of yet more judgment.