

Eyes to see, ears to hear: Not a time for vengeance

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [September 26, 2001](#) issue

In the final days of Jesus' ministry, "so many thousands of the multitude had gathered together that they trod upon one another" in their desire to hear him. Luke reports that Jesus spoke first to his small group of disciples and said, "Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known." There is, he warned, a larger truth than the one you think you know.

"When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

What keeps the vast majority of Americans from interpreting the wider meaning of what happened in the horror that struck this nation on September 11? We see only the obvious, and we are angry and overwhelmed with grief, as indeed we should be. We see the ugly, calculated assault that led to more than 5,000 deaths and the loss of billions of dollars. We respond, under the rhetorical guidance of our president, with a determination to "go to war" against an unseen enemy.

But those are the obvious responses. Surface data evoke immediate, predictable and understandable reactions. We prepare for the rain and the heat by hauling out the umbrellas and moving into the shade. But we do not take the next step and "interpret the present time." Why not? Because we are trapped in the limited vision of our narrow perspective.

Massive crimes have been committed against our people and our nation. Some of those responsible for these crimes died in the plane crashes. Others remain behind, and justice demands we hold them accountable. But justice is not retaliation. We retaliate only because we want to lash out to satisfy our hunger for revenge. Massive revenge is not only self-destructive, it is precisely how our attackers expect

us to respond. Writing in the *Times* of London, Oxford professor Michael Howard warns that a massive U.S. retaliation would be a terrible mistake from a strategic point of view. In his study of the history of terrorism, Howard has learned that one of the goals of terrorist activity is to provoke an enemy into such “savage acts of suppression” that the terrorist will gain international sympathy for his cause. The savage Turkish reaction to Armenian “provocation,” for example, which almost eliminated the Armenians from history, created universal horror in the process.

The horror of September 11 has evoked worldwide sympathy in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. Simon Jenkins of the *Times* (London) writes, “The world is seeing America at its best.” That sympathy could disappear quickly if we yield to a desire to punish “harboring” states such as Afghanistan: “Nobody doubts America’s power to visit unimaginable violence on others. But to what end? Americans are angry but surely not stupid. They can distinguish determination from vengeance, caution from appeasement, acts of will from acts of idiocy.” What will deter us from taking the path of vengeance? We heard a gentle suggestion at the beginning of the National Cathedral service when the dean of the cathedral, Nathan Baxter, said in his prayer: “. . . the evil hand of hate and cowardly aggression that has devastated the innocent in so many other lands has visited America this week and too many of her children are no more.”

In the context of national anger and grief, it is not likely that many in the national audience who heard the words, “in so many other lands,” turned their thoughts to the rubble of the homes, the villages, the police stations and the hospitals of the people of Palestine.

Few would have thought of those Iraqi citizens who are deprived of basic medical care, and whose land remains devastated by a U.S.-sponsored war and its ugly aftermath.

Some might have thought of the suffering of the Israeli citizens who live in constant fear of suicide bombers. Such thoughts would have come from those whose perspective embraces Israeli sufferers as members of our international family. But the human family is global.

George Semaan, editor of the London-based Arabic-language newspaper *Al Hayat*, warns that the U.S. will not be able to uproot terrorism “unless it changes its perspective on how it builds its interests and how it defends them, by building a

network of relationships that takes into consideration the interests of others who are weak and who have rights but are incapable of imposing these interests or these rights.”

This is not a time for vengeance. It is a time for justice, and for reordering how we view the world. Let those who have ears to hear, hear, and those who have eyes to see, see. Only by embracing those “who are weak and who have rights” will we be rescued from our warring madness.