

## Restored Hope in the City of Chaos

**Brian Walsh**

On this seventh anniversary of the tragic events of September 11, 2001, I find myself drawn to Isaiah. This meditation begins with Isaiah 24.1-20 and I suggest that the reader begin there too. And then at the end of the meditation I lead our thoughts into Isaiah 65.17-25. I would encourage you to end with a reading of that oracle of hope.

Isaiah 24.1-20

The description was apt.  
Painfully apt.  
Devastatingly accurate.

The earth has indeed dried up and withered,  
the earth lies polluted,  
as if something no less than a curse has devoured it.  
Lays waste  
Desolate  
Utterly broken  
Torn asunder

Talk about a violent shaking  
talk about the earth like a drunkard staggering,  
swaying like a hut  
and then it falls  
not to rise again.

And I thought these were just metaphors,  
the depressing poetry of yet another pessimist.

But it was literally true  
things did sway like a hut  
and down they came with a deafening roar  
and it didn't matter who you were  
slave or master  
maid or mistress  
buyer or seller  
lender or borrower  
creditor or debtor  
it didn't matter who you were  
or what kind of economic transactions you

were up to that day  
it didn't matter whether you were on the top floor  
or down in the basement  
when it fell, it fell on everyone  
Talk about a leveling of all things.

I was there.  
You were there.  
We all were there.  
When it all came down.  
We saw the horror.  
We saw the bodies.  
We could smell the smoke.  
Our throats parched with the dust.  
The collapse was deafening.  
It was over, it wasn't going any further.

And so the musicians stopped playing for a while.  
The comedians had no more jokes.  
Even the buskers put away their instruments.  
And when you went for a drink, it was to dull the pain,  
not to begin a song.

In this city of chaos,  
it was as if all joy had reached its eventide.  
In these ruins,  
it was if the very gladness of the earth was banished.

But how did he know?  
How did he see all of this?  
The economy was good.  
The state was secure.  
The religious institutions were robust.  
The sacred ceremonies were well attended,  
and executed with meticulous care.  
The whole world seemed open to us.

How did he know?  
How did he see all of this come crashing down,  
with such clarity?  
This was a vision beyond the range of normal sight.  
This was a prophecy against all of the evidence,  
and against all of the odds.  
How did he know?

And as I struggle with the impossibility of it all,  
a new question arises.

Which city of chaos is he talking about?

Is he describing Jerusalem falling before the Babylonians?

Or perhaps this is Jerusalem falling before the Romans?

When had joy reached its eventide?

Was it on September 11?

Which September 11?

Is this September 11, 2001?

Is this New York City,  
the World Trade Centre?

Is this Washington and the Pentagon?

Or might it be September 11, 1973?

Is he describing Santiago, Chile?

Is this the terror of the Pinochet overthrow of  
Salvador Allende's government?

Who are the perpetrators of these crimes?

Is it the imperial might of Babylon?

of Rome?

of radical Islam?

of the United States?

New York,  
Baghdad,  
Santiago,  
Toronto,  
Kabul,  
London

Cities of chaos,  
cities shaken by violence  
cities that fall.

But the prophet sees more.

The prophet sees beyond the violence to peace,

beyond the ruins to rebuilding,

beyond desolation to homes being built,

beyond the languishing of the earth to fruitfulness,

beyond cheap booze to dull the pain to rich wines that will renew joy,

beyond the absence of God to his life-giving presence.

"No more shall the sound of weeping be heard" the prophet says,  
"No more will there be the cry of distress."  
"No more will children die young"  
"No more will people's lands and homes be stolen from them."  
"No more will they labour in vain."  
"No more will they bear children for calamity."  
"No more will they hurt or destroy on my holy mountain."

No more, no more, no more.

Can I believe it?  
If the prophet saw the desolation with such clarity,  
    against the evidence,  
dare I believe his audacious vision of renewal,  
    dare I embrace such a hope?

Dare I believe that after the fall, the city can rise again?  
Dare I allow my tears be turned into laughter?  
Dare I embrace joy when all joy has reached its eventide?  
Dare I believe in resurrection in this culture of death?  
Dare I practice such resurrection?  
Dare I reach for the chalice of light that stands on Jesus' table?  
Dare I drink this wine, this sacrament of radical hope?

Dare I? Dare you?