

Divine Warning

by John W. Ritenbaugh
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The following is an edited transcript of a special announcement given by Church of the Great God pastor John W. Ritenbaugh during Sabbath services on September 15, 2001.

We have all been sobered by the events of September 11, and we have all done a measure of thinking about the who, what, where, when, and why of it all. In one sense, we have been almost overwhelmed by a flood of factual and speculative information so that, in many cases, we are virtually numb, not knowing exactly what to think. In the midst of all this information, however, some things are beginning to become clear.

The book of Amos describes social conditions in Israel and God's reaction to them more specifically and clearly than any other book. Amos also shows Israel's reaction to God's attempts to bring them to repentance and to make changes in their lives. The paraphrased words of Amos 4:4-13 from *The Living Bible (TLB)* catch the essence of God's point:

Go ahead and sacrifice to idols at Bethel and Gilgal. Keep disobeying—your sins are mounting up. Sacrifice each morning and bring your tithes twice a week! Go through all your proper forms and give extra offerings. How you pride yourselves and crow about it everywhere!

"I sent you hunger," says the Lord, "but it did no good; you still would not return to Me. I ruined your crops by holding back the rain three months before the harvest. I sent rain on one city, but not another. While rain fell on one field, another was dry and withered. People from two or three cities would make their weary journey for a drink of water to a city that had rain, but there wasn't ever enough. Yet you wouldn't return to Me," says the Lord.

"I sent blight and mildew on your farms and your vineyards; the locusts ate your figs and olive trees. And still you wouldn't return to Me," says the Lord. "I sent you plagues like those of Egypt long ago. I killed your lads in war and drove away your horses. The stench of death was terrible to smell. And yet you refused to come. I destroyed some of your cities, as I did Sodom and Gomorrah; those left are like half-burned firebrands snatched away from fire. And still you won't return to Me," says the Lord.

"Therefore I will bring upon you all these further evils I have spoken of. Prepare to meet your God in judgment, Israel." For you are dealing with the one who formed the mountains and made the winds, and knows your every thought; He turns the morning to darkness and crushes down the mountains underneath His feet: Jehovah, the Lord, the God of Hosts, is His name."

As I listened to commentary Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, it struck me that it was not until I heard Billy Graham use the word "repentance"—one time, in his address during the service at the National Cathedral—that any figure of national prominence even remotely suggested that we might be guilty of something and that the attack was in reality a warning of God's displeasure with

us. Instead, the full concentration of all commentary focused on our "innocence." All the talk boiled down to an insistence that all of those affected by this sneak attack were innocent victims—as though they were all somehow disconnected to the whole of America and what America as a nation does.

Not only that, our national leaders never mentioned the multitudes of sins Americans perpetrate every day. It is as if what individuals do in their private lives has no affect on the whole of society, and that the law of "what one sows one shall also reap" does not exist.

On Friday afternoon, Pat Robertson interviewed fellow-televangelist Jerry Falwell on *The 700 Club*. Falwell said that, earlier in the week, he had publicly stated that we Americans ought to be asking God what we have done that this should happen to us. He had received so much criticism from people accusing him of judging them that he admitted that he wished he had never said it.

That is disheartening, but it is not fully unexpected considering what Amos prophesied would occur. Modern America is following the same well-worn and proud path as ancient Israel: "There's nothing wrong with me. Everybody else is evil. I'm an innocent victim." With this attitude, there will be no change. The disasters can only increase in frequency and intensity as time proceeds.

Listen again to Amos in light of the service at the National Cathedral yesterday:

I hate your show and pretence—your hypocrisy of "honoring" Me with your religious feasts and solemn assemblies. I will not accept your burnt offerings and thank offerings. I will not look at your offerings of peace. Away with your hymns of praise—they are mere noise to My ears. I will not listen to your music, no matter how lovely it is.

I want to see a mighty flood of justice—a torrent of doing good. (Amos 5:21-24, *TLB*)

Amos, like all of God's true prophets, did not receive any thanks for his warnings about Israel being guilty. So, in Amos 7:10-13, he is reviled and castigated for telling the truth:

But when Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, heard what Amos was saying, he rushed a message to Jeroboam, the king: "Amos is a traitor to our nation and is plotting your death. This is intolerable. It will lead to rebellion all across the land. He says you will be killed, and Israel will be sent far away into exile and slavery."

Then Amaziah sent orders to Amos, "Get out of here, you prophet, you! Flee to the land of Judah and do your prophesying there! Don't bother us here with your visions, not here in the capital, where the king's chapel is!"

It is very plain that nothing has changed. Carnal people do not like to hear spiritual truths.

Like it or not, none of this relieves us of our responsibilities as spiritual priests (I Peter 2:5, 9). I am convinced that most Americans are so far from a true knowledge of God that they do not even know what to repent of. Humility is so far from them that the reality of sin—and its profound effect on the quality of life—is incomprehensible. Americans understand somewhat of crime and its effects on the quality of life, but of sin and its effects, they are virtually blind.

Thus, yesterday they prayed at the National Cathedral. A woman, in defiance of God's Word, introduced the service. There were Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim clergy praying and

reading God's Word. Which did God hear? Did God hear any of them? It is clear that they all disagree as to the nature of God and the ways He is to be served. And, except for the Jews, none of them pays attention to keeping His Sabbaths, among other things.

None of what I have said is in any way intended to denigrate the sheer terror and agony of those who died, nor the grief of those grieving for their lost ones. I am just reporting what God shows happened in ancient Israel and what modern Israel will do in our time. What God's Word provides as prophetic evidence is already beginning to happen.

Listen again to God's Word but this time from Joel 2:17 (*TLB*):

The priests, the ministers of God, will stand between the people and the altar, weeping; and they will pray, "Spare your people, O our God; don't let the heathen rule them, for they belong to You. Don't let them be disgraced by the taunts of the heathen who say, "Where is this God of theirs? How weak and helpless He must be!"

Brethren, this happens at a time when the power of the holy people is shattered because of our own sins (Daniel 12:7). Any warning of the people of this land is certainly not going to be done by our power or might. It is very plain that it will have to be done by God's Spirit (Zechariah 4:6). God will hear us because He loves us and has appointed us to this priestly responsibility. We had better not fail to make use of our privilege. It is time to "sigh and cry" for the abominations of this land (Ezekiel 9).

To me, this is a wake-up call to the church more than anybody else, and we must take advantage of it because our lives are "on the line" more than anybody else's. We must ask God to guide us to repentance, to truly love Him and our neighbor (especially our brother), and to raise up a witness in His behalf before the Israelitish peoples.

We must ask God to guide the leadership of this nation. And we must ask God to be merciful, patient, forgiving—and to teach them what they must do—for His name's sake.