

## **Repent or Perish**

June 2nd, 2013

Luke 13:1-9

*"<sup>1</sup>There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup>And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? <sup>3</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. <sup>4</sup>Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."*

### **A Dilemma Pondered**

Yesterday morning as I was working on this message, I clicked on cnn.com, and the main headline read: "There's Just No Rest: 5 dead, including mother and child", in more tornados that blew through the Oklahoma City area. It reminded me that the subject matter of this passage is a perpetual dilemma, in Jesus' day and ours: the dilemma of evil and suffering. We're not exactly sure what caused some who were present and listening to Jesus (v.1) to tell him about this terrible atrocity that had occurred involving the Galileans (perhaps a connection with 12:57-59, and the need to settle accounts while you have time).

Whatever the reason for mentioning this to Jesus, it was an awful atrocity. If we were to put this in today's language, it would be like some sort of governmental authority crashing into this room, slitting our throats, and pouring our blood into the communion cups. In His response, Jesus mentions another incident that apparently His listeners would have known: "<sup>4</sup>those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them." This incident is different than the first one; the first was a moral calamity, a horrible, man-wrought act of evil. This is a freak accident, a natural calamity.

We may not know much of the details of these two incidents, but we don't need to. All we need to do is look at this week's news, right? And the problem posed here in this passage is, Why? Why does this

happen? Where is God? Why them? It's a dilemma that almost everyone -- believer or not -- grapples with at some point.

One solution that was common in those days (still present today: karma) was those who suffered like this must have been particularly wicked sinners. We see this sentiment throughout the book of Job, as well as in John 9, where Jesus' disciples ask about a man blind from birth: "<sup>2</sup>Rabbi, who sinned (you see the assumption), this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Now the people here in Luke 13 don't say this directly, but it seems as though Jesus knows that this is what they may be thinking: "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?"<sup>3</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

### **A Distraction Exposed**

That's Jesus' answer here to the problem of evil. The people want to know why this calamity has happened, and Jesus doesn't tell them why. He tells them *why it's not* (it's not that they were worse sinners), but He doesn't say why it happened. Some things need to be left to the wisdom of God, and as creatures in this world that God made and governs, we need the humility to embrace that just because atrocities and accidents appear pointless *to us*, that doesn't mean that it must actually *be* pointless.

To say more would require another sermon, because Jesus doesn't say more here to answer the problem of evil and suffering. Instead He exposes the dilemma as a distraction from the real issue that needs to be contemplated. As many questions as we may want answered about the pain and suffering in this world, what we learn from this passage is that when calamity strikes, the thing to do is not to look out (at the victims, and wonder why them?) and not to look up (to God, and wonder why He allowed/ordained this?), but to look in (at yourself, to be sure that you are ready for your calamity, whenever it may come).

What is God doing in Oklahoma City, or Boston, or wherever the next accident or atrocity takes place? Surely He is doing more, but He is doing no less than this: He is warning you that your time will soon come, and pleading with you to consider whether you are ready for that day. He says it twice in this paragraph: "<sup>3</sup>No, I tell you; *but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*" And because He says it twice, it seems like we should consider these words closely. This seems to be the main thing He wants us to see.

### **Jesus' Assumption: All Deserve Death**

Let's begin with the word "all": "<sup>3</sup>Unless you repent, you will *all* likewise perish." Jesus is saying, "Not only are these people not worse sinners than you are, but every person hearing Me (then, and now; "all") deserves to have a tower fall on them." No, their sin was not extraordinarily horrible; it was ordinarily horrible, just like yours. And unless you repent, you're going to experience a horrible ending just like them, *all of you*. The popular book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, is built on an erroneous foundation that is never examined in the book: that at root, we are good people who therefore deserve a good, comfortable life from God.

Jesus assumes just the opposite. All of us are guilty sinners deserving the wrath of God; there are no innocent human beings: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). "There is none righteous, no not one" (Romans 3:10). *All of us* are so sinful that disasters and calamities should not shock us (though we should certainly grieve) as though something unwarranted were coming upon innocent human beings. That's not the biblical diagnosis of humanity. Jesus is saying, you all deserve to have a tower falling on you.

Does that seem severe? An overreaction? If God has created you, you owe Him everything. You owe Him first place in your lives, but you don't put Him in first place; you put all sorts of other things in first

place, mainly yourself. He lavishes us with 10,000 blessings daily and when one hardship befalls us we demand, "Where are you!?" And then we have the audacity to say, "This One owes us a good, comfortable life, this One, who we treat with such apathetic indifference." And because of that, we all deserve to perish: "<sup>3</sup>Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

### **Perish = Eternal Judgment**

Before we move on I should say something briefly about those words, "likewise perish". Surely Jesus doesn't mean that unless we repent, we are all going to be killed by a building falling on us or having our throats slit, because not all of us die like that. And when He speaks of perishing, He's not just talking about physical death, because He implies that if you do repent, you won't perish. But until Jesus comes again, physical death happens to all people, whether they repent or not.

So what does Jesus mean, "you will all likewise perish"? Since Jesus connects it directly to sin ("were they worse *sinner*s") and since He says it can be escaped by repentance ("Unless you repent..."), I think we can say confidently that Jesus is referring to the final judgment, something beyond death (Revelation 20:14 calls it "the second death"). Those Galileans, those ones on whom the tower fell, were taken unprepared, they weren't ready, and experienced a horrible end. They knew they would die some day, but the horror of their end took them by surprise. Unless you repent, you too will be taken unprepared and experience a horrible end, far more horrible than you can think or imagine -- the judgment of God beyond the grave.

### **A Destruction Illustrated**

And the reality is, for every one of us here, you don't know when that end will come. You may live 70 or 80 years, but even that will sneak up on you. And that's only if you're not killed on your way home this afternoon, or if the Deptford Mall isn't the scene of the next awful

atrocious, or if you don't have a weak little blood vessel in your brain that pops and kills you. These Galileans, these ones on whom the tower fell, they were unprepared for their calamity, but what Jesus says here is that there is a way to be ready: "<sup>3</sup>*Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*" So we better know what repentance is.

To help us, Jesus tells a parable that illustrates the key point He's been making in v.1-5:

*"<sup>6</sup>And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. <sup>7</sup>And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' <sup>8</sup>And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. <sup>9</sup>Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.' "*

In a lot of places in the Old Testament the nation of Israel is referred to as a fig tree, or the Lord's vineyard, so Jesus' hearers would have understood Him to be talking about their nation. And what He does in this parable is illustrate their destruction. He's illustrating the very things He has just taught in verses 1-5. Israel is a fruitless fig tree, they've seen the Son of God, they've observed His miracles, they're hearing His teaching, but they are not bearing the fruit of repentance (3:8). And so they are in danger of being cut down, and thrown into the fire (= perishing, v.3, 5).

### **Fruit-Bearing Matters**

Bearing fruit matters to God. Christ didn't come into the world and suffer and die simply to punch for us a ticket to heaven. We praise God that we're not saved by our fruitfulness, but our salvation is the fruit of Jesus' work, not ours. He lived the perfect, sinless, life we have failed to live. He died on the cross as our substitute, taking the punishment for our pervasive self-centeredness and fruitlessness in His own body of flesh. He rose from the dead to demonstrate once for all that the wages of our sin had been satisfied, so that by faith alone (not

fruitfulness) we could inherit salvation, citizenship in God's Kingdom, adoption into His family, and the joy of eternal life with Him. Praise God for His mercy, which we see here in Him pleading for more time!

But let's not forget that we're saved for a life of fruitfulness. Salvation is not just about going to heaven when you die. It's about being united to Jesus in such a way that your life begins to bear fruit for His glory right now (Ephesians 2:8-10). Your life matters. Your life counts. And if that fruit (mainly, love for God and others) isn't there, then what that reveals is that you are not in a living union with Jesus, because those who are united to Him bear fruit. This parable teaches that God expects to see good fruit on the tree of your life. And I think it demands that we take an honest look at our lives and ask, "Is this fig tree a picture of me?"

Cut it down, the owner says, it's worthless. It's a waste of space. It's using up His ground, it's pulling nutrients from others. And don't forget, He's talking to a group of very religiously active people. They clean the outside of the cup, but inside, their hearts are bankrupt. There's no love for God, no genuine worship, no contrition and hatred for their sin, no humility and love of others. Is this a picture of you? Are some of you like this barren fig tree? Sitting in this church building for months, for years, calling yourself a Christian for years, and there's no fruit. Jesus' teaching here demands that we take a look in and humbly and honestly ask, "Am I bearing fruit for God?"

## **Look at Jesus**

But as I've heard it said, for every one look you take at yourself, take ten looks at Christ. This is a beautiful parable, because you see here the holiness and righteous anger of God against the barrenness of sin, the belittling of His name, and yet there is such marvelous patience in the vinedresser, such mercy and compassion in the midst of our fruitlessness. Even now He is fertilizing, He's working, He's

cultivating, He's withholding His wrath. But there is a day coming when the patience will expire, and the barren tree will be cut down and thrown into the fire. Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

It's only by abiding in Jesus that you'll bear fruit for God (John 15:4-5). So as we go to the Lord's table this morning, let's take one more look at our great Savior, and remember the great cost He paid that we might bear fruit for God.