

A Temple, A Tower, and A Tree
Luke 13:1-9

Turn in your Bibles to Luke 13:1-9 and stand in honoring God's Word as I read this passage.

Jesus had a wonderful knack of taking what was around Him, whether from nature or from local events and using them as teaching opportunities. It may be that He was taking to heart the command of Deuteronomy 6:6-7 "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up."

Whether it was in a home, in the synagogue, walking along some road by the sea, or traveling from one town to another Jesus used every opportunity to reach and teach those who traveled with Him. It happened when there was only one person as we see when He talked with the woman at the well.

It happened when he was with two or three like when He was transfigured.

It happened when He was with the 12, alone on the deck of a fishing boat.

It happened when there were multitudes like when He taught on the side of a mountain.

Every place and every opportunity gave occasion for Jesus to impart some truth. He would instruct and illustrate. That's what we see here in this passage. He uses a couple of tragedies to give some much needed instruction.

He then uses a tree to illustrate the truth He was conveying.

Let's look first of all at instruction from tragedy.

I. INSTRUCTION FROM TRAGEDY - v. 1-5

A. Consider the Temple Tragedy – v. 1-3

Going back to the middle of chapter 11 Jesus has been teaching on various important issues. Our passage today is the third time Jesus has been interrupted in His teaching.

The first came while teaching about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, a Scribe interrupted Him stating that what Jesus had said insulted them as well.

The second interruption came when a man wanted Jesus to intervene regarding an inheritance. Once more Jesus used the opportunity to teach about greed and anxiety. Instead, He told them to pursue after that which has eternal value. Seek first God's kingdom and don't be like unbelievers who worry about all kinds of earthly things.

As Jesus taught about the need to interpret the times from an eternal perspective preparing oneself to anticipate the return of the Master He is once again interrupted.

In the crowd there were some folks who started thinking about what Jesus had just said, how they should interpret the times. So they mentioned an event that had recently occurred at the Temple.

Let's look at verse 1 again.

"Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices."

Without stating it directly we know this event occurred in Jerusalem at the Temple because there was only one place where sacrifices could be offered and that was at the Temple in Jerusalem.

This event is not recorded anywhere else, not in Scripture, not in secular writings, but we know it happened because God's Word said it did and Jesus didn't refute it. This incident was something that they were all aware of.

Let's find out a little bit more about these Galileans. Remember Israel was divided into three regions:

Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. Remember also that Jesus was a Galilean. Unger's Bible Dictionary describes Galileans as "generous and impulsive, of simple manners, earnest piety, and intense (loyal) nationalism. (Think of UM or MSU football fans.) They were excitable, passionate and violent."

The great Jewish Historian Josephus and a Galilean himself states that they were "always able to make a strong resistance on all occasions of war; for the Galileans are (trained) to war from their infancy ... nor has the country ever been destitute of men of courage."

The Talmud is a collection of writings constituting the Jewish civil and religious law consisting of the Mishna, which is the text and the Gemara, which is the commentary on the text. It describes Galileans as being quarrelsome, but also admits that they care more for honor than money. Their simple ways in regard to language caused them to be held in contempt in Rabbinical circles.

They were loyal, committed nationalists, willing to defend the honor of their country and beliefs. Couple that with a sacred festival when religious patriotism is at a fever pitch and you have all the makings of potential trouble. That is a sketch of the Galileans.

Now let's meet Pontius Pilate. We know him best from the Jesus' trial and crucifixion. Historical records reveal that there was no love lost between him and the Jews. He despised them. He was appointed governor to that region by Emperor Tiberius. Again calling on the historical records of Josephus, we learn that Pilate had ruled in Judea from A.D. 26 – A.D. 36. From the start there was bad blood between Pilate and the Jews. Even though Rome had given Judea special sanction in allowing them to continue their religious practices including the rule of the Sanhedrin when it came to religious and civil law, it was Pilate's intention to remove their religious practices, but Rome held

strong on its stance. Rome realized that if the Jews were forced to give up their religious practices there would be greater potential for civil unrest led by a very strong willed High Priest than if they left well enough alone. Eventually Rome was able to put a compromising High Priest in Caiaphas as head of the Sanhedrin who could appease the Jews and give Rome what it needed in a more pacifist region. The High Priest could temper some of that nationalistic patriotism.

Being governor of Judea was not easy and Pilate's actions did not make the task easy. Josephus records an account in which early in his rule, he marched Roman soldiers into Jerusalem at night carrying banners bearing the image of the Emperor, a symbol the Jews considered idolatrous. When it was discovered the next day what he had done, multitudes of Jews marched to Caesarea where Pilate was staying in protest petitioning him to remove the banners. For five days Pilate refused to hear their plea. Finally he came and sat on his judgment seat and ordered them to stop the protest. He had soldiers enter and surround the Jews and threatened them with death if they did not stop troubling him with the matter. The Jews flung themselves to the ground pulling their garments down to expose their necks daring him to carry out such a barbaric act. They would rather die than violate their religious laws. Unwilling to commit a massacre, he relented and removed the banners.

His rule was marked by violence, robbery, bribery, persecution, and insults to the Jewish religion. He was proud, arrogant, and cynical.

In the account that we have here Galileans were celebrating at one of the Jewish festivals in Jerusalem. It's unclear as to why Pilate sent in soldiers to intervene that resulted in the slaughter of worshippers. They were killed where the sacrifices were being offered and their blood mixed with the blood of the sacrifices that were part of their religious celebration.

Those who raised the issue believed that if the signs of the time were correct then there can only be one plausible explanation – they were guilty of some sin. The point they were trying to make was clear to Jesus. He responds with a question. “Jesus answered, ‘Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?’”

A popular belief that has been around for centuries and even exists today is that if bad things happen to someone it is because of sin. Bad things don’t happen to good people. That was what Job’s friends accused him of. Based on the calamity that happened to him he must have committed some horrible sin for God to deal so harshly taking all his possessions including his children. They told him he needed to come clean with God and confess his hidden sin. God was punishing Job for his sin. Job 4:7-9 NLT – “Stop and think! Does the innocent person perish? When has the upright person been destroyed? My experience shows that those who plant trouble and cultivate evil will harvest the same. They perish by a breath from God. They vanish in a blast of His anger.”

Eliphaz emphatically denounced Job for his sin because he erroneously believed that sinful acts are always revealed by tragedy. Be sure your sins will find you out. And don’t forget that Jesus’ own disciples believed the same. In John 9 they saw some man who had been blind since birth and they asked Jesus who had sinned: this man or his parents that such a tragedy should befall him. Some people actually believed that a baby in the womb could sin. Like so many others, they believed the popular idea that sin results in tragedy and so that is the reason he was born blind.

Don’t think for a moment that our advanced culture is superior in our estimation of tragedy.

When hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf shore how many Christians came out denouncing the city of

New Orleans for its depravity. God was at last judging them for blatant immorality.

When four planes were hi-jacked on September 11 two of which slammed into the World Trade Center’s twin towers killing 2,996 people some claimed that God was judging America for its disregard for its godly heritage.

The day after Christmas 2004, when a tremendous earthquake convulsed the Indian plate resulting in seismic activity that created a tsunami in the Indian Ocean killing 230,000 people from 14 countries the cry of God’s judgment echoed once again.

If we take the view that tragedy strikes those who are terrible sinners, then what can we conclude about the Apostles or Paul or even Jesus Himself?

Just because someone has more trouble than someone else does not mean that they are a greater sinner. A lack of tragedy in your life does not make you a better person than someone who experiences it. I think we can take what Jesus said about the rain falling on the just and the unjust and conclude that calamity also falls on people whether they are good or bad. Being a Christian does not mean that we are immune from tragedy.

John MacArthur adds this timely advice if you question why bad things can happen even to us. Bad things can happen to Christians to test faith. I Peter 1:6-7
Deuteronomy 8:2

Bad things can happen to Christians to teach them not to depend on themselves.
II Corinthians 1:8-9
II Corinthians 12:7-10

Bad things can happen to Christians because there is still sin in the world.
Job 14:1
Jeremiah 20:18

Bad things can happen to Christians to remind us of our heavenly hope.

Romans 5:3-5

II Corinthians 4:16-18

Bad things can happen to Christians to show us what we really love.

Acts 5:41

I Peter 2:20-21

I Peter 4:13

Bad things can happen to Christians to teach obedience and to discipline.

Psalms 119:67, 71

Hebrews 12:5-11

Bad things can happen to Christians to prepare us for greater usefulness.

James 1:2-4

Bad things can happen to Christians so God can show us compassion.

Psalms 103:13

II Corinthians 1:4-5

Bad things can happen to Christians to equip us to help others.

II Corinthians 1:4, 6

Bad things can happen to Christians to reveal our love for God.

Romans 8:28-29

Tragedy can come for a variety of reasons.

They thought these Galileans had done something egregious in God's eyes that resulted in their death.

But Jesus responded with a question to challenge the belief that those who have something tragic happen to them are worse sinners than those who don't have any tragedy happen to them and He called on them to repent. It wasn't to repent of their erroneous view, but to repent of their own sin.

We'll come to this again in a moment. Jesus first addresses the tragedy at the Temple.

He then calls their attention to consider the tragedy at the tower.

B. Consider the Tower Tragedy – v. 4-5

If they thought that worshippers at the Temple who were engaged in an act of religious ritual were somehow guilty of sin that caused their demise, what did they think about the incident at the tower?

Like the first account this also is not recorded anywhere, but because it is in God's Word I believe it happened and was familiar to those who were raising the issue.

We are familiar with the pool of Siloam as the place Jesus sent a blind man to wash in order to receive sight. This pool is fed by a conduit cut in solid rock from what is known as the Virgin's Spring about 1,800 feet away. Most scholars believe that it is this spring inside the Jerusalem wall that Pilate wanted a tower built. Referring once again to historian Josephus, he writes that Pilate had stolen money from the Temple in order to erect this structure. Purportedly he used Jewish laborers and there was an outcry by other Jews because they were working for Rome. Consequently when the tower fell and 18 were killed in the accident, people thought they deserved what they had coming.

Jesus used this incident to further drive home the erroneous notion that when tragedy happens it is the result of sin. If that were the case we would all have incurred the judgment of God long before this.

Does sin always end in tragedies like this? Jesus' conclusion in both these stories was an emphatic no. He refused to denounce the victims as greater sinners than anyone else because some calamity happened to them. That may have been the case, but it wasn't the reason for their death. Instead, Jesus called on everyone to repent; otherwise we would all fall under the same condemnation because the Bible is expressly clear that everyone of us is a

sinner and consequently under the same curse, that curse being both physical and spiritual death. Hebrews 9:27 “As it is appointed unto man once to die (that is the physical death), but after that the judgment (that is the spiritual death).”

Isaiah 53:6 “All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way...”

Romans 6:23 “For the wages of sin is death...”

We are all under the same curse because of sin. If we only commit one sin, we are just as guilty in God’s eyes of breaking His moral standard as the person who commits 101 or 1,001 or 1,000,001 sins.

Jesus did not offer an explanation as to why these events occurred. What we do know from what Jesus said is that it wasn’t because they were worse sinners than others.

Let’s not be too quick to cast judgment on someone experiencing some tragedy that God is finally giving them what they deserve. The fact of the matter is we need to give thanks to God for His mercy because He withholds what we do deserve. We need to give God thanks for His grace because He gives us what we don’t deserve. Why they happened only God knows.

Romans 11:33 “Oh the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out.”

Jesus gives some instruction from tragedy.
Jesus gives an illustration from a tree.

II. ILLUSTRATION FROM A TREE – v. 6-9

To illustrate his point Jesus tells a story about a man and his orchard. Notice the condition surrounding the fig tree. It was planted in a plot of land that was well cared for. It had every conceivable advantage

to be productive. It was in a place where it would be well tended, but there was a problem. He went out when fruit should be expected and found none.

In Leviticus 19:23-25 the Israelites were instructed that when they entered the land and planted any kind of fruit tree, they were forbidden from eating any fruit it might produce for the first three years. The fruit it produced in the fourth year belonged to God as the first fruits from that tree. After that they could harvest for their own needs.

When our passage says that the tree had been barren for three years, it is saying that the tree had produced nothing for seven years. It was as the owner said just taking up space. He wanted it cut down and destroyed. But the gardener asked for some additional time to tend it, fertilize it, work with it and after another year if it didn’t produce fruit, then it could be cut down.

The point Jesus was illustrating is obvious. The owner is God. The gardener is Jesus and the tree is Israel. They had every conceivable advantage over the surrounding nations. They were God’s covenant people. They had been given the law to teach them how God expected them to live. They had the prophets to guide them back when they went astray. And now they even had the Messiah and yet they still had not produced any spiritual fruit. Israel had been set in the midst of the other nations to be an example of God’s blessings for those who obey Him and instead they were fruitless.

In His illustration Jesus was saying that they still had time to repent. As the gardener, Jesus interceded for another opportunity and we see that at Pentecost when a remnant of Israel listened and repented. They would become the seed of the church that spread throughout Asia Minor. But as a nation they continued to be fruitless and 40 years later judgment did come to Judea as Jerusalem was ransacked and the Temple destroyed.

The lesson is clear to us as well. There is still time to repent, but time is running out.

We have considered the Temple tragedy.

We have considered the tower tragedy.

We have considered the tree tragedy.

Let's consider the true tragedy.

The true tragedy is with those who won't repent.

What is it to repent? The tense indicates that immediate repentance is required. You may have noticed that in Jesus' illustration there was a delay in the destruction of the fig tree. That delay is an indication of God's patience.

II Peter 3:9 "God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."

Every day that God refrains His hand of judgment is a day in which we have to repent, but it is also a day closer to His judgment.

Warren Wiersbe writes "We must not presume upon the kindness and long suffering of the Lord, for the day of judgment will finally come."

Henry Ironside called repentance "one of the missing links in the preaching of modern times." He went on to say that "repentance is not a work of merit: repentance is an acknowledgement that we have no merit, that in himself he is just an undeserving sinner exposed to the judgment of God."

God commands everyone everywhere to repent. It means to have another mind or to change the mind and is used in the New Testament to indicate a change of mind in respect to sin, God, and self. Repentance is not an apology and neither is it being sorry for something you knew to be wrong. When I change my mind about sin I turn away from it and go in the opposite direction.

If I pick up a rock and throw it at my neighbor's window so that it breaks and I say I'm sorry, but then proceed to pick up another rock and throw that

one too, I have not repented. Repentance is not picking up any more rocks. True repentance is not doing it again.

Repentance may come out of fear of consequences. Repentance deepens character as we recognize the baseness of sin itself and how abhorrent it is to God. Repentance becomes most complete and powerful in those who experience the saving grace of God, as we realize the enormity of sin. The older I get, the greater I understand the gravity of sin.

Repentance contains genuine sorrow toward God because of sin.

II Corinthians 7:9-10 "Yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death."

Paul identifies two types of sorrow. The first is Godly sorrow that brings repentance because we recognize we have wronged God and through our repentance experience divine grace. The second is self-centered because we only do it to hopefully spare us from any possible consequences. The one brings life, the other brings death.

Matthew 5:3-4 "Blessed are the poor in spirit (humble), for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn (repentance), for they will be comforted."

In response to David's adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah, the guilt and weight of his sin was brought to bear when the prophet Nathan confronted him. In response, David wrote a wonderful Psalm of repentance.

Psalm 51:1-9

Repentance contains genuine sorrow toward God because of sin.

Repentance contains a deep repugnance for sin followed by actual forsaking it. We abhor it. Romans 6:1 “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?”

Acts 26:20b “...I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.”

Jesus uses the opportunity to teach that no sinner is worse than another. We are all sinners. He uses the opportunity to teach that repentance is necessary and that repentance should be immediate. God does withhold His judgment for a time because He is merciful, but His patience is not permanent.

Jim Elliot once said “when it comes time to die, make sure that all you have to do is die.”

When we repent of sin we experience the wonderful grace of Jesus for the first time and then for countless times thereafter. Nineteenth century Pastor Robert Murray McCheyne once said “Unfathomable oceans of grace are in Christ for you. Dive and dive again, you will never come to the bottom of these depths.”

Today as we come to the communion table it may be that for the very first time you repent of your sin as you realize Christ gave His life by shedding His blood for you. There is no sin so great that God won't forgive. Will you come to Him and repent and embrace His grace by faith for salvation? Now is the day of salvation.

You may come to the communion table today in need of repentance as a Christian because of some sin. Let His grace wash over you.