

Unless You Repent You Will Perish
Luke 13:1-9, 18-21
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Read Luke 13:1-9, 18-21

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matt. 4:4b)

Introduction

Two brothers who went through my youth group in Virginia eventually moved out to northern California for work when they got into their 20s. Their dad still went to our church and I would ask about his sons from time to time and he would update me. One year, there was a particularly devastating series of fires in their area and when I asked about how they were doing, their dad said that the fires had jumped from place to place, crossing highways, randomly sparing some houses and yards but landing on others to burn them to the ground. So thankfully, while his son's houses were in the middle of a lot of devastation, they had been spared getting burned. He concluded that they had been very fortunate, that God had spared their houses.

I remember wondering, “Hmmm... do fires burn according to a pattern that is dependent on elevation, wind direction, vegetation density, and those kind of factors? Or could you say that God directed the path of that fire in a way that spared my friends, and so, by default, did not spare the other houses that it hit? Could you go so far as to say that God brought punishment to people who deserved it and spared the people who didn't deserve it?” Is that how God works in natural disasters and accidents? I remember when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and some preacher suggested that it was the punishment of God on a wicked city. And yet hurricanes hit cities and countries all the time. Are you going to tell me that every time a natural disaster hits, that it's God's punishment? Haiti and the Bahamas get hit by hurricanes a lot, but maybe that has less to do with God's wrath and more with the fact that they are islands in areas where lots of hurricanes hit.

When there are tragedies and disasters, we have a flood of questions: Why did God allow this to happen? What did people do to deserve that death? There is often the unspoken, though sometimes spoken, demand that God needs to answer for what happened. Now, there's nothing wrong with trying to understand God, life, and tragedy better, but Jesus is going to suggest in our Scripture passage today that maybe we're not asking the right questions. Maybe we're missing the point when we reflect on tragedies. We're going to see that God wants us to think about some other things: repentance, outward fruit of obedience, and growth. Our first section emphasizes that

I. God Is Looking for Us to Repent (13:1-5)

¹ There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. ⁴ 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? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

We don't know exactly what these two incidents refer to. Clearly one was an act of violence initiated by Pilate, probably sending soldiers into the temple area to bully some Galilean Jews who were opposing him; and the other was an accident either during construction or something causing a tower to fall over, killing innocent bystanders. From what the text says, no one asked Jesus

directly whether those Galileans were being punished for their sins. But Jesus knew what they were thinking and He put it into words: "Do you think the victims of these tragedies were worse sinners or worse offenders than anyone else?" People in that day had the very common assumption that if something bad happens to you, it must be because you did something wrong. The moralistic view of tragedy was alive and well. This was the worldview of Job's friends. Remember that Job was a man who lost everything - all his children, his house, everything he owned. Job 4:7 records one of the friends, Eliphaz, challenging him: "*Remember: who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off?*" In other words, "Job, you must have done something to deserve this! If you were innocent, God wouldn't have punished you with this bad suffering. You're hiding it from us but you can't hide it from God, so just admit it." People still had that karma-type thinking in Jesus' day, as they showed in John 9:2: "*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*"

The connection between sin and suffering is rarely as easy as that formula. It's true that sometimes God rewards those who are faithful with immediate good things; for instance, God gave Solomon wisdom when He was pleased with him. And sometimes God quickly punishes those who disobey Him, like His many immediate punishments for the disobedience and disbelief of the Israelites in the desert with Moses. But not always. Often, God does not intervene and allows things to play out, and we don't have the tools to know when He does intervene anyways. We don't have an inspired Bible that says, "Oh yeah, that was God's punishment." That does not mean that He is blind to sin and injustice, it just means that He is delaying full justice for His own reasons.

Now, it's always easier to talk about abstract things or about other people's sins and issues. But Jesus always wants you to deal with your situation! Death and suffering should always make us think about our eternal destination. Jesus said the exact same sentence twice, in verses 3 and 5: "*unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*" He is not saying we will lose our lives in a terrible accident necessarily; He's saying we will suffer the eternal wrath of God. It's interesting, because the John 9 answer that Jesus gave about the blind man was, "*It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.*" In other words, "Use tragedy to see how God is at work and how He can redeem things," and here He said, "Use tragedy to remind you of God's ultimate judgment." We should remember both of these responses.

It's too easy to forget that we are all guilty sinners. Some sins are more obvious than others, some are easier to hide. Some sins get immediate consequences, like not showing up for work can get you fired; robbing a store can get you arrested. But all sin is sin, and just one sin makes you a sinner and in debt towards God, deserving of His wrath. Jesus is saying, "You all deserve to have a tower fall on you." What should amaze us is not that some people have terrible accidents to end their lives, but that we are spared and showed mercy. We should not be alarmed that guilty sinners perish but be amazed that God is so slow to anger that we are given time to come to faith in Christ.

How do we avoid perishing eternally? By repenting. Repentance is not merely feeling sorry about our sins. Sometimes we only feel bad about our sin because we got caught. Repentance involves grief over past sins and present sinful tendencies, followed by confessing our sins honestly to the Lord, and then looking to change our ways. With repentance comes a change of mind that also involves a change of direction. It involves both a turning from your evil ways and turning towards your Savior. There is the initial time of repentance when you come to faith in Christ, but then, as Luther said, "the entire life of believers (is) to be one of repentance." 2 Peter 3:9 - "*God is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.*"

God's patience will not last forever, though, as the next parable will show us.

II. God is Looking for Us to Bear Fruit (13:6-9)

⁶And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷And 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?' ⁸And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. ⁹Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Everyone who is an owner has the right to inspect what he owns to see if it is a good investment. Maybe a modern-day version of this parable would be: "A certain man owned a mutual fund that didn't produce any gains for three years, taking up space in his portfolio and tying up money that he could have used elsewhere. He told his broker to sell it and invest it somewhere more profitable, but the broker convinced him to keep it for one more year." So this man who owned a vineyard came for three years in a row expecting to find fruit on this one fig tree. He finally gave up on it and instructed the vinedresser to cut it down so they could use the space more productively. The vinedresser simply asked for one more year; he promised to give it more attention in the hopes that it would produce fruit.

There is a very specific message to a group of people in Jesus' day; there's a clue in verse 7's timeline. Is the three years significant? I think it is. Jesus' ministry lasted roughly three years. In that time, He was preaching, teaching, healing, and demonstrating all the ways that He was God and was bringing the message of the kingdom and establishing the new covenant. But His people Israel, the trees that had been planted, were mostly not believing Him and were not turning out to be fruitful trees. So God was ready to be done with them. But wait, one more year would bring Jesus' death and resurrection, the mighty acts of redemption. If Israel did not believe and look to bear fruit after all of that, God would move on and plant new trees in their places.¹ The passage that we're going to study this Wednesday night in Men's Bible Study is the second half of Romans 11. It uses a similar metaphor and talks about how the Gentiles are grafted onto the tree of faithful Israel: "...some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree" (Romans 11:17).

But this story applies to us as well. In a very general way, this is a warning to all people, but particularly to churchgoers and people who think they are Christians. Are you in some way like the fruitless tree? If you are not producing the fruit of the Spirit and the evidence of a changed life, you should ask some hard questions to yourself about whether you are really a Christian. Those who have repented of their sin and found redemption in Jesus are given new life from the Holy Spirit. This new life produces results, as Galatians 5:22-23a says, "*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*" Ephesians 2:10 says that it's not just character traits, but outward actions that our new life in Christ results in: "*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, that we should walk in them.*"

Jesus is ready to till the ground around you, the Holy Spirit is ready to help you grow and produce fruit that will please the Father. But you must be willing to repent and believe and embrace the new life in Christ that He offers you. I'm not saying that you only have one year left or God will cut you down; the point is that you have more time, but at some point in the future, you will run out of time and be judged for your lack of fruit, which stems from a lack of repentance and belief.

¹ Adapted from Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke, Volume 2* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), p. 11.

The final verses tell us that

III. God is Looking for Us to be Part of His Growing Kingdom (13:18-21)

¹⁸ He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? ¹⁹ It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches." ²⁰ And again he said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? ²¹ It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened."

I have to confess that I know very little about gardening and not much more about baking. But I'm open to learning how to do both as I get older because I'm intrigued by these parables and I feel like I would understand God's ways better. One of my favorite singers and writers, Michael Card, said this about this passage:

"Once you have planted a tiny seed and over time witnessed the enormous plant that grows from it, or once you have placed a small pinch of yeast in a large lump of dough and seen it rise and expand over the sides of the bowl – then you will begin to understand how a series of small encounters two thousand years ago between religious leaders and an obscure itinerant rabbi has resulted in a kingdom whose reign extends across the universe."²

God's kingdom works from small beginnings, and it grows mostly unseen. Jesus didn't say here how tiny the mustard seed is, but He probably didn't have to. Everyone back then would have known that it was a tiny seed that grew into a large tree. With the leaven in the bread parable, the woman was using three measures of flour, which is roughly fifty pounds of flour! She was making a huge batch of bread, but even a small amount of leaven would cause that huge amount to rise.

Think about the life of Jesus and the disciples that He gathered around Himself, knowing that Jesus would be crucified after just three years of ministry, and His disciples would almost all be martyrs for the faith in the decades after their founder's death. Anyone looking at that start for Christianity would have said (and probably many of them did): "That is one doomed religion. They went about it all wrong, didn't try to influence the right people, the important people; they brought down needless persecution on themselves by not adapting their message. And Jesus dying on the cross – that's going to turn off both Jews and Greeks. If that was truly a plan and a movement from God, then God didn't think that one through very well." And yet. And yet. Maybe God knew what He was doing all along. Maybe He chose the way of smallness, the strategy of influencing a small number in a very powerful way, knowing that its influence would spread and multiply across the Roman Empire and eventually around the world. The image in verse 19 is of birds making nests in the mustard tree's branches – that is an image from Ezekiel 17 that speaks to the global reach of the gospel, that all nations would gather in its branches. Christianity may seem to be declining in America and Europe, but it is growing in Africa, South America, parts of Asia; and did you know that some of the fastest growing churches are in Iran and Afghanistan?³

So we have the two images: a seed growing into a tree that represents the growth of the kingdom and the church; and then the leaven of the gospel that makes the bread around it rise, representing how our faith is brought to bear in society so that it helps transform and raise up the world. We should not just be looking to build big churches or just to be making society better by helping the poor, feeding the hungry, etc. We should be doing both, the kingdom work is in both places.

² Michael Card, *Luke: The Gospel of Amazement* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011), p. 170.

³ <https://missionsbox.org/news/youll-be-surprised-where-christianity-is-growing-and-where-it-is-not/>

Conclusion

R.C. Sproul used to tell a story about when he was a young professor at a school near Boston teaching “Introduction to the Old Testament” to 250 college freshmen. He made it very clear that there would be three papers due throughout the semester, on Sept. 30, Oct. 30, and Nov. 30, and that unless the student was confined to the infirmary or had a death in the immediate family, those papers would be due on time or they would receive an F. September 30th came and 25 of the freshmen did not have their papers; they pleaded for an extension and for whatever reason, he decided to give them a little mercy and gave them a 2 day extension. Then, October 30th came and 50 of the students did not have their papers; they pleaded that it was midterms and Homecoming and they needed a couple more days. And again, he gave them an extension. For a few weeks, Dr. Sproul was the most popular professor on campus. Until November 30th came and 100 students came without their papers. But this time, instead of being fearful and pleading with him, they looked unconcerned. He asked one of them where his paper was, and the man said, “I’ll have it in a couple days.” So Dr. Sproul picked up his grade book and told the student that he had received an F. And you can probably all predict the response: “That’s not fair!” Dr. Sproul responded, “So is it justice that you want? OK, let’s go back to your paper from last month that I gave you an extension on, and I will give you justice. You get an F on that one as well.” Then he turned to all of the other students and asked, “Who else wants justice?”⁴

That’s not exactly how God deals with us, but it’s a reminder of the human nature of feeling entitled to mercy. Because God extends mercy at various times, we not only come to expect it, we demand it. And if we get anything less, we are confused and even angry. God has spared people from being immediately punished for any one of their sins, and so they assume that they are always going to be spared. But that is not so. Do not confuse justice and grace. Though God loves to be merciful and forgiving, grace is voluntary, so we cannot presume upon it. Justice is earned and should be expected, grace is freely given and should be a wonderful surprise.

But there is one way to know for sure that you will be given the grace of salvation. There was a Galilean whose blood Pilate would spill, who would become a sacrifice.⁵ The only person who ever lived who did not need to repent, who did not deserve judgment and death, was killed at the hands of the Romans. He was the ultimate example of someone suffering even though He was righteous. But God used that suffering and death for our ultimate good. He became the atoning sacrifice for our sins. In faith and repentance, we can claim Jesus’ sacrificial death as the payment for our sin penalty and receive eternal life. As Matthew Henry said, referring to the parable of the fig tree: “had it not been for Christ’s intercession, the whole world (would have) been cut down.”⁶

Beloved, for the sake of your own souls: repent of your sins and turn to Christ in faith. Cultivate the fruit of the Spirit in your life and walk in obedience to His Word. Look for how you can participate in the growth of God’s kingdom around you. When you do, you will never need to fear death, you will never need to fear God’s judgment.

Benediction - Psalm 121:7-8 - *“The Lord will keep you from all evil; He will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.”*

⁴ R.C. Sproul’s sermon “The Locus of Astonishment” from August 13, 2016, found on the Ligonier app.

⁵ Jeff Heiser’s February 14, 2021 sermon “A Life of Repentance” found at downtownpres.org.

⁶ Ryken, p. 12.