
¹ There were some present at that very time who told Him [Jesus] 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.” Luke 13:1-5 (ESV)

In the past month we have been shocked by the shootings in Christchurch. We are also affected by the news of the Cyclone Idai in Mozambique affecting hundreds of thousands if not millions of people. We hear of earthquakes that kill thousands in other countries. We get nightly reports on the horrors of wars. On a personal level, many of us struggle with private tragedies—loved ones who die untimely deaths, accidents that leave devastating consequences, children who suffer from illness, and people who have experienced horrible abuse.

Naturally, we always ask, “Why?” Why did this have to happen to this person? Perhaps the victim was a good, loving person. Meanwhile we hear of others who have caused great harm, or taken advantage of others, who seem to live in relative happiness and prosperity. We question God’s goodness and fairness. Sometimes we even doubt His existence. It’s the classic philosophic problem of evil: How can an all-good and all-powerful God allow “good people” to suffer and “wicked people” to prosper?

The Lord Jesus gives us some answers to these difficult questions in our text. In the context, Jesus has just been rebuking the multitude because they were able to discern the weather, but they were oblivious to the signs of the times, namely, that Messiah was in their midst (12:54-56). He used an illustration (12:57-59) of a man who is going to be dragged into court with a losing lawsuit against him. If he is smart, he will quickly settle with his opponent before it’s too late. The point is, we all have a debt of sin toward God. If we are aware of our situation, we will be quick to get right with God before we come into judgment.

Then, Luke reports (13:1), “on the same occasion,” some were present who reported to Jesus about the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. We don’t know any more about this event than is here reported.

Apparently Pilate had sent in his troops to break up a gathering of Galilean Jews that he deemed dangerous. The Roman soldiers did not even respect the fact that the Jews were worshiping God by offering sacrifices. They slaughtered them so that their blood flowed together with the blood of their sacrifices. Jesus

uses this current event to make a spiritual point. Then He brings up another tragedy from recent history, when a tower fell down and killed 18 people, and uses that event to reinforce the spiritual lesson.

As for the eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell, they are still more obscure. The King James Version uses the word sinners of them also; but, as the margin shows, it should be not sinners but debtors. Maybe we have a clue here. It has been suggested that they had actually taken work on Pilate's hated aqueducts. If so, any money they earned was due to God and should have been voluntarily handed over, because it had already been stolen from him; and it may well be that popular talk had declared that the tower had fallen on them because of the work they had consented to do.

But there is far more than an historical problem in this passage. The people of old had rigidly connected sin and suffering. Eliphaz had long ago said to Job, "Who that was innocent ever perished?" (Job 4:7). This was a cruel and a heartbreaking doctrine, as Job knew well. And Jesus utterly denied it in the case of the individual. As we all know very well, it is often the greatest saints who have to suffer most.

Now before examine these verses in more detail, let us look at our Lord's method here. He could have used this occasion to launch into a critique of Pilate's cruel ways, but He would have missed the spiritual opportunity. He could have plunged into a philosophical discussion of the problem of evil, but His hearers would have gone away unchanged. Instead, the Lord took this general topic and homed in on the consciences of those who had raised the subject. He applies it to them twice, and then He further drives it home with the parable.

Repent or perish! This certainly sounds like Jesus is giving some stern words of judgment like some of those 'street preachers'. For some of us just hearing the words: "Repent or perish" sends shivers down our spines. So many of us have come from church backgrounds where shame and fear were the primary tools used to keep a faith community together. But I don't believe this is what Jesus is doing. Instead, in the face of tragedy, which can sadly become commonplace, Jesus provides comfort and also a sobering call for all of us to examine our own lives.

Some horrible things have happened. Pilate, whose cruelty has been historically documented, has killed a bunch of people again and 18 people have died senselessly when a tower collapses on them. Jesus absolves them of any extra guilt. They were not especially sinful; they were simply caught off guard by the circumstances of life but Jesus does use this opportunity to call us all to repentance.

Repentance is not a dirty word. It comes from the Greek word metanoia, which is more than just remorse or sorrow or a change of mind. It's a change of heart. Repentance isn't setting off in a direction and slowing down and hitting the

brakes from time to time. Repentance is stopping the car, making a u-turn and driving in the opposite direction. It's an invitation to turn away from the sin which causes life to shrink in order to turn towards what causes life to bloom. Repent or perish isn't a threat. It's simply reality. We either turn away from what causes death in our lives or we are already perishing.

In the Augsburg Confession, Melanchthon writes that "strictly speaking, repentance consists of two parts. One part is contrition, that is, terrors striking the conscience through the knowledge of sin. The other part is faith, which is born of the Gospel (Romans 10:17) or the Absolution and believes that for Christ's sake, sins are forgiven." In the Apology Melanchthon adds that if someone wants to add as a third part "fruit worthy of repentance, that is, a change of the entire life and character for the better," he will not oppose that three-part definition. But in the Augsburg Confession and the Apology works are a fruit of repentance. They follow contrition and faith, the two proper parts of repentance.

There is comfort found in this understanding of repentance. Including faith in repentance lifts your eyes off of yourself and a vain attempt to determine if your repentance is genuine enough to obtain forgiveness. Instead, by including faith, we are directed to lift our eyes to Jesus, that we may be comforted by the forgiveness freely offered to us in Jesus through faith. This teaching can set you free from doubt, giving you the confidence found in Christ alone.

God objectively forgave the world when Jesus Christ died. He did this before any of us repented. We read in Scripture (Hebrews 1:3), "After making purification for sins, Jesus sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high."

Now this does not mean that forgiveness is without repentance. Being truly Christian is to live a life of repentance; to daily confess our sins and rejoice in the forgiveness of sins; and to plead for God's mercy, trusting that He is merciful. But we always do so in the confidence of God's grace.

There are some who might press us with the question, "Where will you be if you die tonight?" But Jesus' parable moves in the direction of promise more than threat: "I'm going to do everything I can to help this tree live and bear fruit...I'm going to find every way possible to get to hearts that are hard as packed down soil." While we're speculating about why certain people died at Pilate's hands or why the others were killed by the falling tower, Jesus, the gardener, is working on our hearts. Yes, those stories were real. They were as real as every tragedy we can name...Such realities remind us that our time is finite. Stories like these dig at our hearts. They get to us with the truth that we can't keep putting everything off until tomorrow.

Into the midst of such despair, the gardener comes. Don't cut the tree down. Let it alone for one more year. Jesus, the gardener, wants us to live. His passion is marked for us by great love.

There are no easy answers to life's tough questions. The Church of Jesus Christ is not built upon easy answers. Instead, it is built upon a singular recognition that in the presence of the God we know in Christ.

There are two kinds of sorrow: worldly sorrow and godly sorrow. Worldly sorrow is when we look at things from a worldly point of view. Godly sorrow is when you realise your whole life is lived in the presence of God, and apart from Him we have nothing. And in this context, 'repentance' is when you run to Jesus' cross.

God is calling us and all people everywhere to repent and believe in Christ. Trust in Him alone, not in any 'gods' of your own making. Christ alone is our righteousness and our salvation, In Him, and through faith in Him, we have everlasting life.

Thank God that he does call us to repent and to put our trust in Christ, so that we will not perish but instead be saved! Christ Jesus is our one hope in the midst of all tragedy and loss. Christ Jesus is our one sure and lasting comfort, who will carry us through this vale of tears and bring us to Himself. He will wipe away every tear from our eyes and give us a joy that lasts forever. Amen.