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WHAT WE SHOULD LEARN FROM TRAGEDIES

Luke 13:1-9

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Luke Lesson 63

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In the past month we have been shocked by the massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado. We also saw stunned people in Oklahoma who in a few minutes lost everything they owned when killer tornadoes swept through their neighborhoods. We hear of earthquakes that kill thousands in other countries. We get nightly reports on the horrors of the war in Kosovo. 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 birth defects or serious diseases.

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 scoundrels who 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.

Jesus was speaking to men who did not apply spiritual truth to themselves (12:56-57). From His reply, we can also surmise that these men were smugly thinking that those who suffered such tragedies were deserving of God's judgment, whereas the fact that they had been spared such tragedies meant that they were pleasing to God. Their theology was like that of Job's comforters, who thought that Job was suffering because he had sinned. Jesus corrects this mistaken view by showing that we all are sinners worthy of God's judgment. Twice (13:3, 5) He drives home the application: Were those who suffered greater sinners? "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." Then Jesus tells a parable (13:6-9) that underscores the point: If *you* don't repent, *you* will soon face God's judgment.

Thus rather than asking the question "*Why?*" with regard to suffering, we should ask the question, "*What?*" What does this tragedy teach me? Our Lord's answer is,

Tragedies should teach us that since death and judgment are imminent, we need to be ready through true repentance.

Before we examine these verses in more detail, let me make a passing comment on 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.

The lesson for us is to take common subjects that come up, like the tragedies in Colorado and in Oklahoma, and apply them to the person's need to get right with God before he stands before Him. Philosophic discussions are fairly safe; but Jesus turned such

discussions into the personal need for repentance. He always had in view the need of sinful souls before the holy God. So should we.

There are two kinds of tragedies in the text: those caused by evil people; and, those caused by accidents or natural disasters. But the worst tragedy, as Jesus shows, will be the final judgment (“perish”), which involves not only physical death, but also spiritual death or eternal separation from God in hell (12:5). If we learn rightly from earthly tragedies, we will avoid the ultimate and final tragedy. So what should we learn from tragedies?

1. Tragedies stem from God’s curse because of the sin of the human race.

Jesus here assumes what the Bible teaches from Genesis on, that all people are by nature sinners who deserve God’s judgment. As the Book of Job shows, even the most righteous man on earth has no case against God, who has a perfect right to afflict that man with terrible suffering without answering to anyone for what He does. When we talk about “good” people or “innocent children,” we are only talking in relative terms. Some people are better in relation to other people, but no one is good in relation to God. Every child is born with an evil heart. Even the most righteous man on earth is a sinner who deserves God’s righteous judgment.

Also, the Bible teaches that man’s sin was the cause of God’s curse on creation (Gen. 3:14-19; Rom. 8:20-22). All natural disasters—floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, droughts, epidemics, diseases, and accidents—stem from man’s rebellion against God. It will only be in the new heavens and new earth that God will wipe away every tear and all death from His redeemed, and there shall not be any curse (Rev. 21:4; 22:3).

Furthermore, the Bible teaches that there often is not a direct correlation between the degree of a person’s sinfulness and temporal judgment. Here Jesus twice asks, “Do you suppose that these [who suffered] were worse sinners” than others because they so suffered? He twice responds emphatically, “I tell you, no....” In Jesus’ day (as well as in our own), many had the mistaken view that people suffer in this life in direct proportion to their sinfulness. If a tragedy hits someone, he must have done something to deserve it, even if it was in secret. Even the disciples asked Jesus concerning

the blind man, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?" (John 9:2). The wrong assumption was that someone was paying for his sin through this tragedy.

There is a general principle in the Bible that God blesses the obedient and that sinners reap the consequences of their evil ways. But there are many, many exceptions. The Bible often shows godly men who suffer and are killed at a young age (*e.g.*, John the Baptist) and ungodly men who live long and relatively trouble-free lives (*e.g.*, Herod). The ultimate biblical resolution to the problem of evil and suffering is the final judgment, when every wicked person who has not repented will pay for his sin, and every righteous believer in Christ who has suffered will be eternally rewarded.

Lurking just beneath the surface of the notion that someone who is suffering is a greater sinner than others is self-righteous pride. John Calvin points out, "This passage is highly useful, were it for no other reason than that this disease is almost natural to us, to be too rigorous and severe in judging of others, and too much disposed to flatter our own faults" (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], A Harmony of the Evangelists, 2:151). So if someone else suffers some tragedy, we are quick to assume that it was his own fault. But if things are going well for us, we smugly assume that it is because God is pleased with us. But, as Jesus shows, when tragedy hits someone else, rather than judging them, we should judge ourselves. The lesson we should learn and ponder is:

2. Tragedies show us that life is fragile and that we must get right with God before we die and face judgment.

When tragedy hits someone else, whether it is a tragedy caused by evil people or one caused by some natural disaster, we all talk about it. We're glued to the TV set, watching the details over and over as they are reported. But, when it's over, most people go on unchanged, with no thought of how it applies to them. Jesus here shows that we should immediately take it to heart by asking, "What if it had been me? Would I have been ready to stand before God? Have I truly repented of my sins? Is my life pleasing to the Lord?" Because the fact is, sooner or later, it will be me!

None of the Galileans who were slaughtered by Pilate knew beforehand that their going to the temple would be their last act on

this earth. If they had known what was about to happen, they would have stayed home that day. None of the 18 people standing by the tower of Siloam knew that it was about to fall and crush them to death, or they would have gotten out of the way. None of the parents of the children recently murdered in Colorado imagined when they said good-bye to their children that morning that it would be the last time. None of those in Oklahoma who perished in the tornadoes had any idea that they only had hours to live. My son-in-law, Shane, spent the day working in the town of Moore, which later was leveled by the tornado. He had no inkling that the entire town would be gone before he went to bed that night!

The point is, life is very fragile! Even though you are healthy and young, you could be in your coffin tonight. Because you are a sinner (13:2), you have one pressing need, to get right with God today, before you, too, perish. The second time (13:4), Jesus uses the word “debtors,” rather than sinners, which relates back to His illustration in 12:58-59, that we all are debtors against God. Either we will pay for our sin by eternal separation from God in hell, or we trust in the death of Jesus as the sinless substitute who bore God’s wrath on our behalf. Whenever we hear of a tragedy, we should immediately apply it to our own hearts by making sure that we are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5). The key question we should ask ourselves is, “Am I truly repentant for my sins?”

3. Tragedies should drive us to repentance, which will spare us from perishing.

Twice (13:3, 5) Jesus emphasizes, “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” If we don’t want to perish, we had better understand what Jesus meant by repentance!

A. The meaning of repentance is to turn to God from our sin.

We must understand at the outset that repentance cannot atone for our sin. The blood of Christ alone satisfies God’s just wrath against our sin. We can weep over our sins for days, but our tears will not get us into heaven. Our sorrow for our sins does not somehow cancel out the debt we owe. Only Jesus Christ and His shed blood atone for our sins. Our trust must be in Him alone, not in our own faith or repentance.

Also, we must understand that true repentance and true faith are inseparable. We can and should distinguish between them, but they are like two sides of the same coin. Thus sometimes (such as in our text; Acts 11:18; 26:20), Scripture links salvation with repentance, at other times with faith (John 3:16), and at other times with both (Mark 1:15; Acts 20:21). Calvin (*Institutes*, 3:3:1, 2) argues that repentance is born of faith, not in the sense that there is a gap of time between them, but rather that “a man cannot apply himself seriously to repentance” unless he has first recognized God’s grace and trusts that God has been merciful to him in Christ. But, by the same token, no one can receive the grace of God in Christ without immediately turning from his past sins and “applying his whole effort to the practice of repentance.”

Thus faith refers to relying on God’s promise of mercy in Christ, whereas repentance refers to the turning to God from sin that always accompanies saving faith. It should be inconceivable (although some false teachers deny it) that a sinner could with one hand lay hold of the promise of eternal life through the death of God’s Son and at the same time, with the other hand, cling to known sin. The hands that reach out to Christ to receive pardon must also let go of the sin that needs pardoning. As J. C. Ryle puts it, “There never was one washed in the blood of Christ who did not feel, and mourn, and confess, and hate his own sins” (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], 3:110).

Faith and repentance are both initial actions, which God grants at the moment of salvation, and continually repeated actions that we must practice the rest of our lives. While a believer may experience hard times when his faith falters and he refuses to repent of known sin, no true believer can live in unbelief and sin as a pattern of life. The Christian life is marked by continual faith in the Savior’s blood and continual turning to God from our sins.

In order to repent of our sins initially and to grow in repentance, we need to get a bigger view of God’s absolute holiness and of His right to judge sinners; and we need a deeper view of our own sinfulness, down to the heart level. Both Jesus’ words in 13:3 & 5 and the parable that follows assume God’s sovereign right to judge every sinner. He is the creator and rightful owner of all that exists. It’s His vineyard and we are His fig trees, planted there for

His purpose and use. As the owner of the fig trees, God has the right to expect those trees to produce fruit for His use. If they do not produce, He is perfectly just to cut down those trees and throw them in the fire. No one can dare say, "What do You think You're doing?" if God decides to cut down an unfruitful tree. He made it for His purpose; He owns it; He can do what He chooses with it. The more we see of God's sovereign and holy right to judge His creation, the quicker we will be to repent of our sins.

But also, to repent initially and to grow in daily repentance, we also must see our utter sinfulness and rebellion before Him. The owner of the vineyard planted these trees within the confines of the wall of his vineyard. They enjoyed his protection, his nurture, and his care. They drank up water from his supply and nutrients from his soil. But they were useless in the purpose for which the owner planted them. They didn't produce any fruit.

In the same way, every person who has ever lived on this planet was created by a good and merciful God for His purpose, to bring glory to Him. Every person breathes God's air, drinks God's water, eats God's food, and partakes of the life that God has granted him in His beautiful creation. Yet how many live only for themselves and their own pleasure, with no regard for God and His glory! Although through creation and conscience, if not through His Word, everyone knows that there is a holy God, they suppress the truth in unrighteousness and disregard God's merciful warnings. If God should bring any tragedy into their lives, rather than humbling themselves and confessing their own sin and their need for God's pardon, they often rail at Him, as if they deserved only blessings from His hand! As the Proverbs 19:3 (NIV) observes, "A man's own folly ruins his life, yet his heart rages against the Lord."

Jesus, then, is teaching that because of our sin, none of us deserves exemption from tragedies. If we all got what we deserve, we would instantly perish. Since life is fragile and the future is uncertain, we all need to get right with God before we die. The way to get right with God is through genuine heart repentance, where we confess our sins to Him and turn to Him from sin to receive His mercy. When we see someone else going through a tragedy, it should drive us to apply all these things to ourselves. Tragedies are God's gracious reminders that a worse end than a horrible death

awaits us if we do not repent. As He said (12:5), "I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who after He has killed has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!"

"But," you may ask, "how can I know that my repentance is genuine? If repentance spares me from perishing eternally, I want to know that my repentance is real."

B. The test of true repentance is fruitfulness.

The parable (13:6-9) underscores the message of 13:1-5, that judgment is approaching and that we must bring forth the fruits of repentance before it is too late. The parable primarily applied to the nation Israel, which was about to reject her Messiah and come under national judgment. The three years of the parable may refer to the three years of Christ's ministry in their midst, or it may just be a way of saying, "There has been sufficient time for the nation to bear the fruits of repentance. If they don't bear fruit soon, they will be cut down."

But, of course, the parable also applies to individual repentance, especially to those of us in the church. The fig tree wasn't a wild one that sprouted up along the road where someone threw a fig seed. This tree was planted by the owner within the walls of his vineyard, which points to the special privileges of those who sit in church and hear the Word of God. If such people do not respond to the message of God's grace by repenting of their sins and seeking to be fruitful in God's kingdom, they are not just neutral. They are destructive to the owner's purpose, in that they are just using up ground that otherwise could be fruitful. They are endangering their own souls and harming others as well.

What are the fruits of repentance? They include the whole process of growth in holiness that begins at salvation and continues until we are with the Lord. G. Campbell Morgan points out that just as the owner could expect figs from a fig tree, so God expects manhood from men (*The Westminster Pulpit* [Baker], 4:338). And, the true meaning of humanity, or manhood, is seen in the perfect Man, the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, fruitfulness is Christ-likeness in our character and in our conduct. The fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) is a succinct list to begin to work on. While believers will never be sinlessly perfect in this life, they will make continual progress in

holiness, not just outwardly, but in the heart, as they walk in repentance and in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Calvin has a very helpful discussion of this process in the *Institutes*, 3:3:8-20).

Conclusion

There is one other aspect of the parable that I have not mentioned: the role of the vineyard-keeper, who appeals to the owner to give him time to dig around the tree and fertilize it, in the hopes that it will yet bear fruit the next year. "If not," he says, "cut it down." This is a beautiful picture of God's patience and mercy in Christ. As 2 Peter 3:9 tells us, "The Lord ... is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance."

The fact that a tragedy similar to the recent ones in Colorado and Oklahoma has not hit you should show you God's great patience. If you have not repented of your sins and if you're not bearing fruit in God's vineyard, there is still time. But, don't mistake God's patience to mean that His axe will never fall. His patience does have a limit. Death and the final judgment could hit you at any moment. Your need to respond to God's offer of repentance and pardon is urgent! Life is fragile; none are exempt from tragedies. But, if you have fled to Christ for refuge and you're bringing forth the fruits of repentance in your life, you are ready if tragedy strikes. You *will not* perish!

Discussion Questions

1. How can we deal with the fear that a tragedy may strike our loved ones or us?
2. Why doesn't God exempt believers from tragedies? Why does He not just punish the wicked with tragedies?
3. How can a Christian know if he or she is truly repentant? What are some signs of true repentance?
4. Some argue that repentance is not necessary for salvation, because salvation is by faith alone. What Scriptures refute this? How would you counter their arguments?

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