

Disaster, Repentance, and One More Chance

Luke 13:1-9

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Does everything happen for a reason? In the face of tragedy, people want to think so. A child dies, and people gather at the funeral saying things like “God needed an angel” or “I guess it was the Lord’s will” or “It must have been better for her.” As a representative of Jesus, I am supposed to reassure everybody that God has things under control and paste a smiley face over the big question mark.

The truth is that if I were really acting like Jesus I might say something like “Are you nuts? Are you consoling yourself by calling this a good thing? Do you think God made this happen? Don’t you understand that this is tragic, that life is fragile, that the world is a messed-up place where some things happen for no reason? Wouldn’t it be more fruitful to be reflecting on the fact that *your* life is fragile, that every relationship you have is precious, and that you’d better orient yourself to God before it’s too late?”

In Luke 13, people come to Jesus and tell him about a tragedy—not a natural disaster but state-sponsored terror. Some Galileans, like Jesus, were offering a sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem and the Roman governor Pilate had them killed—just as he would soon kill Jesus. The Galileans’ blood was mixed with the blood of their sacrifices. Murder is bad anytime, but this is more like one of those stories of people being murdered in the middle of a church service. It’s not only awful on a human level, but it is a kind of desecration. And it does raise in a special way the question of why God lets these things happen. If God doesn’t protect you in church, where does he protect you?

It’s not clear why these people told Jesus this story about Pilate. It could have been to raise the question of why God lets things like that happen. But from the tone of Jesus’ response I have another guess. Jesus had just been talking about how you ought to make peace with your accuser and settle the case before you get to court and get thrown in prison. What Jesus meant was that we should settle with God by repenting before God throws us in prison. But what some people heard, apparently, was “you should make peace with the authorities who can throw you in prison.” So they say, “Yeah, like those guys from Galilee that didn’t know how to get along with the Romans and got whacked right there in the Temple!” The subtext is something like “I guess they had it coming.”

Jesus says, “Wait a minute. Do you think that those guys who were killed were worse sinners than everyone else in Galilee? No way. They didn’t deserve to die any more or less than anyone else. These things just happen in this world. You look at those people and think they must have deserved it. You know what? The truth is that *you* deserve it just as much. And you don’t know when death *will* come to you. Unless you change, you’re going to wind up like they did.”

Jesus would have made a lousy pastor, right? Not content with that one slap in the face, he brings up another example of a tragedy—this time not a massacre but a construction accident, most likely not the result of any sin except the sin of doing work on the cheap. “You remember when that tower fell and 18 people were killed. Do you think that those 18 were worse sinners than the other people in Jerusalem who didn’t get killed that day? Don’t be ridiculous. That’s not the way the world works and you know it. Why do you keep telling yourselves that everything

has an explanation? Does that keep your fear at bay? Here's the situation: death can be random. You don't know how long you've got. You need to repent while you can."

The rabbis made this point in the Mishnah and the Talmud. Rabbi Eliezer said that a person should repent the day before his death. But his students (including Akiva) said that a person could die any day, therefore all of life should be lived as repentance. John the Baptist had preceded Jesus calling for repentance, because the Messiah was coming. Jesus came preaching repentance because the kingdom of God was at hand. What does it mean to repent? It does not mean to regret what you did. It does not mean to apologize for what you did. The word for repent in the New Testament means to turn, to change direction, to reorient yourself to a new life. John the Baptist called for "fruits worthy of repentance"—that is, behavior that shows that your mind has changed. Jesus picks up that idea of the fruits of repentance in the next story he tells.

A man planted a fig tree among all the grape vines in his vineyard. At the right time of year he went out looking for figs to eat, but there were no figs. So the man said to his gardener, "Just cut this tree down. This is the third year I've had it and it still hasn't grown any figs. When I plant a fig tree, I want figs. This tree is just wasting soil. Get rid of it." This is your situation, Jesus is saying. This is your situation as a nation, because God is still looking for justice and righteousness in his people and he has not found it. Jerusalem is on the verge of destruction, as I have been warning you. But I think Jesus is also saying that this is *our* situation. God created us in his image for a purpose: to have a relationship with him and to share in his mission in the world, to produce fruit like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. God wanted us to live together in love with compassion for the poor and the weak and to live in peace with our enemies. God planted us but we are not bearing that fruit, so we stand under God's judgment. We are going to be destroyed if we don't bear the fruit God is looking for.

But in this story the gardener intercedes on behalf of the poor fig tree. He understands, I suppose, that you never know about fruit trees. You never know just how long it will take a young one to bear fruit. You never know how it's going to respond to the weather and to pollination. "Boss, let's just wait one more year. Maybe this'll be the year for figs. Let me fertilize it real good and let's just see what happens. If it still doesn't have any fruit next year, then we can cut it down." Is it too much to see that as Jesus' role—buying time for people to repent, to change, proclaiming the kingdom before the day of judgment? I don't think so. But remember, Jesus never says that there *is* no judgment. He just says that there is time to turn to God in faith and change your life.

Early Christians asked their leader Peter why the day of judgment had not come *already*. Didn't Jesus say it would come? Didn't the world deserve it? Peter wrote to them (2 Peter 3:9) that God is not slow about keeping his promise to set the world right. It's not that God is behind schedule, it's that God is patient. The truth about God is that God does not really want *anyone* to perish; God wants everyone to repent. God is giving the world extra time, but there is no way that God can save people who don't turn to him with a willingness to change their lives.

I think we would prefer a God who just saves everybody without repentance, but that is not the God we have. That would be a God who doesn't care what kind of people we are becoming, who doesn't care what direction we are headed. That would be a God who doesn't give us the freedom to choose the direction of our lives—to choose to face in the direction of God and his life or to face in the direction of selfishness and death. We like the Jesus who says that we should not judge, but we forget that he is saying "Leave the judging to God." We forget the Jesus who says that the main issue is for us to repent, to turn our lives toward God in a way that produces the justice and mercy God wants.

So to step back for a moment: here we have a text in which Jesus talks about two disasters and says that what we really ought to focus on is not why these things happened but rather where we stand in relation to God. If our lives can be wiped out in an instant by enemies and accidents, we have reason to think about whether our lives right now are oriented toward God, because someday we are going to have to answer to God. Deep down we know that but we are able to ignore it in day-to-day life. But disasters strike enough fear in our hearts that we ask ourselves “What’s it all about?” Listen to that question, Jesus says, and repent. I am holding a door open for you. For the moment, judgment has been postponed. But I can’t guarantee how long this will last.

Since we are praying about the Gulf disaster, I’ve been thinking about how Jesus’ teaching relates to that. I think Jesus would ask us “Do you think the people of the Gulf are more sinful than we are?” Are they worse than us because they have made deals with oil companies? So have we. Do they deserve it because they have funny accents and sound dumb to us? Of course not. Could God be punishing them because they are Bible-thumpers and right-wingers down there? Jesus says, “No, it has nothing to do with the victims. There is no justice reason why that oil is not washing up on Block Island.”

But shouldn’t the people of BP repent? Yes. But Jesus will not stop there. He insists on moving to the question: Shouldn’t *you* repent? What makes you think that it my sight you are any less sinful than BP? Every time you identify a sinner to despise you are letting yourself off the hook. How have you contributed to a society where profit is the prime value, where we look the other way when poor people around the world suffer so that the rich can have all they want? When is the last time you said no to an electronic gadget? Have you expressed a willingness to pay more for energy so that the environment can be protected? It may be that this disaster, like so many disasters before, is an opportunity to repent. The owner is giving us one more chance to get it right before we bring destruction on ourselves.

Of course Jesus is not only concerned with this one issue. He is concerned with whether we love God with all that we are, and whether we love our neighbors as ourselves. What we need to repent of is the failure to love. Our behavior shows that our first love is not God. My checkbook proves it. My first love is myself, my comfort, my well-being, and the happiness of people who make me happy. Our whole society lives by that virtue, what we call enlightened self-interest. That’s the basis of democracy and capitalism, and national interests are nothing more than self-interest writ large. Jesus tells us over and over to turn away from all of that: to give God our first love and then love our neighbors—including our enemies, the poor, sinners, beggars, the disabled—to do what is in the best interest of our enemies rather than what is in our own interests. That’s what he means when he tells us to repent.

Dallas Willard began his book *The Divine Conspiracy* with this story: Recently a pilot was practicing high-speed maneuvers in a jet fighter. She turned the controls for what she thought was a steep ascent—and flew straight into the ground. She was unaware that she had been flying upside down. Our issue is that we have lost our orientation to God. To repent is to regain our sense of what is up and what is down.

Becca went to see a pain management doctor this week. He told her that while he was training at Harvard he got to meet Mike Tyson, who was in for a psychiatric evaluation. This young doctor told Tyson, “I can’t do anything for you, but I can help people with their pain after you beat them up. But one thing I don’t work on is ears.” The doctor was quickly escorted out of the room.

Details magazine has an interview with Mike Tyson in their current issue, and it sounds like a case study in repentance. Tyson says, “The first stage of my life was just a whole bunch of selfishness. Just a whole bunch of gifts to myself and people who didn’t necessarily deserve it. Now I’m 44, and I realize that my whole life is just a f***ing waste. ‘Greatest man on the planet’? I wasn’t half the man I thought I was. So if there’s a big plan now, it’s just to give—it’s selflessness, caring for the people who deserve it.”

I’m not holding up Mike Tyson as an example for you. He is still filled with self-loathing, calling himself a pig and “a piece of s***.” I don’t know if he knows anything about Jesus. But before I let you laugh at Big Mike, I think I ought to say like Jesus, “Is Mike Tyson a worse sinner than you? What about you? Unless you repent your life too is just a waste.” If you don’t see the fruit of God’s kingdom in your life, there is still time. This may be the year that everything changes. This may be the year for figs.