

Unless You Repent

Introduction

The Text

¹There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. ⁴Or 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? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” (Luke 13:1–5)

A Long History with a Helpful Text

- A. I have a bit of a long history with this text. I always feel it a particularly helpful place to turn whenever tragedy strikes our nation or world in some significant way.
1. The first time I really engaged these verses in a sermon, I remember, was immediately following the school shooting at Virginia Tech (April 16, 2007) where some 33 people were killed and another 17 injured, making it the deadliest school shooting by far in US history. I was a college pastor at the time, and so, understandably, the students at Cal Poly were all shaken up by what they were seeing in the news and reading in the papers.
 - a. So where did I take them to try to help us process and respond appropriately? Well, quite naturally, I thought of [Luke 13:1-5](#).
- B. I have found that these sorts of catastrophes can be severely disorienting and we are often left wondering how we should interpret them, how we should respond to them, where is God in the middle of all of this, what is He doing or saying if anything at all?
1. In the face of such difficult questions, there really is perhaps no better text to turn to than the one before us this morning. It’s the same sort of thing that Jesus is speaking into here.
- C. If you noticed, two horrific events are outlined side by side for us:
1. The first discussed in [vv. 1-3](#) has a more human cause—Galilean Jews were offering sacrifices to YHWH, perhaps at the time of the Passover or something like that, and for some reason lost to history (we don’t know why), Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea at the time, ordered that they be put to death at once. The matter was so urgent, in fact, that the Roman soldiers seemingly stormed onto the temple grounds and killed the Galileans even as they were in the middle of offering sacrifices, so that their own blood mingled with the blood of their offerings.

- a. In our day, it would be like cops breaking down the door of this school, rushing in on us in the middle of our service here this morning and mercilessly executing us.
 - 2. The second event discussed there in vv. 4-5 has a more natural, even accidental, cause. A tower structurally somehow seems to have given way and it fell on and killed 18 of the people walking by below it. You're just going for a stroll and a building falls on you. Just a fluke, accidental, seemingly natural chain of events, and these 18 people are dead. Daddy kissed his wife and daughters in the morning, but he's not making it back for supper.
- D. These two events outlined here really do provide the two basic categories into which all the tragedies we hear of in the news fit in one way or another, right?
 - 1. Some of the tragedies come as a result of human evil:
 - a. Islamic terrorists hijack planes and fly them into the heart of New York City crashing into the Twin Towers bringing them to the ground, killing over 2500 people.
 - b. A lone gunman from a distant window lets loose on a mob of unsuspecting fans at a music festival in Las Vegas.
 - 2. But other tragedies come as a result of more unintentional or natural processes:
 - a. A massive earthquake out in the middle of the Indian Ocean unleashes a series of tsunamis that ravage the coastlands and, when all is said and done, kill over 225,000 people in 14 different countries.
 - b. A single spark from a downed power line, perhaps, ignites a fire that, because the wind is hot and ripping just right, spreads rapidly and consumes an entire city along with at least 86 of its inhabitants unable to escape the flames in time.
- E. In one way or another, these sorts of tragedies always call for a response from us. We have to do something with them. But what?
 - 1. Well, Jesus is going to help us here, but before we look more closely at what He has to say to us, I thought it might be good to step back and consider the various ways people tend to respond to suffering and tragedy in this fallen world.
 - a. I have five possible responses for us to consider and we'll move slowly back towards this text and the proper response that Jesus is calling us to.

Response #1: Denial

- A. I started thinking about the various responses we have to suffering and tragedy the other night when I was reading a book to my girls before bed.
 - 1. Admittedly, I think the book was a little too heavy for them. In my defense, it looked like a picture book, like something for children. It was written by a Christian author and recommended for kids by people I trust. But as we got in I realized almost immediately the

story was going to bring us to face some pretty tough issues that my girls may or not be ready for.

2. There's this young boy whose dad left him and his mom and he has to be the man of the house. And he's hurting and sad and alone. And all he wants is for his dad to come back and for things to be happy. And his dad does come back momentarily, and we were all excited and hopeful, but then it gets even worse. It's just heartbreaking.
 3. Now a Jesus figure does show up and help the little boy, but still, this book was pretty raw and real. Things don't always get better in the way we want. Sometimes life is hard and we have to trust Jesus to be enough anyways.
 - a. But one of my girls, as we're reading this and things with the dad are going bad, she just starts bawling and says: "I don't like this book. I don't want to read it again!"
- B. Now it actually led to some great conversations as we snuggled in bed about the reality and this fallen world and sin and what a lot of kids deal with and how we can have compassion and bring the hope of Jesus to them.
1. But I think her response there—now I totally get it, she's a kid and perhaps it was simply too much for her to wrap her little heart and mind around—but I still think it is actually, at a basic, instinctual level, the same sort of thing we can do even as adults.
 - a. If I had to put a word on it, I suppose we might call it Denial: "I don't want to think about the fact that this world is painful. I don't want to watch the news and hear about all the tragic stuff that's happening in the world. I would rather flip over to the Hallmark Channel and watch some of those movies where everything ends up happy and right in the end. If I'm going to put up paintings on my wall it's going to be Thomas Kinkade, where it's like perennially Christmas time, where there's always a turkey in the oven, where your neighbors actually go around caroling, and everything has this peaceful little glow to it."
- C. We have various ways we go about this denial thing.
1. Sometimes we try to just numb our sense of the pain with things like drugs or alcohol. Other times we try to distract our attention away from it by busying ourselves with other more superficial pursuits.
 - a. Sometimes, and I hate to say it, I don't mean to spoil your Super Bowl Sunday, but sometimes, we just watch football. "I don't want to think about the pain, the hardship, the brokenness, so I think I'll just escape into this."

Response #2: Triumphalism

- A. Megan and I sometimes enjoy watching medical dramas. And one of the things you start to notice over time is that the surgeons in particular can start to take on this god-complex. "That person was

dying of heart failure or whatever, but now because of the work of my hands, they live.” And you can kind of just see the ego expanding. “I have power over death itself.”

1. I have not seen the movie “Malice,” but I came across a quote from Alec Baldwin’s character in it. He’s a surgeon in the movie, and he’s reflecting on this sort of power that he feels he has, and he says this: “When someone goes into that chapel and they fall on their knees and they pray to God that their wife doesn’t miscarry or that their daughter doesn’t bleed to death or that their mother doesn’t suffer acute neural trauma from postoperative shock, who do you think they’re praying to? . . . You ask me if I have a God complex. Let me tell you something: I am God.” “Let’s be real. I’m the one they are praying to. I decide if their loved one lives or dies. I am God.”
- B. Few in our culture would say it so starkly, but many may indeed be thinking it, at least in roundabout ways. We have this naive confidence, this mistaken sense that somehow death’s not going to get the last word on them.
1. You see, there are some who refuse to think of death at all. And then there are others who think of it alright, but just don’t fear it like they should. They think they can beat it—with their money, with their intellect, with their technology, with their science. It’s what I’m calling here Triumphalism.
- C. I’ve referenced in months past how some of the tech elites even right here in Silicon Valley are trying to use their money and technology and things to beat death—investing in companies like Ambrosia that gives blood transfusions from young people to old people in attempt to prolong life, or companies like Alcor that literally preserve your brain in goo in hopes that someday technology will advance to such a point that you can be revived, hooked up to an avatar of some sort and live forever. It sounds ridiculous but these brilliant people are doing it.
1. The sense among this triumphalist group is that as creatures we are ever-evolving and will soon enough find a way to cure all human ills and beat even death itself.
- D. Well, brothers and sisters, I regret to inform you that such a thing isn’t going to happen (at least not in this way). This doesn’t mean we don’t seek to make medical advancements. It doesn’t mean we don’t strive to improve our science and technology.
1. It just means that we are not God, we are human. And as human beings we are positioned under the curse of God because of our sin. And no amount of money or medicine or technology will save us from that.

Response #3: Despair

- A. So, then, I suppose we should now swing things to the opposite extreme. For while some see the threat of death and respond with a triumphalist hope, others see it and slip into an almost nihilistic sense of Despair. Do you know what I mean by this?
1. The idea is that some look out honestly at life in a fallen world and think: “What is the point? I’m not going to deny that death is coming. I’m not going to naively think I can

somehow defeat it. I see it. I get it. But in the face of this impending reality, what's the point?" It feels gloomy. It feels like the only intellectually honest response is to despair.

- B. The author of Ecclesiastes is clearly, at points, teetering on the edge of this very thing. Consider a few of the lines from the poem with which he opens the book: "²Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.³ What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?⁴ A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. . . .¹¹ There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after" (Eccl 1:2-3, 11).
1. He is looking out at life in a fallen world and wondering what it's all about. He is struggling to find the meaning of life in the face of death. "We labor to gain only to lose in the end. Generations come and generations go. We live and then we die. And then all we are and all we've done is forgotten. What is the point of life?" Later, he says explicitly that, in view of this vanity, "I turned about and gave my heart up to despair . . ." (2:20a).
- C. Plenty of other poets have come after the author of Ecclesiastes and said much the same sort of thing:
1. Consider these line from Edmund Vance Cooke: "This life's a hollow bubble, Don't you know? / Just a painted piece of trouble, Don't you know? / We come to earth to cry, / We grow older and we sigh, / Older still, and then we die! / Don't you know?"
 2. Or what about these lines from James Montague's poem "No Hope": "'Twas ever thus, since childhood's hour / I never had a joy, / That some malign, superior power / Did not, [before] long, destroy. . . . / To gain some joy from this I try, / Though life is hard and rough, / Yet I suppose that I shall die / If I live long enough!"
- D. I wonder if this has been your response, if you've ever felt this way—if over the years of reading the headlines, and seeing friends and family suffer, and even experiencing a lot of it yourself, there's settled in you a sort of despair: "I guess this is what life is: a slow, or sometimes abrupt, dying."
- E. But this response, though it claims to face reality honestly and without flinching, is still not taking in the full picture. Life is not just hard and then you die. There is much that is beautiful here. There is another narrative woven in alongside the tragedy. There is not just doom and gloom. There seems to be some indication to hope. (More on that in a moment).

Response #4: Comparison

- A. Now we come to response #4, what I might call Comparison. And this is really what we see Jesus starting to address in particular back in our text. You remember what He says: "^{2b} . . . Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?^{3a} No . . .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?^{5a} No . . ." (Luke 13: 2b-3a, 4-5a).

- B. What's Jesus doing here? Well, He's combatting yet another inappropriate response to the tragedies that take place in the world around us. It's a response that was particularly prominent in His day, but I suppose it's not much less prominent in ours.
1. It's the response that says: "Well, if such and such things happened to them, I imagine it's because they probably deserve it in one way or another. It is just God giving them their due. Those things happened to them and not to me because they are worse sinners than me."
 - a. So we take what was intended, as we shall soon see, to be a warning from God to us and we instead turn it into a moment of self-congratulating.
- C. Now, I do understand why, even biblically, we might be prone to think such things. The real question emerging in all of this is does God bring particular judgments upon particular people because they have committed particular sins? Can we draw a direct line from the sin of a person to the judgment of God—so that when God lets a bad thing befall you I know it's because you did a bad thing to Him?
1. Can we draw these direct lines? Well, the answer, as you may now have grown to expect is: yes, and no.
- D. At times a particular judgment is correspondent to a particular sin:
1. Adam and Eve sin and there's that direct judgment upon them for it, right? They are thrust out from Eden and the presence of God.
 2. Back in Noah's day, God flooded the earth as judgment in response to the fact that ["the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually"](#) (Gen 6:5).
 3. Moses, because He directly disobeyed God and struck instead of spoke to the rock in the wilderness was laid to rest in view of the Promised Land, but he never set his feet down on it.
 4. David, because of all those shenanigans with Bathsheba, God says through Nathan that the child she became pregnant with is going to die ([2 Sam 12:14](#)).
 5. Ananias and Saphira, because they lied to the Holy Spirit just drop dead as judgment from God.
 6. King Herod, because he happily and arrogantly received the people's praise unto himself, he was immediately struck down by God and eaten by worms ([Acts 12:23](#)).
 7. In the Corinthian church, we are told, because some were eating and drinking the Lord's supper in an unworthy manner, getting drunk on wine and things—Paul tells us that God was disciplining them, causing them to get sick and die ([1 Cor 11:30](#)).
 - a. So, certainly, we know that there are times where God bring particular judgments upon particular people because they have committed particular sins. Clear lines can, at times, be drawn from sin to suffering.
- E. But it's not always, by any stretch, so clear.
1. This was the big mistake Job's friends made with him in his suffering, right?

- a. Eliphaz trying to make sense of what's happened to Job says in Job 4:7-9: “⁷ Remember: who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off?⁸ As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same.⁹ By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed.” In other words: “Job, if there's hard stuff going on in your life, it's your fault. You're the problem here. What did you do to deserve this from God? Clearly, you must be a worse sinner than me.”
 - i. Eliphaz will say as much even more forcefully in one of his later speeches in Job 22:4-5: “⁴ Is it for your fear of him that he reproveth you and enters into judgment with you?⁵ Is not your evil abundant? There is no end to your iniquities.”
 - b. Well, all of this might seem, on the surface, plausible, except for the fact that it flies in the face of God's own estimation of Job at the very beginning before all of this suffering began: “[There is none like [Job] on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil” (Job 1:8).
 - i. So these things have not come upon Job because of some particular sin he has sowed and now he must reap, it is because of some mysterious providence of God through which He would in the end actually bring greater blessing to Job and through him to others.
2. And, of course, we see that this same mistaken idea carried on into NT times. That's why in John 9:1-3 we read: “¹ As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. ² And his disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ ³ Jesus answered, ‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.’”
- F. And we must admit, I fear, that we often carry this same conception of things ourselves. When something bad happens to another we instantly begin to talk amongst ourselves as to what they must've done to deserve such a fate with little sense for the nuance involved and the reality that sometimes it is not for a person's particular sin that a particular suffering has come upon them.
- G. Indeed, I do think it is worth pausing and applying these things even more personally for a brief moment. Sometimes when we personally suffer, when providence seems to be frowning upon us, when our dreams and desires seem to hit one roadblock after another, do we not often step back and ask God, “What have I done?!” Are we not prone to think that God is punishing us for some sin we've committed here or there?
- 1. Certainly, again, I do think this may at times be the case, but, let me assure you: He is not going to hide the reason from you. If you seek Him out, He will show you.
 - a. Think of how He sent prophet after prophet to Israel to warn them and warn them before He ever was willing to bring down discipline upon them. Think of the Corinthians again, God sent Paul to tell them exactly what the offense was.

- b. If you open to Him and genuinely ask—like David at the end of [Psalm 139](#): “²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!²⁴ And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (vv. 23–24)—God will show you!
 - i. And if you are genuine in that, and there is nothing that He brings to mind, if the Spirit isn’t convicting you of this or that, then you must resolve to see that God is indeed not trying to bring your attention to some particular sin, but like Job and this man in [John 9](#), He must have some grace and glory for you in it.

Response #5: Repentance

- A. Nonetheless, we are dealing with our various responses to suffering and tragedy when it befalls others, and here we come now to what Jesus is teaching us the proper response truly is.
 - 1. He moves us away from playing the comparison game and the self-congratulating that can follow, and instead we see what we are to do there in both [vv. 3, 5](#): “[unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.](#)”
- B. What a word! It may at first strike us as lacking compassion, but I assure you, it cannot get more compassionate than this.
 - 1. Jesus is saying, when tragedy strikes others, don’t waste your time trying to tease out why this or that is happening to them and not to you. Instead, let it be an opportunity for you to consider where you stand with God. For unless you stand rightly with Him, the same sort of judgments will soon befall you.
 - a. These are not moments for comparison or self-congratulation, they are moments for self-reflection and repentance. Wake up and flee the wrath of God that is soon coming for all, “[for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God](#)” ([Rom 3:23](#)).
- C. This word, again, sounds harsh, but there’s something beautiful in it. The call to repent is at once both a threat and an invitation. It is both a warning of impending judgment and an offer of free, unmerited grace!
 - 1. Because here’s what we know. When Jesus calls us to repent He is calling us to turn from our sin and take refuge in Him. He will shelter us from the coming judgment we deserve by taking that judgment for us.
- D. Consider it:
 - 1. Jesus too would be put to death by Pilate, only His blood wouldn’t merely mingle with the blood of the sacrifices, His blood would be the blood of the sacrifice: “¹⁸ [\[Y\]ou were ransomed . . . , not with perishable things such as silver or gold,¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot](#)” ([1 Pet 1:18–19](#)).

2. Jesus too would stand under the trembling tower of God's wrath. On Him the full weight of it would fall. And, like Job's friends, everyone standing about on that day thought surely this was an indication of His own sin and God's rejection of Him. As Isaiah prophesied: "[W]e esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted" (Is 53:4b).
 - a. But Isaiah also leaves no room for doubt as to just why these things are happening to Him: "^{4a} Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows . . . ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed" (vv. 4a, 5).
 - i. When He is hanging lifeless on the cross, crushed under the weight of God's holy wrath against sin, we are not looking at what He deserved, we are looking at what we deserve. It is our grief, our sorrow, our transgressions, our iniquities, but in love and grace He takes upon Himself the wounds such things deserve from a holy God and grants to us in their place: peace.

E. Listen, here's what's so great about all of this:

1. Because of Jesus, when tragedy strikes our nation or our neighborhood, our family or our friends, when we come to face the hard stuff of this life, we don't have to go the way of denial. We don't have to run from it. We can face it.
2. But we don't face it with that triumphalist self-confidence, we are humbled by it. It puts us in our place, reminds us that we deserve God's judgment, that the curses of [Gen 3](#) still rest on the world because of our sin.
3. But, even though we're humbled by it, we're not given over to nihilistic despair. We get that there's hope, an offer of forgiveness, of salvation, of eternal life.
4. And this hope doesn't come by comparing ourselves to others and trying to outdo or somehow work for God's favor more than the next, it comes from looking upon the cross and seeing the One who takes my sin and gives to me His perfect righteousness and peace with God.
5. In other words, we can repent and run once more towards the open arms of our Savior.