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Luke 13:1-9

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# INTERPRETING THE TIME: A FALLING TOWER AND A FAILING TREE

*SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

When Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005 certain religious leaders were quick to identify the disaster as divine retribution for sin, though they disagreed on what that sin was: the sexual immorality of New Orleans, or abortion, or failure to support Israel sufficiently, or several other proposed sins. What they agreed on was that those who died deserved to die; they had brought judgment down upon their own heads. This blaming of natural disasters on the sins of the victims is unfortunately the gut reaction of too many leaders who really ought to know better. It is embarrassing to see leaders say these things repeatedly. But these leaders are expressing an attitude that is all too common even among Christians: bad things happen because we must have done something wrong. We are harboring hidden sin, or we have insufficient faith. It is certainly true that we all have sin in our heart, and that we all have insufficient faith, but are the calamities that befall us divine retribution for our failures?

Jesus addresses this issue in our passage for today, Luke 13:1-9. The text divides readily into two sections. The first part (13:1-5) concerns two events of recent news and the interpretation to be drawn from them. The second part (13:6-9) is a parable told by Jesus to reinforce his interpretation of these two recent events.

## I. Two Recent Tragedies (13:1-5)

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

Luke wants us to read this incident in conjunction with the previous section. At the very moment that Jesus has been rebuking the crowds for their failure to interpret the present time (12:56), some people from the crowd tell him about an incident that has happened in the present time. ESV states that these people “were present,” but the verb (*pareimi*) is usually translated as “came” (so HCSB); it means to be present as a result of having just come. Here’s how I picture the scene: as Jesus is still speaking, some people come running in breathless. Perhaps they have come all the way from Jerusalem, or maybe they have just heard about this incident through the grapevine. Either way they rush to tell Jesus. They blurt out, “Have you heard the latest outrage? Have you heard what Pilate has done now?” There is no record of this incident in any other sources, but it is exactly the sort of thing Pilate would have done. For ten years after the death of Herod the Great (4 BC), Herod’s eldest son Archelaus had ruled over Judea (4 BC–AD 6) until the Romans deposed him for being such a bad king. Rome placed Judea under direct rule, appointing a prefect

who governed from Caesarea, the magnificent city that Herod the Great had built on the coast. Pilate was governor for ten years (AD 26-36). He was a harsh ruler who wielded the power of Rome with an iron fist. He brutally suppressed any uprising. He was so brutal that after ten years Rome recalled him and sent a new governor.

For twenty years Judea had bristled under direct Roman rule. Now Pilate had outdone himself. It is not just that he killed some Jews, but that he killed them when they had come to worship God. These were Galileans, meaning they had come on pilgrimage to Jerusalem for one of the three annual festivals. At such times the Roman governor also would go up to Jerusalem to keep an eye on proceedings and watch out for any trouble. There is no mention of these Galileans being trouble-makers, though Galilee was a hotbed of rebel fever against Rome. At their moment of greatest dedication to God, obeying the command to celebrate the festival at the central site for worship, Pilate, the representative of Gentile oppression, had killed them. Their own blood and the blood of their sacrifices mingled together, crying out for justice. This was an outrage: Gentile injustice shaking its fist in the face of God.

Why did these people tell Jesus this? Were they trying to provoke a reaction from him? Were the people reporting this news hoping Jesus would interpret the present time and say, “Enough! This is sacrilege. It’s time to rise up against Rome”? Isn’t this what the Messiah is supposed to do?

Whatever reaction they were hoping to provoke, Jesus does not take the bait. Instead he throws a question back at them: “Do you think...?” How do you read the present time and the signs of the time? Did these people die because they were sinners? This has always been a common interpretation of calamity. Bad things happen to bad people; good things happen to good people. A bad thing has happened to these Galileans; therefore they must be sinners. Jesus contradicts this interpretation: his question implies that all Galileans are sinners. He drives his point home with a challenge: “You are all sinners and you all need to repent.” He diverts attention from the sin of the hated enemy to the sin of all Galileans to the sin of the crowd whom he is addressing. This would not make him popular! This is the sort of thing for which he could be lynched.

To reinforce his message, Jesus brings up his own example of recent troubling news. A tower in Siloam has collapsed killing eighteen people. Again we don’t have any external record of this event. Siloam is to the south of the temple, at the southern end of the original city of Jebus that David captured. It takes its name from the pool at the end of Hezekiah’s tunnel, where water was sent (Heb. *Shiloah*, Gk. transliteration *Siloam*) from the Gihon Spring. Were these people killed because of their sin? Again Jesus contradicts this interpretation, this time implying that all inhabitants of Jerusalem are sinners. Again he issues the same challenge, “You are all sinners and you all need to repent.”

These two little stories of recent catastrophes form a comprehensive package. One story is contributed by the crowd, the other by Jesus. One story features Galileans, the other inhabitants of Jerusalem. One story features death at the hand of oppressive human power, the other due to accidental causes. In one Jesus refers to sinners, in the other to offenders (debtors). The little word “all” is used four times. Whether you are Galileans or Jerusalemites, you are all sinners against God and debtors to God. You all need to repent, otherwise you will all likewise perish. Physical death comes to all. Eternal death comes to all sinners who have not repented.

Many in the crowd would not have taken kindly to Jesus’ inference that they were all sinners in need of repentance. The scribes and Pharisees hovering on the periphery of the crowd would certainly not have taken kindly to this, though they would have agreed that the crowd were sinners.

To persuade the crowd of the need to repent, Jesus tells a parable, and we need to read the parable in light of this call to repentance.

## 2. The Barren Fig Tree (13:6-9)

And he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And 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?’ And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’” (Luke 13:6-9)

The parable features two men: a landowner and his farmhand, a vinedresser. The landowner had a vineyard in which he had had a fig tree planted; perhaps it was the farmhand who had planted it for him. The primary purpose of any fruit tree is to produce fruit. The master had come seeking fruit from the fig tree but found none, so he seeks out the vinedresser and presents the problem: for three years he has been coming to this tree, searching for fruit but finding none. The tree has had plenty of time to yield fruit, so it must now be considered a barren tree, a failed planting. The master presents his solution: he tells the vinedresser to dig up the tree. He adds another reason: not only has the fig tree failed to produce fruit, it is also using up resources, thus depriving the vineyard. The vinedresser counters with an alternative solution. He may have planted the tree in the first place, and has presumably been looking after it. He is invested in this tree. And so he pleads for its life: let the tree alone for this year also; give it another year. The vinedresser is asking his master to forgive the fig tree: forgive it for failing to do what a fig tree ought to do, namely bear figs. The vinedresser promises to redouble his efforts: he will dig around the tree and add fertilizer. He will give it even more care than he has already been giving it. Perhaps then... If it bears fruit in the future, then... But the vinedresser doesn’t give a “then” clause; he leaves the “if” clause hanging. We ought to render the “then” clause with an ellipsis: “then...” But translators are uncomfortable with that, not unreasonably thinking that readers would be uncomfortable also. So English versions supply a “then” clause: “well and good” or similar. But if the tree does not yield fruit... The vinedresser throws the responsibility onto the master: then you cut it down. The vinedresser won’t take responsibility for cutting it down.

What are we to make of this interesting little story? The vineyard and the fig tree are surely both symbolic. In the Old Testament both are symbolic of Israel. The fullest development of the metaphor of

the vineyard is in Isaiah’s song of the vineyard (Isa 5:1-7) read earlier. The metaphor of the vineyard is one of a cluster of images that the prophets use to portray the drama between the Lord and his people. The drama unfolds in four stages: covenant, sin, judgment and restoration. In the case of the vineyard, the Lord’s covenant with his people is portrayed as the planting of a well-tended vineyard. But the vineyard yields only wild grapes, representing Israel’s covenant infidelity. In judgment the Lord ruins the vineyard which had already ruined itself. But the day is coming when the Lord will replant vines that are fruitful. Other metaphors used in the prophets to portray this same four-stage drama are sexual relations (marriage and adultery), animals (domesticated and wild), and drinking wine.

The people Jesus was addressing would have been familiar with this imagery of the vineyard and fig tree. They would have understood that Jesus was telling a story against Israel. Some interpreters differentiate the vineyard and the fig tree: the vineyard is Israel and the fig tree is more specifically the leadership, which is using up the ground, preventing the nation from flourishing.

Are the landowner and the vinedresser also symbolic? They both represent God, but quite how is open to debate. Some propose that the landowner is God and the vinedresser is Jesus. God threatens judgment, Jesus pleads mercy. Others see both the landowner and the vinedresser as God, so that God’s justice and his mercy are set against one another. Marcion in the second century was especially known for juxtaposing God’s justice and mercy; he so juxtaposed them that he proposed two different Gods: the God of the Old Testament is a harsh God of justice; the God of the New Testament is a different God, a kinder God of love, mercy and grace. I suspect that this sort of opinion lurks in the minds of many Christians.

Interpretation of the parable doesn’t require that we precisely identify the fig tree or the two characters. The point of the parable, especially when read in the light of the call to repentance in the previous section, is surely clear. Judgment is deserved but mercy is still available. There is still time to repent and be saved, but the door will not be open forever. Twice Jesus has challenged the crowd, “unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” Why should the people repent? Firstly, because they are all sinners. Jesus has used the two current events to drive this point home. But there is a second reason why they should repent: because God is a forgiving God.

The master had proposed immediate judgment on the failed fig tree, but the vinedresser begged him to forgive the tree. This drama unfolds in the parable, a fictional story. But this same drama had occurred in Israel’s own history. While Moses was atop Mount Sinai receiving from the Lord the instructions for the tabernacle, at the foot of the mountain Aaron made a golden calf for Israel. They had broken the covenant which was only forty days old. Aroused to anger, the Lord told Moses to stand aside so he could wipe Israel out and begin again with Moses. But Moses pleaded for the Lord to repent: “Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people” (Exod 32:12). The Lord did so; he listened to Moses. Moses asked the Lord, “please show me now your ways, that I may know you” (33:13). The Lord hid Moses in a cleft in the rock and passed in front of him, proclaiming his name:

**“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.” (Exod 34:6-7)**

This is how the Lord summarized himself. Moses quickly bowed down and worshiped.

A year later the scene was repeated, this time when the twelve spies reported back from their journey into the Promised Land. Israel listened to the ten spies who brought back a bad report, and decided to go back to Egypt rather than ahead into the Promised Land. Again the Lord told Moses to stand aside so he could wipe Israel out and begin again with Moses. Again Moses urged the Lord to repent. Now he had an additional argument: the Lord's prior self-revelation.

**"And now, please let the power of the Lord be great as you have promised, saying, 'The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression...' Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now." (Num 14:17-19)**

Again the Lord pardoned the people. Thereby he showed not his weakness but his power. The Lord is a forgiving God. Forgiveness is part of his nature, part of who he has revealed himself to be. He doesn't have to be coerced into forgiving. He delights to forgive.

The reason Jesus can urge the crowd to repent is that he knows that God forgives sin. The door is still open for Israel to repent and be forgiven. Repentance involves a change of mind, a new understanding of self and God: God is right and I am wrong. Repentance involves a turning around, a recognition that one has been heading in the wrong direction. Jesus has been calling the crowd to repent, to turn and follow him. Such repentance will bring great joy in heaven. Soon he will tell some well-loved parables showing that "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (15:7, 10). Repentance brings joy to God's heart because he loves to forgive. The door is open.

But the door will not always be open. It will not be open for much longer. Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem. When he gets there the door will begin to close. Then the nation will experience not God's mercy but his wrath in judgment. Even before Jesus began his ministry, his forerunner John the Baptist had warned of impending judgment, also using the metaphor of a tree about to be cut down. He said to the crowds:

**"Bear fruits in keeping with repentance... Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (Luke 3:8-9)**

The warnings were to no avail. A few days after Jesus' journey to Jerusalem reached its goal, the religious leaders teamed up with none other than Pilate to put Jesus to death. The door shut, but immediately before it did, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (23:34). And so Luke wrote a second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, to show how the Father fulfilled the Son's request. Luke records the apostolic preaching of the gospel; for example, in Peter's first sermon on the day of Pentecost:

**"[T]his Jesus...you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up... Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:23-24, 38)**

Even in the face of putting his Son to death, God still forgives.

### 3. Reflections for Today

The two stories and the parable were addressed to Israel. What do they have to say to us today?

#### 3.1 Theodicy

The two accounts of death—of the worshiping Galileans killed by Pilate and of the Jerusalemmites killed by the falling tower of Siloam—raise the issue of theodicy, of God's justice. Why do bad things happen and who is to blame? A very common response is to identify suffering and disasters as divine retribution for sin. Religious leaders were quick to blame Hurricane Katrina on the sins of New Orleans, or the Haiti earthquake on that nation's pact with the devil. Much of the book of Job revolves around this premise. We read the book as privileged readers who are told at the beginning that Job was "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1). His three "friends" were not so privileged. They saw the great calamities that befell Job and drew the conclusion: he must have been a great sinner.

The calamities that befell the Galileans and Jerusalemmites in our text were at least partly due to sin. Pilate was certainly sinning when he killed Jews as they were bringing their sacrifices to the Lord. Perhaps the tower of Siloam failed because of shoddy workmanship. But these calamities were not divine retribution for the sin of those who suffered. Those who died were no worse sinners than everyone else. In the Old Testament God did promise blessings for obedience and threaten curses for disobedience. But Jesus breaks the connection between suffering and disobedience.

There were undoubtedly godly Christians killed by Hurricane Katrina and by the earthquake in Haiti. Throughout the last 2000 years and around the world today many Christians have been and are being killed. They are not dying because of divine retribution on their sin. Many of them die in the course of serving the Lord. I grew up on the mission field with many stories about missionaries being killed in the line of service.

I cannot explain theodicy, how God exercises his rule and justice in the world. Good people suffer and die, bad people prosper and live. This was grievous to the psalmist (Ps 73) until he went into the Lord's sanctuary and pondered things. The wicked would eventually perish but, for the psalmist, the Lord was his portion forever; reminding himself of this brought peace to his soul.

#### 3.2 Sin and forgiveness

When Pat Robertson or other religious leaders identify Hurricane Katrina or other disasters as divine retribution on sin, they show an insufficient understanding of sin, repentance and forgiveness. Jesus demolished the classification into better sinners and worse sinners. Those who died were not worse sinners nor worse debtors than everyone else. All were sinners in need of repentance. We are all sinners. Jesus urged repentance because all are sinners and because he knew that the Lord delights to forgive sins. He taught his disciples to pray for this forgiveness: forgive us our debts (Matt 6:12), or our trespasses (based on Matt 6:14-15), or our sins (Luke 11:4). It doesn't matter which of those we pray; we are all debtors and trespassers and sinners. We sin in what we do and in what we don't do. Hence the prayer of confession in the *Book of Common Prayer* confesses both: "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done."

We confess these things, firstly because they are true. And secondly, because God forgives debts, trespasses and sins. He forgives iniquity, transgression and sin. We are promised,

**If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9)**

God is just not when he whacks us for our sins, but when he forgives us our sins. He forgives us even if we don't confess every individual sin for he knows the intent of our heart. This was hard for Martin Luther to learn; he was terrified by his unconfessed sins.

The wicked will eventually perish: those who reject God's call to repent and experience his mercy, grace and forgiveness. In the meantime it is sinners whom Jesus came to save. This included sinful Galileans and indebted Jerusalemites. It includes sinful inhabitants of New Orleans and Haiti, of San Francisco and Cupertino. It includes you and me.

### 3.3 Bearing fruit

The barren fig tree failed to produce fruit. Israel failed in the purpose for which God had elected it and entered into covenant. Plenty of sermons have been preached on this text about the dangers of failing to produce fruit. Consequently many Christians live in fear that they will be found to have produced insufficient fruit.

Israel had many advantages. Theirs were "the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, the promises,...the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ" (Rom 9:4-5). Yet still they failed to bear fruit. Why should we, who have none of these privileges, be any better? Why should we bear fruit when Israel didn't? Because we have two great advantages that Israel did not have: we are in Christ and his Spirit is in us.

Jesus told his disciples in the Upper Room:

**"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit... Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:1-5)**

Jesus is the True Vine. He is fruitful. He is the delight of his Father's eyes. We have been grafted into him, the true, fruitful vine. When we abide in him then we are fruitful, as he bears fruit in and through us.

Secondly, God's Spirit is in us, doing in us what we could never do ourselves. The Spirit is God's empowering presence in us. It is the Spirit who bears fruit in us.

So what we should focus on is not whether we are bearing fruit, but whether we are abiding in Christ and the Spirit is at work in us. For when we abide in Christ and the Spirit is in us we will bear fruit, the fruit that God intends us to bear.

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