

Repentance

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[0 : 00] Let us turn again to the scripture that we read in the Gospel according to Luke. Luke chapter 13. And we can read from the beginning of the chapter again.

There were present at that season some that told him of the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans because they suffered such things?

I tell you nay. But except ye repent ye shall all likewise perish. By comparison with the sort of tragedies with which we have become aware in the last number of months, indeed throughout the whole of 1985, tragedies by air crashes that killed hundreds of people at a time, by earthquake, by volcano, by volcanic eruption, and of course especially by the famine in Africa, these have been tragedies on such a scale as have almost numbed our thoughts.

Yet, by comparison with that, it might appear that the incidents that are referred to at the beginning of this chapter, Pilate's murdering some Jews as they were engaged in sacrificial service, or this town in Siloam that fell and killed 18 people.

By comparison, these appear to be little trivial incidents, hardly worth mentioning. But you know, tragedy is not to be measured just in terms of the numbers involved.

[1 : 59] As a matter of experience, when the numbers become so great, we cease to come to grips with the matter almost entirely.

We've got to have the matter personalized. And the TV newsmen are experts at this.

Instead of just giving you a prospect, a prospect on the total and the widespread nature of the tragedy that they're recounting, they'll hone in on the personal experience of one or two people. They'll bring before you the case of a little child that has been left fatherless, motherless, or even a little child upon whom a block of concrete fell and crushed its head.

Things like that. You can come to grips with the personal. You can come to grips with the situation where it's presented in terms like that.

[3 : 01] It's not really a question of how many but a question just of the human sorrow and anguish of heart that's involved in it all.

But whatever the scale, when anything like this happens, whether it's the wickedness of a pilot or the apparent accident, maybe through a faulty structure or something like that that makes a tower fall on people and people are killed, when anything like that happens, it raises very serious religious and moral questions.

It releases problems in the minds and hearts of people who have a firm conviction that God is good and that God is compassionate.

It doesn't bother people who have no faith in God. It doesn't bother people who have written God off. They think, well, that's just the way things happen.

There's no accounting for it. That's just the way the cookie crumbles. Things like that happen in an imperfect world and so they go stumbling on their way. But for the people, for people who believe that God is and that God is concerned, that God is in control, then it's a cause of very acute anguish and distress.

[4 : 35] How can we account for it? How does this square? How does this harmonize? How does this fit in to the truth that God is good and that God is compassionate?

I wouldn't kill a child like that. I wouldn't cause a block of concrete to fall on a little child. I wouldn't allow, if it were left to me, I tell myself, I wouldn't allow a mother go through the anguish of bringing a child to the birth and then maybe finding that he's going to live out a short span of years just like a vegetable.

I wouldn't do that sort of thing. That's what we say to ourselves. And how can God? And we say that we believe in God and we believe in the goodness and we believe in the compassion of God and people point to this, they say to us, where is now your God?

The psalmist went through that sort of experience. When he came up against problems, he faced up to situations he couldn't really square with his sense of the goodness and mercy and compassion and justice and righteousness and equity of God.

He said, it's as a sword inside my bones. It's as a sword piercing into the very marrow of my bones. When people in that situation and in that sort of time say to me, where is your God?

[6 : 11] People will ask, how, in what way did these people who have suffered these things, in what way did they offend God? Why were they picked on to suffer?

Were they any worse than others? And how then can you justify a God who kills off innocent men and women and children?

Well, that's the sort of problem that to some extent is brought before us and answered not completely, not exhaustively in the passage before us.

It's an interesting thing to notice how Jesus reacted. How Jesus reacted to the story that people told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

You know, if you were to tell today, if you were to go and tell Alan Boussak or Bishop Desmond Tutu about some blacks whom the police in South Africa had killed, you could almost write the script of what they would say to you without waiting.

[7 : 32] They'd begin to tell you about, they'd begin to expatiate on the evil of the political structures that obtain in South Africa and we would sympathise with them, we would agree, that's right, we'd nod our heads in agreement, that's quite right, it is an evil system.

They'd begin to envy against the political structures and the whole thing would be a text for a development for a South African version of liberation theology.

Now the Israelites, the Jews at this particular time were living under the oppression, were under the heel of foreign oppressors, of people who had come and taken control of their country, and Pilate was the representative of that alien government that had come and taken control of their country, and it was because he was in this position of power that he sent his soldiers to kill off those people who were engaged in sacrifice to God, and people came and told Jesus about this, and maybe they expected him to speak out against the evil of the Roman oppression, and to speak hard words about Pilate, but that's not the way that Jesus thought at all, and it's not the terms in which he answered.

He looked upon this deed and he traced it as it were to the ultimate, he saw God in control and he saw that this raises not just, of course it raises political problems, it raises social problems of social relationships, but fundamentally the real and ultimately the question it raises is a theological one, a question about God and God's government, and how God allows things like this to happen.

see, it comes much more naturally to us to think politically and socially, it comes much more naturally to us to think and to terminate our thinking if we think about the falling of this town in Salome, or we think of other events like that, it comes naturally to us just to ask who were the builders, who were responsible for erecting this, and why were they so careless, where was the cutting of corners in the work here, and holding back on the right materials and so on, so on, we don't raise the, at that point, we're not given to raising the ultimate problem, but that's what Jesus did, because his thinking was always clued in, always keyed in, his thinking was always keyed in to the rule and sovereignty of God, and that's why when they speak to him like this, this is the question he wants us to face, this is something that happens under

[10 : 32] God's control, and that's really where the pain and distress and anguish of it is. Well, the response, the reaction of Jesus will point out some things to us, point out some things that help to explain or help to reduce the tension of the questions and the problems that we've thought of.

We've got to recognize, of course, that we don't get the full explanation, the full explanation as to why God allows this or that is not available to us.

God is not to be called to account. We must be on our guard against assuming that we have the authority to call God to account, that we have the right, as it were, to summon God to answer for his deeds as though he were just one of us.

No, we can't do that. It's presumption on our part to think that we can call God to account. The man of God, however, takes a wide perspective on the whole of reality and he is convinced that the judge of all the earth will do right.

Well, this passage, this particular passage tells us of some things that we are not allowed to say and of other things that we must assert.

[12 : 12] And that's what we want to reflect on for a few minutes. Some of the things that this particular passage tells us we should not say and some of the things it tells us we ought to say.

The first thing that is obvious to us here is this passage and our Lord's reaction to the information that was given to him tells us that we are not entitled to say concerning the victims, whether we think of Pilate's victims or the victims of the falling of the tower in Siloam, we are not entitled to say this happened to these people because they were worse sinners than others.

we are not entitled to say the victims were exceptional sinners. They provoked God more than others and if they hadn't lived so provocatively, if their lives had not been in such open defiance of God and his justice, the likelihood this wouldn't have happened to him.

They brought judgment on themselves. We often talk like that. But Jesus tells us here quite clearly we have no entitlement to talk like that.

He forbids us to speak like this. You mustn't do it. Do you think, he says, do you think that they were worse sinners than others? I tell you they were not.

[13 : 46] We have a tendency very often, and it's a tendency perhaps more marked in religious people than in others, an over readiness to pass judgment.

We excuse ourselves very often by the severity of our judgment upon other people. Jesus had to correct this attitude in his disciples.

One day, they asked him about, they saw a man, a man who had been born blind, and they asked Jesus about it. How did it happen? How did it come about that this man was born blind?

Is this a token? Is it an evidence of God's displeasure, of God's judgment upon the man himself or upon his parents? Who did sin?

This man or his parents, that he was born blind. Jesus told them, you've no right to talk like that. That's not the explanation of this event at all.

[14 : 48] This didn't happen because his parents had been spectacular sinners or because the man himself had done something especially blameworthy.

This is the kind of attitude that Job's friends took. They heard of the tragedies that had befallen him, the way in which he had lost his property, lost his goods, and his children had been killed off as well.

The way in which Job was afflicted in his body. And they came from a distance to speak with him and to comfort him and to counsel him and advise him.

They sat silent for a time with him. And that was the only wise thing they did when they sat silent.

As soon as they opened their mouths they started to pass you, look Job, I'm telling you this.

This is what they said to him. Just come clean with it, Job, and tell us what you've been up to.

There's no use beating about the bush, Job.

[15 : 54] You're bound to have been up to some hunky-punky. You've been doing something and God is not allowing it to go unpunished. It doesn't, nobody gets, nobody gets afflicted like this.

God doesn't allow such judgment, such afflictions, Paul, upon people unless they've been particularly offensive to him. And Job won't have it.

That's not the explanation. He knows in his heart of hearts that that is not the explanation. And the more they speak to him, the nipper he gets in his responses to them because he knows they're wrong, they're totally wrong, they haven't understood, they haven't understood God's ways, they don't understand God's ways at all.

And that's what Jesus is telling us here. You're not to jump to the conclusion because people suffer spectacularly that it's because they have been spectacular sinners.

sinners. You know, the truth often is quite the reverse. We seem to harbor the idea that no favorite of God will ever suffer spectacularly.

[17 : 18] But experience and the scriptures show us that very often it was those who were and are the real favorites of God who are subjected to the greatest and severest degree of suffering.

The point that we're making is that we have to be, we must be exceedingly reticent in passing moral judgments on the basis of tragic events.

Let every man, says the Apostle James, let every man be slow to speak. judge not, says Jesus, that you be not judged.

Of course, this doesn't mean that we are to be morally muzzled. It doesn't mean that we must hold our peace when we are confronted by occasions of depraved behavior.

Nor does it mean that we are barred from tracing any connection between moral depravity and human calamity. It's quite obvious that some forms of misconduct do produce some specific brands of suffering.

[18 : 41] People who abuse their bodies in certain ways bring upon themselves diseases that are connected with the sort of misbehavior in which they've been indulging.

And that's part of the judgment of God. In such cases we can say that people are asking for trouble. Any man who gives himself to a life of drunkenness, for example, cannot be surprised and ought not to be surprised if he suffers, if his body begins to become, if he brings a kind of wreckage upon his body.

we can argue forward. It is possible for us to argue forward and say that gross defiance and open defiance of the law and word of God will bring upon people the judgment of God.

We may even in certain situations be entitled to say, I told you so. but we can't, this is what Jesus is telling us here, we can't make an infallible retrospective judgment.

We must, we can be, we may be aware of misbehavior and we are entitled to warn against what the consequences of misbehavior will be, but we are not entitled to argue backward from affliction and say that affliction or suffering is always just the outcome of specific ways of defying the law of God.

[20 : 19] That's the first thing that our text tells us we ought not to say. We dare not say that the victims of calamity, the people who endure suffering, are exceptional sinners.

But there's a second thing that the passage tells us we're not entitled to say. Whilst we are not entitled to say that the victims of suffering are always those who have been spectacular sinners, we're not entitled to say on the other hand that the victims of suffering are entirely innocent. innocent. We're not entitled to say this tragedy fell upon people who were completely innocent. This is the point at which people often get angry with God.

They look at the statistics of accidents, they hear the statistics of those who have been overwhelmed by volcanic eruption, and they say, why does God allow this?

Why has this happened if it's under the control of Almighty God to people who are just going about their ordinary affairs entirely innocent? He's hurt people, he's hurt people who were not doing any harm, they were no better, but neither were they any worse than others, they were just going about their everyday business.

[21 : 59] Maybe there's some truth in the reflection that it's the divine selectiveness that offends us. Why then?

Or more particularly if we are under affliction, why us? we're no worse than others. Why does God pick on us? Why does God pick on the people he does?

What Jesus tells us here is that none of us is entitled to claim innocence. I suppose it's true to say that even when we do claim innocence, we are only claiming it in a relative sense.

We're saying we're as innocent as other people, we're not any worse than the generality of people. And in relation to this particular calamity, we're not aware that we have done anything that should have presently offended the deity.

But all that this amounts to is this, that we don't really appreciate the seriousness, we don't understand how serious sin and guilt is before God.

[23 : 18] We don't understand how abhorrent in God's eyes is man's sinfulness, man's iniquity.

It can trip off our lips so easily to say all we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way, all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

There is no difference between one and another and because we feel that we are all in the same boat, we're all collectively guilty, because we're all collectively guilty, God shouldn't lay his stroke upon any one section more than any other.

No one, but what we have not appreciated is that in this situation, no one has a just claim upon exemption.

No one, the astonishing thing, after all, the astonishing thing is not the numbers that have been involved in tragedy and suffering.

[24 : 24] The astonishing thing is the number that have been exempted in large measure from tragedy and suffering. The marvel is considering that God has said all have sinned and come short of his glory, they are altogether gone aside, altogether become filthy, there is not one that does

righteously, no not one.

The marvel is not the thousands whom God afflicts, but the millions and the billions whom he does not afflict.

But we are not disposed to make an issue of exemption. We are not disposed to make an issue of the immunity that God has given to most of us from suffering.

And what Jesus is doing here is precisely this. He is warning us not to count on that immunity continuing, seeing that we all have sinned and we are all worthy, we are all deserving of God's wrath and curse.

Jesus is warning us against counting on that immunity going on and on and on forever. I tell you, he says, they were no worse than others, they were no worse than you, and unless you repent you will all likewise perish.

[25 : 59] And that's the second thing that the passage tells us we are not entitled to say, we are not entitled to say that the sufferers are entirely innocent. But then we are brought face to face with this fact also, that we are not entitled to say God had nothing to do with this calamity.

This, in a way, is an easy option. Very often, people who are distressed, people who cannot bring themselves, they cannot see the way to what we call a theodicy, they cannot see the way to any argument that in their sense, in their sight, will justify God's action, or God's inaction, as they may term it.

Because they cannot see any way in which they can present God as a righteous God, when he is afflicting people.

They will say, in order to excuse God, really, you shouldn't bring God into this picture at all.

He had nothing to do with it. It's all a matter of human failing, it's all been a matter of human carelessness or human wickedness. It's all been a matter of natural forces at work.

[27 : 32] If men had been clever enough or careful enough, they might have guarded against them, they might have foreseen what was about to happen, and they might have saved people from all this distress, just as people talk about the people in the town that was immersed by the lava from the volcano.

If these people had paid, and if the people in government had paid attention to the warnings that were given, oh yes, we can talk like that, and there's a measure of truth in all of that, but as a means of forcing God out of the picture, as a means of suggesting that this is somewhere where God does not interfere, Jesus will not allow us to think in those terms.

God is interested, and God is using this incident, he's telling us, to pass on and to give a vivid reality to a message that people need to hear.

When we try to leave God out of the picture, it's no doubt in an attempt to excuse him, almost as though people were ashamed of God, ashamed to acknowledge that he would have anything to do with this, God.

But in reality, this whole enterprise diminishes God. You cannot have a God who is not in control. If God is not in control in any particular area, then you have a diminished God.

[29 : 05] You do not have the almighty, you do not have the almighty God of the scriptures, who is the only living and through God. It may indeed accuse God of carelessness and even accuse him of helplessness, and God is neither.

Nor are we allowed to say, when we think of God in these situations, well, you know, the God you're talking about, and one meets this from time to time, if you speak of a God who visits people in judgment, or allows affliction, and so on, they'll tell you, that's the God of the Old Testament you're talking about.

That's not the God whom Jesus presented, that's not the God whom Jesus represented and of whose love Jesus came to tell us, of whose love indeed he was and is the embodiment.

Listen to this. This is what Jesus tells us about the God whom he represents, about the God whose love he embodies.

There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth in this very same chapter. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth when ye shall see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God and you yourselves thrust out.

[30 : 36] don't do to try and make a distinction between the God of the Old Testament and the God represented by Jesus. Jesus says that these events carry a message from God.

A message about the gravity of guilt, a message about the gravity of human sin, the gravity of man's rebellion against God and above all that a message about the defenselessness of mankind, the defenselessness of mankind if God, if thou Lord, shouldst mock iniquity, oh Lord, who could stand?

But there's also a message that tells us of the opportunities of grace. So, briefly, let's think, having seen these things that thou text tells us we may not say.

Think of some of the things the text tells us and our Lord's response to the information given to him tells us we are entitled to say. What we are entitled to say is that upon every such event, God is summoning us to reflect upon our relationship with himself.

He is summoning us not to pass judgment upon him but to pass judgment upon ourselves. He is summoning us not simply to pass judgment upon ourselves but to present ourselves before him that we may know what is his judgment upon us.

[32 : 22] He is summoning us to recognize the supreme importance of our relationship with himself. Summoning us to recognize the gravity of our situation as lawbreakers and offenders of his holiness.

Summoning us to repentance. repentance. It's not accidental, I think, that we're given the account of a parable immediately after this.

When he had spoken about the eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, do you think that they were sinners above all that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you no, but except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish, he spake also this parable.

Certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none.

Cut it down, why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it and dung it.

[33 : 45] Live it bare fruit well, and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down. What we are being told here is we are entitled to assert God's sovereignty and God's ownership and God's right to indicate God's right to allocate destiny.

As the owner of this vineyard who has the right to say about the unfruitful tree, cut it down. But we are entitled to accept also that there is a patience and a long suffering with God so that the deserved wrath does not come in its finality.

It does not come in its finality upon its being first deserved. Let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it and down it.

What our Lord is telling us is, you have a time of immunity. Such afflictions, such tragedies as you have been thinking about here have not befallen you.

You have a season of immunity. Make use of the season of immunity to seek the safety that is in God's grace.

[35 : 07] turn to him. Except you repent, we shall all likewise perish. Turn to him in the spirit of obedience.

Let there be the fruit of repentance. Let there be seen the fruits of repentance, the fruits of reconciliation, the fruits of obedience. Then we shall know of the truth that the Lord is very gracious. Let us pray. We give thee thanks, O Lord, that thou art the God who answers the prayers of thy people, and in time of perplexity and in time of trouble, when they call upon thee, thou art the God who draws near to them in infinite goodness and grace.

And even as thou didst send thine own Son to the cross, and through that suffering and damnation bring righteousness and salvation to light, so grant that we may rest in him and know that it is through the grace of him who was made perfect through sufferings that we have brought to the inheritance of the saints in light.

For thy name's sake. Amen.