

When tragedy strikes

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Our Bible reading this morning is from Luke chapter 13 verses 1 to 9. Luke 13. Repent or perish.

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?

I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you too will all perish. For those 18 who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them, do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?

I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you too will perish. Then he told this parable. And he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any.

So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, For three years now, I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any.

[1 : 17] Cut it down. Why should it use up the soil? Sir, the man replied, leave it alone for one more year and I'll dig round it and fertilise it.

If it bears fruit next year, fine. If not, then cut it down. Amen. So folks, so we come this morning to the first part of Luke chapter 13.

The next section as we've been working our way through this section of Luke's gospel thinking about journeying with Jesus. Today, verses one to nine of chapter 13, we think about what we do when tragedy strikes.

Why there's a chapter division at the start of chapter 13, I'm not really sure, because as the first verse of chapter 13 tells us, this is still at that time.

This is still while Jesus is on that journey that we've been following along with for these past few months. And the people here in verse one who are telling Jesus about the Galileans, these people are among those in the crowd who a few verses earlier were being urged to interpret the present time.

[2 : 31] It's the same occasion. There isn't a big shift here. And the themes that Jesus is focused on in these verses are not dissimilar to what he's been saying for some time now.

And I think we could sum up these nine verses in one sentence. One sentence that we'll then unpack. Don't rush to judge others. Rather, come to repentance because mercy is available.

But the time is short. These verses, I think, are intended as a call to action. A call to action for those listening to Jesus then and there. And a call to action for you and me as well.

Don't rush to judge others. Rather, come to repentance because mercy is available. Yet the time is short. So, Jesus says, don't rush to judge others.

The first half of this section that Duncan read for us, we've got these two different recent events being described. A number of things differ between the two.

[3 : 34] The one triggered by Pilate, the mixing of the blood with the sacrifice, and the other, the falling of the tower. A number of things differ. One of them is brought up by a group of interested people.

The other occasion is raised by Jesus himself. One of these events is deliberate. It's presumably a political power move. The other is clearly an accident.

One of these two events has political and religious overtones with the blood and the sacrifice. The other has none of that going on. And then between the two events, a number of things are the same.

In both of these situations, there has been a tragic loss of life. And in both of these situations, there's an assumption by some that those who died, that on some level, they deserved it.

And it's this assumption that Jesus challenges. He challenges this assumption saying, do you think that they were worse sinners or more guilty? Now, I suspect that for many of us, the idea that they deserved it, that that instinctively doesn't sit very comfortably for us.

[4 : 43] So before we come to how Jesus challenges that assumption, let's take a couple of moments just to think about what's behind it. And maybe to acknowledge that actually this idea is not quite so completely off the wall as we might first think.

Firstly, let's recognize that, yes, maybe we wouldn't be quick to say somebody deserved it when they've died. I suspect we don't tend to do that, not unless there was something really extreme going on anyway.

But actually, it's quite common to hear a kind of smaller scale version of a very similar idea. There is something within us that's kind of pleased when somebody gets what they deserve.

The driver who ignores the road signs and drives through the cones and gets stuck in the wet concrete. He got what he deserved. Now, we might not say that karma is a real thing, but we still smile when we see instant karma in action.

We think something along these lines sometimes today. And certainly, this was a very, very common idea in Jesus' day. When Job suffered, Eliphaz said to him, Is it for your piety that God rebukes you and brings charges against you?

[5 : 58] Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless? Job suffers because Job must have sinned. And several other similar remarks in the book of Job.

And in John chapter 9, Jesus' disciples ask him, Rabbi, who sinned? This man or his parents that he was born blind? There must be a cause for it.

There must be sin behind it somewhere, they assume. Now, we could perhaps dismiss the applicability of both of these examples because, well, God's quite clear at the end of the book of Job that the friends have not spoken accurately in what they said.

And in John chapter 9, Jesus replies to his disciples saying, Neither this man nor his parents sinned, said Jesus, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.

And yet, we still have to recognize that Job's friends and Jesus' disciples in John's gospel, that they weren't just making stuff up. They weren't completely fabricating ideas.

[7 : 02] The idea that God punishes the guilty, well, that is true. That is perfectly orthodox.

Proverbs chapter 10 says, What the wicked dread will overtake them.

What the righteous desire will be granted. When the storm is swept by, the wicked are gone. But the righteous stand firm forever. Your deeds have consequences.

It's there in God's word. And we've looked on Sunday nights at one or two psalms that say quite similar things to this section of Proverbs. The idea of being punished for wrongdoing, that idea is woven through the whole giving of the law that dominates the first few books of the Bible.

It's true. Ultimately, God does not leave wrongdoing unpunished. And it's true that there are at least some particular cases where God has made the punishment fit the crime with immediate retribution for wrongdoing.

These things are true. But what we cannot say is that suffering is always a consequence of sin. We cannot say, like Job's friends, You are suffering, therefore you must be unrighteous.

[8 : 17] Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no. Do you think those on whom the tower fell were more guilty than the others living in Jerusalem?

I tell you, no. Jesus is very clear. It's not because of some particular sin that these people died. It's not because they're more deserving of that fate than others.

But people still think that's what's going on. John Calvin, the 16th century theologian, he says, 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. The consequence is we not only censure with excessive severity the offences of our brethren, but whenever they meet with any calamity, we condemn them as wicked and reprobate persons.

We think the worst of others. We excuse our own faults, and therefore when disaster strikes, we assume they deserved it, implied in a way that we do not.

[9 : 31] Well, Jesus says don't rush to judge others. Rather, he says, come to repentance yourself. Jesus says our inclination. Our inclination when tragedy strikes is to look out, to look at those affected, and to judge them.

But the course of wisdom is instead to look within, to look at our own hearts, to consider the state of our own souls, and to ask, Am I ready to meet my maker? Am I ready to stand before God and be judged?

Because tragedies like these ones remind me that I could find myself there at any moment. I don't know how long my life will last.

I cannot predict the number of my days, but I do know they will not be infinite. And by reflection on what God has said, and reflection on the state of my life, well, I can know what the outcome will be should those days come to their end today, or tomorrow.

Jesus says to the crowd, and says to us, Unless you repent, you too will all perish. In fact, he says it twice, reflecting on each of these two tragedies in turn.

[10:42] Not that we'll necessarily perish in the same way. These two tragedies have significant differences in their circumstances. And ultimately, this is not a comment on physical death, but on spiritual death, on eternal death.

See, far more important than any questions about physical death are questions about eternal judgment. The death and the punishment that awaits all those who persist in sin.

All those who die with their sins uncovered. See, what we can wonder, if we like, we can wonder who are the greater sinners.

We can compare one situation with another. Some sins are more apparent. Some sins are more repugnant. Some ways that we break God's laws seem to us at least, seem worse than others.

And it's reasonable to consider these kinds of questions. We can ask these questions. But what we can say with more confidence, what we can say is, all have sinned sufficiently to warrant punishment.

[11:50] All have sinned to enough of an extent that we deserve to perish. We can compare the relative degrees of sin, but there's shades of variation within that.

The tiny amount of difference between this sin and this other sin. This pales into its significance compared to the absolute perfect holiness of God that is vast beyond our understanding.

His absolutely perfect, infinite holiness. God is a holy God and we are a sinful people. Here are tragedies in Jesus' day.

Let's take this into our own situation today, shall we? Folks, does a virus that forces us to care for one another rather than caring for ourselves alone if greater catastrophe is to be averted, does that challenge us?

Does that challenge the individualism and the self-centeredness of our age? I think it may well.

Does a virus that shows us that even our best efforts are no guarantee of safety, does it remind us of our mortality?

[13:03] Does it challenge our idolatry of safety? After all, says Jesus, the one who prioritizes saving his life at all costs, he will lose it.

And the virus may well challenge that idolatry. But more fundamentally than those questions and those challenges, more certainly we can say, as Jesus says of those tragedies in his day, we can say, and we must say, repent, lest you likewise perish.

We certainly cannot, and I doubt many of us would be inclined to, we cannot say, you got the virus because you deserved it. Of course not. But what we can and should say is, repent, lest you likewise perish.

So the necessity of repentance is apparent. Without it, there is no forgiveness of sins. There is no pardon for those who are not penitent. There is no fitness for heaven without our sins being washed away.

And so we say, well, don't rush to judgment. Rather, come to repentance because mercy is available. But the time is short.

[14:18] Mercy is available. The parable in verse 6 and following makes this very clear, doesn't it? The man in this parable, he's been waiting for three years already. Three years when the fruit, which should have been there, isn't.

Three years when this tree has not been fulfilling its purpose. Three years when, as he puts it, it's been using up the soil. It's been taking the nutrients that could have been put to better use, that could have been helping the vines and the other trees to grow.

This tree has been sucking up resources and providing no benefit at all. Why should it be allowed to continue? Why should it be allowed to keep going?

Answer? It shouldn't. A fruit tree that doesn't fruit has no reason for continued existence. And yet, yet the tree receives mercy.

The tree is not immediately chopped down. The man who cared for the vineyard, verse 8, urges him to allow this tree to remain. It isn't actually said explicitly, but very clearly we're to assume that this man's proposal is accepted.

[15:27] The fruitless fig tree receives mercy. The tree is not chopped down. Friends, this isn't about trees, is it?

As he often does, Jesus uses this agricultural metaphor to make a point about people. Jesus called in the preceding verses, he called for people to repent in those first verses of the chapter.

The need for repentance is universal. And here in the second half of this section, here in verses 6 through 9, here there is mercy. There is a delay.

There is not immediate enactment of final punishments. Even, even Jesus' arrival on the earth, a present reality as he speaks, this arrival that perhaps we could equate to this third annual visit by the vineyard owner.

Even Jesus' arrival doesn't mean that the time is up. There is still yet an opportunity for mercy for those who listen to Jesus. The sin is still real.

[16:33] There is still a need for repentance to occur. But there's a delay. God in his mercy permits the tree another year, permits humanity a span of years.

Repentance is possible because mercy is available. Judgment is not immediate. So friends, don't rush to judge others. Rather come to repentance because mercy is available.

But the time is short. The time is short. Throughout chapter 12, Jesus has been warning people, warning them to prepare for the coming judgment. And that warning now reaches its climax with the call in these verses to repent before disaster strikes.

The tree gets one more year. One more chance to bear fruit. One more opportunity to become what it ought to be. It gets another year. It does not get an infinite delay.

It's already had its three strikes. It gets one bonus chance. And then that will be the end. Even the compassion of the man tending the vineyard, even the one pleading with the vineyard owner to give it this extra year, even he won't extend it beyond one more year.

[17:44] Even he agrees in verse 9 that if there's no fruit next year, it may be chopped down. See, the vine dresser, he's not blind to reality, is he? He recognizes facts.

If this tree still bears no fruit, then that's the end of the matter. The purpose of the extra year is not for things to just go on as they are. No, he proposes.

He proposes to dig round the tree. He proposes to provide manure with the very clear intention that something will change. The fruitless tree will bear fruit, and that's soon.

See, sometimes people act like the purpose of God's merciful delay is for us to just keep on as we are. Well, nothing could be further from the truth.

Maybe it's overextending the parable to imagine the fig tree saying to itself in the coming year, saying, Life is good. I've got freshly dug soil and all the manure I can eat.

[18:47] Let me relax and take life easy. All is well with the world. Maybe that's too much anthropomorphism for a tree, but there's a definite danger that we say that ourselves, that we say that of our own lives.

There's a danger that we look at this world and we say everything is going to continue as it has always been. We look and we say, Well, I've been fine these past three years and the next year looks pretty good, so why worry?

We look and we say, There's no judgment coming. There's a danger that we say, Well, it's been 2,000 years. When are we going to admit that Jesus isn't coming back? When will we recognize that there is no such thing as judgment day?

When will we see the folly of that attitude? There's a danger that that is what is in our minds. Well, folks, Jesus' friend Peter would address exactly this question a few decades down the line.

He wrote in the third chapter of his second letter, Above all, you must understand that in the last days, scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, Where is this coming?

[19:55] He promised. Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation. It's a very contemporary attitude, albeit written a couple of thousand years ago.

Well, how does Peter answer those scoffers? Do not forget this one thing, dear friends. With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day.

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

Whether it's for one year or for two thousand years that judgment is delayed, that mercy is available, it is still true that the time is coming to an end, that the year will end.

The fig tree, if it does not bear fruit, it will be chopped down. You, if you do not repent, will perish. Friends, friends, hear the message of the coronavirus.

[21 : 15] Whatever other message it might or might not have, it surely tells us time is short, death will come. Let's not rush to judge others, but rather come to repentance, repentance, because mercy is available.

But do not delay. Do not wait for a convenient time. Do not think you'll repent later when you've had your fun. Do not imagine that you will have infinite time or that you'll receive a lengthy warning when the end is nigh.

Come to repentance now, because whilst mercy is available, the time is short. Friends, there is, there is hope in the face of a virus.

There is hope in the face of a tower that collapses. There is hope in the face of violence and war.

There is hope in one place and one only. There is hope in the God who is a refuge, a source of strength.

There is hope in the God whose son died to provide that hope. There is hope in blood shed once for all upon the cross. There is hope in Christ alone.