

Lessons from a Fallen Tower

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 30th of December 2001. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Lessons from a Fallen Tower and is based on Luke chapter 13 verses 1 to 9. Please be seated. And you may like to have open the Bibles in the pews at page 848 to Luke chapter 13, the second reading that we had this morning.

This week, not next week when I'm away, but then the five weeks following, we'll have a series of sermons on some parables in Luke's Gospel. And this obviously is the first.

And then after that we'll finish Romans. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we pray that you'll speak to us now through your word as we reflect on it and this world in which we live at the end of another year.

[1 : 08] We pray that you may help us to see things with your eyes and to respond with repentance and obedient faith for the glory of Jesus Christ.

Amen. No doubt like me, you've started reading in the magazines and newspapers reviews of 2001. There's always debate, always differing opinions and analysis about the key events and what they mean and so on.

But perhaps this year is after all different. Without a doubt, there is no debate or dispute that the key events of the year all happened really on September the 11th.

And despite the fact that Time magazine's man of the year is the former mayor of New York, Rudy Giuliani, no one really disputes that actually the most influential person of the year was Osama bin Laden.

But I guess even Time magazine couldn't quite come at making him their person of the year. And I guess the image of the year will be the plane flying into one of those towers of the World Trade Center on September the 11th.

[2 : 15] And really everything else pales almost into insignificance by comparison with those events. And maybe like me, as you've read the papers and magazines, as they've highlighted other events of the year, you think, oh yes, I'd forgotten that that had happened this year.

Because everything else has been so dominated by the events of just over three months ago. But apart from that, September the 11th, this year, like all the others preceding it, has been liberally sprinkled with the usual disasters.

There have been floods, fires, not just present in New South Wales. There have been starvation, there have been droughts, earthquakes, tornadoes, planes have crashed apart from those on September 11, ships have sunk, cars have crashed, there have been terminal illnesses, there have been murders and bombs in many countries of this world.

Wars, not only in Afghanistan, hijacks, not only on the 11th of September, there have been royal assassinations, for example, in Nepal, and coups in other countries.

And at the end of 2001, you and I, amongst others, have survived. We're still here. We haven't lost our lives through any of those multiple disasters that have happened around our world and some in our own country.

[3 : 38] Some people, of course, were clearly lucky, we might say, at surviving some event. They changed their plane, they missed their plane, they caught a different plane, they were sick, they didn't turn up to work that day, etc.

Some people's escape stories are quite dramatic, as we've heard different ones throughout the year. It could have been us. In all sorts of different catastrophes and disasters this year, maybe our escape stories are not that narrow, but we're still here and we've survived.

And oddly, perhaps, despite the fact that so many disasters have happened in the world this year, as in any other year, most of us, I guess, still expect to be here in 12 months' time to celebrate the end of 2002, to have a New Year's Eve and look forward to 2003.

What are the lessons that we ought to be learning from the year past? Not least from the fallen towers on September the 11th, but not just that event either.

Other disasters and catastrophes that have happened. This reading from Luke's Gospel suggests, I think, two lessons that we do well to heed, as we reflect on another year over and a new one about to begin.

[5 : 01] Some people regard the randomness of various tragedies and disasters in the world as evidence that God doesn't have his finger on the pulse anymore, that he's stood back and he's let the world go on.

There doesn't seem to be any discrimination about who are the victims of the various attacks and wars and so on. Good and bad alike have probably died in the disasters of September the 11th, in the wars or the fires in New South Wales.

The victims don't seem to be particularly bad people or it seems to be random in who suffers. And so people often think that God is really not a God of providence.

He doesn't seem to protect certainly the righteous or good people. The troubles in this world are random. Maybe God isn't even a God.

That's a fairly common and fairly typical humanistic response to the world and the world's events year by year, day by day. Alternatively, and maybe more common in the ancient world in which Jesus lived, people viewed tragedies and disasters as being acts of God's judgment against particularly sinful or evil people.

[6 : 16] Sometimes we reflect that view, not usually thinking about others but ourselves, so that when something significantly bad or catastrophic happens to us, we might very often think, what have I done to deserve this?

Is God punishing me? What have I done wrong that he's punishing me in this way? Does that mean that I'm worse than people who are not suffering from this particular illness or catastrophe?

Well, the context of these words of Jesus in Luke 13 is that he's speaking to people about the issue of God's judgment. The end of chapter 12, he said that God's judgment is coming and that we, people, ought to be interpreting the signs of this world so that we see that it is coming and coming soon.

In response to his teaching about judgment and the signs of God that we ought to interpret, those who are listening to him throw at him one illustration of a particularly nasty act.

At that very time, there was some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. Pilate was the governor or procurator of Judea and Samaria at the time of Jesus, the one under whom Jesus was crucified less than a year later.

[7 : 41] He was a fairly hard-hearted person, especially towards the Jewish people. He was one of a number of successive procurators or Roman governors who ironically were put in place by the Roman emperor because Herod the Great's son, who ruled Judea and Samaria, was himself so nasty that he was removed by the Romans.

His name was Herod Archelaus. And so it ended up at this time that Pilate was the governor, a fairly nasty piece of work. And for some reason that we don't know, maybe he'd issued a particularly spiteful rule or decree, some Galileans from the north of the country who'd come to make their sacrifices at the temple as they ought to do as Jewish worshippers, had for some reason been killed under Pilate's orders and maybe literally or perhaps just figuratively, their blood spilt in the temple was mingled with the blood of the animals whom they'd come or which they'd come to sacrifice.

A fairly awful act. What does it mean, Jesus is being asked? Are they particularly sinful people who've been killed by Pilate?

How do we interpret the signs, as you've just asked us to do at the end of chapter 12? How do we understand this act? Is it an act of God's judgment against such evil people?

Well, Jesus' reply acknowledges what is implicit in their question. They ask, or he responds to them in verse 2, Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?

[9 : 25] That was a common view in the ancient world and part of the implication of thinking that would be to think self-righteously about yourself and say, well, I'm obviously better than they are because God has punished them but he hasn't punished me.

Well, Jesus tackles that head on and he turns the question back at them. In verse 3 he says, No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

Their question implied perhaps some self-righteousness that they were better off. But Jesus says, No, and unless you repent, you will suffer the same sort of fate.

He doesn't mean by that that Pilate will spill your blood in the temple but that you also will suffer, finally, the judgment of God, I guess. Now Jesus' words here to his questioners, I think give us one lesson about how we should be responding to the events of the world in which we live.

Every calamity or disaster is a warning to us to repent of our own sins. Every disaster, whether it be an evil act as this one was, as September the 11th was, or a natural disaster, is a call to us to repent of our sins.

[10:57] Every disaster and tragedy, catastrophe, is if you like, a foretaste of the final judgment of God. Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.

Not by the nature of it, but by coming under the wrath of God. Jesus then throws in another illustration. The first one was a particularly evil act.

The second one is perhaps a natural disaster. He talks about a tower that fell and killed people. Not as many people as September 11 and probably not through the same sort of circumstances.

What about those 18, he asks them, who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? That's on the outskirts of Jerusalem as it then was. Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?

Now, this may have been through builders' negligence that the tower fell. Maybe through some earth tremor or earthquake which were fairly common in Jerusalem. This is not an evil act, presumably, but the same lesson applies.

[12:07] Whether it's an evil act that's killed people or a natural disaster that has killed people, the same lesson is there. Jesus says again in verse 5 exactly what he said in verse 3.

No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did. And Jesus' response to these events is very different from our world's response.

Our world regards the victims of catastrophe and tragedy as heroic, often, and usually as innocent people. We glorify those in some way who are the victims of tragedies and disasters.

And our presupposition, at least in the media and so on, is that such people did not deserve what befell them. But Jesus puts a twist on it that is important for us to grasp.

See, his view and the Bible's view generally is not that they did not deserve to die, but that rather we, the survivors, like those who were victims, all deserve to die.

[13:20] Death is the just desert for all people. For all people are sinners. And the reason that we are not yet the victims as other people have been is not because we are better off, nor because they were innocent and what befell them is somehow unfair, but rather there is a warning to us.

We are given time to repent of our sins and we are to face the same ultimate fate. That's the first lesson from the fallen tower.

It's a sober lesson indeed, but one that I think we do well to heed. For many people the highlight of the year is not Christmas, but the next day.

Not because of the cricket even, but because of the post-Christmas sales. People flock and maybe some of you on Boxing Day flocked early, queued up early to pour into David Jones or Myers or whatever else to get your 20%, 30%, 50% discounts to pick up your two-for-one offers.

Bargains too good to refuse. Maybe some of you have even bought all your Christmas shopping for next year. I remember when I was a theological student, Kurong Bookshop, which is a Christian bookshop in Blackburn, had a sale.

[14:42] It was something like a 40-hour sale. It would be open all the Friday night and at every hour some different book would be on special. So we browsed through the brochures and a few of us went from Ridley College where I was studying out at midnight on the Friday night to pick up our bargain for the hour, which was the particular one, whatever it was, that we were after.

At midnight on this Friday night, Kurong Books, which was then I think a third the size that it is now, was absolutely jam-packed from front to back with people.

When we left at 1am, with our bargains too good to refuse, there were 150 people outside who couldn't get inside and were waiting for people like us to leave in order to get in.

It was a mind-boggling event, let me say, for a Christian bookshop at midnight or 1am on a Friday night. People love their bargains and they know that they can't just come back the next day or the

next week because the bargains have a limited offer time.

For the ones that we wanted, there was a one-hour bracket. We had to buy what we were after in that period or else it would go back to its original price. The first lesson about the fallen tower is that we must repent.

[16:03] repent. The second lesson is there is time for us to repent. But the not-so-small print is this offer must end soon.

So hurry. Jesus makes this point by way of the parable that follows in verses 6 to 9. A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, common practice in the ancient world, and he came looking for fruit on it and found none.

So he said to the gardener, see here, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree and still I find none. The presumption is there ought to have been fruit that he should have been able to pick.

So he says to the gardener, cut it down, why should it be wasting the soil? Death to the fig tree is actually what the fig tree that was fruitless deserved.

It had had its chance, it was clearly fruitless and was wasting the soil, cut it down, let's do something different. The gardener pleads for it to be given more time, so let it alone for one more year until I dig around it and put manure on it.

[17:27] If it bears fruit next year, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down. One more year. Jesus is not teaching a horticultural lesson here about digging around trees and giving it plenty of manure and so on.

He's teaching a spiritual lesson that his hearers would have quite readily picked up. The fig tree is often used as an illustration of ancient Israel in the Old Testament. Jesus is clearly not speaking about physical fruit from trees, but rather spiritual fruit in the lives of God's people.

The parable is accusing the people of God, the Israelites or Jews, of being fruitless and faithless in their relationship with God, not least in their rejection of Jesus himself. Jesus is also teaching here about God's patience.

Jesus, in fact, if he's the gardener, is pleading for a bit more time for the people of God to give them opportunity to repent, bear fruit of repentance. But the parable is warning that the patience of God will run out.

Indeed, patience that never runs out is not in fact patience. God's patience is that he delays his judgment for us to give us opportunity to repent.

[18:46] But the sting in the tail is hurry, this offer must end soon. Repent before it's too late. Indeed, this we could say is the world's closing down sale.

As the world is closing down, there is limited opportunity, but opportunity nonetheless less for us to repent. When a year from these words Jesus was dead, and by and large Israel had not heeded the warning.

They had not heeded the warning of the Galilean martyrs killed by Pilate, nor the warning of the Tower of Siloam collapsing, nor the warning of this parable, and the other words of Jesus himself. They'd crucified the gardener, the Son of God. They'd failed to repent and failed to bear fruit in their lives. Someone said to me just in the last couple of weeks, an old person in ill health, that they were on borrowed time.

time. It's an expression many of us might use, especially in older age and in ill health. The truth is though that we are all on borrowed time.

[19:59] The time in which we live, the year through which we have somehow survived, is in a sense borrowed time. Time that God has held back and delayed to allow that time to continue before his final judgment.

Time though that is dotted with warnings and encouragements to us to get our act with God right before it's too late. To turn from our sins, repent of them, apologise and say sorry to God for them, make restitution if need be for them, and to be forgiven by God in his grace.

Jesus' first lesson was heed the warnings and repent. His second lesson is do it soon, hurry before the stocks of God's patience and grace run out.

The garden or the tree was given one more year. We should not of course think that we only have one more year but we may have less than that. There may be thousands to come.

Now I'm not a prophet or the son of a prophet but let me make some predictions about 2002. You can come back in a year and check off whether I'm right or not.

[21 : 26] In 2002 somewhere in the world there will be floods and people will die. In 2002 somewhere in the world there will be fires and people will die and droughts and tornadoes, avalanches and blizzards that kill people.

In 2002 there will be plane crashes, car crashes and ships that will sink. In 2002 there will be buildings destroyed by bombs, terrorist attacks or builders negligence and people will be killed. In 2002 there will be wars, murders, assassinations and illnesses. And at the end of 2002 my guess is that not all of us will still be here.

And I also predict that in 2002 people by and large will not heed the warnings of these events. And in 2002 by and large people will continue to presume upon the grace of God and think that they are okay.

Will you be different? If the vineyard planter returns in a year will he find faith?

[22 : 48] Will he find the fruit of repentance in our lives? Don't put it off. this offer must end soon.