

# WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN

## LUKE 13:1-9

On March 18, 1937, a tragedy happened that forever marked the small town of London, Texas. Unbeknown to any of the teachers or custodians, a natural gas leak filled the basement of the elementary school with the volatile substance. In the twinkling of an eye, a spark ignited the gas lifting the school off of its foundations with the gigantic explosion. 293 people were killed that day – the vast majority of them young, elementary aged children. London, Texas has never been the same town since. For years people have asked *why?* Why did such a disaster happen in our small town? Was our town more wicked than the other communities in Texas? And even if this were the case, why should young elementary-aged children be offered in sacrifice? Why do natural disasters happen in life?

Many of us are asking this question today. On this day we commemorate the 4<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the terrorist attack on the twin towers in New York City. In just moments, several thousand of the brightest and most influential financial minds in our nation were killed in a senseless

tragedy. And now in light of the disastrous Hurricane Katrina that devastated the Gulf Coast killing thousands of people and causing 10's of thousands of others to lose their homes and all of their possessions. Why did this Hurricane happen? Were the twin towers filled with the most wicked people in New York City? Was this area of the gulf coast more evil than other areas of our country? Is this God's hand of judgment on these areas of our nation?

Now we must realize that this is not a new question in life but it is rather one that has been asked for thousands of years. We know this to be the case because of a conversation that Jesus had with some people somewhere in the vicinity of Jerusalem almost 2,000 years ago now. Let's read the account of this conversation found in the first 9 verses of Luke 13:

LK 13:1 Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.

<sup>2</sup> Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?"

<sup>3</sup> I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.

<sup>4</sup> Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them--do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?

<sup>5</sup> I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

LK 13:6 Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any.

<sup>7</sup> 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. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'

LK 13:8 " 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it.

<sup>9</sup> If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.' "

Now it's obvious from the context of this passage that some people had come to Jesus with some late breaking news. Pilate had just performed a hideous, dastardly act. He had slaughtered some Galileans as they were preparing to sacrifice in the temple. Now these people who came to Jesus

with this late-breaking news don't give details – they probably assume many of the details to be known because this must have been front-page news at the time.

William Barclay sheds some background on this event in his commentary on Luke. His research into extra-Biblical texts showed that this particular group of Galileans were borderline zealots – they were known as revolutionaries against the Roman government. Galileans were known to be more emotional and volatile than the Judeans anyway, but these were extreme even for Galileans. The specific issue that had incensed them was Pilate's decision to use Temple Taxes to construct a much-needed improved water supply system for Jerusalem. Now this decision that Pilate had made probably didn't excite the Judeans living around Jerusalem as much because they realized the need for an improved water supply system. But the Galileans were very incensed over this decision. In the first place, using Temple Taxes for such a secular project was sacrilegious. And the fact that they as Galileans wouldn't get any benefit from this water supply just added fuel to their fire. They didn't want their tax money given to the Lord for the maintenance of the Temple

used for the construction of a water system. So these Galileans had made the trip down and were stirring up Jews to rebel against this arbitrary decision that Pilate had made.

Pilate felt the need to take firm and decisive action. He instructed some soldiers to disguise themselves, wearing robes just like the average Jewish worshiper. Pilate knew that the best place to find these Galilean rebels congregated together would be at the Temple itself. These soldiers were then to mingle with the crowds around the temple area, being careful to spot those who were the vocal Galileans who were inciting all the trouble. At a given signal, the soldiers were to reveal their true identity, disperse the crowds and arrest the main troublemakers. Pilate hoped that this decisive action would settle this issue once and for all. What he didn't count on was both the dedication of these Galileans and the lack of judgment on the part of his soldiers. For when the soldiers revealed themselves, these Galileans were incensed even more by the deception of the Romans. Not only were the Romans stealing their temple tax money, now they were bringing deception right into the temple area. And the Roman soldiers in turn overreacted. Instead of just subduing these

unarmed worshipers, they started cutting them down with their swords. A considerable number of people lost their lives that fateful day. And whatever the excuse, to kill people who had come to the house of their God to worship under the cloak of deception was immediately considered a heinous and wicked act indeed.

So some Jews come to Jesus desiring to hear His commentary on this tragic event – the senseless loss of human life. And we know that the underlying question that they had was the sincerity of the dedication of these Galileans. Were these Galileans sincerely concerned for God's temple or were they really wicked men using their religiosity as an excuse to merely rebel against authority? We know that this was the real concern of their hearts from the way that Jesus answers them. *"Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?"*

Jesus then goes on to speak of another tragedy that had occurred just a short time before. This was another headline event – a tragedy that was news on everyone's lips. Unlike the slaughter of these Galilean worshipers, we don't have any extra-biblical information about the

collapse of this tower in Siloam. But evidently, some unseen cracks in the foundation had formed in this tall tower. And all of a sudden one day, the tower collapsed, killing 18 people who were just standing beside it.

Now in a way, Christ bringing this collapse of the tower in Siloam into the conversation is confusing to us at first because there are some distinct differences between the slaughter of the Galileans and the collapse of the Tower. The first group perished under the assault of man, Roman soldiers took their lives in a carefully planned attack. The second group died in an unforeseen disaster. We would consider this to be more of an act of nature. We often call these acts of God. There is nothing that can be done to avoid these types of tragedies. And another clear difference lies in the fact that the victims in the first group were Galileans, while the victims in the second group were Judeans. But even in these differences, we begin to see a pattern in what the Lord is teaching here. The obvious implication of those who brought this matter up in the first place was that some kind of sin was involved here. Maybe it was secret sin, but sin had to be involved somehow. Their philosophy of tragedies was quite simple. An All-powerful God is ultimately responsible for all tragedies that occur,

and He uses these disasters to punish those who are wicked. So these Galileans must have been wicked people. Even though they appeared to be religious, they really must be sinful. Like Job's friends, these questioners had their philosophy of disasters all figured out and they merely wanted Jesus to confirm their viewpoint. But in introducing this second scene, Jesus muddies the waters for them. First, he moved from a man made plan to an actual act of God. And then he introduces Judean victims instead of Galilean. Suddenly, the natural prejudice that these Judeans had against the Galileans considering them to be less spiritual and more wicked is challenged.

And Christ's purposes become even clearer when we begin to see the similarities between the two scenarios, which He raised. First, the groups of people in both stories had died. But also, they had both died in a similar way, quickly, unexpectedly, tragically. And in the third place, both groups died at a place and time when they probably felt the safest. Would a Jewish worshiper ever feel safer or more close to God than when he was at the temple offering a sacrifice? And a tower was one of the most significant parts of the defense system in these days. A tower was

where the watchmen would guard the city from enemy intruders. Towers were synonymous with safety. God himself is often compared to a tower in the O.T. Where would anyone feel more secure than in church worshipping or at the police station? These would be our equivalent places today to the temple and the tower. But very suddenly, the Galileans and the 18 at the Tower in Siloam lost their lives.

You see, tragic events occur in this world – events that don't appear to have a clear meaning. A mentally deranged workman walks into a post office or plant and starts shooting indiscriminately, one person who is vegetarian and exercises regularly drops over in middle age with a heart attack while another couch potato whose steady diet is junk food lives to a ripe old age, insane zealots hijack airplanes and fly them into buildings not only killing themselves but also thousands of other innocent victims, a hurricane sweeps across a coastal area picking one house for destruction and leaving another standing unscathed. The answer is not always connected with sin and wickedness. We know that from Jesus' answer to these people. <sup>2</sup> Jesus answered, *"Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?"*

*<sup>3</sup> I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. <sup>4</sup> Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them--do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup> I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."*

Now I must say that tragic events are not **always** connected with sin and wickedness because sometimes it is clear that they are. The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in the O.T. suffered a sudden, tragic destruction; the entire country of Egypt suffered a series of devastating plagues; the Canaanite army got bombarded by 100-pound hailstones – all of these were definite disasters that God executed in judgment. The Bible makes this clear to us. But the majority of the time, there is no discernible connection between specific sin and disasters. We know this because Jesus said that it was so in this conversation recorded in Luke 13.

Why are so many people like these who brought Jesus the news about the Galileans? Why do so many people have the natural tendency to jump to the conclusion that people who suffer tragedy are being judged for some secret sin? Why do some people even have to stifle a secret joy in their hearts when they see others who are suffering? I mean, it is obvious that

many people desire to see disasters. News programs feature 90% tragedy as news that they report. They could just as easily feature 90% good news – people helping others, businesses having great success, people attending church and worshiping God. But they have found that the majority of people would rather see the tragedies. Big disasters mean great ratings – and this is what drives the news. The common motto of newsmen is “if it bleeds, it leads”. Why would so many people rather see a disaster than a blessing? Could it be that many find a secret satisfaction in the disaster? After all, if they secretly believe that people suffer in disasters because of their sin, and if they escaped the disaster personally, maybe that means that they aren’t so bad after all. Maybe they are acceptable to God. After all, God didn’t hit their house with a hurricane. Maybe they aren’t as wicked a person as the one who suffered in the tragedy.

Jesus strikes right at the heart of this kind of thinking with 2 phrases that He repeats. After the account of the Galileans and after the account of those who had the tower fall on them, Jesus said the same words. *I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.*” You see, these Galileans didn’t die because they were more sinful than those bringing the

news, and the Judeans didn't suffocate under the tower because they were more sinful than the people just down the road. We are all sinful in God's sight. We all deserve His judgment. So we will all perish one day, unless we repent of our sins. We must confess our sinful condition to God and accept the cleansing that He has offered through the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the only way to be righteous in His sight. Our righteousness does not come by comparing ourselves to others whom we consider to be more wicked than ourselves. The only righteousness acceptable in God's eyes is that of His one and only Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now Jesus goes on to give a brief parable about a fig tree to illustrate what He was saying. We know that this parable continues Christ's thought because of the little word *then* that ties it to Christ's former statements.

*<sup>6</sup> Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. <sup>7</sup> 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. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'"*

<sup>8</sup> "'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. <sup>9</sup> If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

The Lord Jesus told this parable about a fig tree to teach an appropriate lesson. For 3 years, the fig tree had not produced any fruit. So the owner tells the gardener to cut the tree down. It's just taking up space in the soil. But the gardener begs for just one more year. Maybe if he tends it well and spreads manure around it, it will bear some fruit. Just give it 1 more year.

Now we don't have much experience with fig trees here in Michigan. Fig trees grow in a more Mediterranean type of climate. But from my understanding and study, fig trees are a type of plant that do not do well growing wild. Fig trees require a great deal of care. A young fig tree does not bear fruit unless the ground is cultivated, and old fig trees can quickly degenerate if they are neglected. Raising figs can be a labor-intensive business.

A read a while ago about a man who lives in California. He bought a house with a fig tree in the back yard. He could care less about figs and

didn't care for the tree at all. The next year he noticed how the tree had spread - little fig trees were sprouting up all over the place. He ignored it and just ran over the small trees with his mower. But the next year he noticed that the tree had gotten weedy, spreading all over the place. In a couple of years, that fig tree had ruined a stone wall and terrace. The man cut down the fig tree, but he had a terrible time getting it to die. Eventually the roots cracked his pool deck. Finally, in desperation, the man had to use copper sulfate to poison not only the tree but also a large piece of soil around the tree to get rid of it.

I guess uncared for fig trees can be a major problem - a nuisance. Figs require a lot of care. So fig trees that don't bear fruit are just not worth the trouble. The owner in this parable was being very reasonable in asking the gardener to cut down the fig tree that was just wasting soil and potentially could be a big nuisance.

But this gardener for some reason wants to save this tree. *Give it another year. Maybe some cultivating and manure will do the trick.*

This parable that Jesus gave gives us a truth about God and about life – truth connected with this question of people suffering in disasters. First, the owner is patient. He had every reason and right to cut down the fig tree. If a fig tree goes 3 years without any fruit, chances are there won't be any fruit. But he still gives it another chance.

So God is patient with us. There may be times when by any logical measure, we would think that God would give up on us. But He doesn't. He is the God of another chance. Just as the owner gave the tree another year to bear fruit, so God gives us another year to repent and bear fruit.

But in the context of this parable, the overriding message is one of urgency. Whereas the tragedies of life do not necessarily indicate God's judgment, seemingly senseless events continue to occur every day. These remind us that Life has no guarantees. Wicked people continue to kill innocent worshippers without any warning. Towers continue to fall on people. Accidents occur, health fails, terrorists attack, natural disasters happen. God is patient - but we cannot take His patience for granted. Repent now. Bear fruit now. For none of us know how long we have left to live.

Larry King was on the Today Show some time ago promoting his book based on interviews with various leaders about the future. Matt Lauer was interviewing him, but being Larry King, he wound up asking most of the questions. One of the questions that he asked the Today Show host was this one: *What if you could know about when you might die - not exactly, but say, at around 78-79 years? Would you like that?* Matt Lauer answered, *Yeah; I think I'd like that. I might get a lot done in those last few years.* Now Matt Lauer probably responded like he did because he is just a relatively young man. He probably would be happy to know that he would live another 30 - 40 years. But wasn't his response interesting? He would get a lot done *the last few years*. The fact is that Matt Lauer or any one of us might not live another year. We don't know the length of our days here on this earth. So if we would plan to make our lives more productive if we knew we were going to die soon, we had better make our lives more productive right now - for we don't know how long our lives will be. The tragedies that we witness in life should continually remind us of this fact.

Jesus told his followers that there should be an urgency about life. Seemingly senseless events happen. Innocent people die, towers fall,

storms come, disease spreads . . .the time to repent is now, the time to turn our lives around is now, the time to become fruitful is now.

The time to say *I love you* is now. The time to say *I'm sorry* is now. The time to do that thing we have always wanted to do, we always meant to do, we know we ought to do, is now. The time to dedicate our lives to the Lord Jesus Christ and live for Him with our whole hearts is now. God is patient with us. God forgives. God loves us all. Untamed fig trees, weeds, non-hybrids, it doesn't matter. God loves us all. And we all have potential, with a little pruning, a little fertilizing, and a little care - of bearing fruit. And this will bring great joy and purpose to our lives - for this is what we were created to do. This is God's design for us. And God is able to bring about good results – even out of tragedies that occur in life.

You will remember that I started this sermon by referring to a seemingly senseless tragedy. 293 people, mostly elementary boys and girls, who died in a natural gas explosion back on March 18, 1937 in London, Texas. What a waste of human potential! What a tragic loss of life! But that disaster that occurred brought about a change that has saved thousands of lives over the years. For you see, natural gas in its natural state is odorless. That was the reason why nobody detected the gas leak in

that elementary school in London, Texas. But after that tragedy, awareness was brought that something had to be done to make natural gas safer to the consumer. So an odor was added to all natural gas that was sold. Today, you can smell a gas leak. You can't actually smell the natural gas because it is odorless. But you can smell the additive that was added because of that seemingly senseless disaster that occurred in London, Texas. So God is able to bring good even out of tragic events in life. Today, we are safer as citizens in our country because of the attacks on the twin towers on September 11, 2001. We have a department of Homeland Security. We have better communication between the law enforcement branches of our government. There have been hundreds of planned terrorist attacks that have been thwarted because of an increased awareness of security. Now, these measures are far from perfect – the response to help the victims of Hurricane Katrina demonstrated that. But they are much better than they were before 9/11. Today, we don't know what the city of New Orleans will look like a decade from now. But I have walked down the streets of Tokyo and I have seen what can be the beauty of a city built up from ashes. New Orleans could well be one of the model cities of technology in our country one day.

But we must never forget that there must also be an urgency to life. Because seemingly senseless events happen, there is a vulnerability to life. And at some point, we are all getting our last chance to bear fruit. While God is always willing to give us another chance, we don't know what tomorrow will bring, and we never know when another chance will wind up being our final chance. And who knows who might be affected if we take a moment to make a difference right now in someone's life.

It is not our place to speculate about how and why others die. God Himself is the final judge. We can't always make sense out of the seemingly senseless in this life. But God is in control - it all makes sense to Him – even though it often does not to us. Our responsibility is to bear fruit - to make the most out of this life while we can.

God is patient with us - He loves us - and He wants for us to bear fruit. And He says to us - *Now is the time.*