

THIRSTY FOR REPENTANCE

Some people in Galilee are offering sacrifices to God when Pilate kills them. Their blood mixes with the blood of their sacrifice. Certain people are dead, a sacrifice is desecrated, and those sharing the incident with Jesus are looking for an explanation. Why do bad things happen? Are these worshippers more sinful than those who came to offer sacrifices yesterday or those who will come tomorrow? Why does this calamity happen to these people?

Eighteen people are building a tower for Pilate's aqueduct. They are being paid with money stolen from the temple and are crushed by the falling tower. Is their death a penalty for sin? Why do bad things happen? Are these eighteen workers more offensive than those who are serving Pilate in other ways, receiving tainted money for other tasks? Why does the tower fall on these people?

An earthquake devastates Haiti – a country already suffering immense poverty and hardship is pushed down even more into depths of despair that we cannot comprehend. Homes and businesses and crops are destroyed. Disease sweeps in as bodies decay and water is contaminated. Some people are spared, others lose everything. How can this be? Why do bad things happen? Are those people in Haiti worse sinners than people who live elsewhere in the world? Why does this tragedy befall these people?

An epidemic spans the world, killing men and women, children and adults, Christians, people of diverse faiths or no faith at all. Some die quickly, others linger in agony – some receive much needed treatment, others cannot bear the cost. Is this disease a penalty for sin? Why do bad things happen? Are those who are infected, those who suffer, those who die – are they more offensive than those who live in relative health and ease? Why does disease crush these people?

These examples address an ancient – perhaps timeless – human temptation to link disaster or suffering with culpability. If something has happened to someone there must be a reason. It must be retribution for some action or inaction on that person's part. The popular theory, then as now, is that suffering is the consequence of sin. Perhaps you too have fallen into the trap on occasion – assuming that some suffering you are experiencing or witnessing in a loved one is the result of your own immorality or their lack of goodness.

Jesus denies that the suffering of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices, and the eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them, occurred because they were worse sinners than others who were not killed. He cuts across the current belief with a decisive and resounding, "No, I tell you." In this radical stroke he confronts the truth that calamity, tragedy, disease and suffering are not respecters of persons, even though that truth baffles and disappoints us. Jesus does not tell us why tyrants reign and towers fall, nor does he provide an answer to why bad things happen then or now. Instead, the question of "Why?" is pushed aside in favour of a warning to his listeners: "...but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

The examples Jesus provides – his words of denial and warning – serve to move his listeners away from linking suffering and disobedience toward recognizing their need to repent. His examples do not indicate specific cause and effect connections between guilt and death, but

rather show a moment for *repentance* – or turning – by those responsible for causing the pain, if such events are not to continue. Jesus wants to make the point that suffering results not from any *sin* of the sufferer, but from injustice left unchallenged and unrepented. Suffering may not be preventable, but its effects can be mitigated as we repent and reach out to those in need of God’s love – to those whose love for the Lord may be fading.

We will perish if we fail to repent – fail to recognize the true source of our life. The psalmist reminds us that we thirst for God – that we need God. He shares an enormously rich song of longing for God and for the satisfaction that comes from finding God. He tells how God has changed and redirected his life – so turned him around that he now sees that God’s love is life itself.

Think about what draws that profound need, eagerness and appetite out of you. What do you crave? What do you pine for? What makes your heart ache?

We have a physical need for God – what is vaguely referred to in our modern times as “spiritual longing.” For many it is an aimless casting about for something that will satisfy – something that will soothe the pain, calm the chaos. For many it is endless eating and never feeling full – careless consumption that drains resources and fails to nourish – a hopeless hunger of spiritual famine that fills our society.

We experience of fervent desire for God – thirsting – crying out to express the tangled web of our sadness, sickness and yearning. We instinctively recognize that the source of our life and the fulfillment of our need comes from God – we can trust in God – we know that God exists and is personally interested in our lives. This is the point of repentance – the time of turning and realigning ourselves with God – looking at the direction of our life – the path we are on.

Repentance is born of our longing – our thirst for God. We seek the LORD – call out to God – knowing that God has promised everlasting love and abundant pardon. We turn to God realizing that God does not think as we do – does not do things the way we do. God desires much more for us than we can imagine. As our soul thirsts we are drawn to God – we turn from our own course to the way that God would have us go.

Jesus tells his listeners, tells us, to repent – turn from one thing to another – change direction lest we perish. He relates the parable of the fig tree to illustrate his message of judgment offered in love. He says that Israel is privileged like a fig tree in a vineyard. It has a sunny slope and rises high above the vines to enjoy the sky. To many of Jesus’ hearers, and to you, it may seem that Israel’s history has been a succession of disasters, but Israel has the covenant of God, the lineage of the prophets, and the commission to share their knowledge of God throughout the world. This is privilege – a sunny slope.

The fig tree is planted on the sunny slope with a purpose, to produce figs. After a time of patient waiting for the tree to bear fruit, the owner demands that it be cut down. The leaves and shade of the tree may be lush but they are not what the fig tree is for – it must produce fruit or perish.

Each of us, like the fig tree, is given life for a purpose – to bear fruit of some kind. And this fruit is for the benefit of others, rather than for us alone. Our lives may look lush and full to the casual observer, but Jesus calls us to turn from a life that does not bear fruit – to turn from a barren life of self-centeredness – to change – to repent. Whatever our gifts – whatever our circumstances – we have been given life to bear the fruit God desires or we perish.

In the parable, the gardener – Jesus – intervenes to plead for the tree. He offers to give the tree extra attention, to nourish and encourage it into fruitfulness. He opens the story to the future, believing that despite past performance there is hope that change may occur. Jesus – the gardener – does not expect that turning the fig tree around will be easy. Far from offering cheap grace, or forgiveness with no reckoning, he insists that every chance be given before the final decision is made. Like the fig tree, we are nurtured, lovingly tended and supported toward fruitfulness. We are offered a time of reprieve and then of judgment as we struggle with our reluctance to recognize God’s desire for us and for the world. In Jesus we are given another opportunity to bear the fruit of God’s love in the world by challenging injustice – by extending our arms and our hearts to those who suffer.

Jesus calls us to repent – to turn again – and to bear fruit in the vineyard of the Lord. He tells us we can repent and receive a creative life through faith. He insists we dismiss the idea that sufferers deserve their suffering – changing from judges into those who act for justice. He demands that we have compassion for those who are in pain – turning from empty words to soul-filled listening. Jesus convinces us that calamities are not the fault of those who must endure them – begging us to repent of self-interest and self-righteousness so that we might bear fruit in a broken world. We have the blessing of a sunny slope – the privilege of relationship with Jesus – the gift of the Holy Spirit – the eternal love of God – and so we must bear fruit or die. **Amen**

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*O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
So, I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.*

*My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
when I think of you on my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.
My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.*