

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Luke 13:1-5, 6-9
“Do We Get It?”

June 1, 2014
(6th Sunday of Easter)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

		1) 13:1-5 JESUS' COMMENTARY ON MORAL AND NATURAL EVIL. 2 Tragedies, Only In Luke //Josephus <i>Ant.</i> 18:85-89, <i>J.W.</i> 2:160-177	
		a) v.1 Report Of Moral Evil (Political Murder In Religious Setting). Pro-Roman? Revolutionary? Controversy Over Water Project, Temple Monies?	
1	1	There were some present at that very time who told him (Jesus) of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.	11:53-54, Politically Hot, Zealots? Passover? Killed In The Temple Compound By Romans Obituary No. 1: Jesus' Fellow Galileans, Political Question
		b) vv.2-3 Jesus' Response: A Clear Call To Repentance. Dt. 28-30, Corrects Popular Theology Job. 4:7, Correlation Between Fate & Guilt In This Life?	
2	2	And he answered them,	Does Greater Sin Lead To Horrors Now? Question (1)
Q/A		"Do you think that these Galileans/ were worse sinners/ than <u>all</u> the other Galileans, because they suffered thus?//	All (4x) Death Exposes Mortality, Many Would Answer Yes!
3	2'	I tell you, No;	No Comfort, Answer (2): Not Singled Out, Death Always Near
	1'	but unless you repent you will <u>all</u> likewise perish.	Look To Yourself First! Warning (3) Jerusalem in 70AD likewise = 2 nd Death, Sudden, Without Preparation, No Time To Change
		a') v.4 Report Of Natural Evil (A Tragic Accident). Tough Neighborhood, Tragedy = Natural Cause Calamities Are Not From God! Jesus Adds His Own Obituary No. 2: Jerusalem, Did God Aim A Tragedy?	
4	1	Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them,	9:7, 11, City Construction: Aqueduct?
		b') vv.4b-5 Jesus' Response: A Clear Call To Repentance. Not More Deserving Of Death Life Uncertain, Death Capricious, Judgment Certain, Question (1')	
Q/A	2	do you think that they/ were worse offenders (debtors)/ than <u>all</u> the others who dwell in Jerusalem?//	
5	2'	I tell you, No;	Answer (2'): Not Singled Out
	1'	but unless you repent you will <u>all</u> 'in the same way' perish."	Personal Warning (3') Urgency! likewise = Suddenly, Without Preparation, No Time To Repent
		3:8, 5:31-32, 15:1-32, 18:9-14, 24:47, Repent/Reorient = Turn From Evil, Towards God's Kingdom Today (The absence of tragedy and a relatively smooth life is not a sign that one is right with God and needs no repentance. Likewise, the presence of tragedy is not necessarily a sign of an inferior relationship with God. Every tragedy is a warning.)	

Image For Israel, National Warning

		2) vv.6-9 PARABLE OF THE FRUITLESS FIG TREE (L?). Cursing, // Mk. 11:12-14, Mt. 21:18-19 Israel As Fig/Vine, Ps. 80:9-19, Hos. 9:16, Is. 5:1-7, <i>Mic.</i> 7:1, Ahikar 8.25 (Armenian)	
		a) vv.6-7a Planted In Hope Of Harvest: Owner Speaks Of Failure And Judgment. National Warning! Only A Short Time To National Disaster, 70AD Images: People Are Plants, Fruits Are Lives Mic. 4:4, Zech. 3:10, Lev. 19:22-24 3:8 = Repentance, 6:43-45. 8:4-15	
6	1	And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit on it and found none.	Investigation And Disappointment, Sterility Not Fecundity
7	2	And he said to the vinedresser, 'Lo, these three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none.	Fruit = New, Ethical Behavior, New Relationship The Voice Of Judgment And The Voice Of Mercy Patience (3 Yrs. to Maturity + 3 More) 3:7-9, 6:43-45, 8:14-15 On Fruit, Uselessness Towards God Invites Disaster God Wants A Return On Investment
		b) v. 7b Judgment Announced, Dig it out!. Nothing That Only Takes Can Survive Figs Absorb Major Nutrients, Death = Encounter With God!	
Q	3	<u>Cut it down</u> ; why should it use up the ground?"	v.49, Ex. 32:10, i.e. Replace It With Another, Luke 3:9 The Nation Failed, Story Could Have Stopped Here!
		a') vv.8-9a Plea For Patience: Vinedresser Speaks. Political Call, Judgment Postponed Is Mercy Time Limit, Open Ended! Don't Know What Happened, No <i>Nimshal</i>	
8	2'	And he answered him, 'Let it alone (forgive it), sir, this year also,/ till I dig about it and put on manure.	Urgency! Richer Soil, Change → Faith → Obedience? Hope/Mercy, "Insult Humor" Rom. 2:4-6, Hope Still Alive, Patience Prevails For Now
		b') v.9b Judgment Assured. Vinedresser Is Not An Image For Jesus/ Marcionite Heresy	
9	1'	And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can <u>cut it down</u> ."	Judgment Postponed Is Not Judgment Avoided! 3:9, 4:19, 6:43-45, 8:14-15, Some Fig Trees (People) Never Bear Fruit 13:24-35, Mercy Limits (Acts 14:15-17, 17:30, Rom. 2:4ff., 2 Peter 3:9ff.) Holy Spirt Is The Gardener Of Souls (Cyril of Alexandria)
		(The absence of present judgment cannot be taken as a sign one is righteous and thus beyond judgment. It is a sign of God's patience and mercy giving time to return to him before it's too late. All alike must repent, bear fruit.)	

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 13:1-5, 6-9

This thought unit falls into two parts (1. vv.1-5, 2. vv.6-9) on the theme of *repentance*, understood as a radical reorientation away from other agendas- political and religious- towards God's agenda revealed in Jesus. Having ended the previous unit with a call to read the times (vv.54-56) and take prompt action (vv.57-59), the issue is, Who does the call apply to? Jesus' answer is clear: it applies to *all* (4x)! Both paragraphs are from *Luke's special source* (designated *L*). Both use question and answer (vv.2-3, 4-5, 7b) and deal with death (e.g. the Galileans, the Jerusalemites, the symbolic fig tree). The issues are ultimate.

The link between this and the previous unit is clear, "There were some present *at that very time.*" They inform Jesus of an atrocity and sacrilege in the temple, "... who told him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." Galileans were known as political hotheads, and Pilate was brutal in suppression. Further, Jesus was a Galilean with followers, and he too is on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. There's trouble ahead! Is he pro-Roman or pro-revolutionary? Neither, as demonstrated in his reply which shifts the grounds of the exchange, "Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered such?" The common sense answer for his hearers would be *Yes, since God controls everything, and they came to this sudden, violent end, it must be God's wrath against them, which means- since God has not done so to us- we are not so wicked as they.* If God is the immediate cause of all actions and determinism rules, there is appeal to this line of reasoning. But Jesus' firmly denies this presupposition with his *I tell you, No, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.* Not to die this way does not mean one is any less guilty before God. On a political level it means that unless the Jews abandon the increasingly popular agenda of the Zealots, the nation as a whole will perish (as it did in the war of AD 66-70). Political violence is not God's agenda, Jesus is. To their example Jesus adds his own of a tragic accident which crushed eighteen, and with the same refrain again speaks against a one-to-one correspondence between loss and divine judgment (vv.4b-5). That the tower may have been part of an aqueduct project for which Pilate robbed the temple treasury, and for which the workers might then be understood as co-conspirators in the sacrilege, is possible. The surface structure of vv.1-5 is staircase (1-2//1'-2') with 2 and 2' as Jesus' parallel refrains. The absence of tragedy from moral or natural evil is not a sign one is right with God, and it's presence is not a sign of an inferior relationship. In light of Jesus' call, all must turn from all other agendas, and especially the illusion of thinking I am superior and safe because I have not so suffered. There are other wills and powers at work God does not directly control. Bad stuff happens to people all the time in this complex, fallen world; all are always vulnerable.

The attached parable (vv.6-9) is also staircase (1-2//1'-2'). Both the fig tree and vineyard were metaphors for Israel. The owner personifies God's justice and the vinedresser the divine attributes of patience and mercy. Their dialog is about which prevails in the near term. The just verdict to *Cut it down* after years of sterility is challenged with an alternative to *Forgive it, sir* and offer extra cultivation for a year: *till I dig about it and put on manure.* God gives care and grace to enable a response, but at some point patience ends when there is no turning toward the Giver. The fig tree is on probation with the hope of a fruitful response, "And if it does bear fruit, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." By leaving the story open-ended, Jesus draws hearers into participation. To the question, "What happened?" the answer is, "You are the fig tree; it depends on you!" Jesus' stories are multi-valent. Are Jewish leaders in mind? Yes, since their policies that are leading the nation towards ruin. How about the people? Yes, them too, since they form the nation. All are on probation with plenty of prevenient grace to enable a response and fruitfulness. God wants a return. God is patient and merciful and removes excuses because God desires that we live in his fellowship. Jesus is the sign of that gift. Not to respond is disaster.

DO WE GET IT?

“... but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

Jesus offers no false sympathies in the face of death.

L U K E 1 3 : 3 b

One summer day in Charleston I made a house call on a member of St. Mark I had not met. She was in her eighties. The secretary said, “Marge hasn’t been here in years. Someone said she’d just gotten out of MUSC,” so I went by. It’s bad form to bury someone you’ve never visited, so I went with dual purposes in mind.

Her hair- from the picture on the wall- was once golden as honey with a tinge of strawberry; now little was left of her glory but a few stray streaks of yellow. She came to the door wearing a floral housecoat and pair of scuffs.

“I’m Pastor Phil from St. Mark,” I said through the screen door.

“I know who you are. I’ve heard about all the trouble you’re causing at the church! People can’t figure out if you’re a Catholic or a Baptist!” She smiled.

The interior of the house was 1966: avocado appliances, speckled Formica, an old Zenith color TV, a couch with skinny arms. I’d entered a time warp!

She sat on the couch and I in a vinyl side chair. I knew it was her regular place by the piles on either side- magazines, knitting needles, yarn, church bulletin- and on the coffee table a picture book titled *War in the Pacific*. You can tell a lot by the spaces people shape and the artifacts they employ. Pastors are local anthropologists who see people in their native environments.

After learning her deceased husband’s second career was at the Navy yard but his first in the Navy, I asked, “Were you married during the war?”

Her next words riveted me, “We were in Honolulu on December 7, 1941.”

I was all ears.

“We’d not been there long. We were at the Royal Hawaiian waiting for housing. Fifth floor, little round balcony. It was great! My husband left early. I slept in till the sounds of planes woke me, and they were flying low. So I got up, put on a housecoat- not this one! pulled back the curtains and walked onto the balcony. About that time a Jap Zero came right by the hotel at eye level. I could see his face; the pilot glanced at me, then another and another blew by. Big red imperial sun on

each one. I knew it was bad. My husband was safe, but there were lots of grieving widows in Honolulu that night. They sent me home to the U.S.”

Hearing her was like watching a movie. She came back to church a few times. When I saw her on Sunday or visited in her home, she- knowing how interested I was- would open our conversation with, “Preacher Phil, there was something I forgot to tell you about that day.... I see you drive a Nissan. No Jap cars for me!”

The day that marked the before-and-after for that generation was Sunday, December 7, 1941. For mine it was Friday, November 22, 1963, the day JFK was assassinated, or perhaps April 4, 1968, the day the music of “We Shall Overcome” was silenced as Dr. King was killed. I was a fourth grader in 1963, and when the three o’clock bell sounded I went out to climb in the front seat of a blue 1960 Belair station wagon. There I found my mother weeping, her head buried in the steering wheel. And when I asked, “What’s wrong?” She answered, “They killed our President!” It was a quiet ride home, the rest of the afternoon spent in front of a black and white TV, her saying over and over, “I can’t believe it!” She’d voted for Jack in the ‘60 election, Dr. Jim for Mr. Nixon. My first political memory was him saying on election day, “Betty, you canceled my vote today. We’re now a divided family.”

For our generation it’s September 11, 2001 that marks the before-and-after of national consciousness. A hole was torn in history’s fabric; a ripping sound across the land. The moral evil of mass murder. An assault on our symbols of economic and military power by Al Queda, but who were they? We were no longer safe as a national island. It was a deep wound that hemorrhaged trillions from the Treasury and the lifeblood of the land in thirteen years of Afghan war. And we- for all our intelligence- were not ready. Churches filled that night, and for several Sundays after till we began to adjust to *the new normal*, then America went back to the mall.

That fall I gathered ten clergy and laity for a video seminar on Building Strong marriages. The church secretary knocked, and when she came in looked disturbed, “There’s been an attack on New York and Washington.” You need to come see this,” so off we went to stand dumfounded before the screen, then scattered after prayer. I was disoriented. What do I do? Nothing had changed in Georgetown, but it had; I just didn’t know it yet. A woman in our group who was committed to helping marriages in her black church had only recently retired from the New York City phone company with offices in the basement of The Trade Center. Twenty-one friends died that day; when I saw her later all I knew to do was give a hug and say, “I’m so sorry.” A church member whose house bordered our chapel told me of a

friend who died at Cantor-Fitzgerald. He called the man’s wife; she played for him her husband’s last words from the answering machine, “I love you; take care of the boys. I will pray for you. Got to go.” Click. By two o’clock I’d drafted a radio announcement and invited the town to come that night for prayer. The house was packed, the mood solemn. The first lesson was from II Chronicles 7:

“...if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”¹

We sang *Faith of our Fathers* and *We Shall Overcome*. Prayer was real that night.

What a difference a day makes! It chops the flow of history into large chunks. December 7 of ‘41. November 22 of ‘63. April 4 of ‘68. September 11, 2001. Large tragedies have huge effects, and for a time their binding power is immense. Only later come the hard questions. *Why do bad things happen to innocent people?* to which the first answer of Christian doctrine is quite uncomfortable, “My naive friend, here are no- strictly speaking- innocent people.”² Better or worse when compared with one another, but not if God is the standard. Or how about the common outrage, *How could a good God allow this to happen?* to which our answer is that we are knit together in a web of influence where the good I do effects you for good, and the evil I do effects you for evil. It’s what it means to be a human being living in community with a measure of freedom given to us and to angels, good and bad. Not all wills and powers obey God, at least not yet, else why would we be instructed to pray? “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, down below as it now is above.” All is contested.

After all, what would you have God do? Wipe your brain clear every time you had an ugly thought? Stop every negative action? What then would be left of freedom for the development of character, and the Bible is clear that God is after is genuine covenant partners not preprogrammed robots. God wants a new society-

¹ vv.14-15.

² The most offensive doctrine for moderns is Original Sin, “Article VII- Of Original or Birth Sin: Original sin standeth not in the following of Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk), but it is the corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually” (*BOD* 2012, 65).

Israel and then the church- who will listen and love and obey and be a counter-cultural witness to a confused world. And God’s risk is to give us a measure of freedom and autonomy and independent action with true consequences.

Our choices are limited because we are, but within limits the consequence for ourselves and others are real. Everything that happens is not God’s will; he didn’t plan it, cause it, arrange it or render it certain.³ God is not the source of sin and evil and rebellion, though the unrealized possibility for all that goes wrong in life is built in from the start because God’s goal is free, rational creatures who obey out of love, genuine persons, and that’s why all sorts of unpleasant possibilities are built in as real consequences. But strict determinism is out, the idea that life is a detailed blueprint long ago established for each person and invariable is bogus. God sees all the possibilities and all the connections all the time so nothing we do or unleash ever takes God by surprise. God never says, “Oh, I didn’t see that coming!”

Whatever possibilities we enact in all their possible combinations as the present draws from the past and interfaces with the uncertain future are foreseen because God knows all the combinations in the living and limited system of creation which remains enormously complex, and when one path is taken, others are left unrealized. You wear blue that day, not green. You pray one morning and forget God the next so you enter the day as a prideful independent which sets you up for other choices that omit your divine senior manager. Consequences pile up, so you return, “I did it again, Lord, thought I could manage life alone. Forgive me.” You keep saying Yes to something that gives comfort but is bad for your character. You marry this instead of that one. With each decision doors open and close. Life is open-ended and for keeps, and all people walk by faith and not sight; you cannot stop making decisions and thus shaping a life with or without God. Your future is not fixed but is designed to be a cooperative venture with the One who made and loves you. Sin and evil and ignorance and frustration and death are pervasive and exert great pressure on us all. But God did not single out and slaughter the Galileans, nor the ones on whom the tower fell as direct acts of vengeance because they were especially wicked. They were not on a hit list. Pilate killed them, poor engineering or a tremor the others.

God has elected the whole human family in Jesus Christ by identifying with us

³ For a critique of high Calvinism and its *decreetal* theology and philosophical determinism, see David Olson, *Against Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011); also his *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2006).

as a frail human being, and all who say Yes to him are destined for glory in the coming kingdom as they respond to his continual grace in this world under current conditions, but God does not rig every possible interaction because it's not necessary to achieve his purposes. To say that *whatever happens had to be* is not true. To say that God is sovereign is not to say that God pre-plans and renders certain every detail in the universe as in some forms of high-Calvinism and philosophical determinism.⁴ God has full and exhaustive knowledge, but God chooses to rule by self-limitation, by love which grants space and freedom to the other. Love is a give-and-take personal relationship; it's a dance with all kinds of space for creative interaction. God's good purposes envelop and incorporate and finally outsmart and overcome all our wicked tendencies, and there is high drama along the way. So Jesus warns us all to turn to God now and reminds us that the time of God's patience has its limits on a case by case basis. In a broken, tortured creation, political violence takes some, natural disasters and accidents others, disease and starvation still others, and in the end all die and stand before the God whose knows every heart and all the details. The real question is not, Did I manage to avoid as much pain as possible? but, Did I see my precarious condition and respond to the personal cultivation God's mercy and patience so freely offers? Cultivated soil and manure for a sterile fig tree. Calls to love and learn from Jesus Christ for all of us. All are offered resources, all are enabled to turn and become fruitful, but not all do. I am not a Calvinist; I am Wesleyan and believe our approach makes sense of the Scriptures and life.⁵

These are not new concerns. People have always died- sometimes in huge numbers- because of the violence of others and catastrophes of nature. But it was in 1755 with the sudden devastation of the Lisbon earthquake that European philosophers began to make a distinction between *moral evil*- what we humans do to one another that might have been avoided, and *natural evil*- hurricane and tornadoes, volcanoes and tsunamis, plagues and epidemics that sweep away nations, and which are not easily avoided.⁶ The second more or less happen to us suddenly, the former

⁴ Contemporary exponents and proponents are John Piper and R.C. Sproul, and in an earlier generation Jonathan Edwards.

⁵ For a reasoned contrast between the two, see Don Thorsen, *Calvin vs. Wesley: Bringing Beliefs In Line With Practice* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2013)

⁶ On European post-Enlightenment philosophy as the history of dealing with evil, see Susan Neiman, *Evil In Modern Thought: An Alternative* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); for a biblical theology, N.T. Wright, *Evil And The Justice Of*

we do to one another with great intent. We live in a dangerous, unstable neighborhood- planet earth, and are often vicious to one another. The two categories- *moral* for what we do, and *natural* for what the earth does to us- are helpful distinctions, but in life they are often more intertwined.

Some of what we label *natural disasters* did not have to happen because the human consequences are preventable, but the ones that do- say the earthquake in Japan- leave us wondering, How do such events figure into our understanding of God’s goodness? and here two answers come to mind. Creation is not just once long ago but every day; creation is continuous. We live in the midst of a loud, boisterous, immensely energetic construction project.⁷ Plates grind, the earth rumbles and grumbles, ladders slip and people fall. But also, the Bible says, early on an original pair was installed as God co-regents over the whole of garden earth. It is because of their deception, their distrust, and finally their joint treason and mutual banishment that we are born where we are and find the world as it is, out of sync and full of chaos, but one day God will heal us and remake all that is in a single cosmic act of resurrection in which all that is, us and our world, will be forever healed. What happened to Jesus is for us as well. This broken world has an expiration date, and every moment of human pain and earthly disruption is a reminder we’re not home yet.

Idle Speculation Quenched (13:1-5)

Wouldn’t it be easier if bad things only happened to wicked people? The rest could then relax, knowing we’re OK, at least not so bad as others in the great pecking order from the worst to the best. When tragedies happen, we want to make sense of them because we inhabit the same web of life. Life as we know it could end any moment. Swift, sudden, and final, so we push it to the edge of awareness till it comes too close for comfort. A car wreck, a heart attack, a murder, Columbine, terrorism?

When tragedy comes, many ask Why? and blame God. I read the Scriptures and ask, Why not? We inhabit for a few years a radically beautiful and fallen world,

God (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011)

⁷ For a fresh theodicy which argues from science that ours is *the best of all possible worlds*, even the *only of all possible worlds* if God’s goal is free, rational creatures who respond in love, see Dinesh S’ouza, *God Forsaken. Bad Things Happen. Is there a God who cares? YES. Here’s proof* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 2012).

created good but presently not safe and the whole of it behind enemy lines, and on a battlefield there are always casualties. Jesus saw it with a clarity afforded no one else. Every person he met needed what he had to offer- a healed relationship with their Maker through spiritual awakening, repentance and ongoing trust. Every person needed protection from the intrusions and schemes of the Evil One. Every person Jesus met was marked for death, and after that a meeting with the Living God for judgment and one of two destinies. And while I prefer my life to be long and comfortable, I don't know it much matters to God how I make my exit. Only that I am prepared, as Jesus twice said, "... unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

Think about it: Jesus understood sin and chaos, evil and death, who was ultimately behind it and what his Father was doing to set the world to rights. He was the only true realist, the only one who understood the full diagnosis and the required cure which was hidden in himself. So if you write him off, may it not be as a dreamer, as an unrealistic and naive religionist; write him off- rather- because you find his diagnosis too much too handle and his cure too demanding. Jesus was in touch with more reality than we have yet seen or imagined.

The Roman Governor Pontius Pilate was not a nice man, not averse to using violence to deal with problems.⁸ It was- after all- his signature on Jesus' death warrant. And the men mentioned here, men from Jesus' home province, were known as bunch of rebellious hotheads, looking for the day they would rid God's land of pagan domination. Galilee was the home of freedom fighters, an invisible guerilla army. Apparently Pilate had intelligence a band of subversives was in town for one of the festivals, most likely Passover when laity were allowed to participate in the sacrifice of their own lambs. "Take them out," ordered Pilate, and so they did. Defenseless, surrounded, their bright red blood mingled in the dirt with that of their sacrificial lambs. Atrocity and sacrilege.⁹ Word got out, and Jesus heard the report, verse 1: "There were some present *at that very hour* who told him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." Home boys, perhaps Jesus knew some of them. If he sided in outrage with the freedom fighters, he'd be in danger from Pilate. If he sided with Pilate, he rejected his people's deepest hopes.

Jesus' response is surprising, but then he had full access to the Father's wisdom

⁸ Characteristic are Josephus *Antiquities* 18:85-89, *Jewish War* 2:160-177.

⁹ For a plausible historical reconstruction of the incident, see Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2000), 207-212.

through the Spirit’s speech, an analogy for which is in my pocket. If I hold down a button on my iPhone, my work wife *Siri* appears. I ask a question, then the answer comes back through the cloud. Jesus was something like that. When people locked him into two possibilities, a fresh idea and third option came down from above as an idea whose source he knew well. There are no exclamations of sorrow or horror, no words of condolence for the newly widowed and their orphaned children, no “How could God let this happen at church?” Jesus was not a modern pastoral psychologist and grief counselor. Instead he asked a probing question about the belief system that underlay the report. “Do you *think* that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered thus?” Many would have answered *Yes, that’s how God has arranged the universe*, but he said No.

It was a popular Jewish belief that God did good things for good people and bad things to bad people.¹⁰ Tragedy or suffering was directly correlated with ones relationship with God, as was blessing.¹¹ In a general sense there’s truth there. The reward of righteousness is goodness, and sin is its own penalty. Goodness leads to the compound interest of more goodness and sin to more sin. But Jesus will have nothing of a system of thought that argues because I’ve not suffered in the same way as others I’m singled out as superior. Suffering is unevenly distributed for a host of complex reasons, and everyone needs to return to God.

God is not the immediate cause of all events- as in some forms of Christian determinism and Islam. There’s a measure of freedom and consequence in creation that God does not always- or even often- prevent; else God would be always meddling with the space we’ve been granted, and the world would be a different place than it now is. God does arrange and influence in ways we cannot predict and for reasons we cannot fathom. One is healed, another dies. A dream warns one and not another. To the beneficiaries it’s a blessing; to others a conundrum. My best guess is that God intervenes from within the system when it enables divine purposes and not primarily for our convenience. It may also be that God chooses not to act in unusual ways where people have not prayed because God desires us to be full participants in his work. Heaven, I speculate, is full of unopened gifts never asked for.

That God did not prevent these Galileans from being murdered does not mean

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 28-30.

¹¹ John 9:1 ff.

they were singled out for specific divine punishment because they were more sinful than other Galileans. It means they crossed a powerful man with spies everywhere and could not stay out of the way of drawn swords. It was the price of their choice of violent politics, which Jesus steadfastly opposed, as he does to his day. So if my repentance is up to date and my heart open to God's inspirations, it frankly does not ultimately matter when and how I die. I'm already safe with God. But if my repentance is not up to date, and if I assume I must be OK because life is relatively tranquil and free of tragedy, I fool only myself. In the face of that day's brutal suppression, Jesus is blunt. "Life is uncertain; death is capricious; judgment inevitable."¹² "I tell you, No; they were not worse than the others, but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. They are now dead, and your present is more fragile than you know. Without a deep and perpetual turning to the God of mercy and justice, you have no future." It's not *how* we die but *that* we die that's the issue. Life ends; we stand before God; there is no appeal if all the calls have been ignored.

But Jesus did not stop with their report. He added one of his own to expand the range. Not *moral evil* this time, but *natural evil*, what we term an *accident*, verses 4 and 5: "Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem?" Same underlying erroneous pop theology, same answer from Jesus, "I tell you, No; they were not worse, but unless you repent, you will all in like manner perish."

And perish they did, forty years later when the Romans decided to put down the Jewish rebellion and take the walls of Jerusalem down block by block, including the temple, so that the only thing remaining today is the Wailing Wall. The immediate context is political: Herod murdering freedom fighters. Jesus was against the violent version of Jewish nationalism. It was not why God raised up Israel; it was not the Messiah he would be. He absorbed suffering rather than inflict it. The same Pilate who killed the Galileans would soon kill him; Jesus would be taken outside the very same walls for his death. The context is political, but the message is universal. Unless we repent, unless we turn and face the light, we do not have a clue to God's purposes, so we run off on some other project, say *save the nation* or *get the enemy* or *stock up for the end times* or whatever else seems pressing. Unless we repent—which is the doorway to divine revelation, we will always be on the wrong side of God. Some of those who died on 9/11 were right with God because they had turned in their hearts; others were not, and that morning all were alive. Watching them walk

¹² R. A. Culpepper, *New Interpreters Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1995), 270.

into the towers you could not tell one from the other, who was right with God and who was not, but God could! Then the planes came, and destinies were fixed.

In her book *The Cloister Walk*, Kathleen Norris says this about the word Jesus used for the turn-around he offered every day:

“*Repentance* is not a popular word... these days, but I believe any of us recognize it when it strikes us in the gut. Repentance is coming to our senses, seeing suddenly, what we've done that we might not have done, or recognizing ... that the problem is not in *what we do* but in *what we become*.”¹³

Repentance is being jolted; it's the gift of new sight, and to be effective requires a deep change that puts God and the frailty of life at the center of consciousness. The agonies of this world are constant; they will never end till the King returns. It is we who cooperate with the Evil One; our worst impulses make a mess of the world. It is we who are responsible for much of the agony, for poverty and war and pollution and racism and abortion and cruelty and lies. In the cross of Jesus God shows us how far our Divine Lover will go to give us a way out and a way forward. A God who goes this far is worthy of our trust, our love and obedience. Because, as Jesus said, “...unless you repent, unless you turn and face the fierce love of this God, you will all likewise perish.” The crumbling of the twin towers in an apt modern image for that reality- *to perish*. Bad enough to perish in this life, how much worse in the world to come with its second death.¹⁴ It's not how you die or when that's the big issue; it's that we all die and come face to face with the light of God. To turn now is wisdom; all other paths are dead ends.

I'm sorry to tell you this, but Jesus did not moan and groan and offer comfort and long apologetic explanations when people died in mass murders and construction accidents. Neither did he question God's goodness. He called those who remained to self-examination and to a permanent turning; he saw what was ahead unless they

¹³ *Christianity Today*, Vol. 41, no. 12.

¹⁴ Revelation 2:1, 20:1, 14, 21:8.

changed at the heart level.¹⁵ His own people were headed in the wrong direction, and it was in love that he warned of consequences.¹⁶ We have an honest Jesus, not a sweet, indulgent one who pats us on the collective head and coos, “Everything will be all right; don’t you worry about a thing.” It’s not true, never has been.

Patience As Mercy (13:6-9)

My grandmother Lida had a fig tree outside her back door in Saluda, and in late summer one of her favorite indulgences was to peel me a bowl of fresh figs, then put them in the fridge till ice crystals began to form in the juices. Watching her peel them with a paring knife made my mouth water; the time in the ice box intensified the longing, so I understand the frustration of the owner, “Three years and no figs! Time for action. Cut it down as a mooch. Why should it use up the ground?”

The fig tree and vineyard were symbols for God’s people, a tree or vine full of fruit signifying God’s blessing, a barren fig or vine a curse. So when Jesus said in verse 6, “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard,” everyone knew it’s a story about God’s people, and the first half of the parable is not good news. Three years to reach maturity, then three more years waiting for a bowl of figs. Six summers with no return on investment. Using up nutrients, producing nothing but green leaves and shade. Patience has been extended, and here it runs out, verse 7: “Cut it down; why should it use up the ground?” If it ends here, it’s a tragedy. The past determines the future; change is not possible. But that is not how it is with Jesus or the Father he displays. Julian of Norwich- the medieval mystic- saw this and wrote:

“Not what thou art (the present),
not what thou has been (the past), doth God regard with his merciful eyes,
but what thou wouldst be (the future).¹⁷

¹⁵ On the possibility of heart change, see Gregory S. Clapper, *The Renewal of The Heart Is The Mission Of The Church: Wesley’s Heart Religion In The Twenty-First Century* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010).

¹⁶ For a political reading of Jesus’ warnings to Israel, see N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1999), particularly chapter 4, “The Crucified Messiah,” 74-95.

¹⁷ R. Kent Hughes, *1001 Great Stories* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 1998), 287.

Luke 13:1-9 15

God sees what we may become if we respond and so is patient beyond reason. Instead of taking his axe and going for the roots in quick obedience, the vinedresser offer an option, “Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”¹⁸

We have no right to despair over anyone, including ourselves, this side of death. But if I’m coasting along in confidence I’m not so bad as others, it’s false comfort. There is a place where mercy ends and judgment begins, but where that point is in each life is left to God. It is in this limited sense that we are not each other’s judges, but we must make moral distinctions and thus are always judges in some sense.¹⁹ For the fig tree it was one more season with extra tending and fertilizer, but I’ve seen God pour on the fertilizer and soften the ground in some lives for decades; then one day the hoe becomes an axe laid to the root.

In a frontier town a startled horse bolted and ran away with a wagon carrying a little boy. Seeing the child, a young man risked his life to catch the horse and stop the wagon. The child who was saved grew up to become a lawless man. One day he stood before a court to be sentenced for a serious crime. The prisoner recognized the judge as the man who years before saved his life, so he pled for mercy on the basis of that experience. But words from the bench silenced his pleas: “Young man, then I was your savior; today I am your judge, and I sentence you to be hanged.”²⁰ Verse 9, “And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, *you can cut it down.*”

Did the fig tree bear fruit? Did anyone wake up the day Jesus warned them? Will anyone be saved or restored today? We don’t know. The stories are open-ended, as if waiting our response. God cultivates us and looks for fruit. Fig trees cannot decide, only people. Do we get it? Today, today is the day of salvation. Today is the day to surrender and then follow Jesus Christ all your days.

¹⁸ It is an error to allegorize the owner and the vinedresser as the Father and Son respectively. The debate is between two divine attributes, not between persons of the Trinity. The result of *over-reading* the text is that the Son appears more merciful than the Father, which moves us in the direction of the Marcionite heresy which divides the God of the Old Testament from the God of the New. A right reading of the unity of purpose in the Holy Trinity rules this out (See *BOD*: 65, Article VI, “Of the Old Testament,”)

¹⁹ Matthew 7:1-6.

²⁰ “To Illustrate,” *Leadership*, Fall 1985, 76.

**John Calvin (Calvinism/Augustinian) and John Wesley (Arminianism/ Semi-Augustinian)
Five Key Contrasts On Sin, Election, Atonement, Grace, And Perseverance²¹**

Key Issue: The Degree To Which God Determines Or Permits Evens to Occur. What Is Sovereignty?

<p>Calvinism (TULIP) (Canons of Dort, 1618)</p>	<p>Wesleyanism (ACURA) (Don Thorsen’s analysis, 2013)</p>	<p>Comment</p>
<p>1. <u>T</u>otal depravity</p> <p>The entire person in all their capacities is dead in sin and unable to respond to God. All humans are helpless in this sense.</p>	<p>1. <u>A</u>ll are sinful</p> <p>The entire person in all their capacities is dead in sin and unable to respond to God. But God gives prevenient grace (the help that comes before conversion) to all so that a measure of responsiveness is restored.</p>	<p>Major overlap</p> <p>Sinful humans have no natural or innate capacity to respond to God’s grace. Unless God acts, nothing will change. No one can initiate their own salvation.</p>
<p>2. <u>U</u>nconditional election</p> <p>The elect, apart from their response, are eternally chosen to be saved and the non-elect, apart from their response are chosen to be eternally lost, thus double predestination. Christ came only for the previously elected. The reprobate do not have capacity to respond to God’s grace.</p>	<p>2. <u>C</u>onditional election</p> <p>All the human family is chosen and elected in the incarnation of Jesus. But only those who respond and continue in God’s grace are saved. The saved are destined for glory, thus single predestination. Those who chose not to respond are lost by their own stubborn, sinful wills.</p>	<p>Major difference</p> <p>In the Calvinist scheme it’s more or less automatic and you have no voice in the matter. In the Arminian alternative it’s more cooperative and relational with a genuine response both enabled and necessary.</p>
<p>3. <u>L</u>imited atonement</p> <p>Christ did not die for all but only for the elect. The non-elect do not receive the benefits of his atoning death and cannot be saved.</p>	<p>3. <u>U</u>nlimited atonement</p> <p>Christ died for all because God wishes all to be saved, though not all respond. It is not that God has not provided but that we have not responded.</p>	<p>Major difference</p> <p>The benefits of all Jesus did, climaxing in death and resurrection, who are they for? All, or only the elect. Leads to major differences in missions.</p>
<p>4. <u>I</u>rresistible grace</p> <p>The elect are saved solely by God grace which, because they are elected apart from their response, cannot resist.</p>	<p>4. <u>R</u>esistible Grace</p> <p>Since grace (i.e God’s comprehensive outreach) is an invitation to a new relationship with God, it may be resisted on the analogy of human relationships.</p>	<p>Major difference</p> <p>For Calvinists God’s grace is overpowering; for Wesleyans it is invitational and convincing.</p>
<p>5. <u>P</u>erseverance of the saints</p> <p>All who are elected to salvation will persevere, and in this sense salvation may not be lost or forfeited. All of the elect will continue and persevere because of divine monergism.</p>	<p>5. <u>A</u>ssurance of salvation</p> <p>The Holy Spirit gives the inward witness that we are indeed restored to God’s favor and provides the grace we need to continue in the way all the way to the end. Persons may depart if they continue in willful rebellion, but God is faithful, and they may return. Perseverance is thus uncertain.</p>	<p>Some overlap</p> <p>God’s grace is fully able to engage and carry us into the kingdom. The key difference is in the area of human responsiveness. Arminians prioritize grace and include a necessary enabled response.</p>

²¹ Adapted from Don Thorsen, *Calvin v. Wesley: Bringing Beliefs In Line With Practice* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2013), 128-142.
