

Lessons from Unexpected Disaster

Luke 13:1-9

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The gospel is an offer of mercy from our sins and grace from the divine Creator coming into our lives. And the gospel is available to all people for as long as they are alive. But far too many people allow this open-ended invitation to lull them into complacency when the gospel is a very urgent call. And we need to approach it with the same sense of urgency that Jesus did.

The news reports are filled today with the earthquake and flooding that has happened in Turkey and Syria. The death toll has now surpassed 25,000; search and rescue teams are now being called off, with little hope of finding survivors; hundreds of thousands of people are displaced without electricity, shelter, food, and water.

Whenever a natural disaster like this takes place, it doesn't take very long before people start asking the question, where was God? And if God was real, couldn't He have done something about it?

Often the immediate response of people is that God must be angry and He's bringing judgment on these people.

I read just yesterday of a leading Muslim cleric in Iraq who is claiming that this earthquake was due to the lax response from the Muslim world to the recent Quran burning in Sweden. Allah was upset the people in Turkey didn't really do anything about it, so he sent the earthquake to judge them.

Here in the west, a rather common reaction to natural disasters is that Satan just went rogue and did what he wanted to do to torment people; he loves to cause chaos and disaster and death, so he really had a hay-day.

But the Book of Job crushes that false view because it revealed that Satan is on a leash and cannot do anything apart from the will of God.

Another popular reaction I've noticed over the years is the idea that God is aware of all these natural disasters and evil in the world, but He isn't powerful enough to control everything and everybody.

It's just too much for Him to handle.

This view was popularized in modern times by a best-selling Jewish rabbi. Following the tragic death of his young son, he wrote a book, entitled, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

He makes a rather feeble attempt to defend God as loving and kind, but he ultimately concludes, "God wants the righteous to live happy lives ... but it is too difficult even for God to keep cruelty and chaos from claiming innocent lives."

Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon Books, 1983), p. 43

He found that comforting: God wasn't involved because God can't control everything.

In other words, even God can't keep up with nature or disease or disasters. There's just so much bad stuff going on, it slips past Him.

Is that the interpretation of Scripture? Does Scripture tell us that God can't quite keep up with the forces of nature?

Listen to David in Psalm 147 as he writes:

He gives snow like wool; he scatters frost like ashes. He hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs; who can stand before his cold? ... He makes His wind blow and the waters flow.

Psalm 147:16-18

Listen to God speak through Isaiah the prophet as God declares:

"I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things. ... I made the earth and created man on it; it was my hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host."

Isaiah 45:7 & 12

We think we need to get God off the hook when God is actually taking responsibility!

While God established physical laws by which He governs the forces of nature, those laws operate according to His sovereign will.

It's clear from the Bible that even though all of creation has fallen because of sin (Romans 8:20-22) God has not lost moment-by-moment control of His creation.

The alternative view is that God can't handle His creation, that some things just get past Him. And that's supposed to be comforting? God just can't keep up with everything?

Imagine God coming to Noah and saying, "Listen, I can tell the fountains of the deep are about to explode; I can tell the clouds overhead are about to burst, so many things are about to happen at once, but I'm not going to be able to control all of it, so you might want to build a boat. In fact, you better build a big one!"

In his book entitled, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* John Piper writes that the shallowness of the church today has lost sight of the depth of God's sovereign control. He writes:

"Much of the church has become shallow and entertainment oriented, and therefore irrelevant – the popular God of "fun-church" is simply too small to hold a hurricane in His hand."

John Piper – Suffering and the Sovereignty of God

Adapted from John Piper/Justin Taylor, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* (Crossway Books, 2006), p. 18

A group of pastors I read about met together following an earthquake on the west coast. They decided God certainly had nothing to do with something like that, but then they closed their meeting in prayer as one of the ministers thanked God for timing the earthquake to happen in the early morning hours rather than during rush hour.

How ironic is that? Evidently God could control the timing of it, but not its occurrence; He could hold it back, but He couldn't shut it down.

Jerry Bridges summarizes what Scripture actually tells us about nature and the power of God, and in this is true comfort. He writes:

"All expressions of nature, all occurrences of weather, be it a devastating tornado or a gentle rain on a spring day, are acts of God. God controls all the forces of nature, both destructive and productive on a moment-by-moment basis – which means we are never victims of nature or disaster; they may be the indirect cause of suffering or death, but the direct cause is the plan and purpose of God."

Jerry Bridges – Is God Really in Control?

Jerry Bridges, *Is God Really in Control?* (NavPress, 2006), p. 57

Listen, do we really believe what we sing as a church—that God is in control?

How about Isaac Watts great hymn of the faith? Do I really believe it when:

*I sing the mighty power of God,
That made the mountains rise;
That spread the flowing seas abroad,
And built the lofty skies.
I sing the wisdom that ordained,
The sun to rule the day;
The moon shines full at his command,
And all the stars obey.
There's not a plant or flower below,
But makes thy glories known;
And clouds arise, and tempests blow,
By order from thy throne.*

Isaac Watts, "I Sing the Mighty Power of God" *Praise Songs and Hymns* (Zondervan, 1979), p. 9

But still, don't we wonder when something bad happens to others that maybe they deserved it? Maybe there's something wrong? Something hidden behind closed doors?

Isn't the rule of thumb that bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to good people?

And besides, what could God possibly be telling us, on the heels of unexpected disasters and even unexpected suffering and death?

Well let me tell you, two thousand years ago, people were about ask Jesus these same questions.

So, take your Bibles and turn to the Gospel of Luke—we've now arrived at chapter 13.

Now there are two events that have made front page news during this period of time, as Jesus is ministering to the multitudes.

We'll call this first event:

An Unexpected Evil

Now verse 1:

There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

Luke 13:1

In other words, these Galilean Jews were either in the temple offering their sacrifices or going to the temple to offer them when Pilate had them killed.

David E. Garland, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke* (Zondervan, 2011), p. 537

We're not given any information here about what happened, but we do know something about Pilate.

We know that the Roman emperor appointed Pilate as Governor of Jerusalem and surrounding areas, but since he had been appointed in this far outpost of the Roman Empire, which would have hurt his pride and made the prospect of any promotion unlikely, he took pleasure in demonstrating his power over the Jewish people.

Bruce B. Barton, *Life Application Bible: Luke* (Tyndale, 1997), p. 337

His rule would be marked by violence, robbery, bribery, persecution, and insults to the Jewish people.

John Phillips, *Exploring the Gospel of Luke* (Kregel, 2005), p. 192

We also know, from the records of Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, that the Galilean Jews were especially given to fighting Roman rule. Josephus writes: "The Galileans are ever craving for revolution, delighting in sedition."

Quoted by Garland, p. 537

Now Galilee was outside of Pilate's jurisdiction, so he evidently waited until these Galilean zealots arrived in Jerusalem and he had them killed on the spot.

Adapted from Barton, p. 338

This was front page news. Can you believe what Pilate did to those Galileans?

Many people would have been saying, "They had it coming to them; they were plotting a revolt. They were sinful men."

Jesus picks up on that argument and responds, here in verse 2:

And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

Luke 13:2-3

You see, these people were living with the same assumption that many people have today: good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. And these were bad men.

Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Luke* (Zondervan, 2012), p. 350

And Jesus says, “No, you’re missing the point, what if it had happened to you? Are you ready to meet God? Have you repented of your sin?”

When unexpected evil takes place, the question to answer isn’t: “I wonder why God let that happen?” or “I wonder if they deserved it?” or “Can you believe what Pilate did?”

No, Jesus effectively says, “The question to answer is much more personal; it isn’t about what Pilate did with them, the question you need to answer is what will God do with you?”

Adapted from Garland, p. 538

You’ll never be able to answer all the if’s, what’s and why’s behind unexpected evil; in fact, Jesus doesn’t even begin to explain it.

He just wanted them to answer the question, “What if *that* had happened to me?”

Would I have been ready to meet God?

With that, Jesus pulls another event out of the newspaper that had made headlines in that region in **verse 4**.

We’ll call this:

An Unexpected Accident

“Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

Luke 13:4-5

The warning of perishing has the idea of future judgment.

Jesus said in **John 3:16 that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life.**”

So, what happened here at this tower?

We know from history that at one point, Pilate wanted to address the water shortage issue in Jerusalem by building an aqueduct to the pool of Siloam.

The Jewish people loved that idea, of course, but then to their utter fury and dismay, Pilate decided to finance the project by stealing money directly out of the temple treasury.

Jewish people protested and Pilate sent soldiers among them, and many were killed.

Clinton E. Arnold, General Editor; Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Volume 1 (Zondervan, 2002), p. 433

The building project moved forward. But then a tower collapsed in the process.

This tower seems to have been connected with the city wall near the pool of Siloam and it collapsed sometime during the building project.

Adapted from R.C.H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel (Augsburg Publishing, 1946), p. 725

And when it came down, it killed 18 people. The implication is these were Jewish men who lived in Jerusalem.

They had accepted this job from the Roman governor; they had stooped so low as to be on his payroll, even though the money they would be paid with would have been stolen money from the Temple Treasury.

The popular opinion would have concluded that the tower of Siloam fell on them because these were the worst 18 sinners in the entire city of Jerusalem.

Barton, p 338

But Jesus asks them here in verse 4 again:

“Do you think they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?”

Luke 13:4b

The word for offenders is the word for debtors; it has the idea of sin as a debt to God.

Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 180

So, Jesus effectively asks them, “And what do you think is going to happen when you stand before God with your own debt of sin?”

And the answer from Jesus is the same: You’ve got only one way to be freed from the judgment of God—**verse 5—repent**, while you still have time, confess your sin to God, admit you’re a sinner and ask for His mercy and pardon.

You say, “But I’ve sinned way too much; God won’t accept me, I don’t stand a chance.” Wait. Check your pulse. Are you still alive? That’s good, you still have a chance; there’s still time, the Lord has already preached this same principle to this crowd. Settle out of court with God before it’s eternally too late.

Now with that, the Lord moves past these events that made headlines, and He moves right into a parable, and we'll call this parable:

An Unexpected Mercy

Verse 6:

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. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Luke 13:6-9

Now, the fact that Jesus refers to a fig tree in this parable is not coincidental. The Jewish people and certainly the religious leaders would have immediately known Jesus was speaking to Israel.

The Prophet Micah in chapter 7 referred to Israel as a fig tree where God had looked for the fruit of righteousness and He had found none.

Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, Volume 1, p. 434

The fig tree is used as a figure related to the blessings of the promised land for Israel (**Deuteronomy 8**), but it also portrayed an image of the judgment of God on Israel (**Joel chapter 1 and Amos chapter 4**).

In fact, go all the way back to the **Garden of Eden**, and the only tree we're told was in the garden was a fig tree; and we know that because instead of repenting, Adam and Eve took the leaves from a fig tree and decided to go into the garment design business and they sewed fig leaves together.

Adapted from Garland, p. 539

So, the fig tree can be an image of self-righteousness rather than repentance.

And that's exactly how Jesus is using it in this parable; He's tying this unfruitful fig tree to an unrepentant nation, and then more broadly to unrepentant individuals in His audience—both Gentile and Jew.

Jesus says here that the owner of this fig tree has arrived on three occasions and can't find any fruit. So, he orders it to be cut down—a picture of death and then judgment.

But the vinedresser effectively says here in **verse 8**, “Let me work on it some more, I’ll make sure the roots are getting plenty of sunshine and water; I’ll give it an extra layer of manure and some special attention; let’s give it another year.”

And with that the parable ends and by the way, would you notice that we’re not told what happened the next year.

This parable is open-ended; the listener supplies the conclusion in his own life.

Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Compassionate: Luke 1-13 (Victor Books, 1988), p. 149

Did the tree bear fruit? In this context, did it repent?

It was given a little more time; it didn’t deserve it, but it was granted unexpected mercy and longsuffering from God.

William Barclay called this parable the gospel of the second chance until the final chance.

Adapted from William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 176

And no one knows when that final chance occurs.

The question Jesus wants to raise here is personal; the listener wants to know: was the tree spared? Was it cut down? What happened the next year? And we start cheering for the fig tree!

But again, the question Jesus wants us to ask is not, “What happened to the tree?” the question is, “What will happen to you, and me?”

Wiersbe, p. 149

The Lord wants to take them—and us—past the news headlines, past the curiosity and shallow answers. He wants to take us deeper than that.

So let me wrap this up by spelling out several lessons to be learned from what we call natural disasters, unexpected evil and unanticipated events in life.

First,

Unexpected events remind us of the brevity of life.

That could have been you in that earthquake, in that accident, in that mudslide.

It could have been you on the headlines of news reports around the world.

Jesus wants us to consider the brevity of our own lives, this should send us a signal, this could be your last day on earth as you know it.

You have been given one more day—there’s still time to repent of your sin and follow the Savior.

Secondly,

Unexpected events deepen the believer’s trust, no matter what happens in life.

Jesus effectively tells this audience that the unexpected events in life are tutors that teach us to remember God is sovereign.

He is in control over every event; His purposes are being accomplished by every snowflake and every windstorm and every surprise and circumstance in life.

Finally,

Unexpected events warn the unbeliever to repent while they still have life.

He can watch the news and think, “That disaster didn’t happen to me this time. I’m glad I wasn’t there. I still have time; I need to stop putting off the deeper questions about sin and my eternal destiny.”

The point of Jesus’s sermon here in these passages has been consistent: don’t wait to settle your debt with God until it’s forever too late, until your second chance becomes your *last* chance.

I close with a personal testimony of a man in our congregation. I won’t name him, but I asked him if I could share with you what he recently did.

He’s from mixed parents—Jewish and Gentile. Raised to understand Judaism’s requirements, he never really bought into it. He began to wonder about the claims of Christ.

A couple of months ago he decided to visit The Shepherd’s Church. He sat through a couple of services and then asked to meet with me. He had questions—good ones—he wanted to read the Bible as well as learn more about Christianity.

So, I assigned him C.S. Lewis’ *Mere Christianity*. I figured he’d either take off, or contact me in a couple of weeks.

A couple of *days* later, he contacted me and said he’d finished it and asked when we could get together again.

So, we met again, I answered more questions, then I assigned several more books—I thought that would keep him busy for a couple of months.

A couple of weeks later he called. He'd finished all of them and wanted to meet. We met again, more questions and answers and then he asked for more books.

This time, I told him he didn't need more books, he had his Bible. He knew enough about the gospel; it was time, now, to surrender his life to Christ.

He said he wasn't ready. He left my office and continued reading his Bible and attending our services.

This past week, he contacted me and then told me what had happened. He wrote it down for me.

After last Sunday's sermon where the Lord urged people not to wait, he wrote, "I left to drive to Costco. While driving, I felt this compulsion to settle with God. I said to myself, 'I'll pray when I get to Costco; I like Costco, it's a good place to do this,' but then I didn't want to wait even that much longer. I had a pamphlet with the sinner's prayer on it and I decided to read that prayer as I sat at the next light—but then it turned green, and I had to go. The same thing happened at the next light. I thought maybe I should just stay parked there and let people honk. Eventually I got to an intersection where the light stayed red long enough for me to pray."

He came to see me this past week and with joy all over his face, he quoted a verse he had memorized, "I have confessed with my mouth the Lord Jesus and I believe in my heart that God has raised Him from the dead." I have settled with God.

No more waiting. It's done.

This is the message of Jesus to them here in Luke 13, and to you and me today.

That disaster, that accident, that unexpected event, it could be you next time. Why take a chance? No more waiting; settle with God today.

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