

“LEARNING FROM TRAGEDY”

Luke 13:1-9

On September 11, 2001, Islamic terrorists crashed airliners into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City; and also into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. A fourth hijacked plane, American Airlines Flight 175, slammed into a Pennsylvania field, when heroic passengers stormed the cockpit. Flight 175 was likely targeting the White House or U.S. Capitol Building. On that tragic day, nearly 3,000 people died and 6,000 more were injured. Of the dead, 403 were first responders: the firefighters, police, and paramedics who lost their lives while racing to save the lives of others.

History is littered with such tragedies and death tolls. In 27 A.D., a wooden amphitheater collapsed near Rome, Italy, killing 20,000. In the Middle Ages, the Bubonic Plague ravaged Europe, killing 25,000,000. In 1871 A.D., a great fire swept through Chicago, Illinois, killing 8,000. In 1957 A.D., Asian Flu spread throughout the world, killing 2,000,000. In 2010 A.D., an earthquake virtually destroyed Haiti, killing 230,000.

Crashes. Cancers. Catastrophes. Collapses. Random shootings. Stray bullets. Chance encounters. Wrong times and wrong places. Promising young lives lost to dirty needles and heroin overdoses. Entire families killed by drunk drivers. Tragedies. The list is endless. And with each tragedy comes the inevitable, understandable, and often unanswerable WHY. Why did this happen?

Sometimes, the WHY of a tragedy is discernable. Sometimes, there is a clear, follow-the-dotted-line connection between cause and effect, between sowing and reaping. As Paul wrote in Galatians 6:7, **“Do not be deceived; God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.”** Plant an apple seed, get an apple tree. Live to please God, reap godly benefits. Live to please self and sinful nature, reap destruction. Reaping what is sown is as much a spiritual law as it is a physical law. It is as true in life as it is in the field on a farm.

Throughout Old Testament history, the nation of Israel suffered many tragedies and massive death tolls. Often, the reasons for the tragedies were very apparent: cause and effect, reaping and sowing; in simple terms, the consequences of willful disobedience to God.

There are four hundred thousand white grave-markers in Arlington National Cemetery. To view them panoramically is a sobering experience. Yet, there were likely twice as many Israelite graves in the wilderness after forty years of wandering. Perhaps a million dead. And yes, a tragedy. But a tragedy whose reason is known. God Himself

explained the reason, telling the rebellious Israelites: **“But you—your bodies will fall in this desert. Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the desert. For forty years—one year for each of the forty days you explored the land—you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have Me against you. I, the LORD, have spoken, and I will surely do these things to this whole wicked community, which has banded together against Me. They will meet their end in this desert; here they will die,”** Numbers 14:32-25.

Paul provided similar cause-and-effect explanations in 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, our second Scripture reading for today. When writing about the tragedies of the Israelites in the wilderness, he said: **“We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test the Lord, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.”** Cause and effect. Reaping and sowing. Willful disobedience and death.

Yet, sometimes tragedies occur for no apparent reason—tragedies in which we can find no answers for the inevitable, understandable WHY. Why were three thousand people killed on September 11, 2001, when all they did that fateful day was to arrive at work on time, or catch a flight to a certain destination? Why were twenty-six people shot and killed on November 5, 2017, as they attended a worship service at the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, TX?

Ultimately, questions like these lead to the two tragedies mentioned in today’s text, Luke 13:1-9. Tragedies with no explanation. Tragedies for which we have virtually no information, except that one was a criminal act and the other was a construction accident.

Of the first tragedy we read: **“Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices,”** Luke 13:1. For decades, Bible critics insisted that Pontius Pilate was a myth; that there was no mention of Pilate in historical literature. Then, in 1961, an Italian archaeologist unearthed a limestone block in Israel with this Latin inscription: DIS AUGUSTUS TIBERIUM. PONTIUS PILATUS. PRAEFECTIS IUDAEAE. Translation: “To the Divine Augustus Tiberius. Pontius Pilate. Prefect of Judea.”

Pilate was a ruthless man. One did not become the prefect or governor of a distant Roman province—especially one as rebellious as Judea—without a predatory instinct and a readiness to kill. Philo, a Jewish philosopher and historian who lived from 25 B.C. to 45 A.D., wrote of Pilate’s “venality, his violence, his thefts, his assaults, his abusive behavior, his frequent executions of untried prisoners, and his endless savage ferocity.” And this view of Pilate is certainly compatible with the conniving, self-serving, hand-washing, truth-denying Pilate we encounter in the Gospels.

Whatever the provocation, Pilate ordered the killing of Jewish worshipers from Galilee, while they offered sacrifices in the temple of Jerusalem. In other words, Pilate had these Galileans killed in church, in a sacred place. And as they lay dying, their blood mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. A tragedy.

The second tragedy is described in Luke 13:4, this one mentioned by Jesus Himself: **“Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them.”** The Pool of Siloam—the pool where the blind man of John 9 was told to wash—was located on the south side of lower Jerusalem. Somehow, a tower, whether built near the pool or built on the high walls of Jerusalem, unexpectedly collapsed and crushed eighteen people. A tragedy.

Yet, note this carefully: When Jesus addressed the two tragedies mentioned in Luke 13:1-9, He did not even raise the question of WHY. Nor did He engage in a defense of God’s goodness, fairness, kindness, and holiness—the divine attributes so often impugned during times of tragedy: “What kind of God are You? How could You allow this to happen?” How many times were such questions asked on September 11, 2001? Amid our own heartaches and losses, how many times have we asked these questions since?

The truth is, dear friends, that often you and I don’t know the WHY of a tragedy; don’t see a follow-the-dotted-line connection between cause and effect, sowing and reaping. And there may not be such a connection to see. It may remain hidden in the all-loving heart and all-knowing mind of God.

In fact, in Luke 13:1-9, Jesus clearly explained that the deaths of the Galileans in the temple and the deaths of the eighteen crushed by the Tower of Siloam had nothing to do with who they were or what they had done. Listen to His words: **“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no!”** And again in Luke 13:4-5, **“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? I tell you, no!”**

Friends, it’s not what we read into a tragedy that is important; rather, what we take out of it—important lessons for our faith, hope, behavior, priorities, and life. This is the reason Jesus did not direct us to the WHY of these tragedies, but instead to the WHAT; to the critically important lessons to be learned from *every* tragedy, whether the WHY of the tragedy is known or not. Which lessons? Briefly consider three.

The first lesson learned from every tragedy: WE LIVE IN A TRAGIC, SINFUL WORLD. This may come as a surprise. However, Almighty God is not the cause of every disaster, every tragedy, every problem, every flat tire, or every case of food poisoning in the continental United States or throughout the world; though we often blame Him for such, as we have since our First Parents fell into sin.

“Your fault, God—this world of sin, tragedy, disease, death, heartache, loss. Your fault. Your fault that terrorists cut off heads and infants die in cribs. Your fault that wars abound and marriages fail and molesters stalk and maniacs murder.” No, it is not His fault. It’s our fault. Our fault that tragedies exist. Our fault that things go so horribly wrong. Our fault that the natural order of this fallen world is decay, not perfection; destruction, not evolution; death, not life.

Yes, God is the sovereign Ruler of the universe: omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. ‘Not a sparrow falls to the ground without God’s will,’ taught Jesus. Nothing is beyond God’s knowledge. Nothing is beyond God’s power. And therefore, nothing can happen in this universe or in our individual lives without God’s direction or God’s permission. And that is enormously comforting.

But God is never the origin of evil. Never. Can light also be darkness? Can holiness also be sin? No. And neither can the HOLY, HOLY, HOLY God also be evil, unfair, unjust, unloving, or unwise in anything He does. He may allow evil. He may force evil to accomplish His great and glorious purposes—as He did when the world crucified His one and only Son. However, God Himself is never the originator of evil. As James wrote: **“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone,”** James 1:13.

Our world is a world of untold wickedness, suffering, and death; a world unraveling strand by strand like an old threadbare garment. Yet, I ask: Is this the world God created for us—a world where terrorists fly planes into skyscrapers or worshipers are murdered in church or towers crush innocent bystanders? Is this the world God wanted for us? Of course not.

Consequently, before we accuse the Almighty of causing all the ills, evils, miseries, and tragedies in our lives and in the universe, let us first read and acknowledge the reality of Romans 5:12. **“Therefore,”** wrote Paul, **“just as sin entered the world through one man and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.”**

The second lesson learned from every tragedy: WE HAVE LIMITED TIME. Even the world says, “Nothing is certain but death and taxes.” Yet, between these two, human beings often pay more attention to taxes than to death. No one, of course, relishes the prospect of contemplating death or discussing dying. I learned this well when working as a Family Services Advisor at Lakeland Memorial Gardens. One of my responsibilities was to help grieving families. Another responsibility was to sell pre-need funeral arrangements.

Have you ever tried to sell a casket or cemetery plot to an otherwise healthy individual? Even though death is inevitable, not a question of “if” but “when”; and even though the advantages of preplanning funerals are enormous—lower costs, better

choices, the ability to finance, removing the burden from grieving loved ones; still, many refuse to discuss death and burial. They say, “I don’t need that stuff now.” I say, “Sir, you’re eighty-five years old.” They say, “Yeah, but I have time.” I say in a barely audible voice, “Maybe you do. Maybe you don’t.”

Ironically, we act as if we will live forever, when in reality we may die tomorrow. Doesn’t every tragedy teach us this, if we dare to pay attention? When we slow to a crawl to stare at a highway accident—the crushed car, the form beneath the bloody sheet, the grim-faced police officers; for at least an instant, isn’t there a shaky inner voice that says, “That could be me?”

Did the Galileans in today’s text expect to die when they left for church? Did the eighteen victims in today’s text expect to die when they went to the Pool of Siloam for a swim or a stroll? Did the nearly 3,000 who perished on September 11, 2001 expect to die when they got out of bed, showered, dressed, ate breakfast, brushed their teeth, kissed their spouse and hugged their children before hurrying to work? “Can’t be late,” they thought. No. But death came for them anyway.

And as much as we detest thinking about it, dear friends, one day death will come to us too. Whether that be tomorrow or decades from now—an Indonesian man recently died at the age of one hundred and forty-six—how can we face death with absolute confidence? Through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The third lesson learned from every tragedy: WE HAVE AN URGENT NEED FOR JESUS CHRIST. If ignoring our mortality is foolishness, then ignoring spiritual matters; ignoring our desperate need for Jesus Christ and His word and His salvation, is far worse—no, not just worse, but the worst of tragedies. This is precisely why Jesus equated the two tragedies in today’s text with an urgent call to repentance and faith. He said twice: **“But unless you repent, you too will all perish,”** Luke 13:3,5.

The word “perish” in these verses does not mean physical death, as if Jesus were saying: ‘Repent, and you’ll live to be one hundred and forty-six. Repent, and you’ll get good grades in school. Repent, and you’ll never use a sick-day at the office. Repent, and you won’t get cavities or wrinkles. Repent, and you won’t need automobile insurance.’ No. This is the **“perish”** of John 3:16, namely, the eternal death and eternal punishment from which Jesus Christ came to save us: **“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not *perish* but have eternal life.”**

In a narrow sense, repentance means godly sorrow over sin and turning in faith to God for forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Yet, in a broader sense, repentance means far more than this. The Greek word for repentance in today’s text, METANOIA, literally means ‘a change of mind,’ resulting in a change of direction; a change of heart;

a change of attitude, lifestyle, priorities. In short, a change in EVERYTHING for the simple reason that today, while we are living, is our time of grace; and Jesus Christ is the only way to be saved. And if these two things are true—that today is our time of grace, that Jesus Christ is the only Savior—should He be the supreme focus of our lives or a mere afterthought?

God's grace is limitless. Hallelujah. But our time to receive God's grace is not. And this, finally, is the meaning of that parable Jesus told in the text about a man who went patiently to his vineyard for three years, hoping to see fruit on his fig tree, but finding none. Yet, even then, the caretaker of the vineyard convinced the man to wait another year—giving the caretaker more time to do everything he could to make the fig tree productive: digging, weeding, edging, watering, fertilizing, pruning, and probably talking to the fig tree too. "Come on, tree. Grow. Produce fruit."

The point of this parable is as simple as it is sobering. In undeserved grace, God does everything necessary to lead a person to faith in Christ and also to empower a person to bear the fruit of a productive Christian life. But eventually, sadly, tragically, if grace is spurned, the time for grace may run out. The words ring true: **"If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down,"** Luke 13:9.

This, my dear friends, is why the Bible never speaks of salvation in terms of tomorrow or eventually or "I'll get to it later;" rather, only in terms of TODAY. **"Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts,"** Hebrews 3:7-8. **"The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed,"** Romans 13:11. **"I tell you, now is the time of God's favor; now is the day of salvation,"** 2 Corinthians 6:2.

Galileans slaughtered in church. Eighteen bystanders crushed by a collapsing tower. Repent or perish. Granted, this is not a happy text; not the type of text I'd expect to hear in Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church in Houston or, for that matter, in any church more concerned with making people feel good than telling people what they need to hear, God's own truth.

Yet, ultimately, the Lord's call for us to learn from every tragedy—not simply from the tragedy of September 11, 2001, but from every other tragedy too; every earthquake, every flood, every destructive storm, every school shooting, every fatality on Interstate 94 or Highway 12, every loss of property and life—is the result of His great love for us; and, as Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 2:4, God's great desire that 'all be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.'

The truth that we are all sinful by nature, and that we are all saved by grace.