

## Luke 13:1-9 “The Barren Fig Tree”

February 28, 2016

It happened again. Someone had to ask “the” question ... “how and why does God handle Satan the way he does?” If God is stronger than Satan and if God can control Satan, does that mean that He uses him as our test and through that test we can practice our faith and try to learn how to cope with our weaknesses? Still, it is hard to reconcile this almost manipulative outlook on God’s face while at the same time He is showing kindness in giving us a Saviour to help us.

Sometimes the question is asked this way ... “why do bad things happen to good people?” Why don’t career criminals on the way to court for the 10<sup>th</sup> time get killed in a traffic accident and save us all some money? Why don’t terrorists accidentally blow themselves up along with 20 of their friends while building a bomb? Oh wait, sometimes they do. And we smile ... there is a God! Everywhere people want to ask “Where is God?” Isn’t He a God of love? Can’t God prevent such things as violent earthquakes, not to mention tornadoes, hurricanes, wild fires, etc.? Why does God allow these things to happen?

Yes, God is present. I am with you always, Jesus said. The reason for the incarnation was that Jesus might be with us. Yes, God is love and yes, He is able to prevent disaster and protect those who believe in Him. So, why doesn’t he? Why do troubles and trials exist in this world? What has God done to deal with the evil and pain and disaster in the world? And what benefit, if any, can come from suffering?

What I want to do is point you to some of Scripture’s insight. The reality is that bad things didn’t happen to those poor, unfortunate ones in our text today because they were worse sinners than anyone else. The Scriptures say that this is a fallen world. Life here is not the way God intended it to be. Life has its storms. Why does God allow them? God allows the storms so as to refine us as through fire. He allows them in order to lead people to repentance and faith. He allows them so that people would forsake the false gods in which they trust and learn to rely on the true God. God would wake us up to the reality that all those other things in which people put their trust are not ultimately dependable. We must trust in Him.

In our text today, Jesus was asked about those whose blood Pilate mixed with their sacrifices. People gathered at the temple, going about what they did every day. Then the soldiers came ... Why would God allow that to happen? Jesus then mentioned the collapse of the tower of Siloam and those who were killed. People in the wrong place at the wrong time. Why would God allow that to happen? What Jesus wants to do is to get to the heart of the issue, to get us to ask the right questions. There are several things that we must always remember:

- those who suffer are not worse sinners
- those who do not suffer are not better
- sometimes there is a direct connection between a sin and its punishment
- sometimes there isn’t

John 9 ... the man born blind. Do you remember the question the disciples asked Jesus? Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus’ answer was neither. God had His own reasons, and we are not always privy to what they are. Here in our text Jesus used these two current events to encourage the people in the crowd around Him to think about their own relationship with God. They were not more guilty than anyone else, but unless you repent, you too will all perish! They were not more guilty for having suffered it, and **you are not less guilty for having avoided it**. We are all alike under sin and deserve nothing but punishment. The fact that God has delayed it for you is a mark of His grace.

Look at parable Jesus tells: A man owned a vineyard with one fig tree amid the vines. For three years in a row, at the time of the fig harvest ... nothing, nada, bupkus, zilch, zero. So the owner called the man who managed the vineyard for three years ... nothing. Now he has grown tired of waiting. Cut it down! Why should it just take up space? But the manager intercedes. Leave it for one more year and let me work on it. I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. Then if there’s still nothing, you can cut it down. Notice this: he doesn’t merely ask for another chance *for the tree*. He asks for another chance *for him* to make the tree fruitful.

This is a picture of the awesome grace of God. Jesus intercedes and asks for grace so that He can give us grace. Give me the chance to give them another chance. Scripture says that God does not delight in the death of the wicked, but that they turn from their sin and live. Jesus is saying to His hearers that you have one more year. What will you do with it? You had better make the most of it.

Back in Luke 4:14 ff. when Jesus came to Nazareth and read from Isaiah, this is what He read:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour ..."*

The very next verse in Isaiah says, "and the day of vengeance of our God," but Jesus stopped before He got to it. In Luke 4:19, when Jesus read from Isaiah, He left it off. It was the time of God's favour, and not yet the day of vengeance. Now in Luke 13 He reminds the crowd that they must not take the time of God's favour for granted. Don't say tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, for who knows if he will have a tomorrow. Today is the day of salvation! Today is the day of God's favour. Today is the day to repent and believe the good news. The point of the parable is this: for Jerusalem and for Israel, time was running out. Jesus was on His way there for the last time. John the Baptist and Jesus had invested three years into preaching and cultivating. Surely this should have produced repentance but for many people it didn't, and time was running out.

The events as described in our text and carried on the news are to be a daily reminder to us that we too are sinners, reliant on the grace of God. Only if your heart is turned to God in sorrow for sin and in firm trust in Christ can the terrible consequences of sin be escaped. Life carries its own reminders that we are transitory, that the goal of this life is to prepare for the life to come. Each death is a reminder that we need to repent, to turn from our sin and live. God's first concern is the salvation of individual souls through faith in Jesus Christ and Him alone. Disasters such as this point us to the truth that from the fall into sin by Adam and Eve, the world and all who are in it are under the death-curse of Original Sin. Disasters point us to the fact that we humans are not in control of weather, nor of all events in life. They remind us that the circumstances of anyone or nation can change in an instant. They call us to put our trust in the one thing that remains certain - God.

As we see things take place, we need to ask ourselves some questions. Do I believe and trust in Jesus' life, death and resurrection? Have I repented, turning from our sin and unbelief to Jesus alone? Those who are believing and trusting in Jesus alone as the Savior are ready to face death without advance warning, secure in faith in Jesus and His resurrection! Then also, God would move us to reflect the love we have received from Him. He wants us to have hearts of compassion to help individuals who are hurting due to disaster, just as the Good Samaritan did. We are called to weep with those who weep. We are to point them to the only one who can bring the ultimate hope and peace. We are to give of our time, talent, treasure to help. We cannot see into the eternal counsels of God's reasons. We are bound by God's Word. We cannot give a definite answer to questions like: why did God allow this, when He could prevent it? Is God punishing these people?

We can and do know for certain from His Word: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose." Speaking through Isaiah of life's adversities God says to us, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you." God has promised to strengthen and build up faith in Christ through adversities and disasters. He would teach us to rely upon Christ alone for forgiveness, to trust in the resurrection and hope of heaven. Whether we find ourselves in the midst of disaster and death, or whether we only observe them from a distance, God desires to draw us closer to Himself through faith in Jesus.

In the Old Testament book of Exodus God sent a series of ten plagues. Why not just finish them all off with the first one? Or when He got to number ten, let them all have it? God, in His grace, wanted to demonstrate to the Egyptians the folly of chasing after false gods, who were no gods at all, and to help them come to know who the true God is. In response, Pharaoh consistently hardened his heart but others started to catch on. When his own magicians could not duplicate what Moses did, they confessed ... this is the finger of God! When Moses announced that a storm of lightning and hail would come and any man or animal left outside would die, some of Pharaoh's court excused themselves, went home and moved everything and everyone under shelter. Those who didn't believe it and didn't act, lost it all! One of the things we know is this: persistent unbelief and rejection of God brings wrath and judgment. We know that God will not tolerate sin forever. The day came when Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. The day came when God sealed Noah and his family inside the ark and the rain started to fall. The day came when Jerusalem fell to the armies of Babylon and the temple was

destroyed. The day came when the Roman armies did it again. When the tower of Siloam fell, it was intended to serve as a wake-up call. How long do you think God will put up with sin and rebellion?

God made creation good, very good. God created Adam and Eve with a free will. Along with the freedom to choose to love God, came the possibility of an opposite response. They could hate God and rebel. It is humankind's choice to disobey and walk away from God that has brought about the troubled, aching world we see around us. We ourselves are responsible for the evil and pain that is found in our world. We continue to make foolish and selfish decisions that result in malnutrition, famine, and sickness. The blame lies with us. After Adam and Eve disobeyed, God told them life would be hard. Adam would have to work like a dog to gain enough to maintain himself and his family. Eve would experience great pain in childbirth. In the midst of this, there was a great blessing for them in those hard times. Sin broke their relationship with each other and their relationship with God. Now, this God-prescribed medicine would serve like a plaster cast to hold them in close proximity with each other and with God, and give time for their relationships to heal through the power of the Gospel.

A question we need to ask is this one: what is God doing while we suffer? Nobody ever seems to ask that one. Has He washed His hands of the matter and abandoned us to our stupidity? Does He laugh at our foolishness and take morbid pleasure at our suffering? No, He is supremely concerned about the problem of evil and He has a plan to deal with it. Does God love me? Is He watching over me? Are all my moments and my days in his care? The situations and storms of life sometimes suggest "no." But God's word says "yes." Jesus' suffering and death on the cross for your sins and mine say "yes." God's Holy Spirit poured out upon us at baptism says "yes."

There, written in the broken body and shed blood of Jesus His Son, is God's final word. "God so loved the world that he gave is one and only Son..." In the midst of the suffering of a fallen world, God would have us look not to our circumstances to know the truth of His love for us, but to look to the Cross. When we do, whatever our circumstances, whether well fed or hungry, whether in plenty or in want, we have the joy and peace that the world does not know or understand. In Romans 8, God makes a most startling promise:

*"and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose."*

This verse does not teach us that life will be free of pain and difficulties. It does teach us that God will take all the events of our lives, the bad things, the disasters and the trials, and He will bring good out of them. Remember that the disasters and trials do not come from God. They are the result of the sinfulness of the world in which we live. They are the result of the devil seeking to destroy the works of God and lead His children astray. But God is so wise and so powerful that He can take the bad things that happen to us and work them out for our good. He can take the pain caused by sin and hatred and bring about gracious results for us. This is what God promises to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. God loves us in spite of our sin and failure. He reaches down to us in the midst of our anguish and offers encouragement and hope. He promises to transform our trials into experiences that will bring blessings.

If you are in the midst of suffering and are tempted to think that God is punishing you, remember that the punishment for sin has already been paid for by Jesus' death on the cross. God is not punishing you, but He may be warning you, -calling you to humbly turn to Him in repentance and receive His forgiveness and love. God is not punishing you, but he may be answering your prayer to bring His kingdom to those you love. "Thy kingdom come," is a powerful petition. "Thy will be done," comes right after it. Sometimes in order for God's kingdom to come to those around us, we truly want God to use us and mold us after His will so that others may see the light of Christ through our patient endurance.

Our gracious God allows trials to come our way, not to hurt us or dishearten us but so that He might see His purity and love reflected in our lives. God does indeed work out all things for our good. When the Bible says that, it does not mean that believers will never suffer. It does mean that they, you, will never suffer without a purpose. It also means that they, you, will never suffer alone. God promises victory over death to all who will turn from their sins and trust in Christ to forgive them. The God who sent Christ as the Savior promises that He will bring an end to all the evil on earth. He will raise us from the dead and give us new bodies that will never know suffering again. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain."

All this will take place because God Himself, in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, suffered for us. So, while we suffer in this troubled world, we have Jesus with us. He is able to sympathize with our every weakness and comfort us with His compassion.