

The Barren Fig Tree

Luke 13:1-9

With Study Questions

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There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all *other* Galileans, because they suffered such things? ³ I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all *other* men who dwelt in Jerusalem? ⁵ I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." ⁶ He also spoke this parable: "A certain *man* had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷ Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?' ⁸ But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize *it*. ⁹ And if it bears fruit, *well*. But if not, after that you can cut it down'" (Luke 13:1-9).

Introduction

High profile disasters are inevitably followed by a media feeding frenzy. Almost always included in this frenzy are popular clerical figures (men and women in ministry) eager to prophetically point out the particular sins that summoned this judgment from God. This simplistic cause and effect methodology often leads people to the unwarranted conclusion that any misfortune that enters their lives is a result of some moral shortcoming.

Navigating through life with this type of compass can be overwhelming. Why did this bad thing happen? What did I do to deserve it? What must I do to sufficiently remove this curse? The opening verse of Job (a man subject to severe devastation) seems to escape our attention.

There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name *was* Job; and that man was blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil (Job 1:1).

Then there's the flipside. People can easily glide through life thinking there are no consequences for their behavior whatsoever. The whole idea of a

just God who brings forth His justice and chastisements is mocked and ridiculed by those who think themselves too lofty and learned for such Proletariat/Victorian concepts. Of these people Paul writes:

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience (Ephesians 5:6).

People think they've got it all worked out. They've made a deal with their god. I've heard, "I stay out of god's business and he stays out of mine." Isaiah records God's displeasure with leaders who perpetuate these empty words along with the source of true hope.

Therefore hear the word of the Lord, you scoffers, who rule this people in Jerusalem! ¹⁵ Because you have said, "We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement, when the overwhelming whip passes through it will not come to us, for we have made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken shelter"; ¹⁶ therefore thus says the Lord God, "Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: 'Whoever believes will not be in haste (Isaiah 28:14-16).

In the spectrum of judgment we are two potential errors: first, to overly analyze our personal misfortunes or disasters as judgments coming from a particularly heinous sin; secondly, to conclude that since God's judgments have not yet come they will not come at all.

Seemingly Inconsistent

At first glance the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree appears inconsistent with the dialogue which leads up to it. Jesus seems to indicate that there was no particular heinous deed motivating God to leave the Galileans at the mercy of Pilate, nor were the eighteen people killed by the tower in Siloam worse than the other men who dwelt in Jerusalem.

But then He informs them that if they don't repent they will likewise perish! I am not sure there is any way to interpret that as anything other than a judgment from God. And that judgment would surely come. As we established earlier, the historical context for this dialogue was the imminent destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies.

Just a few verses earlier Jesus had chastised them for their lack of discernment in recognizing the events by which they were surrounded:

Hypocrites! You can discern the face of the sky and of the earth, but how *is it* you do not discern this time (Luke 12:56)?

So which is it? Does God judge men's actions in history or not? We must keep in mind that all three of these events are historical events—that is, they are not the White Throne Judgment (Revelation 20:11). They are events that happened, so to speak, ushering people to the White Throne Judgment.

The parable, as often is the case, begins with a dialogue where the audience mentions an intense incident followed by Jesus mentioning an intense incident.

There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all *other* Galileans, because they suffered such things? ³ I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all *other* men who dwelt in Jerusalem? ⁵ I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish."
Galileans

The Galileans in this incident may well have been Samaritans who the Jews would have held in contempt. Their sacrifices would have been viewed as abhorrent in the eyes of the Jews and they may well have looked at this as God's divine justice, when Pilate spilled their blood with the sacrifices they had offered. In all of this they overlooked their own religious darkness—having turned God's temple into a "**den of thieves**" (Matthew 21:13).

Jesus addresses their error with the rhetorical question "**Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all *other* Galileans, because they suffered such things?**" The implied answer is 'no'. These Galileans were no more sinful than the other Galileans. Jesus then mentions an event that appears more random than a choice made by a Roman governor—a tower falling on and killing eighteen people in Jerusalem.

Jesus asks a similar rhetorical question with the same implied answer. It wasn't as if those eighteen people had it coming more than the others in Jerusalem. But after both of these accounts Jesus warns them that if they do not repent, they will likewise perish. He then tells the parable.

He also spoke this parable: "A certain *man* had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷ Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?' ⁸ But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize *it*. ⁹ And if it bears fruit, *well*. But if not, after that you can cut it down'" (Luke 13:6-9).

I believe the parable amounts to this:

The Fig Tree and its Fruit

The fig tree planted in the vineyard is a metaphor for Israel (Hosea 9:10). It is a vineyard that having received the tender care of God yielded only wild grapes and would thus have its hedge of protection and nurturing removed.

Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. ²He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. ³And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? ⁵And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. ⁶I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briers and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. ⁷For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry (Isaiah 5:1-7)!

When the fruit of God's grace is absent, there will be no justice, only bloodshed; there will be no righteousness but an outcry. When the church of God rejects its Savior and bears no fruit the consequences are dire. Such was the case during the time of Christ and we ought to ever ask ourselves if we're

falling into the same pit. The fruit Israel lacked was faith in Christ and subsequent love for God and love for man.

Cut It Down

In the parable Israel has become a waste of ground and the owner of the vineyard (who we might understand to be God the Father) wants it cut down (judged). The “keeper” (who we might understand to be Christ) intercedes on behalf of the tree until it is given more nurturing. Later in the chapter Jesus will express His tender disposition toward the children of these rebellious leaders.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! ³⁵ Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’” (Luke 13:34, 35).

There were many in Israel who, through the ministry of Jesus and later His apostles, would repent and come to faith. But Israel as a nation (primarily the leaders who governed in the temple—see Matthew 23) would reject and seek to destroy Christ and His church. The wrath of God would fall on these people. Their temple would be destroyed and it would take up no more space. It would eventually cease to be a distraction to the faithful who were often tempted to go back to it (what the Epistle to the Hebrews primarily addresses).

Does God Judge in History?

But back to our question--does God judge men’s actions in history or not? Is the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree a non-sequitur in relation to the conversation leading up to it? I believe it appears to be a non-sequitur only when we misunderstand the dialogue.

We often read that dialogue (the mingled blood and the tower of Siloam) as if the people were not sinful at all. Jesus never says that the Galileans weren’t sinful. He merely says they weren’t **“worse sinners than all other Galileans.”** Nor does He say the eighteen people who died from the tower weren’t sinful, but that they were not **“worse sinners than all other men in Jerusalem.”**

It may well be understood that in this dialogue Jesus is utilizing these events as tremors prior to the huge quake. Though one could not point to the specific Galileans or men of Jerusalem in those events as uniquely sinful, Jesus utilizes those events to quicken minds to the realization that there is a God who will judge—in history!

Rather than viewing these events as the pernicious acts of a sinful governor or the random accident of a falling structure, we might view these as judgments that were deserved by all. The warning “**unless you repent you will all likewise perish**” then makes sense. Calvin taught:

...but when God selects a few out of a large number to be punished, he holds out in their person a threatening that he will take vengeance on the remainder, in order that all may be alarmed.”¹

D. A. Carson also explains:

It would be equally foolish to say that people accidentally crushed to death by falling masonry were exceptionally sinful...Rather, the Jewish nation as a whole was sinful in God’s sight, and its members would all suffer the fate of sinners if they did not repent.²

Is every earthquake, hurricane, tornado or act of terrorism a judgment of God? One cannot answer that question without having the authority of a prophet or apostle (the last one died 2000 years ago). But can we view the dreadful events of history as reminders of what men deserve? Yes.

Can we draw the conclusion that if we (as households, churches and nations) refuse to repent—to call upon the name of the Lord and seek to walk in faith—we can expect God’s hand of judgment? I believe the answer is yes.

Will God judge in history? He most certainly will. And this is something for which all men ought to give thanks. For if God didn’t judge evil in history, history would be left in the hands of despots and tyrants who would never grow weary of bloodshed and injustice.

Works Righteousness?

¹ Calvin, J., & Pringle, W. (2010). *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Lk 13:2)*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

² Carson, D. A. (1994). *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition (4th ed.) (Lk 13:1-9)*. Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press.

Is this works righteousness? Is this men pulling themselves up by the own bootstraps? Does this diminish our need for Christ? Certainly not! The primary and ongoing source of Israel's rebellion was their rejection of the person and work of Christ Himself.

Repentance means trusting in Christ as Savior and acknowledging Him as Lord.

All that is good, leading to heaven itself comes from faith in Christ and His victory on the cross. And all that is evil, leading to the final and eternal judgment of God comes from man's sin and rejection of his only hope—the one name **“under heaven given among men by which we must be saved”** (Acts 4:11).

Questions for Study

1. Is all misfortune a result of our personal moral shortcomings (pages 2, 3)?
2. Should we conclude that there are no consequences or judgments in this life for human behavior (pages 2, 3)?
3. What are some ways people mock God's judgments (page 3)?
4. How does the dialogue leading to this parable (at least initially) seem inconsistent with the parable itself (page 4)?
5. What is the historical context of this parable (page 4)?
6. What is the different between a judgment in history and the Great White Throne Judgment (page 4)?
7. What two rhetorical questions does Jesus ask? What are the implied answers (page 5)?
8. What does the fig tree represent (pages 5, 6)?

9. Why did the owner want it cut down? Explain what this all means (pages 6, 7).
10. How does this parable relate to the two events in the prior dialogue (pages 7, 8)?
11. Is every earthquake, hurricane or act of terrorism an act of God's judgment (page 8)?
12. What conclusions can we draw from these two events and the parable (pages 8, 9)?
13. Why should men be thankful for God's judgments in history (pages 8, 9)?
14. Is Jesus teaching a works righteousness here? What does it mean to repent (page 9)?