

Luke 13:1-9 At that time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. ²He answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered these things? ³I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you will all perish too. ⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse sinners than all the people living in Jerusalem? ⁵I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you will all perish too.” ⁶He told them this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it, but he did not find any. ⁷So he said to the gardener, ‘Look, for three years now I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and I have found none. Cut it down. Why even let it use up the soil?’ ⁸But the gardener replied to him, ‘Sir, leave it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put fertilizer on it. ⁹If it produces fruit next year, fine. But if not, then cut it down.’”

One of the big questions in life that people always ask is “Why do bad things happen to good people?” That question is based on a number of false assumptions. The first false assumption is that there are good people in the world at all. Every human being is born a sinner and an enemy of God. That means that all we deserve from him is his anger and wrath. If we get anything less than that, if we have even one moment’s peace in this life, it is a clear sign of God’s love and patience.

The second false assumption is that these bad things are, well, bad for us. The Apostle Paul tells us, “**We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.**” God uses everything in this life—good, bad, and indifferent—for our good. Think about it. When have you grown more in your life: when everything was going great or when you were challenged and you had no choice but to trust in God?

The third false assumption is that God owes us an explanation. God doesn’t owe us anything. He gives us his promises and then he calls on us to trust in him. If God is always right (and he always is) then the question “Why?” is totally irrelevant. Despite that our Savior loves us so much that he gives us a small peek into God’s thinking process in this text. See God’s Solution to Problems—the problem of suffering and the problem of patience.

I’m sure that you were aware of the fires around Los Angeles in January. There’s always a fire season out there, but this year was particularly rough. Dry conditions combined with hurricane force winds to create fire storms that spread quickly. 37,000 acres were burned and 16,000 structures were destroyed including 10,000 homes. UCLA estimates that the total cost of the fires will be somewhere between 76 and 131 billion dollars. The scenes of the hills on fire were surreal.

Almost 24 years ago I woke up early which rarely happens. For some reason I turned on the TV and The Today Show was on. Mere moments after that I see a Boeing 767 plow into the second of the World Trade Center towers. Now smoke was billowing out of both of them. A little over an hour later, that tower collapsed, followed by the first one later in the day. Roughly 3,000 people lost their lives. Only 20 survivors were rescued.

In the Gospel lesson for today people report to Jesus of a tragedy that happened in Jerusalem. Some believers from Galilee were offering sacrifices at the Temple when Roman soldiers under the command of Pontius Pilate killed them in the Temple courts. Jesus talked about another recent event where 18 people from Jerusalem were killed when a tower by the pool of Siloam fell and crushed them.

When things like this happen, people look for answers. They want to know why. Often there is not a good answer to that. People don’t like that so they invent their own reasons. Some argue that the fires were a result of global warming. Others shoot back saying there is no such thing as global warming. Nothing gets accomplished. People just yell at each other and that helps no one.

Back in 2001 two TV preachers, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, said that because of things like abortion and homosexuality, God was withdrawing his hand of protection from the country. I would argue that withholding baptism from infants is just as serious of a sin as that but neither of them seemed to have to much problem with that one. All their comments did was get people angry and make all pastors look like idiots.

Judging from Jesus’ reaction, it seems like the people at his time assumed that the Galileans who were killed by Pilate and those who died under the tower of Siloam must have been worse sinners than everyone else so God wouldn’t let them escape unpunished. Today people still think that way. Karma’s going to get you! That can even affect Christians when they suffer, asking questions like, “What did I do?”

Now sometimes there is a direct cause-and-effect relationship. For example if someone gets drunk and wraps their car around a light pole, their drunkenness impaired their ability to drive which resulted in the crash. But in none of the situations I just described is there a direct cause-and-effect. So what is a believer to make of things like that? How should we think about them?

Jesus' words could not be more clear, "**Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered these things? ³I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you will all perish too. ⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse sinners than all the people living in Jerusalem? ⁵I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you will all perish too.**"

So often we think that we have a near infinite number of tomorrows, especially when we're young. The end of our lives is the furthest thing from our minds. I assume I will live to be an old man, but I have no clue what God's plan is. Maybe my life will be cut short due to illness or a car accident. Or maybe Jesus is going to return again in glory this afternoon. Then the time of grace is over for everyone.

Some people think that dying early or dying violently is the worst thing that could happen to you. Not even close. The worst thing that could happen is that if you would die apart from Christ. Then it doesn't matter if you died as an infant or if you died at the ripe old age of 106. Then death doesn't end anything. It is only the beginning of something far worse: eternal death in Hell.

So tragedies like these are wake up calls for all of us. We should ask ourselves that question that I ask at the beginning of a Bible Information Course, "If you were to die tonight, would you be in heaven?" By God's grace, we know the right answer to that question. Jesus died on the cross to take away our sins. Through the Word and Sacraments, he made us his people and keeps us as his people. So yes, if I were to die tonight I know I would be in heaven, not because of me, but because of my Savior.

This is also good news for us when troubles come into our lives regardless of whether are feather light or bone-crushingly heavy. We don't have to look at them as signs of God's anger. We don't have to keep ourselves up at night pondering the question, "Why?" God is using these things to draw us closer to him, to remind us of our constant need to repent and to trust in Christ alone for forgiveness.

See God's Solution to Problems—the problem of suffering and the problem of patience.

To help drive his point home Jesus tells them a parable. A man owned a vineyard. He decided that in that vineyard he was going to plant a fig tree. Now, the closest I've ever come to figs are within a Fig Newton which I didn't particularly care for. They aren't exactly native to Michigan. But they are very common in the Middle East and tolerate drought well, which is perfect for that climate.

The man wasn't looking for fruit from a wild tree that may or may not have proper soil and moisture. This was a tree that he had planted personally. He had a gardener who was taking care of his vineyard as well as that tree. For the past three years it should have been producing fruit, but it wasn't. If you have an apple tree that hasn't produced a single apple in three years, you don't need to be a botanist to know something is wrong.

The vineyard owner is a picture of God the Father. Already in the beginning of this parable we see how patient God is. Funny, isn't it, that we want God to be eternally patient with us, but when someone does something bad to us we want God's judgment to come immediately. That's not the way he operates. The same God who keeps showing patience with you wants to be patient with them too.

The man in Jesus' parable was understandably looking for fruit. The picture here is of God expecting fruits of faith from his people. Sadly sometimes people get the picture backwards. If you ask someone, "Why do Christians do good works?" too often they will answer, "So we can go to heaven!" That's absolutely wrong. We do them because we are already going to heaven. Just like a healthy fig tree will naturally produce figs so also a spiritually healthy Christian will produce fruits of faith.

I don't know if anyone has ever stated this more beautifully and clearly than the Apostle Paul did in his letter to the Ephesians, "**Indeed, it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹not by works, so that no one can boast.**" Our salvation has absolutely nothing to do with what we do. It is all a free gift from God to us through the life and death of Jesus.

But right after that Paul goes on to say, "**For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared in advance so that we would walk in them.**" God made us Christians and he empowers us to live like Christians. As a matter of fact Paul says that God planned opportunities for us to do that before we were even born. When we think about everything that God has done for us, how can we do anything but want to dedicate our lives to him?

So what does that look like? The most obvious thing is that we will be in God's Word. We will receive the Holy Communion regularly. Otherwise it's like not charging your phone for a month and wondering why you can't send a text. I saw an example of producing fruit on Wednesday. So many people spent a lot of time here at church to prepare for the funeral and the meal after it. As a result over 300 people got to hear about Jesus

and see your love for them. More than 800 more people watched the livestream. That's over 1,100 people who got to hear about Christ on just one day.

In this parable the landowner says, "**Look, for three years now I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and I have found none. Cut it down. Why even let it use up the soil?**" It seemed like the tree was dead. Might as well cut it down, pull up the stump, and plant something else there. Maybe whatever else they planted would produce fruit where that tree would not.

It doesn't take much to figure out what Jesus is saying here. Even though fruits of faith are not necessary to get into heaven, that doesn't mean that they are optional. The evangelist James put it this way, "**For just as the body without breath is dead, so also faith without works is dead.**" This is a warning for every believer to take seriously. The problems in life are wake-up calls for us to examine the way that we are living.

Now I can't look at someone and see if their faith is dead or is extremely weak. God doesn't call on me to make that judgment. But I can and should express my concern. If I really love my fellow believers, the last thing I would want is for them to fall from faith. I want to urge them to make listen to the Word and receive Holy Communion because those are the things that will enable them to be believers and live like believers.

The gardener in this parable is a picture of Jesus. He asks for more patience. He will take special care of that tree with the hope that it will produce fruit. That's how God deals with us. It's not like the first time we sin, he's going to drop us like a hot potato. God is the best, most loyal, most patient Father ever. The point that Jesus is making at the end here is that we should enjoy God's patience, but don't test God's patience.

The last verse is hard to translate, "**If it produces fruit next year, fine.**" The "fine" isn't actually in the Greek. There is no "then" part of Jesus' "if-then" statement. His voice just trails off. He knows that some people will misuse God's patience and remain fruitless. But he always acts in hope and confidence. He wants nothing more than for people to be led to him, remain in him, and live with him forever.

See God's Solution to Problems—the problem of suffering and the problem of patience. Why do bad things happen to good people? Realistically, they don't since even bad things are ultimately for our good. Why is God so patient? Because his love for us and for the whole world is beyond our ability to comprehend. God is faithful. Trust him.