

Worse Than All the Others?

Exodus 3:1-15, Luke 13:1-17 (ESV)

July 31, 2005

“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?...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?” Suffering. Pain. Death. Loss. Sin. Guilt. Despair. Fear. Presumption of one’s own innocence. Jesus is into the thick of it now! This is not about angels in heaven. This is not about ancient rules and regulations. This is not about the niceties of worship. This is about life. This is about life in the rough and tumble world of the Roman Empire, which was not so different from the world in which we live. We still know about murderous tyrants, about contempt for others’ religion, and even about falling towers. These teachings of Jesus Christ are about the meaning of life, and particularly they are about the meaning of life precisely when we are brought face to face with the end of life. What does it mean when one day we are here and the next day we are not?

Again and again, we have seen that the questions in the Gospel according to Luke point us toward the truth being taught, the affirmation being made, and the gospel being proclaimed. The same holds true for today’s reading. Jesus asks a question of his hearers. Thus Luke asks the question to Theophilus. And so Jesus and Luke both ask the same question to us. In fact, the question so important that it is repeated almost word for word to be sure that we get it: “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?...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?”

There are three answers to this question, three levels of response. The first answer, unstated but assumed, is, “Yes.” Yes, of course, the hearers thought that the slaughtered Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans and that the eighteen on whom the tower fell were worse than all the others who lived in Jerusalem. That was obvious. Yes, of course, they thought those people were worse or Jesus would not have posed the question the way he did. He was not looking for information. He knew what they thought. Jesus put their thoughts into the form of a question so that he could provide an alternative answer. We will get to that in a moment. But the first answer, the premise of this whole teaching, is that yes, of course, the hearers did think that the slaughtered Galileans were worse sinners than

all the other Galileans and that the eighteen on whom the tower fell were worse than all the others who lived in Jerusalem. Worse than all the others. Worse, of course, than the hearers.

There are a couple of things going on here in this first, affirmative answer to the question. One has to do with self-deception. Never underestimate the power of self-deception. It must have been a means of self-protection that the hearers of such bad news had to tell themselves that they were different from those other people, that those other people must have had something wrong with them, that those other people must have had it coming to them, and that whatever horrible things happened to those other people could not and would not ever happen to them. God forbid. Perhaps at some level they knew that was not true. Perhaps at some level they knew they, too, had good reason to be afraid of murderous tyrants and falling towers. But they could not face that directly. So they convinced themselves that such bad things happened only to other people, to bad people, to people worse than all the others. Or at least that is what they wanted to believe. Does that sound familiar? Do people still think that way today? Do tsunamis happen only far away? What about hurricanes, earthquakes, fires, and floods?

Beyond the power of individual self-deception, the same thought was enshrined in their religious teachings. That was how they made sense of the world in which they lived. They were convinced that God punished evildoers in this world and that God rewarded the good people in this world. Severe suffering and death were regarded as evidence of divine displeasure and therefore of sin and immorality, while health and wealth were considered evidence of divine blessing and therefore of one's religious and moral superiority. Thus the world was divided simply among the good people and the bad people. And there was no sympathy for the people who suffered, since the system encouraged self-righteousness— not gratitude to God, but self-righteousness— on the part of those who did not suffer. Of course, since the sinless and righteous Jesus Christ himself later “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried,” Christians eventually had to come to question and to reject the simple correlation of suffering in this world with the punishment of God and therefore to question and to reject the simple correlation of ease in this world with the reward of God. And in fact, that rejection is exactly where this teaching is heading. We will get to that in a moment. But the first answer to the question about whether his hearers thought sufferers were worse sinners, an unstated but everywhere assumed answer, was that yes, of course, they thought that. And they did so with a vengeance.

They are not the only ones. It is still a temptation today to think that people deserve the suffering they receive. It is easy to think that people are poor because they are lazy. It is easy to think that people are sick because they misbehave. It is

easy to think that people are lost because they want to be, confused because they enjoy it, wandering because they choose it, and on and on. That is to say, it is easy to think that those who suffer are worse sinners than all the rest of us. But just because it is easy to think that does not make it right.

The second answer to the question is the one that Jesus gives, and it is, of course, exactly the opposite of that of his hearers: “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you... 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.” No. No, no, no, no, no! Not at all. Don’t go there. That is not the way it works. According to this explicit teaching of Jesus Christ, even those who suffer horrible deaths, whether by a cruel tyrant or by a seeming accident are not worse sinners than the rest of us. That false understanding is laid to rest once and for all, forever and ever. That is not the way the world works. That is not the way God works. That is not the way we are to think. The first answer, “Yes,” has tremendous staying power, and it still pops up even among us church people yet today. But this second answer, “No,” is the truth, is the explicit teaching of Jesus Christ, is part of the gospel, and is the answer to which we are to return again and again.

This second answer, this “No,” makes the world a much more complicated place. It is not easy to sort out the good people from the bad people. The evidences which provided the grounds for our self-righteousness have been cut out from underneath us. The tendency to separate ourselves from the sufferers has been rejected. And this makes us realize that God is more complex than we thought. Yes, of course, he rewards the good and punishes the evil, but he does not necessarily do so in this world. Sometimes the evildoers prosper here, and we are not to fret over it. Sometimes God allows his chosen ones to suffer here, and we are not to be dismayed by it. Our own presumptions of righteousness are left in shambles, and we are cast back upon the sheer grace, mercy, love, goodness, and righteousness of God Almighty alone. And that, of course, is a good place to be.

Now, there is also a third answer given to the question. It is not so much an answer as an implied action. And it has a real twist to it. “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. 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.” Can you believe that? Not only are the sufferers not any worse sinners than all the rest of us, but also we are likely to meet the same end. Moreover, even worse than the horrible deaths those people

suffered was the possibility that their sudden deaths had caught them not right with God. Their sudden deaths stand as a warning to all the rest of us to repent of our sin and to turn to God while we still have time and before we die apart from God. It is that simple. That is what Jesus is saying here.

Remember that Jesus was speaking to the people of God and about the people of God. The Galileans had even been slaughtered while they were worshipping God. So Jesus was not talking about unbelievers. And he was talking to his followers and so to us with his warning to repent. Indeed, our very continuing to be alive is evidence of the grace, mercy, and patience of God, who is giving us time to repent.¹ But we should not presume upon this grace of God. We should receive it gratefully and use it for the purpose for which it is given, to repent and return to God. His patience will not last forever. As Jesus taught of the fruitless fig tree, “If it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.” Do not wait.

To repent is both to turn away from sin, to turn away from self-centeredness, to turn away from the presumption of self-righteousness, and also to turn instead to God, who made us for himself, who calls us his very own, and who sent his son to die that we might live. Of course, this is not a simple human possibility. If we were good enough to repent on our own, we would not need to repent. The fact that we do need to repent is indicative of our need for the grace of God. All of this is to say that the order of events is important. It is not the case that we repent first in order to receive the gospel second. It is instead the case that, having heard the gospel first, having received the good news of Jesus Christ first, then we repent second, then we turn away from the gone-wrongness of our lives, and then we turn to God. So repenting is not merely the prelude to the Christian life. Repenting is the content of the Christian life, and we are to continue to do it until the day we die. That is to say, it has less to do with justification and more to do with sanctification.

Yes, this teaching of Jesus Christ is a warning, and thus it is also an invitation. It is a wonderful, gracious, life-giving invitation to follow the loving Jesus Christ who has come to us to make us his very own. And there is an urgency to this gospel invitation. Do not wait until tomorrow to begin to turn ever more fully to God and so to follow Jesus Christ ever more closely. Now even massive human suffering in the world becomes the occasion not for promoting self-righteousness, self-

¹Cf. 2 Peter 3:8-9 (ESV): “But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”

satisfaction, or a sense of superiority, but instead for self-examination, remorse, and repentance, for commitment to improvement, to obedience, and to righteousness, and for gratitude, graciousness, and the worship of God Almighty.

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To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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