

Calling Upon the Lord
Luke 13:1-9, 31-35
Isaiah 55:1-9

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Luke 13:1-9, 31-35

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.' He said to them, 'Go and tell that fox for me, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem." Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

Isaiah 55:1-9

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.
See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.
See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts;

let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

The world can be tough sometimes, can't it? With our 24/7 news cycle and global media, we seem to hear all the time about people suffering. Being Christian does not seem to magically insulate us from that suffering. Bad things do happen to us, and to people whom we love. If that were not the truth, our prayer concerns would be a much shorter section of the Sunday morning worship service.

This part of life was not actually all that different in the days when Jesus walked the earth. We have no other information about this event, but it seems that Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, had recently chosen to kill a number of people from Galilee and insult the Jewish religion at the same time. He had these people killed when they were sacrificing their Passover lambs, and their blood mixed with the blood of the sacrificed lambs.

The tower of Siloam was a part of the Jerusalem city wall near the pool of Siloam. Again, we do not know any more details, but it had apparently fallen down, and eighteen people had been killed.

Some people came and told Jesus about Pilate's blasphemous actions. They wanted his reaction. They apparently wanted him to talk about how wicked the victims had to have been, since this had happened to them, and not to other people.

That view of the world makes so much sense, in a grade-school way of looking at things. You do good things, and God rewards you in this world with wealth and success.

You do bad things, and God punishes you here in this world. Simple, right? It's like the rules in the grade-school classroom, or the rules at home when you have small children. You just shrink God down to the role of the parent, or the teacher.

This way of thinking was very common in those days, and it is very common today, because it speaks to a human need for understanding and control. It is comforting for people to whom bad stuff has not happened, because it lets them feel like their good fortune must mean that God is happy with them.

It is comforting for fortunate people to believe that bad stuff happening in other people's lives must be the result of those other people being bad or doing bad things.

That explanation reassures us that, if we don't do bad things, then, in theory, those bad things won't happen to us. It lets us accept that good things sometimes happen to us for reasons we can't explain – it's not that God has blessed us with blessings we don't deserve; we must deserve them, because we're such awesome people, right?

And, just as importantly, it lets us off the hook to help the person who's experiencing bad things. It excuses a certain lack of compassion for them – they're getting what they deserve. "Don't mess with it. Don't get involved, or bad things might spread to your life, like some kind of a contagious disease."

We sometimes hear people on television saying this kind of thing after a disaster. New Orleans was hit by Hurricane Katrina, we were told, because of Mardi Gras immorality. The same television personality said that God sent an earthquake to devastate Haiti as judgment for voodoo. More recently, a famous preacher told a man

on the radio that his wife's miscarriage may have happened because the man struggled with an addiction to pornography.¹

Some people today seem to assume that all people who are below the poverty line are there because a deficit of character, rather than bad things happening, over which the people had no control. They make that assumption about every one of over forty-one million people, thirteen percent of the people in America.²

It is comforting to think that *those people* and, if you're thinking this way, it is always *those people*, must have something wrong with them. *They* must be lazy, or *they* must be dishonest. *Their* poverty must be evidence of *their* irreparable moral failures.

And that means that *we* are okay, right? *We* will never be in that situation, because *we* aren't lazy, and *we* are not criminal. So it is reasonable to assume that all *those* people are character-deficient, and to treat *them* that way.

It's a lot more comfortable and a lot easier to stand on the sidelines, and keep our hands clean. Whether we want to admit it or not, it can even be kind of fun to watch bad things happening to other people, people we can look down on, because they must be bad people. The Germans even have a word for it – *shadenfreude* – enjoyment from watching bad things happen to other people.

The flip side of this unhealthy view, though, is that, when bad stuff happen to us, it is even more devastating. Not only is this bad stuff happening, but we must have done something to deserve it. That illness, or job loss, or addiction to pain medication. Or something bad happening to a family member, particularly our kids. That must be

¹ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3938526/God-wills-new-humility-Christian-pastor-claims-man-s-addiction-porn-wife-s-miscarriage-punishment-sin.html>.

² <http://blogs.census.gov/2016/09/13/2015-drop-in-poverty-is-largest-on-record-since-1999/>

because we sinned, because we did something bad somewhere. I've even had people explain to me that bad things happened to them because they had not given enough money, money that they did not have, to the church.

Jesus rejects that way of thinking altogether. Jesus asks, flat out, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ... Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you," they were not.

Our God, the creator of Heaven and Earth, is not the operator of a Divine protection racket. "Nice life you got there. It'd be a shame if somethin' happened to it."

The kind of God who leaves a perfect Heaven and comes down into the world where we are and lives and dies and is resurrected for us is a God who does big things. Our God is not a God of petty payback.

The message here for us is simple and profound.

Bad stuff happens.

I seem to recall a popular bumper sticker back in the 1980's that said something like that. Sooner or later, bad stuff will happen to each of us, or to all of us.

I am not denying that there is judgment. Jesus said that there would be judgment, but that comes later, after death or the Second Coming, whichever comes

first. Even when you were in grade school, you usually got to finish the whole test paper before you got graded.

A more grown-up way of looking at the world is that bad things happen, whether we are good people or not. As Jesus said, God, “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”³ God’s ways are not our ways. They are higher and better, thank God.⁴

The good news for us here is that, when *we are those people*, when bad stuff happens to *us*, it is not God’s vengeance on us for something that we did that was bad. It may or may not be our fault, the predictable result of our own actions, but it is not God’s vengeance. No matter what you have done or what you have left undone, God’s forgiveness and grace are complete and total. God loves you, and God is not just willing to get into the mess we’re in with you. God is already here to walk with you through the valley of the shadow of death and to restore us.

When we are in trouble, and we will all get in trouble at some point, we need to call upon the Lord. We need to say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

God wants to give us what is good, and to protect and sooth us like a mother hen with her chicks. God may do that directly, or, more often God uses God’s people to help take care of us.

³ Matthew 5:45

⁴ Isaiah 55:8-9

The challenge for us here is, when bad stuff happens to someone else, it is not God's vengeance on them for something that they did that was bad. It may or may not be their fault, but that does not make it God's vengeance. There is no such thing as a moral failure beyond God's willingness and ability to forgive.

God loves them. God loves all of God's children. God wants to give them what is good, and to protect and sooth them like a mother hen with her chicks. God may do that directly, or, more often God uses God's people to help take care of them.

That is where we come in. God is willing to get into the mess that those people are in, to walk with them, and to restore them. If we are God's people, followers of Christ, that is where we can find him. Often, Christ uses our hands, our voices, our touch to heal others and to help restore them wholeness.

We will rarely find Christ in comfortable places and comfortable spaces. We will find him walking with people in need, with people in trouble, with people who have problems.

Sometimes those people are us. Sometimes they are other people. Christ loves us all, and, if we want to be where he is, we can find him with the people who need him most.

Bad things may happen, but God is right here to walk with us.

In order to walk with him, though, we may have to step outside our comfort zone. Let us all have the courage to do that.

AMEN.