

One lazy Sunday afternoon in Papua New Guinea... Wycliffe missionaries Walt and Vonnie Steinkraus were resting alongside their daughters Kerry and Kathy... when their world came to an abrupt end. ... At precisely 3:00 P.M. a half-mile-wide section of the mountain... on the opposite side of the river from their village... broke off and instantly buried them alive. ... They may never even have heard the sound. ... In a world full of vacant hillsides... in a world full of reprobates... in a world with too few missionaries... the Steinkrauses disappeared under a mountain. ... Was it because of their sin?

During the recent pandemic (where we saw at it's peak - a reported 6.4 million deaths)... the Pew Research Center surveyed 6,485 American adults — including 1,421 evangelicals — in September 2021. They were asked about how they philosophically “make sense of suffering and bad things happening to people.” ... Among the survey's main findings was this: 7 in 10 American adults agree that suffering is “*mostly a consequence of people's own actions.*”

In our passage today... Jesus will contradict this. Jesus will emphatically say that NOT every tragedy or crisis is brought on – because of the sins of those who are victimized. When the Steinkrauses were buried alive... it is wrong for us to automatically conclude that they had greater sin in their life... than those who escape such tragedy.

But we still might question: *Why do bad things happen to good people...?* ... Many skeptics and atheists point to what philosophers have termed “*the problem of evil*” as justification for their rejection of God. “*Why would a good, all-powerful God allow evil to continue?*” they ask. “*Either He is not*

really good or He is not very powerful; otherwise, He would have eliminated suffering long ago." And to be perfectly honest... their argument finds a ready "*Amen!*" when bad things happen to good people—especially when those good people happen to be the ones we love.

More people point to the problem of evil and suffering as their reason for not believing in God than any other — it is **not** merely **a** problem... it is **the** problem. ... A Barna poll asked, "*If you could ask God only one question and you knew he would give you an answer, what would you ask?*" The most common response was, "*Why is there pain and suffering in the world?*"

(Author/Theologian) John Stott said:

"The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith, and has been in every generation. Its distribution and degree appear to be entirely random and therefore unfair. Sensitive spirits ask if it can possibly be reconciled with God's justice and love."

Richard Swinburne... writing in the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*... says the problem of evil is "*the most powerful objection to traditional theism.*" Ronald Nash writes:

"Objections to theism come and go. ... But every philosopher I know believes that the most serious challenge to theism was, is, and will continue to be the problem of evil."

You will not get far in a conversation with someone who rejects the Christian faith before the problem of evil is raised. Pulled out like the ultimate trump card... it's supposed to silence believers... and prove that the all-good and all-powerful God of the Bible - **doesn't exist**.

If the “problem of evil” has ever been a concern of yours... our passage today in Luke 13 will provide you with some needed insight. Jesus was confronted with it... and we will see how He addressed it.

But first... let me provide you with a little context. As we open chapter 13 this week... we find a very strong link to the final verses of chapter 12... which we studied last week. (Here is the 1st verse of today’s passage... with it’s clear connection that it makes to last week’s passage....)

Luke 13:1 (ESV)

¹ There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

“...*at that very time*...” – **WHAT** “*very time*”...? ...”At the very time” when Jesus had the discussion – shown in the previous verses. ... So let’s take a look at *this connected discussion that He referenced.*

Luke 12:58-59 (ESV)

⁵⁸ As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison.

⁵⁹ I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny.”

Jesus warned the crowds about the coming final judgment. ... Using the image of a debtor walking to court with his lender... Jesus urged everyone to seek mercy. ... He said (in effect) “*All of you are indebted to God because of your sin. Admit your inability to pay... and beg God for forgiveness. Seek mercy now... because justice is coming soon... and once it is too late... you will have to pay every scintilla of what you owe!*”

At His mention of judgment... some of the people in *this* crowd immediately turned their minds to a recent event that had just happened in Jerusalem

during Passover. Pilate (the very brutal Roman Procurator) had slaughtered a group of defenseless Galileans... who were in the midst of a righteous act. They were doing good... they were offering sacrifices in the Temple (like they were supposed to)... They were given neither time or opportunity to appeal to their cruel magistrate. That is the way it is... when tragedy strikes. Victims don't have the time or opportunity for making restitution. And these victims were righteous Galileans as they tried to sacrifice.

“Jesus... we are having a difficult time with what You just said. It seems unfair and impossible for some people...” And judging by the way Jesus responds to them... (which we will come to in just a moment)... It seems clear to me that the picture these people were trying to paint was this:

“Those righteous Galileans were innocent victims who deserved much better! But the evil Romans (who deserve condemnation) are allowed to prosper...”

Luke 13:2-3

Wow! Certainly no one is able to accuse Jesus of telling people what they wanted to hear... (Here) he bluntly tells them what they needed to recognize. In essence He says: *“You are barking up the wrong tree... Your perspective is entirely mistaken.”*

Jesus taught the crowds that calamity can happen to anyone – those who we believe are innocent – as well as those - who we view as great sinners. (And to make sure they got His point... Jesus continued.)

Luke 13:4-5

Notice how Jesus answers His Own question and how emphatic He was:

Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? ... Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?”

His answer was extremely resounding. He asked the same question twice... and He answered the same way twice. “*I tell you, **no!**... I tell you, **no!**” ... Jesus could not have put it more forcefully. ... His point is: “Those who died were run-of-the-mill sinners **just like the rest of us!!!**” (He wanted them – and us – to see that these people were neither greater sinners or lesser sinners.)*

Jesus assumed and taught the universality of sin... and of death as its consequence. ... We are **all** sinners. ... (Sure) there are differences between us sinners... but they are only differences of degree —we **all** “fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). ... We are **all** guilty. ... We **all** deserve death.

“So... *you are barking up the wrong tree... Your perspective is entirely **mistaken**.*” ... (LISTEN!) You are wondering how God can allow bad things to happen to good people. But the question that **NEEDS** to be asked is: Why does God **allow** any of us to live (who are sinners and deserve His instantaneous punishment)...? We deserve an abrupt death EVERYTIME we ignore (or actively turn our back on) the God Who created us.

You try to impugn God by suggesting that He is unfair... because you wrongfully think God allows innocent people to suffer and die. ... But you fail to notice **His grace** - in not (simply) wiping-out every one of us. Jesus will explain that God is giving us GRACE – by giving us time to repent. ...

His extension of time is grace (which Jesus describes in verses 6-9) ... and it is MORE than fair!

Catastrophes... sickness... human suffering... and death (as Genesis 3 explains) came when sin entered the world. We live in such a broken world – because man (including you and I) have turned our back on God and have sinned. This broken UNIVERSE is a reminder that we all have sin... and we need to repent... or else **we** will (likewise) perish at God's judgment – which will come!

Luke 13:5

Repentance is a much **misunderstood** word. Kent Hughes writes:

“Some people think repentance is an emotional experience enjoyed by strange people who like to cry in public. This caricature involves well-trained men who lead their fellow Christians to weep and wail their way back to God. There is more to repentance than manipulated or even genuine remorse...”

Another popular characterization of repentance is that it requires some sort of ritual of penance. ... And by that... I mean a mechanical carrying out of self-inflicted torture and exercises... as a means of making restitution or paying the price of our sin in some sense.

Neither of these caricatures are true repentance. Repentance begins with a change of the mind... but not in the contemporary sense of changing one's mind (which can easily flip back around.) No. This is a change of mind that brings a change of actions. ... It is both *intellectual* and *volitional* — and then it often has (but not necessarily) an *emotional* element.

Repentance is a real turnaround of one's life in respect to sinful conduct.

Repentance must happen in our souls... or we will perish in the judgment. If Jesus has not changed your conduct... and if He is not continuing to change your conduct... (then) on the basis of our passage today... I say to you that you are not a Christian. ... Repentance is the requirement of true Christianity!

(LISTEN!) Repentance is not an option. And as Jesus will explain in the next three verses – it will **always** be obvious. There will **ALWAYS** be evidence if repentance has occurred. It always has fruit. Simply praying a prayer... or walking down an aisle at church is not the evidence that someone is a Christian. Jesus says in Luke 13:5 and then in verses 6-9 that repentance (life change) is the evidence of being a Christian. Jesus is about to describe it as “noticeable/obvious fruit” in the next three verses.

But before we turn there... please ask yourself: *Have I truly repented? Is there noticeable/obvious change in my life?* ... Don't be distracted by the supposed “problem of evil” – by which so many people reject Christ and the truth of His Gospel. ... Don't let it keep you from placing your full trust in Christ and the provision He has made for you to be saved from the coming wrath of God. (This supposed “problem of evil” is Satan's smokescreen. He would have you improperly think that it is a proper justification for delaying what is necessary – **genuine repentance!**) ... God is giving you grace right now – but it is only for a limited time. It won't last forever. God's judgment will come and then it will be too late.

Luke 13:6-9

We have (now) the answer to the better question that everyone should be asking. “*Why do bad things happen to good people?*” is not the right

question. The better question is “Why does God allow us to continue to live?” (And) now we have the answer. (God is gracious in giving people time to repent... to come to Him... and grow in Him.)

By God’s grace... evil people (and this means you and I) remain alive. By God’s grace... we are given time for the fruit of repentance to emerge. ... But there will come a day when He will say, “Cut it down” and time will be no more.

In the Old Testament... a fruitful tree was used as a symbol of godly living.

Psalm 1:3 (ESV)

³ He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

Jeremiah 17:7-8 (ESV)

⁷ “Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. ⁸ He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.”

Jesus pointed out what would happen to the other kind of tree — the kind that took valuable time and space and still produced nothing for the patient gardener. ... God will not tolerate (forever) the lack of productivity. ... A fig tree in fertile soil should certainly have produced fruit — a tree that did not produce for three years was probably not going to produce at all. The farmer gave the command to cut it down so another (more fruitful tree) could be planted in its place. Who can blame this farmer? (And) by implication – who can blame God?

The parable has an application to all of us... (Jews and Gentiles.)

God is gracious and long-suffering toward people.

2 Peter 3:9 (ESV)

⁹ 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.

However... I must point out that I think Jesus was also giving a particular warning to the nation of Israel. The fig tree was Scripture's symbol of the nation Israel.

Israel had been given many unique opportunities. Everything was done to make it fruitful. God had been dealing with the nation of Israel in contrast to the Gentile nations. Israel had been blessed with God's covenants and commandments. He had sent them patriarchs... prophets... princes... and priests. ... God sent Jesus into their very midst for three years (which may be why this parable used three years). ... What thanks did He get for all of this? ... None! ... The fig tree turned out to be barren.

The Gardener interceded... and our attention is drawn to *the borrowed time*: The nation of Israel was to be given a second chance.

Here is how it played out for Israel. The day of Pentecost came... and the Holy Spirit came down. In its very earliest period... the church was composed solely of Jews. The remnant of Israel became the nucleus of the church. But (already) the nation and its leaders were causing problems. Gentiles were being invited into the church and were already outnumbering the Jews - many times over. ... Having rejected the Son of God... the Jews as a whole were now rejecting the Spirit of God... at home and throughout the Roman Empire. The borrowed time ran out... the Romans came... and the *nation* of Israel was non-existent for 2,000. ... **[P A U S E]** ...

Here is how the parable pays out for us Gentiles. Puritan John Bunyan (the author of Pilgrim's Progress) explains God grace in it... for us - this way:

The parable says the gardener dug up the earth... around the tree. The earth (with all of it's ungodly desires) binds us at our roots. We become earth-bound souls. But the caretaker mercifully comes along and says... "*I will loosen the roots. I will dig up this earth and free it from the trees roots. I will dig all around him until he stands shaking and tottering – nearly ready to fall...*"

The Master Gardener digs around us with blows to our heart... to our pleasures... to things that we lust after... He digs at our comforts... the reasons we are self-conceited... and everything that is making us unfruitful. He digs to free us. He pounds on us through life's ups and downs. He pries at our earthly attachments... so we might become fruitful.

This is all the astonishing mercy and grace of God! But some misunderstand... and they curse God for allowing hardship to come into their life. ... **[P A U S E]** ...

John Bunyan has (perhaps) given us another answer to the question of why God allows bad things to happen to good people. ... Has Jesus been digging around the roots of your earthbound soul with inexplicable life-challenges that have left you reeling? ... The object of these shakings is most likely that you might become fruitful. – Oh! The astonishing grace of God! ... **[P A U S E]** ...

Did you happen to notice that the Lord did not tell us whether or not the fig tree of this parable **EVER** BORE FRUIT...? "*So what happened...? After*

the Gardener took another year and did all these things... did the fig tree finally bear figs...?" It doesn't say... and I am convinced that this was intentional. The answer is left to the hearers ... and readers. ... Let each supply the answer *in his/her own life*.

Turn to the Lord without delay! ... God is very patient. ... However... His patience does not last forever. ... One day (and God alone knows when that day will arrive) the opportunity to be saved will be withdrawn. ... The procrastinator... and the one who refuses to see God's grace... will die in his sins... and will be lost forevermore.

Why would a loving God send anyone to Hell?

(That is another poor question.) The better question is: Why would a loving God FORCE someone into His heaven... when they clearly chose – *"I don't want it" ...?*