

It's good to be back leading worship again! Several people, here and among friends and colleagues, have commented on a spiritually dry period as our normal routine of worship had been interrupted. Yes! Many have slipped into online services (even ours!) and we rejoice they are being fed on the word of God, but many of us miss our fellowship with friends, and of course, we have missed breaking bread together.

Planning for this occasion and this season, I was directed to Luke chapters 13-16, to refresh ourselves with a deeper appreciation of God. During this pandemic, a lot has been said, and not said about God, who He is and isn't, what He is doing and not doing. The greatest damage to God's reputation comes from within the Church by people who **claim** to have an inside track on God, which is often at the expense of Truth.

There are many things happening around the world that we know nothing about; the fact we know nothing about such events, does not mean they do not happen. So it is with Luke's account of two current calamities: Pilate's act of state-sanctioned terrorism in Jerusalem and the desecration, profanity and impiety of mixing human blood with the blood of sacrificed animals, and the collapse of a well known tower in Jerusalem. The manner of Luke's writing tells us, both incidents were well known to his audience. Jesus seizes on these two calamities, one a planned massacre, and the second an unfortunate, random building collapse, both are likely to have been subjects of recent conversation around the local watering holes in Jerusalem.

Both these incidents mirror headlines in today's Sunday's papers, reporting planned genocides around the world (killing of female babies, wanton rape and killing, systemic annihilation of sections of the population in many countries, and the supposedly random explosion in Beirut which brought down an entire city district and damages beyond.

Back then, as now, people would have seized the opportunity to decry God for mismanaging His creation, for being absent when calamity strikes, and Luke's audience were no different, expecting Jesus to defend God against such charges.

Instead, Jesus asks a "why?" question, to correct our own misunderstanding. It is **NOT** the "why?" question we would normally ask, *If there is a God, **why** does He allow bad things to happen to innocent people?*

Jesus' question is different: *Is this "why" they suffered, because the Galilean worshippers were worse sinners than all people from Galilee?*

*Is this "why" the 18 suffered sudden death in the collapse of the tower, because they were the worst sinners in Jerusalem and God had to snuff out their lives?*

To those who reported to Jesus about Pilate's act of murder and desecration, He says, *Do not equate tragedy with divine punishment. Sin does not cause atrocities to happen. Wicked, cruel, inhumane and savage incidents, and random unplanned events, that cause suffering, happen.*

Reports of death, when life is snuffed out with little warning, and for no apparent reason, bring us face-to-face with the precariousness and fragility of our existence, giving it urgency. But Jesus turns our attention away from dwelling on disasters and victims, to address those of us who have survived the hazards of the universe, and pain inflicted by human society: *Don't mistake your good fortune of survival, as evidence of God's special blessing. The next mistake you will make, is to then believe, God kills those He considers sinners!*

So, when Jesus twice repeats, "*unless you repent, you all will perish*" like the others did, He is not promising, the godless will be struck by an asteroid.

There are two words in Jesus' twice repeated phrase: **perish** and **repent**.

**PERISH** is a very important word to God, and is the main reason why Jesus left Heaven and came to earth.

God is the Creator and Sustainer of life. **Perish** is the opposite of everything God stands for; **Perish** stands for death, and in God, there is no such thing as death. The last thing God wants to see is us **perish**, which means, the last thing God wants to see happen, is that we are lost to Him in eternity.

Let's take an important diversion to the life of the disciple Peter. Jesus met with His disciples and asked them, *Who do peoples that I am?* They offered several names. Then He asked them, *Who do **YOU** say I am? When they say all that nonsense about me, who do **YOU** say I am?* The apostle Peter blurted out, *You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.* Jesus would have spun around to face Peter and exclaimed, *Only My Father in heaven could have personally revealed My true identity to you; no human could have done this. You are Peter the Rock, upon which I will build My Church.*

I bring this up because in Peter's second letter, he is *reminding (us) of what (we) already know (3:1), we who have been given a faith in the righteousness of our God, and our Saviour Jesus who is the Christ, (1:1),* he reveals something God has revealed to him.

He says, *you must not forget this one thing, dear friends: A day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day (He is not setting up mathematical formula to measure God's time; He is merely pointing out, God's lives outside time, and we should not try to measure His time, which is not part of His existence).* *The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise (of restoring His eternal kingdom with Christ as its Head), as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to **perish** (be destroyed) but wants everyone to repent (which is to choose life).*

Peter then uses an image we are familiar with, that of the sudden massive explosion in Beirut.

*The day of God's return will come suddenly, as unexpectedly as a thief, when the heavens will disappear with a terrible noise, and the very elements themselves will disappear in fire, and the earth and everything on it will be found to deserve judgment.<sup>1</sup>*

Peter isn't trying to frighten us with apocalyptic images as seen in films like Star-Wars, the Martian Chronicles, Armageddon, The Rapture, Terminator 2 - Judgement Day, The Remnant. These films are taken from Peter's second letter and from sections of the Book of Revelation and Daniel and are made so unreal, it weakens our belief in the real thing.

Peter then asks the "why?" question Luke has recorded, *In view of the fact that all these things are to be dissolved, **WHY** don't you want to be the sort of people ought you to be? Surely people of good and holy character, who live expecting and earnestly longing for the coming of the day of God. True, this day will mean that the heavens will disappear in fire and the elements disintegrate in fearful heat, but our hopes are set **not** on the what will be destroyed, but on the new Heaven and the new earth (and new life) which he has promised us, in which nothing **but** good shall live.<sup>2</sup>*

If the "end of the world" has not yet happened, it is because God wants everyone, as many as would choose to have it, to be on the side of life and not on the side of death.

Back to Luke. Commenting on the tragic events of His day, Jesus uses the suddenness of death to remind us, like Pilate's victims and the 18 who died in a building collapse, no one has the luxury of choosing the time of their demise.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Peter 3:9-10 (J B Philips)

<sup>2</sup> 2 Peter 3:11-13

Is Jesus exploiting tragedy to score theological points? It certainly looks like He is capitalising on the memory of recent horrors to stress the suddenness of death and the unpredictability of life.

There is a section of Church leaders who whip up fear-mongering after every natural and unnatural disaster, and we are right to be wary of them.

Jesus offers a different approach. He does not promise freedom from calamity, He urges his hearers against accepting false self-assurances. There is nothing we can do to be saved from the ultimate calamity; what we can do is to have a relationship with the One who is outside of death and destruction, and in Whom is life and life eternal, who is waiting for us!

Many years ago, I read a book on the last hours in Saigon, Vietnam before it fell to the Vietcong (I apologise not remembering the name of the book and the author), in which the Author noted (this is not a quote, rather my paraphrase of what he wrote), *Anyone who knew someone in the American Embassy, had a ticket to get out before the Vietcong overran the city.*

This is what Jesus is talking about, *If you know the Father, He is waiting to receive you in a place of safety; the means of access to the Father's place of safety is through the Son, who has His hand out to grasp us and carry us out when the final destruction Peter talks about, takes place. Get to know the Father!*

**Repentance**, says Jesus, sets you facing the right direction, looking away from the ultimate calamity Peter was writing about.

Let me tell you about God's character, says Jesus, and my role. If a fig tree planted in the garden does not yield fruit, the Owner has every right to say to the Gardner, cut it down to make room for another fruit-yielding tree. But the Gardner pleads with the owner, *Master give it another chance. Leave it for one more year **and I will give it special attention and plenty of fertiliser.** If it still does not yield fruit, then you can cut it down.*

Like Jesus' earlier words in response to the recent tragedies, the parable warns against false reassurance: Just because you have not been cut down, do not presume that you are safe and considered to be bearing fruit. **BUT** neither is Jesus trying to pacify God because He is eager to have a "clean house".

Jesus' "why?" question begins to make sense. The calamities in this world, man-made or accidental, are not the result of *Why doesn't God do something about it?*

The man-planned calamities and sudden accidents *remind us daily that life is fragile and death can happen suddenly.* Jesus' "why?" question is this, **why** does it not stir us enough to take advantage of all the efforts and inputs the Gardener is offering, so that we bear fruit, the Owner of the Garden and the Gardener will be proud of?

This parable is about this "season of second chances".

God does not leave people to their own resources but encourages their **repentance**. Repentance gets a lot of bad press and is very misunderstood. It is **not** about grovelling in the dust about past misdeeds, turn 180 degrees, leave everything and pursue an austere life.

**Repentance** is about grasping the future, the future God has planned for us. If only we would spent time understanding God, and all He has planned for us, **repentance** becomes a joyful decision. **Repentance** is like telling yourself, *What am I doing, living on beans-on-toast for every meal, everyday, when I can enjoy a large menu of wonderful, healthy and tasty food without fear of any health consequences!*

**Repentance** is about telling God, *I always thought you left me to make my own my way through the mess of this world. I'm sorry I misunderstood you completely! I want what you offer - please tell me more! Where can I learn more about You and Your offer! I don't want to miss out!*

This pandemic should serve to caution us and remind us of God's character:

First, God does not kill people, or let them die because they are "worse sinners" and deserve "God's punishment" to have their lives snuffed out. Second, please take all the precautions we are being advised to take, but know, there is nothing **WE** can **DO** to "stay safe".

We stay safe because of God's love and His grace (unmerited favour), and because we are kept safe, God transforms us into being generous toward those who are suffering though devastation of all kinds.

**AMEN.**