Text: Luke 13:1-5
Title: Repent or Perish
Truth: It is wrong to think of ourselves as "holier than thou" in comparison to other people.
Date/Location: Sunday September 8, 2024 at FBC

I. Introduction to Some Common Beliefs

A. Today a commonly held belief is that too often, "bad things happen to good people[1]." We feel a burning need to explain why this is, explaining how God can be just and good when bad things happen to good people.

B. We feel upset when "good things happen to bad people." They should not experience such blessings, yet they regularly do, at least for a time.

C. Sometimes "good things happen to good people" and we feel good about that when we hear it on the nightly news.

D. The reality is that none of these catchy statements is universally true. They are not "rules" of life. Bad things happen to all kinds of people and good things happen to all kinds of people.

E. A more insidious philosophy is that when bad things happen to a person, it is invariably the fault of someone *else*. And sometimes it *is* the fault of someone else. But blame-shifting is not always correct, though that is a commonly held belief today.

1. Sometimes, that someone else is the person who did the bad thing. "Bad things happen to good people because of other bad people." This is the oppressed-oppressor model that has become so commonly held today. The oppressed person is a victim, and the oppressor is an aggressor. The oppressor is, on this view, without doubt one who holds privilege, whether of race, economic status, or gender. Listen, sometimes there *is* an oppressor, but sometimes a person puts *themselves* into a disadvantaged position.

[1] Apart from God none of us are truly good, but we can be relatively good. God is working on His children—Christians—to make them into truly good people.

2. Other times, the person at fault is someone *not even involved in the incident*. What I mean is that criminal A did something to person B—but it is not really the fault of criminal A. It is somehow the fault of person C or group D or government E, someone other than the victim and even someone other than the criminal. Maybe it is the fault of the government, or the patriarchy, or the man, or people who support the right of self-defense, assigning them the blame for someone who went off the rails. This thinking works for many people because it fits their emotions. But it is not logical, nor is it Biblical in many cases.

F. A commonly held belief in Jesus's day was this: "bad things only happen to bad people." They thought that if you experience some bad event, it must be because you are wicked in some way, perhaps hidden. You were receiving just rewards for your deeds. Today this is called "blaming the victim."

1. We see this kind of thinking in the disciples of Jesus when they ask about a blind man: "Who sinned—this man or his parents—that he was born blind?" Jesus answered that neither was the case. The man was afflicted with blindness so that God would be honored through His life.

2. The entire book of Job reminds us that two thousand years before Jesus's time, Job's friends thought the same thing—Job was suffering, therefore he had to be wicked.

G. We can fall into this common manner of thinking. A corollary of it is that we tend to think we are better than others, or that they are worse than we are. Our moral compass is superior; our logic more sensible; our intellect brighter; our conduct better, our information more accurate. We might be thankful that we have not experienced much trauma, but we might look down upon others who have. Jesus cautions us against this whole mindset. He turns the spiritual mirror around and points it straight into our souls.

II. Two Examples of Disaster, v. 1-2, 4

A. Recently, Pontius Pilate had killed some Galileans. We do not know what their offense was, if any, but apparently they were offering

sacrifice in the temple area, and it was convenient for Pilate to have his soldiers kill these Galileans and make an example of them. The blood of their animal sacrifice was there, perhaps poured out at the altar, and then their own blood was spilled there too. This is not only cruel but also sacrilegious and defiling to the service of the temple. It is "over the top" evil, unwarranted, unnecessary, and unjust. It added to Pilate's notoriety for wickedness, which he used to put fear into the people so that they would obey him.

B. This event reminds us of particularly cruel murders that have happened in our own era. Genocides are one such cruelty that people face because of nationality, ethnicity, or religion. One estimate says that there have been 43 genocides between 1956 and 2016, with 50 million victims. Then there are wars, started for wicked reasons, that killed millions of souls. These are not events relegated to a time long ago, a barbaric past that we have moved beyond as an "enlightened" society. Indiscriminate killing goes on today all over the planet.

C. The second evil Jesus mentions was when a tower in a district of Jerusalem called Siloam collapsed and killed 18 people under its weight and rubble. The Lexham Bible Dictionary explains some background information:

> A tower referenced by Jesus that collapsed and killed 18 people (Luke 13:4). The Tower of Siloam may have stood on the western slope of Mount Zion. It may have been located where the village now called Silwan, or Kefr Silwan, sits: on the east of the valley of Kidron, and to the northeast of the pool. The book of Nehemiah mentions "a projecting tower" in connection with Ophel, which may be the tower of Siloam (Neh 3:26).

The International Standard Bible Dictionary adds:

> A tower in Jerusalem whose collapse killed eighteen people. The tower probably formed part of the fortifications in the old wall

of Jerusalem, which according to Josephus "turned [from the east] southwards above the fountain of Siloam."[2]

D. The tower collapse reminds me of the Surfside Towers South collapse just over 3 years ago on June 24, 2021 in south Florida. At 1:22am that morning, a portion of the tower simply fell to the earth. The eventual death toll was 98 people, with many other rescues and injuries. The causes of the disaster are complex and probably cannot in the end be assigned to a single individual or group. The investigation is expected to be done in 2025.

III. Personal Application, v. 3, 5

A. These events, as shocking as they were, did not prove that the victims were worse sinners than all the other Galileans. Nor were the tower-collapse victims worse than others from Jerusalem. In the first case, the terrible demise of the worshippers is evidence that *Pilate* was an evil man. In the second case, human fault cannot be assigned based on the information we have, for there could have been an accident, an unknown design flaw, an earthquake, a sinkhole, or something else. Similarly, the number and diversity of victims in the Surfside collapse and cruelties of our own day ought to cause us pause before we blame any of *them*.

B. You and I must not think that people suffer bad events just because they are particularly evil. Sometimes consequences follow foolish behavior, and other times God permits bad things to happen to many people: "[11] I returned and saw under the sun that—the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favor to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all. [12] For man also does not know his time: Like fish taken in a cruel net, like birds caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly upon them." (Ecclesiastes 9:11-12).

C. Rather, we need to look inward to ourselves. In a weird way, do we feel better about ourselves when such things do not happen to us?

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[2] Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., "Tower in Siloam," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979–1988), 881.

Do we think ourselves wiser than the victims? Or that our 'karma' is good because what goes around comes around? None of that is true.

D. We are no better than those people who have unfortunately fallen into tragedy. Acknowledge the truth:

1. "All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).
2. "There is none righteous, no not one" (Romans 3:10).
3. "There is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin" (Ecclesiastes 7:20).
4. "When they sin against You (for there is no one who does not sin)…" (1 Kings 8:46).
5. "Who can say, 'I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin'?" (Proverbs 20:9).

E. Jesus repeats this basic truth: if you do not repent, you will perish. What Jesus means by that is not that Christians are immune from calamity in their lives on this earth. Rather, He is referring to eternal disaster in terms of final judgment. Listen to his words carefully: "Unless *you repent you* will all likewise *perish*." In other words, those who repent will be spared in eternity the kind of disaster that happened to the Galileans and the residents of the city of Jerusalem.

IV. The Problems of Evil

A. The most common formulation of the problem of evil is this claim: God cannot be good/loving and all powerful because evil exists. It seems to Christians to be formidable claim to overcome, and to those who believe the claim, it seems to be an intellectual fortress that is impenetrable by logic, facts, or any type of theology.

B. Recognize that the claim is another common belief like we introduced at the beginning. But instead of "blame the victim" or "blame the innocent," this one is "blame the Creator." God is the most innocent "person" possible that could ever receive blame. Perhaps He is an easy target because He is invisible?

C. We should spend some more time thinking about the problem of evil. In fact, there are many problems of evil and perspectives from which to examine it. There is the religious perspective, the philosophical problem of evil, the gratuitousness of evil, natural evil, man-caused evil, demonic evil, and probably others as well.

John Feinberg in his 2004 book *The Many Faces of Evil* divides the study of the problems of evil into four sections: The logical problem of evil, the evidential problem of evil, the problem of Hell, and the religious problem of evil. His 500+ page work on the issue will prove to be an informative read.

D. With Feinberg, I have been convinced for many years that "Christian theism can be successfully defended against the problem of evil in its various forms" (p. 16). In part, this is because our intellectual and moral limitations prevent us from plumbing the true depths of the problem or its solution as God can do with His infinite and pure wisdom. In another part, we who know God truly trust Him and know that sometimes bad must happen for His design to come about, or for good to peek through the clouds in the end. Trust carries us through when the mind cannot conceive of a good reason for a dreadful thing to happen. Again, in part we recognize that the sufferings here are not worthy to be compared to the glory that will follow (2 Cor. 4:17). In another part, we understand that God uses difficulties to purify and shape us, to make us like Christ, to help us comfort others. A deep yet overly simplistic claim does not do justice to the overall situation (that God cannot be good and omnipotent *and* evil exist at the same time). In fact, we believe God *is* good, loving, kind, *and* all powerful, *and* He can permit evil to exist for reasons beyond our present ability to comprehend.

Conclusion

It is strange that we people tend to be self-centered when we should be more focused on others, but then again other times we are focused on others instead of thinking about ourselves. The latter is the case in this passage: our default thinking is to think well of ourselves and look down on others. Frankly, we need to think a little more about our own need for repentance. Yes, even if we are

experienced Christians, we have a lot to repent about. And *that* should help us stay humble in this world of people just like us. What Jesus says here "flattens" humanity into a basically homogenous mass of people who are sinners. There are in the big picture no hierarchies of superior and inferior.

To each and every one: repent, for the king and judge of all the earth is coming back.

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