

No time to waste

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[0 : 00] Let us again pray to our great God. Father, as we come this morning and as I get ready to preach your word, please help me to be clear, help me to be faithful, help me to be convicting in the way that you want me to, help me to be God-honouring, and I pray that as I speak, your voice would be heard and that we would respond the way that you want us to.

We pray all this in the name of Christ. Amen. Now if there is one sure thing in life, it is that bad things happen. When I was 13, I got the news that a classmate who had been very sick but then had gotten well was sick again, and by this time, he couldn't recover. He died from cancer. When I was 19, like quite a number of you in this hall, I was very much shaken when I heard that the elder of this very church and my youth leader, Jason Eng, had perished aboard a fallen helicopter.

When I was 33, I got news that my uncle, my father's youngest brother, had perished in a fire. And what is true on a personal level is also true on a macro level.

Just consider some of the things that have happened since I was born. And let's just restrict myself to the 2000s. In 2001, of course, September 11 happened as two planes crashed into the World Trade Center.

[1 : 41] In 2004, there was the Boxing Day tsunami in which hundreds of thousands of people perished in several countries, including here in Malaysia.

In 2005, I was in London itself when the 7-7 London bombings happened, and my brother wasn't all that far away from one of the suicide bombers.

In 2014, like many of you, I felt sick to my stomach hearing about the MH370 and MH17 incidents one after the other.

If there is one sure thing in life, it is that bad things happen. So, what do we do when bad things happen?

Now, one common thing to do, I suppose, is to ask, why? Why did this happen? Why did this happen to these people and not the other people?

[2 : 41] Why did God allow it? It is not uncommon to want a theodicy. Now, what is a theodicy? That's just a fancy philosophical word, which literally means a justification of God's ways to human beings.

And we long for God to justify himself, to explain in detail why he has allowed evil to keep existing at this very time.

And I think there is definitely a time and place for the why question. It is not wrong to ask why. But today's passage isn't primarily concerned with the why, although there are several things Jesus says that will help address the why issue.

What it's more interested in today is the how question. When bad things happen, how will we respond? Some people respond with panic, with fear and anxiety.

They cancel flights. They stay indoors. They empty supermarkets. Others go into denial. They don't want to know about it. They don't want to even think about it.

[4 : 03] They don't want to change their behavior in any way which might acknowledge the current trial or calamity before them. And perhaps others head straight for the blame game because that would bring some sort of relief.

At least we know who's responsible. But when bad things happen, what is the one response above all that Jesus is seeking?

As Christians, that's what we should be most concerned about. And that's what we're going to find out from Luke 13, verse 1 to 9 today.

But first things first, and we're going to start with the kind of response Jesus wants us to avoid. So firstly, when bad things happen, don't seek idle speculation.

At the beginning of today's passage, we learn of a horrific incident, verse 1. Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.

[5 : 13] Now we're not entirely sure what incident is being referred to. Whatever this is, it's not recorded by any other historian. But it seems as if some Galileans had been cut down by Roman troops on the orders of Pontius Pilate while they were in the very act of offering sacrifices at the temple.

To the point where their blood mingled with the very blood of the sacrifices they were offering. It was clearly a shocking incident.

Imagine today if we were taking the Lord's Supper together and some terrorists came in and gunned us down and our blood dripped into the untouched communion cups.

That's the picture. Here is an example of a great moral evil, an evil deliberately done by a human being in Jesus' time.

And that is not the only bad thing that happened. Jesus himself brings up another incident in verse 4. A particular tower, known as the Tower of Siloam, appears to have fallen, taking the lives of 18 men.

[6 : 36] We don't know all the details of this incident either, but we do know that there were some towers built along the Wall of Jerusalem. And we do know of a pool of Siloam from John's Gospel.

So presumably this tower was near there. And what happened? Now this was not a deliberate attack, unlike Pilate.

The tower fell on them. Perhaps it was some sort of construction accident. Perhaps the safety apparatus was lacking. Perhaps there might even have been an earthquake.

But whatever it was, it was a bad thing that happened. An example this time of natural evil.

Something not caused by human hands.

So, when bad things happen, how should we respond? Let's go back to the first incident.

[7 : 41] Notice that it was the crowds who brought it to Jesus' attention. Indeed, it had the feel of breaking news. Perhaps it happened very recently.

And people were now whispering it all over to one another. It was going viral. But why tell Jesus? It probably wasn't just because they wanted to inform Jesus of something that he didn't know before. No. This is probably something closer to gossip. This is probably something more like when people hear something shocking and they immediately post it on the internet, hoping to stir up some combination of moral outrage and disgust as people give their comments.

And in the process, subconsciously make themselves feel good as people join in the condemnation of whatever perceived wrong was done.

Perhaps they hope that Jesus, in response to this piece of news, would say, he did what? Ayuh, people are so terrible lah.

[9 : 00] Or perhaps they hope that he will offer some social commentary on the situation. All politicians are the same. Pilate is a crook, just like everyone else.

Come, let's reformasi. And based on how Jesus will reply to them in verse 2, it also seems they might be hoping Jesus would agree with what they secretly thought.

You see, it seems like the crowd has made a logical deduction. Yes, Pilate was a bad guy. But in such cases, he wasn't the only one.

After all, don't people eventually get what's coming to them? Isn't that how the laws of the universe work? If something bad happened to you, that must be because you have done something bad in the first place.

So those Galileans must have sinned terribly in some way. Same goes for those 18 guys on the Tower of Siloam. They weren't victims.

[10 : 16] It was a terrible accident, sure, but at the same time, it must have been an act of God. Isn't that what the insurance companies call it? And that act of God must have been judgment.

Why did these 18 men suffer disproportionately? Must have been because they sinned disproportionately. Or why did those Galileans under Pilate suffer disproportionately?

Must have been because they sinned disproportionately. That's the logic of the crowd. And I think this is probably a very common belief among people everywhere, including here in Kuching.

Sometimes, we call it karma. Now, Buddhists and Hindus, of course, officially believe in karma. But I suspect many who don't call themselves either, indeed, even people who call themselves Christians, might also believe in some version of karma.

You can see why, can't you? It provides a reassuring moral framework. You do good, you get good things.

[11 : 38] You do bad stuff, you get bad stuff. It's simple, yet offers a sense of justice. And for Christians, karma is appealing.

Because it means that when bad things happen, you have someone to blame, but the blame doesn't fall on God. And at the same time, I come out well because if the bad thing happened to other people, but not me, I must be good in the eyes of God.

Certainly, that is the line of thinking that Job's friends had back in the Old Testament. And yet, people also sense something wrong with this logic.

Back in 2004, after the huge Boxing Day tsunami happened, a few religious leaders were asked by the media as to why they thought this happened.

A leader belonging to a major world religion said, oh, it's probably because of all the sexual perversion that happens on beach resorts throughout Southeast Asia.

[12 : 57] Another representative of another religion said something similar. Oh, it must be because there was direct pent-up judgment now being unleashed on all those who perish.

And not surprisingly, they got a lot of criticism. But, if we believe in karma, surely what they say is accurate.

And yet, karma doesn't feel quite right. Jesus agrees. Look at how he responds to the crowd in verse 2.

Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? And then verse 3, he answers his own question.

No! Jesus doesn't subscribe to karma. Now, you might think, hmm, but, I thought retribution was part of God's moral code?

[14 : 09] And yes, it is true that God does judge. In the Old Testament, he brings about a flood to wipe out evil on this earth.

He brings about the Assyrian army to bring about judgment on the idolatrous Israelites. So, there is a sense in which sin logically leads to judgment and therefore suffering.

And, it is true that God has designed the world in such a way that often, when we go against his design, we invite consequences that make us suffer.

So, if I drink way too much, for example, no surprise that I have a horrible hangover the next day.

But, Jesus says, while you can reason from cause to effect, that is, if I commit idolatry, I will be judged, or if I drink too much, I will have a massive headache, that is, cause to effect.

The reverse is not true. You cannot argue from effect to cause. You cannot say, he is suffering, therefore, the cause must be sin.

[15 : 41] You cannot say that the reason those Galileans perished in AD 30, or the reason that those holiday makers perished in 2004, is because of their individual sin.

Human disaster or tragedy is no gauge of someone's degree of sinfulness. Jesus is not saying that these people are not sinners, but he is saying that is not necessarily the reason in this instance for their perishing.

And so you certainly have no basis to try to do some kind of sinfulness ranking based on such disasters. You see, God's world is more complex than that.

It doesn't operate on an instant reward and demerit points system. Yes, sin will lead to judgment, but not necessarily judgment now.

Judgment doesn't always fall immediately. Rather, God is patient. He even shows what theologians call common grace.

[17 : 01] Now, what is that? Here is how one theologian puts it. It's on the screen also on your handout. Common grace is every favor of whatever kind or degree falling short of salvation which this undeserving and sin cursed world enjoys from the hand of God.

It is basically the present patience and kindness of God towards even the unrepentant. It is why Cain lives on and isn't struck down immediately when he murders Abel although he shows no repentance for his sin.

It is why Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount that God causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

You see if God acted immediately according to what we deserve then we should all die immediately. As the psalmist cries out in Psalm 130 if you Lord kept a record of sins who could stand?

But in this present age we learn that God does withhold what we do deserve earthly misery and gives what we don't deserve a measure of earthly enjoyment regardless of whether we trust him or not.

[18 : 44] And so having this theological category in our heads prevents us from reasoning from effect to cause from suffering straight to sin.

But there is another category the Bible also introduces to help us not to jump to the conclusion of the crowd. And that is the category of the righteous sufferer.

We find him in the Old Testament in the figure of Job. Now here is a guy whom we know is not sinless but is blameless.

That is he acts with integrity. And we know his great sufferings are not brought about by sin. So clearly that disrupts the neat logic of the crowd.

But for us today there is perhaps one more person who disrupts the logic even more. And that is Jesus himself.

[19 : 55] Does Jesus not suffer greatly? Does he not even die a horrific death? And yet is his suffering brought about by his own sin?

Absolutely not! And so Jesus proves there is such a thing as the righteous sufferer. And even more amazingly this particular righteous sufferer chose to suffer on our behalf by taking the judgment we deserve.

And so here is the big takeaway from this point. When bad things happen don't engage in idle speculation don't be so arrogant as to think that you can straight away discern the reason behind someone else's suffering.

In almost every circumstance we cannot ultimately know why did this happen? Why did it happen in this way? Why did it happen here to this person and not that person?

Why does one person have cancer and the other person is healthy? Why does one person seem to encounter loss all the time through no fault of his own?

[21 : 19] The other person seems to have earthly blessing upon blessing heap upon him. Often we don't know.

And to make pronouncements of sin without basis upon someone's suffering is to do the opposite of loving your neighbour. Instead of giving comfort to a vulnerable person you leave them feeling doubtful and hopeless.

You might even cause them to stumble and God takes that seriously. So don't engage in idle speculation.

Don't say things like maybe the person didn't have enough faith or something. Instead God invites us to weep with those who weep. And he encourages us to invite those in pain to turn their eyes to Jesus the righteous sufferer who knows the pain they are going through.

And that brings us to how Jesus wants us to respond in this passage. Secondly, when bad things happen, seek instead repentance.

[22 : 44] That is the repeated refrain. You can see it in verse 3. I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you too will all perish.

Or again in verse 5, I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you too will all perish. Whenever you see bad things happening, Jesus says, you should think of them like those red warning lights you see on the dashboard of your car.

They are signs calling you to take action, to turn to Jesus. You see, in many ways, today's passage is the climax of what Jesus has been saying all throughout chapter 12.

All throughout Luke chapter 12, Jesus has been calling on people to be ready for the moment he comes again. That is why he calls on people to acknowledge him, rather than disown him, to be responsible stewards, to live in confidence in the provision of God, and to be faithful, even when there is painful division.

And here he summarizes why he is calling on people to do all that. Unless you repent, you too will all perish.

[24 : 14] Jesus is not simply saying, be a good boy or girl, otherwise you are going to get it from Pilate, like those Galileans. Rather, he is saying, use every disaster you hear about to reflect on what sort of world we live in.

Instead of self-righteously speculating why someone else has suffered such calamity, we should be humbly recognizing that every calamity is a testimony that our world is a fallen world, a world under a curse, a world heading for final judgment.

We might not be able to explain why specific tragedies take place at a specific time and place, but we can say they all point to the reality of what a world under God's final judgment will look like.

So, repent, before it's too late. Now, that is not something we like to hear, is it?

I don't like to say it. I don't like to be pigeonholed as some kind of fire and brimstone preacher. But consider that I am only repeating Jesus' words to you.

[25 : 45] These are not my own words. as we always say at the end of a Bible reading, this is the word of the Lord. For as C.S.

Lewis memorably said in his book *The Problem of Pain*, God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains.

It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world. So rather than speculate on whether someone is a worse sinner than you or I, and use that to say, oh, I'm not perfect, but I'm basically okay, recall instead that God doesn't use the morality of the other person as his standard.

Rather, God's standard is himself. And given that God is perfect, if you're not perfect, you're not okay, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

So repent. But let us dwell on that word repent for a little longer, because I think it probably needs a little bit of redeeming in the modern context.

[27 : 07] You see, when we hear repent, what do we think? There's a lot of negativity associated with the word. For one thing, when we hear it, we often picture a frowning boss wagging his finger at us, shouting, repent, or else.

It sounds like being forced against our will to do something that is not pleasurable. Or to come at it from another angle, we might think of repentance, that repentance is all about willpower.

It's all about willing yourself to become a better person. We think that's the essence of repentance.

But if it is, we're all in trouble because we all know our willpower is weaker than it should be.

But what does repent actually mean? It is literally to turn around. It is to turn back. It is to go in a different direction.

That's what repentance means. And that is what Jesus is pleading with us to do. He's saying, I can see clearly what direction you are heading in.

[28 : 33] It is the direction of despair. it is the direction of desolation. It is the direction ultimately of eternal death.

So turn around and walk towards me. You see, when you repent, what are you really doing? You are moving from perishing to flourishing, thriving.

you are turning around from a life where you fear death to a life where you don't fear death. You are turning around from a life where everything seems meaningless and purposeless to a life that is filled with meaning and purpose.

You are turning around from being slaves of Satan to being sons and daughters of God. It is a positive thing. You know, repentance is a big theme in Luke's gospel.

And as we progress through the gospel, I think you'll see it more in the coming chapters, Luke paints for us a picture of the repentant. And what we discover, for one thing, is that the repentant are objects of God's mercy.

[29 : 56] mercy. They are like debtors who were hundreds of thousands of ringgit in debt, but no longer. And the repentant are objects of God's joy.

When you repent and turn to Jesus, God is so happy and so excited and he can't wait to greet you and hold you in his arms, no matter what you have done before.

repentance is actually a positive thing. So, what does repentance look like for you today? Let me tell you what it doesn't look like.

Repentance is not an apology without change. As someone once said, an apology without change is just manipulation.

Rather, to repent today is first of all, to agree with God's assessment of you and I. You and I must first face our true selves.

[31 : 06] We are sinners. We are murderers if we have gotten unrighteously angry. We are adulterers if we have given in to lust. That is how we are to call ourselves.

But then, to repent is second of all, to come to Jesus and agree with his reassessment of you and I. In Christ, we are truly forgiven, we are truly made near, and it is then to live in light of that reassessment.

We don't remain as we are, we turn to Christ, we now live like Christ. And that brings me to the final thing Jesus says in this passage about how we respond.

Thirdly, when we seek repentance, that means bearing fruit while it is still the season. In verses 6 to 9, Jesus moves on to tell a parable.

[32 : 12] There was an owner who planted a fig tree and after three years, came looking for fruit on it. However, this fig tree had not yielded a single fig in three years.

So when the owner saw that there was none, he ordered the vine dresser to cut it down because it was basically wasting all the nutrients of the soil. But the vine dresser pleads for an extra year.

He says, I will give it even more care, verse 9. I will dig around it and fertilize it. And if it still doesn't bear fruit, then you can go right ahead and take it out.

So what's happening here? Well, the audience would have understood what Jesus is getting at. Israel is being put on notice. The fig tree or vineyard is a common picture for Israel in the Old Testament.

And an unfruitful vine or unfruitful fig tree likewise is a common picture of judgment. After all, God has cultivated Israel from the very beginning to be a fruitful tree.

[33 : 29] Notice in this parable that this is no wow fig tree, but one that has been planted and is growing in the vineyard. In other words, you cannot make the excuse that this fig tree was neglected.

certainly Israel had no such excuse. They had the word of God and in Christ, they had many signs from God too. But this fig tree isn't doing what it should do.

I don't know anything about fig trees, but from what I understand, a normal fig tree will bear fruit twice a year, once to be eaten fresh, the other dried for winter.

but God's people are not bearing fruit at all. So, they are going to be cut down. Patience is granted, yes, but this patience is not infinite.

It's a bit like a video game. You get a number of lives, but once you exhaust it, it's game over. But this parable isn't just about judgment.

[34 : 37] In pleading for the fig tree, the vine dresser is like a mediator, an intercessor. He is pleading on the fig tree's behalf for patience.

And God is more than happy to grant it. As the apostle Peter puts it elsewhere, the Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness.

Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. And notice, the vine dresser thinks change is possible.

Despite a rather bad track record, the vine dresser thinks the tree could still bear fruit. fruit. So if the vine dresser thinks the fruit can still come out, this is also a picture of hope.

And that is what Jesus wants for us. He wants to give a sense that, yes, it is still possible to turn around and start over.

[35 : 54] There is still time. so today, if you look back at your life and realise that your life is not one that has borne fruit, one that has been rather pointless so far from the point of view of God, hear the good news.

Jesus is actually hopeful for you. He is saying to you, if you let me into your life to do some fertilising, or you let me dig into the hardened earth of your heart so that the roots can be nourished and strengthened, they can be changed.

They can be hoped that your life still can be fruitful. There is still time. Other people might have written you off, but I haven't, Jesus says.

The only thing is, you must repent. You must turn to me. You can't do this yourself. But if you let my love and my grace become the soil of your heart, if you say, Jesus, I'm sorry, I confess my sin, I have turned my back on you, but now I turn to you and accept your precious gift, and I want a truly renewed life, Jesus says, I can work with that.

I can turn you into what you were made to be, a fig tree that actually bears figs. But there is no time to waste.

[37 : 41] We don't know when the tomorrow of judgment is coming, but it is still today, the day when you can repent. So will you do that?

If not now, then when? Alexander Noel was the dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London in 1563 when the great plague struck.

It wiped out, I think, a quarter of the population of London. And let me read to you some words with some slight modernization that he preached during this season.

For when shall we mourn for our sins, if not now, in this time of mourning? When shall we forsake sin in our life, if not now, when life is forsaking us?

When will we give over our gluttony, if not now, when we must forgo the belly and whole body also?

When shall we give over our love of money, if not now, when we cannot hold or use it?

[38 : 55] When shall we understand that this life is as a vapour, as a bubble rising on the water, if not now, in the passing and vanishing away of it?

In other words, if not now, when? When bad things happen and we don't want to repent, then when?

So let us not waste any more time. If today you know that you need to turn to Jesus, let us do it now. Don't wait till you leave the service, don't wait till you get into the refreshments area, don't wait till you get home or after you had lunch, repent today, this moment.

Let's pray. Let me just give us a few seconds of silence first to reflect on what we've just heard.

Maybe you want to speak to God personally before I lead us on in prayer. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[40 : 03] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Father, I pray that these words of yours will be heard loud and clear this morning.

Father, help us not to be like the crowd. Help us not to be people who kind of compare ourselves to others so that we can feel morally superior. but Father, but Father, if by your Holy Spirit, you are doing a work in us today, you are convicting us, challenging us, rebuking us, correcting us of some sin that we hold in our lives, some area where we have turned away from you.

Father, we pray that we will turn back to you today. Father, help us to hear the good news of turning back to you, that when we come to you, we have life, we have fruitfulness, we have joy, and so many other things as well.

And so, Father, help us to hang on to the hope and the assurance that we can find when we turn to Christ, knowing that he will hold on to us, he will cleanse us, he will complete the good work that he has started in us.

So, I pray again for any among us who need to turn to you, I pray that indeed that is what they would do. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.