

1 Corinthians 10:1-13 and Luke 13:1-9

We have something of a disadvantage when it comes to understanding this text. We are not 100% sure what the events mentioned here are. But Bible scholars think they have a good guess.

We know Pontius Pilate, the Roman appointed governor of Judea, decided the city of Jerusalem needed a better water supply. The water supply for the city was the Pool of Siloam. Centuries earlier, King Hezekiah had built a tunnel from inside the city out into the Kidron Valley to bring a natural spring inside the city. That way, if the city was under siege, the people in the city would have water, and the attackers would not.

Pilate was probably right in his assessment. But the problem was that he needed money to do it. And since the Temple just had a lot of money lying around, he decided to use that money. Of course, that was sacred money. It couldn't be used for something like a water project. So there were protests.

Pilate sent his soldiers out into the protest in disguise. They were armed only with clubs, not swords, and they were told not to kill the protestors but just to disperse them. Whether they got out of hand, or people died in the ensuing panic, either way, people died. That may have been the Galileans in question. Revolutionary fervor was strong in Galilee, so they were likely Galileans involved.

As for the Tower of Siloam, that was almost certainly part of this project, since the water supply was the Pool of Siloam. Those who took work on the project would be seen by many as traitors to their people for helping the pagan Romans with their project using money stolen from God. Jesus calls them "debtors." Some would say they were debtors to God for taking pay in this work. They "owed God" sacred money.

The question is, who was getting their just deserts?

Some groups, the Sadducees, the Herodians, likely the Pharisees, would say it was the Galilean rebels. Those groups were all in favor of "getting along nicely with Rome," or at least they were opposed to any kind of violence. On the other hand, the Zealots, the revolutionary party, would obviously say the men working on the Tower got what they deserved. And a lot of "common people" would agree with them.

The question brings up the subject of theodicy. Theodicy means "the justice of God." Is God just? If he is, then how do we explain suffering? Why do calamities and atrocities happen? Why do bad things happen to "good" people?

Many people believed in a “theology of retribution,” which is basically that, “If you suffer, it’s because you’re a sinner and God is paying you back for your sins.” The wicked suffer and the righteous prosper. After all, it’s like Job’s friend Eliphaz told him, “Does the innocent person perish? When has the upright person been destroyed?”

But Jesus denies this theology of retribution, at least in the case of the individual. It seems to be different in the case of “national sins.” Old Testament Israel was exiled for their sins. That doesn’t mean every person was guilty. In 40 years, the Jewish people would be decimated by the Romans for their constant rebellions. That doesn’t mean all of them were involved. Sometimes individuals are caught up in the consequences of national sins. Both the rebel and the law-abiding suffer in those times.

Instead of trying to find out “who’s the worse sinner,” Jesus focuses on the need to repent. There are no simplistic answers to calamity or atrocity; both are reminders of God’s coming judgment. Life is fragile. Death comes for us all. We can’t protect ourselves or others. And after death comes judgment.

I had a theology professor in seminary who was discussing this question of theodicy, and his words have always stuck with me. “People always ask, ‘Why do bad things happen to good people.’ But the Bible doesn’t call us good people. It calls us all sinners, and the wages of sin is death. The better question is, ‘Why do good things happen to sinners?’ And the answer is because God is merciful and gracious.”

Jesus illustrates that idea with the parable of the fig tree in the garden. This tree has a privileged position. It’s in a garden, a place with good soil. But it is not bearing fruit. Fruit is a picture of godly living. After three years, it has not born fruit. We should probably understand that as three years after the time when it would be expected to bear fruit.

The owner says, “Cut it down.” There was a tradition in Hebrew thought which said that God would examine the sins and righteousness of Israel every year and determine their fate for the next year. That might be in mind here.

But the gardener pleads for the tree. “Give it one more year. I’ll fertilize it and everything.” This is a picture of mercy. It’s a picture of God’s patience. He is the God of second chances.

“But if it doesn’t fruit next year, we’ll cut it down.” God is patient, but God’s patience should not be taken for granted. God is the God of second chances. But eventually, second chances become last chances.

What if we knew that we only had one year left? Would we not live with a new sense of urgency? Would we not invest that time in the things that matter and let go of frivolous

things? Would we not prepare to stand before God? Why don't we live that way when we don't know?

1 Corinthians deals with the same topic of the uncertainties of life and the certainty of death and judgment, but from a different perspective. The warning in 1 Corinthians 10 is that having received grace does not mean that we should have no thought for judgment. We can fall away from grace.

Paul illustrates that with the story of Israel in the wilderness. They all received grace. They were "baptized" in the Red Sea crossing. They were given holy food and drink in the manna and the water in the wilderness. Paul is applying the New Testament images of baptism and the Lord's Supper to an Old Testament story of salvation.

But most "fell away." They fell back into idolatry and sexual immorality, which were constant temptations in the ancient Near East world. They were constant temptations in first century Corinth. Frankly, they are constant temptations in 21st century America! They put God to the test, and they grumbled about his provision.

We must beware of spiritual pride. If we think we are standing secure and strong, then we are setting ourselves up for failure. If others can fall from grace, so can we. Conversely, if others rise above temptation, so can we.

How do we resist temptation? Here are four strategies:

First, avoid troublesome situations. If alcohol is a temptation for you, you shouldn't hang out in bars, right? We all have temptations that are difficult for us, and we know what they are. So stay out of situations that hit us where we are weak.

Second, if you find yourself in a troubling situation, get out as soon as possible. Don't hang around temptation to see how much of it you can put up with.

Third, pray and ask God for help.

Fourth, surround yourself with people who will hold you accountable. Do you have close friends in the faith who know your struggles and you know theirs? People you can turn to when you are feeling the power of temptation? We all should.

Someday we will all stand before God and give an accounting for what we did with the life we have received in Christ. Did we live in a way that reflects the immensity of what God has done for us? Did we invest our lives in the things of God, the things that last? Did we live into the holiness and goodness God intends for his children? The fact that we will give this accounting before God is a certainty. What is not a certainty is when it will happen. So make the most of the time you have so that you will not be found fruitless before God.