

When Life's Directions Need to be Changed • Luke 13:1-9

John F. Kennedy, Jr., his wife and sister-in-law boarded their single engine plane at an airport right across the highway from the high school from which I graduated. He piloted the plane toward Cape Cod, but they never made it. Their plane crashed into the ocean not far from Nantucket Island. Almost immediately there was worldwide speculation about a Kennedy curse. Could it be that he, his wife and sister-in-law tragically died because of some sin he committed or a series of sins in the Kennedy clan?

When a day-trader-gone-wild shot and killed innocent people in and around Atlanta, was there something spiritual and supernatural behind what happened? Or when Oklahoma City's Murrah Federal Building exploded taking hundreds of lives of unsuspecting visitors and workers, was there some spiritual connection between what happened and their deaths?

Every generation has its tragedies. And every generation wonders about the spiritual and supernatural meaning behind the otherwise unexplainable catastrophes that steal the lives of otherwise healthy people. Plane crashes. Epidemics. Tornadoes. Hurricanes. Droughts. Mass murders. What do they mean?

It was no different in Jesus' generation. Some people came to Jesus with the latest news of tragedy. Worshipers from the northern province of Galilee had been murdered at the temple while they were offering sacrifices to God. The tragic news reminded Jesus of another recent tragedy when the tower of Siloam in Jerusalem collapsed and crushed to death 18 people. Both of these stories raised a practical theological problem that Jesus wanted to answer: "Is suffering always a direct consequence of sinning?" Let's review the stories that triggered the question "is suffering always a direct consequence of sinning?"

The first of these stories is about the alter murders. We don't know the exact historical details although it isn't hard to fill in some of the blanks. Pilot was the Roman governor of Jerusalem at the time. He was notoriously hardhearted and heavy handed. While he did some wonderful things for

the city he often stomped out all personal and political opposition. And the people of Galilee were renowned as rebellious. They often opposed Roman rule.

Some news-bearers ran up to tell Jesus "*about the Galileans whose blood Pilot had mixed with their sacrifices.*" It was big news of a great catastrophe.

Do you remember the moment when you first heard about some catastrophe? I was talking on the phone when a friend heard the news and told me that the Challenger had exploded killing all the astronauts on board. I was in a rental car in Finley, Ohio, when I heard a radio report about the Oklahoma City federal building explosion. I was in Moscow, Russia, when Wooddale Church missionaries Matt and Terri Miller told me that John Kennedy's plane was missing and was presumed down. I was driving to the office at church when I heard the news that a plane had flown into the World Trade Center.

...we never know when tragedy will strike so we should always be spiritually ready.

Jesus was teaching his followers when news arrived of the slaughter of the Galilean worshippers.

History reports at least one other occasion when Pilot ordered his soldiers to enter a temple crowd under

disguise and then suddenly throw off the disguises and bludgeon the worshippers. Apparently that's what happened to those Galileans. They had their hearts on God and they were murdered.

You can't help but wonder why, so Jesus asked the question that was on everyone's mind: "*Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?*" People in those days believed calamity was a direct consequence of sin. They assumed these murdered people must have done something terribly wrong to suffer as they did. They must have gotten what they deserved.

There are people today who hold to the same theology. If someone gets cancer or has a huge business setback or faces some other calamity it must be because of sin in that person's life. It is not uncommon for terminally or chronically ill patients

to rehearse everyone they have offended in life and ask for forgiveness in order to receive divine healing.

So Jesus asked, “*Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?*” And then he answered, “*I tell you, no!*” Jesus is saying that such a notion is bad theology. It’s just not true.

But then Jesus adds a seemingly contradictory line when he says, “*But unless you repent, you too will all perish.*” This seems to say there is a direct connection between sin and sickness and death.

Before an explanation is given he moves on to a second story about another recent event. It is the story of the tower tragedy. The tower in Siloam in Jerusalem collapsed killing eighteen people. One Bible scholar has an interesting possible explanation of this story. Pilate recognized the need for a new water system for Jerusalem so he forcibly withdrew money from the temple treasury to pay for it. The Jews were really upset and angry. Pilate then used the money to pay the construction workers. Some people assumed that God punished the workers for accepting the stolen money as wages by causing the tower to fall on them and crush them.

Suppose you accepted drug money to pay your salary; then you were severely injured in an accident. Would you think it was God’s punishment?

Jesus asked, “*Do you think those eighteen were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?*” Jesus answered, “*I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.*”

What is the moral to these tragic stories? The moral is that we never know when tragedy will strike so we should always be spiritually ready.

We live in a world that is contaminated by sin. There is sickness, corruption, injustice, disasters, violence and risk everywhere. No one is exempt. We never know when we will be in a car accident, be assaulted, get a disease or suddenly die. Life is not fair or predictable. We never know when we might be murdered or have a building collapse on us or be in a plane crash. So, we must always be ready. If we have sin on our conscience we must confess it and get right with God. If we have something wrong with a relationship, we should straighten it out now. If life is going in the wrong direction we must not assume we have time to change direction.

Jesus told his followers to repent or perish. To

repent is to change direction. It is to stop going the wrong way and start going the right way. It would be tragic to die headed in the wrong direction.

Having said this Jesus then tied a parable to his teaching about repentance. A parable is a made-up story to teach a main point. It was a common teaching tool of Jesus Christ. He said:

“A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’

“ ‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it *down.*’ ”

Topsoil in the Middle East is scarce. While vineyards are mostly for growing grapes, farmers sometimes planted trees on any unused little piece of soil. Fig trees were a good choice because they didn’t take a lot of room and typically produced a crop after three years. Except in Jesus parable this fig tree didn’t produce anything. So the owner ordered it to be chopped down. The land was too valuable to have a tree that didn’t do what the tree was supposed to do.

Jesus was probably referring to the nation of Israel in the year AD 70, but the principle applies to us as well. Each of us has a purpose in life. God planted us where we are to produce fruit. If we don’t do what we’re supposed to do, we might as well be chopped down.

What does God want from you and me where we are planted? What is the purpose of your life? Many people have no idea. That is sad—to live life and have no idea why; to be born and live and die and never have a purpose or accomplish what life is supposed to be about.

Other people have mistaken purposes. They say that the purpose of life is to have a good time, make money, be famous or have success. This is like a fig tree that grows leaves but never grows figs. It looks good but misses out on what matters the most.

I encourage you to learn and know God’s purpose for your life. Think about it. Pray about it. Be quick to name the fruit you are supposed to grow. Knowing your purpose can transform your whole life. Your attitude at work, at home, in the neigh-

borhood or wherever you are planted will be different when you can say, “My purpose is to show others the life and love of God in this place.” You will be able to face disappointment with courage and accept success without pride. All of life is about growing the fruit God has called you to grow.

In Jesus’ parable, the gardener intervenes on behalf of the fig tree and asks the owner to give it one more year. It is a second chance to do what it is supposed to do.

It’s just like Jesus to bring this into his story. Jesus intervenes on our behalf to give us another chance. For those who have wasted years of life, for those who have lived without purpose and direction, for those who have born no fruit for God where they are planted Jesus says, “Give it one more shot. Allow one more year. Let her try again. Give him another chance.” It is still the theme of repentance. Remember, repentance is changing direction. Quit going the wrong way and start going the right way.

If that’s you, listen up to Jesus’ parable. Take this as a gift from Jesus. Seek for and live your God-given purpose in life. Do it now. Don’t wait. Don’t waste another day just taking up space. Be and do what God wants you to be and do where he has planted you—now!

With Jesus’ gracious offering of a second chance he adds a serious warning about the last chance. He says, “*If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.*” In other words, the tree doesn’t get 100 years to do what a fig tree is supposed to do. It needs to produce figs or make room for a tree that will produce figs.

Jesus warns us not to waste our lives. Don’t assume we can go on indefinitely without fulfilling our God-given purpose in life. There’s a limit. There’s an end. There’s a last chance.

Some people may hear these teachings of Jesus and take them negatively. They resent talk about catastrophes and warnings about going the wrong way in life. Religion can sound so restrictive. Jesus may seem so pessimistic. Where’s the freedom? The grace? The fun?

Well, let’s be fair and let’s understand. Imagine that you get a terrific new job with a new car as a

perk. You will represent the company around town and maybe even across the nation. You will go to wonderful places and meet lots of interesting people. The boss gives you directions as he hands you the keys to your new car. They include six right turns and four left turns to get to the highway you need to take. He warns you not to take some tempting short-cuts.

As you drive away you see the highway you want but it’s much closer than you expected. The problem is that there is a left turn arrow with a red circle around it and a slash through it. There is also a sign that says NO LEFT TURN. You decide to turn left anyway. Next there is a sign that says DO NOT ENTER, but you keep going. A delivery truck is coming straight at you but you are driving a big SUV so you swerve onto the shoulder and into a nearby ditch and have a near miss. Back on the road you keep going until you see a huge sign that says WRONG WAY. What are you going to do? Keep going or change directions?

Jesus says, “. . . *unless you repent, you will perish.*” It’s simple. If you’re going the wrong direction,

turn around and go the right direction. If you aren’t fulfilling your purpose in life where you are planted, grab your second chance and do what you are supposed to do.

The sum of it all of this that Jesus loves us and wants the very best

for us. But he warns us against going the wrong direction. He invites us to turn around and follow him, go the right direction and experience the transforming delight of fulfilling our God-given purpose in life.

Don’t assume we can go on indefinitely without fulfilling our God-given purpose in life. There’s a limit. There’s an end. There’s a last chance.

Faith Matters® is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.wooddale.org
©Leith Anderson