

**Parts of the Saving Gospel:
Repentance**

Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

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We've witnessed two global tragedies recently. The first could be called an act of human evil. It was a deliberate act. An Australian white supremacist, whose name I will not call, opened fire on unsuspecting worshipers in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Fifty people died in the rampage. Fifty more were injured, ten of whom remain in critical condition. A thirteen-year-old boy lost his brother and father. One of those in critical condition is a four-year-old girl. New Zealand's thirty seven year old prime minister has been universally praised for her leadership. Knowing that hate filled actions like this are often a desperate attempt at notoriety, she has refused to speak the shooter's name in public and has implored the media to do likewise, denying the perpetrator what he desired most. She said, "He may have sought notoriety but we in New Zealand will give him nothing—not even his name."

It was a deliberate act. It was an act of human evil.

The second tragedy could be called an act of natural evil. It wasn't deliberate. It was a terrible accident. Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 took off from Ethiopia to Nairobi, Kenya. The plane was a Boeing 737 Max, the fourth and newest generation of the Boeing 737. Six minutes after takeoff the plane crashed into a field near the town of Bishoftu. All 157 passengers on board were killed. Another Boeing 737 Max crashed in October killing 189 people. The cause of the crashes is still under investigation. Meanwhile, regulatory authorities around the world have grounded this plane.

It doesn't appear to be deliberate. Just a terrible accident. It was an act of natural evil.

If we had lived two millennia ago, in the time of Jesus, we would have looked at these two tragedies differently than most do today. God, they believed, was behind all things. Nothing happened by chance, good or evil. They saw a direct correlation between suffering and sin. If you suffered, that was evidence of your sinfulness. It was because God was punishing you for your sin. It was just retribution. You got what you deserved. Likewise, if you prospered and were healthy, that was evidence of your righteousness. God was rewarding you with prosperity and good health. You got what you deserved.

So the people looked at two recent events in their day—one an act of human evil and the other an act of natural evil—and they asked Jesus, “Were these victims worse sinners than everyone else?” That was the common belief of their day. “Is that why these tragedies occurred, Jesus? Was this God’s punishment because of their extraordinary sinfulness?”

The first incident involved Pontius Pilate, a particularly despicable human being. Maybe we should refuse to speak his name. On this particular occasion, he murdered some Galileans, probably in the temple, and then mingled their blood with the blood of their sacrifices. It was deliberate. It was an act of human evil.

The second incident involved a tower near the pool of Siloam. It fell killing eighteen people. It was not deliberate. It was an accident. It was an act of natural evil.

So tell us, Jesus! Did God get ‘em? Did God pour out vengeance upon these people because they were greater sinners than others?

Allow me to insert a footnote here. People with disabilities have long been victims of this kind of thinking. He’s blind. Poor fellow. I wonder what he did to deserve that? She’s stuck in that wheelchair. Bless her heart. I wonder what she did to deserve that? It’s hard enough to be blind or to use a wheelchair. People with disabilities should not be further stigmatized by superstitious, ignorant religious people.

Jesus surely didn't do that. Were they greater sinners than others, Jesus? His answer could not be clearer, "No."

Jesus then said something I find very interesting. It is about repentance. "Unless you repent," he told them, "you will all perish just as they did."

Then he told a brief parable about a fig tree. It bore no fruit. The farmer had waited for three years, but received no figs. So the farmer told his gardener to cut it down. The gardener intervened and requested a little more time. "Let me take care of it for one more year," he suggested. "I'll loosen the soil around it, fertilize it, and if it is still unproductive, then we will cut it down."

This text and the brief parable serve two purposes. The first is to debunk the horrible thinking of their day that suffering was a direct result of sin, that suffering was God's punishment. Now, let me say this. That is taught in some parts of the Bible, especially the Old Testament. Then it is corrected in other parts of the Bible, especially the book of Job and the teaching of Jesus. Jesus went so far as to declare God's favor on the poor, the maimed, the blind, and the crippled. They were singled out for blessing, not punishment. And then Jesus himself became *the* sufferer for humankind, the man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. It wasn't because of his sinfulness. He suffered because of his righteousness.

As important as that is, that is not the driving message of this text. The driving message is Jesus' call to repentance. Now, I know that word has fallen out of favor. People don't want to talk about repentance anymore. It makes them think of tent revivals and high-pressure preachers. I understand that. I've been there too. But I want to suggest that this is a good word, a word we still need to hear. What Jesus is saying here is that we need to awaken to the reality that life could be taken away in an instant. A terrorist attack. A plane crash. A barbaric act by a leader. A tower falling. Jesus' call to repentance is simply this: be aware that life is a gift and use it well. Be aware that it can be snatched away in an instant. So be a fruitful fig tree. Bring love and goodness into the world. Make your community a better place. Be

people of integrity, graciousness, forgiveness, and kindness. Care about the little people. Know your neighbor. Produce good fruit.

So, no, God did not do that to them, Jesus said. But be aware that it could happen to you too. So repent, Jesus said. Wake up to the reality that you're all going to die one day or another, just as they did. Until then, you have a gift. It is life. Use it to do good while you can.

I know I've shared this poem with you before. I'll probably share it again one day. That's how much I like it. I found it in a book by Leo Buscaglia, whom some of you have read. He was a special education professor in California. One of his students gave him this poem and asked to remain anonymous. It is titled "Things You Didn't Do."

Remember the day I borrowed your brand new car and dented it?

I thought you'd kill me, but you didn't.

And remember the time I dragged you to the beach, and you said it would rain, and it did?

I thought you'd say, "I told you so." But you didn't.

Do you remember the time I flirted with all the guys to make you jealous, and you were?

I thought you'd leave me, but you didn't.

Do you remember the time I spilled strawberry pie all over your car rug?

I thought you'd hit me, but you didn't.

And remember the time I forgot to tell you the dance was formal and you showed up in jeans?

I thought you'd drop me, but you didn't.

Yes, there were lots of things you didn't do.

But you put up with me, and you loved me, and you protected me.

There were lots of thing I wanted to make up to you when you returned from Viet Nam.

But you didn't.

(Living, Loving, and Learning, p. 76-77)

A part of the saving passion is repentance. Because this life, this day, is a gift. And we do not know when it will be taken away. So live

today. Love someone today. Extend a hand of support today. Forgive someone today. Repent and produce good fruit today.

Closing Prayer

For this gift of life, O Lord, we give you thanks. For opportunities this day and every day to matter, to make a difference, we give you thanks. During this Lenten season, awaken us to our potential. Amen.