

## **COPING WITH LIFE'S INEQUITIES**

**Luke 13:1-5**

**Dr. George O. Wood**

Luke's Gospel chapter 13, a very short passage. We're going to spend three nights in Luke 13. We're going to share together from the thirteenth and fourteenth chapter of Luke over the next three Sunday nights.

“Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, ‘Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish’” (Luke 13:1-5, NIV).

Before we look at this particular text, it may be well to take a moment to pause and reflect on where we are and where we've been and where we've been going in the Gospel of Luke. I had a tremendous new appreciation for the Gospel as I stood in Athens a few days ago listening to our guide in Athens speaking. We were on top of the Acropolis and the wind was blowing gently and I was on the fringe of the group trying to hear what she was saying and listening. As she was speaking on that Acropolis, I was looking over to the side where Mars Hill was at and where Paul had preached. His sermon is reported in Acts 17. As I was standing there, I was thinking also how the gospel had gotten from Jerusalem all the way to Greece, a long journey thousands of miles and numbers of years. It all traveled by people who didn't have even a megaphone, they certainly didn't have any means of modern amplification. They didn't have a sound system. The human voice can only travel so far and then it can no longer be heard. When the gospel was

## **COPING WITH LIFE'S INEQUITIES**

### **Luke 13:1–5**

being transmitted as it first came to us, someone in Jerusalem couldn't start a broadcast that could reach Athens or anywhere else. It needed to be carried by word of mouth, from one voice to another voice to another voice, until it came to them and until it came to us.

One of the ways that God has within human history is that of making the voice permanent so that the voice didn't simply remain on the phonic level but took on the cast of that which was unalterable and unchanging and fixed. The way God had of doing that was taking those who first preached the Word, and compelling some of them to write it down. We have an authentic word for us written down as though Luke himself were with us in person tonight speaking. If I had said tonight in a newspaper ad, "Luke the writer of Luke's Gospel is speaking tonight; we have a first century saint as our guest speaker and he's come back especially for this occasion," we would have had difficulty shoehorning everyone in tonight. But he still speaks. It's his word that he gave us by the Spirit.

Thus far in the Gospel of Luke, we've looked at his preface, where Luke tells us about his not being an eyewitness but he interviews other people who were. We have, in the first two chapters, the infancy narratives. We have, in chapter three, the ministry of John the Baptist. In the end half of chapter three, the early part of chapter four, the beginning of Jesus' ministry, His baptism, His genealogy, His temptations. Then from chapter 4:14 to chapter 9:50, we have a whole section of material that deals with Jesus in Galilee. Luke shares with us twenty-six incidents out of His Galilean ministry which basically fall in three lines of approach—His preaching/teaching ministry, His healing ministry, and His calling of His disciples. Jesus' ministry in the early years functions on these three levels.

Then beginning in chapter 9:51, all the way through 19:44, we have a section that is called the "Journey to Jerusalem" where Jesus is going from Galilee to Jerusalem. There are twenty-six

## **COPING WITH LIFE'S INEQUITIES**

### **Luke 13:1–5**

events that are in these ten chapters. In the outset, we are by now in chapters 11 and 12, we have witnessed the growing intensity of the opposition to Jesus' building. We've also witnessed in these chapters His training of the disciples. This serves as the backdrop for launching in tonight Luke 13:1–5.

As you well know, context is so vital to our understanding of what a particular passage means. This little paragraph of five verses is linked to what has gone on before it. In fact, if you look back for a moment to chapter 12:57, you'll find Jesus saying, "Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right?" That little phrase comes in the midst of a denunciation that Jesus is making against the religious leaders who are able to read the signs of the weather but not the inner spiritual signs of the times. He's saying, "Why don't you judge correctly?" Here is where Luke 13:1–5 fits in. They're sitting there and their response back is, "You are all mistaken about us. You're accusing us about not judging correctly, but we do judge correctly. Those Galileans who were killed by Pilate—remember that story, Jesus? Have You forgotten that? When they came down here to offer sacrifices, they were killed by him, weren't they? The fact that they were killed suggests that they were worse than other people. Therefore, they got the judgment against them. So Jesus, we make right judgment!"

Jesus launches into that matter of inequities. Is it a sign of God's abandonment when people suffer? When there's tragedy, is it a sign that God's saying, "I'm singling you out because you're worse than other people and I'm going to teach you a lesson." The temple mount is being referred to here, by the way, obviously you only offer sacrifices on the temple mount. Pilate had this nasty habit of being very suspicious of rebellion among the people, so he would, at times (we know this from secular history), have his soldiers wear normal tunic garb over their battle or soldier dress and mingle among the crowds on the temple mount with daggers and assassinate

## **COPING WITH LIFE'S INEQUITIES**

### **Luke 13:1–5**

people they didn't like or people they thought were fomenting rebellion. This is what happened to these Galileans. These Galileans were sort of like Northerners traveling to the South. Their accent was very distinct. The Jerusalemites sort of looked on Galileans as outsiders, out-of-towners, naïve, simple folk who've come to our sophisticated religious institution with all their village piety. So here they were to offer sacrifices, and while they're offering sacrifices, they're assassinated by Pilate's troops. The Jerusalemites, therefore, were saying these Galileans must have been bad sinners.

That squares, by the way, with what we know of the times in 9:2. The disciples had this same idea when there was a blind boy brought to Jesus, and the question was, why was he blind? They say to Jesus, "Who sinned? This man or his parents?" There was this idea that somehow suffering is associated with the wrong that we have done.

It's interesting that we have no record of the event of the killing of the Galileans in secular history outside of this reference in the New Testament. That's not surprising, because many things happen that never make it into the pages of history. If you travel in the United States or travel the world, you'll find that there are murders in Orange County that never make it into the pages of the New York Press. That doesn't mean they haven't happened, just because they're not mentioned back there. It's just that they weren't of earthshaking significance. But they were earthshaking to the people they happened to.

As an answer to the Jerusalemites who are saying—"Those Galileans! Just goes to show those folks have done something wrong"—Jesus turns around and says, "What about the Jerusalemites who were working on the tower of Siloam?" That's a very specific place in Jerusalem. It is not far from the spring which is the ancient water source for the city. It was located outside the city walls. So in biblical days, from David on, they had to find a way to divert the water to get it

## **COPING WITH LIFE'S INEQUITIES**

### **Luke 13:1–5**

inside of the city walls so that when the town was under siege, their drinking supply wouldn't be cut off. One of the things Hezekiah did was he was able to get the water supply inside the city when they were besieged. There was a connection between the spring and the Pool of Siloam where the water was held.

Evidently, Pilate was at work building great aqueducts. One of the things he was doing to build the aqueducts was take temple revenue—the tithe of the people—come in with a clutching hand and take that money away from religious purposes, for which it had been donated, and putting it into a very needed aqueduct system for the city of Jerusalem. And people didn't like that. It would be like the governor reached his hand into this church and said, "I'm going to take half your income next year because we're going to build a sewer line in Costa Mesa. We'd all be upset! You can understand that people were upset with that whole process.

Here there were some workers on the tower of Siloam, which was a holding tank or some kind of facility associated with this Pool of Siloam. Jesus says, "Those eighteen who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them, do you think they were guiltier?" The word in the Greek is: "Do you think they were 'debtors' more than the others living in Jerusalem?" Maybe there was some talk about these eighteen. They were obviously working for Pilate, and where were they getting paid from? They were getting paid from temple revenues, which a religious Jew shouldn't do. So Jesus is saying, "If you're going to say the Galileans are guilty, are you saying that about the eighteen who were killed at Siloam?" These people were debtors. They should be indebting themselves to these ill-gotten sources of revenue funding this product. Therefore, they have paid with their life for what they're doing. Are they more in debt than all the others in Jerusalem? Jesus is saying no to both cases. He challenges them that they are not judging rightly. Basically, Jesus' handling of these two illustrations is two-pronged.

## **COPING WITH LIFE'S INEQUITIES**

**Luke 13:1–5**

**I. On the one hand, Jesus repudiates the view that there is a necessary connection between tragedy and human sin.**

I'm amazed at how many people in the body of Christ still today are on that line that Jesus said no to. Somebody will come down with an illness or a financial reversal and they'll immediately say, "See! There's something wrong in your life. That wouldn't have happened if you'd been living right." Jesus is saying, "No." The Galileans were not worse sinners. Nor were the Jerusalemites who were working on the tower of Siloam. To that, we can add all the other tragedies. When somebody is killed in a freeway accident, was it because they were more unrighteous? When they're struck with multiple sclerosis or cancer, is it because they're more unrighteous? The Son of God repudiates the view that bad things only happen to bad people. By deductive logic, we can also say that He repudiates the view that good things only happen to good people. There are good things that happen to bad people and bad things that happen to good people. That's the way it is in life. Life isn't fair.

This doesn't do away with the law of sowing and reaping. Sometimes there is—we know—a moral connection between suffering and sin, and between prosperity and righteousness. It would be interesting to chronicle the history of the Assemblies of God. I grew up in churches that had nowhere near the kind of physical attachments that our fellowship has and enjoys in this church. I can recall being in storefront churches and basement churches. At one church, where my dad was the pastor, I jokingly said—but I think it was true, "There was no one in the church that was gainfully employed." Therefore, the support of the pastor was very low, too. But people got saved. And they started putting into operation the principles that the Scripture teaches about honestly and integrity and hard work and giving and stewardship and, all of a sudden, over a

## **COPING WITH LIFE'S INEQUITIES**

### **Luke 13:1-5**

period of time, those natural moral laws of sowing and reaping began to take place and people began to increase. That's natural and normal.

But God does not tamper outside the moral law. Jesus is getting away from the view that God is sitting up in heaven saying, "This person has been really good today. I think I'll give them a couple extra strokes. And who's been real bad? I think I'll knock them in." There is a natural moral law at work that what you sow you'll reap. But, at the same time, there are catastrophic events that occur seemingly by random chance or by the wrongful decision of others that intersect our life and we're powerless to stop them. For example: a person who is killed by a drunk driver. It's not because God has caused it, but because the driver got drunk and God did not intersect that moment by turning the car into a soft pillow. He didn't tamper with the natural order. So Jesus teaches us that when there are inequities in life, we're not to pass judgment on why they occur. So often we have no idea at all. There is no answer at this moment and there may never be on this side of eternity. Life is filled with mystery, and when tragedy happens to people, it's no sign of whether they're close to God or far away from God. It has nothing, many times, to do with their relationship with God. But we would like things neat and orderly.

**II. The second prong of what Jesus is saying, I think, is a real kicker in this statement.**

**You're looking at these Galileans and the Siloam tower workers. Unless you repent, you too will all perish.**

Jesus is saying, "The house is going to crash down on everybody. So don't look at them if you're a judge and say they did something bad. Look instead at yourself. You too will perish."

What Jesus is doing in this Scripture is giving a warning. And what everyone needs is a warning.

If those Galileans had only been warned! If someone had said, "Pilate has his assassins out today. Don't go near the temple," then, if anything had happened to them, people could have

## **COPING WITH LIFE'S INEQUITIES**

### **Luke 13:1-5**

said, "It was their own stupidity. They were warned and they went anyway." If the Pool of Siloam workers, the tower workers had been warned the construction was unsafe, "The city inspector has been out and he says one more hundred-pound weight on that thing is going to topple it," the workers probably would have been smart enough to stay away from that tower that day and not go to work. But the tragedy happened because they were not warned.

Jesus then takes these instances and says, "Now in regard to all of humanity, and in regard to you whom I'm talking to when the judgment of life moves in on you: You cannot say that you have not been warned, because that's why I'm here. That's why John the Baptist came preaching about the kingdom of heaven and the necessity of repentance. That's why I have been preaching about change and repentance in your life, because likewise, all you, too, will perish unless you repent." There's a judgment!

We start by looking at the fact that a judgment of a sentence of death really hangs upon us all. We talk about capital punishment. But there is a death sentence hanging on all humanity. As Christians, even today, it's uncomfortable to talk about that because "we should only talk about light and cheery and positive things from the pulpit." It's almost gotten to the point that I don't like to talk about judgment because it's not light, cheery, and positive, and sending us out with a whistle and six ways to grow better in life. But the fact is, anybody who lives close enough to where the rubber meets the road in life knows that life is filled with sudden unexpected death and danger and tragedy and disease. That is a product of sin at work in the world and the product of the work of the enemy. There is a visitation of judgment upon all mankind. Jesus came to give us the warning alert and tell us to get our heart right so we can get out of the mess.

Jesus' statement, "Unless you repent, you too will perish," has a two-pronged effect upon the generation to which He spoke (Luke 13:3). On the one hand, He's warning the people who are

## **COPING WITH LIFE'S INEQUITIES**

### **Luke 13:1–5**

contemporary with Him that their pursuit of an earthly kingdom rather than a heavenly kingdom is going to bring them to ruin. He's saying this to the religious opposition and the zealots who have challenged Him. He's saying, "If you keep on this path—this path of needling Rome, this path of wanting the political earthly Messiah, this path of nationalism that challenges the military might of the day—if you keep on this path, you're going to come into ruin unless you repent. Unless you change, unless you get the values of the eternal kingdom in your heart; unless you get war out of your life and get peace in your life, you too will perish." And A.D. 70 certainly fulfilled His words.

But on the other hand, He's telling us all about a day of judgment that is coming. Twice He tells us to repent. Verse 3 and verse 5, "Unless you repent." We don't pick this up in the English, and I hate to fall back on the Greek because it's not fair to you if you don't work with it. It can sometimes create in people the sense that "I can't have confidence in my own Bible. I have to have some secret knowledge or whatever." But this is so good; I'll have to pass it on anyway. There are two tenses in the uses of the word "repent" here; the tense of verse 5 is different from verse 3.

In verse 5, the tense in the Greek is what's called the aorist tense. It denotes a "once and for all" action. You do it and it's done. It's completed. You can always look back to it and say, "That's when it happened."

Then in verse 3, the tense is in the present imperative. That suggests an action that is going on. What Jesus is saying to us about repentance is that it is both a once and for all thing that we do in our Christian life with an act of conversion. I submit to you there's a great deal of difference between being saved and being converted. They should be synonyms. I think in our use in the church world today we have not kept them as synonyms and we have begun to use the word

## **COPING WITH LIFE'S INEQUITIES**

### **Luke 13:1–5**

“saved” as though believing in Jesus didn’t require a change in your life. You could just go ahead and be the same immoral, irresponsible person that you were, but now you’ve been saved and you’ve got an asbestos suit on. Jesus talks about the need for moral change—renovation. Therefore, to be saved is to be converted. It is to go from serving idols, gods that were no gods, values that are not God’s values and be turned from that to serve the living and true God. That’s a once and for all decision we make. The little gospel song says, “I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back.” “Repent,” Jesus says.

Then He turns around and uses this present tense and says that not only is this repentance a once and for all thing that shapes the whole subsequent force of your life, but it’s a day-by-day process of putting sin away. It’s a life that’s marked by a continual repentance. Jesus’ teaching on continual repentance ends the viewpoint that when you become a Christian, from then on He expects you never to make another mistake or commit another sin. He is realistic. He knows that our life with Him begins in a relationship, but there are failures on our part in that relationship and we have had one basic repentance which has brought us to God, but many repentances along the way of our Christian experience.

What the Lord is saying about life’s inequities is, you can’t look at an inequity and pass any judgment as to why it happened. Except in a case where a person has violated a clear moral law, for example, when there’s a drunken driver that kills somebody, you know that what happened was connected with their drinking. But a lot of events in life—airplane crashes, or whatever—you just can’t say, “That’s God’s judgment.” But Jesus then backs off and says, “There is a judgment that is coming and My ministry has given warning that that day is approaching. The kingdom of God is at hand!”

## **COPING WITH LIFE'S INEQUITIES**

### **Luke 13:1-5**

J. B. Phillips tells a little story that I think has application here to what the Lord is saying. With this story I'll close the message tonight. Phillips did the Phillips translation of the New Testament and he lived in England. He talks about the harvest fields where there are thousands of little tragedies every year. He says the victims are the field mice. "Early in the year, the growing corn seems to be the ideal place in which to settle. Food and shelter and building material are there in plenty. There everything seems perfectly adapted for their needs. The forest of innumerable corn stalks is their whole world. In it, they court and play, mate and bring up their families. Their happiness seems to be complete until the harvest. For when the day comes for the owner of the field to reap his harvest, tragedy inevitably begins for the harvest mouse. The whole world of waving corn that seems so snug and secure, so especially designed for his comfort and nourishment, comes crashing down. The field that he thought was his world never really belonged to him at all. The fact that the growing corn was not meant for his food and shelter, alas, had not entered his tiny head." "The life of the harvest mouse is not a bad picture," Phillips says, "of the way some people live in this world. They work and play, court and get married, and bring up children in the happy belief that it is their world and that to believe in an eventual harvest is old fashioned and silly. Yet our Lord, who claimed to be the Son of God, said quite plainly that this world is like a field that belongs to God and is moving inevitably toward a harvest. This little world is not, as we imagined, a permanent thing at all. When God announces the consummation of His plan, He will reap the harvest. The field mouse is deceived because for months he's left to his own devices. He never sees the owner of the field and naturally knows nothing of the coming harvest. It's possible that we may allow ourselves to be deceived because God, the owner of the world, does not put in an appearance for the purpose of the experiment we call life. He does not interfere with man's power to choose. We may imagine that the field

## **COPING WITH LIFE'S INEQUITIES**

### **Luke 13:1–5**

belongs to man and that there is no such thing as an eventual harvest. But if Christ really was as He claimed to be—God—then His statement about this world being an experimental field with an inevitable harvest should seriously be considered. No one could blame the little harvest mouse for not realizing the true purpose of the cornfield or the certainty of the eventual reaping. But what are we? Mice or men?”

Paul says, “Knowing the fear of the Lord, I persuade men” (2 Corinthians 5:11). He says we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.

It's such a comfort this week, when there have been two members of our congregation that went to be with the Lord, to know that they took the Lord's warning and made ready and prepared.

We have a little clock in our kitchen. It's in the shape of a Swiss coo-coo clock. It has, on the clock, this little phrase, “Now's the time. Prepare to meet thy God.” This is from the Book of Amos.

### **Closing Prayer**

Lord, help us to live in such a way that we heed all the learning we've been given. Inequities will be swallowed up in God's answers for eternity.

Father, we thank you for Your presence, as we realize our mortality anew, Lord, by events that happened within our own church family this week. If we would but have the eyes to see we're in a solar system that's burning out and we're in a world that's not our permanent home. We are strangers here. Help us, Lord, to enjoy the life that we have in You while here, but let's not assume that we're here to settle because we're just strangers and pilgrims. We use the land but never own it. We use things but they never own us. We are Your people and we have heard Your Word, “Repent. For the kingdom of God is at hand.” Lord, I want to take a moment to pray for those who are experiencing or who have experienced some of life's inequities and who have

## **COPING WITH LIFE'S INEQUITIES**

### **Luke 13:1-5**

really been tossed about by what any fair person would call unfairness. Each of us, Lord, in humility before You, knows not all of the reasons why these things happen. We ask for Your grace and Your strength to help us as they happen and after they happen, so that in us there would be no root of bitterness. Also, that we will not become stuck in life. Life sometimes, Lord, is like a phonograph record that gets a scratch on it and when the needle plays it, it gets stuck. Inequities can do that for us. We can begin grieving so much in them and living so much in them that we never get out of that groove. So many valuable years of our life are wasted in bitterness and in regret and in anger and in hostility and in a desire to get even. We wind up coming to the end of life, never having accomplished anything for the good, never getting on with things because we got stuck. Help us, Lord, to have the power of the Spirit to never get stuck, but to go on and to leave some things that cannot be answered today unanswered. And to not let them detract us from our service to You. For we want to go on. We want to forget the things that are behind and we want to press onward to that higher call of God in Christ Jesus. Help us Lord to prevail, to continue, to go on. Then Lord, too, You've placed us in life to be, along with Yourself, warning beacons in our world. This world is not our home. Help us, Lord, to have the fervor that You would want for us in pleading with others about their life and their need for commitment to You. Grant these things Lord, we pray. In Your name. Amen.