

WHAT DOES GOD REALLY WANT FROM ME?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

Last week I was looking through a photo album Anne Marie and I had put together of our trip to France in 1989. As I turned one of the pages, the front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle* fell out on the floor. I picked it up, and memories flooded through my mind. "My goodness, that was an amazing day," I said. The paper was dated October 18, 1989, and the headlines read in bold letters: "Extra, Extra, Extra: HUNDREDS DEAD IN HUGE QUAKE. As a stunned Bay Area comes back to life today, millions of residents will start trying to cope with the aftermath of the area's worst earthquake since 1906." On October 17, 1989 Anne Marie and I were sitting in a hotel room in Lourdes watching the local news when the station switched to Dan Rather, who gave us the report about the San Francisco earthquake. I wonder if you were "tempted" as I was for just a moment, to believe that perhaps God was finally judging that wicked and immoral city.

Shortly after the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 a wonderful English Christian preacher and writer named G. Campbell Morgan said from his London pulpit, "People said that the earthquake in San Francisco and the fire that followed was the judgment of God." So it appears that no matter what generation we live in, we human beings are quick to make judgments on all kinds of situations, or we are at least tempted to. When we read about the tragic events in Romania this week, in which a dam broke and killed sixty-six men, women, and children and forced some ten thousand people to flee for their lives, did we think that God was judging that nation for the way they treated their children in the past? And what other human events taking place around us each day, from a local murder, to the drug wars, to the bombing of a church or a synagogue, are we tempted to put our stamp of judgment on and miss the whole point of what God is really trying to get us to understand?

As we turn to Luke 13:1-9, we will find our Lord Jesus challenging his generation to stop thinking they knew what God was doing behind two current "tragedies:" (1) a political and religious conflict resulting in the murder of some worshipping Galileans, and (2) a fallen tower which resulted in the deaths of eighteen human beings. He followed this with the parable of the unfruitful fig tree, which was given as a warning to sober them about their own relationship with God and to get them to ask the question: "Since God has not called me to be a judge, what does he really want from me?"

I. A repentant heart

Luke 13:1-5

Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And He answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered this fate? I tell you, no, but, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

Over and over again as we watch our Lord moving toward the cross of Calvary we can hear a quiet theme in the background, a soft but tragic melody: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). Few understood, but we need to keep it in mind because that's what was in God's heart, and that's what was in his Son's heart. That theme just kind of wraps itself around this passage. At this moment our Lord was still standing with his disciples among the multitude (Luke 11:14-12:59), and he had just confronted them: "You hypocrites! You know how to analyze the appearance of the earth and the sky, but why do you not analyze this present time?" (Luke 12:56.) He was saying, "This is the time when your long-promised Messiah has been sent to you, and for the last three years the rulers of the nation of

Israel and a majority of the people have been rejecting me. If you don't change your minds about me, you will be dragged before the Judge and found guilty of rejecting me as your Messiah and placed in prison forever. There is great wisdom in settling your case before you get to court."

Now, in this particular story that comes up, there is a warning about discerning the present times, and some people approached our Lord, who was known as "the Man from Galilee," and asked him what he thought about the Galileans Jews who had come up to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices at the temple only to be murdered indiscriminately by Pilate's soldiers. Pilate was governor of Judea and Samaria from 26 AD to 36 AD. He had a reputation for being inflexible, merciless, obstinate, cruel, and unjust, and he lacked common sense in handling the delicate problem of the strained relationship between the Jews and their Roman conquerors.

William Barclay, a Scottish pastor and New Testament scholar with great insight into the history and culture of the New Testament times, tried to shed some light on this obscure political event when he wrote in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke:

...Galileans were always liable to get involved in political trouble because they were a highly inflammable people. Just about this time Pilate had been involved in serious trouble. He had decided rightly that Jerusalem needed a new and improved water supply. He proposed to build it, and to finance it with certain Temple monies....But at the very idea of spending Temple monies like that, the Jews were up in arms. When the mobs gathered, Pilate instructed his soldiers to mingle with them, wearing cloaks over their battle dress for disguise....at a given signal they were to fall on the mob and disperse them. This was done, but the soldiers dealt with the mob with a violence far beyond their instructions, and a considerable number of people lost their lives.

So our Lord answered, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered this fate?" People have had the false notion at least since the days of Job that the greater the sin of a man, the greater the calamity. Eliphaz the Temanite asked the suffering Job, "Is there any pleasure to the Almighty if you are righteous, or profit if you make your ways perfect? Is it because of your reverence that He reproves you, that He enters into judgment against you? Is not your wickedness great, and your iniquities without end?" (Job 22:3-5.) We can also see this same idea in the case of the blind man in Jerusalem when the disciples asked Jesus in John 9:1, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?" indicating that they thought his blindness was a result of God's divine judgment upon his parents or the man for some terrible sin in the past. So now these people have moved this theological logic over to the present atrocity in the temple. It was obvious to them that God directed the soldiers of Pilate to pick out the greatest sinners within the group of visiting Galileans and eliminate them from the face of the earth as a punishment for some personal sin. They missed the principle of mercy and grace.

The Lord rejected that false concept, for physical disasters like physical advantages are no indication that those who experience them are either worse or better than their fellow man. He went on to say, "...but unless you repent [a present imperative with continued force], you will all likewise perish." This warning was given earlier by John the Baptist as he addressed the Pharisees: "Therefore bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. And also the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (Luke 3:8-9.)

Our Lord had preached the good news of the kingdom of God and healed the sick all over Galilee, and most of the Galileans had rejected his person and message, so when they came to Jerusalem, they were already in the process of spiritually perishing. Then a day came when there was no more time to repent, and they were killed. Jesus was saying, "But you who are standing in front of me are still alive, so you still have time to repent of your view of me. The issue is not who is the greater sinner, but the reality that all of you who have entered into the sin of rejecting me as your Messiah, Savior, and Lord will perish as the Galileans did because you did not change your minds about me. The fate of these people is a reminder not of their sins, for they were neither better nor worse than those of many others, but of the urgency of the gospel. If you reject me as your Messiah, you will in time perish." The Lord could see not only the final destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the nation of Israel some forty years away but also the eternal destruction of the lives

of the individuals standing before him.

"Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem?" The Lord and the crowd were aware of a recent accident in the city of Jerusalem. The Tower of Siloam was built inside the southeast portion of the Jerusalem wall near the pool of Siloam. Apparently there was some structural failure, and the tower suddenly came crashing down on the crowd. Once the dust settled and the bricks were removed, some eighteen bodies were recovered. Again there was that false notion that the hand of God had judged those eighteen people because of their personal sin.

Our Lord challenged that foolish notion and questioned the crowd by saying, "Do you think those folks were killed because their sin was worse than that of all the men who live in Jerusalem?" And the Lord's second warning: "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. These eighteen Jews had no time to repent, but you do have time because you and I are standing here, alive and breathing—so repent! Repent of your views of who I am: I performed all those miracles and fulfilled prophecies. I am not casting out demons in the power of Satan. I am the Messiah of God, your long-awaited Savior and Lord. Are you just dismissing that? Unless you come to terms with this reality, all of you from the least of sinners to the greatest will suffer the same fate as the eighteen Jews in Siloam. You will experience not only physical death, but also spiritual death resulting in being eternally separated from God.

I couldn't help but think this morning about the cruise ship off of South Africa with six hundred people aboard. Those six hundred people are facing eternity because the ship has sprung a leak and it's in a fierce storm, and rescuers are having trouble getting the proper rescue equipment there in time. When they boarded that ship a few days ago, these people did not think they would soon be faced with eternity. Those of them who are Christians have nothing to fear, but those who have rejected Jesus as their Savior are in the process of perishing.

We need to note that God may allow some atrocities and disasters to fall on certain people or nations as a temporal punishment for their particular wickedness, as in the case of the people of Sodom (Genesis 18:16-19:29), who were utterly destroyed because of their wickedness, or of the nation of Israel when they forsook the Lord and followed after idols, so that they were taken into the Assyrian captivity (2 Kings 17). But not all atrocities and disasters are to be viewed as God's visitation because of some special sins, but rather as what is called the wrath of God, which means that God allows the natural consequences within a fallen humanity and a fallen world to come to fruition. The real issue, as the Scriptures point out, is that "...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23.) Our Lord was directing their attention to the reality that their sin was that of rejecting him as their Messiah. Our Lord wanted these people as well as all of us to come to terms with who he was. And in his love and mercy he may use some "tragic event" to shock or sober us into dealing with the spiritual realities. He is the Savior of the world. "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12.)

I was recently reminded of how the Lord will use apparent "tragedies" to sober men and women within this community. A few years ago I and several Christian businessmen in this community were friends with a non-Christian man who had a wonderful Christian wife and two beautiful children. He had a lovely home in this community and was a successful businessman himself. For several years his wife and his friends had sought to share the good news of Jesus Christ with him, until one night this young man was "accidentally" killed while working on some equipment in his own shop.

Two days later, as one of the friends of this man and his family, I was invited to give a message from the word of God at the memorial service. I remember standing up to share a word of comfort to a mostly stunned community of family members, business associates, and friends. At the time I was tempted in my own heart to try to figure out what God was doing behind the curtains of time and space. "I guess God judges sinful men," I thought. "He was quite a sinner, and God judged him." Then I thought, "No, God is doing something else here," and I wondered what it was. I forgot about that event for many years, and then this year a man in this church pulled me aside and told me that he was in the audience at that memorial service as one of the friends of the man who had died. He too was stunned by what happened. He went home, thought about the message, and about Jesus and eternity, and invited Jesus Christ into his life. And he sits here today, growing in the Lord with his wife and family. In the same way, God used the murder of the Galileans and the tower that fell down on people to shock those still living into listening so he could say, "All of you have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Every man, woman, and child has to come

to a relationship with me in order to be saved. There is redemption in me—don't neglect it. And don't keep talking about atrocities and disasters. Be thankful you're still alive to make a decision. There will come a time when suddenly you will part of a tragedy or disaster. Where are you in light of a relationship with Christ?"

Our Lord challenged this crowd to stop thinking that the murder of the Galileans at the temple or the death of the men at the tower was a judgment of God on sinners. Rather, they were to take their eyes off those two events and search their own hearts for the sin of rejecting Jesus as their Messiah in light of all the evidence that he really was who he said he was: the Son of God. Unless they repented of this sin they would soon perish.

What does God want from me? A repentant heart and...

II. A fruitful life

Luke 13:6-9

And He began telling this parable: "A certain man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it, and did not find any. And he said to the vineyard-keeper, 'Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?' And he answered and said to him, 'Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down.'"

The Lord was about to explain why this generation was worthy of judgment. He used a common example of a man who owned a vineyard and had a vineyard-keeper whose task was to make sure that the vines and trees produced fruit. This is a beautiful picture. Now, the fig tree and the grape vine are both used in the Old Testament as a metaphor for Israel. Isaiah had written a song to that effect some 700 years earlier:

"Let me sing now for my well-beloved
A song of my beloved concerning His vineyard.
My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill.
And He dug it all around, removed its stones,
And planted it with the choicest vine.
And He built a tower in the middle of it,
And hewed out a wine vat in it;
Then He expected it to produce good grapes,
But it produced only worthless ones.
"And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah,
Judge between Me and My vineyard.

What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it?
Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones?
So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard:
I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed;
I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground.

And I will lay it waste;
It will not be pruned or hoed,
But briars and and thorns will come up.
I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it.
For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel,
And the men of Judah His delightful plant.
Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed;
For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress."
(Isaiah 5:1-7)

The ten tribes of the nation of Israel fell from within and were taken into the Assyrian captivity in 721 BC.

In Jesus' parable, when the owner came to the tree in its fruit-bearing season he found no fruit. It was foolish to keep any fruit-bearing tree if it didn't bear fruit in its season. It would be better to cut it down and plant a new tree with the hope that it would produce fruit. But the vineyard-keeper interceded: "Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, fine: but if not, cut it down."

The owner was clearly Jehovah God, the vineyard was the world, and the fig tree was Israel. "I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your forefathers as the earliest fruit on the fig tree in its first season." (Hosea 9:10.). In Jesus' parable the fig tree represented the then present Jewish generation for the past three years. From the beginning of its creation, God had planted Israel as a fig tree in his vineyard with the hope that his life would flow through them, produce the fruit of righteousness and justice, and draw all the nations to Israel so that they could find the one and only living God (Deuteronomy 4:1-9). And now that God was standing before them in Jesus, in finding him they would experience salvation. But at the moment Israel was "using up space" like the fig tree that bore no fruit, so the vineyard owner wanted to cut it down (see Romans 11:17-26).

The vineyard-keeper was the Lord Jesus and the one who had worked for three years by word and deed seeking to cause the tree to produce good fruit. It is interesting that in the beginning of our Lord's ministry, John the Baptist had preached, as we saw a moment ago: "...when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance; and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, "We have Abraham for our father;" for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'" (Matthew 3:7-10.) Now, three years later, the nation had rejected their Messiah and sat among the nations fruitless. Then the Lord Jesus interceded to his heavenly Father with a heart of mercy: "Let me have one more year, for I will dig around it and put in fertilizer; I will shake up the ground of the nation by presenting the miracle of the resurrection and fertilize the nation by sending the Holy Spirit and the beginning of the church. Then if they don't repent of their rejection of me as their Messiah, let the fig tree be cut down."

However, within a few short months, as Mark tells us, Jesus would enter the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and be rejected by the Jewish leadership. He would then go into the nearby city of Bethany. "And on the next day, when they had departed from Bethany, He became hungry. And seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And He answered and said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.'" (Mark 11:12-14.) The Jewish legalism had caused spiritual famine in the nation of Israel with no hope of any spiritual food in the near future. They had the leaves of a fig tree, but they were a tree that produced no figs. Hence Jesus' cursing this fig tree would be symbolic of God's judgment that was going to fall on Jerusalem and the nation. At that moment, in effect the Lord would close the door on the purpose, fruit, and life of Israel for that season. Within 36 years the nation of Israel would begin its rebellion against Rome, and the owner of the "vineyard" would allow the Romans to utterly defeat and destroy the city of Jerusalem in 70 AD and take the inhabitants into captivity. This did not mean the termination of God's program for Israel, but indicated that Israel would be set aside (see Romans 11:17-24).

Through a new program God would produce fruit for his glory. Christ revealed this new program in Matthew 16:15-18. When Jesus asked Peter who he thought Jesus was he answered, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Jesus replied, "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it." The nation would not rise again for some 1900 years, until in 1947 Israel would become a nation among the nations as part of the fulfillment of the "last days." That generation was living on borrowed time, and so are any of us who refuse to repent or change our minds about Jesus as Messiah. We're living on borrowed time if we keep putting off the great offer of our Lord. These Jews did not owe their reprieve of judgment to their own good merit, but to the love, mercy, and intercession of Jesus Christ. Peter would write years later to a rebellious generation who mocked our Lord's second coming: "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9.) That's a most amazing verse. What Peter is saying captures the heart of God. God does not wish that anyone here would ever perish. That's his heart. So if you perish, it's because you won't repent and change your mind

about who Jesus is; because there is salvation in no one else.

Last week the Couples Class surprised a young Christian celebrating his seventy-fifth year on this earth. They presented him with a big cake and candles and wished him happy birthday. But he's just a year old in Jesus. He had spent a lifetime serving himself, and yet because of the love and mercy of "the vinedresser," this man had been surrounded by a host of Christians young and old who were used by our Lord to fertilize his heart. Last year he repented of his sin and asked Jesus Christ to become his Lord and Savior, and because of that simple act of faith he will never perish but has been given eternal life and now is bearing the fruit of the character of Christ in this community.

As God called the nation of Israel into existence as a fig tree to offer the nations the fruit of his character and the hope of salvation, so he has called his church into existence to express the character of Jesus Christ and the same hope of salvation to those all around us.

What does God really want from us?

1. He wants a heart of repentance, once for all as well as each day. Peter, in speaking to the Jews in Jerusalem after the resurrection of our Lord on the day of Pentecost, said, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38.) (The Holy Spirit is the power that lives this new life in and through us to God's honor and glory and to our joy.) Later he said to the crowd in the temple who had gathered to see the formerly lame man who had been healed, "Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord." (Acts 3:19.)

2. He wants a fruitful life. It will be manifested in the character of Christ: "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit...I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing." (John 15:1-5.) The character of Christ is portrayed in the fruit of the Holy Spirit: "...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law....if we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit." (Galatians 5:22-24.)

Something happened last week that was a real rebuke to me. My wife at times just scares me about what she really understands about God, and to live with her at times is really difficult! We had some French people show up out of nowhere to stay with a friend across the street, and our friend asked Anne Marie to help her with a few things while they were there for two weeks, as she had a bad hip. So my wife just poured her life into these people. They were here last week, but when we got home she went right to bed, for she was exhausted because of all that she had been doing for them. So the next day I went to breakfast with her and said, "Honey, why did you do all that? You don't even know them." She just looked at me and said, "Because I'm kind." I was supposed to know that! That's the fruit of the Spirit, isn't it? (It wasn't that she was kind apart from the Lord; it was that she was allowing the Holy Spirit to be kind through her.)

The result of the fruit of the Holy Spirit is good works: "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:10.) Let's go walk in these good works. The world around us is filled with men, women and children in the process of perishing. They are starving for spiritual food, and the Lord wants to meet their spiritual hunger through you and me. Ask him to give you the faith to "show up" in the midst of a world that is perishing so that he can be glorified through you today.

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Luke 13:1-9

41st Message

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