

Prior to 2004, hardly anyone in the world even knew what a tsunami was. But on Boxing Day, 2004, that all changed... An earthquake occurred in the Indian Ocean, and a massive uplift in the seabed floor, produced a tsunami.

While it was in the deep water, it wasn't very noticeable, but it was moving at 500-1000kph.

But when it reached the shallower waters, it slowed down. And grew, until it became a massive wall of water (in some places, 24m high by the time it hit land).

*It devastated the low lying coastal areas of Indonesia, Asia, and the sub-continent (Think India – particularly on the Eastern side).
228 000ⁱ people died.*

Tragedy??? Or; The judgment of God?

*25th August, 2005 – hurricane Katrina generated winds of 200km/hr, creating a storm surge, with waves some 30-50 feet, causing the flooding of 80% of the City of New Orleans.
1400 people diedⁱⁱ.*

Tragedy??? Or; The judgment of God?

26th February, 2023, an earthquake in Turkey (near its Syrian border), measuring 7.8 on the Richter Scale, killed 55 000 people.ⁱⁱⁱ

Tragedy??? Or; The judgment of God?

You see, when tragedy strikes, there always seems to be a search to find meaning **in** the tragedy.

- Why did it happen?
- Who is to blame?
- What did they do to deserve this????

And with the disasters that I just mentioned, some folk were very quick to point the finger, and say *“This is the judgement of God. – those people are evil – they’re godless, and they deserve what they got.”*

And that’s not a new thing – people have tried to find meaning in tragedy, since the beginning of time.

When a tragedy occurred in 1st century Israel, the people told Jesus about it. But in the context of what Jesus had just been teaching, I think what has happened, is “They have been listening to Jesus (teaching about the coming judgment, and His message has been “Get ready while there’s still time.”), and they’ve had a bit of a thought-bubble. *“Oww, this is probably an example of God’s judgment...”*”

So, what was the tragedy? Pilate killed some Galileans who were making a sacrifice to God...

Now, who’s Pilate, and who are the Galileans?

Pilate was a Roman Prefect (his military rank). As “Prefect”, Pilate would have been in charge of all of the Roman Military throughout Judea. It was his job to keep the peace, and to keep those pesky locals under control, and stop any up-risings.

Who are the Galileans? Well, the Galileans came from up North (around the Sea of Galilea). And the Judeans from down South, looked down their noses at the Galileans. And especially those who lived in the religious capital of Jerusalem, looked down upon the Galileans. There was a history (you see) – they’re not very Godly, those Northerners – stinkin’ Galileans....

Now, none of that is recorded in today’s Bible reading, but it would’ve been fully understood by the locals, what’s going on here... And when we are aware of this, their bias and their prejudice is exposed.

So, when it comes to “judgment”, when Pilate killed those people who were on their way to sacrifice (or were actually doing the sacrifice), was that God’s judgment on them???

Now, I can understand why they may have come to that assumption.

You see, in the Old Testament, there **had** been some clear cases, where individuals had dishonoured God in their worship, and they were killed.

I think of Korah (and 250 of his accomplices), who were filled with pride, and they demanded that they should be allowed to

do what God had appointed the Levite priests to do... And so they came with their censers (incense burners), and (after warnings) Moses and Aaron said “Quick, everyone get away from these guys” – this is going to happen... And it did happen. The ground opened up, swallowed them up, and closed back up again^{iv}.

And there’s a 2nd example: 2 of the sons of Aaron (Nabad and Abihu), and (we’re not exactly sure what they did), but we **are** told they burned an offering to God, that they were not authorised to do.^v And fire came out from before God, and they were consumed...

Both: clear cases of the Judgment of God, for wrong worship...

And so, you can see what’s behind their thinking, hey...: The Galileans were in the midst of making their sacrifice to God, when they were killed (The problem is, there was nothing supernatural about it – it was simply an example of the iron-fist of Roman control over their subjugated people – The Romans could be brutal.)

And I love what Jesus does here. The first thing Jesus does, is He brings it closer to home:

“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because of what happened to them??? ³ **No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.**

And **then**, in a very powerful way, Jesus brings it even closer to home, and He cuts right through the bias/prejudice they held against the Galileans...

You see, they came up with an example of a tragedy in Galilea that was perpetrated by men. **Jesus** highlighted a tragedy in their own city – in the Religious Capital of Jerusalem. And while this tragedy may have been an engineering and construction failure, it was certainly something that would have been understood as an “unlucky disaster”, or perhaps an “act of God”...

The Tower of Siloam fell, and it killed 18 people.

And Jesus said: **do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?**
5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

You see, we humans – we are (generally) much quicker to judge those who are not like us, than we are to judge those who are like us... True???

*I remember when the New Orleans floods happened – “It’s a den of iniquity down there – this is the judgment of God” ...
But when the Twin Towers fell – Oh, they didn’t deserve that...*

And when an earthquake hits Turkey, “Oh the Godless people – it’s the judgment of God”, But when an earthquake hits Los Angeles, “Oh, those poor people” ...

It’s easy to be quick to judge those who are not like ourselves... But Jesus turns it back to us.

There’s 4 words here, that are going to be helpful for us to understand:

- Sinners;
- Offenders;
- Perish;
- Repent.

The Greek word behind our word “sin” is “hamartia”, and the word “Sinners” here is actually an adjective form of that (“more sinful”). Sin, is the rejection of God... And I’ve told you this before, but I’m going to tell you again, a big learning for me, was when I was at Bible College, and my New Testament lecturer (an Irishman), said to me in his broad Irish brogue, said *“Michael, “sin” isn’t “doing naughty things”, you know. Sin is the rejection of God, and “doing naughty things”, is a symptom of that sin.”*

Second word: “Offenders”. The Greek word here is ὀφειλέται (opheiletai), which means “debtors”... You see, when I sin against God, there is a price to be paid – I am left with a debt, that I can **never** repay.

Third word: “Perish”. ἀπολεῖσθε (apoleisthe) It means, to be destroyed... It’s a picture of the hopeless, eternal destiny of “death” ...

You see, what Jesus is saying, is “When you see tragedy, don’t ask yourself the question, “What did they do wrong” – ask yourself the question, “If it happened to me, would **I** be ready?””

And so, the fourth word, is “**repent**”... The word “repent”, is a key word, right throughout the Gospel of Luke.

- It begins with John the Baptist proclaiming a message of repentance;
- And the Gospel of Luke ends with Jesus sending His Disciples out, to proclaim the message of repentance; and
- right the way through, the message of Jesus, is consistently calling for people to repent.

You see, Jesus didn’t just come to give us good, moral advice (that we can take it or leave it). Jesus demands repentance.

- To repent, is to stop heading one direction, turn and go the other.
- And so, to repent of sin, is to turn from self, and worldliness, and to turn to Christ.
- To repent, is to stop doing it my way, and to start following Jesus;

- It is to forsake **self**-righteousness, and to call out to God for forgiveness;
- To repent, is to stop putting myself in the place of God – it is to stop being so arrogant – that I dare to create my own moral code...

And repentance, is agreeing with God, “You are God – not me, and You are the one who has perfect righteousness, and so ‘shape me to Your will/righteousness’”.

What Jesus is saying, is whenever we see tragedy, it’s not so we can go pointing the finger at others – it’s a reminder for ourselves. Are they worse sinners than what I am? Not in God’s eyes. And so, unless **I** repent, **I** also, will perish.”...

In the book of Romans, Paul talks about how creation groans.

You see, when God created Adam and Eve, there was no sin, and the world did not groan. But when Adam and Eve sinned against God, everything changed.

From then on, the world would groan. Humanity would meet with tragedy. And, when we are confronted with tragedy, it’s a reminder of our own mortality, and of our own coming judgment, because every one of us needs a Saviour.

Now, some Christians believe that if you’re struck down with some dreaded illness, it’s because of some sin in your life (or

a lack of faith)... What a load of ‘rot’. In the famous words of “Forest Gump”, “It happens”... Bad-stuff happens... Even to those who love God.

In our district, we’ve recently experienced a terrible tragedy, when Allan Neale – a Christian – a man of a very strong faith, was tragically and unexpectedly killed when he was crushed by a bale of hay...

And that really shook our community. I had non-Christians approach me, wanting to make sense of it. One person even asked me, “What bible verse can you give me, to make sense of this?”

*Weeks later, I **still** have conversations with unbelievers, trying to make sense of Allan’s death...*

And this Bible reading is where I take them. We know Allan **was** ready. He is now with His Lord, in paradise.

The tragedy of Allan’s death, should cause us to consider our own mortality, and our own coming judgment.

You see: The issue is not “**when** death will happen” or “why?”, but avoiding a terminal fate with even **greater** consequences. When Jesus is talking about “perishing”, He’s talking about “destruction” – “eternal death”.

Now, that’s a concept that isn’t even a blip on most people’s radar... You see, most folk today do not have an **eternal** perspective, and so for most, “Physical death” is the worst

tragedy that they could imagine... But it's not. The greatest tragedy, is to perish – to experience “eternal death”.

Only repentance saves us from perishing. And so, for a Christian, physical death is a blessing – we enter paradise – we experience eternal life. And that's the joy we look forward to...

Anyway, last week, we talked about how God is merciful. When Jesus came, He didn't come straight away to judge – Jesus came to save (and we praise God for that).

And at this point, Jesus tells a parable, to explain how, in God's mercy, He is giving us a chance to repent, but at some point, His patience is going to come to an end...

He tells a story about a fig tree in a vineyard. *And the farmer in me – the first thing I want to know, is: “What on earth is a fig tree doing in a vineyard?”*...

Fig trees don't belong in a vineyard. A vineyard is where you grow grapes. A fig tree, you grow in an orchard, or in a grove... And particularly in Israel, a lot of the country isn't that flash, and so they would grow their grapes where the soil was good, because a fig tree could survive in shallower, more rocky soil.

But **this** fig tree had been given prime position, and yet it did not bear fruit.

The fig tree, represents Israel. Israel, were God's chosen people. By the grace of God, Israel were given what they did not deserve.

- God brought them to the promised land;
- He dwelled among them;
- It was to Israel, that He gave His Law; and
- He made His covenant with Israel;
- He chose Israel, to be the people into which His Own Son, would be born.

But they did not bear fruit. God had chosen them; He'd given them pride of position; They had the Son of God in their midst, but they did not bear fruit.

They did **not** repent; They did **not** turn to Jesus; they did **not** produce fruit in keeping with God's character.

And the owner of the vineyard had had enough...

*When I was working at the Ag college, I remember a time when I was horrified to see the D6 pushing out a whole row of well-established stone fruit trees. And I asked the Horti man "Why are you doing this." And he said very matter-of-factly, they don't bear fruit. They're taking up space and water and nutrients, and we're going to plant citrus there because they **will** bear fruit.*

And so, the **justice** of God, is saying, "It's time for judgment – we're going to chop that fig tree down – Israel, you've had it – you're just taking up space and bearing no fruit..."

But the **mercy** of God is depicted as the vinedresser. And the vinedresser says, “Give it another year. I’ll dig around it to loosen up the soil; I’ll dig manure into the soil to fertilise it, but if it still doesn’t bear any fruit, then you can cut it down...

Jesus is the vinedresser. He was there with the people of Israel, teaching them about the things of God – He was fertilising them, giving them every opportunity to bear fruit for God...

But the image was clear: Time was ticking for Israel... And ultimately, God’s chosen people rejected Jesus, and those who were meant to serve God, they’re the ones who had the Son of God crucified...

And the main missional thrust of the Christian church was pushed out of Israel, and they went to the Gentiles (non-Jews)...

You see, the parable Jesus told, displays God’s displeasure, alongside His patience. But His patience won’t be forever...

So, the message was for Israel, but the beauty of a parable, is we can apply it to ourselves...

The message of the Gospel, is a call to repentance. And the Lord has sent the message of the Gospel out into the world. To be “fruitful”, is to recognise my sin/brokenness/need of a Saviour. And to turn to the Lord Jesus Christ... In God’s mercy, He’s been giving us time.

When the Apostle Paul was invited to speak at the Areopagus (the university {if you like} at Athens), basically he was saying “There’s nothing random about the circumstances you find yourself in”... What he said, was God has determined the time that we live, and the exact places where we live, so that we would seek Him, and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, even though He isn’t far from us...

You and I, are that fig tree. He has put us in a place where we would seek Him. Have you ever wondered why you were born in this century and not 200 years ago? No, it’s not because God wanted you to have air conditioning... It’s because this is the time for you to seek God, and to reach out and find Him...

The Holy Spirit prepares our hearts to receive the word of God, and the Lord is giving us every chance to respond to Him... But there will come a time when His patience is ended.

And so the message of the Fig tree: It’s the same message that John the Baptist gave, right at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke: **Luke 3:8** Bear fruits in keeping with repentance...
9 Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

God is merciful – He’s giving us time, but His patience will come to an end.

And if you know:

- that your time is now
- that God has been mercifully calling You to repentance, and to follow Him,

then I invite you to pray this prayer with me.

Let’s pray:

Heavenly Father,

I thank You that You are a God of mercy.

I thank You that You have patiently waited.

I thank You that You have been digging around me;
and fertilising around me;

Giving me every chance, to bear the fruit of repentance.

Lord,

in pride I have held back from You for so long;

But not anymore.

Lord, I repent of:

- my sin;
- my long-held holding back from You;
- pride – and not depending on You;
- self-righteousness – feeling I didn’t need a Saviour;

God, forgive me.
Lord, I turn away from my old way;
And I turn to You.

I thank You, Lord Jesus,
that You died for my sins.
And that You rose that we might live.

I commit my life to You;
Help me to be the Disciple of Jesus that You've called
me to be.
And to give You glory.

in Jesus Name,
Amen.

If you have prayed that prayer (and meant it), you are in a new relationship with Jesus. Follow Him, and live by His word, and you will be filled with joy, even as you walk through life's tragedies.

And if God has touched you today, and set you in a new direction, don't keep that to yourself. Share it with others here. Share it with me, so that we can walk alongside you, because it's a big thing (entering a whole new way of living).

Bless ya...

ⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2004_Indian_Ocean_earthquake_and_tsunami

ⁱⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Katrina

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/slideshows/here-are-10-of-the-deadliest-natural-disasters-in-2023?slide=12>

^{iv} Numbers 16

^v Leviticus 10 & Exodus 30:9