

Luke 13:1-9

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[0:00] Well, Luke 13, verses 1-9. Luke 13, verses 1-9. And hypothetical questions are irrelevant, aren't they?! But they can be great fun, hypothetical questions.

! What if Hitler had defeated the Russians in 1941? What if I passed those exams back when I was 16?

What if that girl had said yes instead of saying no? What if I got that job? What if, what if, what if? Mao Tse-tong was asked a what if question.

What if somebody asked Mao, what if Khrushchev, the Russian leader, had been assassinated instead of President Kennedy? Mao, the Chinese leader, paused for a few moments, then he replied, well, I doubt if Aristotle and Arsist would have married Mrs. Khrushchev.

It's as good as that. Other questions may be hypothetical, isn't it? But certain questions are dead earnest.

[1:01] They're deadly in earnest. There are lots of questions that people have about Christianity, but in every kind of evangelistic event I've ever done, I mean, every Christian explored course I've ever done, very near the top, if not at the top, is the question of God and suffering.

God and suffering. And many people doubt that they can come to terms with the kind of God that we speak about, and the kind of God that we sing about, when they see the suffering that's in the world.

It's a very real problem. It's a problem, isn't it, for us? If we want to believe in a loving, all-powerful God, and yet we live in the kind of world we do, with all the kind of suffering that we know exists, it's a problem.

And I have not got all the answers. You wouldn't believe me if I said I did. I have just got one, I think, fascinating insight that Jesus gives us. Jesus touches on this subject in conversation.

And in chapter 13, verse 1, it looks like, doesn't it, those around there have seen the news. They've read the internet of the latest massacre. They've been watching BBC or CNN, and they've seen the dead bodies, whom Pilate has done away with, and had their blood mingled with sacrifices.

[2:19] It's a foul thing. And they seem to be saying, well, what do you make of that, Jesus? For all we're told in verse 2, he answers them, and as he answers them, he gives us a fascinating glimpse.

He gives us something of an insight into the whole issue of suffering. So, I've got three points. I want to look at Christ's question, Christ's answer, and then why you should listen to him.

Christ's question. They ask him a question, don't they? Verse 1. Some person at that very time told him about the Galileans whose blood piled and mingled with their sacrifices. And he answers them with a question of his own.

Look at verse 2. He answers them, do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way?

And verse 4. All those 18 on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?

[3:17] Christ's question echoes, does it? Very obviously the question that people ask. You see, when people are face to face with tragedy, the question that springs automatically to their lips is, why?

Why? Why? Why? I think of a family I know. The two oldest daughters have committed suicide. The oldest son has had a brain tumour. There are three other children. One of the other children has attempted suicide.

The boy has Asperger's. And what can you do when you go and sit with them? That family. What can you say? Let me tell you what you can say.

You can say nothing. All you can do is sit there and have a cup of tea. And you sit. You listen. You read a bit of the Bible. You pray.

[4 : 19] And you feel your fish. Why now? Why here? Why me? And we don't think logically in those moments, do we?

And we ask the question, why? We went on holiday to Kendall and as a person that managed the flats and that we live in, he's a very good friend of ours, his father went on holiday to Greece two weeks ago.

He said goodbye to his sister, the father did, and he went for a day trip on a Greek island. He's not been seen since. You might have seen it. It's on the news. And nobody knows where he is.

They've had scanning helicopters. This father, he seemed pretty normal. He's a normal Cumbrian man, full of humour.

Why? Why? Why? Why? And I want to say to you, the Bible knows that question. In fact, the Bible knows that question so well, it devotes the whole book of the Bible to it, the book of Job.

[5 : 17] There are 42 chapters in that book, aren't there? Dealing with the question, why? And Jesus echoes it here. It's as if he knows it's on their mind.

And he echoes the obvious question. He offers, as he asks his question, he offers the easy answer. Do you see that? Because it seems to be the only solution that can solve the problem.

If you can link suffering, if you can link tragedies with sin and God's judgment, then perhaps I can live with an all-powerful, loving God.

If suffering was only allowed in this world as a punishment directly for sin, well, I can just about cope with it. But it doesn't fit the evidence, does it? You know that. And that is why we keep asking the question, why?

Why? How can you believe in a God who is so unfair? Part of the tragedies that we see all around us, it's not that the particularly sinful die, is it?

[6 : 22] It's not. The good suffer with the bad. Why him? Why her? Why that family? And the assumed premise for all those questions and all our statements is that the only solution to the problem could be if suffering was God's judgment.

But if suffering is because of God's judgment always, God isn't actually a very accurate shot, is he? And Christ just seems to be floating that kite.

Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered like this? Or those 18 on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them? Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?

And I want to say to you today, Jesus rejects the easy answer, wonderfully. He doesn't buy into it any more than you or I do. The Bible doesn't take that line.

He could hardly be clearer. Could he? Look at verse 3, No, I tell you. Look at verse 5, No, I tell you.

[7 : 34] There are no easy, glib answers to suffering. We've got two different types of tragedies in this paragraph. Look at verse 1, you've got Herod's violence.

It's an atrocity. It's a horrific thing when you think about it. And there is no denying is there human wickedness in many of the tragedies that we face.

I think it's tough, isn't it, to put all the blame on God. That's what people do. When very often, much of the suffering we face is because of human wickedness. And that tower falling in verse 3, what's that like?

It's like some air crash. It's like some earthquake. A tsunami. The floods. The famines. A car crash. It's very complex, isn't it? It's so complex that in the book on suffering that the Bible has written, two-thirds of the book of Job is full of the wrong answers. So whatever you do, don't give up. If you start, don't give up halfway.

[8 : 40] You're just ahead full of wrong answers. So those are Christ's questions. Let's look further because he doesn't just pose a question, he gives the answer to it. He goes on to give his own reply. So secondly, Christ answers, Were sinners, I tell you, no.

Verse 3, No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Were they worse offenders? Verse 5, No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

Now notice please, he doesn't try to explain away suffering. He doesn't try and explain it away.

Jesus does not pretend that suffering does not exist.

But rather strangely, Jesus' reply doesn't need to comfort you at all, does it? It's what a hard message. It does in other circumstances.

There are other parts of the Bible that we could go to where there is great comfort. Jesus' reply doesn't need to pity. It leads to warning. You see, when we're face to face with tragedy, we want to scream out and we want to say something is wrong.

[9 : 49] Something is wrong. And Jesus says, He did right. Jesus agrees with you. Yes, there is something wrong. But Jesus says, it's closer to home than we imagine.

Look at it again, verse 3, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Verse 5, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

If we go for the easy answer, if we think suffering and tragedy are like God's laser beam bombing, God's kind of precision punishment, well, it leaves you and I so complacent, doesn't it?

If suffering is just God's judgment, it's very easy to end up saying, well, actually, I'm alright, Jack, aren't I? But you see, when you ask Jesus about these tragedies and these sufferings that are taking place around him, he reverses that way of thinking.

He picks a tragedy and Jesus gives a warning and the warning is, watch out, Jack. Not, I'm alright, Jack. Were these worse offenders?

[10 : 57] No. And unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Now, what does he mean by that? Is he speaking that there is some faith that isn't limited to selected sinners, but it is universal.

What does he mean by that? You will all likewise perish. But he doesn't really mean that Pilate's going to massacre all his hearers. The Romans are going to come and wipe them out. Well, Pilate can't do that because he'd need this huge sword as well as just a tower falling on them.

He can't even actually mean that they will all die. He doesn't mean that, does he? Because he seems to imply if they repent, they will not perish. So he's not just talking about death.

But repentance does not allow you to avoid death. So what does repentance allow you to avoid? Not death, but God's ultimate judgment. And repentance is always linked to my sin and my relationship with God.

And these tragedies, they are not, they are not God's ultimate judgment on people. But they are consequences of living in a rebellious and a sinful world.

[12 : 13] these sufferings are vivid illustrations of God's coming judgment. God's coming judgment on those who will not turn around and will not turn back to him.

And God's judgment is far more universal than just some highly selective group of sinners that suffer. unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

Let's try and put this in the context of Luke's gospel. Of all the gospels, Luke's mustn't just be treated as a pick and mix gospel. It's not a series of independent stories. Luke says, I wrote it and I've written down the incidents in a particular order so that you can know the truth most clearly.

So go back to verse 54. In page 54, he's speaking to multitudes. He's speaking to crowds. And we automatically assume crowds are innocent.

That's the starting point for us. Most people think they're innocent but Jesus says, no, they're not. He knows that the average person, indeed all of us, are guilty.

[13 : 18] We are all those who've rebelled against God. And he says to the multitude a number of things. Look at verse 54 to 56. He says, read the times. He said to the crowds, when you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, the showers coming.

So it happens. When you see the south wind blowing, you say there will be scorching heat and it happens. You hypocrites. You hypocrites. You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

Why don't you understand what is going on at the minute? That God has stepped into the world in the person of his son and you are rejecting him. And in verses 57 to 59, judge yourselves.

Judge for yourselves. Use your common sense. Time is short. See the picture? Judgment is coming. Judgment has come. Time is short. So beg for mercy. Every one of us is guilty.

So the only sensible thing to do is to throw yourselves on God's mercy. Those are the times you are living in, says Jesus. And he comes to our paragraph and he says, take the warnings.

[14 : 21] Take the warning. Do you think Jesus judges just especially wicked sinners? No. No. Those who the tower fell on them, they are facing their judge now.

And how long will it be before you are face to face with your judge? So repent while you've got time. Turn around. Turn around from living your own way and turn to God and do it now.

He tells you another parable in verses 6 to 9 and it's all part of a series of stories. And the story really is don't presume. It's a little story of a man with a fig tree in his garden. He comes looking for

fruit on it and he finds none.

Now I am no gardener. I don't know anything about gardening. But you can see his frustration. Can't you? He said to the vine dresser, how long have I got to put up with this fig tree? Let me pull it up.

Let me stick in something else. And he answers, doesn't he? He says, no, let it alone, sir. Let it alone, sir. Until I dig around it and put on manure.

[15:28] Then if it should bear fruit next to you, well and good. If not, you can cut it down. You see, his hearers have not had any towers fall upon them. They've not been cut down in a massacre yet.

But don't presume. Don't presume. Where's the sign that you're bearing the fruits that befit repentance?

What are the signs of your repentance? That you're living a life towards God. Now of course, all of this has got very particular reference to the people of Jerusalem in Jesus' day, isn't it? It may well be that they've had three years of his public ministry and within a year their final rejection of Jesus will be complete.

They will lay him to a tree. And their predicted destruction will be sealed. But every tragedy that you and I read about, that you and I experience, is a reminder of the same warning.

It's not that those who suffer are especially wicked. It is that we will all have to face God's judgment unless we repent. And that is why, let me say this to you, that is why a world of tragedies is a very fitting world for you and I to live in.

[16:49] If you're like me and all too many of you are, we are so selfish and rebellious that we need a world that won't let us think that it's okay. We need a world full of constant reminders that if there were no tragedies to bring us up short, if there were no deaths to bring us up short, we might think God doesn't care about sin.

But God cares intensely about sin. He cares intensely about you. But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

Somebody says, well, it's a bit of a sledgehammer and a crushing nut, isn't it, Jesus? It's a bit over the top. No, it's not. Because God's judgment that we look at tonight is a terrible, terrible thing. And I am so, I'm so anesthetized to my need. I'm so blandly indifferent that I need to be put in a world that sets my nerves jangling.

That it sets my mind screaming, there is something wrong. There is something wrong. I need to be driven to turn from my sin because I don't do it and I won't do it naturally or easily.

[18:14] And it is mercy God will do anything to provoke me to do just that. It is a very blunt warning, isn't it? Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

But it is born of mercy and of love. So we have Christ question and Christ answer.

But I want to step back for a moment and I want you to see who delivered this warning. Who delivered this warning? Why should you listen to such a harsh message?

Why should you listen to this person as he brings me a warning from tragedy and suffering? How dare he do that? But let me give you two reasons. Two reasons why you need to listen and why you should listen and why you should be glad to listen.

The first reason is this, because the Jesus who is speaking here is on his way to Jerusalem. That's the section we're in in Luke's Gospel. He's in this vast narrative, Luke is, of telling you Jesus is on his way to the cross.

[19:25] He's on his way to the judgment of God. Most of Luke's Gospel is taken back with Jesus journeying to Jerusalem and Jerusalem is the place of death for him. The place of the cross.

And what is the cross? The cross is the place of the most unjust suffering of all time. We talk, don't we, about innocent people being killed and suffering.

But actually none of them are really innocent. none of us are truly innocent. And yet he was. He lived a pure life.

He had pure lips. When they pulled Jesus' heart apart, that is literally what happened in crucifixion, they pull your heart apart at the cross. And what came out of Jesus' heart?

Not selfishness, but love. There was no thought for himself for a moment. You can excuse it, can't you, at the cross in that immense agony. No thought for himself, but thought for others.

[20:35] His mother, behold your son, he said. John, look after her. Out of his heart, when they pulled it apart, came not bitterness, but forgiveness.

Whether it was for the soldiers who were hammering the nails into his wrists, or perhaps more likely the Jewish religious establishment that had kind of finished their kangaroo court, Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.

Yes, this appeal of Jesus, this answer from Jesus, is from somebody who knows first-hand unjust suffering. And that is why we must listen to him.

John Stott writes in the cross of Christ, in the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who is immune to it. I have entered many Buddhist temples in different countries and stood respectfully before the statue of Buddha, his legs crossed, his arms folded, his eyes closed.

There goes from a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while, I have had to turn away, and in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hand and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding through thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness.

[22 : 16] That is the God for me. There's a well-known poem, Jesus of the scars, last verse, was like this, the other gods were strong, but thou was weak. They rode, but thou did stumble to a throne.

But to our wounds, only God's wounds can speak, and not a God has wounds, but thou alone. The one who delivers the warning is the one who experienced suffering.

the one who delivers the warning is the one who went to the cross, not to suffer just physically, but to take the judgment, the spiritual judgment, that we deserve.

That is the one who warns. In his body he bore our sins on the tree, by his wounds you have been healed. Christ dies once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.

Why listen? Because he knows. He suffered. And why listen? Secondly, because he's dealt with suffering. That Jesus' death has reversed the effects of our rebellion.

[23 : 28] One writer puts it like this, says this, the leaves of the New Testament rustle with the promise of a new world. Don't they? The leaves of the New Testament, they rustle with the promise of a new world.

A world where in righteousness dwells. A world where there will be no sickness or sorrow, no pain, no death. A world where all these things will be sorted out.

And his cross gives me access to that world. It's one of those books written from the US, they come out occasionally, it's written by a child, the child was severely disabled, he lived to the age of six, six and died.

It's not a great book, but it's a wonderful title and it picks up the promise of this new world. Where There Won't Be Any Disability. The title is something that the little boy had said that stuck with his parents.

It's from the 1970s, I won't be a cripple when I see Jesus. When you come face to face with suffering, you've got problems, I've got problems, if you want to believe in an all-powerful loving God.

[24 : 35] We can't duck them, but please don't think this morning that if you remove God, you've come to the end of your problems. You haven't. You've just got a completely different set.

You've got the same world, the same tragedies, the same unjust suffering, but actually you've got no hope. I'm not asking you to believe God because wouldn't it be nice if it were true?

That's not a good enough ground. But don't let's throw God out of the window until we're dead sure he's not true. We've got nothing to lose.

We've got nothing to gain by doing that, I mean. Why listen to that Christ? Well, he knows what suffering is like, he's faced it himself, and he claims to have dealt with it. I was reading last night's little book, and in it it talks about finding God is in the darkness little book, Irene Howard is written, and she tells the story of Pat Cardy.

She and her husband were living in Northern Ireland around 1980, and their nine-year-old daughter Jennifer went to play with one of her friends. She started riding her bike over to her friend's house, and they never saw her again.

[25 : 47] They found her body about a week later. She'd been murdered. They did not know why, they did not know who. You can imagine the parents facing that situation. Pat Cardy relates how she was given grace to make it through Jennifer's funeral.

But then she talks about the following day when she did not find any of that grace. She tried to busy herself tidying up and cleaning, but it did not work. She tried to give in to tears as she saw and touched Jennifer's belonging.

Finally, she was in the bathroom, and there again were Jennifer's own personal items, and the awful finality of death for her. She said that once the tears started, there was no holding back, and the violent, suffocating sobs kept coming.

I would never see her again. I wished that I too could die. She began as best as she could to call on God for help and for sustaining grace in that time. There followed another stream of bitter tears as she picked up her copy of Daily Light, which was there in the bathroom.

She said, I could read nothing. My tears were unwipeable as well as unstoppable. Twice I tried to read, but I could not. The third time I read these words more clearly.

[26 : 54] And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, for the former things have passed away.

Why listen to Jesus Christ this morning? Because he knows what suffering is. He's faced it himself and he claims to have dealt with it. And he offers to lead you to that world where suffering will be removed.

He's taken the initiative, isn't it? It's an amazing gesture of love. And he says, I love you. He says, stop the war. Stop the war against me.

Stop living your life your way and turn to me and repent. They face him with a tragedy, the latest tragedy. And as he replies, he makes it clear, the tragedies are not just meant to leave me pitying the sufferers only, but they are meant to leave me listening to the warning.

to live on myself without repenting is simply to live on borrowed time. And he answered them, do you think that these Galileans are worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way?

[28 : 04] No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Please do not walk out of these doors and ignore the warning. Come again, speak to me, call to God.

I'm very aware this morning that there are lots of questions about suffering that I've not answered. And the topic is very, very painful. I'd be glad to try and share some of the Bible with you.

I know David Barnes did an excellent seminar at the church weekend. I'm sure he would talk to you about it. We'll be hovering around. There was some present and they asked, do you think that they were worse sinners, those people in Nairobi, the latest victims in our city, those who died in Nigeria?

No, of course not. But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Let's pray.