

March 14, 2004  
Lent 4

*"God Is Faithful Even During Tragedies"*

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### **NIV LUKE 13:1-9**

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**N**ow there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup> Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? <sup>3</sup> I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. <sup>4</sup> 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? <sup>5</sup> I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." <sup>6</sup> Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. <sup>7</sup> So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' <sup>8</sup> "Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. <sup>9</sup> If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

I want to begin this sermon today by holding up a large art project my daughter did while attending Cal Poly. Faces of people were placed on brown paper bags and placed on a large sheet of paper. The faces of people show anguish as a result of the tragedy that struck our country on September 11 when the World Trade Center towers came crashing down. Notice the center of the artwork. The little girl rests on the shoulders of her dad and holds an American flag. She is a symbol of hope. She believes in her country and her dad on whose shoulders she rests.

Tragedies will always happen to the world in which we are living. The people of Spain are suffering right now because terrorists set off bombs in trains that killed over 200 people. Little children in Spain are asking their parents why God would allow such a terrible thing to happen. This morning Jesus has an important answer for us regarding the tragedies that come into our lives. He tells us beyond any doubt that no matter how bad things get in our lives and in the world in which we live, our loving heavenly Father wants people to repent and see the greater plan he has for their lives. Jesus summed up this amazing plan that looms up large like a mountain with the words of John 3:16, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." Let's see how **"God Is Faithful Even During Tragedies."**

#### **1) The tragedies will come**

The people that were listening to Jesus speak about the future events, asked him to comment on the terrible tragedy that had taken place in Jerusalem when Roman soldiers killed people who were worshipping in the temple. "Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices." In the various accounts of Roman history, there is no mention of this happening while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. Stab some Jews while they are worshipping in the temple, what's the big deal? Stuff like that happened all the time in the Roman Empire,

just as people are being blown apart by bombs almost every week in the Mid East today.

I am holding in my hand a book by Philip Yancey called, "Where Is God When It Hurts." Here is another book written by a Jewish rabbi, "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People?" C.S. Lewis wrote a book, "The Problem of Pain." How many hundreds of books haven't been written over the same question the people of Galilee are bringing up to Jesus. "Jesus, if God is good, or if you are the Messiah, why are the Roman soldiers allowed to kill people in the temple of the Lord as they are worshipping, sacrificing and bringing their praises and praises to the Lord?" During WW2 when the bombs were being dropped on London, the people who prayed for protection wondered why God was not concerned about them. Some said, "Either God is all powerful and he does not care, or he cares but has no power and strength to delivers us from the bombs."

In typical fashion Jesus answers a question in the minds of these people by raising another question. He says, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?" The friends of Job would have said yes to this question. They were convinced Job had done something wrong in his life and that is why God was punishing him by taking away all his possessions, causing the death of his ten children, and taking away his health. Even Job's wife got in the act and began to think her beloved husband had done something terribly wrong that offended God and led God to punish Job. Job's friends searched his past life looking for evidence on why God was punishing him, similar to way thieves looked for secure information on old computer hard drives. Even Job fell into this way of thinking as he tried to justify himself by showing God the evidence that he was not such a bad fellow and should not be punished as he was.

When I was a child, we suffered a tragedy on our family farm. One evening, as my father was tucking us into bed and saying our prayers with us, we heard our mother scream, "The barn is on fire." We looked outside and the barn and attached buildings were engulfed in flames. Our whole livelihood on a dairy was going up in flames. I recall the terrible fear I had that something would happen to my dad as he tried to rescue the trapped animals. It seemed like everyone for miles around came to see the cause of the flames leaping up into the clear September night. What I remember most about that night were the words spoken by an elderly aunt who was not a mean spirit person. "I wonder what you did wrong to deserve this?" I could not sleep that night because I kept thinking maybe she was right, maybe God was punishing us. Does God punish us for our sin the way Mel Gibson portrayed a vengeful God with a crow picking out the eye of the thief that mocked Jesus? That's the question of the ages.

Remember that time Jesus and his disciples were walking along and saw a man who had been blind from birth. The disciples asked Jesus this question, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Even the disciples associated tragedies with being punished for some sin in the past. Some years ago a man was driving over San Marcos Pass. A stone, about the size of a grapefruit or softball tumbled down from the mountains, tore through the canvass top of his car, and killed him. The tragedy was such a freak accident, it is easy to think God was punishing that man for something he had done wrong in his past life.

Behind all the tragedies of life whether it is September 11 in New York City, or March 11 in Madrid Spain, God has a higher purpose and a greater plan that fills our lives with

hope. Jesus spoke about that plan with these words, "But unless you repent, you too will all perish." God's plan that superimposes itself over all the tragedies of life is to bring people to repentance. Repentance means that we change our minds, change our hearts and go from looking to ourselves as the source and hope of escaping the judgment to come, and putting our hope and trust in Jesus. Jesus preached a message wherever he went, "Repent for the kingdom of God is hand." Jesus called on people to give up trying to govern their own lives and put their life right with God on their own. He pleaded with them to put their lives and their hope of salvation in his hand. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords who will not fail to rescue us.

The Lord our God in his infinite love and wisdom can even use tragedies in life to shake people and help them see the need to change their way of thinking. This past week I talked with a man who lived through very dangerous battlefields in WW2. He described the death he saw all around him but then went on to say that over and over again he heard soldiers praying the words of Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd...." A pastor was visiting woman in the nursing home and she kept asking him why the Lord was allowing her to suffer under such conditions. Little did she know that her roommate next to here was listening to every word of the devotions from her pastor. Through her suffering, her roommate was being brought close to Jesus. Tragedies will come to all of us, even to Christians who follow Jesus closely. In the midst of these tragedies God is always bringing people to change their minds and trust in the blessings of his kingdom.

## **2) The Lord's love is always faithful**

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm tells us: "Goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives." In the worst tragedies of life, the mercy and kindness of the Lord remains the same. We see that in the parable Jesus tells us about the fig tree. "A man had fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it and did not find any." People loved their fig trees at Jesus time. Here was a tree that always seemed to bear fruit, whether it was hot or cold, wet or dry. You did not have to do much to keep a fig tree bearing fruit in Palestine. That's why the story Jesus told seemed so strange to the people who were listening. For three years a man looked for fruit on the tree, and it bore nothing. "'For three years I have been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?" Every year this man looked for some change in the fig tree, some evidence of little figs starting to grow in the branches, but no matter what they did to encourage the growth there was nothing.

That's what the Lord does with the world in which we are living. He lets people continue to live their lives here on this earth, and even allows tragedies to come into the world, so that there might by changes in the lives of people, and repentance, and turning to faith in Jesus for salvation. 2 Peter 3: 9 says: "God is not patient with you, and not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." The Lord will even allow Christians to suffer in this world rather than take them home to glory, so their suffering can be used to bring glory to Jesus and turn the hearts of others to Christ. 1 Peter 4: 16 says: "If you suffer as a Christian do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name."

In fact our Lord Jesus even adds to this story of the fig tree. The person who was tending the fig tree pleaded for more time. "Sir," the man replied, "leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not then cut it

down.” One more year. One more year to bear fruit. One more year to change. That’s the faithfulness we see in our God. He is allowing this world in which we are living to continue to exist for a certain time, and during this time he will be using people like us to bring the message of salvation to other people so they can change, and be born again into God’s family and cling to Jesus for their hope of eternal life.

If Jesus has died for all my sin, and he cried from the cross, “It is finished!” why am I being punished for me sin. A Christian man recently asked that question. Christians cry out, “Why is the Lord still leaving me here?” The answer is found in what Jesus tells us this morning. We are left here to suffer for Christ, witness to our faith, even pray for people who don’t know about Jesus. God’s whole plan is to rescue people from the judgment to come and he can use tragedies like 9-11 and 3-11 and sudden deaths and people suffering in a nursing home to rescue people from the greatest tragedy of all, eternal death and punishment. That’s the bottom line. Amen.