

**THE RADICAL RABBI:
“A RADICAL OPTION”
(Luke 13:1-9)**

Description: *Jesus reiterates the need for repentance or face the prospect of spending eternity separated from God — what the Bible refers to as spiritual “death.”*

INTRODUCTION

I used to watch a show called “Seconds From Disaster.” It ran for parts of seven seasons spread over some 15 years. What it did was show a disaster that had happened, but then rewound the clock to see all the circumstances that had to come together to make a particular disaster occur. Sometimes the focus was on man-made disasters — airline crashes, for instance — while others were natural disasters, such as Mount St. Helens back in 1980. I’m not a science guy so their unraveling of a sequence of events to show the science at the root of a moment was fascinating to me.

For instance, one of their shows focused on a horrific fire that occurred at the King’s Cross subway station in London way back in November 1987. From an almost imperceptible start — a discarded lit cigarette — this fire literally exploded up one of the ancient, wooden, World War II-era escalators leading from the level of the subways to a ticket platform; there were unfortunately 31 fatalities — including one of London’s most senior fire fighters — along with 100 injured. As the police tried to determine what exactly had happened — with the Irish Republican Army very active at that time, there was a lot of concern that a terrorist bomb had been behind the fire — scientists brought in to assist in the investigation of the blaze actually stumbled upon the cause, using a computer simulation to reconstruct the fire and its behavior that at first nobody could believe. But after actually taking the time to build a life-size replica of the subway station, escalator and platform, and then essentially re-creating the fire, the result confirmed the accuracy of exactly what the computer sims said would happen, and wound up rewriting how fires are fought on sloping, angled structures all over the world. They discovered an entirely unknown phenomenon in the way that fires behave, now known as the “trench effect,” that was the root cause of the fire exploding so quickly up the escalator with such devastating results.

Now while I can go ahead and be as fascinated as I want to be, at the end of the day, there was still a disaster that occurred with deadly consequences. And

unfortunately, in the world in which we live, disasters are a part of that world — events that leave incredibly indelible, unforgettable impacts. For instance, if you're a fan of the space program, all you have to do is mention Challenger or Columbia to be immediately transported back to those terrible images. Mention the word “tsunami” and you'll immediately go back to the SE Asian earthquake and resulting tidal wave that is thought to have killed some 230,000 people back in December 2004. Mention the name “Katrina” and our minds will go back to New Orleans and the Gulf coast in August 2005. Then there's something that happened before some of you were even born, but I can't think the name “Bangladesh” without thinking of the 1970 cyclone that is thought to have killed some 364,000 people. Those, along with so many other events, have a way of making some lifelong imprints on anybody who may have witnessed those moments.

A question often comes up when talking about those kinds of things: “Where was God?” The idea is that a loving God would certainly not let such a thing happen. Yet happen they do. So how do we answer that question? Or is there maybe a better question, a more appropriate question, that can challenge that particular train of thought? Perhaps today's story will help. So as we prepare for some challenging considerations, **let's start it all with a moment in prayer.**

TEXT

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices — Luke 13:1.

Before we go any further, we should start by establishing the fact that Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor at this time, who we've obviously heard about in other contexts, was not a guy to be admired; in fact, we have historical reason to believe that he could be unapologetically cruel. Now any Roman assigned to duty in Palestine would have understood that this was a “hornet's nest,” a harsh and unforgiving land with a people to match. The reputation of a difficult people over which to rule was well earned and a whole lot deserved. But Pilate amplified this difficulty by being particularly insensitive to the religious convictions of the Jews.

For instance, one time he tried bringing Roman ensigns — the insignias, the various symbols of the empire raised on a pole — into Jerusalem. This infuriated the Jews, who deeply resented having images of Caesar displayed in their holy city. They protested their presence and, in response, Pilate threatened to kill anybody who demonstrated opposition — which just increased their determination. Really, he must have thought, you all are willing to die over this? But finally, seeing that there was no way to win, he had the ensigns moved out of the city. But

the incident created a breach in his relations with the Jews that would be impossible to heal.

Now while there is no specific validation outside the Bible of the incident to which Luke refers, it is possibly tied to an alleged attempt on the part of Pilate to appropriate money from the sacred temple treasury to help pay for a new aqueduct. Another protest from the Jews ensued but this time, instead of mere threats, Pilate sent some of his soldiers in civilian clothes into the crowd, secretly arming them with daggers. The disguised soldiers suddenly lashed out at the protesters, who were themselves unarmed, killing a number of them. Again, this response just made Pilate's job as governor even more difficult. And likely because the crowd knew that Jesus was from Galilee, they made sure he heard this story.

So as Christ journeys ever closer to Jerusalem, such news about this hated governor of the hated Romans was sure to be in the air — and it would seem, at least at first glance, to present Jesus with a dilemma. If he says nothing about it, some would take that to mean a pro-Roman attitude, thus making him disloyal to his very own people. And if he went after Pilate for such an injustice, that could potentially get him into trouble with the Romans — to which the Jewish religious leaders would have been only too glad to offer their assistance.

But instead, Jesus chooses another route, asking the crowd: ***“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”*** — *Jesus Christ, Luke 13:2-3.*

Now in no way is Christ either excusing or minimizing what Pilate had done. But his bottom line is that a whole bunch of Galileans had all woken up that morning, assuming just another day was at hand. But that's not what happened. Instead, whatever the details, they were all dead and, instead of being in Galilee or Jerusalem or wherever, they were now in eternity.

The point being: None of them knew that their end of life was at hand. Neither, says Jesus as he eyes everybody in that crowd, do you. The point is not when life ends, Jesus is saying. The point is, are you ready when it does?

And his focus in this moment is two words: “repent” and “perish.” To repent is “to change one's mind or purpose,” and always for the better. To experience repentance is to literally make a U-turn, to reverse course, to now be thinking opposite of what you were thinking before. To perish means “to destroy fully.” But in spiritual terms, to perish means to be in eternal separation from God. And

so profoundly different is that existence from living in eternal fellowship with God that the Scriptures communicate those two realities as “life” and “death,” and other words (such as perish) that denote the same idea.

And then he continues along that same line: ***“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” — Jesus Christ, Luke 13:4-5.***

It is not uncommon in this day and age to hear somebody’s opinion that such and such a thing that happened to somebody, or such and such a time of suffering for somebody, is “God’s judgment” on them. That is simply not always the case; in fact, that can be a really slippery slope. Obviously Job was not dealt his tragedies because of his sin. The early Christians did not suffer because of their sins. Obviously Jesus did not endure his sufferings because of his sins!

Now while Pilate could be pinpointed as the cause of death of those Galileans, is that the same reason why that second group of 18 people got killed by a falling tower? That wasn’t Pilate’s fault. They died because they were too close to a tower when it gave way and then gravity took over. They weren’t involved in protests; they weren’t causing Pilate trouble. That was simply the means by which their lives ended.

And then Jesus borrows their own logic, in effect saying to the crowd: “If that is in fact how God does deal with sinners, then what about you? Shouldn’t you all repent? Isn’t everybody here a sinner?” Now the scriptures they had would have clearly answered that question. David would have answered that question: ***The Lord looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one — David, Psalm 14:2-3.*** And Isaiah would have answered that question while speaking to God: ***All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins — Isaiah 64:6-7.***

Maybe, Jesus is saying, the question to ask is not, “Why did these people die?” Maybe the better question to ask is, “What right do I have to continue to live?” If nobody is without sin, how can I ensure being ready for God when my time comes? And it will come.

So then, as he so often did, always at just the right point in the conversation, Jesus told a parable: ***“A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. 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?’ ‘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’”*** — Jesus Christ, Luke 13:6-9.

A little background: During the course of God’s articulating his commands to Moses concerning the nation of Israel, he said this: ***“When you enter the land and plant any kind of fruit tree, regard its fruit as forbidden. For three years you are to consider it forbidden; it must not be eaten. In the fourth year all its fruit will be holy, an offering of praise to the Lord. But in the fifth year you may eat its fruit. In this way your harvest will be increased. I am the Lord your God”*** — God speaking, Leviticus 19:23-25.

Now if the farmer in the story had been living in obedience to the Lord, this meant that he had been waiting for fruit from this tree for seven (7) years: The original three years the fruit was forbidden, and the one year of fruit being a praise offering to the Lord gets us to four (4) years. Now this guy had been waiting three (3) more years — year 5 being the first year fruit was available to him (but none had grown) plus year 6 plus now this year — seven (7) years in all! He had shown remarkable patience but now he was showing frustration as well.

What is Jesus teaching? He is telling the crowd that day that God is incredibly patient with us, and gracious beyond measure. As his disciple Peter would write: ***[The Lord] is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance*** — II Peter 3:9b. In that gracious patience, God does more than enough to encourage and enable our repentance and the subsequent fruit that shows us to truly be Christ’s disciples (John 15:8). But there are two factors that are also just as true: (1) God has every right to “cut us down,” and (2) the day of judgment will eventually arrive.

This was also true for the nation of Israel — the Jews standing in the crowd listening to Jesus that day. God granted them three (3) years with himself in human form to listen to his words of life and watch his works of divine power. But as a nation, they rejected his Son. There was another 40 years of patience as the church brought witness of the gospel message — which was rejected as well. Finally God used Roman armies to “cut down” the tree that was Israel. A day of

reckoning absolutely arrived — which simultaneously offered a preview of the end of time.

This was a rather unique parable of Christ's in that it was not a completed story; there was no conclusion. That was left to the listener to supply the ending — not for the crowd but for each individual. That was the power of this kind of parable: The only conclusion was by application to each life.

APPLICATION

It's interesting to me as we look at this story that, at this point toward the end of his ministry, in sharing with his audience the thought of “repent or perish,” a theme he mentions twice, Jesus is actually going back to the same themes he proclaimed at the beginning of his ministry. When he first came out of the wilderness after being tempted by Satan (the point at which we started the “radical rabbi” series), his first words were, as recorded by Matthew: ***“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”*** — *Jesus Christ, Matthew 4:17b*. When he met with the Pharisee Nicodemus, he shared with him some of the most famous words in the entire Bible: ***“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”*** — *Jesus Christ, John 3:16*.

So what exactly makes the phrase, “Repent or perish,” any kind of radical? Is that idea really that far out? Yes — in the world in which we live. Yes — in the world in which God has placed us.

We live in a world in which people have sought to establish that all religions and beliefs are valid — with, of course, the possible exception of biblical, fundamental Christianity. Within this line of belief is the idea that all people are basically good, and that all people will go to heaven (even Hitler will go to heaven, or so I've been told — and yes, I actually was told that by an Episcopalian deacon). And it is that world to which we have been called to minister. Guess what, y'all? We are all ministers. We are all called to be ambassadors of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And what is that? What is the gospel of Jesus Christ? The gospel of Jesus Christ is this: Man is a sinning, sin-filled creature whom God has called to repent, whom God has called to confess their sins. Problem: Man is unwilling to do that. Why? Because man would have to say, “I was wrong.” Man would have to confess that God's holy perfection is the standard by which man will be judged. And man is so corrupted by sin that no man cares about God's standard, and man is so blinded by sin that he doesn't believe there is a consequence for failing God's standard.

So Jesus Christ came to earth — God in human form. He did live up to that standard, and then offered his life in trade for anybody who would come to him. You see, it is only in surrendering to Jesus Christ that we are able to confess, to say, “I was wrong.” God recognizes no confession based on human effort. He only recognizes confession based on Christ’s effort on the cross. And then comes the enabled ability to repent — to do a lifestyle U-turn, going from an old, corrupted, sinful way of thinking and doing to a new, God-way of thinking and doing as demonstrated by Jesus Christ.

So against the backdrop of this world comes this radical rabbi with his incredibly radical message: “You have two options — (1) repent, essentially pleading ‘guilty as charged,’ confessing, ‘I was wrong’ and allowing me to enable you to begin navigating life in a whole new, God-pleasing way, or (2) do nothing, essentially declaring ‘I am fine with my life’ — the result of course being that you will perish; you will endure an eternity of unspeakable suffering in a separation from God that is called ‘hell.’ And that day of God’s acting on your choice is coming.”

CONCLUSION

And what is behind all of this is God. God established the standard by which he would judge the world. God established the number of our days; according to David: *[All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be — David, Psalm 139:16b.* God established the means, the one and only way, by which any man, woman or child can be saved — his one and only Son, Jesus Christ (John 14:6, Acts 4:12), through Whom opportunity was purchased and then offered for any individual to be seen by God as though they had never sinned, and therefore perfectly pleasing to him. And none of this was done in hiding; as God said to the prophet Isaiah: *“I have not spoken in secret, from somewhere in a land of darkness; I have not said . . . , ‘Seek me in vain.’ I, the Lord, speak the truth; I declare what is right” — God speaking, Isaiah 45:19.*

So what gives? Why do so many so stubbornly remain outside the Kingdom, so steadfastly refusing the opportunity for eternal life? The answer is found in hearts, minds and consciences totally corrupted and made numb by sin. According to Isaiah, some 2,700 years ago, what he saw coming was *those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter . . . those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight — Isaiah 5:20-21.* According to Paul some 2,000 years ago, what he saw coming was that *[p]eople will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful,*

unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God — having a form of godliness but denying its power — Paul, II Timothy 3:2-5a. Why think about God when you think you're fine? Ultimately, I think Isaiah nailed it when he wrote about those who reject God: *You have seen many things, but you pay no attention; your ears are open, but you do not listen — Isaiah 42:20.*

So does that mean that we quit, that we give up? Is the world a lost cause, and evangelism the ultimate exercise in futility? No way. Ministering the gospel of Jesus Christ is our mandate, and our incredible privilege. Think about it: We get to talk about Jesus — our Savior, our Redeemer, our never-failing Lord. That's not a burden; that's a gift! And because of everything given us by Christ, no Christian is considered unqualified to do that — or excused from it, either. Instead, as Jesus said, we are all to *“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” — Jesus Christ, Mark 16:15.* And God is always faithful: He will supply the words, he will supply the courage, he will supply the power, he will supply the opportunities, and he will supply the growth found only in the Holy Spirit. We simply need to be faithful to the moment.

Now we talked about this last week but this story's worth repeating: There's a guy named Penn Jillette, one half of the magician performance duo of “Penn and Teller.” You also need to know that Penn Jillette is a loud and proud atheist. A few years ago, someone came to talk to him after one of his magic shows — a guy about his age. The man complimented Jillette on the show, then said, “I brought this for you.” The man held up a small book — a New Testament with the Psalms. “I wrote in the front of it,” the man said, “and I wanted you to have this.”

Jillette was moved by the man's gesture, and then said this: “I don't respect people who don't proselytize. If you believe there is a heaven and hell, and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life or whatever, how much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate someone to believe everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?” There's the challenge — played out against one fundamental truth: Nobody dies.

Over the time that I have been here in Redwood, we have lost several precious saints — brothers and sisters in Christ who are no longer with us. But not one of them died. Instead they are, as Paul so wonderfully wrote, *away from the body and at home with the Lord — Paul, II Corinthians 5:8,* more alive and well than they ever were here on earth, with a promised, guaranteed eternity in the presence

of God and his Son to follow — with new eternal bodies absolutely prepared to take in and enjoy every incredible experience that heaven has to offer.

But just as “nobody dies” is true for believers, it is just as true for nonbelievers. Upon their life ending here on earth, they also will experience being “away from the body.” But their final outcome will have nothing to do with being “at home with the Lord.” Instead, they will be waiting — waiting for a judgment that absolutely will come, followed by a guaranteed horrific beyond-words separation from God that the Bible calls hell — a separation from God that they chose by choosing unbelief in all that God offered them through his Son. And their new bodies will be just as eternal, and just as capable of absorbing and feeling all that been prepared for them in that place of darkness and agony.

“Repent or perish” is only radical to those who don’t believe. Jesus Christ is only radical to those who don’t want to know him. And Christians are only radical if they keep their salvation to themselves. We have our mission field, our ministry, our message, and our marching orders — “Go to all, preach to every.” Nothing else in this life we inhabit matters. Let’s pray!