

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 13:1-9

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This story of the murder of some Galileans by Pilate and the destruction of a number of people when the tower collapsed in the wall of Jerusalem near the pool of Siloam is a story for which we have no other historical records from the ancient world. Nevertheless, it is clear that the people who came to speak to Jesus about this massacre were highly offended and shocked at this action by Pilate. This was grounds for revolution.

In a later incident, in 35 A.D. shortly after Jesus' death, Pilate had his soldiers and cavalry attack a group of Samaritans who had gathered at the base of Mount Gerizim to go up on the mountain. He killed many Samaritans who were simply trying to climb the mountain as an act of devotion. The man who was leading them was a little bit of a kook and may have had some kind of rebellion in mind, but there is no evidence of that. The Roman legate in Syria, Vitellius, was so offended by what Pilate did that he reported him to Caesar. Pilate had to return to Rome to report directly to the Emperor about what he had done because there was such offense in Galilee, and especially in Samaria, at his action. Thus, we know Pilate did the kind of thing reported in Luke 18:1-9, even though we don't have any historical records of Pilate having attacked Galileans.

The Galileans Pilate is accused of massacring in Luke were probably sacrificing in the Jerusalem Temple. It's very unlikely that they would have been sacrificing at the temple on Mount Gerizim, which was the Samaritan temple. In all probability this was a group of Galileans who came to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices and to participate in a religious ceremony. For some reason that we don't know, Pilate attacked them and killed many innocent Galileans who were simply there for a religious observance.

The first sentence is therefore told with a tone of scandal and offense. This isn't just an objective account. This is an account of a major offense by Pilate. There is horror at this. For the people of Judea and for people who would be telling this story in Luke's time, this was a remembrance of the kind of offenses that led to rebellion and ultimately to the Jewish war. Rebellion was ruthlessly repressed by the Romans and the war resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Jews and the enslavement of even more. All of this history is in the background of this story.

This story is part of a motif that runs throughout the Gospel. Many people thought that Jesus was the Messiah who would establish Israel as an independent state. Clearly what was in the minds of the people who were speaking to Jesus was the expectation that they were giving him grounds to lead the people of Israel in revolt against Pilate. He did not do that.

Instead he used this as an occasion, according to Luke, to get people to think about their *own* offenses and about their *own* being subject to God's judgment. He asks them, "Do

you think because these Galileans suffered in this way because they were worse sinners than all the other Galileans?" Well of course not. Jesus uses this as an occasion to get people to reflect on their own guilt and possible imminent death.

The impact of all three stories—the Galileans, the people in Jerusalem who died when the tower fell, and the fig tree parable—is to call on Jesus' listeners and Luke's listeners to stop procrastinating and to start producing fruits of the Spirit immediately because your life is short, and you don't know when something may happen that will end your life. The impetus of these three stories from Jesus is to reverse the expectation that the way in which people will be set free is by a revolt against the Romans because of their ongoing atrocities, and instead to focus on how we need to reorder our own lives. What can we change about our behavior that will in turn bear fruit for the kingdom of God?

The impact of this story is to redirect the audience's political rage from condemnation of the Romans to reflection on their own guilt. Jesus is encouraging his listeners then and now to get with it right now and stop putting off getting their lives in line and making as much of a contribution to the welfare of others as possible.

Jesus' response is tough. "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all the other Galileans? No! But unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

And what about the folks who were killed when the tower of Siloam collapsed? Apparently what happened was that a part of the wall in Jerusalem had deteriorated. Some blocks fell out and the whole tower came crashing down. A number of people were killed—18 people according to this story—and Jesus' question is, "Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem and that was the reason why they were singled out for this tragedy? No, it doesn't have anything to do with that. Everybody is subject to God's judgment."

The parable of the fig tree is also hard headed. A landowner—clearly one who could be compared to God—is fed up with the fig tree not producing any fruit and says "Cut it down!" The servant pleads for the tree, "Give it another year." The landowner agrees to give it another year. But if it still doesn't produce fruit, it will be cut down.

This story is reminiscent of the teaching of John the Baptist that the trees that don't bear fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire and burned. Jesus here is speaking as a prophet of the kingdom of God. He is calling on people to repent now, to turn their minds around and to start thinking in a different way in relation to the government of God in the world, and to start bearing fruit *now*. This is a story where Jesus is tough on his listeners. Jesus is stating a fact of life. We have an opportunity to bear fruit for the kingdom of God, and that time is now. And if we don't, judgement.