

Luke 12:54-13:9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 12 verse 54 to chapter 13 verse 9. He also said to the crowds, when you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, a shower is coming, and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, there will be scorching heat, and it happens. 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? And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer puts you in prison. I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny. There was some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices, and he answered them, do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?

No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. 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? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. And he told this parable, a man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it, and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?

And he answered him, sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then, if it should bear fruit next year, well and good. But if not, you can cut it down.

In the concluding verses of Luke chapter 12, Jesus observes that people can read meteorological signs, but they can't recognise the times in which they are living. It's imperative that they learn to interpret the present time, to see the signs. The immediate signs in that context are those of the divisions and families mentioned in verses 52 to 53. These foreshadow what's going to happen in the future, this great division of judgement. The Son of Man is going to come, and they won't be prepared for his advent. From speaking of interpreting the signs, Jesus moves to speaking of judging what is right. The theme of judgement is important here. Recognising the signs, they should appreciate that they are hastening towards the time of reckoning. A similar image to the one that Jesus uses here is found in Matthew chapter 5 verses 21 to 26, when it is related to the commandment not to murder.

But here it seems to have a different purpose. In speaking about settling with the accuser, Jesus is making a different claim in this context. Jesus calls his hearers to make every attempt to settle with their adversary before being brought to judgement. They should recognise the signs of imminent judgement in Jesus' ministry, and get right with God before his judgement falls.

[3 : 02] As in the case of previous interruptions, such as the man from the crowd in chapter 12 verse 13, or Peter in verse 41 of that chapter, Jesus takes the statements of those bringing up the actions of Pilate as a springboard for developing his discourse. The people whose blood was mingled with the sacrifices were Galileans, a fact that is repeated three times. This brutal act on Pilate's part isn't recorded elsewhere, but it is in keeping with other things that history records of Pilate.

Jesus, of course, is another Galilean whose blood will be shed as a sacrifice by Pilate, so maybe there's something going on there. The warning that they will all likewise perish is probably looking forward to the events of literal judgement that will come upon Jerusalem in 1870, where the blood of the slain will fill the temple, and where there will also be falling masonry.

In discussing these two events then, Jesus is highlighting some of the signs of their own times, signs that point to a judgement that is far more serious to come. A judgement that will fall upon the nation more generally, not just upon a few individuals within it. Jesus speaks of the 18 people who died in the collapse of the Tower of Siloam, which is an interesting detail because the woman in verses 11 and 16 had 18 years of an infirmity.

While I am unsure of the significance of this particular unusual number, at the very least it might serve to connect these two stories together. When we see disaster befalling some other person, self-righteousness and our temptation to explain events neatly tempts us to attribute negative outcomes to things that people did wrong, and positive outcomes to things that people did right. But Jesus stresses that the Galileans and the 18 in the Tower of Siloam couldn't be distinguished from others in such a manner.

Others in Galilee and others in Jerusalem are every bit as worthy of perishing in such a manner. Elsewhere in the Gospels, the fig tree serves more explicitly as a symbol for the nation of Israel.

[5 : 02] Jesus here seems to be the patient keeper of the vineyard, seeking to delay judgement upon the nation and its temple. Here the fig tree faces imminent destruction, but it is only the mercy of the vine dresser that allows it to remain, and only for a few years longer. If it doesn't bear proper fruit, it will be destroyed. The parable, of course, would remind people of Isaiah chapter 5 and the song of the vineyard. Isaiah chapter 5 verses 1 to 7.

Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines. He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and chewed out a wine vat in it. And he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.

What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured. I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste. It shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up. I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting. And he looked for justice, but behold bloodshed, for righteousness, but behold an outcry. God's mercy allows Israel to hold on for now, but if they do not produce fruit soon, destruction is imminent. A question to consider. What are some notable signs of cultural decline and imminent judgment to which we should be alert?