

## “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”

Luke 13:1-9

As Jesus continued His journey toward Jerusalem, some people in the crowd wanted to know His view of what happened to the Galileans who were cut down by the Roman soldiers as they were sacrificing their lambs for the Passover Feast.

The Judeans from southern Israel who asked Him this probably thought that the Galileans from northern Israel deserved this suffering, and God punished them justly. (Those from southern Israel, especially those from the immediate region of Jerusalem, thought of the Galileans as second-class citizens. They were the “down-staters” to Jerusalem’s Chicago.)

Or possibly, some in the crowd wanted to “elicit a strong rebuke against Pilate and the Roman occupation of Israel.”<sup>1</sup> There was a great deal of thought in the crowds about wanting the Messiah to re-establish the nation of Israel and restore the land to the glorious peace and prosperity of the days of David and Solomon.

But Jesus speaks not of Pilate’s sin, but of the sin of the Galileans – not just the ones who were killed, but of all Galileans and of all the “righteous” people in Jerusalem. These people who were cut down by the Romans were deserving of death, but no more than any of you, He says. He tells the

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<sup>1</sup>Just, *Luke*, 533.

crowd that these people were not worse sinners than the others. They were no worse than you.

We turn on the news and see suffering and horror and death. We see it all across the world. We see it in Quincy. The unbelievers who die in Syria or Iraq or Afghanistan, are they more under God's wrath and judgment than the unbelievers of Quincy? No. The believers throughout the Middle East and Africa who have been persecuted and oppressed and driven from their homes, whose churches and homes have been destroyed, who have been tortured and killed; have they done something that puts them out of God's favor? Is it just that we believers of Quincy are more favorably disposed to God? No. What they deserve and what we deserve is the same as what those unbelievers have received. All sinners deserve death and hell.

When we view suffering or hardship in this life as a random punishment from God, we are generally viewing reality completely backwards. God is the One who rescues us from harm and danger, sin, and every evil. Luther had such a wonderful understanding of this. He once said in a sermon (I referenced this in Bible class recently), Luther said: "even though God does not want to assault and torment us, the devil does, and he cannot abide the Word. He is by nature so malicious and venomous that he cannot endure anything which is good. It irks him that an apple should be growing on a tree; it pains and vexes him that you have a sound finger, and if he were able he would tear everything apart and put it out of joint.

...Therefore he too does not rest...And if our dear God were not guarding us through his angels and we were able to see the devil's cunning, conspiring, and lying, we should die of the sight of it alone, so many are the

cannon and guns he has ranged against us. But God prevents them from striking us.”<sup>2</sup>

Although hardship and even tragedy do occur, we must remember that only through God’s patience and long-suffering have we been allowed to live this long. Only because the Lord is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, as Scripture repeatedly says, are we able to face the difficulties of this life with the sure hope and confidence of the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting.

The critics of Christ and His Church love to call into question how a “loving God” could tolerate such evil in the world and allow “bad” things to happen to “good” people. The answer is pretty simple. It should not surprise us when the sons of Adam who have rejected the love of God embrace this evil world, do the devil’s bidding, and do harm to their neighbor. It should not surprise the children of Adam that the children of Adam grow old and die. God told Adam, “If you eat of this tree, you will surely die.”

Why is there evil and suffering in life? It’s not God’s fault. When we see outrageous suffering, when we see loved ones, faith Christian friends and loved ones suffer and die, we cry out, “This is not how it should be! This does not seem right!” God agrees with you. This is not how it should be. This should not seem right. Your understanding of the situation would be correct. Death should never seem right. When God created this world, the world as we see it right now was not His plan. Suffering should never seem right. Death should never seem right. Death is the wages of sin, and we are Adam’s children.

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<sup>2</sup>LW 51:206

be, which is why our Father in heaven provided the answer for our distress. He sent His Son to do what Adam could not or would not do.

That is the promise of the New Covenant which Christ made with us and sealed with His own blood. He has placed Himself between us and the torments Satan desires for us. He is our fortress and our shield.

Like those Galileans killed by Pilate or the men who died when the tower fell at Siloam, or those millions of Christians who have lost their lives in the Middle East and North Africa over the past centuries. Because of our sin, if God were only a God of justice, He would have struck all of us down and cast all of us into the pit of hell for being steeped in sin from our birth, because that is what we deserve.

Instead, God shows that He is not only a God of justice, but He is most rightly defined as a God of mercy and grace. Those are His dominant attributes. And He has most clearly shown this by sending His Son to stand between us and the torment and death we deserve. Christ experienced it for us. As we Lutherans love to sing, “A Mighty Fortress is our God.” (We just sang it two weeks ago.) So also, we just sang “Rock of Ages, cleft for me; let me hide myself in Thee.”

He continues to protect us and rescue us, so that when the time comes that God does call us out of this life, we will feel, not the wrath and judgment upon our sin (although that is what death is – the wages of sin), but we will experience the fullness of the promises made in Christ. So, St. Paul says, “whether we live or whether we die, we do so to the Lord.” And we are forever, here and in eternity, under His protection. A mighty fortress is our God. Amen.