

“IMMINENT PERIL”

I. Introduction

- A. You probably heard about the false alarm that was raised in the state of Hawaii last month.
1. What was supposed to be a test of the state’s emergency alert system was mistakenly sent out as real alert, warning that a ballistic missile was headed Hawaii’s way.
 2. The public was not made aware that this was an error for about 30 minutes.
 3. Now try to imagine what it would be like to be in that kind of situation, a situation where you know that imminent peril is headed your way.
 4. I think that if somebody told you that there was something that you could do to escape that impending threat, you would listen very carefully to whatever they had to say.
- B. This text from Luke’s Gospel contains that kind of message.
1. It sets forth the way to escape from the imminent peril that is hanging over the entire human race.
 2. In these verses, Jesus says that unless we do two things we will perish in the face of the coming judgment.
 3. Unless we repent of our sins, we will be destroyed.
 4. And unless we produce fruit in keeping with repentance, we will be undone on the last day.

II. Unless You Repent

- A. Our passage picks up in the midst of a section where Jesus is teaching the crowds about the need to be ready for the day of judgment.
1. Luke tells us that some of the people who were present in the crowd brought up a current event that seemed to relate to the things that Jesus was talking about.
 2. They pointed to an instance where the Roman governor Pontius Pilate had a group of Galileans slaughtered while they were offering their sacrifices.
 3. Perhaps the people in the crowd thought that Jesus would take a special interest in this tragedy since he was a native Galilean himself.
 4. This is the only reference that we have to this incident, which means we are in the dark about most of the details.
 5. Why did Pilate have these people killed?
 6. Had they done something that he perceived as a threat?
 7. Were they murdered in the temple, or were they offering sacrifices in some unauthorized location?
 8. Were they orthodox Jews, or were they part of some sect?
 9. We do not know the answers to these questions.
- B. What we do know is that Jesus used the mention of this incident to point out an error in people's thinking.
1. Many Jews in that day thought that victims of great calamities were being punished by God for their great wickedness.
 2. This is the same line of reasoning that was used by Job's friends throughout that Old Testament book.

3. For example, Bildad the Shuhite explained the tragedy that took the lives of Job's children by saying, "If your children have sinned against [God], he has delivered them into the hand of their transgressions." (Job 8:4)
 4. People still have a tendency to think along these lines today.
 5. Whenever someone experiences great trouble or intense suffering, there can be a suspicion that the person has done something to bring the adversity upon himself.
 6. When some kind of catastrophe strikes, people sometimes wonder if it might be a judgment from God.
 7. There were a couple prominent evangelicals who said this about the 9/11 attacks, suggesting that they were a judgment on America for its apostasy and its gross immorality.
 8. While the broader culture found that suggestion to be outrageous, there is something about it that rings true for Christians.
 9. We know that there is no denying that America has become quite decadent.
 10. We know that God is a God of justice.
 11. We know that God is in control of everything that takes place in this world.
 12. Nevertheless, Jesus's teaching in this passage makes it clear that it is a mistake to interpret all of the troubles and tragedies that befall people as judgments for specific sins.
- C. Jesus does not say that the Galileans who were slaughtered by Pilate were without sin.
1. Instead, he says that it is wrong to conclude that this tragedy marked them out as worse sinners than any of their neighbors.

2. Jesus underscores this by referring to another tragedy that was well-known to the people in that crowd, a tragedy in which eighteen people were killed when a tower near Jerusalem's south and east walls collapsed on them.
 3. Jesus says that the people who died in that accident were not worse offenders than the other inhabitants of Jerusalem.
 4. In both instances, the harm that befell these people was not the result of their specific sins.
 5. Of course, there are times when we can see a clear connection between the sins that people commit and the consequences that naturally follow from those sins.
 6. For example, when a drug addict dies from an overdose, it is pretty clear that he brought his death upon himself.
 7. We can see the relationship between cause and effect in that kind of situation.
 8. But there are other times when troubles and tragedies come upon people through no fault of their own, times when the relationship between cause and effect is not evident to us.
 9. There are reasons why such things happen, but we are not privy to those reasons.
- D. Jesus's teaching in this passage tells us that instead of trying to speculate about the reason behind tragic occurrences, we should see them as warnings that are directed to all of us.
1. When we hear about some disaster, we should not look upon the victims as more worthy of judgment than we are.
 2. We need to remember that apart from Christ we all stand guilty before God.

3. Remembering this keeps us from asking questions like, 'Why do bad things happen to good people?'
 4. If we are going to ask anything, we should ask questions like, 'Why don't bad things happen to all of us all of the time?', or 'Why do so many good things happen to bad people?', or 'Why does the Bible tell us that the bad things that happen to Christians are made to work for our good?'
 5. It is not a mistake for us to think that there is a connection between the tragic events that take place in this world and God's moral order.
 6. It is just that the nature of that connection is not what we are inclined to think that it is.
 7. Tragedies are not instances of God meting out judgment for the specific sins of certain individuals or certain groups of people.
 8. Instead, they are indications of the fact that God's judgment is hanging over our entire fallen race.
 9. This is why Jesus says to the crowd, "unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."
- E. We should not take those words to mean that God forgives our sins on the basis of our repentance.
1. The only basis of God's forgiveness is the finished work of Jesus Christ, and the only way that we can lay hold of God's forgiveness is by placing our faith in Christ.
 2. That being said, the Bible makes it clear that saving faith is always accompanied by repentance.
 3. This means there is no forgiveness of sins without repentance.

4. God produces both faith and repentance in the hearts of all of those whom he draws to Christ.
 5. This leads J.C. Ryle to declare that "There never was a pardoned man who was not also a penitent. There never was one washed in the blood of Christ who did not feel, and mourn, and confess, and hate his own sins."
- F. Repentance is not just the general acknowledgement that you are a sinner.
1. Nor is it a matter of feeling bad when you experience the negative consequences of your sin.
 2. Nor is it something that you only do at the time of your conversion.
 3. Consider what the Westminster Confession of Faith tells us about what is involved in repentance unto life: "By it, a sinner, out of the sight and sense not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature, and righteous law of God; and upon the apprehension of his mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavoring to walk with him in all the ways of his commandments." [WCF 15.2]
 4. Repentance means acknowledging your sin, hating your sin, confessing your sin, and turning away from your sin.
 5. And as Martin Luther asserted in the first of his Ninety-five Theses, the whole of the Christian life is a life of repentance.
 6. For as long as you live in this world, you will have sins to confess, to deplore, and to turn away from.
 7. Make sure that you keep doing that.
 8. Don't presume on the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience.

9. Don't forget that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance. (see Rom. 2:4)

III. Unless You Bear Fruit

- A. We turn now to the second part of our passage, where Jesus tells a parable to illustrate the other thing that we need to do in order to avoid the impending judgment.
 1. The parable is about a man who planted a fig tree in his vineyard.
 2. Jesus explains that this man grew weary of keeping the tree when it failed to produce any fruit.
 3. When his patience reached an end he instructed his vinedresser to cut the tree down.
 4. But the vinedresser implored him to grant a stay of execution.
 5. He proposed that the tree be given one more year.
 6. And if, after receiving the vinedresser's special attention, the tree still did not produce any fruit, then it would be cut down.
- B. This parable draws upon imagery that is used at several points in the Old Testament.
 1. One passage that especially comes to mind is Isaiah 5, where the Lord describes Israel as a well-tended vineyard that produced nothing but worthless and disgusting fruit.
 2. This background tells us that Jesus's immediate focus in telling this parable was upon his fellow Jews.
 3. As God's covenant people, they had been given many wonderful blessings.

4. They should have been producing the fruit of righteousness, but they were not.
 5. As a result, they were given one last chance.
 6. They were given a brief period time to respond to the gospel before judgment would fall upon the whole nation, the judgment that came when Rome destroyed Jerusalem and its temple in A.D. 70.
- C. The basic lesson of this parable is that God expects proportionate returns for the spiritual privileges that he bestows upon people.
1. This is a sobering thought for us to ponder.
 2. As members of Christ's church in this particular time and place, we have been given much.
 3. Think of the access that we have to God's Word, to gospel preaching, to the sacraments, to public worship, to the fellowship of the saints.
 4. Many believers from other times and other places would be shocked to see all that we have available for the building up of our faith.
 5. What are we doing with all of these opportunities?
 6. What kind of fruit are we producing?
 7. We need to remember what Jesus said in the previous chapter of Luke: "Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required."
- D. Of course, this parable is not saying that we are saved on the basis of our good works.
1. That would be a direct contradiction of the gospel message.

2. What Jesus is saying is that we are saved for good works, saved to produce good fruit.
3. Paul says the same thing in Ephesians 2, where he writes, “we are [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Eph. 2:10)
4. The apostle John says something very similar in his first epistle, where he writes, “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.” (1 Jn. 3:9)
5. In saying this, John does not mean that Christians stop sinning entirely.
6. That would contradict what he said in the opening chapter of that epistle about how the truth is not in the person who says he has no sin.
7. Instead, John is saying that a Christian’s life will not be characterized by the habitual practice of sinning but by the habitual practice of endeavoring after new obedience.
8. If God’s seed truly abides in you, it will produce good fruit.
9. The parable of the barren fig tree teaches the same thing, except that it does so negatively.
10. It warns that if you are not striving to live a holy life, you are in great danger.
11. The peril of imminent destruction hangs over you, and the time is growing short.

IV. Conclusion

- A. The fact that the day of judgment has not yet come tells us something about God's character.
 - 1. It is a confirmation of who God revealed himself to be when he caused his glory to pass by Moses in Exodus 34.
 - 2. The Lord is "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." (Ex. 34:7a)
 - 3. God is a God of patience and mercy, a God who takes no delight in the death of the wicked.

- B. At the same time, when God passed before Moses he also revealed himself as a God "who will by no means clear the guilty." (Ex. 34:7b)
 - 1. He is a God of perfect justice.
 - 2. He will not let sin go unpunished.
 - 3. This is why we have to be united to Christ to receive forgiveness.
 - 4. Jesus's death on the cross is the only satisfaction for sin.
 - 5. And if we truly are in Christ, who called himself the true and living vine, our lives will produce the fruit of persevering faith, ongoing repentance, and constant striving after new obedience.
 - 6. Is your life producing such fruit?
 - 7. Let us take heed to Paul's words in Galatians 6: "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life." (vv. 7-8)