

Time is Running Out for Israel, and You

Long before Messiah was born, God had repeatedly sent His Word to His sinful people, calling them to repentance. But they stiffened their neck, like their fathers before them, and refused to listen. So Yahweh responded:

¹² Go now to my place that **was** in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel. ¹³ And now, because you have done all these things, declares the LORD [YAHWEH], and **when I spoke to you persistently** you did not listen, and **when I called you**, you did not answer, ¹⁴ therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers, **as I did to Shiloh**. ¹⁵ And I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim (Jer. 7:12-15; cf. 2 Chron. 36:15-16; Neh. 9:26).

When Jesus, Israel's Messiah, had finally arrived, the Jewish people had a long history of rejecting the multiple warnings God had graciously provided. Israel not only had a long history of rejecting God's prophets, but of killing them. Jesus Himself testified:

³⁴ "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, *the city* that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her!" (Luke 13:34).

Jesus further testified back in **chap. 11 of Luke's Gospel**:

⁴⁷ "Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets, and *it was* your fathers *who* killed them. ⁴⁸ "So you are witnesses and approve the deeds of your fathers; because it was they who killed them, and you build *their tombs*. ⁴⁹ "For this reason also the wisdom of God said, '**I will send to them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and some they will persecute**, ⁵⁰ so that the blood of all the prophets, shed since the foundation of the world, **may be charged against this generation**, ⁵¹ from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the house of God; **yes, I tell you, it shall be charged against this generation**' (Luke 11:47-51).

"All the blood of the prophets" will be charged to the account of Israel's last generation – that generation of Jesus' day - because in the scope of redemptive history they have murdered the last prophet God has sent them (cf. Heb. 1:1-2). Note that Jesus here indicates that Israel's killing of God's prophets was not merely their hateful response to God **in the past**, but they will continue to kill God's prophets, including **the ultimate prophet of God** who is standing right in their very midst. In the book of Acts, Stephen rebuked the house of Israel:

⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, **whom you have now betrayed and murdered**, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it” (Acts 7:51-53).

The apostle Paul explained to the church in Thessalonica:

¹⁴ For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they *did* from the Jews, ¹⁵ **who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets**, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, ¹⁶ hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost (1 Thess., 2:14-16; cf. Luke 20:9-18).

Paul points out that the current generation of the Jews in his day is continuing to kill God's prophets and apostles, as did their fathers before them, **in an attempt to impede God's salvation**. But Jesus assures us that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against Jesus' church” (Matt. 16:18). The Book of Acts chronicles the church's certain and relentless expansion into Satan's kingdom in spite of the Jewish treatment of God's messengers like Peter, John, Stephen, James, the church as a whole, and finally the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul.

But if the Jewish people kill every messenger God sends to them, what are they going to do when they finally kill the last, ultimate prophet He sends them (cf. Deut. 18:15-19)? Further, what if that ultimate prophet, the final watchman at the gate, is God's own Son? The preacher to the Hebrews says:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² **but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son**, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power (Heb. 1:1-3).

The LORD said to Ezekiel the prophet:

The word of the LORD came to me: ² “Son of man, speak to your people and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from among them, and make him their watchman, ³ and if he sees the sword coming upon the land and blows the trumpet and warns the people, ⁴ then if anyone who hears the sound of the trumpet **does not take warning**, and the sword comes and takes him away, **his blood shall be upon his own head**. ⁵ He heard the sound of the trumpet and did not take warning; his blood shall be upon himself. But if he had taken warning, he would have saved his life (Ezek. 33:1-5).

The only question left for Israel in her final days was, did Jesus, the ultimate prophet of God, faithfully blow the trumpet and warn the people? Was Jesus a faithful watchman on the gate? Did He call God's people to repent before it was too late? Will their blood be on their own head or on

His?

It is clear that the Jews in Jesus' own day understood exactly what it meant when they cried out for Him to be crucified. Pilate even warned the Jews that they were about to murder their King – **Regicide!** (cf. **Matt. 27:17, 22; John 19:21-22**). But they would not relent so he publicly washed his hands of the matter and cried:

“I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.”²⁵ And all the people answered, “**His blood be on us and on our children!**”²⁶ Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified (**Matt. 27:24-26**).

We know God is indeed patient! Paul himself said of God:

This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins (**Rom. 3:25**).

Look how long God has tolerated the rebellion of mankind since the fall. How many generations have gone by and God has not wiped out the whole human race for their wickedness? How long do you think God's patience will last? Who among us knows the mind of the LORD and when He has drawn the line in the sand and said, “This far and no more?” We fiddle while Rome is burning; we party while the Vandals are at the gates. We act as if all is well when in reality we are destined for destruction! Oh, how little we have learned from Israel's example when they too cried out in foolish presumption of God's kindness and trusted those deceptive words:

‘This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.’ (**Jer. 7:4; cf. 1 Cor. 10:6**).

They mouthed words of hope and yet their heart was far from God. God responded:

“Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail.”⁹ Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known,¹⁰ and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are delivered!’ —only to go on doing all these abominations? (**Jer. 7:8-10**).

It is within this long tradition of God's mercifully warning His people by the mouths of His prophets that Jesus now addresses the crowd of Jews before Him. Their final days are quickly drawing to a close but God has once again shown His “Amazing Grace” that He has saved **the best for last** (cf. **John 2:10**).

Some in the crowd hoped to instigate a kerfuffle between Jesus and Pilate by drawing up once again all the raw emotions of a recent incident when Pontius Pilate had to put down an insurrection and several faithful worshipers got caught in the crossfire (**Luke 13:1**). It was the time of Passover and several Galileans had come up to Jerusalem to offer up their sacrifices to God when Pilate, in an attempt to keep order during a popular festival, killed several of those worshipers along with their intended sacrificial animals. The crowd obviously wanted to hear Jesus' interpretation of this tragic

episode, but as is usually the case, there seems to be much more to their interrogation of Jesus.

You will remember that Jesus had just warned them about the urgency of settling their debts before they must stand before the judge (**Luke 12:57-59**). But Jesus wasn't giving the crowd a lesson in civil law – He was warning them about standing before the ultimate Judge of the universe and giving Him an accounting of their lives before God – it is not wise to wait when salvation is offered you by God – “today is the day of salvation” (**2 Cor. 6:2; cf. Ps. 95:7-11; Heb. 3:7, 15; 4:7**); “it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (**cf. Heb. 9:27**); their might not be another invitation given! They must not take this “day of grace” for granted but put their faith in Jesus who has come to die for sinners.

But some in the crowd were not having it – surely they were ok before God. After all, nothing like what happened to those Galileans had ever happened to them! Whose to say the judgment of God will be all that terrible? You can hear the essence of their complaint in Jesus' response, “Do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered in this way?” (**Luke 13:2**). Do you hear their objection? Sure you do! You've all had the exact same objection!

How many times have you looked at someone in a moment of suffering and began to wonder what he or she must have done to deserve this? Or, perhaps you saw someone who was homeless, or poor, or injured and you begin to think inside that you are glad you have lived your life the way you have so that you didn't have to live the way this poor soul is having to live. After all, you made yourself the way you are. Right? To think that your world is all right and tidy because you are good and that the lives of others are messed up because they are not as good is not just a Jewish way of looking at life – it's a human way of looking at life.

We all want to be righteous and clean and holy and just, if not with God, at least with the rest of the world. The easiest and simplest route to feel that you are “in the right” is to just point out all the faults of everyone else around you. There will always be plenty of specimens of true fallenness because we are ALL fallen! You will never run out of sins to point out if that is what you enjoy doing in life – and some of you enjoy it a whole lot, believe me, I've had to sit and listen to many of you list the sins of your brothers and sisters! That's what was going on in the crowd standing before Jesus that day. They thought these Galileans must have been worse sinners than others because of what happened to them!

But there is another level, much deeper, to their objection! You can almost hear it right in the text! “Where was God when all this happened?” See **vv. 4-5** – “do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?” “No! I tell you unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” We hear it every time there is some unexpected tragedy or even just when life doesn't go our way. God must have been asleep on the job or turned away for a moment when Pilates' sword was unsheathed or when the tower at Siloam began to lean the wrong way. Whatever happened, God didn't come through in how we expected Him to come through.

The traditional logic of this objection begins with two assumptions: (1) if God is all good, He would want to want to secure the happiness, joy, peace, safety of all His creatures; and (2) if God was all powerful, He would be able to secure the happiness, joy, peace, safety of all His creatures. But whatever tragedy is being observed is supposed to be a clever counter of either these two

assumptions, therefore denying God's existence. If the tower killed eighteen citizens of Jerusalem then God must not be all good or He would have wanted to stop it OR God must not be all powerful or He would have been able to stop it. Either way, God is either not omnibenevolent or He is not omnipotent.

The problem with such thinking is that it is not clever at all! It intentionally ignores a far more obvious assumption about God's character namely, He is holy. Once we begin with God's holiness and then we understand our utter sinfulness, the whole world begins to look very different. Suddenly all the objections of such tragedies in life vanish. There are no more questions like where was God when Pilate slaughtered the Galileans with their sacrifices or when the tower of Siloam fell and killed 18 inhabitants of Jerusalem or when the terrorists flew planes into the World Trade Centers or when New Orleans flooded and many lost their lives or when my husband died or when my child was raped. When we understand what happened to our world when we as humans chose to sin and rebel against God – what we did to His beautiful and glorious creation by our transgression of His law then our questions suddenly become why was I spared from being slaughtered by Pilate's sword when I am just as much a sinner as the rest of those Galileans?

You see, we have all been blinded by just how terrible is our situation before God because God is regularly so gracious to us. Throughout my life I have never had someone come up to me and cry, “Why did God save such a wretch like me?” “Why would God show me grace?” Instead we presume God's grace. Sadly we think it is our job to sin and it is God's job to forgive! God's not doing His job when I'm not happy. He owes me an easy life without cancer, without the death of my child, without the loss of my job. If I have any of those things, the problem resides with Him!

We have forgotten that He is perfectly Holy and we are fully polluted, contaminated through-and-through with sin. We don't deserve another good day in His good creation. We all deserve the tower of Siloam to fall upon us all!

That's what Jesus is trying to remind the Jews standing before Him, as well as you who are standing before His Word this morning. If you think you are ok before God – that at least you are not as bad as your neighbor – think again! You will never be judged by God by how well you are doing compared to Joe or Jane next to you. You will be judged by God with whether or not you are as perfect as God is perfect (**Matt. 5:48**) OR whether or not you have done all things written in the Book of the law (**Gal. 3:10**). When you finally wake up from your daydreaming and realize you are much worse than you think you are, then you see that your only hope before a holy God is to “repent and flee to Jesus Christ” to wash you with His own blood and cover your whole life with the precious robe of His righteousness!

Far too many people live hugely unbalanced lives – they will spend all their life worrying about death in this life. They try and figure out how to prolong their life as long as possible, visiting their doctors concerning the slightest pain, worrying if this time they're going to hear the words they dread the most. But how much time do you worry about death in the life to come? How much time during the day do you spend concerning your eternal destiny and what you will do when you stand before the Judge of all the universe? Are you ready to face Him?

When we look at the tragedies like what the crowd brought to Jesus or Jesus' mentioning the falling

of the tower of Siloam, we see that they are not God's ultimate acts of judgment. If those things were God's ultimate act of judgment, none of us would be here. Rather, like all suffering and trials of life, they are God's acts of mercy and grace. How? How is it possible that the terrible events in our lives are actually God being gracious to us? Because every time we are awakened from our stupor and made aware of how fragile life is God is graciously giving us a precious moment to repent before it is too late. How late is it?

Jesus tells a parable in **vv. 6-9**. God often used the picture of a vineyard for His precious people. The most memorable is in **Isaiah 5:1-7; cf. John 15**. Picture God's people as an abundantly rich and beautiful garden with every imaginable luscious fruit abiding within. God provides every possible care and nourishment for His garden that not even a single branch is lacking what it needs to bear an abundant harvest. But no matter what level of care He gives to this certain tree, it refuses to bear fruit. All it is doing using up space and the nourishment in the soil that the other fruitful trees need (**v. 7**). The only good that will come out of this tree is firewood! Cut it down and throw it in the fire to make room for another.

Jesus Himself warned Israel in another place:

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits (**Matt. 21:43**).

In the parable, the vinedresser begs the owner of the vineyard to let him give a little more attention to this fig tree to see if he can't help wake the tree up (**v. 8**). If that works then the owner of the vineyard now has a tree producing good fruit. If it doesn't work, then the tree can be made into firewood (**v. 9**). Jesus' point is clear: He has been sent to His own people, Israel. They have a little more time to respond to God's offer of salvation. But like John the Baptist warned earlier, "the axe lies at the root of the tree" (**3:9**) and God is about to cut the tree down to make room for another.

At this point, the parable ends abruptly as if to offer you, the reader, the chance to now decide what YOU are going to do with Jesus! We all know what Israel chose to do with Jesus and what happened to them as a result. But they are for the world an example (**1 Cor. 10:6**), screaming out to us all, the way the rich man did from Hell asking Abraham to send Lazarus back to warn his brothers to do everything they could not to come here (**Luke 16:19-31**). What will you do with Jesus?

Yes life is very hard and often filled with tragic moments we all wish would not take place! But mankind has no idea just how tragic life can become when you - the sinner - fall into the hands of the living God. Don't let the tragedies of this life cause you to make an even more fatal mistake by refusing the offer Jesus extends to you today by His grace! While today is still today, hear His merciful offer and come:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (**Matt. 11:28-30**).

Amen!

-SDG-