

PARABLES, “THROUGH PEASANTS EYES!”

Study 31, Pilate, the Tower and the Fig Tree. Part II, Luke 13:1-9

1. Jesus assumes that the informers are trying to initiate a discussion on the relationship between suffering and sinning. Yet the intent of the informers is not stated. If we would read the account backward and supply the missing motive from the answer, then we would read the account forward from the original political stance and understand it as a complete surprise. An atrocity story is told, Jesus is expected to denounce the Roman Overlords. He does not, he opens the question of sin and suffering and the call for them to repent! Political enthusiasts struggling for this concept of justice do not ordinarily take kindly to such a call. The brief reference to the question of the relationship between sin and suffering is a bridge to the conclusion that focuses on repentance.
2. On the topic of sin and suffering, the text gives a double renunciation of a one to one relationship between them similar to the account of the man born blind in John 9:1-3. The popular opinion is there that the man is born blind due to the sin of either himself or his parents. Jesus denies both. In Luke 5:19, Jesus addressed the paralyzed man on the bed and announces the forgiveness of sins. Jesus seems there also to be speaking to the same mentality. We assume that the paralyzed man has been told of his condition because he is a sinner. Thus healing cannot be accomplished until he is assured of forgiveness of his sins. In reference to this text, the scholar Edersheim makes the intriguing suggestion that the 18 killed by the tower were working on Pilate's aqueduct, much to the horror of the local population. Thus if some masonry had fallen on such workmen, the entire countryside would assume that this is God's judgment for their collaboration with the project. This suggestion is intriguing because it relates to the two illustrations of Pilate. Some such background may well have been the context of the falling stonework. Yet speculation is pointless. The text clearly affirms that in both cases (in the opinion of Jesus) the suffering of those involved cannot be traced to their sins.
3. The movement of these illustrations are significant, they ask, What about the suffering of national heroes struck down by their enemy? Jesus answers,

“What about the suffering of those whom God strikes down in the falling of a tower?” (There is no category of fate or chance in the Bible). The understanding of God’s will and knowledge precludes it. (Not even a sparrow falls w/o God being aware of it). Jesus refused to discuss the suffering of the politically oppressed w/o broadening the discussions to other types of sufferers. Those who suffer political oppression are the only ones who assume theirs is the only one that matters. Then a crass indifference may develop to the suffering of others around them, particular of a non-political nature. The incisive thrust of Jesus response does not allow for such a narrowing of the discussion, irrespective of the grim nature of the political oppression presented.

4. In the first stanza we read of sinners, then in the third of ‘debtors.’ The same shift can be found in various versions of The Lord’s prayer, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive those who trespass...” (Matt. 6:12). And the same prayer is recorded likewise in Luke 11:4. Marshall observes that the presence of these two words demonstrates a Semitic background to the story. Simply stated, the first (debts) are the believers’ unfulfilled duties in discipleship and obedience; the second (sins) are the overt evil acts that the believer commits. (Sins of omission and sins of commission).
5. It has long been noted that the Arabic word, “Hoba,” which occurs in both texts in the Old Syriac, carries both meanings. If we can assume an Aramaic background to this text (as we surely can in The Lord’s Prayer), then quite likely here also the original word would have been “Hoba,” in both texts. A sensitive translator in the Greek may have known the two-sided nature of the word and find no equivalent in Greek, so he gave us half of the content of “Hoba,” in the first stanza and the other half in the second. Irrespective of this suggestion, we do have this two-sided nature of evil expressed in the words for sin that are parallel in these verses. The evil of which the political enthusiasts are urged to repent is described first as sins, (verse 2) and then as debts, (verse 4)
6. The stunning climax of the twice-repeated refrain is the call for the listeners themselves to repent, lest they also perish. This unexpected thrust gives us an illustration of the courage of Jesus, and understanding of a part of the reason why he was rejected by this community, and a profound insight into a part of his response to the oppressed struggling for justice. When Jeremiah opposed the political climate of his day, he was protected by influential friends and his life was spared, (Jer. 26:24). So as far as we know, Jesus did not have powerful

friends who would or could protect him. Nicodemus' one feeble attempt illustrates the point in John 7:50. In studying Luke 13:1-5, with ME classes the present writer often had students marvel that Jesus was not physically attacked on the spot. This call for repentance is thrown in the face of political enthusiasts who stand in opposition to Roman oppression. Those who fight for a just cause can often assume that the struggle for this cause makes them righteous. It does not. (Luther on war and righteous assumptions). The more intense the struggle for justice the more oppressed tend to assume their own righteousness. This assumption of righteousness at times expresses itself as arrogance that refuses any criticism. The subconscious rational is very often that if our cause is righteous than we are righteous. "With all we have suffered, how dare you inflict more wounds on us by your criticism." Attitudes of this type have on occasion surfaced on both sides of the barb wire in the ME the past 30 years. Only the strong and brave can dare to endure the wrath of such oppressed and turn the attention away from criticism of the hated enemy to painful self-criticism with the warning. "Unless you all repent! You all will perish." In the synagogue in Nazareth there is a similar refusal on the part of Jesus to identify with the nationalism of his day. There he chooses two foreigners (one a woman) as illustrations of the kind of people who through faith will receive the benefits of the Kingdom. There the listening audience is so upset that they try to kill him. Here in Luke 13 we have no record of the audience' reaction, but we can assume similar hostility. Anyone who wants to recast Jesus as a political revolutionary must not fail to take seriously the confrontation here in Luke 13.

7. The same call for repentance can be seen in its deepest level to those who are outraged as Jesus refuses to reinforce their views. Jesus speech should not be read simply as a rejection of the nationalistic struggle nor as a concern for things, "spiritual," rather than political. Rather he seems to be saying at least, "you want me to condemn Pilate, I am not talking to him, he is not here, I am talking to you, Pilate or no Pilate. You must repent or all of you will be destroyed by those forces." Among those who struggle for justice, the attitude develops, "we are the angels and they are the devils." Blessed is the movement that is willing to listen to a courageous voice quietly insisting, "there are devils among us and angels among them." We must repent. He does not tell them to submit to Pilate. Jesus is not acquiescing to Roman oppression. Rather, he bravely demonstrates a deep concern for the people in

front of him who will destroy themselves and all around them if they do not repent.

8. Finally, what is the precise response Jesus is hoping to evoke from the nationalists who bring him the atrocity story? At least this; “We ask him to look at evil in Pilate. He wants us to see evil in our own hearts. We must repent. If we do not, that evil will destroy us.”
9. What are the theological motifs found in this Dominical response to the atrocity story? We can identify at least the following:
 - a. Sin is defined by both evil acts and duties unperformed.
 - b. There is a one to one relationship between sin and suffering. Easy theological judgments about the reasons for natural and political disasters must be rejected.
 - c. Any intense political movement must look deep within its own soul to repent of its own evil, lest it destroy itself and the very people it seeks to serve.
 - d. The compassion of Jesus reaches out to all who suffer, not only to those who are politically oppressed.

10. THE BARREN FIG TREE: (Luke 13:6-9)