

Thought for the Day 10th August - John Reed

Read Luke 13:1-5

What lessons can we learn from the explosion in Beirut last week?¹ I don't mean what political, geographical, or financial lessons, but what *spiritual* lessons are there in a tragedy like this?

Thankfully, I have not yet heard anyone suggest that this tragedy is somehow God's judgment on the people of Lebanon. But it wouldn't surprise me if that didn't happen at some point.

We have seen the drought and bushfires in Australia presented in some quarters as God's judgment on our nation for allowing abortion and same-sex marriage.² We have seen the felling of the twin towers in New York on 9/11 presented by some as God's judgment on America, because it was the centre of the "World government's enslavement of the World, through taxation."³ In fact, with any major disaster, whether it be "natural" (fire, flood, earthquake), "man-made" (bombings, wars, global warming), or "the jury is still out" (was this explosion an accident or a deliberate attack? Was COVID-19 actually developed in a laboratory somewhere?), it doesn't take long before someone, somewhere, pronounces that this is God's judgment on someone for something.

It is true that there is some Biblical basis for seeing God's judgment in disasters. But there is also strong Biblical evidence that we should be wary of seeing God's particular judgment on particular people in everything that goes wrong.

The simplest way I can think of to understand this is to look at the two towers. Not the ones in New York, but ones in Babel and at the Tower of Siloam.

The destruction of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11 is clearly God's judgment on mankind for seeking to "make a name for ourselves" (v. 4), as opposed to honouring God's name. There is a clear cause-and-effect: an act of rebellion against God, followed by a disaster.

This, tied in with numerous other examples, led to a generalised assumption that a disaster was the direct consequence of personal sin. So, for example, when Jesus encountered a man born blind in John 9, people asked: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" What Jesus replies I'll leave for you to read for yourself. The important thing to note is the assumption that is being made: this tragedy must be punishment for sin.

Which brings me to the tower of Siloam, in Luke 13. Jesus says (v. 4): "Those eighteen 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?" The implication is that his listeners are going to

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53668493>

² <https://www.nst.com.my/sports/others/2019/11/539851/rugby-star-says-australia-bushfires-gods-judgement-gay-marriage>

³ <https://famguardian.org/Subjects/Spirituality/Articles/GodsWordTwinTowers.htm>

say “Yes! Such disasters are punishments for sin!” But Jesus says (v. 5): “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

Interestingly, Jesus doesn’t say that people perishing *isn’t* a consequence of sin. He simply warns his hearers that they are as bad, if not worse than, the people in that tower, and that *they too* will perish – *unless* they repent.

That is, this disaster is not a direct punishment for the personal sins of the people in that tower – it is a part of bigger picture, that we live in a broken and fallen world, where we have all sinned (Romans 3:23) and suffering and death come to us all as a result. It may come in a tower collapse, or a bombing, or a flood, or an earthquake, or a war ... It could come in a thousand ways. But death stalks us all.

And disasters like this ought to remind us of our mortality. They also ought to call us to repentance. That is, to make our peace with God while we still have time.

It would be overstepping the mark to suggest that God is punishing the people of Beirut, or that he is punishing the south coast of NSW with floods now, or that he punished us with fires earlier this year. Not only would that be wrong, but we would be being callous, insensitive, and cruel into the bargain. And God has not called us to be like that. We ought not to rejoice in the sufferings of others and to judge them, because in the end judgment belongs to God alone (Romans 12:19). Rather, God has called us to be people of love and charity. He calls us to love our neighbour (Matthew 22:39), to show mercy even to our enemies (Luke 10:25-37), to do good and share with others (Hebrews 13:16), and not to turn our backs on those in need (Matthew 5:42).