

From this past week’s storms, to other natural disasters taking place around the country and across the globe, it seems we can’t escape the avalanche of bad news. On top of that, each new day brings word of personal disaster that people are experiencing. The unexpected death of a spouse or a parent. The implosion of a marriage or the loss of a job.

When disaster strikes, there is a predictable human reaction. We begin to ask questions. We want to know why something terrible happened. We can take that a step further and ask, “What did they do to deserve such a horrible experience?” And some people are more than willing to try to explain.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, a prominent televangelist was quick to say that New Orleans deserved it because of their high degree of sinfulness. (“Where does that leave Las Vegas?” I wondered at the time.) That’s a nice, tidy theory. But is it true, according to Holy Scripture? Is that how we are supposed to interpret disaster when it strikes? Let’s take a look at the beginning of Luke chapter thirteen for answers.

Some people came to Jesus, reporting an ugly incident that had taken place in which Pontius Pilate apparently had some Galileans put to death. This was just an awful situation and extremely provocative politically. But see how Jesus gets to the heart of the matter? He discerned that this story was being reported to him so that he could affirm that ““those Galileans” had it coming” because “they” are way more sinful than “we” are, and then everyone could go on their way feeling better about themselves. Jesus meets that expectation head-on and says: “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” To reinforce his point, Jesus brings up His own disaster story; a quick account of a tower falling on eighteen people and killing them. Then he asks: “do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

Jesus first refutes the theory that “they had it coming,” and then turns the entire discussion around so that it is directed at his listeners—which means, of course, it is directed at you and me. He’s not interested in getting into a discussion of “why do bad things happen.” He’s interested in where you are at spiritually. He knows that we get hung up on the wrong questions, so he cuts through all that and asks the right ones. The ones that matter most. Are you ready to have a change of mind and heart? Are you ready to turn around? Are you ready to go in God’s direction, confessing your deep need for forgiveness? What is it’s you that the tower falls on? What if it’s you that’s crushed in the earthquake? What is it’s you who has a massive heart attack and dies before they hit the ground? Are you ready for what comes next?

The person who is ready and well prepared is the person who knows that their sin ought to exclude them from heaven. The person who is ready has realized that there is only one hope; one path; one key that opens heaven's door; and that is the Son of God, Jesus Christ, put to death for the price of our sin and raised to life to lift us into heaven. Our Lord Jesus knows that we procrastinate and put it off and would do just about anything to avoid thinking about our own mortality...yet it is absolutely necessary. So, he sidesteps the perplexing theological questions about the existence of evil and "why does God permit such things to happen" and says, straight up, what really matters is whether or not YOU truly know your need for God. What really matters is whether or not YOU believe in His Son's sacrifice and risen life. If you reject God's mercy, you will inevitably die, but that's just the beginning. What comes next is a living nightmare, an existence where access to a loving God is no longer possible, and things like forgiveness and kindness are forgotten.

But that's not what God wants for his creation. That's why He placed the punishment for sin on His Son. It had to fall on someone, so God had it fall on Jesus instead of you and me. With that awful price paid for, God invites you leave sinful ways behind and to receive the gift of forgiveness. He invites you to change your mind about your old ways and to live in a whole new way. His Holy Spirit is at work at this very moment to guide you to Jesus, that you would trust Him and Him alone for a never-ending life with God. A person who is gifted with this faith is a person who can withstand disaster when it comes. Because of Jesus they can live with urgency, yet without fear.

There is a Japanese movie that I love called "Ikiru." The story is simple; a man who has a desk job in the local government goes through the same lifeless routine day after day until he learns he has stomach cancer. After absorbing the shock of this news, and after trying the "eat, drink, and be merry" approach to life and finding it empty, he latches onto a purpose that gives the rest of his days meaning. He decides to push a project through the system—the building of a children's playground—and he goes after this project with great urgency because time is obviously running out. He also goes after it without fear. He realizes this when the local Japanese mobsters try to prevent him from building the playground. They threaten him with death, and you see this look of awareness cross the man's face—their greatest weapon means nothing. Threatening to kill someone's who is terminally ill is not going to scare them very much. Not incidentally, the title, "Ikiru," is a Japanese word meaning "to live."

If you return to God and believe the good news about His Son Jesus, then you know what it really means to live. You will live with urgency, picking up the mission God has given you to complete, because no tomorrow is guaranteed. You will live without fear, because you trust that Jesus—who defeated death and came out of the grave—will be with you in this life and the next. And you will live through times of both delight and disaster with confidence that every heartbeat brings you that much closer to the endless, joyous Day of Heaven, thanks to Jesus Christ our Lord.

