

“The Barren Fig Tree”
Luke 13:1–9
Mark Cushman
April 16, 2023 • Sunday Morning Sermon

We will be looking at Luke 13:1-9 in this study but before I get to that I want to give a little bit of a lead in on this. In the past few weeks, our society has been shocked, especially our society at Briarwood with the tragic murders of six people in Nashville – three children and three adults at Covenant Presbyterian School. It's especially close to home for us because it's a fellow church in the PCA where these people were killed. It is a church where there's many people who have friends or family members who attend not only the church but the school as well. It's also the church where the associate pastor is the brother-in-law of our own, Frank Barker, III and Peggy Townes.

Many from our fellowship have watched those circumstances very closely, but that tragedy, interestingly in Middle Tennessee was followed by a couple of more that week, which were horrendous. The Nashville shooting was on Monday, and then on Wednesday of that week, 11 Armed service members in the Army were killed in a helicopter crash at Fort Campbell, which straddles the Middle Tennessee Kentucky border. Likewise, on Friday of that week, tornadoes blew through five counties in western Tennessee, killing 15 people. This morning there was a shooting down in Dadeville, where four or five young people were killed and over 20 were injured.

We read this again and again in our headlines in such tragedies are shocking as they should be. How do we respond to such tragedy and indeed to such evil in our society, especially when it affects our family and our friends? One pastor in Nashville wrote these words “Why would a good and loving God who is sovereign over every square inch of the universe, who knows the number of hairs on our heads, who said, ‘Let the little children come to me’ and who promised again and again to be our Shield, Protector and Defender, allow this senseless loss of life for these precious little ones? Why would the same God let faithful, loving, godly educators be gutted from their families and communities so prematurely?” Those are legitimate questions. Those are questions really everyone asks, certainly all Christians have in their minds and often they're not answered at all. We will know more when we step into the presence of the Lord Jesus, but on this side of heaven there are many questions like that, that we will never know, that we don't entirely understand. Frankly, if we did know the explanation, most of us don't have the brainpower or the capacity to begin to understand.

I appreciate what Janet Pascal said about Job after he lost his family members even if he knew why God did that, ‘for he would still have empty chairs at the breakfast table in the morning.’ So, in many ways we yearn for the whys to be answered, but in many ways, they wouldn't help entirely, but they're legitimate questions. Sadly, at this point, some people, even Christians, shake their fist at God and turn away. They run from God in their anger, rage and their disappointment, and they choose not to worship Him again. We've seen that actually in our family, in our extended family, where the loss of a daughter caused a mother to say, “I will never darken the door of the church again” and she never did. It can be very difficult.

Today we're looking at a passage which helps our perspective and I think hopefully will point us in the right direction as we wrestle with some of these issues. Now to the text of Scripture we'll be looking at in this study found in Luke 13.

Luke 13:1-9 says [1] *There were some present at that very time who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. [2] And He answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? [3] No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. [4] Or 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? [5] No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."*

[6] *And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. [7] And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' [8] And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. [9] Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"* May God continue to bless His Word as He works it into our hearts.

When you look through the New Testament and read about, especially in the Gospels the story of Jesus, you realize that He was under constant criticism. He had many enemies who early on desired to kill Him. He had many people were just friends that at times criticized Him. Even His disciples were not reliable followers for many years. It's interesting to see how He was constantly under criticism and this passage is no exception.

Here are some people in Jesus' audience who tell Him about what happened to some Galilee who had been brutally murdered, massacred, if you will, by Pilate, and that was the same Pilate that presided over Jesus's death. We don't know the details of the event, except that no doubt it was certainly notorious in the land of Israel. Many would have heard about it. The Galilean were known to be outspoken critics of the Roman occupation and of course, the Romans were legendary and well known in their brutality, in dealing with social and political unrest.

Here Roman soldiers invade a time of worship at the temple in Jerusalem and murder some Galileans. Likely the people would have been enraged and there's nothing they could do about it. It would have bred a very, very cynical response. Apparently some who were present were so filled with anger and rage that they asked Jesus about it in this text. Now, they were not making a simply, bland, philosophical question. They were actually seeking to incite Jesus, to have Him become outraged with the Romans in order to marshal Him. Many felt that in His Messianic role, He was primarily going to free Israel from Roman tyranny, and some were using that to feed to Jesus to incite Him. Others think that they were just using this situation to boost their own confidence in themselves. They were saying, so to speak, "what was wrong with these Galileans, that this happened to them in the temple? Maybe something was wrong. What do you think? Jesus." Whatever the case, Jesus didn't bite. He didn't go there.

In fact, what we find is that Jesus turns their attention to their own rage and self-righteousness. In fact, to press the point, Jesus goes ahead and adds the report of another tragedy in Luke 13:4-5. 'You want to talk about tragedy,' Jesus says and He describes a likely well-known story of 18 people upon whom a tower in the village of Siloam fell on them and they were killed. It was in Jerusalem, actually. We don't know again the details of that event. There's no doubt that it was historical and we don't know the why. Perhaps it was a product of shoddy construction. Perhaps there had been some kind of earthquake or tremor that caused the tower to come down. Either way, these two events, the murders, the massacres at the temple or the falling of this tower were tragic events, unspeakable tragedies for these families, for the people that were killed and for the communities around them.

Jesus challenges His listeners not to grow in their bitterness and rage, but to consider a different response to such horror and pain. He knows that their anger and rage embittered them and perhaps has driven them from God and yet He says to them in Luke 13:3 and 5, “No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” Make no mistake, Jesus is not being cruel here. He's not being abrupt, but He's warning them that not only might you die here, but you might experience that ultimate judgment – perish in the final judgment. Now, it's interesting to think that He's not inviting them to stop grieving. He's not criticizing them or telling them to stuff their anger. That's not the point. He's basically asking them to turn. That's what repentance means. It's a much bigger than simply accepting Christ and just repenting of their sin, but to turn from running away from God. Jesus isn't minimizing their anger and rage.

Jesus sees a message in every tragedy where people perish and it's this; all our lives are fragile, equally susceptible to such sudden, tragic endings, and we too will perish unless we turn back to God and repent. This is an important redirection that I think is extremely valuable in and informative to us in this simple little parable that comes. He tells of this parable in part to remind the people of His followers, to remind them of the grace, mercy and patience of God.

Vineyards, of course, were very familiar in ancient Israel and to the Jews. Apparently in this vineyard a fig tree was planted which may have been somewhat unusual. Usually, fig trees grew all out in the country and in the fields, but this particular fig tree was in a vineyard where it had much better surroundings. It had better soil. It probably had better fertilizer and it had better personal attention through the vine dresser from a single gardener. Then, apparently, for three years after growing, when it should have borne fruit, it didn't. So the owner of the vineyard said, ‘Come in and just chop down the fig tree. Don't let it use up the soil.’ But the vine dresser interceded and said “No, no, no, let's fertilize it for another year and if it doesn't grow figs, then we'll cut it down, but if it does, all the better.’ So the fig tree gets an extra year.

The takeaways from this parable, this simple little story, and are pretty obvious to me. Number one, the owner has planted the fig tree. It's his tree. I believe Jesus here is speaking of those of us, the Jews originally, and later, of course, the Gentiles, among whom the Gospel has been planted and who have enjoyed the means of grace and the blessings of the church. He's talking basically to us. We're a bunch of fig trees. We know the Gospel. We've embraced Christ. We've come to Him; we enjoy the fellowship of the church.

He is warning and advising us that, number two, the owner expects to find fruit. That is a message that's found throughout Scripture that fruit is the logical result of a person coming to Christ. We see it listed in various places, like even in Galatians 5 when it talks of the fruit of the Spirit which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The owner expects to find fruit as he should.

Thirdly, the owner is patient, but not permanently patient. He is patient. He's waiting. He's given it three years and there are people that tie all kinds of symbolism into the three years – the length of Jesus's ministry and other things. I don't think we have to go there necessarily, because all of us have been dealt very patiently with by God Himself. The owner is patient, but there will come a time when that patience will be over and He will bring His judgment. He's looking for fruit and unfortunately, He won't find it in some places.

Fourthly, the principle is that the vinedresser stands between us and destruction. Of course, Jesus is speaking about Himself as the vinedresser. That's precisely what Christ has done and continues to do. In His work on the cross He took the penalty for you and me. He paid the price so that by repenting of our sin and embracing Christ as Lord and Savior, we can have our sins forgiven. We can be clothed in His righteousness. It's a remarkable thing that He has done to

stand in the way of the vineyard owner, to say He will work on our behalf and He continues to intercede for us as God patiently waits for fruit to be produced.

Perhaps Jesus recalls His cousin, John the Baptist's word, where John basically said at all times, in good and bad, in easy and hard circumstances, in victories and defeats that Matthew 3:8 is true – produce fruit in keeping with repentance. How? This is very difficult to live in such a dark and evil world, such a violent world where there's so much lawlessness, loss of life, and so many tragedies. It is really difficult to stay steady in our faith, to repent and cling close to Christ in the face of unspeakable wickedness and tragedy in this world as with Pilate's massacre in Jerusalem, as with the tower in Siloam falling and killing 18 people, how do we deal with anger, rage and that tug that would pull us away from faithfully following the Lord Jesus Christ?

If you've not been tempted that way, just wait. If tragedy, heartache and difficulty has not hit your life yet, just wait. Times will come that will be difficult. Sometimes disappointment and pain in this world can be excruciating. At this point, I was reading a book by a pastor named Mark Vroegop titled Dark Clouds and Deep Mercy. He gives his testimony that over the years, he and his wife have struggled with the inability to bear children as they wish. At one point in his life, he mentions that they had a baby that came to full term. They named her Sylvia but shortly before the due date, the baby died. It was a tragic, heartbreaking event for this family. In fact, Vroegop writes, "I felt such piercing grief and sorrow it's impossible to fully describe. Pain and fear mingled together in a jumbled torrent of emotion. Thoughts about the future raced through my mind. Questions haunting me. Would my wife ever be happy again? What if we never conceived another child? How could I live with this pain while feeling the need to have it all together as I pastor a church? Would my marriage even make it?"

In pouring out his heart, we see the effect of that loss in his life. Such pain is deep, profound and life changing. It can be produced by all kinds of loss and not just murders and violence, but all kinds of deaths through divorces, business failures, loss of health, wayward children, and all the things that can crash into our lives and cause pain. For some at such times, it's just easy to drift away from God or turn away from God and be tempted to question His goodness, mercy and grace. Vroegop writes, "Following Sylvia's death, I poured out my heart to the Lord with desperate candor. I fought the temptation to be angry with God. I wrestled with sadness that bored a hole in my chest. In the midst of my pain, I begin to find words and phrases in the Bible that captured the emotions of my heart. Some leapt off the pages at me. **The Bible gave voice to my pain.**"

Perhaps you've been through dark times of loss of pain and suffering, and well-meaning Christians have come along and they've tried to help and you understand and you love them, but their words have fallen short. Perhaps they've tried to fix you and you don't want to be fixed. Perhaps they've shared Bible verses which seem more like a sock in the nose than words of comfort and sometimes their counsel may even fall short, seem kind of shallow. Then we come to Scripture, and I'll bet that during such times, you never got a card of sympathy in the mail that had Psalm 13 written in it. Consider the first four verses of Psalm 13.

Psalm 13:1-4 says [1] *How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?* [2] *How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?* [3] *Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,* [4] *lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him," lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.*

I'll bet you've never had a card that said that – a sympathy card that came to you in a time of darkness and loss, but God has written that to you for a time of darkness and loss. Psalm 13 is

an example of a Biblical lament, and the words almost seem inappropriate, especially to those of us that have been Christians for a long time. We may draw back from such words that are so raw and seemingly disrespectful and perhaps even blasphemous. You've read these passages before and perhaps wondered what's going on. Psalm 13 is a perfect example of a whole genre of Scripture which actually inundates the Bible, especially in books like Lamentations and Job. In fact, over half the Psalms are psalms of lament. They are just as inspired, just as inerrant as John 3:16 and Romans 8:28. They're just as powerful if we use them properly and they are designed to bless us.

One writer said that they bring voice to our suffering, that they help us navigate the wilderness of our grief. Pastor Vroegop writes, "I came to see lament as a helpful gift from the Lord, a rich but untapped reservoir of God's grace. Lament is how you live between the poles of a hard life and trusting in God's sovereignty. Lament is how we bring our sorrow to God." His book Dark Clouds and Deep Mercy is a really interesting read to see his analysis of Biblical laments.

What are laments? They are honest cries to God. They are words that we can adopt in prayer and adapt that affirm that this world is broken, but that God is powerful and God is faithful. Laments are a pathway, as one said, from heartbreak to hope. Now not all curses, rage and angry words against God are appropriate. I'm not saying that and that's not exactly what laments are. Vroegop said that they include exactly what you and I need to help us grieve, to help us recover and heal in our time of grieving.

Vroegop suggests that most laments contain at least four things, not all of them, but most do. The first is reading or praying Biblical laments turn us toward God. That's very important. Laments address God. They may be emotional. They may be direct. They may be urgent, but they definitely approach Him and it's crucial to begin here. Consider the lament found in Psalm 77. Asaph, the author of Psalm 77:1-2 writes *[1] I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, and he will hear me. [2] In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted.* That is a picture of a psalmist in the midst of a very dark time and we don't know what that is, but in a very dark time he's seeking to turn back to God. That's what that parable is about. Jesus is commanding that we repent, and that's to turn around and come back to Him. Biblical, immense laments turn us toward God.

Secondly, they express our complaint to God. Laments, don't vent, just self-centered rage. That's not what we're doing, but they address the disconnect that we struggle with, the disconnect between the way we know God is, in His mercy, wisdom, sovereignty and grace with the way it appears in my life right now. It's that disconnect that causes the angst, the difficulty and we appeal to God. We even complain to God. Complaint gives voice to our hard questions. Let's look back at Psalm 13. Psalm 13:1-2a says *[1] How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? [2] How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day?* He was complaining, he was struggling.

In Psalm 22, we find a complaint that Jesus used in the greatest lament of all time when He was hanging on the cross and He said, 'My God, My God, why has Thou forsaken Me?' in Psalm 22:1a. David continues in Psalm 22:1b-2, *[1b] Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? [2] O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.* He was complaining. It wasn't disrespectful. It wasn't mean spirited, but he was laying out his complaints before God. He was maintaining his humility, but he was honest. God loves our honesty.

Thirdly, Biblical laments help us ask boldly before God. Often laments come with a request. We may not know the exact why of the tragedy, but we remember God's character. We remember God's promises and we lay our requests before Him. We anchor our souls to God, so to speak. Psalm 13:3-4 says *[3] Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, [4] lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him," lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.* It's a request and Vroegop lists a number of requests that appear in the Psalms. In fact, seven Psalms contain a request that says 'Arise, O my Lord.' In Psalm 60, David says, 'Grant us help.' In Psalm 25, David says, 'Remember your covenant.' In Psalm 51 David says 'Blot out my transgressions' is his plea. In Psalm 28 he says, 'Don't be silent.' In Psalm 143 he says, 'Teach me.' In Psalm 35, it says 'vindicate me' and I could on and on with specific requests before God asking boldly. God loves to hear us ask. He loves to hear us pray.

Then fourthly, laments affirm our trust in God. You'll find that they often start out very raw and emotional, and they end up ultimately trusting God, express a trust in God, even in words of praise. We hear the words of trust, of rejoicing and singing here in Psalm 13:5-6 which says *[5] But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. [6] I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.* Again, David was turning his attention to God and ultimately expressing, 'Lord, I don't understand. I'm hurting like crazy, but I'm hanging on and I'm going to trust You.'

Pastor Reeder calls Romans 8, sort of the citadel of the book of Romans and in it, the apostle Paul is waxing eloquent about the great power, sovereignty, mercy and grace of God and the protection that He gives. The Apostle Paul himself suffered many difficulties in his ministry. He had friends that were killed. He was violently treated by evil men. He was stoned. He was whipped. He was opposed in city after city, after city. I promise you that the Apostle Paul understood the laments of the Old Testament. He probably had read the laments of King David, and I can prove it to you in Romans 8:35-37 when Paul says, *[35] Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? [36] As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."* (a lament from Psalm 44) *[37] No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.* The Apostle Paul found comfort in the laments of Scripture so much so that he included them in this profound message of triumph in Romans 8.

Here we affirm that God's promises will not necessarily end the pain of tragedy, of loss and of suffering, but they do give them purpose. They do declare that death, tragedy and loss are not the final word. In a sense, laments in Scripture, recapture our hearts. Life is not easy, and many of you reading this will have some very tragic events in your life that Satan and the world has used to draw you away from Him. Jesus would say to us, 'Don't let it do that. Come back to Me.' I have given you the words that you can use to be honest with our Heavenly Father, to pour out your hearts the way He wants you to do. If you want to study some more, Google Biblical laments and you'll find a number of articles. I don't necessarily commend them all, but it'll give you something to explore.

I want to conclude with the words of Joni Eareckson Tada today. Many of you know who she is. As a young girl she dove into the water, broke her neck, severed her spine and suffered being a quadriplegic. In her early twenties as she was gradually healing she was plunged into the pit of depression. She even said at one point, 'I tried to kill myself, but I couldn't because I couldn't move my arms and legs' and she wrote an interesting thing about laments.

In terms of her (Tada's) depression, she said, 'That is how I felt but after weeks in bed, I got tired of being depressed, and I finally cried out to God, 'God, if I can't die, please show me how to live.' It was just the prayer that God was waiting for. From then on, I would ask my sister to get me up, park my wheelchair in front of my Bible. Holding a mouth stick, I would flip this way and that, looking for answers through the Scripture, any answer. I sought the help of a Christian counselor friend who took me directly to the Book of Lamentations. He showed me the third chapter where Jeremiah writes, 'I am the man who has seen affliction, surely against me God turns His head again and again the whole day long.' I marveled, thinking, 'that's me.' It was amazing to learn that God welcomes our laments. I would eventually learn mainly through Lamentations and Psalms that nothing is more freeing than knowing that God understands. When we are in pain God feels the sting in His chest. Our frustrations in questions do not fluster Him. He knows all about them. He wrote the book on them and more astoundingly, He invites us to come and air our grievances before Him.'

What a wonderful analysis of the laments in Scripture. We all know the story of Job. It's remarkable that with God's permission, Satan was allowed to take from Job his family for all his children died, to take many of his possessions, to take his livelihood, and ultimately to take his life. Job is a series of laments, one of the most famous of which is found in Job 13:15, where Job is speaking of God, 'Though He slay me, I will hope in Him. Yet I will argue my ways to His face.' What a wonderful, intimate relationship with God – laying out his complaint before Him, yet you know the story at the end. Job 42 Job records that the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for friends and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.

Commenting on that passage in Job 42, songwriter, composer and singer Michael Card, who has done a lot of reading and studying in the area of Job and of laments, made this statement; 'The point of the Book of Job is not that he got his stuff back, but that he got God back.' That's precisely what Jesus is teaching in the parable of the barren fig tree. In times of violence and evil, when people are mercilessly slaughtered or times of natural disaster when towers fall and people are killed, we need to be humble and remember how vulnerable we are, but never let that drive us from our Lord Jesus Christ. Never let it drive us from the face of God, but be willing to turn, to repent, if you will, and come back to Him and enjoy our fellowship with Him because we live, frankly, in a watching world.

One writer says "we are the gazing stock of the world, and they watch you and me very closely, especially in times of difficulty and pain." We don't need to be fakes. We don't need to put on airs that aren't really true, but we do need to cling to Christ and that can have a profound impact among our family and friends for the glory of the Gospel and of Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, we thank You so much that You understand, that You care for us far more than we can possibly imagine. Thank You that You never leave us or forsake us, even though in times of difficulty we are tempted to pull away from You. Perhaps we find our relationship with You to be sterile and dry. We know that the dissonance, the sound, the distractions of grief and pain can be very powerful, but in the midst of that, Lord, let us draw back to You. Let us keep clinging closely, bringing You even our complaints, but also our praise and I pray that You would heal our hearts and work in us for Your glory, for we ask this in Jesus' name, and for His sake, Amen.