

ARE SOME PEOPLE MORE GUILTY OF SINS THAN OTHERS?

By Pastor's Francis Williams

Luke 13:1-5

When people are massacred at the hands of criminals or perished in natural disasters such as earthquakes or the wildfires in California, should we conclude that they are more guilty of sins than those who survived? There are people who believe that all suffering is related to personal sins. But is it true that the victims of the wildfires in California are more culpable than others? How might Jesus respond to this crucial issue? In Luke 13, Jesus recounts two different disasters that would help us understand how to respond to artificial or natural catastrophes.

The first incident is the massacre of the Galilean Pilgrims (vv.1-3). While Jesus was teaching the multitudes about His imminent return (Luke 12:35-59), some people arrived and informed Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices (Luke 13:1). These Galileans had apparently made the long trek from Galilee in the north to Jerusalem. While they were busily engaged in offering their sacrifices in the temple, they were suddenly cut down, upon orders of Pilate. Consequently, in some sense, the blood of these Galileans was mingled with their sacrifices. That Pilate was cruel, we know.

Luke does not tell us when or why this massacre happened. Certainly, there are all kinds of assumptions. We are told, for example, that the reported incident must have occurred in connection with the Feast of Dedication, and the reason Pilate had done this was that these men from Galilee were zealots, members of a nationalistic party that was openly and aggressively opposed to Roman rule. But all this is theory.

What is clearly implied is only this: the informers and/or the people who were crowding around Jesus did not interpret this incident as an illustration of Pilate's cruelty, but rather as evidence of God's displeasure with the slaughtered Galileans. Their reasoning was: the victims of Pilate's wrath must have been very wicked, indeed; otherwise, God would not have allowed them to be put to death in this fashion. Like Job's friends, they wanted to establish the view that this calamity was a judgment upon the sufferers for exceptional wickedness. This notion that personal disaster is the result of personal sin was deeply rooted in the consciousness of the Jew (Job 4:7; 8:4,20; 22:5; cf. Jn. 9:1, 2).

In response, Jesus condemns neither the Galileans nor Pilate but warns all those present of what must befall them unless they free themselves from their guilt (Luke 13:2-3). Repent or perish like the Galileans!

The second incident is that of the catastrophe at Siloam (vv.4-5). In order to emphasize the seriousness of the matter (repent or perish) still further, the Lord refers to another instance where people were overtaken by an extraordinary calamity, and declares that this occurrence, too, is no proof that these people were guiltier than the masses not visited by the calamity. The truth is, all are guilty, and those who do not repent in time are heading for a disastrous future.

The gospel is glad tidings but only for those who leave the way that leads to destruction and come to true repentance. Those who remain unconverted are heading for inexorable destruction. There are only two options, repent or perish. True repentance involves turning from evil and turning to God through Jesus Christ evidenced by good works (Matt. 3:1-10).