# Almost Too Late

Luke · Luke 13:1-5; Luke 13:6-9; Romans 2:4

## AT A GLANCE

In his first sermon at PBC, part of the Luke series, JC takes Luke 13 as a warning that must not be mistaken for background noise. Jesus refuses to read tragedy as a verdict on its victims and turns it on the listeners: repent. The fig tree's extra year is mercy, not optimism, and God's patience is meant to lead us home, not to make us comfortable.

- Other people's suffering is never a ledger of their sin; Jesus turns every conversation about someone else's disaster into a summons for our own repentance.
- We miss the urgency of the warning because we miss the depth of our sin, and we only think we are not that bad.
- God's patience changes nothing about the outcome. It is undeserved mercy, and presuming on it breeds entitlement that dulls gratitude and numbs us to sin.

> *"When God says repent, he is the one who is forgiving. It should sound completely different."*

## EXPOSITION

### Scripture engaged

Luke 13:1-5 — [1]Some people there with Jesus at that time told him about what had happened to some worshipers from Galilee. Pilate had them killed. Their blood was mixed with the blood of the animals they had brought for sacrificing. [2]Jesus answered, "Do you think this happened to those people because they were more sinful than all other people from Galilee? [3]No, they were not. But if you don't decide now to change your lives, you will all be destroyed like those people! [4]And what about those 18 people who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Do you think they were more sinful than everyone else in Jerusalem? [5]They were not. But I tell you if you don't decide now to change your lives, you will all be destroyed too!" (ERV)

Luke 13:6-9 — [6]Jesus told this story: "A man had a fig tree. He planted it in his garden. He came looking for some fruit on it, but he found none. [7]He had a servant who took care of his garden. So he said to his servant, 'I have been looking for fruit on this tree for three years, but I never find any. Cut it down! Why should it waste the ground?' [8]But the servant answered, 'Master, let the tree have one more year to produce fruit. Let me dig up the dirt around it and fertilize it. [9]Maybe the tree will have

fruit on it next year. If it still does not produce, then you can cut it down.'" (ERV)

Romans 2:4 — God has been kind to you. He has been very patient, waiting for you to change. But you think nothing of his kindness. Maybe you don't understand that God is kind to you so that you will decide to change your lives. (ERV)

## The argument

### Jesus Refuses to Read Suffering as a Verdict on Victims — and turns the question toward the one asking

The crowd brings Jesus two tragedies: Galileans killed by Pilate among their sacrifices, and eighteen crushed when the tower in Siloam fell. JC reads their logic off Jesus' reply. In a spiritual culture with a high view of God, suffering needed a reason, so the victims must have been worse sinners. Jesus answers no, and then redirects. One event has a villain, the other none, yet the answer is the same. JC hears Jesus saying: "They're sinners just like you are. And the consequence of sin, what you deserve as sinners, is such destruction. Therefore, repent." A debate about other people's calamity becomes a summons to the listeners themselves.

> **Insight —** *Tragedy among others is not a puzzle for us to solve but a mirror held up to our own need.*

### We Miss the Gravity of the Warning Because We Miss Our Own Sin — the crowd's error survives in the sincere

JC's diagnosis is that we do not think we need Jesus as much as "those people" do. He tells it against himself. As a teenager he bristled when the preacher kept saying "I'm a sinner"; it felt like overkill. He was a goody two-shoes who asked his parents for beer for the post-prom party and could not believe they would not trust him. Only God's mercy opened his eyes. Nor is he finished: preparing this first sermon, he wanted to be loved and respected. "As long as we do not understand the depravity of our hearts, we do not understand the gravity of the situation."

> **Insight —** *Seeing the seriousness of the warning depends on seeing the seriousness of our own hearts, and sanctification does not end that seeing.*

### The Vinedresser's Extra Year Is Mercy Without Optimism — patience is not slowness, and it is almost too late

In the parable of the fig tree, JC stresses that there is no logical reason to spare it. The tree has taken water, space and labor for three years, and it is the tree's problem, not a matter of timing. Yet the vinedresser says, one more year. "For no logical reason whatsoever, he's just like, hey, just one more year. That's how patient God is." JC insists the vinedresser is not hopeful: "There is no optimism. It's almost too late." He sets this beside the narrow gate and the axe laid to the root. Amid a week of horrendous events, with Christians crying "Jesus, please come," he reads 2 Peter 3:9: the Lord is not slow but patient.

> **Insight —** *Delay in judgment is not a sign that judgment is unlikely; it is mercy extended against every reasonable expectation.*

### Unreceived Patience Hardens into Entitlement — and entitlement robs us of joy and gratitude

Why do we not feel the urgency? JC's answer is that we become entitled to God's mercy. "When God is patient, it changes nothing. It doesn't change the outcome." He illustrates from a college squash class. A kind instructor kept saying "I got you," JC's apologies grew shorter, and then came, "By the way, you failed." He was livid, and only years later saw it was not the instructor's fault. He cites a psychology term, forgiveness entitlement: an offender forgiven again and again comes to treat it as normal, so that paying the price feels like the victim's cruelty. "We think that we deserve something better when, as sinners, what we deserve is destruction."

> **Insight —** *Repeated mercy, unreceived as mercy, quietly trains us to mistake grace for what we are owed.*

### When God Says Repent, It Is an Invitation from the One Who Forgives — the same word sounds different from different mouths

Repent sounds oppressive from a preacher, JC says, because the speaker is not the one forgiving. From God it is different: "I have forgiven you already. I'm offering you life instead of death." It means, "Walk with me, my child." He reads Romans 2:4, in the NLT and another paraphrase, to show God's patience and apparent silence as kindness meant to turn us from sin. The Titanic operator, in JC's telling, answered the final ice warning with "Shut up, I'm busy." JC asks whether we are too busy, too entitled, too dulled. "Please don't hear from me, this newbie at this church. Please hear from God."

> **Insight —** *Repentance is the response to a Father's kindness, not the price of earning it.*

### Cross-references

- 2 Peter 3:9 — the Lord's delay is patience, not slowness, wishing none to perish but all to reach repentance
- Matthew 7:13-14 — the narrow gate shows salvation carries no naive optimism
- Matthew 3:10 — the axe laid to the root shows the urgency behind the vinedresser's extra year

## DEVOTIONAL

A fig tree stands in a vineyard, drinking water, taking up ground, giving nothing back. Three years have passed. The owner's verdict is sound business, and nothing in the tree's record argues against it. Then a second voice, quieter: one more year. I will dig around it. I will feed it. Notice what the vinedresser does not say. He does not promise fruit. He does not say it will be

fine. He asks for time, and the time is the gift. We live inside that year. The towers still fall and the headlines still wound, and we ask where God is. The answer in Luke is not that the fallen were worse than the rest of us. The answer is that the ground we stand on is borrowed, and the one who lent it is not slow but patient. In JC's telling, a weary operator on a doomed ship held the warning in his hands and answered, shut up, I'm busy. It is easy to hear that and feel superior. It is harder to hear how short our own apologies have grown, how ordinary mercy has come to seem. But listen to the voice behind the word repent. It is not a foreman's. It belongs to the one who has already forgiven, who says, walk with me, my child. The kindness that spared the tree is the same kindness that calls. The year is not a threat. It is a hand held out across the dirt, still open.

### Reflection

- Where have you become numb to a sin or entitled to God's patience, so that apologies to him have grown shorter over time?
- When you hear the word repent, whose voice do you hear: an impatient foreman's or a forgiving Father's? What shaped that?
- When tragedy fills the news, what do you reach for first, an explanation about others or a question for yourself? What would change if you reversed it?

### Closing prayer

*Dear God, we repent. We need you. We forget how serious and how urgent this is. Thank you for your patience and your kindness, which are meant to lead us to repentance. Where we have grown numb or entitled, awaken us. Where we have been too busy to listen, turn us. Help us to repent and to walk with you, Lord, bearing the fruit you desire.*

## FORMATION

### One thing to remember

God's patience is not a verdict that you are safe; it is the open hand of a forgiving Father who is still saying, walk with me.

### This week

This week, read Luke 13:1-9 once slowly. Then, alone with God, name one area of sin you have grown numb to. As JC invited, place your hand on your heart and say to him: "I need you, I want you, I repent."

*Return to* Romans 2:4