

What is the Christian response to tragedy and disaster? To innocent suffering and death? To acts of terrorism and persecution? According to Jesus, the response, in a word, is repent. Repent? Yes, that's right REPENT. Is Jesus off a little today? Did his hearing fail? We have to repent of the notion that we "deserve" anything from God. We repent of the notion that we deserve special favour from God because we follow Jesus.

The Galilean incident with Pilate appears to have been the hot topic of Jesus' day. Up in the far northern hill country, Galilee was a hotbed for messianic types eager to pick a fight with Rome for independence. It was a place of Bin Laden types who were eager to make their mark on history for Israel's independence. Many would probably be right at home with today's political terrorists. One of Jesus' Twelve was one of these. And so it's not surprising that people wanted to know what Jesus thought of those Galileans who were slaughtered by Pilate and whose blood had been mixed with the sacrifices. They want to get a read on Jesus' politics, his messianic ambitions, his plans. What did He think of this atrocity? Was God on their side or not? Did their slaughter indicate God's displeasure?

Jesus tosses back another question in their direction. "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered thus?" What do you think? Can you measure God's favor by what happens to you? Is there a hard correlation between sin and suffering? It's a common notion. When Jesus' disciples encountered a man born blind, they asked Him, "Who sinned, this man or his parents." When Job lost his family, his wealth, and his health, his three friends automatically assumed that Job had done something wrong. "Get right with God," they said to their suffering friend, "and God will get right with you."

So were these slaughtered Galileans worse sinners because of how they died? Jesus' answer: No. And then a surprise. "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish." Did we hear that correctly? Repent? I'm confused.

Jesus then moves the discussion to politically neutral ground. Forget about this incident of Pilate and the Galileans. Let's talk about that tower in Siloam that toppled over and killed 18 innocent bystanders. What about that? The Galileans may have been asking for trouble. But a toppling tower? A freak accident. Dumb luck. Bad engineering. An earthquake, perhaps. Being at the wrong place at the wrong time. What do you think? Do you think they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? And again comes the answer from our Lord, "No. But unless you repent you will all likewise perish."

What is the response of the disciple to disaster, to tragedy, to sudden death? How do we respond to disasters natural and manmade – earthquakes, tsunamis, genocides, persecutions, construction accidents? What are we to do when bad things happen for seemingly no good reason, or when evil seems to get the upper hand on good, when the prince of this world seems to have won over the Prince of Peace. One word: Repent.

Repent means to re-think. The Greek word *metanoia* means to come to a change of mind, a “re-cognition” if you will. I like that word because it tracks most closely with *metanoia* – re-cognition. We need to have a good, hard re-cognition about these things, to think of them in a different way. We need to re-cognize Death, that death isn’t the worst that can happen to you. Jesus died and came through it quite alive. And He promises that you will too, trusting in Him. The worst thing that can happen, which is also an unnecessary thing, is that we die unbelieving, unrepentant, looking to ourselves instead of to Christ, justifying ourselves instead of being justified by God, refusing to be saved rather than receiving a salvation that has always been ours.

To repent is to cease to question God. Why does God permit suffering in the world? Why does God permit evil to have its way in the world? Why did God let this happen to me? What is God trying to tell me? To all these questions, Jesus simply answers “repent.” The questions themselves tell us that we are not trusting God. When you demand to see the blueprints, it means you no longer trust the builder. I believe it was Oscar Wilde who said something to this effect: If life is a play, then I need to have word with the Director.

God doesn’t promise to make sense of things, but to make good. He works good in, with, and under all things. He doesn’t cause earthquakes, floods, fires, mudslides, tidal waves, wars, genocides, plagues, toppling towers, or political tyrants because he doesn’t love us. They all operate in the freedom they have as God’s creatures in a fallen world. God is not our Micro-manager in heaven, running interference for each and every disaster that comes along. Now that’s not to say He can’t or even that He won’t. The Bible is a written record of God’s interfering with things. But in general, His mode of operation is to leave things be and to reconcile all things in the good, dark death of Jesus.

That's what it means in Romans 8 where Paul says, "we know that in everything God works for good with those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose. It doesn't mean that everything is good. Towers that topple on people are not good. Despots that slaughter citizens and desecrate the temple are not good. Earthquakes that kill hundreds of thousands of people and injure millions are not good. Cancers are not good. They are all signs of a creation thrown into chaos. But God works for good in, with and under all these things through the death of Jesus. That's where faith comes in. Faith doesn't say, "That's good." Rather faith says, "God will work good, and has already worked good, in the death of Jesus, in spite of what I see or feel or experience."