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**Title:** Journey to Jerusalem: Grow

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**Scripture:** [Luke 13:18-22](#)

**Text:** [Luke 13:1-9](#)

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A tornado rips through Lee County Alabama. Twenty-three people including three children die. Fifty more were injured and numerous homes and businesses were reduced to rubble. Why these people? What was their sin?

A gunman enters houses of worship in New Zealand within minutes, 50 are

dead and 40 others injured. Why these people? What did they do that caused them to die?

These tragedies are as fresh as our current news feed and as old as the bible itself for as "Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem" (Luke 10:22) some came up and interrupted his conversation about the weather to talk to him about two tragedies. Do you ever imagine that Jesus talked about the weather? He did.

On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus was talking about the weather. He said: "When you look up in the sky and see clouds forming in the west, you say, 'It's going to rain.' And it does. You see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat' and it happens." There is a cause and effect. We can see it with our eyes. Northern winds push spring back; too much of that this year. Dark clouds mean rain. Too much of that too. What is the expression? Red sky in morning, sailors take warning. Red sky at night, sailors delight. We look at the sky and can be our own meteorologist. Jesus too. Jesus talks about the weather, just like we do. Imagine. It's a cause and effect world. You can read the sky so why can't you see what going on around you?

I don't know if they weren't listening or if it reminded them of the two tragedies. They were likely so fresh in their memories, so recent in their experience that they needed to talk about it. They were in shock, angry, grieving. We feel some of those things, even when the tragedy is around the world. But for them, it was in their country, in the Holy City; it was "their people."

The first tragedy was this. See if it sounds familiar. A group of Galileans was worshipping in the temple. They were pilgrims, just like Jesus, who had journeyed to Jerusalem to offer prayers and sacrifices. Pilate, the governor of Judea, sent his soldiers to kill them in the act of worship. While kneeling in prayer, they were slaughtered. Then the soldiers mixed the Galileans blood with the altar sacrifices. Why these? "Jesus answered, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?'" (Luke 13:2) Well yes, that seems to be the thinking. What did they do? What about the Tower?

This tragedy may have been connected to the first. Pontius Pilate, who had been governor of Judea for 10 years by the time he and Jesus met in Jerusalem, had a pet project. It was an aqueduct designed to convey water from a spring, thirty miles away from Jerusalem, directly into the city. Freshwater isn't bad. But Pilate decided to siphon money away from the temple treasury for an aqueduct. Maybe the slaughter of Galileans was a robbery that went bad. We don't know.

We just know that the Tower of Siloam had fallen and that the pool of Siloam was a spring with a reservoir, possibly part of the aqueduct system. Why did it fall? Was it faulty construction, old age or did a tornadic wind rip through Jerusalem? We do not know. When they removed the rubble, they found 18 bodies.<sup>1</sup> Why these? What sin did they commit? "...do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?" (Luke 13:4), Jesus asks.

What are you getting at Jesus? Just tell us. You've got the answer. It's a cause and effect world. This was God's will and who better to talk about God's will than you. What's going on here? Who sinned? Jesus said, "You think they were guilty? "I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Luke 13:5)

"What? What did we do? We didn't do anything. We're not guilty. What do you mean 'repent'? Repent of what?" I don't know. I'll be personal; you can take it for what it's worth. Sometimes I need to repent of feelings of moral superiority. A cause and effect world leads to that kind of thinking. Have you noticed this? Have you ever felt like you are the good one and they are the bad ones? It's easy to fall into this kind of thinking. There are good ones and the bad ones and we're the good ones. What did those sinners do?

Jesus utterly rejects the notion that those who died at Pilate's hand were somehow more sinful than others. He is just as emphatic about the collapsed tower of Siloam. "I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." (Luke 13:3, 5). You can't read the mind of God like you can read

the weather. There is far more mystery to life and death than a tragic disaster, whether man-made or natural in origin. You've got to repent from that kind of thinking that God punishes with either. That's not the way God works. Let me tell you the way God works.

"A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still, I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" (Luke 13:6-9)

It's an odd story to tell after talking about disasters and punishment unless of course, you are trying to talk about just how God's will really works. God's nature is not to chop but to wait, to patiently plan for growth. God doesn't want to punish but wants to encourage us to bear fruit. We should not be surprised by this. How many parables does Jesus tell about growth?

Do you remember what he says? What is the kingdom of God like? What should you look for? Not death and disasters. He said: "It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches." (Luke 13:19) It's a tiny seed which grows to a 25-foot tree in the Middle East, valuable for shade cover and purple, fleshy sweet fruit that is edible. It's a big impressive tree but the gardener has to be patient. They grow slowly, 3 years into the planting of the seeds it is just a small in a container, suitable for transplanting outside.<sup>2</sup>

The same can be said for bread, can't it? You can't rush the yeast. Jesus says, "It's God's will and God's ways "It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened" (Luke 13:20-21) You can't just throw it in the pan and into the oven. You've got to give it time, let it rise. The slower the rise, the tastier the bread. You have to be patient. Patience leads to growth and patience is the very shape of God's love for us.

It's there, but you have to look for it and I'll confess that I'm as bad as you in looking at the carnage of this week's headlines for signs. And there are all sorts of voices out there that are suggesting that every earthquake, tornado, hurricane, flood is evidence that God is mad and trying to get even with us. But every time you hear that I hope you'll hear Jesus say, "I tell you no!" Listen to the voice of the gardener who is saying, "Don't cut down that tree," says the gardener, "let me work on it some more, give this hopeless case

another year." Maybe there will be fruit." It's a parable that says that "God's mercy is still in serious conversation with God's judgment."<sup>3</sup>

I don't know about you but I think that's good news because too often I worry that even though I'm planted in good soil, I'm not bearing fruit. I worry that the owner is expecting more and if I don't get busy and grow, there will be a consequence. An ax will show up, deservedly so. I need reminding that the gardener says, "Let's give this hopeless case another year." It might bear some figs after all.<sup>4</sup>

Do you know the name Dan Ponder, Jr.? He was a distinguished Republican state representative from a small town in Georgia and a recipient of the JFK Profile in Courage award in 2003. Three years earlier in March of 2000, the Georgia legislature was engaged in a bitter debate over a bill to strengthen penalties for hate crimes. The house had just voted 83-82 to shelve the bill when Ponder rose to speak. He had told no one of his plans to support the legislation. Ponder told the Legislature that all his ancestors in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had owned slaves. His great-great-grandfather had fought in the Civil War. His third-grade classmates cheered with him when they heard the news that President Kennedy had been shot. He told his fellow legislators of how his college fraternity had ostracized six of its members because they were suspected of being gay. He told of the African-American woman who had raised him, who had changed his diapers and read him books and taught him, more than anyone else, the difference between right and wrong.<sup>5</sup>

He said, "One day when I was about 12 or 13, I was leaving for school. As I was walking out the door she turned to kiss me goodbye. And for some reason, I turned my head. She stopped me and she looked into my eyes with a look that absolutely burns in my memory right now and said, 'You didn't kiss me because I am black.' At that instant, knew that she was right. I denied it. I made some lame excuse about it. But I was forced at that age to confront a small dark part of myself.

He spoke of the shame he had carried ever since that day. He said, "I pledged to myself then, and I re-pledged on the day we buried that magnificent woman, that never again would I look in the mirror and know that I had kept silent and let hate, prejudice, and indifference negatively impact another person's life." Then he said, "I finally figured out that the only way we are ever going to make progress is when somebody stands up and takes a stand. I urge the House to pass this hate crimes bill." And so, they did. The house, Republicans and Democrats alike, gave him two standing ovations and subsequently voted 116-49 in favor of the bill.

And the gardener said, "See I told you. Give it time. After all these years figs, figs at last." <sup>6</sup> Jesus, as he was going through towns and villages, teaching on his way to Jerusalem, told this story about growth and the voice of a gardener, offering hope for another chance. Of course, when he got there, they didn't give him another chance. He was cut down, nailed to a tree. Why him? What was his sin?

Patience. Give this hopeless thing a chance. Not a year but three days. Look carefully. Someone looking like the gardener will show up.

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<sup>1</sup> Craddock, Fred B. The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock (pp. 165-166). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hunker.com/13429114/mustard-tree-facts>

<sup>3</sup> Craddock, Fred B. Interpretation: Luke. page 169

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.religion-online.org/article/breaking-and-entering-luke-131-9/>

<sup>6</sup> This story was used by Stephen Montgomery @ <http://day1.org/8346-stephen-montgomery-the-voice-of-the-gardener>. I augmented it with material from <https://www.jfklibrary.org/events-and-awards/profile-in-courage-award/award-recipients/dan-ponder-jr-2003>