

Luke 13:1-9, Gen 14:17-24
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South Plains

Meeting Your Melchizedek

The appearance of Melchizedek in Genesis has intrigued believers almost from the beginning. Scholars can make neither head nor tale of him, except to say that his kingdom of Salem might have been Jerusalem. He comes out of nowhere and abruptly disappears from the story of Abraham. He is probably a pagan king. But because he brings a blessing to Abraham, his Most High God is identified with the God of Abraham. Perhaps it is the very mystery around that character that leads the book of Hebrews to say that Christ is a priest of the order of Melchizedek.

Jesus introduces a mystery in the verses we read from Luke's gospel. And, he brings a blessing mysterious and welcome in its own way. We know nothing more about the slaughter of the Galileans or the disaster of the falling tower of Siloam except what Jesus tells us. But, that is enough. Just hearing about those two tragedies raises the mystery of evil. Why did those terrible things have to happen? Is it God's will for worshipers to be killed with their sacrifices at the altar of the temple, or for 18 people to be crushed to death by a tower? And, what about the victims of suicide bombers and earthquakes in our own time? Does God punish sinners that way?

Jesus answers those questions with a resounding, "NO!" It's always tempting to look for someone to blame when lives are snuffed out needlessly. The temptation is all but irresistible to respond to news of a tragic death by asking, "Did he smoke? Didn't her parents teach her better? Was the brake system defective? Why didn't someone do something?" And, when we cannot find human error to blame, we sometimes want to blame God. In the words of Rabbi Kushner's book, "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

Jesus says we dare not make an easy connection between tragedy and punishment. Of course, there are consequences to human failure to do the right thing. All too often, however, doing the right thing is not enough to protect us from the dangers of living in a world of uncertainty. Jesus warns us that some evils, whether caused by human beings or caused by the nature of things, cannot be explained or justified.

Having made that point, Jesus goes on to a more important message, the message of the good news of the kingdom. "Repent!" he says. "Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." Of course, Jesus does not mean that a tower will fall on their heads, or that Pilate will slaughter them at worship. Death always has a double meaning.

One meaning of death is the physical end of life. The monitor shows nothing but flat lines for brain activity, heartbeats and respirations. We are clinically dead. But,

that's not the only way we talk about death. Marriages die, neighborhoods die, languages die, churches die. Even faith can die. It's this second way of talking about death that Jesus means when he says, "Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

We like to use the biblical language about eternal life and eternal death as though they refer only to heaven and hell, those far away realities on the other side of the grave. Jesus, on the other hand, preached the nearness of the kingdom of heaven, the reality of God's reign in this world that was so close at hand that the evidence of its arrival is right in front of us. "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me," he said. Why can't you see the signs of life? If you don't have eyes to see the kingdom, you are perishing.

Jesus is re-framing the mystery of evil, asking us to see some tragedies not only as problems to be solved by blaming someone, but instead seeing evil as an opportunity to re-think our lives. The killing of those people at the altar was an alarm not to take worship for granted. The fall of that tower was a siren call, a warning that faith is no protection from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Recently while on a trip, I set my cell phone to ring at 5 o'clock in the morning to get ready to come home. To my satisfaction, it worked perfectly. However, I forgot to disable the alarm. At 5 AM the next

morning, it rang again. This time I leaped out of bed, unsure whether it was the doorbell, a fire alarm or what. But, the message on both mornings was the same: "Wake up and look at where you are and do what has to be done."

That is exactly what Jesus means when he says, "Repent!" Re-examine your life. Re-think your behavior. Remember you are fragile. And, re-connect with your Creator.

Lest Jesus sound like a judgmental evangelist portraying God as an angry judge waiting to pounce on sinners, he tells a parable about the patience of God. The owner of a fig tree comes looking for fruit but finds none. He talks 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?" But the gardener intervenes and asks for one more year. This year he promises to cultivate and fertilize the soil. Give it another chance.

Isaiah compares Israel to the vineyard of the Lord as does Jesus in another parable. In this parable the point is clear: God is merciful. God's expectations are clear and his patience is not inexhaustible, but in the words of 2 Peter 3:5, "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance."

Sooner or later, each of us will meet our Melchizedek, a person or an event in our lives full of mystery. There will be no explanation. It won't do any good to assign credit or blame whether your Melchizedek brings a blessing or a curse. Some mysteries can never be unraveled. Nevertheless, his arrival will be a wake up call: Shake off your complacency. Look where you are and do what must be done. In other words, repent.

Put your trust in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Most High God who made us to bear fruit, and who waits patiently for us to produce.