

The Rejected Cornerstone

Mark 12:1-12

Covenant Waterfall, 21 February 2021

Read

Pray

Introduction

I don't think there are many of us who have not experienced some form of tragedy in our lives. Real, heart-wrenching tragedy – death of a loved one, death of your own child, death of a parent, someone you know suffering from a terminal illness, involved in a freak accident. Whatever it may be, whenever tragedies befall us, we are bound to ask the question, how and why did God let this happen? If he's all powerful, surely he could have prevented it? How could there possibly be a purpose in this? How can this possibly lead to anything good? Honest questions!

In our text this evening, Jesus tells a parable that speaks about his own rejection and death, that is to come on the cross. He speaks about it in such a way that we see that it was no accident, nor was it out of God's control, but that it was actually "the Lord's doing" all along. What we will see here is that because God is sovereign, he really does work all things – even the evil things – for his good.

- Tenants of the Vineyard, vv.1-9
- The Rejected Cornerstone, vv.10-12

A. Tenants of the Vineyard, vv.1-9

Let's be reminded of the context of our text. From last week, we saw Jesus cursing the fig tree and the Temple in Jerusalem. How come? Both bore no fruit. The fig tree was a picture of the Temple system. What should have been the heart of Israel's worship, a house of

prayer for all the nations: a place for Gentiles to come and pray to the One True God of Israel, had instead become a corrupt and fruitless place – a den of robbers.

At the root of the rot in Temple, were the guardians of the Temple system – the Jewish religious leaders. They had corrupted the system and not been good shepherds of the people of Israel. It is they – the chief priests, scribes and elders, who in the verses just before our text (11:27-33) question Jesus' authority in pronouncing judgement on the Temple. After a back and forth between them, they are unwilling to admit that his authority comes from God himself.

It is these people – the religious leaders of Israel – to whom Jesus addresses this parable. Read from verse 1:

“And he began to speak to them in parables. “A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for the wine press and built a tower, and leased it to tenants and went into another country.”

Jesus describes a land owner, who leases his vineyard out to tenants, while he goes off to another country. The expectation of this arrangement would have been that while the tenants would farm the land, and keep most of the crops for themselves, they would need to give a portion of the produce to the land owner as form of rent.

So why does Jesus frame this parable in this way? What message is he trying to communicate to the religious leaders of Israel, who are listening to him? He most certainly has in mind Isaiah 5, which bears some stark similarity to this parable, vv.1-3:

“Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.”

The passage goes on to say in verse 7, **“For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel...”**

So we can see, in the light of Isaiah 5, that the vineyard that Jesus is talking about in his parable represents the house of Israel, which though it was planted on fertile soil and choice vines, it yielded only wild grapes – not good grapes.

On top of that, earlier in Isaiah 3:14, it says, **“The Lord will enter into judgement with the elders and princes of his people: “It is you who have devoured the vineyard...”** Not only do we see from the Prophet Isaiah that the vineyard represents Israel, but we also see that those who were placed in charge over the vineyard, to tend it and care for it, have done precisely the opposite – they have devoured the vineyard. Who are they? From Isaiah, it’s clear that they are the religious leaders of Israel – the elders and princes of his people. The very people to whom Jesus is telling the parable. Knowing their OT Scriptures, already they would have connected the dots and realised that Jesus was speaking against them.

Verses 2-5 continue:

“When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. ³ And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ⁴ Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. ⁵ And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed.”

The parable continues and now we see that when the time came for the owner of the vineyard to receive his rent in form of fruit from the tenants, he sends servant after servant to them, and the repeatedly beat them up or kill them.

Who, then are these servants? It’s evident that they represent the OT prophets. Consider these verses from the prophet Jeremiah 7:25-26:

“From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day. ²⁶ Yet they did not listen to me or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck. They did worse than their fathers.”

God calls his prophets, “servants” throughout the OT (e.g. Amos 3:7 etc.). And throughout the OT, we see God sending his servants, the prophets to Israel. Why? We need to understand a bit of background here...

When God set Israel in the Promised Land, he made a covenant with them – covenant with Moses. This covenant set the terms of Israel’s existence in their new land. If they obeyed the covenant – if they were obedient to God’s laws, worshipped him faithfully, lived lives that

glorified him – he would bless them in the land, and they would live abundant lives under God’s protection. However, if they disobeyed the covenant, broke the law, they would be cursed, and their existence in the land would be troubled.

So what happened? The story of the OT is a sad story of Israel’s continued disobedience and hard-heartedness towards God. Judge after judge, king after king, leads Israel into a pit of immorality and debauchery. They worship the idols of the pagan nations surrounding them, they commit all sorts of sexual immorality, they are unjust towards the poor and vulnerable in the land – they repeatedly break the terms of the covenant, God’s law.

What does God do? Because of his mercy, he sends his prophets to them, confronting them of their sins, calling them to repentance and come back to the terms of the covenant. How does Israel respond? In repentance? Yes, there is some here and there. But by and large, they reject the prophets. They hardened their hearts to their message of repentance, mocked them, and they even killed some of them. God even warned the prophet Ezekiel as much in chapter 3:7, before he confronted Israel, **“But the house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me: because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart.”**

Prophet after prophet, Israel rejected. Put to death the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Micah, Amos and even the last OT prophet, John the Baptist, who we know from Mark, was beheaded.

The servants in Jesus’ parable, likewise are rejected, ridiculed and even put to death. It’s clear that they are representing the prophets of the OT.

Verse 6 continues...

“He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’

Even though the tenants have rejected and killed the owner’s servants, the owner persists in sending his own “beloved son” to them. The owner still holds out hope that the evil tenants will come to their senses, even more so as he sends his own flesh and blood, not just servants. He thinks. “surely they will respect his son.”

Jesus is clearly speaking about himself here. Twice in Mark's Gospel has Jesus been referred to as the "beloved Son". Chapter 1:11 – at his baptism. Chapter 9:7 – at the Transfiguration. In both cases, it is God the Father himself who calls him this.

So after having repeatedly sent the prophets to Israel, to call them to repent, God finally sends his own beloved Son to his people, in the hope that when faced with the Son of God Himself, they will humble their hard hearts and turn to him.

Verses 7-8 continue...

"But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.'⁸ And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard."

Sadly, in the face of persistent kindness and mercy on behalf of the owner, to the point of sending his own son, they kill him too, thinking that once they've got rid of the heir, they'll seize the owner's property. And that's what happens – the son is killed and his body thrown out of the vineyard.

Jesus once again foresees his own death. This is now the fourth time in Mark's Gospel that he has done so. Previous three – telling his disciples. This is the first time he does it before the religious leaders of Israel. He foretells his own rejection and crucifixion before the very people who will carry it out. This will be the epitome of the religious leaders' hard-heartedness to God. In the face of mercy, forgiveness – sending prophet after prophet to get them to repent, still not budge. And when God's own beloved Son, Israel's promised Messiah comes, they kill him too. Tragic!

What then happens? Have the owners' plans been scuttled? Has he now lost his property to a bunch of thieving thugs? Verse 9 continues...

"What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others."

While the tenants may have thought they had succeeded in their desire to claim the vineyard for themselves by killing their owner's son, the heir, this is not to be. No, he will come and destroy the wicked tenants and give the vineyard to others.

Similarly, the religious leaders of Israel assumed they had accomplished their mission by handing over Jesus to be crucified. Yet that is not how things turned out. The crucifixion marked a turning point in redemptive history, where God brought judgement upon the religious leaders of Israel, by breaking them off from his covenant and instead, grafting in the Gentiles into a new Israel, through a new covenant. He has now given the vineyard to others who would produce fruit.

B. The Rejected Cornerstone, vv.10-12

“Have you not read this Scripture: “‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; ¹ this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes’?” ¹² And they were seeking to arrest him but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away.”

Having finished telling the parable, Jesus quotes from Psalm 118:22-23 to drive his point home to the religious leaders. **“The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone...”** What relevance does this have to the parable that he’s just told?

We first need to understand what a cornerstone is. It is the most important stone in a structure – forms the foundation of the building. All other stones will be set in reference to this stone.

The Apostle Peter, quotes this same text from Psalm 118, when he is preaching before the Jewish leaders in Acts 4:11-12. He says, **“This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. ¹² And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”**

Jesus is that stone rejected by the Jewish leaders. As Jesus has taught in the parable – the Jewish leaders have rejected all the prophets and now in the height of their hardheartedness, they reject God’s own Son. They discard him like a useless stone – sentencing him to a criminal’s death on the cross. Yet what they don’t realise is that the very stone they have discarded and rejected has become the cornerstone – the most important stone of the building, which holds all things together.

The rest of Psalm 118 which is quoted carries on by saying that **“this was the Lord’s doing and it is marvellous in our eyes.”**

What was **“the Lord’s doing”**? From the context, it’s clear that the Jewish rejection and killing of Jesus and exaltation of Jesus as the cornerstone, is **“the Lord’s doing”**. This was a part of God’s sovereign plan all along. This is why Acts 2:23 declares that, **“this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.”**

Nothing in this world happens by random chance. Because God is sovereign, he has ordained all things that come to pass at the WCF 3 correctly declares. All things – even evil things, such as Jesus’ crucifixion and death, as we see in Acts 2:23 are ordained by God – according to his definite plan and foreknowledge, yet carried out by the hands of evil men.

Yet God didn’t allow that heinous act of the crucifixion to have the final say. On the third day, God raised Jesus from the dead. While evil men intended Jesus’ death to destroy him, God instead used it to destroy the power of sin and death, triumphing over the evil one in the process. He turned the most evil act ever committed into the ultimate good. This is why the quote from Psalm 118 concludes with, **“and it is marvellous in our eyes.”**

See this truth demonstrated in the parable – it initially looks as though the evil schemes of the tenants to destroy the owner’s son and steal his property will succeed, as they kill the heir. Yet they don’t prevail. The owner judges and destroys them and gives the vineyard to others. The owner of the vineyard – God – has been in control all along, and ultimately accomplishes his purposes through the death of his Son.

What did God achieve through the death of Jesus? God’s vineyard is given to others. Through Jesus’ death and resurrection on the cross, God redeemed for himself – a new Israel - a people chosen from every nation, tribe and tongue. Though we did not deserve to be God’s people because of our rebellion and sin; he sought us out while we were still his enemies. He forgave our sins by allowing Jesus to pay the punishment that we deserve – death and judgement. Indeed, God has turned what the enemy desired for destruction, into victory, life and blessing. This is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes!

Conclusion

Friends, the good news is that no matter what tragedy the Lord has permitted in your life, no matter how devastating, the truth is that the Lord is sovereign over it. He will not abandon you in it, but his promise is, as Romans 8:28 says, **“all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”** The same God who foreknew the rejection and crucifixion of his own Son, turned this evil into something that is “marvellous in our eyes.” will be glorified in some way through your tragedy.

We may not want to admit it, but our sinful tendencies are like the evil tenants on the vineyard – who resisted their master at every turn. Left to ourselves, we’d raise our fists to our Creator as we prefer living lives that are centred on ourselves, instead of God. Like the tenants, God would be just to destroy us because of our hardheartedness and rebellion.

Repent then and receive Christ, the one who was pierced for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. Receive his forgiveness of your sins, a heart of stone turned into a heart of flesh, and assurance of eternal life with him, our cornerstone, and our one true foundation.