LUKE 13

Luke 13:1–5. Tragedy and Repentance

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke *(Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 654–655.*

Tragic events that unexpectedly engulf innocent people, beginning with the deaths of Galileans in the Jerusalem temple, allow the Savior to tackle an ever-important question—that of sin and suffering. The most notable attempt to deal with this issue lies in the book of Job, wherein the suffering Job maintains his innocence in the face of his friends' accusations that he must have done something to offend God, sufficiently that Job "shall not depart out of darkness; the flame shall dry up his branches" (Job 15:30). But both Job and Jesus turn against this view, even though it undergirds passages in the Old Testament.[1] For Jesus, the deaths of the Galilean worshipers in Jerusalem and those caught in the collapse of the Siloam tower did not happen because they are "sinners above all" (Luke 13:2, 4). For Him, they remain innocent, they stand free of blame. Their only mistake was to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. But their deaths, unlooked-for as they were, point up a person's need to be ready to meet God in the next life, unburdened by sin.

These verses appear in no other ancient source, including the other Gospel accounts. It is evident that Luke's careful research brings Jesus's view on sin and suffering into the full light of day, much as it will in the story about the woman who has suffered "a spirit of infirmity eighteen years," another report that Luke alone preserves (Luke 13:11–17). Here, and in the following parable of the fig tree, Luke shows himself independent of the other Gospel writers, apparently drawing on a special source or sources generally called "L," which stands behind a full one-third of his Gospel.

The threefold concern with Galileans, of whom Jesus is one, raises to view the imminent suffering that faces Him—He will suffer in the capital city and at the hands of the Roman prefect. Within the incidents that Luke introduces lies the threatening sense that the capital city is a menacing place and its ruler, Pilate, is a person to be feared. The lesson remains: bad things happen to good, innocent people. Jesus will not be exempt.

Luke 13:6–9. The Parable of the Fig Tree

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke *(Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 658–659.*

As a deep, throbbing cadence, the Savior's drumbeat for repentance continues in His parable of the fig tree. In prior verses, He turns news of tragedy into an appeal for His hearers to live life in readiness to meet death unencumbered by sin (Luke 13:1–5). Here, in His parable of the barren fig tree, Jesus strikes the drum with a different beat, all while showing His mercy when signaling a delay in judgment—"let it alone this year" (13:8)—and His intent to pursue justice against those who persistently ignore or turn against His message—"cut it down" (13:7). But His generosity carries a limit within itself because a person does not have forever to repent; even though the time for changing is generous, this fig tree will be cut down next year (see 13:8–9; the comments on 13:25).

Punishment, however, does not come to the unrepentant as a sudden, unrestrained whim. Instead, the parable opens a window onto the divine consulting process wherein the Lord and others weigh the soul of the unredeemed and, in an act of mercy, decide to allow the sinner more time to turn back. To be sure, the responsibility is carried by the Lord, not His associates, but He shows a clear willingness to listen to pleas on behalf of others. In this light, the scene recalls the Lord's willingness to warn His people of impending doom on other occasions after discussion in His council.[2] It also recalls His willingness, in an astonishing act of grace, to counsel with His Father on behalf of those who, though touched with sin and transgression, have shown repentant hearts: "Father, behold the sufferings and the death of him who did no sin. . . . Wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren that believe on my name" (Doctrine and Covenants 45:3–5).

Remarkably, certain elements of the parable resemble in striking ways components of the allegory of Zenos (see Jacob 5). The resemblances do not support a common origin for the parable and allegory, but they may well point to a common stock of stories that carry a similar message. For instance, the action takes place in a vineyard, most of the human interaction occurs between a master and a caretaker, the tree disappoints unexpectedly, the caretaker persuades the master to wait before rendering ultimate judgment, the offending tree takes up valuable space, the caretaker seeks to bring the tree to fruition by digging and dunging, the ultimate judgment consists of cutting down the offending tree, and the judgment about the first and last appears in the general context.[3] The chief difference, of course, is that the allegory

pictures the master and caretaker grafting branches between trees, whereas this activity does not appear in Jesus's story about the fig tree. Both Matthew and Mark record a story from the last week of Jesus's life wherein, out of season, He curses a barren fig tree (Matthew 21:18–19; Mark 11:12–14). Although some see a connection between Jesus's act and the parable, to propose such a connection seems rather fanciful given the marked differences both in the settings of the reports and in Jesus's evident intentions.

Luke 13:10–17. The Infirm Woman

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke *(Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 664–665.*

The Sabbath day dawns. All gather to the synagogue. Acts of worship approach. Sacred gifts rest in bags. Devotions hover. Scripture reading draws near. The stranger and His entourage enter the door. An unforgettable day begins.

The massive weight of this story about the infirm woman, at first notice, lands on the proper use of the Sabbath day. The treatment of the Sabbath takes up dense space in Jesus's society because "it is a sign between [God] and the children of Israel for ever" and stands as "a perpetual covenant" that binds Him and His people together (Exodus 31:16–17). Therefore, under penalty of death, people are to do no work on the Sabbath, including no kindling of "fire throughout your habitations" (Exodus 35:3). But a second glance brings into focus another center of gravity that complements the first and adds heft. This one has to do with Jesus's announced program for His ministry in the Nazareth synagogue: "The Spirit of the Lord . . . hath anointed me . . . to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, . . . to set at liberty them that are bruised" (Luke 4:18). From one synagogue to another, from initial announcement to fulfillment, the two stories, one inside Nazareth and the other somewhere outside Galilee, uncover the heart of Jesus's ministry—deliverance.

In another vein, Jesus's appeal to Abraham points to Himself not only as the true continuation of Israel's destiny but also as the one who "is able of these [despised, crippled] stones to raise up children unto Abraham" (Luke 3:8). In a real sense, Jesus's restoration of this worn-down woman lifts her back to her prior status as a Jew of strength and vigor, back into the embrace of acquaintances and friends who have come to think ill of her, back to a proper state of self-worth. In a word, Jesus has healed her wholly—physically, socially, psychologically.

In two verses (Luke 13:15–16), Jesus draws an important contrast between human beings and animals, illustrating the loftier importance of humans just as He does in His contrasts with sparrows and ravens (12:7, 24). His technique is to argue from the lesser to the greater: from an ox to a daughter of Abraham; from a rope that binds an animal for a few hours to a disease that binds a person for years; from a superseding of the Sabbath for the health of a tame beast to a superseding of the Sabbath for the sake of an unnoticed, quiescent woman.

Luke 13:18–21. Parables of Growth and Gender Equality

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke *(Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 667–668.*

The main emphases of Jesus's two short parables about the mustard seed and about the leaven rest squarely and comfortably on the growth of the kingdom of God and its nurturing powers. By bringing forward such stories, Jesus signals clearly that His kingdom is in its growing stages. He has called and empowered the Twelve as His governing officers; He has called and empowered the Seventy, whose reach spans into the gentile world; and He has commissioned others to carry His message and healing powers, as hints that lie throughout Luke's report suggest.[4] Like a growing plant and rising dough, the kingdom will mature majestically as an aid to those who choose to roost under the canopy of its branches.

In a stunning reversal, when shaping His points, Jesus frames tasks that, first, a man undertakes—planting—and, second, that a woman performs—adding leaven to dough before baking. These are typical household chores, underlining a link to the home. By such an appeal, remarkably He reaches out to all in His audience, men and women alike, uncovering subtle but bedrock messages that He concerns Himself with each person and that His kingdom will consist of men and women alike and their homes, all on equal footing. This thrust forms a complete, radical turnabout from the traditions of His society—from those of any ancient Near Eastern society—by placing women on the same level as men. His is not an organization that reaches out mainly to men in a recognition of the status quo wherein the voices and actions of women somehow rank lower than those of their male counterparts. His Church will fully and genuinely embrace everyone.

Luke 13:22–30. Citizens of the Kingdom

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke *(Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 675–678.*

As a bright example for citizens of His kingdom, the Savior models for His followers their eventual missionary tasks: "teaching, and journeying" (Luke 13:22). This will be their pattern. For Himself, He keeps moving along the path of His journey in part because of the rejection that He experiences in the synagogue where He heals the woman afflicted by an eighteen-year-old disease. A person can infer that this kind of repudiation is common, even though messengers are traveling ahead of Him and preparing people to hear Him (9:52). Such rejection from devout Jews will also characterize the frustrating future of His disciples (21:12). When they travel without purse or scrip, as He is doing, they will have "not where to lay [their] head" (9:3, 58; 10:4). But, as He, they are to persist because salvation awaits both them and many of their hearers, as the man's question coaxes to the fore: "Are there few that be saved?" (13:23). The fact that

Jesus is not stopping during His journey points to the need for people to make a decision in this very moment, in His presence. He will not return. Further, within Jesus's story of the guests who are locked out of the banquet hovers the notion that the time for people to respond grows threateningly short (13:25–29).

The ember that first glows and then bursts into flame is sparked by the hearer's question, "Are there few that be saved?" The underlying issue—Who will be saved?—has become a heated talking point in Jesus's society; will "all Israelites have a share in the world to come," or will "but few . . . be saved"? In a real sense, this question undergirds all of Jesus's teaching from Luke 13:24, beginning with His insistence that a person must "strive to enter in at the strait gate" and ending with His observations about duty (17:10).

The grand soothing experience for those who are saved, of course, comes at the celestial banquet. Here the dedicated disciple finally sits with and is acknowledged by the Lord; here the faithful follower rubs shoulders with "Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob"; here the adamant adherent enjoys the heady company of "all the prophets" (13:28); here the devoted servant accepts the heavenly reward in a palpable and physical way, complete with odors and tastes and enlivening conversation. Rich references to this moment of moments lie in scripture and elsewhere, beginning with Isaiah's sketch: "In this [holy] mountain shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined." But more than a social event, the gathering will also see God "destroy . . . the face of the [dark] covering cast over all people, and the [benighted] vail that is spread over all nations." There, "He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces" (Isaiah 25:6–8).

Isaiah's pointer to "all people" draws attention to Jesus's intent. For, irrespective of ethnic origin, He reaches out to those "from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south." To all He issues the invitation to "sit down in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29); to all He commands, "Strive to enter in at the strait gate" (13:24). From the earliest of his public utterances, in the Nazareth synagogue, Jesus has pointed to Gentiles, underscoring in that setting God's gracious acts to the widow of Zarephath and to the Syrian general Naaman through His servants Elijah and Elisha (4:25–27).

Besides the image of the banquet, Jesus's words set out another dominating figure: that of the narrow gate or door. The symbol, of course, has to do with entering or not entering, and not surprisingly, it has to do with whether and how a person accepts Jesus. At base, entry into the kingdom comes only by consistent, hard effort, as other passages illustrate—for "every man [who seeks to enter] presseth into it" (Luke 16:16). A casual approach to the gate will not gain us entry. In the most vivid scene painted by Jesus, we are to grasp that "it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (18:25). Here, Jesus underlines in illuminating language the enormously challenging task that faces anyone who wishes to gain entrance.

Another dimension competes for center stage. For all the talk that all people are invited into the kingdom and ethnic origin plays no ultimate role, the matter of one's origin raises its head in these verses, but not in an ethnic sense—not Jew versus Gentile. Rather, it has to do with a person's knowledge of his or

her divine origin. In Luke's report, the master's reason for refusing entry to those outside after he shuts the door has to do with his lack of knowing where they come from: "I know you not whence ye are" (Luke 13:25, 27). Considering Luke's portrait of Jesus as the one who knows even people's thoughts (5:22; 6:8), this statement makes no sense as it applies to Him. Notably, the Joseph Smith Translation tips this scene sideways. To those who are standing outside the door, the master says, "Ye know not from whence ye are" (Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 13:25, 27). In this light, those who are within acknowledge what those without do not—they know their divine origin, an element of understanding that they can obtain only from Jesus and not from their current religious environment. This observation makes clearer sense of the protesters' claim that they are familiar with the master: "We have eaten and drunk in thy presence." But mere familiarity does not open the door, for they have not taken from Him when He "taught in [their] streets" (13:26), one of the key doctrines that He offers, the one that discloses their true origin.

Luke 13:31–35. Jerusalem's Future

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke *(Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 682–683.*

Framed amid the exalted language of the Psalmist, "Blessed be he that cometh in the name of the Lord" (Psalm 118:26), the scene begins with Herod's threat against the Savior and ends with Jerusalem's desolation. The city is Jesus's destination (Luke 9:51), and Herod and his allies will not deter His destiny. Yet, when He arrives, Jerusalem will sadly fill its stereotypical reputation, that of killing "the prophets" and stoning "them that are sent unto [its people]" (13:34). Within all this talk lies the simple but stark imperative—"I must walk" (13:33)—that Jesus must undertake His daunting, ultimate act in the city, the center of Jewish worship and identity. In a word, Jesus's foreordained destiny is tied to Jerusalem, and His fate will be the city's fate.

These verses capture Jesus's tender feelings for the city and its citizens, feelings that are gnawed at and frayed by the inhabitants' conscious turning away from His attempts to reach out to them and their fellow countrymen: "How often would I have gathered thy children together, . . . and ye would not" (13:34). Even so, as hinted in the Joseph Smith Translation, He will allow the people of this sacred center, who are stained by their hostility toward their Savior, to come to know Him, but only after they "have received from the hand of the Lord a just recompense for all [their] sins" and thereby are cleansed (Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 13:36).

Woven into the tapestry of these lines rests the threads of Jesus's Atonement. As Jesus reminds His hearers, on "the third day I shall be perfected" (Luke 13:32), an experience that will take place in Jerusalem, for "a prophet [cannot] perish out of Jerusalem" (13:33). As a bright coloration, the Joseph Smith Translation adds emphasis to the His Atonement. For at the end of Jesus's declaration that "a prophet

[cannot] perish out of Jerusalem," the Joseph Smith Translation inserts: "This he spake signifying of his death." (Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 13:34). Moreover, the element of judgment that appears in the adjusted and added words of Jesus ("Ye shall not know me, until ye have received from the hand of the Lord a just recompense for all your sins") raises one of the important results of the Atonement: the divine evaluation of a person's mortal acts.

Notes

1 See Exodus 20:5; Job 4:7; 8:4, 20; 22:5; also John 9:1–3.

2 Isaiah 6:8; Jeremiah 23:22; also Amos 3:7.

3 For the parallels, see, on the vineyard: Luke 13:6; Jacob 5:3; on interactions between master and caretaker: Luke 13:7; Jacob 5:7, 10, and so on; on the tree's unexpected disappointment: Luke 13:6–7; Jacob 5:6, 25, 30–32, 39; on judgment being put off: Luke 13:8–9; Jacob 5:26–27, 50; on the tree taking up space: Luke 13:7; Jacob 5:44, 49, 66; on digging and dunging: Luke 13:8; Jacob 5:4, 11, 27, 64; on ultimate judgment of tree: Luke 13:7, 9; Jacob 5:42, 46–47, and so on; on judgment of first and last: Luke 13:30; Jacob 5:63.

4 See the notes on 9:49–50, 60; 10:2.

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