

# Better or Worse

20 March 2022

## Call to Worship Psalm 63

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you;

**My flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.**

So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.

**Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.**

So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

**My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips.**

## Blessed Assurance

*Fanny Crosby*

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!

Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!

Heir of salvation, purchase of God,  
born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.

This is my story, this is my song,  
praising my Saviour all the day long.

This is my story, this is my song,  
praising my Saviour all the day long.

Perfect communion, perfect delight,  
visions of rapture now burst on my sight.

Angels descending bring from above  
echoes of mercy, whispers of love.

Perfect submission, all is at rest.

I in my Saviour am happy and bless'd,  
watching and waiting, looking above,  
filled with his goodness, lost in his love.

## Prayer of adoration and confession

*Bethne Dodd*

Lord Jesus, You offer us so much.

The example of Your life.

The embrace of Your acceptance.

The eternity of Your love.

And yet, in our short-sightedness, our stubbornness and self-sufficiency,  
we often choose to overlook Your best by settling for ours.

When we

Lose sight of what we need, distracted by what we want.

Are more concerned with what others think of us than what You think.

Reject Your comfort and restoration...

Lord Jesus, **FORGIVE US**

When we're

Quick to criticise,

Are easily offended

Or fail to listen...

Lord Jesus, **FORGIVE US**

When we

Gossip,

Believe the worst,

Or delight in others misfortune...

Lord Jesus, **FORGIVE US**

When we

Refuse to take responsibility for our own behaviour,

Our part in wrongdoing,

Our actions, or choice of words, which hurt others deeply...

Lord Jesus, **FORGIVE US**

When we are unaware of our own short-comings, bring these to light, Lord,  
in whatever way speaks to each of us most clearly.

Call us. Draw us. Show us compassion.

Encourage us. Rile and remind us. Prompt and prod us.

Confront, challenge and convict us, all by Your Holy Spirit.

Your Spirit, whose presence is poured out for our benefit and well-being along  
with that of others.

We pause to listen to what You may have to say to each of us now...

Thank-you for Your word that reassures us, when we acknowledge and confess  
our sins You are faithful to forgive and renew us in love.

Help us nurture those seeds sown within our lives, by Your Spirit.

Those things which, given time and patient attention, will mature in us Your good hope, peace, joy, kindness and self-control – and so much more besides - all for Your glory. Amen.

## Notices

All services and study groups on pause until the 4<sup>th</sup> of March. We will update everyone on the 5<sup>th</sup> as to whether we are meeting again from the 10<sup>th</sup>. The plan is to do so, but as we all know, things change.

## The Peace

### Reading 1                      Luke 13:1-5

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup> He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? <sup>3</sup> No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. <sup>4</sup> Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup> No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

### Reflection 1

Sometimes we come to something in the Bible that is difficult to understand. Often that is because we have no way of understanding the context in which it was written. What did the original listeners understand? How did it make sense to them in the midst of their everyday concerns and worries? Then we come to this reading and it seems horrific and unnecessary, talking about events and experiences for which we have little or no conception.

When we add in the fact that we have different concepts of sin and punishment it becomes difficult to work out what is going on. All of which means we need to not only translate the words, we also need to reorient the story itself so it makes some kind of sense in our context.

Let me give you an example of language that needs multiple levels of translation. “Cracked him, go right. 3 coming in from the left. Camper in that tower. Downed one. Armour here. GG guys, I’ll be AFK for 5.” Not only do we need to translate things like the abbreviations; none of it makes sense unless you actually have some idea of what a first-person shooter even is. Many of you may not have even heard of a first-person shooter. To a computer game player it’s obvious what is going on because it is their context.

Let's keep that in mind as we ponder what Jesus has to say in our reading today. The first sentence is particularly gruesome and seemingly has no relationship to our experiences today. Animal sacrifices and murder are not a part of our public order. To tie this into the idea that the event may have been the result of some kind of terrible sin is akin to certain people claiming that the 185 deaths in the Christchurch earthquake were linked to homosexuality in the community. There is a deep disconnect between the story as it is told and what our lived experience tells us is right and that can be enough to cause us to miss the deeper point.

I want to come to what I think is the deeper point in a moment. First, let's think about what may have been going on in the minds of Jesus' listeners 2000 years ago. The truth of the Galilean incident is lost in history. It may have been that the Galileans were part of an attempted uprising, a not uncommon event in those times. Or they may have simply been unfortunate enough to anger the governor on a bad day. Whatever the motivations behind the event, the people of the day would have immediately applied their fate to the idea that God punishes sinners. In other words, they must have done something really bad and so God was giving them their comeuppances. The same thing for those killed by the falling tower in Siloam. They had obviously done something bad for the disaster to happen. To these listeners it was God's way of showing everyone that they couldn't get away with bad behaviour. We see the same attitude in the story of the lame man lowered through the roof when the assumption is made that the lame man must have committed some terrible sin to have ended up lame.

The other side of this understanding was that I am obviously better than those hurt or killed, because I wasn't hurt or killed. All of which is really no different to someone who goes to church and thinks they are better than those who don't because they are, 'SAVED.' It is this attitude of, 'holier than thou,' that I think Jesus is getting at here.

Notice how verse 3 and verse 5 are the same. Jesus is trying to get a point across here. You cannot look at other people and think you are better than them, more deserving of God's mercy simply because of your circumstances. The stories that lead into this conclusion could be nearly anything – I don't have Covid, but other people do so I must be better than them. Those terrible people in prison have done awful things, I'm not in prison so I must be better than them. How about the people in the Christchurch mosque attack, or the people of Ukraine, or the Houthi in Yemen, or any people afflicted by disease

or disaster? Am I better than any of them? Jesus is saying here, 'No, you are not better than any of those.' We are all on the same level and we all need God's mercy equally. Maybe that is why the proverbial tower is falling on the church – because God wants us to look for our salvation in Jesus and not in our own goodness and this is the only way to get our attention. Just a thought...

## Celebrate

*Don Moen*

Celebrate, Jesus celebrate

Celebrate, Jesus celebrate

Celebrate, Jesus celebrate

Celebrate, Jesus celebrate

He is risen, He is risen

And He lives forevermore

He is risen, He is risen

Come on and celebrate

The resurrection of our Lord

## Reading 2                      Luke 13:6-9

### *The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree*

<sup>6</sup> Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. <sup>7</sup> 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?' <sup>8</sup> He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. <sup>9</sup> If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

## Reflection 2

Jesus really doesn't beat around the bush! This parable leads directly on from our first reading. If we read it in this context it suddenly makes a whole lot more sense. The same people who were listening to Jesus talk about the Galileans and those killed by the tower of Siloam are listening here. That means they know that this parable is about them. And they know that they are represented by the fig tree.

Let's put ourselves in the story. We have just come to Jesus, full of self-righteousness because of the disasters that have befallen people living just down the road. The first thing Jesus does to burst our bubble is to suggest that

we are no different to those people in terms of our need for God's mercy. Now for the sucker punch.

'See, I have been looking for fruit on this tree for 3 years and still I find none.' If God were to come up to you and say these words, what would have to say for yourself? How would you go about explaining what fruit you have produced? Keep in mind that this is for an audience of one and that audience already knows what you have been up to. I don't know about you, but I would find it incredibly confronting. What fruit do I have to show for the last 3 years? Not only that, but the owner of the fig tree proceeds to tell the gardener to cut the tree down because it is wasting the soil.

Fortunately for tree, and for me, we have an advocate – the gardener. 'Let me work on it for one more year. I will turn the soil and feed it well. Then if that doesn't work, we will cut it down.' Wow! A bit of a lifeline there. Things were sounding pretty grim for a moment there.

Here's my question though. Is this like an annual check-up? Does God check in on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March every year to make sure we are living up to expectations? And what do those expectations look like in real life? How would I know if I was bearing fruit? Do I have a quota of salvations and invitations I need to fulfil? Or is it measured in number of verses read and prayers prayed? Or is it something else I'm equally unlikely to measure up against?

Personally, I think it is none of the above. I think the fruit is best measured in Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness and Self-control. It's not about getting them all lined up in neat rows. It's about getting a little better at some part of it. The turning of the soil and the manure is the work of the Holy Spirit, and the fruit is the growth of these things in our lives. We definitely have a role to play in growing in the fruit and God is looking for how we allow the Spirit to mould us into true followers of Jesus. And maybe, just maybe, if we get that right the tower might fall on empty ground. What do you think?

### We Pray

Merciful God, we know that we do not deserve your love and kindness. There is nothing about what we do that can earn us a way out of disaster. Instead, you chose us before we knew you and you send the Holy Spirit to work away at our fruitlessness so that we don't need to be cut down. Teach us to trust you and allow you to mould us into people who fully represent you to the world. Amen.

## How great is our God

*Chris Tomlin*

The splendour of a king, clothed in majesty  
Let all the earth rejoice, all the earth rejoice  
He wraps Himself in light and darkness tries to hide  
And trembles at His voice, trembles at His voice

How great is our God  
Sing with me how great is our God  
And all will see  
How great, how great is our God

Age to age He stands and time is in His hands  
Beginning and the end, beginning and the end  
The Godhead Three in One, Father, Spirit and Son  
The Lion and the Lamb, the Lion and the Lamb

Name above all names, worthy of all praise  
My heart will sing how great is our God

## Offering

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning>

Patient and merciful God, we bring our offerings humbly on this day, hoping they will bring fruit to the ministry of your church on earth. We ourselves have not always set our priorities on bearing good fruit, and yet you are a patient gardener. You have sent saints into our midst to make the soil richer, yet like the stubborn fig tree, good fruit has been scarce. May our journey this Lenten season feed our spirits to bring forth the fruit you desire. We pray in the name of our Saviour and redeemer, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

## Prayer for ourselves and others

For refugees from Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Somalia, Ukraine  
Lord, in your mercy

**Hear our prayer**

For rubbish collectors, roading contractors and factory workers  
Lord, in your mercy

**Hear our prayer**

For the church, its leaders, the workers, the worshippers  
Lord, in your mercy

**Hear our prayer**

For peace in the midst of war and courage to face problems like loss of habitats and extinction of species

Lord, in your mercy

**Hear our prayer**

For ourselves, our families and friends, those things that keep us awake at night and the things that fill us with joy

Lord, in your mercy

**Hear our prayer**

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us how to pray...

[The Lord's Prayer](#)

Our Father in Heaven, holy be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

[Praise to the Lord](#)

*Joachim Neander*

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!

O my soul, praise him, for he is your health and salvation!

Come, all who hear; now to his altar draw near,

Joining in glad adoration.

Praise to the Lord, above all things so wondrously reigning;

Sheltering you under his wings, and so gently sustaining!

Have you not seen all that is needful has been

Sent by his gracious ordaining?

Praise to the Lord, who will prosper your work and defend us;

Surely his goodness and mercy shall daily attend us.

Ponder anew what the Almighty can do,

If with his love he befriends us.

Praise to the Lord! O let all that is in me adore him!

All that has life and breath, come now with praises before him.

Let the Amen sound from his people again;

Gladly forever adore him.



## Benediction and Grace

May we go from here mindful of our need for God's mercy and ready to be dug over and manured so we can bear good fruit for God.

May the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,  
the Love of God,  
and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit  
be with us all, now and forevermore. Amen.