

# The Great Molasses Flood of Boston

Jim Elliff

We've all heard of 150 mile-per-hour hurricane winds, but have you ever heard of the 35 mile-per-hour molasses flood?

It really happened. In 1919, a wave of molasses, the country's main sweetener, escaped from the Purity Distilling Company and slid its way down North End Boston street at 35 miles-per-hour. It not simply a humorous incident. At least the 21 people who were killed and 150 who were injured did not think so.



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A 50 foot high tank with a 90 foot circumference collapsed releasing 2,300,000 gallons of the sticky stuff on to the streets. Those looking on said that there was a loud rumbling sound like a machine gun as rivets shot off the tank. Some claimed that the ground shook the way it does when a train passes by.

The molasses was 2 to 3 feet deep as it moved over the area, lifting a train car off its tracks and moving buildings off their foundations. Stephen Puleo wrote this firsthand account:

Molasses, waist deep, covered the street and swirled and bubbled about the wreckage. Here and there struggled a form — whether it was animal or human being was impossible to tell. Only an upheaval, a thrashing about in the sticky mass, showed where any life was . . . . Horses died like so many flies on sticky fly-paper. The more they struggled, the deeper in the mess they were ensnared. Human beings — men and women — suffered likewise.<sup>i</sup>

After 87,000 hours of labor, the mess was cleaned up, with bodies removed and animal carcasses carried away. At least two bodies were unidentifiable.

## **But Why?**

Why did this happen? Could it be that these people were worse sinners than most?

Jesus once asked a similar question after hearing of a tragic event recounted some Jews—the news that the blood of Galileans had been mixed with the unholy sacrifices of Pilate.

Jesus asked, “Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate” (Luke 13:2)?

He posed a second tragedy himself, that of the 18 people who perished when the tower of Siloam fell. “Do you suppose . . . [they] were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem” (v.4)?

To these two poignant questions Jesus gave the same answer: *I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*

Did Christ mean that those people would all die in a similarly tragic way? Perhaps He did mean that. After all, Jesus knew that in 70 A.D., some few years in the future, perhaps as many as a million Jews would be killed for their rejection of Christ as Jerusalem was taken by Titus of Rome. The horrible stories of dying in the Jewish Wars are forever imprinted into our historical memory base. Yet, according to early historians Eusibius and Josephus, Christian believers escaped the city before the massacre. Repenting made a real difference in a physical way.

Or, perhaps, Christ is speaking of perishing eternally, as in the living death of eternity in hell. Regardless of which, the final result for the one who dies without Christ is hell.

The tragedy of the blood of Galileans and those dying because of the falling tower, along with all other tragedies is a placarded message by God to the world telling us that *everyone* must repent, whether we are worse sinners or not.

Anthony di Stasio, walking homeward with his sisters from the Michelangelo School, was picked up by the wave [of molasses] and carried, tumbling on its crest, almost as though he were surfing. Then he grounded and the molasses rolled him like a pebble as the wave diminished. He heard his mother call his name and couldn't answer, his throat was so clogged with the smothering goo. He passed out, then opened his eyes to find three of his sisters staring at him.<sup>ii</sup>

Anthony was spared death at that time. But he died later, as all of us will. For him at that time, and for us now, the question remains. Will I spend eternity in hell, even if I escape a tragedy or two?

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<sup>i</sup> Park, Edwards (24 November 2004). "[Eric Postpischil's Molasses Disaster Pages, Smithsonian Article](http://www.Smithsonian.com/eric-postpischil/molasses-disaster)". *Eric Postpischil's Domain* (Smithsonian Institution) **14** (8): 213–230. <http://edp.org/molpark.htm>. Retrieved 2006-12-16.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.