

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Luke 13:1-9

Year C - Lent 3, Text: Luke 13:1-9
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The death of the Galileans at the hands of Pilate (v. 1) and the accidental death of those on whom the Tower of Siloam fell (v. 4) are presented by the Lucan Jesus as timely reminders of the need for all to repent. The victims of these tragedies should not be written off as outstanding sinners who were singled out for punishment, assuming we are in the clear.

Verses 13:1-3: The slaughter of the Galileans by Pilate is unknown outside of Luke's reference to the event. However, what the Jewish historian Josephus reports about Pilate indicates that such a slaughter would have been in keeping with Pilate's character. Josephus reports that Pilate once disrupted a religious gathering of the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim by slaughtering the participants. He also reports that, on another occasion, Pilate killed many Jews who had opposed him when he appropriated money from the Temple treasury to build an aqueduct to Jerusalem.

Verse 13:4: Nothing of this accident in Jerusalem is known outside of Luke and the New Testament. The tower was possibly a part of Jerusalem's defense system. Yet Jesus speaks of it as a current event, known to his audience.

Verse 13:5: John the Baptist called his hearers to repent — passionately (see 3:1–17). Jesus points out the “cause and effect” relationship between the way we live and the life that we experience. The implications relate not only to life here and now but also to life in the hereafter.

In Jesus' day, physical suffering was widely viewed as a consequence of sin (see John 9:2-3). Jesus affirmed the teaching of the prophets that organizations and communities can and do bring God's discipline on themselves — a discipline that works its way out in history. However, we should not attribute accidents and misfortunes to divine punishment. Here, Jesus denies that individual sinners are punished in this life by specific tragedies.

The tale is told of a pastor who, when suffering great distress, dreamed that he was to be granted a personal interview with Jesus. “Now I shall get answers to all my problems,” he thought as he prepared a questionnaire for His Lord. However, while standing in the Divine Presence, he forgot all his questions and was content to learn and embrace all the answers in Jesus' face and heart. Jesus is the only Answer in relation to dealing with personal difficulties.

Nations, communities, and even churches can and do bring God's discipline on themselves in this life. Of the fourteen great civilizations that have already disintegrated, Professor Arnold Toynbee (in his ten-volume historical survey) suggests that they were instruments “that God could no longer use.”

Verses 13:6–9: The term “fig tree” is used frequently as a metaphor for Israel and Judah (Hosea 9:10; Micah 7:1; Jeremiah 8:13). For other references to “looking for fruit,” see Matthew 21:19; Mark 11:13.

In Palestine, fruit trees were often planted in vineyards, turning them into a kind of orchard, but in this instance, it is to no good purpose. In the parable, the fig tree is eating up the goodness of the ground at the expense of the surrounding vines, but it is still bearing no fruit. So, the owner decides to cut it down. It is no more than a glorified weed!

However, the gardener pleads for a year's respite. He says that he will loosen the earth around the roots and fertilize it — trouble that is not taken with fig trees. The owner agrees. He will wait until the next harvest. But this could be the last chance for the fig tree.

Although this parable related to the situation of Jesus' day, its message is timeless. In His mercy, God continues to give us — His people — many more “second chances.” However, this should not lead us to presume upon God's goodness. There will be a last chance. The owner's patience was eventually strained to breaking point with the barren fig tree. Sir Winston Churchill

once mused, “I wonder what would happen if God lost patience with the world.”

Following on the call to repentance in verses 1–5, the parable of the barren fig tree presents a story about the continuing patience of God with those who have not yet given evidence of their repentance. The parable may also be alluding to the delay of the end time when judgment will be meted out and to the importance of preparing for the end of the age, because the delay will not be permanent (verses 8–9). A Final Day is coming when humanity at large must appear before the throne of the Lord of eternity and “give account” (Matthew 25:31–46).