Why did this happen?

為什麼會發生這種事？

Luke 13: 1-9 3/23/2025

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*At that very time there were some present who told Jesus[*[*a*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=luke%2013%3A%201-9&version=NRSVUE#fen-NRSVUE-25512a)*] about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.****2****He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?****3****No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish as they did.****4****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 other people living in Jerusalem?****5****No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish just as they did.”*

***6****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.****7****So he said to the man working the vineyard, ‘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?’****8****He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.****9****If it bears fruit next year, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down.’ ”*

Prayer for illumination

God of all things, wherever and whenever, may You be with us. As we read and meditate on the Bible, we ask that Your Holy Spirit work among us so that we may hear Your word. In the holy name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Forty-five years ago this month, Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, during a worship service in a cancer hospital, proclaimed the Gospel of John: “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a grain; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.” Then he presided over communion, and as he raised the chalice to bless it, a gunman walked into the church. Shots were fired from the back of the sanctuary. Romero fell to the floor, his blood mixing with that in the cup representing the precious blood of Christ.

Romero challenged the Salvadoran military government with outspoken candor. Despite the ever-increasing death threats urging him to be silent, Romero told reporters, “I am frequently threatened with death. I must say, as a Christian, I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I will rise again with the Salvadoran people.”

Today’s scripture mentions that a group of people came to tell Jesus this news: “Have you heard? A group of Galileans, while worshiping and offering sacrifices to God, were suddenly attacked by a detachment of soldiers under the tyrant governor Pilate and were slaughtered. As they died, their blood mixed with the blood of the sacrifice.” Truly tragic!

Surely someone in the crowd wondered what the Galileans had done to deserve such a fate—upon hearing such remarks, Jesus had to explain.

Jesus essentially said, “Do you really think that those Galileans are more sinful than other Galileans? Or do you really think that not long ago when that tower collapsed, those Xiruo people crushed under the rubble were more deserving of punishment than the other people of Jerusalem?”

Many believe that God rewards good and punishes evil, that those at the front of the line should go first and those at the back last. Do you also think so? Although we speak of the profound theology of God’s love and mercy, in practical life we often use the simple formula: sin = curse, obedience = blessing.

Whenever we do wrong, our hearts are always waiting for punishment and curses to come. When we do good or come to worship this morning, we expect to receive some kind of heavenly blessing—at least God’s protection.

Sometimes we do not believe in God, but in retribution. We think that God is that fair and impartial moral judge. But our God is not like that, and neither is the world. Our God lets the sunlight shine on both the wicked and the good, and lets the rain fall on both the righteous and the unrighteous.

Our God gives the same wages to the latecomers as to those who worked all day. Our God, in Jesus Christ, forgives murderers and associates with sinners; our God simultaneously rebukes the Pharisees and instructs the saints. In mystery, our God temporarily withholds the justice we seek; He is willing to let the tares and the wheat grow together. His great patience, restraint, and mercy sometimes lead us to think that He is neglectful or even insane.

Although in this world it is often “you reap what you sow,” there are times when you sow, sow, and sow, yet only reap a storm. And there are times—as Jesus told His disciples—when we reap in fields where no seeds were sown; the abundant harvest is entirely a gift, and the appearance of fruit is not because of the farmer.

Understanding the chaotic mystery of the cause and effect we encounter is already very difficult; when facing terrible suffering, the well is too deep and we simply have no bucket to draw water. Yet, we still take our little bucket and strive to find meaning in our suffering.

As humans, we crave answers. In order to extract meaning from our pain, we believe we must explain, and explanation often means we must blame someone. Therefore, those tragically slain Galileans must have been worse than other Galileans. And those crushed to death under the Siroa Tower must have deserved it. Thus, we think that killings, tower collapses, earthquakes, miscarriages, accidents, or diseases, etc., must be related to deserved retribution or to God.

Our world is indeed, to some extent, fallen, to some extent broken, and to some extent in dire need of redemption, isn’t it?

Suffering is not always a direct, black-and-white message; sometimes it cannot describe its meaning, and sometimes it merely signals a general, flickering warning light.

We live in a fallen world, yet Jesus did not stop there. He does not allow us to carry a complacent attitude that confirms our sense of security, as if these tragedies have nothing to do with us. No, clearly this bell tolls for you and me as well.

Jesus said, “Unless you repent, you will all perish like them.” This is not merely a threat, but a diagnosis. The modern world sometimes leads us to mistakenly believe that we can truly control everything in life.

Diseases can be treated, wise preventive measures and laws can avert tragedies, building inspections can prevent tower collapses, and economic changes can be forecast. “We are smart modern people! We can handle everything.”

But these moments let us glimpse that human life is far more fragile and dangerous than we believe. When violence erupts, towers collapse, the earth trembles, or when we fall ill, those moments that make us feel vulnerable overwhelm us. They force us to face a harsh and even frightening reality: despite our neatly trimmed lawns, carefully designed homes, five-year plans, and advanced technology at the push of a button, we do not control everything as we imagine.

These moments make us realize that our money, power, connections, or anything else cannot save us; even living in a comfortable, gated community cannot separate us from the forces of sin, tragedy, and death.

Jesus said, “Unless you repent, you will all perish, unaware, just like them.” Jesus did not intend to frighten us but to tell us the truth—to remind us of our vulnerability and our false sense of security.

When we feel that we are standing on a solid foundation, Jesus tells us that we are actually sitting on an unstable volcano. It makes us clearly recognize what is truly important. Encountering tragedy opens a sacred space in our hearts, where we can feel and recognize our fragility and instability in this fallen world.

When you experience all this, Jesus says it is a moment of truth—a reality check. Let it lead you to repentance.

The repentance that Jesus speaks of is better rendered here as “rethinking” your life. Rethink reality. In that open, vulnerable, easily injured space, rethink your life. Rethink where your ultimate security lies. And let it change your view of the world we inhabit, your understanding of life, and your knowledge of God.

After opening the vulnerable space in our hearts and calling us to repent, Jesus gave us a special story. The ending of this story is open.

There was a man who planted a fig tree in his vineyard. He nurtured it diligently. Year after year, he waited for the fig tree to bear fruit. He loved figs. So every day he watched the fig tree grow and dreamed of figs. He let the fig tree grow for three years, and every day he came looking for that first fig… expecting to taste its flavor… yet there was nothing.

How long can you wait? For a fig tree, for a church, for a job, for an addict, for a marriage, for a life that bears no fruit? How long can you wait?

That fig tree is absorbing all the resources of the soil; it is not only an innocent waste of space, but it is also harming this vineyard.

Day after day, year after year—far beyond the time when the tree should bear fruit—the owner of the vineyard continuously inspects the tree, searching for any sign of figs. Finally, he tells the gardener, “Cut it down. At least cut it to firewood, so that we can get something out of this so-called fig tree.”

But there is a gardener here, and the gardener says, “Lord, let us wait a little longer—wait another year. Let me dig around the tree; perhaps I can use this manure to help the tree bear some fruit.”

Looking at all the wrongs in this world, seeing manure everywhere, seeing Romero being shot, seeing many children injured in war, some dying from lack of medical care, looking at this world, one almost wants to say, “Cut it down. Just cut it down and start over.”

Or perhaps some people occasionally look at their own lives, feeling a desolation, a life without fruit, and doubt whether it will ever change—like a fig tree with no figs—and they even wonder if it might be better off cut down.

God looks at this world, looks at us, looks at this struggling fig tree—should we continue to try or simply cut it down and start over?

This question was answered when Jesus came to the vineyard. Jesus did not cut down the tree, but instead allowed Himself to be hung on a tree. He would become another Galilean killed by Pilate, His blood mixed with the sacrifice of His life. And on the cross, as He offered His life, all our sins, all our brokenness, pain, and tragedy were laid upon Him.

He was killed as a sacrifice. On the third day, Mary came to the tomb and found Him alive: He was the first ripe fruit of a new creation.

That grain of wheat fell into the soil and died—now, here is all the fruit.

God accomplished all of this through the death of Christ: God can do likewise for our world, our church, and our lives.

Repent, rethink everything. Let Christ on the cross be the gardener who can use manure to help this tree bear some fruit. On Easter morning, when Mary encountered the risen Jesus, she was so surprised that at first, she mistook Him for the gardener. But Mary was not mistaken. Thank God. Amen.