

Judgment, Suffering, and Hermeneutical Repentance in Luke 13:1-9

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Abstract: Human suffering becomes theologically dangerous when tragedy is treated as proof of divine punishment and victims are made objects of moral suspicion. Although Luke 13:1–9 has commonly been interpreted through the lenses of individual repentance and eschatological judgment, and studies of suffering have largely developed within theodicy and disaster theology, the passage has received insufficient attention as Jesus’ critique of religious victim blaming. This study therefore reinterprets Luke 13:1–9 by examining how Jesus reframes the relationship among suffering, sin, divine judgment, and repentance. Using a qualitative narrative-theological exegetical method, the analysis integrates historical-contextual, literary-narrative, and theological inquiry in dialogue with New Testament scholarship and contemporary theology of suffering. The findings show that Jesus rejects the inference that the Galileans killed by Pilate and those who died at Siloam were more sinful than others; instead, he redirects judgment away from victims toward the universal summons to repentance. The barren fig tree further portrays divine patience and the continuing opportunity for transformation without eliminating the seriousness of judgment. This study argues that repentance in Luke 13 entails not only personal spiritual reorientation but also a transformed way of perceiving sufferers. Its originality lies in reading the pericope as a theological dismantling of religious victim blaming, thereby contributing a non-stigmatizing biblical theology of suffering with significant implications for pastoral care, disaster response, Christian education, and solidarity amid contemporary human crises.

Keywords: judgment; suffering; repentance; Luke 13:1–9; hermeneutical repentance

Article’s History:

Received: May 11, 2026. Revised: July 17, 2026. Accepted: July 19, 2026

How to Cite:

K, Y. (2026). Judgment, suffering, and hermeneutical repentance in Luke 13:1–9. *Educatio Christi*, 7(2), 210–225. <https://doi.org/10.70796/educatio-christi.v7i2.438>

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Introduction

When human tragedy is interpreted as a moral verdict, the suffering of victims is compounded: they bear not only the wound itself but also religious stigma. In some Christian communities, disasters, serious illness, pandemics, and tragic death may still be construed as direct consequences of sin, curse, or divine punishment. Lloyd (2021) shows that such spiritualization of suffering can associate life disruption with sin and spiritual punishment, whereas Wessel (2015) emphasizes that Christian understandings of suffering must be situated within the revelation of God's solidarity with suffering humanity. The problem is that theological explanations that too quickly connect suffering with individual wrongdoing can transform faith from a source of hope into a mechanism of judgment. This issue is also significant in religious education, because religious learning does not merely transmit doctrine; it shapes how learners interpret human experience, treat vulnerable persons, and critically assess religious claims (Go, 2018; Jarmer, 2025).

The tension among sin, suffering, and punishment has long been present within the biblical tradition. Several Old Testament texts portray suffering within the framework of covenantal disobedience and its consequences, yet the biblical witness itself does not support a mechanistic relationship between personal sin and every instance of suffering. In the Gospels, Jesus challenges precisely such simplification, as seen in John 9:1–3 (Carson, 1991) and, most notably, Luke 13:1–9. In responding to the Galileans killed by Pilate and the eighteen victims of the collapse of the tower of Siloam, Jesus rejects the assumption that they were more sinful than others. According to Bock (1996), the primary direction of the pericope is not the identification of the victims' guilt but the universal summons to repentance. Luke 13:1–9 therefore does not abolish the realities of sin and judgment; rather, it questions the legitimacy of interpreting tragedy as direct evidence of a person's degree of sinfulness. Such a hermeneutical posture is particularly relevant to religious education that seeks to cultivate reflective evaluation of religious claims rather than their uncritical acceptance (Jawoniyi, 2015; Mones & Mauk, 2025).

Previous studies of Luke 13:1–9 have generally been shaped by exegetical and eschatological concerns. Green (1997) reads the passage as a universal call to repentance, while Bock (1996) emphasizes readiness for divine judgment. These readings are important because they preserve the dimensions of sin, repentance, and moral responsibility that are intrinsic to Luke's narrative. Nevertheless, an emphasis on individual repentance and eschatological judgment may leave underdeveloped another feature of the text: Jesus first rejects the assumption that victims of tragedy bear greater moral guilt. In a different field of inquiry, Davis et al. (2019) demonstrate the complexity of religious meaning-making among disaster survivors, whereas Rumahuru and Kakiay (2020) criticize punitive paradigms in disaster theology and advocate more humane theological responses. These studies enrich contemporary understandings of suffering, yet they have not sufficiently integrated the discourse on suffering with the argumentative structure of Luke 13:1–9 as a critique of religious victim blaming. This gap matters because the interpretation of religious texts directly shapes how faith communities understand victims and teach the meaning of suffering.

The gap becomes even more evident when research in religious education is considered. Studies in this field emphasize the importance of critical engagement with religious claims and practices (Go, 2018; Jarmer, 2025), dialogical approaches to controversial issues (Flensner, 2020),

and the capacity to learn from religious traditions through self-reflection and responsible interpretation (Carmody, 2025). Kimanen (2022, 2023) further shows that religious education can cultivate informed empathy, awareness of injustice, and social agency, while Mogra (2022) links religious education with the formation of concern for social justice. Even within Christian higher education, Best and Jun (2017) demonstrate that victim blaming has concrete consequences for how faith-based institutions respond to victims. Yet this educational discourse is rarely brought into direct conversation with Luke 13:1–9. Two intersecting gaps therefore emerge: Lukan studies have predominantly foregrounded repentance and eschatology, whereas research in religious education has emphasized critical thinking, empathy, and justice without treating Luke 13:1–9 as a primary biblical resource for correcting religious perceptions of suffering.

Against this background, the niche of the present study lies in reading Luke 13:1–9 through the problem of religious victim blaming without removing the passage from its intrinsic framework of repentance and judgment. Its novelty rests on the argument that repentance in this pericope refers not only to personal reorientation toward God but also to a transformation in the way sufferers are perceived. Jesus redirects attention from speculation about the victims' sins to the self-examination of the hearers, while the parable of the barren fig tree presents a constructive tension between divine patience and the urgency of bearing the fruit of repentance. The contribution of this study is therefore to propose a non-stigmatizing theological construction that preserves the seriousness of sin and judgment while rejecting the use of suffering as a direct indicator of personal moral guilt. This perspective also opens a space for Christian education to integrate biblical literacy, critical reflection, and the formation of empathy.

The significance of this study lies in its effort to bring New Testament exegesis into conversation with contemporary pastoral and educational concerns. In contexts where disasters, illness, and humanitarian tragedies continue to generate religious interpretations, churches and Christian educational institutions require a hermeneutical framework capable of speaking seriously about sin and repentance without intensifying the stigma experienced by victims. Holistic Christian ministry requires sustained attention to concrete human needs and solidarity with vulnerable persons (Yustinus et al., 2025). Accordingly, this study aims to analyze how Luke 13:1–9 reconstructs the relationship among suffering, sin, judgment, and repentance; to explain how the two tragedies and the parable of the fig tree function within Jesus' argument; and to articulate the passage's relevance for a theology of suffering and for the formation of a more reflective Christian perspective. Educationally, this aim is significant because it contributes to the development of learners' capacity to read religious texts both critically and ethically, a competence increasingly emphasized in religious education research (Agnew, 2012; Carmody, 2025).

On the basis of this reading, the study argues that Luke 13:1–9 provides no warrant for concluding that a person's suffering demonstrates the degree of that person's sinfulness. Jesus does not deny sin, repentance, or divine judgment; rather, he rejects the transformation of another person's tragedy into a measure of moral superiority. This is where the theological contribution of the study becomes particularly important: suffering is redirected from an object of retributive speculation toward a space for self-reflection, repentance, and solidarity. In theological education and Christian religious education, this finding offers a model of biblical learning that moves beyond

the transmission of textual knowledge and trains learners to distinguish responsible interpretation from religious assumptions that can wound others. Such an approach corresponds with research that understands religious education as a space for critical thinking, self-evaluation, and awareness of the social consequences of religious belief (Go, 2018; Jarmer, 2025; Kimanen, 2023).

Consequently, Luke 13:1–9 can function as a pedagogical resource for cultivating a theological literacy that is critical, empathetic, and oriented toward justice. Teaching this passage can invite learners not merely to ask why someone suffers, but to examine the theological assumptions embedded in that question, to attend to the experience of victims, and to consider more responsible responses of faith. Religious education that nurtures informed empathy can help learners understand suffering without reducing it to simplistic moral explanation (Kimanen, 2022), while dialogical pedagogy can create safe spaces for discussing sensitive and controversial religious issues (Agnew, 2012; Flensner, 2020). The contribution of this study therefore extends beyond Lukan exegesis: it offers a foundation for Christian education that integrates interpretive rigor, personal repentance, critical thinking, compassion, and solidarity. More broadly, such education can help shape faith communities that do not use religion to condemn the suffering of others but learn to stand with sufferers reflectively and humanely (Mogra, 2022).

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach through narrative-theological exegesis of Luke 13:1–9 in order to analyze the relationship among suffering, sin, repentance, and divine punishment within the narrative of Luke’s Gospel. A qualitative design is appropriate because the study does not seek to measure variables but to interpret meaning, argumentative structure, and theological constructions that emerge from the text and its context; the use of qualitative methods for questions centered on meaning and interpretation is consistent with the characteristics described by Hammarberg et al. (2016). The primary data consist of Luke 13:1–9, while secondary data include academic New Testament commentaries, studies of Lukan theology, research on the historical and religious context of first-century Judaism, and contemporary scholarship on suffering, theodicy, disaster theology, and religious victim blaming. Secondary literature was selected according to its direct relevance to the research problem and was used to clarify the historical setting, narrative dynamics, and theological discourse surrounding the pericope. The choice of a narrative-theological approach is justified by the literary character of Luke 13:1–9 itself: Jesus’ statements concerning the Galilean tragedy and the collapse of the tower of Siloam cannot be separated from the development of the dialogue, the repeated summons to repentance, and the parable of the fig tree, which together form a coherent argumentative unit.

The analysis was conducted in three interrelated stages. First, historical-contextual analysis was used to reconstruct Jewish understandings of the relationship among sin, suffering, and divine punishment, together with the socio-political context relevant to the two tragedies in Luke 13:1–5. Second, literary-narrative analysis examined the structure of Luke 13:1–9, with particular attention to the development of the dialogue, Jesus’ rhetorical questions, the repetition of repentance language, the contrast between victims and hearers, and the function of the fig-tree parable in Luke

13:6–9. Third, theological analysis synthesized the results of the first two stages and placed them in dialogue with New Testament scholarship and contemporary theology of suffering in order to assess whether suffering in the pericope can legitimately be read as a direct indicator of divine punishment and to formulate its implications for religious victim blaming. Interpretive credibility was strengthened through contextual reading, comparison across academic commentaries and studies, and consistency between textual evidence and theological conclusions, so that the interpretation would not rest solely on the researcher’s normative assumptions. The entire procedure was directed toward a defensible account of the text’s communicative meaning within its narrative-historical horizon and its relevance to contemporary discourse on suffering. Because the study relies exclusively on biblical texts and published academic sources and involves no human participants, interviews, experiments, or personal data, formal ethical approval was not required; nevertheless, academic integrity was maintained through accurate attribution, proportionate representation of scholarly arguments, and avoidance of decontextualized source use.

Results and Discussion

Sin, Suffering, and Divine Punishment: Tensions within Retributive Logic

The first finding indicates that the presumed relationship between sin and suffering in Luke 13:1–9 did not emerge within a theological vacuum. In several Old Testament traditions, suffering may be located within a covenantal framework in which obedience is associated with blessing and disobedience may entail punitive consequences. Brueggemann (1997) situates this pattern within the logic of God’s covenantal justice toward Israel, while Berlejung (2015) shows that concepts of sin and punishment in Israel’s tradition are closely related to divine holiness and the demand for covenant fidelity. Historically, experiences such as exile, warfare, famine, and the destruction of Jerusalem could therefore receive theological interpretation as consequences of collective unfaithfulness. This finding is important because it shows that the retributive logic presupposed in Luke 13 cannot be dismissed merely as popular prejudice; it grew out of a theological structure deeply rooted in Israel’s religious memory.

Nevertheless, a theological relationship between sin and consequence is not identical with a human right to conclude that every particular instance of suffering is punishment for a particular sin. A crucial conceptual distinction is therefore required between a theology of divine judgment and a hermeneutic of judgment directed at victims. The former remains a biblical category; the latter emerges when human beings claim to know the specific divine reason behind another person’s suffering. This distinction is significant for Luke 13 because Jesus does not deny the reality of sin or judgment, but he does challenge the inference from tragedy to the victim’s moral status. The central theological issue in the text is therefore not whether God judges, but whether human beings possess the epistemic authority to interpret a specific tragedy as transparent evidence of such judgment.

Retributive reasoning becomes even more problematic when it moves from collective experience to individual suffering. Wisdom traditions do contain a pedagogical correlation between morality and the consequences of life. Walton and Longman (2015), for example, show that ancient wisdom often teaches that righteous living bears positive consequences whereas wickedness leads

toward destruction. Yet when such a pedagogical pattern is transformed into a universal causal law, suffering easily becomes a moral indicator. Those who are ill, impoverished, bereaved, or caught in tragedy may then be regarded as persons who must have committed some particular wrong.

The book of Job itself dismantles such simplification. Mariani and Betaubun (2024) argue that Job's suffering demonstrates the impossibility of equating every form of suffering with divine punishment, while Fransiska et al. (2025) read the book as a critique of a mechanistic application of retributive law. Theologically, Job exposes the limits of human knowledge: the reality of divine justice does not mean that human beings can reconstruct with certainty the divine rationale behind every experience of suffering. Jesus' rejection of retributive assumptions in Luke 13 should therefore not be understood as a rupture with Israel's tradition, but as a continuation and intensification of an internal biblical critique of overly simplistic retributive theology.

A similar dynamic appears in John 9, where the disciples ask whether a man's blindness was caused by his own sin or by that of his parents. Thomaskutty (2022) shows how disability can be embedded in structures of stigma that associate bodily conditions with moral fault. The comparison reveals a broader anthropological tendency: human beings often seek a moral agent when confronted with suffering that is difficult to explain. In contemporary terms, processes of meaning-making can provide orientation and coherence in suffering, but the form of meaning that emerges is strongly shaped by the worldview and religious convictions through which the experience is interpreted (Hall & Hill, 2019; Hall et al., 2018; Park, 2005). Religious interpretation of suffering is therefore not a neutral activity; it may support recovery, but it can also generate stigma when suffering is automatically constructed as punishment for the victim's wrongdoing.

This finding gains empirical relevance from research on religion and disaster. In their systematic review, Aten et al. (2019) demonstrate that religious and spiritual beliefs play a significant role in how individuals interpret, confront, and make meaning of traumatic experience. Yet the potential benefit of religion does not depend merely on its presence, but on how religious resources are mobilized in interpretation. This corresponds with the distinction developed by McMartin and Hall (2022) between causal views of suffering—why suffering occurs—and functional views—how suffering is responded to and what may emerge from it. The distinction is especially productive for Luke 13. Jesus does not provide a causal explanation for why the Galileans were killed or why the tower of Siloam collapsed; he redirects the discussion toward the human response to mortality, repentance, and the remaining opportunity for life.

In Luke 13, this shift becomes explicit. Jesus rejects the assumption that the victims of tragedy were more sinful than those who escaped such suffering. Bock (1996) argues that the center of the pericope is not the identification of the victims' sins but the universal call to repentance. Bruehler (2023) similarly shows that repentance in Luke-Acts functions as a complex human response to God's action and summons. The principal finding of this section, therefore, is that Jesus preserves the seriousness of sin while dismantling the use of suffering as a moral diagnostic tool. Rumahuru and Kakiay (2020) develop a comparable implication in disaster theology by calling for a movement away from paradigms that primarily interpret disaster as punishment toward a more contextual, humane, and pastoral theology.

This analysis yields a deeper interpretation: Jesus' correction is simultaneously epistemological, theological, and ethical. It is epistemological because it limits human claims to know the divine purpose behind tragedy. It is theological because it retains both the need for repentance and the reality of judgment. It is ethical because it prevents the hearers from assuming moral superiority over victims. The central problem in Luke 13, therefore, is not merely an error in explaining suffering but also the moral position produced by that explanation. When tragedy is treated as proof of a victim's sin, the interpretation can implicitly become a means by which observers construct themselves as more righteous, more secure, or more blessed. Jesus collapses that moral distance by placing all hearers within the same category: all stand in need of repentance.

Two Tragedies and Jesus' Rhetorical Reversal in Luke 13:1–5

The second finding concerns Luke's narrative strategy of placing two different tragedies side by side. The first involves Galileans killed by Pilate, whereas the second concerns eighteen people who died when the tower of Siloam collapsed. Bock (1996) reads both events in relation to the urgency of repentance, while Lee (2018) argues that the Galilean tragedy must be considered within the political complexity of the Roman world and the possible tensions among Galilean identity, Jerusalem, and imperial power. The first tragedy, therefore, cannot adequately be reduced to a consequence of individual moral failure.

The differing character of the two tragedies is itself an important argumentative feature. The Galilean incident involves political violence and human agency; the collapse of the tower more closely resembles a public accident. Luke thus presents two distinct categories of suffering—human violence and unexpected calamity—yet Jesus responds to both in structurally parallel ways. This indicates that differences in the empirical causes of tragedy do not generate different moral evaluations of the victims. The Galileans were not more sinful because Pilate killed them, just as those who died at Siloam were not more guilty because they perished beneath the tower.

Within the broader context of Luke 13, Shirock (1993) shows that this unit is closely related to the theological structure of the chapter and to the theme of response to the kingdom of God. This reading prevents Luke 13:1–9 from being isolated as merely a discussion of disaster. Within the narrative, tragedy functions as an event that interpellates the hearers and calls them to consider their own position before God. Yet that interpellation can be read correctly only after Jesus' rejection of moral assumptions about the victims has been taken seriously. Repentance cannot therefore be built on the logic that 'they perished because they were worse.' The narrative severs that connection before it issues the summons to repent.

This pattern becomes clearest in Jesus' rhetorical question. In Luke 13:2, he asks whether the Galileans were greater sinners because they suffered in this way. His answer—'No'—functions as an explicit rejection of the retributive premise. Bock (1996) stresses that this denial does not erase the reality of sin; rather, it corrects the tendency to infer spiritual condition from suffering. Bruehler (2023) likewise shows that repentance in Luke cannot be reduced to a moral label that distinguishes the 'righteous' from the 'guilty,' but is a transformative response to God's summons.

Here an important rhetorical reversal occurs. Those who approach Jesus bring news about ‘them’—the Galileans who died. Jesus redirects attention from them to ‘you.’ Rhetorically, concern with the victims’ morality becomes a question of the hearers’ responsibility. Jesus thus transforms what may be called third-person theology into first-person accountability: from ‘Why did this happen to them?’ to ‘How do you live before God?’

This reversal has profound hermeneutical implications. Tragedy is not positioned primarily as a theoretical problem to be solved but as an event that exposes human limitation and mortality. Repentance therefore does not depend on successfully identifying the moral cause of another person’s suffering. Rather, it begins when human beings cease using the suffering of others as a means of securing their own moral position. In this sense, Luke 13 corrects not only a theory of suffering but also the observer’s way of seeing the sufferer.

The reference to the tower of Siloam reinforces this argument. Bock (1996) interprets the repeated question about whether the victims were ‘more guilty’ as further evidence of Jesus’ rejection of retributive assumptions. Jones (2022), through his discussion of Warren Carter’s interpretation of Roman imperial power, helps situate public suffering within relations of power that cannot be reduced to individual morality. Carroll (2012) likewise presents a Lukan ethic of suffering that provides no simple warrant for categorizing victims as morally more culpable.

Although Dinkler (2016) focuses on Mark’s Gospel, her methodological observation is useful for New Testament studies of suffering: suffering does not function uniformly across early Christian narratives. Its meaning must be derived from the specific rhetorical and narrative function of a text. This principle strengthens the case for reading Luke 13 according to its own internal structure. In this pericope, the suffering of victims does not function as proof of their guilt; rather, it becomes the occasion for Jesus to dismantle moral comparison and redirect the hearers toward repentance.

Accordingly, this study distinguishes between empirical explanation of tragedy and theological judgment of victims. Tragedies can and should be investigated in terms of political, social, structural, natural, and human causes. Yet identifying such causes does not justify a leap from ‘what caused this tragedy?’ to ‘what sin caused God to punish this person?’ This distinction is essential for preventing theology from using providence as an instant explanatory device that obscures the complexity of suffering.

Repentance as Existential and Hermeneutical Reorientation

After rejecting the premise that the victims were more sinful, Jesus twice issues the call to repentance in Luke 13:3 and 13:5. This repetition demonstrates that rejecting victim blaming is not equivalent to rejecting sin or judgment. Bock (1996) associates repentance here with human readiness to face divine judgment, while Bruehler (2023) understands repentance as a recurring and coherent theological configuration in Luke-Acts. Both dimensions must be preserved together: the victims were not more sinful, yet all human beings remain in need of repentance.

This tension determines the theological direction of the pericope. If only Jesus’ denial of the victims’ greater sinfulness is retained, Luke 13 can be reduced to a denial of judgment. Conversely,

if only the warning ‘unless you repent’ is emphasized, the deaths of the victims can once again be used to frighten or condemn others. The narrative chooses neither extreme. It maintains the universality of the call to repentance while rejecting the particularization of guilt through suffering. The distinction may therefore be stated as follows: divine judgment remains real, but human beings are not authorized to determine, from another person’s suffering, who is being specifically punished by God.

This study therefore proposes that repentance in Luke 13 has two inseparable dimensions. First, there is spiritual repentance, understood as human reorientation toward God. Second, there is what may be called hermeneutical repentance: a transformation in the way human beings interpret the lives and suffering of others. One has not fully responded to the logic of the text if one calls for repentance while continuing to treat another person’s tragedy as evidence of moral guilt. The repentance demanded by Jesus dismantles the observer’s position of superiority and places all human beings in a shared dependence on divine mercy.

The Fig Tree: Deferred Judgment and Space for Transformation

The next finding emerges from the narrative relationship between Luke 13:1–5 and the parable of the fig tree in verses 6–9. The parable depicts a tree that has failed to bear fruit and stands under the possibility of being cut down, yet the final decision is delayed. Bock (1996) identifies a tension between divine patience and the reality of judgment, while Bruehler (2023) shows that repentance in Luke-Acts is closely connected with the opportunity to respond to God’s action.

The history of interpretation demonstrates that the fig tree has been read in collective, historical, and individual ways. Bovon and Ševčenko (2016) show that Christian reception has associated the fig tree variously with Israel, humanity in general, and individual persons. This diversity cautions against reducing the symbol too quickly to a single referent. What remains more stable within the narrative structure is the function of the parable itself: there is a demand for fruit, a threat of judgment, and an intervention that opens additional time.

This structure is particularly significant when read after the two preceding tragedies. If the deaths of the Galileans and the victims at Siloam were intended as straightforward demonstrations of immediate punishment for personal sin, the narrative logic would be expected to emphasize swift judgment. Instead, the following parable highlights delay, care, intervention, and opportunity. The owner considers cutting down the tree, but the gardener requests time to dig around it and fertilize it. Judgment is therefore not abolished, but deferred for the sake of possible transformation.

This produces an important temporal distinction. Victim blaming is retrospective: ‘What did they do for this tragedy to happen?’ Jesus’ summons and the fig-tree parable are prospective: ‘How will you live while opportunity remains?’ The theological orientation shifts from reconstructing the past sins of victims to confronting the future responsibility of the hearers. The fig tree thus functions not as a key for explaining why victims have died, but as a symbol of urgency for those who are still alive.

This finding strengthens the interpretation that judgment in Luke 13 is paraenetic rather than a license for moral diagnosis. The warning of judgment is intended to produce the fruit of repentance among the hearers, not to provide secret information about why God allowed others to experience tragedy. Divine patience and divine judgment are therefore not mutually exclusive: patience is precisely the temporal space within which repentance remains possible.

Theological Implications: From Causal Explanation to Responsible Meaning-Making

The third finding concerns the theological and pastoral implications of this reading. Luke 13:1–9 indicates that suffering cannot be used as a direct indicator of a person’s spiritual condition. This finding is particularly important in contemporary contexts because research on religion and suffering demonstrates the powerful role of religious interpretation in shaping experiences of trauma. Park (2005) shows that religion can function as a meaning-making framework in contexts of life stress, while Hall and Hill (2019) emphasize that religious worldviews shape the ontological, anthropological, and practical interpretation of suffering.

The power of meaning-making is ambivalent. Religious belief can generate hope and orientation, yet uncritical interpretation can also produce meanings that blame, stigmatize, or isolate victims. Hall et al. (2018) therefore emphasize the importance of attending to the specific religious resources through which people construct meaning from suffering. The implication for Luke 13 is clear: the question is not simply whether tragedy is given religious meaning, but what kind of religious meaning the text authorizes.

The present analysis shows that Luke 13 rejects religious meaning that treats suffering as evidence of greater sinfulness. This does not mean that suffering is stripped of all spiritual significance. Rather, its significance is redirected from evaluating victims toward transforming hearers. McMartin and Hall’s (2022) distinction between causal and functional views of suffering helps articulate this shift. Causal questions ask, ‘Why did God allow this to happen?’ or even ‘Whose sin caused this?’ Functional questions ask instead, ‘How does faith shape the human response to suffering?’ Luke 13 offers no detailed causal explanation, but it does provide a functional orientation: repent, bear fruit, and relinquish judgment of victims.

Post-disaster empirical research underscores the relevance of this orientation. Hakkim and Deb (2022) found that religious meaning in disaster response may be associated with humility, awareness of vulnerability, and prosocial action. Similarly, Shannonhouse et al. (2024) found that Christians who had endured severe suffering could draw on faith resources to construct meaning through trust in God, prayer, surrender, social support, and growth in compassion. Such findings cannot be used to ‘prove’ an interpretation of Luke, but they provide an important interdisciplinary dialogue: religious interpretations of suffering have real consequences for how individuals understand themselves, God, and other people.

For this reason, the study proposes epistemic humility as a first implication of Luke 13. The text does not provide a metaphysical explanation for the two tragedies. Jesus’ silence regarding their specific theological causes is not an argumentative deficiency; it is part of the argument itself. He refuses the question that seeks to identify the victims’ particular guilt and redirects attention toward

the repentance of the hearers. In some pastoral contexts, the statement ‘we do not know why this tragedy occurred’ may be more faithful to Luke 13 than confident assertions that God is punishing a particular sin.

A second implication is the deconstruction of moral superiority. Religious victim blaming enables people to create a sense of security through comparison: ‘they suffered because they were guilty; I did not suffer because I am different.’ Jesus’ response dismantles this structure. Once he declares that the victims were not more sinful, there is no basis for turning one’s temporary escape from tragedy into evidence of spiritual superiority. Freedom from suffering is not a certificate of righteousness, just as suffering is not a certificate of guilt.

A third implication is a pastoral orientation toward solidarity. Rumahuru and Kakiay (2020) emphasize the need for a more humane and contextual theology of disaster, while Yustinus (2025) highlights compassion as concrete action toward people who suffer. In the perspective of Luke 13, solidarity is not merely an ethical addition after theological reflection has been completed; it is a consequence of corrected interpretation. If a victim’s suffering cannot legitimately be used as proof of guilt, the response of the faith community must move from moral investigation toward presence, accompaniment, restoration, and responsibility.

This conclusion receives indirect support from research on religion and disaster showing that religious resources can foster prosocial action and resilience when used constructively (Aten et al., 2019; Hakkim & Deb, 2022). A theology of suffering should therefore be evaluated not only by its doctrinal consistency but also by the kind of praxis it produces. Interpretations that consistently generate stigma toward the sick, disaster victims, or those who experience tragedy require critical examination, especially when such interpretations stand in tension with the rhetorical direction of Jesus’ response.

Solidarity, however, does not require the elimination of the category of sin. Bock (1996) emphasizes the universal dimension of the call to repentance in Luke 13. This study therefore distinguishes between the universality of the need for repentance and the particularization of guilt through suffering. All human beings stand in need of repentance, but the fact that a person experiences a particular form of suffering does not give others grounds to conclude that the person is more sinful. This distinction enables Christian theology to preserve a serious moral anthropology without turning the doctrine of sin into an instrument of stigmatization.

Four theological orientations emerge from the findings. First, epistemic humility: human beings acknowledge the limits of their ability to know the divine rationale behind every tragedy. Second, self-reflection: the suffering of others is not used as evidence against them but becomes a summons to examine one’s own life. Third, hermeneutical repentance: transformation in one’s relationship with God is expressed through a transformed way of interpreting the suffering of others. Fourth, solidarity: victims are encountered not as objects of theological speculation but as fellow human beings whose dignity calls for compassion and presence.

Taken together, the findings indicate that Luke 13:1–9 does not offer a simple causal law between individual sin and suffering. Jesus preserves the realities of sin, repentance, and judgment while rejecting the use of tragedy as an indicator that victims are more sinful than others. The two

tragedies in verses 1–5 dismantle comparative moral logic, while the fig-tree parable redirects attention from retrospective explanation of victims' fate toward the prospective possibility of transformation for those who remain alive. The interpretive originality of this study lies in its argument that repentance in Luke 13 is both spiritual and hermeneutical: returning to God also requires a renewed way of seeing those who suffer. In this perspective, suffering is not a legitimization for religious victim blaming but a context that calls for humility, self-examination, moral responsibility, compassion, and solidarity.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Luke 13:1–9 significantly reconstructs the relationship among suffering, sin, judgment, and repentance by rejecting the assumption that tragedy directly indicates a person's degree of sinfulness. Through two different events—the killing of the Galileans by Pilate and the deaths of eighteen people in the collapse of the tower of Siloam—Jesus does not deny the realities of sin or divine judgment; rather, he rejects the use of suffering as a basis for concluding that victims are more guilty than those who escape tragedy. The rhetorical reversal from questions about 'them' to the summons for 'you' to repent shows that another person's suffering is not intended to become an object of moral speculation but a moment for self-examination, humility, and human responsibility before God. The fig-tree parable strengthens this finding by portraying judgment in tension with divine patience, thereby directing attention not toward retrospective reconstruction of victims' sins but toward the prospective possibility of transformation for those still living. The novelty of the study lies in its interpretation of repentance in Luke 13 as both spiritual and hermeneutical: returning to God entails transforming the way one interprets the suffering of others. Within this framework, the text distinguishes the theological legitimacy of divine judgment from the human claim to treat tragedy as privileged knowledge of a victim's guilt. These findings contribute to Lukan studies, theology of suffering, pastoral ministry, and Christian education by offering a non-stigmatizing framework that integrates moral responsibility, epistemic humility, compassion, and solidarity while challenging religious victim blaming in responses to disaster, illness, tragic death, and humanitarian crisis. Future research may test the concept of hermeneutical repentance through comparative study of John 9:1–3, the book of Job, and other narratives of suffering in Luke-Acts, or through empirical research on how churches, pastoral leaders, and Christian educational institutions interpret suffering and how such interpretations shape attitudes toward victims in contemporary contexts of disaster and crisis.

Acknowledgements

The author has no specific acknowledgements to declare.

Artificial Intelligence (Ai) Use Statement

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used during the preparation of this manuscript to assist with English translation, language editing, structural refinement, and the identification and verification of relevant scholarly references. AI was not used to conduct independent data collection, empirical analysis, or autonomous scholarly decision-making. All exegetical arguments, theological interpretations, source selection, factual verification, and conclusions were reviewed, revised, and approved by the author. The author assumes full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and scholarly content of the manuscript.

Author Contribution

Yustinus K.: Conceptualization, research design and methodology, literature search and analysis, exegetical and theological interpretation, writing—original draft, writing—review and editing, critical revision for important intellectual content, and final approval of the version to be published. The author accepts responsibility for all aspects of the study and for ensuring the accuracy and integrity of the work.

Funding Statement

This research and the preparation of this manuscript received no specific funding from governmental, private, institutional, or other external funding sources.

Conflict Of Interest Statement

The author declares no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research process, analysis, interpretation of the findings, or the preparation and publication of this manuscript.

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