

November 27, 2011

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

Born Blind for God's Glory

John 9:1 – 12

In a George Barna research poll, the question was asked, 'If you could ask God only one question and you knew He would give you an answer, what would you ask?' The overwhelming response was, 'Why is there pain and suffering in the world?' In fact, that is one of the biggest questions people wrestle with – not only before they come to faith but afterward as well. It is the question most often asked by unbelievers who want to justify their unbelief, and by Christians who are trying to make sense of seemingly random tragedy that crashes into their lives. We live in a world in which a child dies every five seconds of starvation. Every five seconds. Every minute there are twenty-five people who die because they do not have clean water to drink. Every hour 700 people die of malaria. We live in a world in which earthquakes generate tsunamis and wipe out cities and kill 300,000 in one fell swoop. We live in a world where hurricanes destroy cities and where millions of children are born with horrible birth defects. We live in a world full of pain and suffering.

And people routinely ask, 'Where is God in all this?' And underneath that question is a presupposition that mostly we don't deserve suffering, and if God is any kind of God at all, we should expect Him to keep us from suffering. Somehow God owes us a comfortable life. The skeptic and the atheist take the fact that there is suffering to prove the non-existence of God; or if He does exist, He is not the all-powerful God of the Christian Bible; or worse, He is not all-good. If God does not exist, then all of existence, including our suffering, has no enduring value or purpose. If God is not all-powerful, then we have no hope that suffering will ever be eliminated. If God is not all-good, then to pain and despair we must add the threat of divine sadism. If God is all-good, then He is not all-powerful because He sees our suffering and yet is powerless to prevent it. And if He is all-powerful, then He is not all-good because He has the power to stop the suffering and yet does not. And here in this story of a blind man and Jesus, we see this universal question asked yet again. Let's look to the text.

As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. John 9:1 Jesus had just left the temple. Verse 59 told us that what He said to the unbelieving Jews made them so mad that they picked up stones with which to stone Him to death on the spot. But *'...Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple'*. I haven't run across anyone who actually knows how Jesus pulled this off, but the fact remains that somehow He gave them the slip and left the temple. And the text tells us that He was just passing by and saw a man blind from birth. And if you are tempted to think that this was somehow a random, chance meeting, don't be. Jesus never did anything random. The guy was probably just outside the temple area, begging for his living. That is where you could get pretty good donations from religious Jews anxious to be on good terms with God as they went into the temple to worship. In Acts we read about the lame man who was sitting outside the temple when Peter and the others were going into the temple at the hour of prayer. So there were probably a lot of crippled beggars looking for a handout here.

What is interesting about this is that there is no mention of this guy asking Jesus for anything. It just says that He saw a man blind from birth. Of course the guy was blind so he couldn't even see Jesus, and since Jesus was traveling incognito at this point, there was no one pointing Him out like they did to blind Bartimaeus in Jericho. No one was asking Him for healing – no one was tugging at the hem of His garments – Jesus was simply walking by and stopped in front of this blind guy. And I think John is trying to tell us something here. As we have pointed out before, John tells us that *'...there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written.'* John 21:25 And John only gives us certain events in the life of Christ to look at. So we need to understand that He puts this story in just the place he intended it to be. And the first thing to note about this healing is that **sovereign grace dominates the scene**. Out of all those begging in front of the temple, He chooses one.

Remember, this comes on the heels of His encounter with those unbelieving Jews, and immediately we encounter a blind man. I think John is trying to tell us something about the nature of unbelief – namely, **unbelief means that we are blind to who Jesus is**; that we are blind to the truth of God. Jesus just gets away from an angry crowd of Jews to whom He has revealed ultimate truth, and they want to kill Him. And then He runs into this blind man. And this is not someone who had his eyesight and then lost it. This guy was blind from birth. I think this speaks to the fact that apart from the sovereign grace of God to open our eyes, we are blind to the gospel from birth. The nature of sin is such that it blinds us to the grace and beauty and truth of Jesus, and this is a universal condition.

The apostle Paul tells us that the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the glorious light of the gospel of Christ. The first thing that has to happen for people to believe is that they need sight – spiritual sight. The blind man is like every one of us before our eyes were opened to the gospel. We couldn't see Jesus even when He was standing right in front of us. We cannot recognize Jesus; we cannot see God; we cannot discern truth – we are blind to spiritual reality. The Bible, and especially the gospels really make an issue out of blindness. Of all the specific miracles the gospel writers mention, healing people with blindness is mentioned most often. He healed a deaf and dumb man once; He healed someone with a fever; once He healed a man with dropsy, He heals a woman suffering from an issue of blood; twice He healed lepers; three times He raised the dead – but five times Jesus heals blind people. And just like this blind man who is at the mercy of Jesus who sees Him and comes over – we sinners are at the mercy of Christ to come and graciously meet us and say, 'Let Me touch your eyes and make you see'. The sovereign grace of God is necessary to overcome our blindness.

But then we hear the question: *And His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?"* John 9:2 The disciples understood, as many do not, that **at the root of suffering is sin**. Without sin in the world, there would be no suffering – wouldn't even be an issue. Notice they didn't ask as so many do – 'If God is so loving, why was this guy born blind'? They understood that whatever the case, there was sin involved. But they assume that it is sin in particular that is responsible – either this guy sinned, or his parents sinned. In other words, there was something he did, or his parents did that caused him to be born blind. The rabbis taught that all suffering was a direct result of sin by the individual or his parents, and so the disciples naturally assume that he or his parents were responsible. The idea that he was suffering because his parents sinned is perhaps a little more understandable than to say he did something before he was born so that he was born blind. But in fact, the rabbis taught a doctrine of pre-natal sin. That is, a baby could sin in the womb, and as a consequence be born blind.

They based this doctrine on Genesis 4:7, where God is speaking to Cain and warning him that *"If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it."* And the rabbis all agreed that the door here refers to the door of the womb. Which is bad exegesis making bad doctrine. But the key teaching among the Jews was that the children would pay the consequences for the sins of their parents. For this they looked to Exodus 20: *"You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me"*. Exodus 20:5 But what this verse doesn't say is that when your daddy sins you get it. God is saying that when the 'Fathers' sin – plural; the 'sons' – plural, will pay.

And God is speaking to the nation of Israel here about idolatry, and saying that when the nation turns from God to worship pagan idols, God will punish them, and that punishment will affect even the third and fourth generations. And in fact when the northern kingdom turned to the idols their kings had set up, God sent the Assyrians to punish them and enslave them, and that affected even more than four generations. Today we speak of the ten lost tribes of Israel, because when the Assyrians overran that kingdom, those tribes that were conquered were simply absorbed into the Assyrian empire. When the southern kingdom fell into idolatry, the Lord sent the Babylonians in and for seventy years Israel was in captivity. The point of Exodus 20 is that the **unfaithfulness of the fathers will have an impact on generations of their sons**. It was a national issue, not an individual issue.

Ezekiel takes the rabbis to task for even suggesting that God punishes one individual for the sins of someone else: *"What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, 'The fathers eat the sour grapes, but the children's teeth are set on edge'?* In other words the teaching that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the sons. *"As I live," declares the Lord GOD, "you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel anymore. Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die."* And then in verse 20 Ezekiel spells it out: *The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity."* Ezekiel 18:3-4 So the disciples were simply asking a very pertinent question according to their faulty understanding – whose sin is responsible for this? Theologically, whose fault is it that this man is blind?

And the answer, Jesus said, is **neither** – neither the man nor his parents are responsible for his blindness. *Jesus answered, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents..."* John 9:3a He was setting them straight on Exodus 20. Particular sin here is not the issue. Not his sin, nor his parents. And then He adds the staggering claim: *'...but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.'* John 9:3b

Jesus is not saying here that present pain and suffering are unrelated to sin in general – just that sin in particular may not be the cause. In other words Jesus is saying that **specific suffering is not always owing to specific sin**. The existence of sin in the world is the cause of suffering in the world, but specific sins in the world are not necessarily the cause of specific suffering in the world. And here the explanation of the blindness is not in past causes, his sin or his parents, **but in future purposes** – the glory of God. This man was born blind for one reason – so that God's glory could be revealed in his healing. That is breath-taking – that is stunning. That God deliberately willed this man to be born blind, suffer decades of blindness, in order that God would put His power and glory on display at some future date in giving this man sight.

There are some pastors and teachers who cannot accept the idea that God would will that a child be born blind so that some purpose of God might be fulfilled. It doesn't seem loving or fair they would say. So they interpret this passage by saying that Jesus is pointing to the result of the blindness not the purpose of the blindness. When Jesus says, *"It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him."* He means, the result of the blindness is that God was able to **use** the blindness to show His work, **not** that He planned the blindness to show His work. But that just doesn't work here – it doesn't square with the text. The disciples are asking for an explanation of the blindness, and Jesus' answer is His explanation. **Question: 'Why was this man born blind? Answer: so that the works of God might be displayed in him** But if you say that God had no purpose or design in the blindness, that He simply uses the blindness, that is **not** an explanation of the blindness. The disciples **really** want to know – Why is this guy blind? And Jesus **really** gives an answer – 'So that...' **The point Jesus is making is not about the cause of blindness but the purpose of the blindness.**

Also, if you teach this way, that God would never will a person to be born blind from birth, then you have to wrestle with texts like this one in Exodus – *'The LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?'* Exodus 4:11 Or Psalm 139:13 - *For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb'*. If God is the one forming us – then obviously the finished product is all His doing – even blindness. Instead of kicking against what we perceive to be unfairness, or point to God and call Him unloving, hadn't we better bow to the King of the universe who made us exactly according to plan – each and every one of us? Should we presume to know better than God who alone has the power to make and unmake us? What Jesus said to the disciples He says to all of us – 'Forget your theories of cause and effect as the conclusive explanation of pain and suffering – and abandon any idea you might have that suffering is random or meaningless as well – and look at the purposes and plans of God. There is no person and no suffering outside the plan and purpose of God. The truth is, **suffering can only have ultimate meaning in relation to God.**

What this says to us is that human causes are not conclusive in explaining things – divine purposes are. God is not a responder but a planner. God is not someone who takes events that He cannot control or did not plan and make the best of them. He is not responding to the blind man's suffering by healing him – **He planned this** so that His work would be displayed and His glory revealed. The implications of this for your life are huge. No matter what mess you're in or what pain you're in, no matter what you are suffering, the causes of that mess and that pain and that suffering, are not conclusive in explaining it. What is conclusive in explaining it is God's purpose. Yes, there are causes. Some of them your fault, perhaps, and some of them not. But those causes are not ultimately conclusive in determining the meaning of your mess or your pain. **Human causes are not conclusive in explaining things – divine purposes are.**

Alexander Solzhenitsyn had long been impressed with the patience and longsuffering of Russian believers. One night in prison in Siberia Boris Kornfeld, a Jewish doctor, sat up with Solzhenitsyn and told him the story of his conversion to Christ. The same night Kornfeld was clubbed to death. Solzhenitsyn said that Kornfeld's last words "lay upon me as an inheritance. . . It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good . . . **Bless you, prison, for having been my life.**"

Unless Christ is your highest goal, your supreme value in this world – more valued than life or breath or health or friends or family or career or goals or dreams or ambitions or money or security – more valued than anything, suffering will not make sense to you. This man was born blind for one reason – as a living display of the awesome works of God. **That means that the glory of God is so great a thing that being born blind just so that His works would be revealed is not a punishment but an honor.** When Jesus says that the purpose of this man's blindness is so that the works of God would be displayed, **He assumes that the display of God's work has a value that far outweighs the years of blindness and begging this man endured.**

Our problem in all this is that we put our comfort, our welfare, our sense of fair play, way ahead of the glory of God. We don't value the work and glory of God as we should. And we don't value God's work and God's glory because we don't treasure Christ above all things. If you don't treasure Christ over all things then suffering becomes all about you and how it relates to you and how it affects you. And if we suffer – maybe sickness or blindness like this man – and we don't see God opening our eyes or healing us, then we begin to conclude a lot of wrong things about God. **Because sometimes God's work is not displayed in healing – but in not healing.**

Howard Hendricks tells of visiting a leprosy center in India. The morning he arrived, the residents were gathered for a praise service. One of the women with leprosy hobbled to the platform. Hendricks said that even though she was partially blind and badly disfigured, she was one of the most beautiful women he'd ever seen. Raising both of her nearly fingerless hands toward Heaven, she said in a clear voice, "I want to praise God that I am a leper because it was through my leprosy that I came to know Jesus Christ as my Savior. **And I would rather be a leper who knows Christ than be completely whole and a stranger to His grace.**"

Sometimes the glory of God is **better** served by letting sickness or blindness or whatever constitutes suffering, run its course. When Paul prayed three times that the Lord would remove the thorn that was causing suffering in his life, the Lord's response pointed to His glory, not Paul's comfort: *"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."* 2 Corinthians 12:9 In other words, 'My power will be on display in you not by healing you, but by sustaining you.' **Supernatural healing** in John 9 put God's work on display – and here in 2 Corinthians, it is God's **sustaining grace** that makes the glory of God shine.

What shall we conclude from this? **Suffering is not a surprise but a plan.** God is not reacting to the sin-induced suffering in the world as though He is surprised by the suffering and pain that comes into our lives, and now He has to figure out a way to turn what was meant for evil into good. Just as He planned the suffering His Son would endure for our sakes, He lovingly crafts everything that comes into our lives to display His glory and grace. **Suffering works to display God's glory in our lives in a way that its absence cannot.** Very often our prayers go like this: *Comfort me, Lord, and... pay my bills. Comfort me, Lord, and... cure my ills. Comfort me, Lord, and... remove my fears. Comfort me, Lord, and... dry my tears. Comfort me, Lord, and... increase my wealth. Comfort me, Lord, and... preserve my health. Comfort me, Lord, and... plead my case. Comfort me, Lord, and... enlarge my place. Comfort me, Lord, and... tell me "why?". Comfort me, Lord, and... set me on high. Comfort me, Lord, and... do what I say. Comfort me, Lord, and... do it today. The Spirit listened as I uttered my mind. He said not a word as I pleaded and pined. And then He spoke in the language of conviction, saying, "Comfort isn't comfort in the absence of affliction."*

I have never heard anyone say, "The deepest and rarest and most satisfying joys of my life have come in times of extended ease and earthly comfort." Nobody says that. It isn't true. What's true is what Samuel Rutherford said when he was put in the cellars of affliction: **"The Great King keeps his wine there"** -- not in the courtyard where the sun shines. What's true is what Charles Spurgeon said: **"They who dive in the sea of affliction bring up rare pearls."**

Finally, **suffering actually works to increase our joy**, knowing that it is not random or meaningless, but that God has a purpose and a plan in mind that magnifies His glory and works for our good. Tony Campolo tells a story about being in a church in Oregon where he was asked to pray for a man who had cancer. Campolo prayed boldly for the man's healing. That next week he got a telephone call from the man's wife. She said, "You prayed for my husband. He had cancer." Campolo thought when he heard her use the past tense verb that his cancer had been eradicated! But before he could think much about it she said, "He died." Campolo felt terrible. But she continued, "Don't feel bad. When he came into that church that Sunday he was filled with anger. He knew he was going to be dead in a short period of time, and he hated God. He was 58 years old, and he wanted to see his children and grandchildren grow up. He was angry that this all-powerful God didn't take away his sickness and heal him. He would lie in bed and curse God. The more his anger grew towards God, the more miserable he was to everybody around him. It was an awful thing to be in his presence. But the lady told Campolo, **"After you prayed for him, a peace had come over him and a joy had come into him.** Tony, the last three days have been the best days of our lives. We've sung. We've laughed. We've read Scripture. We prayed. Oh, they've been wonderful days. And I called to thank you for laying your hands on him and praying for healing." And then she said something incredibly profound. She said, "He wasn't cured, but he was healed."

If you are here this morning, and you have not yet embraced the gospel and surrendered to Christ, it may be that your suffering is working to bring you to that eternal joy. Don't run from it – run instead to Christ and know that all things are working for your good and His glory. For those of you who know Jesus, know that God's work in your life through suffering is not a surprise but His plan, and that it is intended to increase a God-ward joy that displays His power and grace in you.

'For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison...' 2
Corinthians 4:17

Our gracious Father and Holy Comforter,

Grant that we would see and savor Your wisdom and power and love and grace toward us in all things. May we understand that suffering is not a surprise but Your plan for us in order that Your work would be displayed in us. Fill us with joy knowing that Your grace is sufficient for every trial, and every pain and produces an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs every momentary suffering we endure. Forgive us when we kick against what we perceive to be unfair, or look at our circumstances and call You unloving. Don't let us presume to know what is best for us. But grant us to know that suffering works to display Your glory in our lives in ways that its absence cannot, and let it instead increase our joy and teach us to delight in You, through Jesus Christ and spread that joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the precious, loving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.