

## John 9:1-7

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup>And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. <sup>4</sup>We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. <sup>5</sup>As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." <sup>6</sup>Having said these things, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud <sup>7</sup>and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.

## Questions

Several years ago there was an interesting Gallup poll. It asked: "If you could ask God any question, what would it be?" Here are the most frequent questions people would like to ask God.

- 37% - Will there ever be lasting world peace?
- 33% - How can I be a better person?
- 31% - What does the future hold for me and my family?
- 28% - Why is there suffering in the world?
- 26% - Is there life after death?
- 22% - What is heaven like?
- 21% - Will there ever be a cure for all diseases?
- 16% - Why is there evil in the world?
- 16% - When will the world end?
- 10% - Why was man created?

The recent earthquake and tsunami in Japan has made millions ask: Why all those innocent people? The "God question" of our age (even if it wasn't #1 in the Gallup poll) is: "If there is a good and loving God, why is there so much evil and suffering in the world?"

Then there's the anguished personal cry I have heard so often in forty years of pastoral ministry: "Why me? What did I (or we) do to deserve this?" The presupposition behind this question is this: If God were really fair, He wouldn't have done this to me. Even believers with sound theology can find themselves crying out this way in times of deep pain.

The question the disciples asked is hardly ever asked anymore: **Who sinned?** This used to be a common question when tragedy struck. This is the question his friends asked Job.

This question reflects an earlier worldview. That worldview took God's justice seriously, and wondered why He would show any mercy on this sinful world. Today we center on ourselves and ask, "**Why isn't God more loving?**" The fact that we cannot answer that question has led many to embrace atheism. (The presuppositions behind phrasing the question this way almost preclude an acceptable answer, by the way.)

Whenever tragedy strikes, questions tumble around us. One thing I've learned in forty years of pastoring: there is one unanswerable question. It is the question, "WHY?"

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Why did this happen? That sounds so simple, but it actually is a very complicated question. We can try to answer it different ways. We can wonder about the physical causes. Why did I or my loved one get cancer? Was it genetic? Was it my diet or my environment? We can study earthquake faults and weather patterns to try to figure out some disasters. Others, such as wars and oppression, have human causes.

But we can only speculate about the spiritual causes. Is this an attack of Satan, like Job's troubles? Am I being disciplined by God for some sin? What is God's purpose in allowing this pain? (Even if Satan is the instrumental cause, God's permission is always needed for Satan to act; so God is still "on the hook.")

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The physical causes of a tragedy are complex enough. The spiritual causes are beyond our ability to calculate. We simply don't have access to enough data. Job never knew why he was suffering. God had offered to show Satan that Job would still trust Him no matter what pain and loss he experienced. This was never explained to job. Instead, God simply revealed His great power and love and really let it go at that.

Martin Marty talks about two kinds of Christians, "summer Christians" and "winter Christians." Summer Christians are all about God's blessings and the nice benefits of being a believer. God to them is all wrapped up in goodies and joyful experiences. Then there are winter Christians. These folks trust God only because of His Word, not because He has blessed them with comfortable lives or financial success or happy families. Winter Christians know that God's greatest blessings are not physical. In fact, physical blessings such as money, fame, or comfort can actually be spiritual snares in disguise.

Jesus' answer to the disciples' question must have confused them. They were sure that every bad thing that happened to a person was a punishment for sin – either the sin of the person himself or of his parents. That was their worldview. Jesus' answer just didn't fit.

And it doesn't fit the modern worldview, either. Jesus refuses to answer the "why" question directly. Instead He gives them a "how" answer. How are God's people to respond to tragedy and suffering? By doing the "works of God." The multiplicities of causes behind this tragedy are not revealed. Only one: So that Jesus could show He is the light of the world. The answer Jesus gives makes spiritual sense only if we accept the eternal truths which frame it.

**Let's look together at the Biblical framework for dealing with suffering:**

### 1. THE WORLD IS UNDER CONDEMNATION

When Adam and Eve fell into sin, the whole world was put under God's curse (Gen. 3). This included human death, disease, natural disasters, and the spread of sin throughout the world. Satan was also given spiritual authority over the unsaved heart of man. The curse also includes the warning that one day God will destroy all evil (He will "crush the serpent's head"). The only way this can happen is for all sin to be judged. This means the damnation of all demonic beings and unrepentant sinners. It will include the destruction of the old heavens and earth in order to create a new universe.

This is the world we live in. This is a fact. There is no way this world will escape the terrible suffering and pain which come from sin. Natural disasters will occur. People will murder and enslave and oppress. Satan will attack and deceive individuals and nations. Every calamity is a sign of the judgment to come.

Look at this passage of Scripture: <sup>1</sup>*There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.* <sup>2</sup>*And [Jesus] answered them, "Do you think*

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*that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?*<sup>3</sup>*No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*<sup>4</sup>*Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?*<sup>5</sup>*No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish (Luke 13:1-5)."*

Jesus refuses to say that every disaster or loss is a specific punishment for a particular sin. Instead, He asserts that calamities are reminders of God's judgment on the whole world, on all unrepentant men and women.

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We live in a world under God's judgment because of human sin. Believers are not exempt from the general consequences of sin. We suffer in natural disasters. Our genes carry diseases and disorders just like everybody else's. We can fall victim to illness, violence, and loss. These things are usually the result of long strings of cause and effect, stretching back uncounted years and connecting with all other events in a complex web known only to God. He remains sovereign over all events, but He does not cause each bad thing to happen as a specific punishment for a specific sin. The Bible is clear about that.

The Bible is also clear that God's ways are higher than ours and God's thoughts are not understandable by us, except where He has clearly spoken in His Word (Isaiah 55). Luther spoke about the "left hand" of God. By that he meant God's providential rule over creation. He sends rain on the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:44-46). He also says, "I make well being and create calamity" (Isaiah 45:7). These acts of Providence are not understood by us. We cannot fathom the ways of God's "left hand." We are simply unable to answer the "why" questions.

### 2. THE CHURCH IS UNDER THE CROSS

"Who sinned, this man or his parents?" Neither. Not that they were not sinners, but that this tragedy had nothing to do with their personal guilt. This happened, Jesus said, so that the "works of God" might be displayed. What are these works? Whatever shows that Jesus is the "light of the world" are the works of God. Luther called these works which reveal Jesus the "right hand of God."

We do not comprehend the judgments of God on the world. But God has revealed this: <sup>28</sup>*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*<sup>29</sup>*For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers" (Romans 8:28-29).* God does have a loving plan for His children. Everything that happens to us is used by God for our ultimate good. And what is our ultimate good? Comfort and convenience? No. It is being conformed to the image of His Son, the "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). To know Christ is to know *the fellowship of His suffering* (Philippians 3:9-11).

As the Holy Spirit works, through His church, Jesus shines His light into the world. He draws people to Himself through works of healing and love and compassion. There's only one question we can ask when faced with tragedy or pain: "How can I display the works of God?" In my own tragedy, just holding on to faith, knowing that the everlasting arms are underneath me, displays God's gracious work in my life. When I face sorrow and tragedy in the lives of others, there, too, I have only one question: How can I bring the mercy of God to them?

One more point, dear ones. We have to work with what Jesus worked with: mud and spit--mud from the earth, spit from our own persons. Now remember that this is a metaphor. We aren't called to go around spitting on people! But that's always how He works: with ordinary things, with water, bread and wine, with

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the spoken and written word. Christian works of love are usually ordinary human works. (God sometimes chooses to work miracles through us, but that is His choice, not ours). We give words of encouragement. We bring food to the sick and sorrowing. We stand with people in their suffering. We listen as witnesses who give dignity to their sorrow. We give to larger organizations, such as the Salvation Army, which can help many in a more effective way than we can as individuals. And always, we are ready to share the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ.

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This is God's "right hand work." He will make the place of sorrow a place of love. He will make the broken and the lost the recipients of mercy. This is our call as Christians. We are not sent into the world as judges but as servants of grace.

And the promise of grace always applies to us. Frank Laubach said: "*God's highway runs straight through us...*" From birth and baptism, through tragedy and joy, all the through the hospital and the nursing home to our deathbed—our path is lighted one step at a time by God's promise. All the way, until that blessed day when all tears will be wiped away and all questions finally answered.