

# John 9:1-12

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Why is there so much suffering in the world? Why do good people suffer? Why am I suffering?

These are big questions. For some, they are questions that keep them from faith in God. For others, they are questions that make them doubt or even abandon faith in God.

How can I believe in God when this is happening? As we've sung, there were those who mocked the psalmist or taunted the psalmist in that way. Where is your God? Where is God? And if He exists, does He care? Where was God when April Jones was cruelly snatched from her family and loved ones?

The ninth chapter of John's gospel begins by relating a conversation between Jesus and His disciples concerning both the cause and the purpose of suffering.

But before we do launch into considering this subject, we do need to take a step back and identify the bigger picture of the purpose of Jesus' miracles and, in consequence, John's purpose in recording them. In order to have that insight which is necessary before we consider the passage, let's just notice very quickly what John says in chapter 2 of his gospel and in verse 11 concerning the purpose of the miracles of Jesus that He records for us. Then in verse 11 of chapter 2, we read this, the first of His miraculous signs, Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee. He thus revealed His glory and His disciples put their faith in Him. Well, you can't get much clearer than that.

[ 2 : 0 4 ]     The miracle, we're told, served and was intended to serve as a sign that revealed His glory, that in a measure revealed the identity and the mission of Jesus with the resulting end that His disciples put their faith in Him. Are we to presume that this was the purpose of all of Jesus' miracles? Well, we don't need to presume because, again, John states the case with clarity. In that verse that we've read, he says, this, the first of His miraculous signs. So, it's evident what John is saying. He's saying that this and subsequent miracles served this purpose of being signs, revealing something of the glory, of the identity, of the mission of Jesus Christ.

Do the miracles have this as their sole purpose, to serve as a sign? Well, by no means. We think of that first miracle in Cana of Galilee. Well, one happy purpose of Jesus changing water into wine was to rescue the reputation of the newlyweds and ensure that the nuptial celebrations continued unimpeded.

That was a genuine purpose of the miracle at that level. But there was a further purpose as it served as a sign. And we're going to consider chapter 9 or part of chapter 9 this morning in this miracle, the healing of the blind man. And as we consider this chapter, and we will do so not only this morning, but this evening, and God willing, for another couple of Sundays as we do so, I trust that over the peace we will do justice to this, if you wish, dual purpose of the miracle, even if we don't do so on each occasion. But that's really just a little bit of background that I think is helpful for us or necessary for us before we launch into considering this miracle, and very especially the beginning of the chapter where we have dealt with, in some measure, this big subject of suffering.

Well, why is there suffering in the world? In the face of human suffering, it seems to me that there are three questions that need to be grappled with on what we might call an escalating scale of urgency.

Three questions. The first question is, what do you think? What do you think about this matter? Then another question is, what do you feel? How do you respond in the face of suffering?

[ 4 : 57 ] And the final question is, what do you do? In the account that we have here in John's Gospel, in chapter 9, in the account of the dialogue between Jesus and His disciples, and then following the dialogue, the miracle that Jesus performs in healing the blind man, in these opening verses of the chapter, all three of these questions are either addressed very explicitly or certainly illustrated.

And so we want to think of them in turn. The first question that I suggest we need to grapple with in considering this matter of human suffering is, what do you think? When I say that, what I'm really getting at is, what do you think intellectually or philosophically or theologically is the cause and purpose of suffering? This is the question that occupies the disciples as they observe this suffering man, a man, a man we are told blind from birth, born blind. And the question that they pose and the answer that Jesus gives reveals a wrong and a right way of thinking with regard to suffering. First of all, the wrong way. Though the disciples pose a question to Jesus, it's very clear that they have already decided what the answer is. Certainly the big answers. They've already decided that the cause of suffering is sin.

And they've already decided that the purpose of suffering is punishment, and that this was so for this man. The cause of his suffering, they were already clear it was sin. And consequently, the purpose of the suffering was the purpose of suffering was punishment for that sin. The only uncertainty in their mind is with regard to who sinned. It's a detail, if you wish, an important detail, but a detail that they're not clear on.

Who sinned? Whose sin is being punished? And possibly there is also in their mind a sense of, in the light of the answer to that question, who sinned? Whether there is a question of the justice or injustice of the blind man's suffering.

Well, the disciples conceive of two possibilities in regard to who sinned, and it is stated very clearly by them in the question they pose there in verse 2, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind. Two possibilities. The first possibility is the man himself. The man himself had sinned, and so, as a result, was born blind. Now, they themselves clearly see this as difficult, implausible. He was born blind. If he had become blind, well, that would have been more credible. Well, yes, the reason he became blind is because of something that he had done. That makes sense. You may reject it as an explanation, but it has some logic to it. But he was born blind. So, the idea that it would be his own sin does seem implausible. But maybe some of the disciples thought that it was a possibility.

[ 8 : 17 ] It would seem that there were those at the time who did conceive of the possibility of sin in the womb, and reference would be made to Genesis chapter 25, where we read of Jacob and Esau quarreling, as it were, in the womb. And so, some would say, well, there's an example that even in the womb, a child can be guilty of sin. So, perhaps, perhaps that's the answer. This man himself sinned, and so, he was born blind. It also appears that there was current, the idea of some form of reincarnation. And in the measure that the disciples were conscious of that idea, certainly wasn't a Hebrew idea, not one that you would find in the Old Testament, but one that seemed to have permeated in a measure to the thinking that was current at the time. And if the disciples had, as I say, taken on board some of those ideas, then that would have given a possibility for explaining that it was this man who had sinned, sinned in another life, and now he was paying the consequences as he was born blind. Well, that was one possibility that the disciples contemplate, but of course, there is another possibility that they propose, and that is that it was his parents. And it may well be the reason why they propose the parents as an alternative is precisely because they see it as difficult, but it could have been this man's sin that was being punished. If the man himself was not responsible, well, this left the parents as the likely culprits, with the poor man having the misfortune of inheriting their guilt and punishment, being born blind. Well, that is the way they thought. That was their thinking on the matter. Now, the disciples were wrong. Jesus is very clear in revealing and declaring that they are wrong. Verse 3 is eloquent, neither this man nor his parents sinned, and we'll come to that in a moment. But it is clear that the disciples were wrong. Their thinking was wrong. They were mistaken as regards both the cause and the purpose of this man's suffering. Now, that is not to say that there is no connection between sin and suffering. Far from it. There is an intimate and indeed a causal connection between sin and suffering. Sin is ultimately the cause of all suffering. But it is not the case that such a connection always exists between the sins and sufferings of any given individual.

It may exist on some occasions. But it most definitively does not always exist, as Jesus makes very clear in the case of this man born blind. So, this was a wrong way of thinking about suffering. The ideas held by the disciples may seem to us very anachronistic. And we might say, well, it's of academic interest to listen or to imagine or to consider what they thought, but nobody thinks like that nowadays. Well, I wonder, is that true? Is it true that nobody thinks like that nowadays? What about one billion plus Hindus? I'm not saying that all of them think in this way, but many do. And what about in the civilized? And I use the word rather ironically, in the civilized West. How often do we increasingly hear folks speaking of karma as the cause of a particular misfortune?

Or in more popular language, what goes around, comes around. So, there's a wrong way to think about suffering, but there's also a right way. And Jesus gives the right way. In verse 3, neither this man nor his parents sinned, said Jesus, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. Jesus summarily dismisses the views held by the disciples. Neither this man nor his parents sinned. Jesus is not saying that the man and his parents were sinless, but that their sin was not the cause of his blindness, and consequently, punishment could not be its purpose. So, if their sin was neither the cause nor punishment the purpose of the man's suffering, what was? Well, Jesus gives an answer. But this happened so that the glory of God might be displayed in his life. I have to say, we're tempted to echo the words of some of Jesus' disciples recorded for us in chapter 6 of this

Gospel. This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it? What is Jesus saying? What is Jesus saying? Well, I think he is saying a number of things. He is saying, first of all, that blindness, and by extension, all suffering, is not outside the sweep of God's control. He is saying, most definitively, that God is not impotent in the face of suffering. Now, that is a very important truth. So often, when there is great suffering, and we think of what is occupying our minds quite rightly in these days, when God is brought into the picture, he's brought in almost as another victim, poor God crying with us. Yes, of course, if he could, he would help, but, well, he's as impotent as we are. But he's a nice, warm figure to cry with.

Well, Jesus is saying that that is not so. But Jesus is further saying that given that suffering falls within the sweep of God's control, it must also fall within the outworking of his purposes.

[14:15] There is a purpose in suffering. God is not detached or uninvolved in the face of suffering. And he is further saying, or certainly implying, that the purpose of God is a good purpose, that the work of God might be displayed in his life.

And what can we say of the work of God? Is the work of God good? Is the work of God bad? Is the work of God indifferent? Well, at the dawn of human history, God answered that question.

As he concluded his work of creation, he looked down, and what did he declare? God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. God doesn't do bad. God only does good.

Now, in the case of the blind man, the work of God is very visible and evident. Jesus healed him of his blindness. So, in the case of the blind man, it's so evident how the work of God was made manifest, was displayed in his life. There's not a problem there. We can say, well, yes, there it is. It's so clear. He was blind. Now he can see. We see the work of God. But we do, and we must recognize that so often suffering does not appear to climax in a happy ending. See, in the case of this man, it does, so it's easy. But often it doesn't. And what are we to conclude on those occasions when there appears to be no happy ending? Do we conclude that what Jesus said was true in the case of this blind man, but is not necessarily true for every particular experience of human suffering? That would be one conclusion. But I don't think that is the conclusion that we should come to, because the basic principles that we've outlined on the basis of what Jesus says here always hold. You see, God is always in control. The work of God always serves to fulfill his purposes, and God's work and purposes are always good. And that is so even when there is not a happy ending. Does this provide us with easy answers in the face of suffering? No, it does not, nor is it intended to. So often it is not for us to know the what or the how or the when of God's purposes. The parents of a wee blind boy in Jerusalem certainly had no notion of the what or the how or the when of God's purposes in the life of their wee boy as he grew up blind. Sometimes, indeed often, we don't have the answers, and we ought not to try and discuss that which God's purposes. In commenting on this incident, John Calvin comments wisely, when the causes of affliction are concealed, we ought to restrain curiosity, that we may neither dishonor God nor be malicious towards our brethren. Or as he also exhorts us to exclaim in this same context, thou art righteous, O Lord, and thy judgments are right, though they cannot be comprehended.

For the unbeliever, and sometimes even for the believer, this will prove unsatisfactory, to simply say, well, there are times when we don't understand. And I can sympathize with that.

[18:10] I can see where people are coming from when they say, well, that's just not satisfactory for me. But what we have to say in response is that that response to suffering, a recognition that there are times when we don't understand, and when we simply leave matters in God's hands, that response is only doable. It only works, if you wish, when there is a relationship of trust that exists. You see, in the absence of trust, we are not satisfied with that answer. And that trust in God is possible only in the context of a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. If we do not know God through Jesus Christ, if we don't trust in God, then such an answer is simply not satisfactory.

What do you think? But there's another question that I said we need to grapple with in the face of human suffering, and that is, what do you feel? Our response to suffering ought not to be, in the first instance, at the intellectual or theological level. What do you think about it?

We must respond with feeling. And the wrong way and the right way to feel is illustrated in this incident, and it revolves around how you see the sufferer, how you see the sufferer.

The disciples illustrate the wrong way. They demonstrate a detached and even superior indifference to suffering. Of course, that's grounded in what they think. You see, if they think that the reason he's suffering is because it's his own fault, then of course you can look down with superiority on those who suffer. But there is this detachment, there is this indifference that certainly appears to be the case in the disciples. The disciples see the blind man not as a person, but as the object of theological debate and curiosity. They don't feel anything, or at best a tinge of passing pity.

What do you see in the face of human suffering? Do you see a debate to be had on health spending or benefits policy? Do you see the failure of the church to get to grips with the biblical demands of mercy ministry? Do you see victims of a broken society? Or do you avoid looking altogether?

[ 20 : 57 ] What do you see? Do you see a person or a problem? Jesus illustrates the right way. The right way of seeing, and hand in hand with that, the right way of feeling.

Jesus didn't see a problem. He saw a person, and he saw this blind man because he chose to see him. He chose to see this man amongst all the teeming crowds on the streets of Jerusalem. He saw him. He saw him, and we can be sure that he had compassion. We're not explicitly told that this was so, but is this not the repeated testimony of the gospel writers? Jesus saw and had compassion. It's almost a formula. He saw and he had compassion. The two go together. We think of the two blind men by the roadside outside Jericho.

What does Matthew record for us? Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. And is it conceivable that it was any different on this occasion? Jesus saw. Jesus was moved to compassion. Jesus touched. So again, the question that is necessary for us to pose is, what about you?

What do you feel? Do you feel anything? Do you feel compassion in the face of human suffering? But that brings us to the final question. And I said there was an increasing, an escalating scale of urgency. And the final question is this, what do you do? This is in many ways the critical question of the question. In the light of human suffering. What do you do? What you think is important, and what you feel is significant, but what do you do? And of course, they're related. I'm not suggesting they're not related. But what you do is critical. And this is certainly the great concern of Jesus.

What does Jesus immediately go on to say following his declaration that the purpose of the man's blindness was that the work of God might be displayed in his life? Well, let's notice what he immediately goes on to say. That in verse 4, as long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work. I wonder, does that seem a little disconnected with what has gone before? Well, it is far from being disconnected. What Jesus is saying is that in the face of the man's blindness, and by extension, in the face of suffering generally, what is principally required is not a neat theology that the disciples wanted. It's not even a sympathetic heart, important though that is, but work. Work.

[ 23 : 48 ] You see, in the light of this discussion, what does Jesus say? We must do the work of him who sent me. We have to do something. Not just talk about it, not just feel bad about it. There is work to be done in this sin-sick world where people suffer. And Jesus certainly has in mind work that goes beyond the needs of this blind man, but he certainly includes and has immediately in mind the blind man.

Hence, in verse 6, we read, having said this, he healed the man. Having explained why he was going to proceed to heal the man. Having said what's really important is to work, it's to do something. He then goes on and does something. He heals the man from his blindness. But I did say, and we can't leave to one side the bigger picture of the work that Jesus was sent to do. It included the healing of this man, and that's important. But we did suggest or hint that there was a bigger picture, and of course there is. And what does the work that Jesus came to do have to say about human suffering? Well, it has everything to say. Jesus came to suffer. He didn't just come to relieve suffering. He came to suffer himself.

He came to die. The eternal Son of God experienced suffering to a degree of intensity we cannot even conceive, all culminating in the anguished cry from Calvary, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

So we can certainly affirm, as we consider this matter of human suffering, we can certainly affirm that God understands. For the one who suffered so is seated at the right hand of the Father. He certainly understands, but we can say more, because Jesus not only experienced suffering, He conquered it.

God's redemptive purpose secured by and flowing from the suffering and death of Jesus in the place of sinners is moving towards that moment when the defeat of suffering culminates in the removal of all suffering for God's people. Listen again to what John tells us of his vision of a new heaven and a new earth that we read earlier on. Now the dwelling of God is with men and He will live with them. They will be His people and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes.

[ 26 : 25 ] There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. For the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, I am making everything new.

Well, that is the work of Jesus. But what about you and me? We're not in the business of healing the blind. We're certainly not in the business of creating a new heaven and a new earth.

We can endeavor to think like Jesus and maybe even try and feel like Jesus, but act like Jesus? Hardly. So are we off the hook in the matter of doing? Well, hold on just a wee moment. What does Jesus say in verse 4? And let's look at it again. As long as it is day, we must do the work of Him who sent me.

It's very significant, the manner in which Jesus expresses Himself. He says, as long as it is day, we must do the work of Him who sent me. While Jesus recognizes that He has and there is a unique personal element in the work commended by the Father, the Father sent me, He also recognizes as includes His disciples as those who must do the work of the Father. We must do the work. He doesn't say, I must do the work. We must do the work. And for the avoidance of doubt, we are included in the we that Jesus pronounces here in this verse. So there is something that we must do. But we just think a little bit more about what He says and dwell on it or draw from it. Not only is it clear that there is work for us to do, but it is also clear that the work that we are to do is God's work. Jesus says that

He is to do the work of Him who sent me. The work we are to do in the midst of and in response to human suffering is God's work. He goes before us and He walks alongside us and He works within us to ensure that we do the work. It is a difficult work. And how important as we recognize how difficult it is that it is God's work that we do. And this work, is it a work that we volunteer for or that we ponder on whether we will do or we will not do? What is the language that Jesus uses?

[ 28 : 56 ] As long as it is day, we must do the work of Him who sent me. The language that Jesus uses is of compelling necessity. We must see the blind man. We must see those who suffer all around us. We must do God's work. And then one final element there in what Jesus says. Night is coming. Night is coming, for no one can work. The work to be done is an urgent work. The clock is ticking. People are suffering.

The work must be done now, for night is coming. But what is the work? If it is not to heal blind men, if it is not to build a new heaven and a new earth, that is what Jesus does. If it is not these things, what is the work for us? Well, there are two related aspects. Blindness, the blindness of this man represents human suffering in its multiple expressions. And so, the work that we have to do is to respond with compassion and concrete action in favor of those who suffer. But blindness also symbolizes the spiritual blindness that afflicts all men and women. The miracle is a sign, remember.

And the spiritual blindness of this man is also a sign. It's very real. The real man afflicted with a real affliction, but it symbolizes the spiritual blindness of all men and women. And given that that is so, our work is to shine the light of the gospel, the good news concerning Jesus Christ, to dispel the darkness that men who are blind, women who are blind, would see. And as we do, praying that God would open the eyes of the blind, that they might see Jesus and put their trust in Him, the Savior of the world, the light of the world. So, there is work for us to do. We must do the work, says Jesus, and He dignifies us by including us in the work that is to be done.

Why is there so much suffering in the world? What do you think? Well, I would urge you to steer clear of the wrong answers, but also to recognize your limitations in fully grasping the right answers.

What do you feel? What do you see? Do you see problems or do you see people? Do you move on, or are you moved with compassion? But finally, and perhaps most importantly, what do you do? Let us pray.