

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Sin and Suffering: Can We Know Why?

By Dan Trygg

“And as He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. ² And His disciples asked Him, saying, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?’ ³ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man sinned, nor his parents; but in order that the works of God might be displayed in him. ⁴ We must work the works of Him who sent Me, as long as it is day; night is coming, when no one is able to work. ⁵ While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.’ ⁶ When He had said this, He spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and smeared the clay upon his eyes, ⁷ and said to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which is translated, ‘Sent’). And so he went away and washed, and came back seeing.” John 9:1-7

Of the many miraculous signs that Jesus performed, the healing of blindness is related more often in the NT than the cure of any other single affliction (Matt. 9:27; 15:30; 20:30; 21:14; Mk. 8:22; 10:46; Lk. 7:21; 18:35). Undoubtedly, part of the reason for this is because OT prophecies describe healing of the blind as an identifying characteristic of the Messiah, and the reign of God (Isa. 29:18; 35:5; 42:7; cf. Psa. 146:8). Jesus Himself had alluded to these prophecies in reference to His ministry on more than one occasion, once even to help the doubting John the Baptist regain His confidence in Him (Lk. 4:14-21; 7:18-23). In light of his expressed purpose (20:30,31), we would certainly expect John to record at least one incident of the healing of a blind person as evidence for his demonstration that Jesus is indeed the Anointed One of God, Christ the King. This account is by far *the most dramatic incident* recorded, because of the particular nature of this man’s blindness.

“He saw a man blind from birth...” (vs. 1). How would they know that a man was blind from birth just by a sideways glance as they walked by? It was obvious to the disciples as well as to Jesus. What must have been the condition of this man for them to come to this conclusion so readily? He must have had physical features that immediately were recognizable as birth defects, ones which made sight an impossibility.

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he should be born blind?” Behind this statement is *the assumption that there is a one-to-one correspondence, or at least a direct causal relationship, between sin and suffering*. If someone experiences suffering, sickness, hardship or sorrow, he *must have been guilty of sin, ...or he is the direct victim of someone else’s sin*. The sorrows of life are *direct consequences* of the actions of those who experience them, ...especially if the malady is a long-term, debilitating affliction. Some Jewish teachers, in support of such dogma, had concocted the idea that if the parents had not been responsible for the sin which resulted in such horrific consequences, then possibly the child itself had been to blame. Either the child had sinned in the womb, or possibly the souls of children pre-exist conception and the child had sinned while in that state.

One consequence of such a teaching is that *it assigns blame to the victim, and closes off the compassion of the heart*. Often these poor people were *treated with abuse*, assuming that they *deserved punishment* for some past sin. These are examples of the same kind of reasoning exemplified by Job’s “comforters”. God condemned *their* intellectual machinations as untrue, and He said that His wrath was “burning” against them (Job 42:7). **The false image of the character of God portrayed by such theology, and the damage and oppression it causes, is reprehensible in God’s sight.** Jesus confronted this kind of thinking in Lk. 13:1-5. Here, tragedy had befallen two groups of people. One group were victims of a natural disaster, the others were unjustly murdered by Pilate’s soldiers. Jesus rebuked the idea that these poor unfortunates had come to such a violent end because they had been greater sinners than others.

“It was *neither...; but in order that the works of God might be displayed in him*” (vs. 3). Jesus rules out *both suggestions in this case*. We must be careful how we interpret this statement, however. **The Lord is not saying that this man had been given a birth defect by God**, and had spent his entire existence from birth to adulthood as a freakish reject and beggar, *just so* that God could “strut His stuff”, ...with this guy serving as an audio-visual prop for the demonstration of His abilities. There is no doubt that there are some difficult issues involved here. In Ex. 4:11, for example, God says, “Who has made man’s mouth? Or who makes him dumb or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?” How are we to understand this? (Actually, the language of both the Hebrew and Greek versions of this verse says that God made *them*, the *individuals*; it does not say He made them *to become* dumb, deaf, seeing or blind. *They* are His creation, and therefore *valuable*. Cf. Prov. 22:2. We have misconstrued the entire *point* of the statement!) **Certainly God is not in favor of sickness, disease, or deformity.** There will be no such malady in the heavenly kingdom. **The healing of such things was a big part of Jesus’ ministry, His revelation of what the Kingdom of God was like.**

It’s not possible to solve the problem of evil in just a few sentences. There are some helpful insights to be gained from Lamentations 3:19-38, however. Jeremiah plainly declares (1.) **the absolute and unending**

faithfulness and love of God (vss. 22,23). God's *character* is *completely trustworthy*! While this is true, Jeremiah also clearly states that **(2.) God is in ultimate control** (vss. 37,38). *Nothing*, good or evil, can occur without His express word. From this last passage, we might conclude that God must be a monster. However, there remains a third glimpse of God that modifies this conclusion, and helps us to reconcile the apparent contradiction. These verses declare that **(3.) the evils of life are not the expression of His heart, i.e., He does not approve of such things** (vss. 33-36). In other words, there are things that happen which are *not* His desire.

When we put these three concepts together we come to a conclusion very similar to God's actions in Job 1 & 2. There, **God allowed evil to occur within certain boundaries, though He Himself did not cause it**. In a sense, **He takes responsibility for the evil, in that He permitted it**. In another sense, however, **it is important to see that He is not evil** (Psa. 5:4), and therefore **He is not the immediate cause of the defect, sickness, or injustice**. Furthermore, Romans 8:28 says that **He is able to weave all things, even painful and destructive experiences, together in our lives so that they can work out for good**. He doesn't *cause* them, but He is able to *redeem* them

Some have attempted to place God on trial because of the inequities or tragedies of life. Others have concluded that, because such evils and suffering exist, He must either not be truly good, or He must not be powerful enough to combat evil. The truth is, as Job discovered (Job 38-42), *we just don't know enough of the big picture to be able to draw any accurate conclusions*. **If we accept the testimony of the Scriptures, we know that God is good and He is all-powerful** (Jer. 32:17; 33:11). We also know that the world God created was without sin, but that sin entered this world through the independent choices of humankind, at the urging of an evil spiritual being masquerading as a beautiful creature. Death came through sin (Rom. 5:12). **God did not cause sin. In fact, He clearly warned Adam against it**.

We also know that the world as we know it is only temporary. God has promised to create a new world free of the corruption and tragedy of evil. *Then*, He will *redress* the wrongdoers, and will *comfort* and *bless* those who are His.

The boldest and clearest demonstration of His love and commitment are revealed in the coming of Jesus to be our liberator. He gave Himself to the abuse and injustice of evil men so that, by His suffering and death, He might set us all free. **Whatever the problem of sin and evil may actually be, God did not treat it lightly**. He does not look down upon our tragedies with disregard or with dispassionate, uncaring eyes from some insulated, distant heavenly ivory tower. **He experiences grief and pain over our suffering. He notices and remembers our pain** (Psa. 56:8). **He came to be fully identified as the victim** in order to secure our release, and even now **He is with us in our pain** (Matt. 25:40,45; 28:20; e.g., Acts 9:4,5). The philosopher's "either/or" scenario is a false dilemma, not taking into account all the facts.

Jesus' response to the disciples' question concerning the origin of the blind man's affliction was not an attempt to explain all of this. His dismissal of their question with a "neither" indicates that **tragedy does sometimes occur to the innocent**. There is no "blame" to be assigned to any one person as the cause of this man's experience. Nevertheless, **Jesus moves beyond this line of inquiry to point their attention in another direction, to see this situation as an opportunity to "display the works of God"**. Marcus Dodds, in The Expositor's Greek Testament, observes that "Evil *further*s the work of God in the world. It is in conquering and abolishing evil that He is manifested. The question for us is *not* where suffering comes from, but *what we are to do about it?*" His point is well taken. What benefit could it possibly serve to know where fault might lay? **In this case, the tragic circumstances would serve as the backdrop for revealing the power of God**.

"We must work the works of Him who sent me..." (vs. 4). *Whose* works? Jesus again is careful to say **that the miracles are not done in His own power. They are the works of the Father** (lit., "the [One] sending Me [at a point in time]"). **Who are to do these works?** Literally, "it is necessary *us* (including the disciples) to work the works". In other words, **this was not a dynamic that belonged only to Jesus!** This is borne out by the other gospel accounts. **The disciples also went about doing miracles. When can we do these works?** "...as long as it is day..." **While the opportunity exists**. "...night is coming when no man can work." Note the imagery of darkness and light, and how this leads into the statement in the next verse. Cf. 1:4,5,9,10.

"While I am in the world..." (vs. 5) -- The Greek literally says, "**Whenever/while I might be in the world...**" **The wording seems to more strongly emphasize the uncertainty or limitedness of His continued presence**. His absence, then, would be the time of darkness referred to in the previous verse. "**I am the light of the world**" -- This was the second time He had made this statement about Himself (cf. 8:12). **Here, it seems to mean, "As long as I am here, my purpose is to reveal the light of God's character in the midst of a world of darkness."**

"**When He had said this... He made clay...**" (vs. 6). The healing of the blind man was to serve both as a *physical illustration of this spiritual principle He had just been speaking of*, as well as a *demonstration of the power of God working through Jesus*. **It was a powerful sign that revealed God's compassionate heart for this poor beggar, while also pointing again to the inescapable conclusion that God was with Jesus**.