

52 – Don't Ask "Why?"

John 9:1-7

I think we all ask the question. Our need to ask is automatic; it's instinctive; it comes uninvited. When serious illness strikes, or when we or those close to us are hit by tragedy, particularly if something happens to a child, we ask: "God, what did I do wrong? Why did You let this happen?" We assume it happened because someone sinned. Even those of us who feel very confident that God is a loving God are likely to struggle with guilt when a crisis comes to us or our immediate family. Everything inside us asks: "Why? Did I do something? Did I say something? Do I lack faith?" And then our minds go searching for an answer, and the pressure inside is so great, sooner or later we always come up with one and believe it deeply, whether or not there is any truth in it. This process of seeking to place blame on ourselves or others is the source of much human misery. Many of us can carry a burden of shame or hatred for the rest of our lives.

But we aren't the only ones who ask the question "Why?" when we experience a tragedy. Others watch us in fear and ask the same question. They too want to know who to blame so that they can avoid doing whatever it was that brought that suffering into our family. They don't want it to arrive at their door. So their minds try to solve the puzzle as well, and they too, just like you and I come up with wrong answers. One would hope that the religious community would be immune from this process, but it is not. In fact religious answers to the terrible question "Why?" can be the cruelest of all.

This is the situation Jesus passed by on His way out of the temple. He saw a beggar who had been born blind; He saw a man with a disability so sad that everyone was determined to find out who was to blame for it. And that day He taught us to stop trying to answer that question.

Who sinned? (Jn 9:1-3)

• DBS (Wed-Sat)

If Jesus' words did indeed mean that God made the baby blind in the womb, so He could perform this miracle, then the lesson here is that this particular man was chosen to suffer so that He might glorify God by receiving His sight. As we read on we'll discover that the man became a disciple through this encounter, and his eternal life was surely worth far more to him than those years of blindness. But if Jesus didn't say that, if that was not the lesson He was teaching, if what He actually said was "so that the works of God in him might be revealed," then Jesus wasn't explaining why this man was blind, but why He stopped to minister to him. After all, this man was only one of many beggars that lined those streets.

Why Jesus stopped

When Jesus passed the man He "saw" something in the Spirit. The Father pointed him out and revealed that He had been at work in the man preparing him to believe. So Jesus stopped because He knew the man, though blind to natural light, was ready to receive spiritual light (v39). He knew the miracle He was about to perform would reveal the "works" the Father had already done inside that person's heart. He knew the man would respond in faith and become His disciple (vs27, 38).

We must work (v4)

Another key to understanding this passage is the fact that the subject of Jesus' statement is plural, not singular. I'll explain. Jesus said, "It is necessary for us to work,," or it might be translated, "We must work,," What's surprising here is that He did not say, "I must work,," If this blind man was a special case whom God had blinded in the womb, so Jesus could give him sight, then surely Jesus would have said, "I must work the works of the One who sent Me,," But He didn't. He said "we," which means He was modeling something He expected His disciples to continue doing after He ascended into heaven. Surely by saying "we" He did not mean that God was going to disable more babies in the womb, so future disciples could heal them. No! He was alerting His disciples that He wanted them to do what He was doing. He had been vigilant; He had been watching for the Father to show Him people to whom He wanted Him to minister. In the future they too must be vigilant to watch for the Father's leading so that they too will do the "works of the One who sent Me." And then He added to that statement a note of urgency. He told them that they must do those works "while it is day, [for] night comes when no one is able to work" (literal). In other words, He told them to seize every opportunity the Father showed them because those opportunities pass away quickly, like daylight darkens into night.

Creating Adam (vs6-7)

What happened next is one of the most amazing moments in the Bible. Jesus spat on the ground and made clay out of the spittle and dust. Then He smeared the clay on the man's eyes. For obvious reasons there has been much speculation about this. Some suggest the ancients believed saliva had healing properties, but there is almost total silence about why He made clay. Yet what that act symbolized was breathtaking. Jesus was revealing that He was the One who made Adam's eyes; He was the One who formed Adam out of clay (Ge 2:7). In effect, as He smeared the clay over the man's unformed eyes, He was saying, "This is how I made Adam's eyes." In other words, He wasn't healing eyes; He was creating them.

By that act Jesus revealed two truths. First, He proclaimed His divinity as God's Son. He was the One who created Adam and Eve. But second, He demonstrated God's perfect will for that man. Though he had been born blind, God's will for him was not blindness, but sight. It's true, if Jesus Himself had not passed by, that man may never have seen. Very few believers have been able to minister at the level of power Jesus made possible for us. But even if that man had remained blind, we now know God's will for him. God wanted that man whole; his suffering had nothing to do with punishment for sin.



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Don't ask why

So what do we learn from this encounter? We learn a very important truth: We learn that when we or someone else is suffering, God is not asking us to look around for someone to blame.

Are there situations in which human suffering is the result of sin? Yes, in fact most, or actually all, human suffering is the result of sin, but God isn't the One who sends that kind of suffering; we bring it on ourselves or inherit the trouble previous generations have caused. Does God ever send suffering? Yes, there are definite examples of that in the Bible, but those occur when there has been willful evil and a stubborn refusal to repent (2Ch 24:22-25; Ps 32:1-5; 1Co 5:3-5). When God has to discipline us like that, no one needs to look around wondering who to blame. The answer is obvious, and the solution is repentance. The danger lies not in those obvious disciplinary matters but in situations where we don't know the reason why.

Jesus didn't tell His disciples why, because answering that question wasn't their assignment; their assignment was to ask, "What?" What did they see the Father doing? And then they were to do that. Our assignment isn't to answer that question either. We only hurt ourselves and others when we try.

The works of God

The difference in the way Jesus approached this man and the way the disciples approached him is painfully clear. They saw him as a moral problem to be solved. They took the role of judges, looking for a way to assign blame. But thankfully Jesus was there, so you and I get to see how God thought about that man. And what we observe is that He not only didn't blame the man or his parents, He loved him and had been drawing him to Himself for years. When He looked at him He didn't see a blind beggar. He saw a heart ready to receive spiritual light, and the opportunity, because Jesus was there, to give him new eyes.

The right question

The difference between what God saw and what the disciples saw should warn us against trying to answer the question of why. When suffering comes we must fight against the impulse to blame someone. We must humbly refuse to sit in God's judgment seat because we will, inevitably, be wrong, and wrong answers condemn innocent people including ourselves.

When suffering comes, and it seems to touch everyone in one way or another, the right question to ask is "What?" not "Why?" What do I see the Father doing, and what does He want me to do about it? Answering that question properly always turns us from judges into servants, and then the healing begins.

Questions

- 1) Can you think of a time when you tried to answer the question "Why?" Who did you blame? Yourself or someone else? Were you right?
- 2) Can you describe a time when God showed you what He was doing in a situation? Try to explain how you knew. What clues did you see? What did you do? Did it help?