

Purpose and Pain John 9:1-5

As we come to this chapter it is so fascinating to see the interplay between light and darkness, and through the midst of all of the darkness the light of Jesus Christ. Jesus says something in the opening of this chapter that we also saw in chapter 8 and that is that he is light of the world in verse 5. He is the one that shines that light, and there is very different response. Here in this chapter we have highlighted some of the responses to those who believe. After this opening episode and miracle Jesus is largely absent from this chapter and we see the interactions of those who believe with those who do not.

Also there is such a contrast between the opening of this chapter and the close of the last. Look at 8:59, **“So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.”** This is the response from that heated dialogue, and we see here Jesus “went out of the temple.” Literally Jesus “passed by.” Now why is that so significant? And the reason why is they had rejected Jesus but Jesus in his judicious role has passed by them. The second reason it is significant is because of what we see right here in verse 1 because the same language is used and it isn’t used by accident, **“As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth.”** This is still right after the feast of tabernacles and it is still in the region around Jerusalem. As he passed by, but here it is Jesus extending his mercy and grace. And this is the principle that you see over and over, and that is if you never admit your need in your life; if you never see your sin before a holy God then you will always reject Christ. But the moment you see yourself as sick and needy you humbly and enthusiastically welcome the Lord Jesus. And people might pass by Jesus, and he in return will pass by them, but he is always going to the humble and the broken in this world that realize their need. We should marvel at the seeking mercy of our great Saviour and Lord.

This opening passage here has been a fascination of so many because it deals with pain and suffering. And it is such a needed subject to preach on because we live in a world of pain and suffering. We live in a world, as you know that does not operate and function as it was meant to function. In the original creation there was no pain and suffering. And we realize that sin entered the world, and a curse came upon all of creation. And we are suffering under that curse and fall even now. And theologically I do not think I have said anything that you do not know and have not heard. We know the origins and the pain of this world. But we also know two facts about God. One that he is in control of everything. We use the word sovereignty to describe that reign and rule of God. Nothing happens that he does not authorize and that he has not planned. But we also realize that God is all good and all loving, that he is for us and not against us. And that is where the tension comes in. Because, if you are a thinking believer you will ask the question: “why?” You will not ask it accusing God that he is not wise or loving or sovereign but because we know that he is wise and loving and sovereign. How does all this fit together? What purpose could I have for going through the things that I am going through? If we just knew the purpose of why the pain then I could handle the pain and suffering so much better.

What makes it even more difficult in the midst of the suffering is not all suffering is alike. All of us suffer and know pain personally, but some seem to be more

acquainted with it. It seems to come at them in such heavy and vicious ways. Yet others that happen to be around us do not suffer the way that you do or the way that someone you love. We see an inequity sometimes, people who are more wicked can have little or no suffering in this present life. We might understand something of the struggle of Psalm 73:12-14, **“Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning.”** Ever felt that? I always seem to get the short end of the stick. Life might not seem fair and through our pain and confusion we look for answers.

And not only that, but pain and suffering can come in so many forms. It can be physical. it can be relational. It can be spiritual. All who desire to live godly will be persecute, and even how we are persecuted is different. People might hate us here in Canada, but in certain parts of the world they might burn your house down or even take you life. But suffering comes in many forms and in many ways. The disciples in this passage as they come to this man who was born blind know about suffering, and who better to ask than our Lord. And so to fortify us as we suffer and as we will go through suffering through understanding suffering from the words of Christ. I hope this will bless and encourage your heart with whatever you are going through tonight. I want us to understand the question and misconceptions about suffering, and then I want us to look at the answer that our Lord gives.

1. We need to understand the misconceptions of suffering. V.2.

You can learn about individuals not only by the questions that they ask, but also how they ask questions. The “how” is that sometimes in questions there are assumptions made. You can see that in the question that the disciples asked Jesus. And I think through how this question is asked because each of us makes an assumption about suffering in our lives. In fact all people do. It might be from dumb luck and chance to who you were in a previous life, and this is punishment for the past lives that you lived. It is nothing but Karma catching up with people through their various different life spans. And if you have any history of years behind you, you have suffered or are suffering and will suffer. That is a given. The only question that remains is what conclusions have you come to as far as your sufferings? Are they biblical? I think that for many believers the conclusions that they come to are a mixture of Biblical and non-biblical answers. It is something like the disciples here. They know something of God and suffering but the conclusions they reach certainly give no or very little hope. And I find this with so many believers. They are hopeless in the midst of suffering because they have that mixture of truth and error, and the error is always dominant. What are you believing about your suffering?

So look at the question that is asked here, **“And his disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’”** They already have the “why” question answered in their minds. The reason why this person is blind is because of either his sin or his parents, and it is because of some evil done where God has taken notice and now has meted out his judgment. You can see the outcome: someone sinned and the outcome of that sin was true judgment of blindness. Now certainly there are consequences to sin. If I cheat on my wife I could destroy my

marriage. If I steal I could go to jail or get a criminal record. If I lose my temper instead of being patient and kind, I could destroy a friendship. We know there are consequences to sin, and all of us that are here tonight have felt those consequences to our sin. And we even know that God because he loves his children will many times bring in chastening to keep us from going in a faulty way. He as a loving Father chastens us that we might learn what is best and follow Him. Listen to Hebrews 12:6-8, **“For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.’ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.”** If we can sin without any consequences and we can get away with it then we have to wonder if we are his children. God disciplines those who he loves.

But so often people think that any suffering is directly related to sin in their lives. I heard of a health and wealth preacher who got a cancer diagnosis. And he wrote to everyone he could think of that he had any grudge or ill-feelings with and confessed. He saw his cancer as a judgment from God and if he could come clean the cancer would go away. He died of the cancer. I met a woman in the hospital that was in so much pain and death was imminent. And the preacher that was just in to see her asked her to confess some secret sin in her life that she was holding out on. She was so greatly disturbed. People often know some truths about God not make faulty conclusions, and those conclusions can cause so much harm.

We are told three times in the opening of the Book of Job that Job was an upright man. Why the repetition? God wants us to know that the reason that Job is suffering is not related to sin. It is not a punishment. And this is what his three friends missed. Listen to what Bildad says to Job in Job 8:2-4, **“How long will you say these things, and the words of your mouth be a great wind? Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right? If your children have sinned against him, he has delivered them into the hand of their transgression.”** And he gets so much right, but he is wrong just like the disciples of thinking this is just chastening for some sin. It is like God is in heaven ready to crush us for any infraction in our lives. We often do not make this declaration about ourselves when we are suffering but it is so easy to make it about others. And we have a lot to work with because we are all being conformed to the image of God and none of us have been perfectly transformed.

But another error that they made about suffering, and again there is a mixture of truth and error that happens to be here. Certainly, the things that we do in this life can have radical consequences in someone else’s life. A pregnant woman who drinks might cause her child to be born with certain cognitive problems and struggles. The child did nothing wrong, but the mother did. And certainly we praise God that there is forgiveness at the cross for any and all sin, even sin against others although the consequences may remain throughout this lifetime. But what the disciples are thinking about here is direct judgment of God against the parents for some sin they have done against God. It was either the child or the parents who are at fault. And they might even have chapter and verse on that. Exodus 20:5 says, **“You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who**

hate me.” This is certainly done in a natural way. If a parent lives life all about me, then the child will learn that life is all about him or her. If a father uses harsh language against his wife, the son will be that way to his wife. If a mother handles all the pressures through angry outbursts the child will learn it also. But God is a loving and forgiving God to anyone who repent throughout that whole cycle. It does not need to be that way. Listen to Ezekiel 18:20, **“The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.”** God is a God of immense grace.

And the warning here is not to jump to conclusions about suffering, especially about other individuals suffering like the disciples are doing here. Richard Phillips in his commentary of John records this warning from John Calvin, **“If my brother meets with adversity, I instantly acknowledge the judgment of God; but if God chastises me with a heavier stroke, I wink at my sins.... If we wish to be candid judges in this matter, let us learn to be quick in discerning our own evils rather than those of others.”** Great words of caution. But we truly still need some biblical direction. For that we turn to our Lord.

2. We need to see and hear our Lord’s response. V. 3.

We certainly want to direction when we are going through suffering but we also want to help others. And the Bible gives many wonderful reasons and answers of suffering from the hand of a sovereign and all loving God. It indicates that there is reason and purpose behind everything in our lives, and no suffering is meaningless. But we also have to humble enough to realize that we cannot give ourselves or others pat answers as if we have figured it all out. God is doing far more in our suffering than we could ever imagine. Look at all that he was doing in Job’s suffering. Job could have never imagined how his suffering has sustained and encouraged so many fellow pilgrims on their way to glory throughout the millennia of redemptive history.

Now saying all of that, we can be thankful our God is not silent on the subject of suffering but speaks wonderfully in the midst of our tears and heartache and pain. And this is one of those passages. Look at what he says here in verse 3, **“Jesus answered, ‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.’”** Jesus first of all denies any of their conclusions. Certainly we live in a fallen world, and all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. None of us deserve anything from God. But Jesus says the reason for the man’s blindness was not directly caused by the parents’ sin or the man’s sin, but it was there to manifest or display the glory of God in him.

And this means several things. One is that notice it is not the work of God but the “works of God” that will be displayed in him. It is not just the healing of this man by Jesus that manifested the glory of God, but works of God through him. We will see some of those works a little further in the chapter as he has interactions with the religious leaders and speaks about who Jesus truly is. And if he was a believer before this time, then he would have been speaking the works of God through his suffering even before this. It is the multifaceted work of God that he does through suffering. He

is not just accomplishing one thing but several things. God is always doing far more than we know in our suffering. It is never just one thing.

We realize this is the outcome of our salvation is these works of God through us. Ephesians 2:10, **“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”** And one of the chief ways that God changes us in this life is through trials and sufferings. Listen to Romans 5:3-5, **“Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”** Notice that suffering produces. It produces the works of God in us. Jesus says this about the blind man. If there is no blindness there is no healing, if there is no suffering in our lives there will be no change. God will send us through things that we would never choose to go through to bring change that would never come unless we went through those things. He is moulding and making something that did not exist before, and that is the display of the work of God in us and through us.

And suffering is not just for our benefit. When we go through pain it is not just our benefit - that we might have a closer walk with God or be changed into the image of Christ - but suffering is for the benefit and spiritual growth of others. Listen to 2 Corinthians 1:6, **“If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.”** Paul went through some extraordinary suffering. And suffering is a bullhorn. People notice when others suffer, but they also notice how they respond. And Paul says if we suffer it is “for your comfort and salvation.” When other believers see you responding in faith and worshiping God even when you do not have answers for your suffering, but you realize he is worthy of worship and worthy to be trusted, people are comforted by that. They are comforted because they want that faith and trust in Christ. They realize how big God is. They realize that his promises are true and grand. And they want that relationship with God that you have.

These are the works of God that are displayed, and people realize that this is not normal that people suffer and glorify God and rejoice in his salvation. So they come to the conclusion that this must be the work of God and he is glorified. And we realize that he is worthy to be glorified. The more we realize how worthy he is, then no sacrifice or suffering is too great.

So as we conclude tonight, let me ask you: what conclusions have you come when life becomes painful? It might be a rebellious child, a difficult marriage, a job that is tough, a body that is breaking down physically, or we might be oppressed for our faith. Whatever it is, it is painful. How do we explain the pain or the “why” of the pain? Here is one answer to the why question - to manifest the works or the glory of God in his people. In suffering, let us work toward that glory and trust and make much of him.