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John 9:1-25

“WHY DO WE SUFFER?”

A few years ago, I had the responsibility to conduct funeral services for one of our young men, who had died in a bicycle accident at the age of 26. He was riding down the bike path on Summerlin Road, as he did every day. Apparently he ran over some glass and cut a tire. He was hurled off the bike, and his head struck the wall. There were only three stitches required. But the resulting brain damage took his life.

And we want to ask: “Why do such needless, pointless tragedies happen?”

It’s even harder to figure why some are stricken by diseases like cancer, when they had done nothing to bring it on. One of my best friends died of lung cancer. He never smoked a day in his life. He was the model of fitness and lived an exceptionally clean life. He used to look at me and shake his head saying: “I don’t understand why.”

One lady, with cancer, asked her pastor: “Is God punishing me for something I’ve done?” A father, at a cemetery, asked his pastor, “Has God taken my little boy because of my sins?” We hear such questions again and again, in the presence of pain and sorrow.

So we are not surprised to hear the disciples of Jesus, asking the same thing, when they saw a man, who was suffering from blindness since the day of birth. They took Jesus aside and asked him: “Who did the sin that caused this man to be born blind? Did he sin or his parent?”

It’s the very oldest problem of man: Why do we suffer? And the most often accepted answer is that suffering is the price, which God makes us pay because of our sins.

The oldest book in the Bible is “Job”. There we have the story of a man who lost his wealth, his health, and his children. And his so-called friends kept asking him what awful sin he had done. The typically said: “Who ever perished being innocent?” (Job 4:7)

That’s just the way that people had it figured. That was their best explanation of the question why men suffer and their best answer to problem of pain. It was a part of their basic philosophy.

Even today, this seems like a tidy little formula to answer life’s questions. And some continue to give their pat and easy answers, no matter whom it hurts.

But there is one problem: **How do you explain when bad things happen to good people?**

Job was a good man, and God made it quite clear that his tragedies were not a punishment. And the so-called “friends,” who told him so, are clearly portrayed as “heels,” before the story is ended.

This problem is even tougher, when you see a little baby suffer. The man in our story had been born blind. He had never lived long enough to sin. Yet he was suffering from blindness, from the moment of his birth. How could you call his suffering a punishment for sin?

That’s what the disciples were trying to figure out. And their best shot at an answer was to figure that the man’s parents must have sinned. God must be punishing the parents, through the tragedy of what happened to the child. So they asked Jesus: “Who sinned, the man who was born blind, or his parents?”

Jesus’ answer may have shocked them, but it had brought instruction and hope to people ever

since. He answered: "Neither has this man sinned, nor his parents..."

With this answer, the Son of God blew the age-old theories (that all suffering was God's punishment) right out of the water. And He added a new direction in our treatment of other people's suffering. He said: "Instead of trying to figure out why it happened, let's make it an opportunity to do the work of God. Let's help him." And Jesus performed a miracle and gave the blind man his sight!

In this marvelous event, I see three lessons for us - **three inspired answers to the old-age problem of "Why do we suffer?"**

SOME SUFFERING IS THE RESULT OF SIN.

Suffering is not necessarily the result of God, punishing us. But it is a consequence of wrongs, which we have done.

Scripture tells us: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked. Whatsoever a man sows, he must also reap." (Gal. 6:7) Again, we are warned to "Be sure your sins will find you out." (Numbers 32:33)

We are not punished **for** our sins, but we will surely be punished **by** our sins. If we insist on breaking God's laws, we cannot escape being broken on those laws.

Our sins will "in us out." They will eventually catch up to us.

What we "sow" over here, we must "reap" over there. It is a fixed law of nature. And nature makes no exceptions and shows no partiality.

Listen, my friend, God takes no personal delight in punishing us. He loves us. He is patient and long-suffering toward us. Like a loving Father, He pities His children. He even disciplines them in love.

But He has warned us about what is right and wrong. And if we insist on doing what is wrong, we start a chain reaction, which will eventually catch up with us. And even a loving God will not interfere with this process. He allows the spiritual laws, which He has created in our universe, to work themselves out.

I was reading, in a recent paper, about the rising epidemic of AIDS in Lee County: fifty new cases in the last two months. "Many of them were young women, who contracted the disease through heterosexual contact...the number of young women is drastically rising - a year ago we were hardly seeing any." This is a perfect example of people, being punished - not **for** their sins, but **by** their sins. Their sinful actions simply "found them out."

By the way, God warned us in love - many years ago - that the only "safe sex" is between man and his wife, within the commitment of marriage. Even with all of our sophisticated knowledge and the modern scientific marvels, called condoms and antibiotics, we cannot break God's laws without bringing suffering on ourselves.

The fact of life is that much suffering is a result of sin. And I must speak boldly on this fact, especially in our day, when people laugh at this and call the idea "old-fashioned."

The Bible tells us that only "fools mock at sin" (Proverbs 14:9). It's like a boomerang. It will come right back and hit you. Don't deceive yourself.

God is not mocked. What we sow in rebellion, we must reap in suffering. We bring it on ourselves.

(One footnote here: The Bible does make it clear that, although God does not want to punish individuals for their sins, **God will directly punish whole nations for their sins.** And that concerns me, because I believe that our nation is just asking for it!!)

But what about our children? I can see our sins finding us out. But will my sins affect my innocent children?

Wake up, my friend. "No man is an island." Whatever we do affects someone else!

God warned that "the sins of the fathers will be visited unto the children to the third and fourth generations." (Exodus 20:5) Again, it is not God vindictively getting even with us, by taking it out on our kids. No! But it is still a fact of life: what we do wrong has to set-our-kids-up for a certain amount of suffering.

If a father breaks the law and goes to prison, his family is going to suffer as a result. There is no avoiding it.

How many babies have been born blind, because their mothers had the venereal disease of

gonorrhoea? And as the baby came through the mother's infected vaginal canal, its eyes were infected. And it was born blind, not from anything it had done, but from the mother's sin of a sexuality promiscuous lifestyle.

God only knows what effect all the drug abuse is going to have on the children of drug users. We are just beginning to see these effects.

If a drunken father has a wreck in his automobile, his children will be maimed or killed, also.

If a parent is abusive, the children will be psychologically scarred for life.

If the father will not work or is a gambler, then his family will do without the necessities of life.

Listen, no man is an island. It is ridiculous to say, "If I sin, it is my own business. It affects no one else."

This outlook is one of the biggest mistakes of our "politically correct" society. And we will pay dearly for our willful ignorance!

That's why we must warn people to take sin seriously. It is an unbeatable game. No man has ever beat the odds. And our God weeps with us, but He cannot violate His own laws of cause and effect.

He warned us that our sins will bring about suffering. He has spelled these sins out. Why won't we listen to His loving guidance? Much of man's suffering IS the result of sin. But, wait. Notice also that...

NOT ALL SUFFERING IS THE RESULT OF SIN.

In the case of the blind man in our story, the Son of God made it quit clear that his blindness was not the result of his sin nor the sins of his parents. Nobody's sins were being "found out." **All suffering does not have some logical explanation.**

In the story of Job, he never did find out why God had allowed him to go through such severe testings. In the end, God simply said, "Trust me." And God gave him back double of everything he had lost.

There are some things in life, which we must endure, for which there are no answers available. God told us it would be that way. He said: "In this world you will have troubles" (John 16:33)

Do you see? We live in a twisted and damaged world. When man first rebelled against his Creator, the very course of nature was jarred. Thorns appeared on the rose bush. The "law of tooth and claw" replaced a natural order of harmony and peace. Man, who had stood tall and picked the fruit of God's Paradise, now became stooped over, as he had earned bread by digging in the dirt (Genesis 3:16-19).

Today, "The whole Creation groans and travails under the weight of mankind's sins" (Romans 8:22). We live in a world which has the possibility of disaster and disease. And a certain percentage of us will fall victim to these things, no matter what we do and without any direct design of God.

All suffering is not a result of sin. Some of it is the inevitable result of living on a planet and in the midst of a fallen race.

But, listen, this is no reason for gloom nor pessimism. God will bring us out on top and even use these things to help us become stronger.

Romans 8:39 assures us that "none of these things can separate us from the love of Christ. Shall troubles, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No. In all these things we are **more than conquerors** through Him who loved us" (and died for us--Roman 8:35-37).

We don't even have to content ourselves with being "survivors." We can be "conquerors," overcomers in whatever we must face. And Romans 8:28 assures that God will "work all these things together for our ultimate good."

My mother took flour and shortening and raw eggs and sugar. None of these was any good, by itself. But she would mix them all "together," and they would come out so good, as a wonderful cake. In the same way, God stirs all the circumstances of life together, the good with the bad, and makes it come out good for us.

Not only that, God uses our trials and sufferings to develop our characters. Surely, our bodies are short-lived, at best. But our spirits and our character will live on forever. So **God uses the rough sandpaper of hardship and suffering to shape and polish us into beautiful persons.**

James tells us to “Count it all joy when you fall into various testings, knowing this, that...testing develops patience, “wisdom and character. Without these trials, we could never become “perfect and entire, lacking nothing” (James 1”2-4).

So, we need not fear troubles nor resent them. We can see them as challenges for growth, knowing that God has promised not to allow us be tested beyond what we are able to bear (I Cor. 10:13).

Dr. Robert Schuller’s youngest daughter, Carol, lost one of her legs at the knee, as the result of a motorcycle accident. What a tragedy for a lovely, young, vivacious girl.

One day, her dad found Carol looking at the scar on the end of her stump of a leg. The doctors had folded over several flaps of skin and sewn them together. Carol said, “It looks like a star, doesn’t it?”

From that, her dad came up with a principle, which had lifted many disappointed people to faith and victory. He has preached, on TV to millions, about how God will help us to **turn scars into stars,**

Once, the family took a vacation on a cruise ship. Carol was a typical, active teenager. She swam and entered many activities. She made no attempt to hide her artificial limb. Naturally, everyone noticed sooner or later. She became the subject of a great deal of curiosity.

Near the end of the cruise, there was a talent night, where everyone could perform, if they desired. Carol signed up. Her parents wondered what she would do.

That night she put on a green evening gown. She was a striking blonde, except for a tell-tale limp. When her turn came, all eyes were fixed on her.

She came to the microphone and said: “I guess you’ve all been wondering about me, so I thought I’d just tell you my story.” And, without a hint of bitterness or self-pity, she told of her accident. Then she told of her discovery, that God could turn our scars into stars, using these tragedies to help us grow and to give us an even greater usefulness to Him.

By the time she was through, there was not a dry eye in the ballroom. God used her to touch many lives deeply. And the typical, superficial gaiety of that cruise changed to an inspiration, which would help people for years to come.

That’s how God can turn sorrow into victory, ashes into beauty, for those who trust Him to bring them through. Instead of asking “Why me?” let us ask, “Why not me” and look for the victory.

Remember. Some suffering is the result of sin. Avoid bringing it on yourself unnecessarily.

But not all suffering is the result of sin. Some can’t be avoided. So accept it by faith, and be an overcomer.

But, perhaps the most obvious point of all is that...

ALL SUFFERING IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO SHOW GOD’S LOVE

Jesus says to His disciples, then and now: “Instead of speculating about the cause of the mans troubles, let’s do something to help him. Instead of spending our time by judging or condemning someone, let’s spend the time in doing the work of God and ministering to him.”

Jesus has little use for ivory tower philosophers nor isolated judges of other men’s pasts. He only looks at their need, in the present. He sees their needs as an opportunity to do the loving work of God.

This is the working philosophy of McGregor Baptist Church. We are not her to “see through each other.” We are here to “see each other through.” We are here to care, when people hurt and to lead them to Jesus, for help.

We have coined this philosophy in the slogan: “Find a need an meet it. Find a hurt and heal it.” All of our outreach ministries are attempts to care about hurting people and to bring them to Jesus, for healing.

Twenty years ago, we saw the hurts of people who had been through the demoralizing trauma of a divorce. We decided to stop asking, “Whose fault was it? Who sinned? Was it a sin for them to get a divorce?”

Listen, one person can’t hold a marriage together anyway, if the other person wants out. There are no easy answers to who was wrong.

The only thing, which we do know for sure, is that people are suffering. Husbands are feeling like

failures. Wives are scared and rejected. Children are trying to adjust to a one-parent home. People are suffering.

So we stopped speculating on who sinned, and we tried to help them “rebuild” their lives. And, as a result, we have helped many people to find a new life in Christ.

The same thing is true of our “New Directions” for the alcoholic and drug dependent. You don’t have to tell these people that they are sinners. They know that. They need love and they need help and they need Jesus’ life-changing power. And we are here to offer it.

I don’t know where this philosophy will eventually lead us. But we are determined not to stand around and speculate about how people got into the jams, in which they find themselves. We are going to try to do something to help them.

Oh, my friend. This is Jesus’ way. He does not want to condemn us for our past. He wants to save us and to help us see how to live a new and better life. John 3:17 assures us that “God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that through Him the world might be saved.”

Today, you may be suffering from your past. You may even know that your own sinful choices and actions have brought you into this suffering.

Let me assure you that Jesus does not want to cut you down. He wants to lift you up. He is making you the gracious offer of His life-changing help.

Won’t you respond to Jesus today? He has the answer to your need!

Psalm 103 reminds us that “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy...He has not dealt with us after our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great His mercy toward them who reverence Him.” Oh, He wants to lift you, my friend.

I can certainly relate to this. If there ever were someone. Who deserved punishment from God, it was me. In my first 15 years, I had gotten onto a very ruinous path and had dragged other onto it with me.

But God showed such great mercy and forgave my past. Not only did He lift me from the miry clay of my sinful choices, but He set my feet on a solid rock. And He has given me the privilege of representing His kingdom and of sharing the unsearchable riches of Christ with others. I am amazed at His tender mercies!

I believe that I can relate to the apostle Paul, who called himself the “chief of sinners.” Yet he states that God was “rich in mercy” and appointed him to be a missionary to the Gentiles.

Oh, my friend, God wants to lift you up. He does not want to judge you nor condemn you. Right now, He wants to save you. Won’t you come to Him today?