

Born blind – who sinned?

HN 28/05/05 preparatory

Reading: Job 2, John 9

Study Text: John 9:1-4

Sing Psalms: 95:1-6; 124; 119:65-72; 46:10-11

Thousands of people suffered and died in the recent tsunami that hit countries to our north. Were those who suffered more sinful than other people? Debate over the connection between suffering and sin was ignited – not for the first time and not for the last.

It is a connection we find addressed in most religions. Buddhism is the attempt of Gautama to overcome suffering. He was a Hindu, who after ‘enlightenment’ taught that suffering comes because of desires. The state of peace is found only when human passions have been completely extinguished.

The same problem is addressed in the Bible. But here of course we have the teaching of God not man. The text before us today speaks about sickness and sin, as do many other passages of Scripture. Still however we find confusion, even among Christians. There are those who think that Christians should not get sick – if they are truly made perfect. There are those who think that God will heal all who believe – providing they have sufficient faith.

On seeing a blind man Jesus stopped and looked at him. He was probably begging at the entrance to the temple. It was some time after Jesus had escaped the Jews and their attempt to stone him (8:59). It was the Sabbath day (9:14). It was known that the man was actually born blind. The disciples were puzzled, for according to their understanding he was blind because of sin – but whose sin. They asked their Rabbi/teacher *who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?*

Sin and sickness

It was the common understanding of Jews that all sickness was caused by sin. In one sense, in broad terms, this is correct. Before sin entered the world, the perfect world that God created, there was no sickness, no pain, and no death. *God saw everything that he had made and it was very good.* With sin came separation from God and the curse of God upon creation.

God gave the law through Moses. He promised to bless his covenant people if they obeyed his law but to curse them if they disobeyed. Among the curses would be the withholding of rain, crop failure, defeat in battle and *consumption, fever and inflammation* – in other words sickness (Deuteronomy 28:22). When the Lord was angry with Miriam he struck her with leprosy (Numbers 12:10). Gehazi (II Kings 5:27) and King Uzziah (II Chronicles 26:10) were similarly struck with leprosy for their sin against the Lord.

So even in a specific, individual sense, God is able to and will strike with sickness those who sin, if in his sovereign purposes he chooses. Jesus told the man he healed at the pool of Bethesda *see you have been made well. Sin no more lest a worse thing come upon you* (5:14). He healed the paraplegic saying *son, be of good cheer your sins are forgiven you* (Matthew 9:2).

In the church at Corinth many were weak and sick, and many had died (I Corinthians 11:30). Why were they sick? Paul mentioned this in the context of taking the Lords supper unworthily. He wrote *for if we would judge ourselves we would not be judged*. Clearly he saw this particular wave of sickness as judgment from God.

The Lord does chasten his people with the rod of affliction (Psalm 119:71). In his wrath he does send sickness upon sinners. We should examine ourselves in this regard. By all means seek medical advice when you are sick but remember the Lord is sovereign not the doctor.

Born blind

While it is true that sickness may be a judgment or a chastening from God, it would be wrong to conclude that all sickness is directly related to a particular sin. Yet this is what the Jews had concluded. Hence they judged everyone who was sick, charging them with sin. Not only Jews but Gentiles make similar judgments – remember the people on Malta when Paul was bitten by a snake.

How the Jews could hold this position when they had the book of Job before them is hard to understand. This book clearly teaches that Job's affliction was not because of a particular sin. His friends repeatedly called upon him to repent of his sin that he might be healed. But Job had examined his heart and, although not claiming to be without sin, could not honestly find a sin associated with this affliction. The reader of this book knows he was not afflicted because of sin. On the contrary he was blameless and upright in the eyes of God.

The man born blind presented the disciples of Jesus – typical Palestinian Jews – with a problem. According to their thesis he was blind because of sin – but whose sin. Did he sin before he was born? Some scholars, including Calvin, say that the Jews believed in transmigration of souls. Others point to the rabbinic idea that Esau tried to kill Jacob in the womb (Genesis 25:22 -26 – *they struggled together in the womb*). On the other hand if it was the parent's sin that was to blame for his blindness then they might well have believed it was because of the father's immorality.

All such speculation was unnecessary for their teacher, Jesus Christ the Son of God, answered them *neither this man nor his parents sinned*. He did not mean they had never sinned but that sin was not the direct cause of this man's blindness. His answer must have shattered their theology. 'You mean no one is to blame for this mans blindness'? They were not looking to help this man but to judge him. Jesus was looking to help this man to the glory of God the Father.

On another occasion Jesus had warned the Jews against making the direct association between sin and suffering. Some Galileans had died at the hands of Pilate as they sacrificed, and eighteen had died when the tower of Siloam fell on them (Luke 13:1-5). 'Do not suppose that they were worse

sinners than anyone else' said Jesus. But look to yourself, and examine your own heart in the light of these disasters.

Like the Jews, some Christians delight in theological debate. They love to ask questions, they love to make pronouncements and judgments on each and every matter that arises. It is important of course to have correct doctrine but is that the end? One wonders what these disciples intended to do for this blind man – apart from discuss why he was blind. We know from the parable of the Good Samaritan that they would probably have looked and passed on. Jesus was not content merely to discuss his plight. He acted; he did the work God sent him to do.

Glory to God

This man was blind not because of sin *but that the works of God should be revealed in him* said Jesus. In other words God would be glorified through this man. Not only in physical healing, which Jesus 'worked', but in his believing in Jesus and becoming a child of God! There is the great wonder; there is the greatest wonder in all the earth! Not only rejoicing on earth but rejoicing in heaven, when a son of Satan becomes a child of God (Luke 15:10)!

Jesus rejoiced when his disciples returned from their mission full of joy and praise (Luke 10:17f). He saw Satan fall like lightning. He saw the defeat of the adversary and the victory of God. This reminds us of the heavenly council presiding over Job's tribulation. Ultimately God was glorified through Job and he was richly blessed by God.

The apostle Paul suffered a *thorn in the flesh, a messenger from Satan* (II Corinthians 12). He prayed for healing but this was not the will of God. God would be gloried through him having this affliction not through taking it away. And we know of servants of the Lord today who are bringing glory to God through their affliction.

That the works of God might be revealed in him. That was why this man was blind – indeed born blind. 'All things – even afflictions and calamities – have as their ultimate purpose the glorification of God in Christ by means of the manifestation of his greatness' – so writes Hendrickson. Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever (Shorter Catechism 1).

Have you been able to give glory to God through some affliction? Many become bitter and blame God. Few stop to examine their hearts and confess their sin. Even fewer have the grace to endure affliction and give glory to God knowing that his grace is sufficient.

Will you look to the Lord now believing that he is sovereign in all things, that his will for your life is perfect and that nothing will happen to you except that he allows it? Are you prepared to suffer for a little while that your God might be glorified and his kingdom might be advanced?

We do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory (II Corinthians 4:17-17).

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