

John: Who Sinned?

John 9:1-41

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Turn with me now to John's gospel, the ninth chapter, as we read this story of the healing of a man who had been born blind. Hear the Word of God.

As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him. "We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; night is coming when no one can work. "While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world." When He had said this, He spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and applied the clay to his eyes, and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which is translated, Sent). So he went away and washed, and came back seeing. Therefore the neighbors, and those who previously saw him as a beggar, were saying, "Is not this the one who used to sit and beg?" Others were saying, "This is he," still others were saying, "No, but he is like him." He kept saying, "I am the one." So they were saying to him, "How then were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man who is called Jesus made clay, and anointed my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash'; so I went away and washed, and I received sight." They said to him, "Where is He?" He said, "I do not know." They brought to the Pharisees the man who was formerly blind. Now it was a Sabbath on the day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also were asking him again how he received his sight. And he said to them, "He applied clay to my eyes, and I washed, and I see." Therefore some of the Pharisees were saying, "This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath." But others were saying, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And there was a division among them. So they said to the blind man again, "What do you say about Him, since He opened your eyes?" And he said, "He is a prophet." The Jews then did not believe it of him, that he had been blind and had received sight, until they called the parents of the very one who had received his sight, and questioned them, saying, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? Then how does he now see?" blind; but how

he now sees, we do not know; or who opened his eyes, we do not know. Ask him; he is of age, he will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone confessed Him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue. For this reason his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." God; we know that this man is a sinner." He then answered, "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." So they said to him, "What did He do to you? How did He open your eyes?" He answered them, "I told you already and you did not listen; why do you want to hear it again? You do not want to become His disciples too, do you?" They reviled him and said, "You are His disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. "We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where He is from." The man answered and said to them, "Well, here is an amazing thing, that you do not know where He is from, and yet He opened my eyes. "We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing and does His will, He hears him. "Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, He could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you teaching us?" So they put him out. Jesus heard that they had put him out, and finding him, He said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?" Jesus said to him, "You have both seen Him, and He is the one who is talking with you." And he said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped Him. And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, "We are not blind too, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

Amen. May God bless the reading of His holy and inerrant Word. Let's pray together.

Our Father, we thank You for Your holy inerrant Word. We ask by the illumination of the Holy Spirit that You would now cause it to come to life in our hearts and minds, for Jesus' sake, Amen.

Some of the dearest members of this congregation have contracted terrible diseases, and in some cases it has taken their lives. Why? And there are some children—very special children—but severely challenged. Why?

My favorite Puritan theologian is John Owen. He became the vice-chancellor of Oxford University in the middle of the seventeenth century. He was the chaplain to Oliver Cromwell. He was in a position to secure the release of John Bunyan from prison. He married his adoring wife, Mary Rook. She bore him eleven children; ten of them died in infancy, one survived until she was about 25 or 26

years of age and then died. Why? We could go on. Bad things happen to God's people, to the Lord's people, to the best of Christ's disciples. Why?

It's the question of—forgive the word—*theodicy*. If you don't know it; write it down. It's the justification of the ways of God with men and women. That's what this chapter is all about. Why was this man born blind? He's called a man. We don't know how old he was. His parents say at one point that he is of age which means he's at least over thirteen; let's say he's twenty. A man who has lived all of his life as a beggar because, in the first century, that's what you did if you were blind, disfigured, or challenged in some way. That's how you survived; there were no social security checks. You'd beg for your living in the streets. They knew him; they recognized him; he was a familiar sight in the streets of Jerusalem and the disciples asked this question. They've got a working theodicy. And their working theodicy goes something like this: suffering is always invariably the result of sin. It's either your sin or your parent's sin, but in some form or other, suffering is always, without exception, the result of sin. You see, they weren't wishy-washy liberals. They believed in judgment. They believed that God punishes sin. After all, doesn't one of the commandments say that God visits the iniquity of the parents on the children to the third and fourth generation?

I'll never forget visiting a lady in the hospital. I think I've told you this story before. Forgive me if I'm saying it again, but it's one of those things that won't go away from me. She's dying from complications of breast cancer and is literally twenty-four hours away from death. She's in the hospice; she's skin and bone. She can barely speak; she can barely breathe. I go in to visit her and she's crying and I ask her why she's crying and she says, "Derek, that minister." I had seen the minister walking out the door as I was walking in. I had said "hello" to him. And she said, "That minister said that if only I had faith, I would be healed." She was dying because of her sin. Lack of faith is a sin. Those words from that minister had come from the pit of hell. Forgive me, but I think that's where they came from.

I. The meeting.

Let's look at this story because it's the same issue. It has three parts to it. The first part is the blind man meeting Jesus. There are three things John points out for us. First, it was the Sabbath day. I don't want to spend too much time on this but I do want us to note it. It says in verse 14 that John carefully notes this was the Sabbath day. There has already been a controversy with the Pharisees about the Sabbath day and Jesus' attitude about the Sabbath day. It's as though Jesus is going out of His way to court trouble with the Pharisees over the Sabbath day. Actually, just watch this issue of "Sabbath" as we go through John over the next few months. This issue will be the issue that will bring down Jesus in the end. This is the issue that really gets to the Pharisees. That's why they are beginning, even now, to plot His destruction.

Secondly, is the part of the conversation about the blind man's condition. The disciples ask about the man's condition, "Who sinned?" Their theodicy was a work-a-day-familiar kind of theodicy: Suffering is the result of sin—invariably, without exception, always. It's your sin. And you may not even remember what the sin is. It may be so far back in your childhood that you may have forgotten it. Maybe it's something you did in your adolescence. Maybe it's your parents' sin. But one way or another, there's always a connection between sin and suffering. By the way, that's the theology of Job's comforters. That's exactly what they're saying throughout the whole book from Job 4 to Job 37. Elihu included, in my opinion, all of them. That's their theodicy; that's what they're saying. But we say that too. Things are not going well. There's trouble, difficulty, and we say, "I must have been very bad." We almost instinctively say things like that.

Now let's be fair here and let's be biblical here because *sometimes* that is the case. It's not the case here and it wasn't the case in the book of Job, but sometimes that is the case. God does sometimes visit us because of our sins. You want to see the difference? Let's take the example of AIDS. We think we're a long way away from AIDS in Jackson, Mississippi, but let's just take that example for a second. There are two ways you can contract AIDS. You can contract it by sexual promiscuity. If you get AIDS by sexual promiscuity, it is *your* fault. You understand that. You can't throw your hands up in horror and say, "It's got *nothing* to do with me." It's got everything to do with you, and it's got everything to do with your behavior and your pattern of life. But you *can* get AIDS through no fault of your own. Through a partner that you know nothing about; through a husband or a wife who is having affairs or sexual promiscuity and you could contract AIDS. Or you could contract AIDS through a blood transfusion through no fault of your own. Do you see the difference? Sometimes there is a connection between suffering and sin and sometimes there is not. In this instance Jesus isn't interested in answering the question, "Who sinned?" Whether it was this man or his parents.

Jesus is more concerned to answer the question, "How can God be glorified in this troubled situation?" Oh, how I wish we could adopt that viewpoint in the trouble and difficulties in our own lives instead of wallowing in sorrow and in grief and often in self pity. Asking the question, "How can God be glorified in this position?"

What can God do about this man's blindness? You see, Jesus doesn't take the viewpoint that there is no purpose in this blindness. He says very clearly in answer to these disciples, "These things have happened in order that the works of God might be displayed in him.: There is a purpose in this man's suffering because suffering is always purposive. There's always a reason. Actually there are more times than not when we can't discern what that reason is. Just as God is incomprehensible, so His providence can often be incomprehensible and we *can't* discern it, and we can't work it out, and we must simply bow and worship

Him not knowing the answer to this question. We should not say, "Well, I belong to a Calvinistic church and therefore, I must just grit my teeth and submit and obey this sovereign God because that's what Calvinism teaches." Actually it's not what Calvinism teaches. The distribution of pain isn't capricious; it's not arbitrary; it's not the outworking of *mere* sovereignty; it's never whimsical. It's not like the mythical gods of Mount Olympus who decide to throw down a few hand grenades of suffering into a family. My favorite verse here is Lamentations 3:33. Do you know it? "The Lord does not afflict willingly." God isn't like some suicide bomber, who capriciously goes into a bus stop or a pizza store and plants a bomb and pulls a string or presses a button and out of sheer hatred causes as much damage and chaos and mayhem as he can. God isn't like that. Providence is always intelligent; providence is always purposive. There's a Puritan home in Chester, England, and in the main street on this home are the words "God's providence is my inheritance." Isn't that beautiful? You know, all I get every day is God's providence. You know that day this week when you couldn't stop feeling sorry for yourself because of the trouble you found yourself in whether it was a family difficulty or an economic difficulty or whatever it was. All you got was God's providence.

What is God's purpose in this man's blindness? God's purpose is to provide a remarkable illustration of the gospel itself. Richard Dawkins, the guru atheist of the hour, in his book *The Blind Watchmaker*, can answer the question, "How did this man get blind?" He could give you some scientific explanation as to the cause of this man's blindness. But he can't answer the question, "Why?" Science can't answer the question. It cannot touch it. Science can't touch that question; has no answer to that question. It's only Jesus that will give you an answer to that question—a satisfying answer to that question. It's an amazing testimony of Joni Erickson Tada, that the book that made the most sense to her is Loraine Boettner's *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*. Isn't that astonishing? That's a tough book; it doesn't get tougher than Loraine Boettner's *Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*. Joni says that in the hour of her *greatest* agony, that is the book that comforted her the most. Do you know *why*? It's very simple. Because it says that in the midst of my trouble there is a purpose. There is a *divine* purpose at work. This world isn't chaos; it's not haphazard; it's not whimsical.

II. A sign.

Do you notice what Jesus does to this young man. That's the third thing. He gives him a tactile sign by touching his eye with clay. He gives him an audible sign. He says to him to go and wash in a pool that's actually called *Sent*, which is a little odd when you first read it. But when you realize John is the one who is putting that little thing in parenthesis, John has been telling you seventeen or eighteen times in this gospel that Jesus is the One who has been *sent* from the Father. Going to that pool would remind this man of the mission and person and identity of Jesus. Actually, if you remember the phrase we've studied from *The*

Apostles' Creed, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." What's going on here? Do you see that this is an act of re-creation. When Jesus heals this blind man, He is restoring just a little bit of what the world ought to be like. When that young man opened his eyes, he saw his mother for the first time. He'd been born blind and he's never seen his mother. He'd never seen her face; he'd never looked into her eyes; he'd never seen her hair; he'd never seen those lips that had kissed him as a young baby. Imagine! It was like a little foretaste, a little glimpse of heaven when our eyes will be open to see what God intended us to see. And what is happening here as John tells us in the first chapter in the prologue? The Creator of the world is in Jerusalem. The One who made the stars. Do you remember that short phrase from Genesis. Isn't that astonishing? Oh yes, and He made the stars and He's standing in Jerusalem and He's restoring the sight of this blind man.

There follows secondly an investigation by the Pharisees. There is a dark side to this story. It is, in all probability, the end of the Feast of Tabernacles. You remember that the candles had been lit in The Court of the Women and this court was open, it had no roof on it. At the end of the Feast of Tabernacles this voice had come out and said, "I am the light of the world." He repeats it here in verse 5. "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." The One who is light is restoring light to this blind man so that he may no longer walk in darkness, but that he may see the light of lights.

But there's a dark side because not only was He restoring and re-creating, but He was also exposing the darkness and the hostility in the hearts of the Pharisees. "The darkness was not able to extinguish the light." John in chapter one verse five, and that's the best translation of it, "The darkness wasn't able to extinguish the light."

Notice in verse 16, the Pharisees had divided. These Pharisees had a fixation about the Sabbath and about what the Sabbath means. And for them, Jesus is destroying the Sabbath. The consequence for the Pharisees is that Jesus is going to destroy *them*. It's a very significant principle—not because of the Sabbath—but because of the principle. It's like having a little speck in your eye and you rub it and rub it until you become blind. And that is what you see being worked out in the hearts of these Pharisees. They saw themselves as the guardians of the law, and for the Pharisees the Sabbath was about what I cannot do—not what I *can* do.

You know, I think that's the great difference between the Pharisaical view of the Sabbath and the Christian view of the Sabbath. The Pharisees are consumed by the question, "What *can't* I do?" One thing you couldn't do on the Sabbath was heal. You couldn't make bread on the Sabbath; you couldn't make dough on the Sabbath. And Jesus has come to pour light and joy into the Sabbath as a principle. They refused to believe that this man was ever blind. Don't you love reading through chapter 9 of John? They keep on asking and asking and asking.

Notice in verse 24, they summoned Him; in verse 26, they interrogate Him; in verse 28, they're insulting Him; and then they excommunicate Him. They throw Him out of the synagogue. Don't you love that little line when the blind man says to the Pharisees, "Why are you asking me all these questions? Do you want to become disciples too?" They say, "Jesus can't possibly have blessed you." You see what it is? It's a dress rehearsal for John 18 and John 19, because the seeds of the hatred and the venom and the blindness are right here in this chapter. Actually there's a double principle at work here because Jesus will quote from Isaiah 6, "God has blinded their eyes so that they cannot see." He confirms them in their blindness and in their hostility to Jesus.

III. Coming to faith.

And then there's a third part of this story. It's the blind man coming to faith and it's a beautiful part of the story, from verse 35 onwards. We can end with something that is far better. Notice the difference of Jesus' approach to the Pharisees where He stiffens His back. You know, Jesus can stiffen His back against the Pharisees. And notice the way in which He bends His back towards this blind man who has just begun to see. He's been thrown out of the synagogue and Jesus has heard about it and He's come and found Him. Whoever comes to Me, Jesus says, "I will not cast out." Watch as this man comes to an understanding of his faith. It is so exciting. In verse 11, the man says, "It was Jesus who healed me." He hasn't much clue who Jesus is or where Jesus comes from; he just knows from hearsay that this was Jesus who had done this. He hasn't seen Him since. In verse 17, under interrogation he says, "He's a prophet." In verse 22, in their conversation with the parents discussing this in their home: "Could this be the Christ?" And down in verse 35, when Jesus asks him does he believe in the Son of man, and he says, "Well show me where He is." And Jesus says, "It is Me. It's the One who is standing by you." And he *believes*, and he worships.

You see, the story ends with those who thought that they could see being confirmed in their blindness. And the one who was blind, having his eyes opened to understand and appreciate who Jesus is. It's a picture of the gospel; this is how the gospel works. It's interesting that there's no mention of the man's name. Don't you think John might have slipped in the man's *name*? You know, he was Peter or Joe or whatever. And isn't John perhaps saying to us, "Look, I don't want to tell you his name, because slip in your own name, because this is *every* man's name. This is *your* name; this is *my* name. We need the touch of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to see. And when our eyes are opened, what is it that we see? The same thing that this man saw when he believed and he worshiped!

Amazing grace!-- how sweet the sound-- that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.

There's always a purpose in suffering. Some of you are going through unimaginable trouble and suffering. And this story, this chapter is written down for *you*. It's written down to underline that God has a purpose in this. I can't tell you what that purpose is. Sometimes the purpose is salvation itself. The question is, what are you going to do with this man? What are you going to do with Jesus? What are you going to do with someone who can heal a blind man? Spoon benders don't preach the Sermon on the Mount; frauds don't deliver some of the profound discourses that Jesus delivers. Or do you think of Plato or of Bertrand Russell sawing a woman in half or pulling a rabbit out of a hat? Would they rise in the estimation of their value and their esteem of teachers of the truth? But with Jesus Christ, we are being told by skeptics, that He deliberately deceived people and yet, at the same time, He taught the most sublime truths.

But if He actually did heal a blind man, then these actions are the actions of One whom God sent into this world. And it says that these gospel stories are true. They're true, I tell you. And they are written down for our instruction and they are written down for our comfort and encouragement. That in *every* trial, in every difficulty, there is a *purpose*. It's the purpose of *God* who became incarnate and died for us.

God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.
Deep in unfathomable minds of never-failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs, and works His sovereign will.
Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; the clouds ye so much dread
are big with mercy, and shall break with blessing on your head.
Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain.
May God bless His word to us. Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You now for this narrative, for this story. We thank You for the Jesus that is at the heart of it. We thank You; bless You for the encouragement to our souls in the certainty that everything that befalls us is Your providence. Bless this truth to our souls, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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