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John 9:1-12

Twenty-eighth Message

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SIN, SUFFERING, AND THE SPLENDOR OF GOD

The lyrics of *Everybody Hurts*, a popular song of a few years ago, ring true for every person who has ever been born: “Everybody cries. And everybody hurts sometimes.” We might evade suffering for a time, but sooner or later everybody hurts. We find assurance in that we are not alone in our tears and pain, yet more often than not we are haunted by the questions that germinate from our sadness. Why me? we ask. Why do I suffer? Why does God allow this? We search for answers and causes to our journey’s seemingly random unfolding, but most of the time we are left completely unsatisfied.

As we come now to the account of the healing of the blind man in John 9, we find that the topic of suffering is embedded in the story. Jesus takes the opportunity presented in the asking of an off-hand question about suffering to broadcast critical spiritual truth. In this miracle we will learn some things about suffering, but we will learn a great deal more.

In chapter 8, Jesus declared himself to be the “Light of the world.” This statement was followed by a lengthy dialogue with the scribes and the Pharisees, an interchange that ended with attempted murder. Now in chapter 9, John, the masterful preacher and teacher, weaves into his gospel a story that illustrates what Jesus meant by his startling claim. This miracle presents a picture of what happens when the “Light” shines. The story also prepares the way for chapter 10 by contrasting the good shepherd who will give his life for the sheep with other religious leaders who are thieves and hirelings. In the end, the blind man ends up seeing, while the religious leaders are still in the dark.

This lengthy story will be the subject of a two-week study. Today we will look at the healing of the blind man and talk about suffering; next week we will look at the investigation that follows the healing, focusing more on the significance of it.

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.” (John 9:1-5 NASB)

The story begins with a transition phrase, “as He went along.” The second half of chapter 10 is tied to the Feast of Dedication (10:22), which comes three months after the Feast of Tabernacles, the setting of chapters 7 and 8. The miracle in chapter 9 presumably takes place somewhere in between, while Jesus is in Jerusalem. However, the controlling principle is theological, not chronological.

This man has been blind since birth. As we will see, he is a beggar; he cannot support himself any other way. We assume that he is an outcast living on the fringes of society. He has suffered greatly and has no supportive community.

The man’s condition points to the fact that we all are spiritually blind from birth. This is true for every one of us. The Bible says that we are born into sin. We are disconnected, separated from God so that we cannot see spiritual realities. Church-going and Sabbath-keeping cannot heal our blindness. That takes an act of God.

The disciples ask Jesus a million-dollar question about suffering: “who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?” It was commonly thought that suffering was the direct result of sin. This was the perspective held by Job’s friends, who pleaded with Job to confess and repent. The rabbis also held this view, perhaps based on Ezekiel 18:19-20:

“Yet you say, ‘Why should the son not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity?’ When the son has practiced justice and righteousness and has observed all My statutes and done them, he shall surely live. The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son’s iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself.”

It seems the disciples concurred with this view. The only question they had concerned who had done the sinning, his parents or the man himself. It’s hard to imagine how the man’s sin had caused his blindness since he had been born blind. Certain religions hold that one carries things over from one life to the next, but I doubt that is what the disciples had in mind.

The notion that sin is the cause of suffering has been perpetuated through the years in many segments of the church. Even if this is not taught directly by the church, those who suffer often feel it is projected upon them by other Christians who delight in identifying the cause of their affliction. And even if we don’t hear this view from others it is a perspective that we hear continually from within ourselves. I know that this is true for me.

In the last few years I have begun to realize that for most of my life I have struggled with some level of depression and maintaining adequate levels of physical and emotional energy. In reality I am a depressive, obsessive-compulsive hypochondriac! People kid me about my lack of energy, but it is a huge source of frustration to me, one that at times really bogs me down. I have often pondered why God has given me this condition, this makeup. Always I hear a voice inside me asking, What did I do wrong? I think that somewhere along the line I must have really messed up. Very subtly I begin to believe that I am suffering because of the sins of my youth, things I did in defiance of God’s will. I wonder if I had not messed up so badly whether I would have this condition.

Is there a correspondence between sin and suffering, and if so, what is it? Was the devastation caused in New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina God’s punishment on the wickedness of that city? Some Christians would say yes. What about cancer and other disabling

conditions? What if you lose a loved one? Is there a formula to explain these things?

Our minds want to make sense of it all. We seek categories and explanations, direct causes to the events in our life. We are attracted to the idea that sin causes suffering, because we like the corollary truth – that doing good brings blessing.

Jesus does not get caught up in the discussion. He does not deal with the “why” question, but does say how God responds. In this case he says that sin is not the issue. The purpose or result (perhaps both) of the blind man’s suffering is that God’s glory can be made manifest.

We learn a couple of things from Jesus’ response. First, we cannot always explain suffering from the perspective of sin or the events of a person’s life. There is not a well-defined cause and effect. What we can say is that in general, sin and suffering are related. This has been the case ever since the fall, when sin entered into the world. All suffering is indirectly related to living in a fallen world. We don’t like it, and we discover in chapter 11 that Jesus doesn’t like it either. This is not how life was supposed to be.

At times we do suffer from the results of sin. We can contract AIDS by engaging in unhealthy relationships. We can go to jail for committing a crime. There can be direct consequences to our sin. However, there is not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence. Many times doing bad things doesn’t cause bad results, just as doing good things doesn’t bring good results. Some suffering is due to nothing we have done. People get cancer or die in automobile accidents. Children are molested or abused. We also know that some suffering is due to the sins of others, like Israel’s defeat at Ai, or an automobile accident caused by a drunk driver. Whether we like it or not there is a great deal of mystery surrounding suffering.

The second thing we learn from Jesus’ answer is that God uses our suffering for his glory. Even though much of the time we don’t know what God is doing, we do know that he is doing something. He can change something horrible into an opportunity for the light to shine. In our story Jesus will heal this blind man, and that will bring glory to God.

Let me mention a few ways in which God can use our suffering for his glory.

1. Suffering allows us to share in the sufferings of Christ.

This is what Peter says in his epistle: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation” (1 Pet 4:12-13). We share in the sufferings of Christ and we also share in the glory of Christ. We identify ourselves in his life and death.

2. Suffering releases the treasure within us, the resurrection life of Jesus.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians: “[we are] always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body” (2 Cor 4:10). The transcendent life of Christ is made manifest through difficult times. Even in the midst of suffering we can be a fragrant aroma of Christ.

3. Suffering shapes our character and deepens our relationship with God.

We see this truth in the book of James: “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (Jas 1:2-4).

And Paul tells us: “And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Rom 5:3-5). Tribulation produces proven character. Humanly speaking, this is not what we would think, but it’s true. Both the Bible and our human experience testify to it.

4. Suffering provides the opportunity for love and compassion to be experienced both from God and from his people.

Often the closest moments we have with God come in the midst of tragedy, in the darkest hour. The same thing is true with family and friends. We grow closer and touch at a deeper level. We comfort one another with the comfort we have received in our suffering. Love and compassion in community is a wonderful gift and a tremendous witness to the world. This is what shaped evangelism in the first century. The love of the body of Christ in the midst of persecution spoke much louder than words. This is one of the things that drew me to Christ. In college, a good friend shared the gospel with me. At that time he was going through some very difficult things. As I watched his life and how he responded to suffering, I became convinced that what he had was real, and I wanted that.

We don’t know everything about suffering, but we do know certain things. We may not know the causes but we can know the purposes.

Next, Jesus goes on to talk about day and night and reiterates his claim to be the Light of the world.

“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.” (9:4-5)

John connects what happens here to chapter 8, when Jesus made this claim during the Feast of Tabernacles. It also connects to chapter 11, where Jesus will once again talk about day and night and light: “Jesus answered, ‘Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him’” (11:9-10).

The “night” will come when Jesus dies on the cross. That is when the sun will set on Israel. It will be the end of history, the day of the Lord for the nation. Jesus represents day for Israel, and his death brings the night. The nation is called to respond while Jesus, the light, is in the world. In the end, Jesus goes out and it is night. The end of things takes place at night. After the cross, there will no longer be a distinction between Jew and Gentile. Jerusalem will become the city of the world and will be destroyed in A.D. 70. This is a paradigm for the end of the world. Night will come again at the final judgment, when no one will be able to work. But now, the world is in darkness and the church is called to participate in the ministry of Jesus, to be a light to the world, while it is day.

There is another way of reading this text. There is no main clause after the “but” in verse 3, so it is grammatically possible to connect the end of verse 3 with verse 4. Jesus could be saying that the man’s blindness had nothing to do with sin, “but it is necessary to work the works of the one sending while it is day in order that the works of God might be manifested in him.” In other words, Jesus ignores the reason for the suffering. It’s not important. What counts is doing the work of God in the midst of the suffering.

No matter how we read the text the message is clear for the disciples and the church. There is an urgency to work while it is day, to make hay while the sun shines. The blindness is not outside God’s control. He has a purpose for it. When we encounter suffering, all of our analyzing and explaining does not accomplish the work of God. We do not know why suffering came about, but we are called to bring life and light into the situation. We want an explanation from God, but what we need is an experience of God. The church is not called to explain suffering but to change the world by pointing people to the light. Times of suffering are often the holiest moments when God’s splendor is manifest.

This is why it does no good to try and explain or analyze Hurricane Katrina. It’s not up to the church to assess the government’s response. Let the politicians do that. The church is called to do the works of God and to bring glory to God in the midst of this disaster. We saw the same truth at work with the Metzlers, our missionaries in Thailand. In the aftermath of the tsunami, they had many opportunities to serve the people of Thailand and to bring the light of Christ to bear on the situation. We do the works of God while it is day.

Jesus now takes the initiative.

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. (9:6-7)

Jesus spits on the ground and makes clay and applies the mud to the man’s eyes. What is the significance of this action? Several suggestions have been offered:

1. In ancient times, spittle was thought to have healing properties. However, because this practice was associated with magical rituals in pagan cultures, it was rejected by the rabbis.

2. What was called “fasting spittle” was used to bring healing, but such could not be applied on the Sabbath, only on weekdays. This might be partly in view in this story. Since the healing took place on the Sabbath, tensions were raised in the process.

3. It was believed that human excreta, like saliva, were unclean and polluted. However, in the case of a person authorized with appropriate power it could be used as an instrument of healing and blessing. The reversal of the taboo would mean that Jesus had religious authority. Rather than Jesus becoming unclean, he makes everything he touches clean.

4. Perhaps this is reference to the potter and the clay of Jeremiah 18. God is the potter, we are the clay, which he takes and shapes according to his desire.

5. Some church fathers saw a connection here with Genesis 2:7, when God made man from the dust of the ground. Here Jesus performs an act of creation, using a little dust to create new eyes. This suggestion makes a great deal of sense to me. It fits very well with John’s gospel, which opens with a reference to the “beginning,” and many times points to the fact that Jesus is working a new creation.

God created light with his word and now he comes as light to the world, the Word of God, to give sight to blind eyes. The blind man is an illustration of the new creation.

Jesus instructs the man to wash his eyes in the pool of Siloam. The fact that he responded indicates some level of faith. The actual pool where he washed was discovered only recently when workers were repairing a sewer line. It is much grander than anyone ever realized, measuring 225 feet in length, with three tiers of stone stairs on three sides allowing easy access to the water. The traditional site of the pool at the end of Hezekiah’s tunnel is very close to this newly discovered pool.

The pool of Siloam is significant because of its prominence in the water ritual conducted during the Feast of Tabernacles, which is the context of chapters 7 and 8. During the feast, water drawn from this pool was taken to the temple and poured out on the altar. Jesus redefined this ritual when he announced in chapter 7 that he was the water of life.

It is also significant to note that John includes the meaning of the word Siloam as “one having been sent,” or “sent one.” The pool of Siloam was sent from the spring of Gihon in the Kidron Valley. The man was sent by Jesus to the pool to be healed. Jesus was sent by the Father to bring healing to the world.

There is also an interesting word play. Siloam is the transliteration for the Hebrew *Shiloah*, which is itself derived from the verb *shalah*, meaning to send. And there are two references in the Old Testament that catch our attention. First, we see in Isaiah that Israel rejects the waters of Shiloah:

**“Inasmuch as these people have rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloah
And rejoice in Rezin and the son of Remaliah
Now therefore, behold, the Lord is about to bring on them the strong and abundant waters of the Euphrates,
Even the king of Assyria and all his glory;
And it will rise up over all its channels and go over all its banks.
Then it will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass through,
It will reach even to the neck;
And the spread of its wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel.” (Isa 8:6-8)**

Just as Israel rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloah, so here they reject Jesus. The leaders reject the blind man’s witness, so they will get raging waters.

Second, there is a reference in Genesis 49 to the Messiah:

**“The scepter shall not depart from Judah,
Nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet,
Until Shiloh comes,
And to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.” (Gen 49:10)**

The man does as Jesus instructed him. He goes to the pool, washes his eyes, and comes back with his sight restored.

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.” (9:8-12)

The neighbors are so amazed and confused they do not even recognize if it's the same man. They want to know what happened. The blind man knows he has been healed, but he doesn't know where Jesus is to be found.

People who are transformed by the light are unrecognizable to their family and friends. They see that a change has occurred and they wonder if it's the same person. Eventually they want to know who has transformed them. This very thing happened to me. After I had become a Christian, a girl I knew in college was bewildered by the change that had come over me, so much so that she said she missed the old John. I told her that I didn't miss him; I was just glad to get rid of him.

The concept of suffering creates deep confusion and tension for us. The older we get, the more suffering we encounter. Life doesn't always make sense, and everybody hurts sometimes. But I would like you to take three things home with you this morning.

1. We may not know what causes our suffering, but we do know that God can use it for his glory.

We can expend a great deal of energy looking for answers, explanations and reasons, but that won't get us very far. Jesus sent the man to the pool of the Sent One. That is the response to suffering. We look for God's glory to be revealed and we work the works of God while it is day. Through our tears we see God is working out his grace and mercy, his compassion and salvation.

Our own Marie Chaney whom we honored this morning is an illustration of this truth. Despite struggling with cancer for the past seven years, Marie has faithfully served in our children's ministry, bringing light and life, doing the works of God while it is day. One day we will be able to see the impact she has made in the hearts of our children and it will glorify God.

2. God takes the stuff of this fallen world and creates anew.

God takes our blindness, our brokenness, our weakness, and even our sin and does a new work of creation. He takes the ordinary dust of our shattered bodies and our shattered dreams and speaks light and life into them. He chooses bodies that are disabled and handicapped, physically and emotionally, to become the temple of his presence. “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Cor 5:17).

We never have to worry about being good enough, smart enough, handsome enough or athletic enough. We are all handicapped in one way or another. Our place of poverty and weakness often becomes the place of beauty through God's healing.

3. In order to see the work of God we need to be healed from spiritual blindness.

We are absolutely blind to the ways of God. Our eyes need to be healed for us to have spiritual sight. Unless we are able to submit to the light of the world we will never see.

A wonderful illustration of these truths is evident in the short life of Mattie Stepanek. Mattie and his three siblings were born with a life-threatening neuromuscular disease, and all four of them died. Mattie, the youngest, died at the age of 13 in 2004. From a very early

age this young boy began to write poems about pain and laughter and peace and God. Here is one of them:

Opportunity Knocking¹

I open the door
To each new day.
I welcome the dawn and
I swing open wide
The entry portal
To each next moment in life.
Some days thrust tsunamis
With storms and squalls.
Some days shower sunshine
With laughter and love.
Some days illustrate
The circle of life,
Highlighting the grass which
Is always greener
On the other side of the hills
Where blossoms grow and
The land prospers
Fruitfully and the
Dreams always come true,
Or perhaps,
They don't really
Stand a chance.
As birds announce life
Through sweet or sad songs
Of that part of the circle
Which cannot be seen
From this side,
I walk with content
In the green of my youth,
Though shaded with challenges,
Each darkened or lightened by
My choices in vision and views.
But I know that if only
I open my eyes and
I open my mind and
I open my life,
I open the door
To each new day.

Mattie wrote this poem when he was 11 years old. In the midst of his suffering he was healed. He could see the splendor of God. May God heal our eyes, too.

1. Mattie J.T. Stepanek, *Reflections of a Peacemaker: A Portrait Through Heartsongs* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel, 2005), 175.