

Signs: *The Blind Man*

John 9:1-41

Today, we'll be focusing on two critically important issues: the problem of suffering and the problem of spiritual blindness. The problem of suffering is the issue that seems to keep many people from coming to faith in Jesus – and even causes some churchgoers to abandon the church altogether. We often ask in times of trouble, “Why is there so much suffering in a world that an all-powerful and loving God made?”

The second issue is even more important – if we look at matters from a longer-term perspective. The problem of spiritual blindness is what keeps people from knowing God at all.

The episode we read about today in our Bible passage addresses both of these issues. In Jn 9, we read about a man who was suffering. He was physically blind. And, then we read about people who could see physically but who, according to Jesus, were spiritually blind. And, you heard what happened in the story as we read it earlier: The blind man ends up seeing – both physically and spiritually. But, those who thought they could see – and whom everyone else thought could see too – were deemed by Jesus to be blind.

The Setting: The Feast of Tabernacles

The story plays out in Jerusalem the midst of this feast, in also known as “Sukkot” or the Festival of Lights. This festival was and is visually awe-inspiring. <http://clfrancisco.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Temp-Illum2-385x300.jpg>

Let me tell you about it. This is the Jewish festival that looks forward to the fact that a promised and long-awaited Messiah is to usher in a

time when all nations will flow to the city of God to worship the Lord. It looked back to a promise made to their forefather Abraham that all the nations of the world would be blessed through someone who would come through Abraham's line.

The lights of the festival pointed to the people's conviction that darkness had come into the entire world because of the sin of human beings. But, they believed that God had brought them together as a people to bring light to all peoples in this dark world. So, their Temple and their synagogues would shine lights out into the world for the entire week of the festival. And, based on passages in the Book of Isaiah, they believed that as a part of his work, the Messiah would bring sight to the blind. The people of Israel celebrated the Festival of Lights each October for centuries – and still do. They prayed for Messiah to come as the light of the world and they pledged to be faithful to Jehovah until his work was completed.

With that in mind, in the midst of this festival, Jesus had declared in Jn 8:12, "*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness...*" His claim, of course, created a lot of controversy. All this brings us to this issue of suffering in the world. In the midst of all the light at the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus and the disciples came upon a man who had been blind from birth.

The Problem of Suffering – *Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind (9:2)?*

As Jesus and his disciples were walking in the vicinity of the Temple, they came upon a blind man. So, the disciples asked him the kind of question I have been asked countless times. And, I will confess to you that I have asked it too in the deepest parts of my soul, i.e., "What caused this man's suffering? The God we believe in is good. And, he is in control of all things in the world. Why would a God like that allow a person to be born blind? Is it his parents' fault? Were they using drugs when he was conceived? Or, could the man somehow have

sinned in the womb? Anyway, it doesn't seem fair." You see, the only two options the disciples offered Jesus were these two: either the man had sinned, or his parents had sinned.

The effect of this kind of thinking, i.e., that my suffering is directly caused by my sin or someone else's sin -- is devastating. For one thing, it often leads to self-pity – to always feeling like a victim in this world. When that happens in us, we begin to develop a hope-less way of living as we saw in the lame man by the pool in Jn 5. When Jesus asked the lame man about his life, the man simply made excuses. Jesus had to ask him, "Do you even want to get well?"

But, the main effect this way of thinking has is that it leads to unending blame-casting. Some people blame themselves. "What did I do that made this happen to me?" Some people blame others. "What did my husband or my wife or my parents do so that this happened?"

Of course, many blame God directly saying, "If there is a God who is both good and all-powerful and he lets suffering happen, I don't want anything to do with him." As you may know, many who have experienced that the God of the Bible is real and wonder why he lets suffering happen, have chosen to believe God is good but that he is not omnipotent. This was the view of Rabbi Harold Kushner in his best-selling 1981 book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People.* Kushner's position is that God was able to build a beautiful world for us, but that he is limited in what he can do. So, God sees people suffering, but he cannot prevent all pain and grief. All God can do is be with his people when we need him. When you think about that view, you soon recognize that it offers no real hope that God will actually have the ability to bring about the kingdom of peace and justice that the Bible promises. A good God may want justice to come – but a limited God may not be able to accomplish it.

So, let me try to give you an all-too-brief summary of how I understand the Bible speaking about the suffering of this world. In its

opening chapters, the Bible lets us know that God did not create a world with suffering in it. However, when the apex of God's creation, i.e., human beings created in God's image, turned away from God, everything in all creation was affected. Nothing has been quite right since that time. Our world still bears much of the goodness that God created but nothing works quite the way it is supposed to. Now, of course, we live in a world characterized by centuries and centuries of the effects of human beings leaving God out of our lives and going our own ways.

All this is to say: Human sin in general causes suffering in general. And, as I often point out from Scripture, we are all a part of this – both in experiencing the harm that results from others' sins but also in the reality that we too have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. That is the imperfect and suffering-filled world that we all are a part of. And, it's the kind of suffering-filled world that we further through our own sin. Using more contemporary language – we are all dysfunctional parts of an already dysfunctional world. Even the rest of creation is damaged by the ways human beings leave God out of our lives. Rom 8 tells us all creation groans for human beings to turn back to God and for this world to be made new.

But, in this passage, Jesus teaches that individual suffering isn't always caused directly by individual sin. I want you to listen carefully here because it is so important that you grasp this. Sin in general in this world is responsible for suffering in general. But, sin in particular is not always the cause of suffering in particular. Sometimes, our bad choices lead directly to us suffering – like the choice to drive drunk often leads to all sorts of pain. But, Jesus said that this man was not blind directly due to the fact that he or his parents had sinned.

There is so much nuance in this. Indeed, there is no other religion or ideology I know of that provides this understanding of the world. But, it is at the heart of the Bible's teaching. So, let me summarize the impact that grasping this biblical world view can have in your life:

1. Removes self-pity – You begin to see that the things that go wrong in your life are a part of this larger issue of being in an imperfect world. We get frustrated when our suffering seems worse than others. But, suffering will come to them too – someday and somewhere. This is the world we are in. And, because we own the fact that we too have fallen short of God’s glory, this is the world we deserve.
2. Minimizes blame-casting – You’ll find you don’t revert to beating yourself up every time something goes wrong. And, you may develop greater understanding of and compassion for those around you who are messed up and whose choices negatively impact you. I find that I don’t write others off as quickly as I used to be inclined to do.
3. Provides a basis for hope – We hold on to the fact that God is still God. God is not impotent. So, you may not see what he is doing now but you hold on to the certain hope that God is at work even in the worst of things to bring about his kingdom in which justice and peace will prevail. As we remembered in our communion time, even the great injustice of the sinless Jesus suffering was a part of God’s plan.

Jesus said, *“Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him (9:3).”* Jesus was thereby teaching us that we may not see in times of suffering that God is doing something that will change things. We often cannot perceive the fullness of God’s presence, goodness and power at work in this world. Jesus is asking us to see through eyes of faith that, although we might not know what God is doing in the difficult times in our lives, we still can trust that he is at work.

Let me tell you as honestly as I can: There have been times in my life when I’ve been hard pressed to hold on by faith to these biblical truths. That’s been true when I experienced three years of pancreatic dysfunction from 1992-94. It’s been true when I’ve experienced the loss of people I love. It’s been true when I visited places like the Holocaust Museum in Phenom Penh, Cambodia. Yet, still I stand before you today and declare without reservation that if you know God personally and you have an understanding of the fallenness of this world and God’s promise of redemption revealed in Scripture, you can make it through any kind of

suffering this world throws at you. God is at work to make all things new – including you and me.

So, you can go through life in this world and when suffering comes up say, “I hate you and everyone in this world – including God -- who has done this to me.” Or, you can say, “I hate me and the mess I’ve made of my life!” Or, you can turn to God and say, “I don’t always know what you are doing, Lord. But, I know you and I trust you to be at work until your work is done – and your kingdom of justice and peace prevails.”

The Problem of Spiritual Blindness -- *Some Pharisees asked, “What? Are we blind too (9:40)?”*

This issue of spiritual blindness is the most important part of this episode – but I will only be able to say the most important things about it today. As we have seen in our entire series of messages called “Signs”, this physical healing was only a sign. It was important. Physical suffering is hard and physical healing is significant. But, just as realities like blindness are temporary in the plan of God (i.e., there will be no blindness in heaven), so too is physical healing in this world. It’s like last week’s message about the feeding of 5,000. Hunger was serious, and Jesus cared. He fed the hungry. But, the next day they were hungry again. So too, when people hurt, Jesus cares. But physical healing will not last forever. If this world is all there is, death will eventually take the healing away. We need eternal sight. We need eternal life. This physical healing was a sign – a sign that points to a day when death will not take our sight away. Do you see?

So Jesus healed the man. But, he did it on the Sabbath, the day when many religious leaders thought that what was most important was that we shouldn’t do any work on it. This leads to a huge dispute that runs all the way from Jn 9:13-34. If you read it on your own, you will recognize many of the complaints and accusations:

- “This Jesus cannot be from God because he doesn’t keep all the regulations. He must be using demonic power.” But, others said, “That can’t be right. Sinners can’t heal the blind. That’s what Messiah is supposed to do!”
- “Then, this man can’t have really been healed. It must be a case of mistaken identity.” “No,” say his parents, “he’s our son who has always been blind.” But the parents, not wanting to clash with the leaders throw their own son under the proverbial bus and say, “Don’t bring us into this. He’s of age. Ask him!”
- So, they go to the man and say, “Come clean! Tell the truth. With what trickery has this man done this. We know he is a sinner!” And, this brings one of the most powerful and clear testimonies in all the Bible: *“Whether he is a sinner or not, I don’t know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”*
So, the leaders thrown the man out of the synagogue.

What I want you first to see here is that this man had been both physically and spiritually blind. Which, I ask you, was the more serious condition? It’s the spiritual blindness.

So, what is spiritual blindness. It is a part of the condition of all people who are not alive to God. Do you remember that I just said? “If you know God, you can make it through any kind of suffering this world throws at you.” Do you know him?

So, how do you know whether you are spiritually blind? Jn 9 teaches us that one way you’ll know whether you have spiritual sight is by whether you understand sin and grace. If you don’t know the holy God, you will not fathom how serious it is that you too have done wrong. That was true of these religious leaders. For them, the man or his parents might be sinners. And, they declared that Jesus was a sinner. But, not them.

So, are you aware of the fact that it is not just others who need forgiveness? Not just others who need to own up to their pasts? Who need to change? If not, you're almost certainly blind. This is more than just saying, "Oh I'm not perfect." It's that you see you're not in control of your life -- That you need cleansing for things you've done and that you need divine help to change. When you see spiritually, you begin to own how serious your sin is! Is that true of you now?

But, those who have received spiritual sight also begin to understand grace. That means that God is not only holy, but he loves you. He has found a way to show mercy to people like us -- To forgive us and begin to remake us. We who see know this, "*God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (Jn 3:16)*". We don't deserve that – but our new life is a gift of grace. So, are you deeply grateful for God's grace shown most fully when the sinless Jesus died on a cross for your sins? If you see that, you almost certainly are alive to God.

Here's my spiritual eye test. Ask, was I ever blind? Do I see now as I did not see before?"

Can you see that? By, that, I mean – Can you remember a time when you were blind to God but that now you see – and Jesus is the one who did it? These religious leaders could not see that. They thought, "Everyone else may be messed up – but not me." They claimed to be keeping all the laws given by Moses. But, they were blind to themselves as well as to God. What about you?

How does Jesus heal spiritual blindness? We saw how Jesus healed the man physically. Jesus spat in mud and put it on the man's eyes and sent him to wash. The man heard what Jesus said, and obeyed by faith. V. 7: "*The man went and washed -- and went home seeing.*" But, Jesus would not leave him physically seeing and spiritually blind. And, the man's spiritual healing was not unlike his physical healing, i.e., a word from Jesus followed by a response of faith. Let's look at it.

I love v. 35: *Jesus heard that they had thrown the man out, and when he found him...* This is what Jesus always does? He comes after us? His love for you is unrelenting. Even this morning I believe Jesus is saying to you, "Do you know that I know all that is right and wrong about you and I love you. I want you to see."

Jesus said to the man, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" "Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him." Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you."

1. 38 makes known to us the man's faith commitment: *The man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped Jesus.* That last phrase is so important, i.e., "*and he worshiped Jesus*". That means, he entrusted his life to Jesus. You can worship many things – your money, your career, your children. Only one is worthy of worship. Only one opens your spiritual eyes. Only one gives you eternal life. Believe in him. Worship him. He'll open your eyes to what really matters. He'll give you hope to go on until suffering is ended.

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost, but now am found; T'was blind but now I see.*

*Through many dangers, toils and snares, we have already come.
T'was grace that brought us safe thus far -- and grace will lead us home.*