

WHILE THE LIGHT SHINES

John 9:1-5

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“We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (Jn. 9:4-5).

Chapter 9 begins a new section in John’s Gospel. After the doctrinal prologue in chapter 1, John tells of Jesus’ witness in gathering his disciples (Jn. 1:19-4:54). This leads to a period of conflict with the unbelieving leaders (Jn. 5:1-8:59). Now begins Jesus’ ministry among those who believe as he advances toward the cross (Jn. 9:1-11:57).

John 9 records events in Jerusalem immediately after Jesus’ departure from the Feast of Tabernacles. Jesus himself is largely absent from this chapter; instead, we witness in action the kind of religion that rejected him and the response of those who believe. But, first, we find that even though Jesus had removed himself from the public sphere, his saving work still continued among the needy. Even as he was rejected by the ancient people of God, Jesus was active in calling out a new people who would follow after him in faith.

The comparison between John 9:1 and the preceding verse, John 8:59, is significant. John 8 ended with the Jews taking up stones to throw at Jesus, “but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple” (v. 59). John 9 begins, “As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth.” These two situations, one right on the heels of the other, are intended for us to compare. Jesus had been standing to teach the religious leaders, but when they rejected him he moved away. But as he was going he saw a poor, afflicted man, and Jesus stopped to help him. This reminds us that Jesus came for those who are broken, weak, and lost. But those who think they are well and put-together –

those who deny their need for a Savior – not only reject Jesus but are abandoned by him in return. He once explained, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick... I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mt. 9:12-13).

A QUESTION ABOUT TRIALS AND SUFFERING

John 9 unfolds with a discussion between Jesus and his disciples regarding the man born blind, whom Jesus had stopped to see. This discussion focuses on two great questions regarding trials and suffering. The first is *why?* Why is there suffering in this life? The second question is *what?* What should we do about this suffering?

First was the why question: “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 was born blind?’” (Jn. 9:1-2).

When it comes to understanding suffering, there are many errors that people frequently express. One error is to think that we suffer in this life because of bad things we did in a previous life. This pagan view is not frequently held by Christians, but as Eastern religions make progress in Western culture we are starting to encounter it more often. This is the idea of *karma*, that bad things in this life result from evil we did in previous lives. The problem with this view is that the Bible plainly teaches that we each have only one life, after which comes death. Hebrews 9:27 says, “It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.” Scholars tell us that the ancient Jews had another view that may be meant by Jesus’ disciples. They thought that some children sin in the womb and that birth defects were the result. Since the man had been born blind, that might account for his suffering. But Jesus dismisses the idea completely.

A second error is that suffering results from the sins of our parents or more distant ancestors. It is true that the Bible speaks in ways that seem to make this possible. In Exodus 20:5 God speaks of “visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me.” This happens in a natural way, as sins of anger, dishonesty, and substance abuse are passed from parent to child, along with their tragic consequences, or when children are born with AIDS or drug addictions gained from their mothers. None-

theless, we should not assume that we or anyone else are doomed by generational judgments from God. Reminding us that anyone who repents and believes can be saved, God said in Ezekiel 18:10: “The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son” (Eze. 18:20).

A third error is to assume that every instance of suffering is caused by God’s immediate wrath. We commit this error frequently, saying of some suffering person, “I wonder what he did to deserve that?” This was the perspective with which Job’s friends afflicted him. They just knew that Job had done something to deserve his incredible sorrows, and their ministry was almost as bitter to Job as his sufferings themselves. Such a view assumes that God is vigilantly watching so as to pounce on our every mistake. But how wrong this is! Donald Grey Barnhouse explains: “God is not up in heaven trying to hit people... Anyone could testify to the fact that many times he has sinned and has not reaped the fruits of that sin. God has been gracious in a wonderful way. How tender and patient He is with us.”¹

Assuming that others somehow deserve their suffering turns us into mean-spirited judges. It relieves us of our calling to weep with those who weep, and deters us from realizing that we could just as easily have suffered instead of them. John Calvin insightfully warns that we tend toward a harsher judgment of others’ sufferings than our own: “If things go badly with my brother, I at once acknowledge the judgment of God. But if God chastises me with a heavier stroke, I overlook my sins.... If we want to be fair judges in this matter, let us learn to be perspicacious in our own evils rather than in those of others.”²

We should avoid these specific errors in assessing the suffering of others. But more generally we should also avoid giving pat answers at all. Anyone who has endured a great trial can tell you that quick and easy explanations offer little comfort. Much less does it help when Christians falsely claim that suffering proves that one has simply not trusted God enough. The Bible state that “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

¹ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *The Love Life* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1973), 126.

² John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, trans. T.H.L. Parker, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 4:237.

Therefore, if we experience many and severe trials, it may simply indicate that we are traveling on the right road.

BIBLICAL EXPLANATIONS FOR TRIALS AND SUFFERING

Does this mean that, according to the Bible, suffering occurs without explanation? The answer is no. The Bible teaches much about the cause of trials, beginning with the role of sin. While God does not immediately judge every sin, it is still true that all suffering stems from sin's entry into our world. The disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (Jn. 9:2). Jesus might well have answered, "Adam sinned." As Paul put it, "Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin" (Rom. 5:12). Had man never fallen into sin, then death, blindness, sickness, and heartbreak would never have been known. This reminds us to hate sin as the root of all our woes.

But why does a loving God permit us to suffer? One reason is that God's people will suffer for corrective purposes. Just as loving parents spank their errant children, our heavenly Father also chastises his sinful brood. James Boice comments, "Some suffering is given to teach Christians that sin is wrong and to teach them obedience."³ The writer of Hebrews said, "The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.... All discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." (Heb. 12:6, 11). My experience as a pastor is that those who are being chastised by God usually have a good idea what sin is being corrected. What they should do, then, is repent of that sin. It follows, as well, that suffering Christians who cannot see something for which they should repent are probably not being chastised.

Suffering therefore has a second purpose; it is not only corrective but also constructive. Trials teach us lessons about life, wean us from a love of the world, and draw us close to God. Malcolm Muggeridge wrote: "I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through

³ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 2:690.

affliction and not through happiness.”⁴ Often suffering is given to prepare us for greater challenges. I witnessed an illustration of this while living in Florida during successive hurricane seasons. The first year, our area received only glancing blows from relatively minor hurricanes. These storms knocked over the more weakly-rooted trees and caused comparatively minor damage. The next year, when we received a direct blow from a major hurricane, the earlier, lesser storms had toughened us up and removed the trees that would have caused the greatest harm.

A biblical illustration is seen in the life of Joseph. God intended Joseph to be ruler of Egypt, leading the nation through its great famine, and providing a home for God’s covenant people. But God first prepared Joseph’s character and faith in the crucible of unjust slavery and wrongful imprisonment. As weight lifters grow strong by enduring the agony of lifting more than they can comfortably handle, so it is with our faith. Knowing this, Paul wrote, “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (Rom. 5:3-4).

If you are experiencing trials, I wonder what God is preparing you for. The story is told of a Christian who, depressed over tragedies in his personal and professional life, wandered alone on the streets. He passed the construction of large church. A workman was chipping on a stone cross, and the man asked him what it was for. He replied, “You see at the top of the spire? There is a space up there where this special stone is going, and I am chiseling down here so it will fit up there.” This gave the answer the Christian was seeking. Walking back home, he lifted his heart to heaven: “I understand my trials now, Lord. You are shaping me down here so that I will fit in the place you have prepared for me up there.”

According to Jesus, this particular blind man suffered for neither correction nor construction. He illustrates a third reason for our trials, “that the works of God might be displayed in him” (Jn. 9:3). His suffering was intended simply as an opportunity for Jesus to display his divine power by healing him.

⁴ Malcom Muggeridge, *A 20th Century Testimony*, cf. Hughes, 2.

The Bible plainly states that God ordains trials as a means to display his glory. Sometimes, God displays his power by delivering us through answered prayers. Just as often, God displays his power by empowering Christians to endure their trial. This was Paul's experience when he asked God to remove the thorn in his flesh. Instead of removing it, God said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Hearing this, Paul replied, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor. 12:9). In the same way, trials present Christians with a priceless opportunity to show our children and neighbors what it means to know a mighty, saving God, so that our suffering becomes a pedestal for the display of his glory. It will often be through the testimony of our trials that many will come to faith. This is another reason this man was born blind, so that through faith in Jesus he would gain eternal life so as to see the glory of God.

It is maturing Christians who gain these perspectives on trials. None of us ask for trials, but when they come we can know that it is a holy, loving God who has either sent or permitted them. One seasoned saint expressed this awareness in the form of a poem:

I thank God for bitter things; they've been a "friend to grace";
They've driven me from paths of ease to storm the secret place.
I thank Him for the friends who failed to fill my heart's deep need.
They've driven me to the Savior's feet, upon His love to feed.
I'm grateful too, through all life's way, no one could satisfy
And so I've found in God alone my rich, my full supply!⁵

WORKING THE WORKS OF GOD

If this encounter helps us understand our own trials, Jesus went on to teach us how to respond to the trials of others. Having answered the *why* question, we now address the question of *what* we should do in response to suffering and trials. Jesus said, "We must work the works of him who sent me" (Jn. 9:4). If God wants to glorify himself in suffering, it will often be through our ministry to those in need.

⁵ Florence Willett, from Swindoll, *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart* (Nashville: Word, 1998), 581-2.

The disciples were much like us. Encountering this tragic man, they did nothing to help him, but stood by speculating on his condition. Instead of this, Jesus said we should engage ourselves in the works of God. There is nothing wrong with seeking a correct understanding of theological questions. But we must not stop there, but be led by them to busy ourselves with deeds of love.

Jesus' spoke of this in emphatic terms: "We must work the works of him who sent me." This provides a mandate for every Christian. We *must* be about God's works. What are they? Surely, they include works of mercy, so that Christians are called to minister to those who suffer. They include works of service, so Christians are called to go about doing good. They include works of stewardship, so we must maintain things that are noble and true, especially holding fast and teaching God's Word. God calls for us to engage in acts of worship directed towards him. Especially, we must share the gospel of salvation to a world that is constantly in the state of passing away.

Christians often wonder about God's will for their lives. But this is not difficult to determine. God's will for a Christian is to glorify him by doing his works! We all have worldly affairs to attend to: we have jobs to perform and families to raise. But of all our work, that which is done in God's name is most significant and alone promises eternal results. Boice asks, "Do we apply the same discipline and enthusiasm that we have in other areas of our lives to the work of God?"⁶ Are we willing to take on difficult or unpleasant tasks on God's behalf and for his glory?

This is an excellent argument in favor of church membership. It is to "work the works of God" that Christians join together in a congregation. Many so-called Christians say, "I believe in Jesus, but I don't think I need to attend a church." But that is not possible if Christians are required to do God's works. How will God's praise go forth, how will resources be gathered for works of mercy and service, how will the gospel be spread, unless Christians commit themselves in church bodies and devote themselves to God's work?

But not only must the church be devoted to God's works; every individual Christian should have a definite role that they are playing.

⁶ Boice, 3:696.

As a young woman, Amy Carmichael had a dream of heathen children perishing in far-away India. She knew she must respond to that need, so she traveled to Calcutta and devoted her life to rescuing poor girls from temple prostitution and teaching them God's love. Florence Nightingale lamented the needless loss of life during the Crimean War, so she founded the profession of nursing. God laid the tragedy of orphan children on George Muller's heart, so he devoted his life to providing for thousands in 19th century England. What has God laid on your heart? The needs are great today. Boice writes:

Men and women are perishing in our time without the gospel and without Christ. They fill our cities and our countryside. There are the poor, the lonely, the outcasts of our society. The need is there. Who will reach them? Will you? Do you feel that you must work? Jesus felt it and, as a result, was a blessing to all who knew him. What have we done to be a blessing to those who are in need?⁷

Moreover, Jesus said, we must recognize the urgency of the hour: "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work" (Jn. 9:4). Jesus was aware that his time on earth was coming to an end, so he devoted himself to glorifying his Father through saving works. The same is true of us: our time for service to God lasts only as long as our lives. Furthermore, Jesus was aware that the darkness of unbelief was spreading in Israel, so his urgency was great. The same is true in our society today, as barbarism daily advances and Christian influences recede. Therefore, we must make the most of every opportunity to show God's love and power through our witness and our grace-bearing ministry.

In a sermon on this theme, Jonathan Edwards pointed out that whenever a commodity is in short supply it has a higher value. This is true of time. Edwards asks us to "consider how much time you have lost already... You ought to mourn and lament over your lost time... you must apply yourselves the more diligently to improve the remaining part," since time is short and once it is past it is gone forever.⁸

⁷ Ibid., 3:695.

⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *The Preciousness of Time*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendriksen,), 2:234-5.

The world is filled with needs, but none is greater than its need for salvation. God provided for this need by sending his own Son to die on the cross for our sins. And now he provides by sending his people as witnesses of that gospel, so that many may be saved by trusting in Jesus. Let none of us neglect this calling, through which God's saving power is displayed in the turning of many hearts to the Lord.

Our world is passing away and the judgment draws near. We live our lives on the threshold of eternity. Now is the time when our work most greatly counts. In all the millions of years of our eternal life, now is the time when eternal destinies are decided. These are the only years when we have the privilege of glorifying God with tears in our eyes and of ministering his grace to the suffering of others, especially as we preach and share the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus urges, "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work."

LIGHTS IN THE WORLD

“As long as I am in the world,” Jesus said, “I am the light of the world” (Jn. 9:5). He illustrated this by opening the eyes of the man who was born blind. It was a picture of his whole ministry. During his three years ministering on earth, Jesus displayed the light of God to the world, and through his saving work he led many to his light. Especially in the suffering he endured by dying on the cross for our sins, he displayed the glory of God's grace for the salvation of sinners. Do you realize that God's greatest glory was shined through his own, voluntary suffering for us, so that we might be forgiven and accepted into his love? Have your eyes seen that light? Then come to God in faith, believing in and receiving his Son, Jesus, as your Lord and Savior.

But now Jesus has gone from the world. The time of his life among mankind ended with his death, resurrection, and ascension into glory. He is still the light of the world, but now that light is seen only as it is reflected in the lives of those who know and serve him today. This, then, is the Christian's calling: to exhibit the power and grace of God to a dark and dying world. Jesus told us: “You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your

good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 5:14, 16).