

Study Ten Suffering to Salvation

Suffering

To experience or be subjected to something bad or unpleasant

“He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind...” -Jesus

The unity of the book of John is absolutely amazing. The past eight chapters have given us a clear and compelling understanding of John’s main message – that Jesus is indeed the long-awaited Messiah. In chapter nine, we find Jesus once again in Jerusalem, performing the work of the One who sent Him.

In His rendezvous with a man born blind and the resulting discourse with the religious leaders, Jesus addresses several key issues, including the role of suffering in our lives. Let’s take a look together at what Jesus had to say about this topic. Beginning in verse two, Jesus’ disciples ask a question concerning a man who John tells his readers was “blind from birth.”¹ They questioned Jesus, saying, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”² This question stemmed from a commonly held assumption:

that sin and suffering are intimately connected. In one sense they are correct; they are simply working out the

entailments of the fall. If rabbis argued that there is no death without sin (Ezk. 18:20) and no suffering without guilt (Ps. 89:32), Paul in the New Testament would certainly agree (Rom. 1-2, 3:10ff). But once theologians move from generalizing statements about the origin of the human race’s maladies to tight connections between the sins and the sufferings of an individual, they go beyond the biblical evidence (whether from the Old Testament or the New).³

While it is unquestionable that our actions have distinct consequences and some of our sins directly result in suffering, a causal link cannot and should not be assumed. Jesus gives us a far better, and more complex, lens through which to view not only this man’s particular case, but individual suffering more generally: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned... but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.”⁴

Jesus explodes the common sin suffering link, by explaining that the broken, fallen state of this world, caused by original sin, is an opportunity for revelation. “John [as the author, shows he] does not think that the occurrence of blindness from birth was outside the sweep of God’s control and therefore of his purpose.”⁵ God’s hand is on this man’s life and situation from start to finish. He was there when the man

¹ John 9:1 NIV

² John 9:2 NIV

³ Carson, D.A. p. 361

⁴ John 9:3 NIV

⁵ Carson, D.A. p. 362

was born blind – not surprising given the fallenness and decay of our present world – and He is there now, bringing about a miracle of new creation. As scholar N.T. Wright put it, “The chaos and misery of this present world is, it seems, the raw material out of which the loving, wise, and just God is making his new creation.”⁶

Suffering, in this case, is an opportunity for revelation: a deeper knowing of who God is. This revelation is also highlighted in this chapter as we look at the progression of the man who was healed as John documented it. This man’s first interaction with Jesus was when he was still physically sightless. After that encounter, he obeyed Jesus’ command to go to the Pool of Siloam and wash and he came back with sight. When his neighbors question him about this wonder, he replies, “The man they call Jesus made some mud...”⁷ Later, when the Pharisees investigate this miracle and ask what this man has to say about Jesus, he boldly declares a new conviction: “He is a prophet.”⁸ He has gone from the innocent questions of his neighbors and a noncommittal statement of Jesus’ name, to the pressurized interrogation of the religious leaders that produced a decision, and an unpopular one at that: Jesus has religious authority.

The second time the Pharisees summon him, they are looking for evidence against Jesus, making the environment more hostile and even more tense. When they question the man he gives a logical defense for Jesus as a man who is from God: “We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens

⁶ Wright, N.T. p. 134

⁷ John 9:11 NIV

⁸ John 9:17 NIV

to the godly man who does his will. Nobody has heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”⁹ And then when Jesus finds him again, He gives him a clear choice by asking, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”¹⁰ This question was not one of veracity. For example, do you believe in the Easter Bunny? It was, instead, a question of trust. Do you trust in the Son of Man? We see the man’s ready willingness to believe, in his question, “Who is he, sir?”¹¹ This man would very likely not have been ignorant of the function of the Son of Man, that is, to judge the earth, rather, he was asking for a specific identification: “Who is here that is the Son of Man? Tell me, that I may put my trust in him!” And we find in verse 38 that this man who was healed both believes and worships Jesus.

And to think that this man’s journey all began with suffering! In the same way, sometimes we face suffering that can produce or has produced profound revelations in our hearts and minds. God has both the power and the wisdom to orchestrate all things to His good purpose and He is totally trustworthy, even in the midst of pain and when we cannot see what He is doing.

Scripture Reading: NIV

John 9:1-41

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth.² His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his

⁹ John 9:31-33 NIV

¹⁰ John 9:35 NIV

¹¹ John 9:36 NIV

parents, that he was born blind?"³ "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him."⁴ As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.⁵ While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."⁶ After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes.⁷ "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means "Sent"). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.⁸ His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?"⁹ Some claimed that he was. Others said, "No, he only looks like him." But he himself insisted, "I am the man."¹⁰ "How then were your eyes opened?" they asked.¹¹ He replied, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see."¹² "Where is this man?" they asked him. "I don't know," he said.¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind.¹⁴ Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was the Sabbath.¹⁵ Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "He put mud on my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed, and now I see."¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others asked, "How can a sinner perform such signs?" So they were divided.¹⁷ Then they turned again to the blind man, "What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened." The man replied, "He is a prophet."¹⁸ They still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man's parents.¹⁹ "Is this your son?" they asked. "Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?"²⁰ "We

know he is our son," the parents answered, "and we know he was born blind."²¹ But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself."²² His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.²³ That was why his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."²⁴ A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God by telling the truth," they said. "We know this man is a sinner."²⁵ He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"²⁶ Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"²⁷ He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?"²⁸ Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses!"²⁹ We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from."³⁰ The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes."³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will.³² Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind.³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."³⁴ To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out.³⁵ Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"³⁶ "Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him."³⁷ Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you."³⁸ Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him.³⁹ Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into

this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.”⁴⁰ Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, “What? Are we blind too?”⁴¹ Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.

Scripture Meditation:

John 9:3 “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus, ‘but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.’”

Partner Assignment:

Meet with your prayer partner from this week and Read chapter nine of the Gospel of John. Answer the following questions together:

- A. What does this chapter teach us about Jesus?
- B. What does this chapter teach us about Jesus’ kingdom?
- C. What specifically from this chapter challenges you and why?
- D. What questions or comments do you have for Life Group next week about this chapter? (Make note of them to ask at the beginning of next week’s study)

GOJ Study Ten, Sample Questions for Discussion:

Pre-Article Questions:

- 1. For those of you who did the prayer partner assignment, are there any questions you had or comments you’d like to share from the reading of chapter eight?
- 2. Have you or someone you love ever experienced something in your life that was hard or painful and

wondered why God would let something like that happen? How did you react?

Post-Article Questions:

- 1. How does Jesus’ encounter with the blind man and the subsequent actions and reactions shape or reshape your understanding of suffering in the lives of God’s children?

Post-Scripture Reading Questions:

- 1. Have you ever experienced a painful situation where you could not see God working, but later, in hindsight you were able to see how it all fit into God’s plan for you? If you feel comfortable, please share with the group.
- 2. Many Jews both in the Old and the New Testament eras believed that blessing was a result of a righteous life and pain or suffering was the result of sin. Where do we see that assumption in this passage? Where do we see it in the Old Testament? (*Hint: If no one knows, send them to Job 4:5-9.*) How does Jesus dispel this notion? You can also read Matthew 5:44-45.
- 3. What was the ultimate result of this man’s suffering? How does God use suffering in the world today to draw people to Himself? How did He use it in the Old Testament? Read Hosea 6:1-3.
- 4. What are some assumptions you have made regarding suffering either in your own experience or in the lives of others? How can you bring your opinions on suffering in line with the truth that God is good and just and all His ways are good and just?

5. The man in this story progressed from only knowing Jesus as a name, to knowing Jesus as Lord. How did his discussions with and the pressure from the Pharisees influence his decision (if at all)? How does persecution today influence people's decisions to follow Jesus?
(*Hint: Whenever the church has been persecuted, it has grown exponentially. We see this in China and some of the Arab countries today.*)
6. The man in this story was healed physically by Jesus, have you ever witnessed someone's physical suffering put to an end with a supernatural healing? How did that impact your faith in Him? In what ways does the fact that Jesus still heals people today who are in pain draw you to Him apart from other gods?