

This summer, I am preaching on interactions that various people had with Jesus in John's gospel, so that we can better understand who Jesus is and what it looks like for us to know and follow Him. This morning, we'll be in John 9, looking at a meeting between Jesus and an unnamed blind man. If you're unfamiliar, there are four accounts of Jesus' life – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, with John being from the perspective of one of Jesus' disciples named John, and directed towards a non-Jewish audience more than the other three. One of the distinct features of John's gospel is that he includes a number of "I am" statements by Jesus that illustrate who He is and what He came to do – for example, "I am the bread of life," "I am the good shepherd," "I am the gate." In chapter 8, we read another I am statement:

John 8:12 - *When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*

Jesus calls himself the light of the world, and in chapter 9, acts this reality out in dramatic fashion with a blind man. Let's read the first 7 verses:

John 9:1-7 - *As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³ "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. ⁴ As long as it is day, we must do the work 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 Having said 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.*

Jesus heals a blind man, and then for the next 30 or so verses of chapter 9, Jesus is not a part of the action, while the Pharisees, the religious leaders, who are not fans of Jesus, interrogate the formerly blind man about how he got his sight, and who this Jesus character is, leading up to this memorable exchange:

John 9:24-25 - *A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God," 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!"*

The formerly blind man confesses that he doesn't know who this Jesus is, only that once he was blind, and now he can see. Eventually the Pharisees become so upset by this blind man's testimony that they throw him out of the synagogue.

John 9:33-34 - *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.*

After the blind man is expelled from the synagogue, Jesus reenters the scene, finding the man again:

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.*

I want to focus on two things in particular from this passage about the significance of Jesus being the light of the world:

1) Jesus gives spiritual sight

The main drama of chapter 9 is of course Jesus bringing physical sight to a blind man, and the angst that ensues among the Pharisees:

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!"*

But John's gospel is full of stories that are physical events pointing to deeper spiritual realities. Think of the woman at the well being told that Jesus can give her living water, or Jesus feeding the 5,000 bread and fish and then telling the crowd that he is the bread of life. In John 9, Jesus uses the giving of sight to the blind man to point to his ability to heal our spiritual blindness.

John 9:39-41 - *Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, "What? Are we blind too?" Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains."*

As you can see, he is speaking figuratively – he has not come to physically blind those who see. But just as the light can help us to see, bright light can also cause some to turn

away. The Pharisees, who think they see clearly, refuse to believe and are blinded by Jesus. Their guilt still remains; they have not received spiritual sight, the salvation Jesus offers.

So what do I mean when I say that Jesus gives spiritual sight?

The first verse that comes to mind is *Matthew 5:8 - Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

God is Spirit. But there is a sight that is more real than our physical eyesight.

Ephesians 1:17-19 - I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. ¹⁸ I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

Jesus gives spiritual sight. We see God, and we see ourselves differently, and others, and what really matters in life. We see love, and hope. When I came to faith, I saw things differently. As C.S. Lewis said, *"I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."*

He opened the eyes of my heart, and now I see. And He can do the same for you. Have you been given spiritual sight? Ask Him to give you His Holy Spirit. Even those of you who know Him desperately need Him to illuminate your path right now.

Psalm 119:105 - Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

Let's pray for Jesus to give us spiritual sight. One of the specific ways that we need spiritual sight is when we are suffering. Let's look again at this passage to see how God's Word can be a light for our path with whatever suffering we are experiencing. I think we learn this:

2) Be future-oriented with regards to your suffering

² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³ "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.

Certainly one of the biggest questions of life, whether or not you follow Jesus, is why do I suffer? Why does a young man die of cancer? Why was I abused? Why do I have mental illness? Divorce. Rejection. Abandonment. Every week a different hurricane, tornado, earthquake, disaster. Why is there so much suffering? This little dialogue does not answer every question about suffering, but I believe it sheds an interesting light on Jesus' approach to the question of suffering.

The disciples ask Jesus, "Who sinned – this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" You can probably tell from the question that the popular understanding at that time was that a man was probably born with a deformity because of the sins of the parents: the sins of the father are visited upon the son. The disciples see this man, born blind, and wonder whether it is due to his sin or his parents.

In the disciples' question, I think we see two common but often false views of suffering that I want to deconstruct this morning, before looking at how Jesus addressed the question.

The first – is this man blind, is he suffering, because of his parents' sin?

The first approach to suffering is that if I'm suffering, someone out there is to blame. My parents are to blame for all my problems. The church is to blame. My boss, my husband, my friends, Trump, Biden, the hegemony, white people, the patriarchy, the system - someone out there is to blame. Or ultimately, God is to blame. We are primarily victims, suffering because of the sins of other people. If it weren't for them, my life would be great. As you can imagine, or as some of you know intimately, this is an approach to suffering that often results in anger and bitterness.

The second approach – it's the man's fault.

This approach believes that if I am suffering, it's my own fault. I am guilty, I am responsible for my own suffering. I am responsible for my own happiness and for my own suffering. If I'm in poverty, it is my own fault. Broken marriage – my fault. Kids screwed up – my fault. No job – my fault. If I am hurting, I must deserve it because of something I have done. As you can imagine, or as some of you know intimately, this is an approach that leads to tremendous guilt and despair.

Now, I would say that there can be some truth in both approaches. While things like being blind from birth may not have anything to do with my or my parents' sins, it is not always that way with other suffering. There are times when we suffer because of mistakes and choices we have made, like when our marriage falls apart because we

cheated on our spouse. And there are other times we suffer because of mistakes and choices that others have made, like when our marriage falls apart because our spouse cheated on us, or because of unjust systems. **But for the sake of this morning and this passage, notice Jesus' response to their question – who is to blame. He refuses to answer the why question, but instead focuses on the “so what” question:**

² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³ "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.

This suffering is so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.

What words would you use to describe Jesus' take on this man's suffering? **Future facing, hope-filled, purposeful – this is Jesus' response to the question of suffering.** Yes, because we live in a fallen world, we will suffer. Suffering and pain was introduced into the world because of the fall, because of our sin. And now we will suffer, being in this world. Everyone we love will eventually die, we will get sick or injured, work will be toil, and so on. And often we will not understand why, and it may not seem fair to us. But Jesus' response is this:

This suffering is so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. What would it look like for you to believe this, to adopt this attitude with regards to your suffering, this morning?

I see in the Bible two ways in particular that this statement is true:

1) He uses our suffering to make us more like Jesus

Take some time and consider that for a minute as you consider the suffering you have experienced or are currently experiencing in your life. **The beautiful thing about God is that he is able to take the suffering and pain that you experience, that you sometimes bring upon yourself, and at other times is visited upon you with no fault of your own, and bring something good out of it.**

Romans 8:28-29 - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

Notice what the good is. It's not that the marriage will always turn around, or that the kids will always come back to health, or that your cancer will always be healed. What is the promise? The promise is that God can take any evil and turn it to good, conforming us to the likeness of His Son. **This does not minimize the evil of what was done to you**, or what you did to yourself. No – it is a promise that if you will trust Him and not turn away from Him, God will always be at work to purify you through suffering so that you might be more like Jesus, people of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. What a source of hope, to go through suffering knowing that no matter what others have done to you, no matter what you have done to yourself, or no matter what else you might be going through, that God is always at work to bring good out of it. And one of the most common ways He brings good out of our suffering is this:

2) God uses our suffering to equip us to more effectively minister to others

Paul suffered tremendously, but wrote these encouraging words about how God used his pain:

*2 Corinthians 1:3-7 - Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ **our comfort overflows**. ⁶ If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. ⁷ And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.*

Our suffering is not meaningless. **One of the main reasons that God allows us to suffer is to equip us to minister to others in a way that we could not do if our life was always comfortable and easy.** What would it look like to be forward-facing in your suffering, to know that however your suffering came about, that it will be used by God to display His power and glory in and through your life.

Think of Joseph. Sold into slavery by his brothers. Put into prison unjustly by Potiphar and his wife. Forgotten in prison. But eventually put in a place where he would save his family from famine and death. And as he reflects back on his journey, he says this to his brothers who had caused him so much harm:

*Genesis 50:20 - You **intended** to harm me, but God **intended** it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*

What would it look like to be able to say that? I know that some of you have suffered unspeakable horrors at the hands of other people. Your parents, your boss, your pastor, your spouse, someone or some people have hurt you deeply and left real scars. I believe that God is encouraging you this morning to be forward-facing in your suffering, to trust that He wants to turn your pain into a thing of beauty, so that one day you can stand up and say “you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” Please hear me: that doesn’t minimize the evil that was done to you, but it moves you from being a victim, angry and bitter, to being a person who leaves the “why” question and the hurt with God and trusts Him to use your pain to display His power and glory.

Can I encourage you, that whether or not your suffering has come because of something you’ve done, something another has done, or just because you live in a fallen world, to put your hope in God and believe this this morning: “This suffering is so that the work of God might be displayed in your life.” Bring the pain, the suffering, to God and trust in His ability to bring something beautiful out of the pain.

Nowhere has this been put more beautifully than by the 19th century London preacher Charles Spurgeon in his book “The Soul Winner.”

Some years ago, I was the subject of fearful depression of spirit. Certain troublous events had happened to me; I was also unwell, and my heart sank within me. Out of the depths I was forced to cry unto the Lord. Just before I went away to Mentone for rest, I suffered greatly in body, but far more in soul, for my spirit was overwhelmed.

*Under this pressure, I preached a sermon from the words, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" I was as much qualified to preach from that text as ever I expect to be; indeed, I hope that few of my brethren could have entered so deeply into those **heart-breaking words**. I felt to the full of my measure the horror of a soul forsaken of God. Now, that was not a desirable experience. I tremble at the bare idea of passing again through that eclipse of soul; I pray that I may never suffer in that fashion again unless the same result should hang upon it.*

*That night, after sermon, there came into the vestry a man who was as nearly insane as he could be to be out of an asylum. His eyes seemed ready to start from his head, and he said that he should utterly have despaired if he had not heard that discourse, which had made him feel that there was one man alive who understood his feeling, and could **describe his experience**. I talked with him, and tried to encourage him, and asked him to come again on the Monday night, when I should have a little more time to talk with him.*

*I saw the brother again, and I told him that I thought he was a hopeful patient, and I was glad that the word had been so suited to his case. Apparently, he put aside the comfort which I presented for his acceptance, and yet I had the consciousness upon me that the precious truth which he had heard was at work upon his mind, and that the storm of his soul would soon subside **into a deep calm**.*

*Now hear the sequel. Last night, of all the times in the year, when, strange to say, I was preaching from the words, "The Almighty hath vexed my soul," after the service, I walked this self-same brother who had called on me five years before. This time, he looked as different as noonday from midnight, or as life from death. I said to him, "I am glad to see you, for I have often thought about you, and wondered whether you were brought into perfect peace." I told you that I went to Mentone, and my patient also went into the country, so that we had not **met for five years**.*

To my enquiries, this brother replied, "Yes, you said I was a hopeful patient, and I am sure you will be glad to know that I have walked in the sunlight from that day till now. Everything is changed and altered with me."

*Dear friends, as soon as I saw my poor despairing patient the first time, I blessed God that my fearful experience had prepared me to sympathize with him and guide him; but last night, when I saw him perfectly restored, my heart overflowed with gratitude to God for my **former sorrowful feelings**. I would go into the deeps a hundred times to cheer a downcast spirit: it is good for me to have been afflicted that I might know how to speak a word in season to one that is weary.*

*Suppose that, by some painful operation, you could have your right arm made a little longer, I do not suppose you would care to undergo the operation; but if you foresaw that, by undergoing the pain, you would be enabled to reach and save drowning men who else would sink before your eyes, I think you would willingly bear the agony, and pay a heavy fee to the surgeon to be thus qualified for the **rescue of your fellows**.*

*Reckon, then, that to acquire soul-winning power you will have to go through fire and water, through doubt and despair, through mental torment and soul distress. It will not, of course, be the same with you all, nor perhaps with any two of you, but according to the work allotted you, will be your preparation. You must go into the fire if you are to pull others out of it, and you will have to dive into the floods if you are to draw others out of the water. You cannot work a fire-escape without feeling the scorch of the conflagration, nor man a lifeboat without being **covered with the waves**. If Joseph is to preserve his brethren alive, he must himself go down into Egypt; if Moses is to lead the people*

through the wilderness, he must first himself spend forty years there with his flock. Payson truly said, "If anyone asks to be made a successful minister, he knows not what he asks; and it becomes him to consider whether he can drink deeply of Christ's bitter cup and be baptized with His baptism."

The disciples ask, "Why did this happen?" Jesus refuses to answer the "whose fault is this" question, but instead points them forward to what God will do with this man's pain and how God will display His power and glory in this man's life.

² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³ "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.

I don't know what has happened to you, or what suffering you have gone through or are currently going through or will go through one day. But please know that God's desire is to use your pain to display His power and glory, to take what others intended for harm and use it for good, the saving of many lives, to take the comfort you receive from God and use it to comfort and encourage others.

How do I know this is true? Because on the cross, Jesus suffered unjustly, a sinless man betrayed and crucified. Why did he suffer? Whose fault was it? An evil Father? A guilty son? Neither – the death of Jesus happened so that the power and glory of God might be displayed in this world, that all who trust in Him would receive spiritual sight, forgiveness of sins, eternal life. Trust in Him today.

Let me close with one of my favorite quotes, from Donald Miller in his book, *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*:

"Somehow we realize that great stories are told in conflict, but we are unwilling to embrace the potential greatness of the story we are actually in. We think God is unjust, rather than a master storyteller."

Trust in Him and ask Him to give you spiritual sight to light your path through the pain.

God, I trust you with my pain. Help me to be forward-facing, to not get stuck on the "why" question but to trust that you are working for good, to make me like Jesus and to equip me to minister to others. Give me spiritual sight and strength by your supernatural power so that I might endure the trials I am currently facing as well as the ones that will come my way. Open my eyes as to how you might use my pain to bring comfort and

encouragement to others that many might be saved and strengthened, and so that you might be glorified. Amen.