

Sermon- Birth Defects and the Glory of God

Scripture: John 9:1-3

Sunday, September 9, 2018

Most of you who have been regulars here or following me on our website have been on a journey through the Gospel of John. Today we are beginning the 9th chapter of John. In the course of the last 8 chapters, every sermon has been a consecutive section of John's Gospel. But even though we are following linearly through one Gospel, there are many different types of content that we have encountered along the way. And different content types require different sermon styles. So, for example when you are in the story of a sign miracle Jesus has performed, you are actually looking at a *narrative content* type. This kind of content is best served with a "textual sermon". A textual sermon gets its structure from the text it is working with, and focuses on extracting truth from the story being told. The feeding of the 5000 sermon for example needed a "textual sermon". But later in chapter 6 when Jesus says, "I AM the Bread of Life", or "I AM the Light of the Word" now that is a statement that has deep meaning and requires examining the original language as well as looking at the cultural background to extract the full meaning of the text. That kind of sermon is called an "exegetical sermon". In John chapter 2 when Jesus was being introduced by John the Baptist and we focused on the character of John that made him such a perfect witness to Jesus, that is a "character sermon". When we analyzed the details of what was going on within the super-heated exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees in John 8, that was an "Analytical sermon". To serve the scripture and the congregation well, the sermon style has to be appropriate to the portion of scripture being preached.

Today, we have a very short text and it is not the Greek we need to examine, but a question introduced to us in those three verses. As Jesus walks along, he sees a man who was born blind. His disciples ask him, "Rabbi, why was the man born blind? Was it

his sin or his parents sin?" Then Jesus replies in one sentence, "This happened so that the power of God could be seen in him". Now this reply sets up nicely another sign miracle that Jesus is about to perform. But today we are going to hold back from plunging into that story. Today we are going to focus more broadly on the issues raised just in the first three versus i.e. the problem of suffering. I am setting this up for you to let you know that today's sermon will be mostly a "topical sermon" focusing on the issue of suffering. So let's get into our passage.

Today we have a bit of a break from the heat of the arguments in John 8. Here Jesus and his disciples are walking along in an unspecified location and Jesus sees a man who was born blind. How does he know he was born blind? Perhaps the man was too young to be blind from age. Perhaps he had no injury scars that could have caused his blindness. It could be simply that everyone knew this man from birth, because it was a small place and everyone knew about everyone else. We don't know how but it was obvious to both Jesus and the everyone else that this man was born blind. This situation gave the disciples an opportunity to ask Jesus a question that has bothered people for ages. Why was this man born blind? When someone is born with a health issue it really gets to us in a particularly deep way right? To put this issue in context, birth defects occur at a rate of about 3% of all births in the US. That means that a baby is born with a birth defect in the US every 4.5 seconds. Globally, the figure is almost double, about 6%. Here is the fascinating thing though. 20% of these defects are caused by genetic abnormalities. Some abnormalities come from the parents. Some abnormalities are not from the parents. Some birth defects are caused by the parent's drug and alcohol abuse and in some cases by environmental pollution. But if you add up all these known causes of birth defects, you account for just 30% of these cases. That means even with all of today's advancements, we don't know why 70% of the birth defects happen. And that is very unsettling right?

When I see bad things happen, particularly to the innocent the first thing I want to do is cry out, why did this happen God? We know that bad things happen when we make bad choices. But what about a child who is newly born into the world? What have they done? Why do they need to suffer? People have always been asking this why question, whether it is someone living today in this country or Jesus' disciples living 2000 years ago. Now as the disciples ask Jesus the question, they also reveal what they are thinking. According to them there can only be two possibilities, either this man's sin or his parents sin.

Does the Bible speak to this issue of the cause of congenital defects? You see the Jewish world was not fully decided on this issue. Because on the one hand you have a scripture like Exodus chapter 4 and verse 11 which says ¹¹ *Then the Lord asked Moses, "Who makes a person's mouth? Who decides whether people speak or do not speak, hear or do not hear, see or do not see? Is it not I, the Lord?"* So some Jewish scholars interpret that as God causes those defects to happen and he is causing it as some kind of punishment. I want to clarify that the Bible is not saying God causes these issues. What this verse is only saying is that God "decides". That means he is permitting some of this to happen within limits. In other words he is putting boundaries on the bad stuff, ok? Further, the Bible also says that each person is punished for their own sins and not for their parent's sins. Ex 18 and verse 20 says this, *"The person who sins is the one who will die. The child will not be punished for the parent's sins, and the parent will not be punished for the child's sins. Righteous people will be rewarded for their own righteous behavior, and wicked people will be punished for their own wickedness"*. So the Bible is saying that sin and its punishment are contained to the individual. If we apply this principle, to our blind man, clearly the Biblical view is that he is not being punished for his parent's sins.

But what about his own sins? Do people have sin at birth? Let's look at a couple verses on this. Ps 53:8 says, *These wicked people are born sinners; even from birth they have*

lied and gone their own way. At the same time Rom 9:11 says, *But before they were born, before they had done anything good or bad, she received a message from God.* (This message shows that God chooses people according to his own purposes;. Because we don't have time to do an exhaustive study of all the scripture passages on the issue, I am taking verses that sound like they are at the opposite ends of the issue and stitching together the truth that the Bible is getting at. So how do you reconcile these two passages? Well, I would reconcile these two and other passages that we don't have time to quote today like this. Firstly, an individual may be affected by sins of the people around them and their parent's sins and even their children's sins but they are only accountable to God for the sins that they commit. Secondly, the Bible says that a person is born with a sin nature but their sin account is at zero until they are old enough to know the difference between right and wrong and choosing to do what they know is wrong. As an aside, the age of accountability varies for each individual child.

So clearly, since he could not have committed any sins at birth, this blindness was not caused even by his own sins. And that is exactly what Jesus says. OK so Jesus has knocked down the two common answers to the "why" question. But what then do we do with the "why" question?

Before we go ahead I want to restate the question. Remember today we are not asking why this man was born blind. We are asking the more general question, why do "innocent people" suffer in this world. And to clarify the unexplained "why" even further I am going to flesh out the question that people have asked for thousands of years, "if God is good and God is all powerful, then why do innocent people suffer in this world". Theologians call this the "theodicy" question. It is a question that challenges our understanding of who God is and takes us to the very limit of our ability to understand the world we live in. In fact this was the question that is dealt with in the oldest book of the Bible by date, the book of Job. Even though Job's friends, like these disciples tried to explain away Job's sufferings as the consequence of Job's sins which

they conclude must exist as the only way to explain his suffering, in the end God was very clear that Job suffered not because of any sins. Job was innocent as far as these calamities were concerned. But in actually answering Job's why questions, God himself appears and says this,

³ *Brace yourself like a man;*

I will question you,

and you shall answer me.

⁴ *"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?*

Tell me, if you understand.

⁵ *Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!*

Who stretched a measuring line across it?

⁶ *On what were its footings set,*

or who laid its cornerstone—

⁷ *while the morning stars sang together*

and all the angels^[a] shouted for joy?

This incredible speech goes on for four chapters. But the point God makes to Job is this. Job is in no position to question the wisdom of God's actions because he is talking to someone who made the universe. And the details of how God made the universe is beyond Job's capacity to understand. And if Job cannot understand how God made the universe, how is Job going to understand how God runs the universe? What is required of Job in situations that are beyond Job's understanding is to trust God fully with his situation. Because if God made an incredibly beautiful universe, then God also will enable incredible beauty to emerge from the most difficult situations on earth including the most extreme suffering of the innocent.

So here is the problem with the "why" question in the first place. When you ask a "why" question, you seek to understand. And by seeking to understand you seek to control.

Now “Why” questions are very important to ask in many contexts and especially in contexts of leadership and when you are trouble shooting right? But when we focus on the biggest challenges of life, the “why” questions encroach on the realm of God’s leadership. It is beyond our realm and nothing good comes out of focusing on things that our not in our job description. In those cases, what God was telling Job to do was to trust Him. He made the universe beautiful beyond compare, right? So trust Him to make your situation beautiful become compare as well. The human tendency when life seems out of control is to try and reclaim control by asking the “why” questions. The fact is, the control we had early was only an illusion and many things in life are not in our hands. What we need to do is release our anxieties about things that are not in our hands into God’s hands and trust Him to gain the victory and create beauty from ashes.

There is another thing about God’s nature that is important to understand. God does not desire that we suffer in any way. The decision to introduce suffering into the world was made by Adam and Eve when they chose to receive the “knowledge of the fruit of good and evil” and become like God. Evil and suffering exist because we live in a fallen world based on the decisions of human beings. From God’s part, He allowed suffering to enter the world but within limits and only after He had already put into place a plan to bring history to a perfect ending even through the suffering that was injected into it by human sin.

So friends, when it comes to the problem of suffering, don’t waste your time asking questions you don’t have the capacity to receive an answer for. But know this. In the end God is going to glorify himself through the situation. It may look different in your life and my life, but God will glorify himself through it. That is what Jesus said. What happens next in the Gospel of John is that we get to see how Jesus’ words play out in the case of this individual who was born blind. And what happens is absolutely fascinating. I will be unpacking all of that in the next few weeks.

But here is the deal. It may be possible that you may not have any close connection with the problem of children born with a “birth defect”. And it is possible that you feel that this is not an issue that concerns you personally. If you think that, I want you to consider this. When I began, I mentioned to you that the rate of birth defects in the US was 3% of all births occurring right? Well, I want to correct that. The real % of birth defects in the US is 100%. Because every human being is born with a fatal defect; the nature to sin. It is a fatal defect because it allows the evil spirit to take control of our lives and to take us on a path to eternal destruction. But here is the Good News friends, if we put our trust in Jesus Christ, He will allow the old “us” to die and a new “us” to be born. The new “us” will be without defect or blemish. And in the transformation and through that transformation, God is tremendously glorified even in a world where sin abounds and His name is not honored by the majority. Isn’t that amazing? This is the story that is being told in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. And the invitation to each of us is best summarized in the words of Proverbs 3:5 and 6, *Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;⁶ in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.*

Not only that, Rom 8:28 promises that those who put their trust in God will see all things work out to an amazing conclusion and that includes God’s name being glorified.

So when you ask your “why” questions, ask God to show you the level of “whys” that is appropriate for you, trust God in all the levels of your life and watch as God brings glory to His name even through the most difficult and unexplainable situations of your life.

Let us pray.