

Many years ago, on a visit to a non-Christian family in the community, the husband said to me, "I've had a good life, God must be satisfied with me." By most standards he did have a good life. He had a good job with a good income. He and his wife had good education, a nice home, good health, and two fine sons, both grown and living responsible lives on their own. Because of his blessings, he assumed that everything was fine between himself and God.

His assumption was that if God wanted something more from him than simply being a good person and believing in the existence of God, that God would do something to get his attention. God would bring something bad into his life.

A lot of people have that kind of theology. It is a rewards theology. It says that if you are good, God will reward you in this life. If you are bad, God will punish you in this life.

Maybe you have had that kind of belief system at one time. Maybe you still do. You might have heard or read someone say something like that about the virus sweeping the earth. God is punishing the sins of mankind with the corona virus.

This is not a new belief system. It has been around almost as long as people have been on the earth. We see it several places in the Bible. It was the theology of Job's friends. They assumed that Job had committed some horrible sin. In their minds it was the reason Job had lost all his wealth and all his children in one day. That was the only explanation that made sense to them at the time.

We also see this theology in the New Testament. The disciples of Jesus asked him a question that was based on a rewards theology. Look with me at the gospel of John, chapter nine.

John 9:1-2 (NIV) As he (Jesus) went along, he saw a man (who had been) blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi (teacher), who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

This man was not a stranger to the disciples. They knew him. That is how they knew he was born blind. He sits each day at a busy intersection and begs for money. They see the man and their curiosity is aroused. So they ask Jesus, "Who sinned that this man was born blind?"

Here we recognize the rewards theology, the rewards belief system. It was quite prevalent in Israel at that time. We see it in the Pharisees. They spoke the same way as the disciples. In their minds, poor people, handicapped people, and chronically sick people were in that condition as punishment from God for sin. They believed that all, not just some, in such a condition was being punished. In contrast, they believed that the rich and healthy were living righteous lives before God and were therefore blessed.

This rewards theology is quite common today, in our world. You may have encountered it like I have. However, if you take a careful look around you will see that often very good people are suffering, and very bad people are rich and healthy. Several books of the Bible point this out. The evidence for rewards theology is not there.

The question of the disciples shows their belief in such a theology. You and I know of medical or genetic reasons for someone to be born blind. They did not have that information. They assumed that such a thing only happened because someone sinned and was being punished by God.

Let's go with their thinking a few moments. We could imagine the man's parents sinning. But how could the man have sinned?

Some Jewish teachers taught that people could sin in the womb. Maybe the disciples were thinking this was the case. I am not agreeing with that idea. I am simply holding it out as a possibility of what THEY were thinking.

Now let's see what Jesus answers.

John 9:3, 6-7 (NIV) "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.

... Having said this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam"... So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

Jesus says that both of their suggestions were wrong. He does not mean that the man and his parents are not sinners. The Bible clearly teaches that we are all sinners (Romans 3:23). Jesus means that the man was not born blind as a punishment for sin.

Let's take a moment and look at four reasons for suffering. These are all presented to us in the Bible. We are going to take these in the order of quantity. The first is the most prevalent reason for suffering in the world.

1. Suffering is a part of life in a broken world.

The world became broken when sin was introduced into it in the Garden of Eden. Thus we all suffer. We suffer injuries and death from viruses, tornados, floods. In addition there are germs, viruses, genetic diseases, and suffering caused by poor medical conditions. And some physical problems are the result.

In addition to such things we are affected by the sins of others. Criminal acts, war, ignorance, prejudice, and other such things by others may bring suffering to us. Peoples suffer sometimes from the policies and actions of leaders.

And everyone on earth dies. Everyone, in general, is effected by sin in general. This is true of both Christians and non-Christians.

But to say that a specific experience of suffering is due to a specific sin is usually beyond the knowledge of any of us. I will mention an exception in a moment. But for the most part we suffer because we live in a broken world.

2. We suffer the natural consequences of our sins.

If you play with fireworks, there is a real possibility of getting hurt. God usually does not protect us from our own carelessness. If we choose to do things that could result in suffering, God usually allows us to do so, and suffer the consequences.

When my sons were small they liked to wrestle, sometimes against dad and sometimes against each other. I usually let them. But I always reminded them that whenever we wrestled, someone always got hurt and mad. Those were natural consequences of their wrestling.

If you play catch in the house, something could get broken. If you lose your temper, some ONE may get broken. These are natural consequences of our actions. Even though God forgives sins in Jesus Christ, we still suffer the natural consequences of our sins.

3. God may discipline a Christian for a pattern of sin.

Paul mentions this in 1 Corinthians. God loves us. He wants what is best for us. He hates to see us living in patterns of sin, especially sin that hurts the cause of his Kingdom. So God may discipline his children in order to call them to repentance.

This is not the usual reason for suffering in our lives. But Christians should ask God the question, "Lord, is this suffering because of sin?" But this is NOT the reason for most of our suffering. And this only applies to those in a covenant relationship with God.

4. This may be a test of your faith.

There are several Biblical examples of this, but like the last point, this is not the reason for most of our suffering.

Now the answer Jesus gave did not address any of these. The disciples were looking at cause. Jesus was looking at purpose.

John 9:3 (NIV) "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.

God allowed this man to be born blind.

God has complete knowledge. God knew before the man was born that he would be born blind. Maybe it was a birthing complication. Maybe it was a genetic problem. We don't know. God saw that this man would be born blind, and did not prevent the blindness or the birth.

God allowed the birth of this man with blindness because God was planning for the day when He would have Jesus heal this man. The man was an instrument of revelation to the community that Jesus is the Messiah. We see this in the rest of the chapter.

Picture what life was like for this man. There were probably many times that he thought and prayed, "Why was I born? Of what use am I? I am a burden on my family. I can only help support myself by begging. I'm useless to my community. Why was I born like this, God?"

Maybe you have thought such thoughts about yourself. “God, I’m a nobody in a somebody world. Of what good am I? I don’t have the looks, the brains, the skills, the money I wish I had. Why am I like this God?”

Well God knew all about you before you did. He knew what gender you would be. He knew what you would look like. He knew at what age your hair would turn gray. He knew if you would need glasses. He knew what your personality would be like. He knew what health problems you would develop. He knew what experiences you would have. God knew everything about you before you were ever conceived. He planned for you to be unique.

Each of us is custom-designed by God.

You are a custom-designed part of his world. God is ready to use you to reveal Jesus to a lost world. And just as Jesus revealed himself to be the Messiah through this man, he has plans to do so through each of us. You are an instrument of the Gospel in the hands of God. In order to do this, God does not need you to look like a movie star or have great health, or be especially talented in some way. Just as God was not hindered by this man’s blindness, God is not hindered by whatever you think you lack.

God had planned since before this man’s birth, that God would use the man’s blindness in a positive way for the good of His kingdom. The blind man did not serve as a sign of someone’s sin, but rather as a sign of the presence of God. The disciples were focused on cause. Jesus was focused on purpose. The disciples saw a problem. Jesus saw an opportunity.

In the same way, open your eyes to the possibilities that God has for you, even in these troubled days. Though we need to distance ourselves from others physically, we can still be a voice of friendliness reaching out to them.

A final point in Jesus’ answer is that we exist for God’s purposes, not our own. So, adopt the following truth. **You are not your own to do with as you want.** You are an instrument of the Gospel in the hands of God.

So, Instead of asking, “Why am I like this,” volunteer for service.