

John 9 - Why do people suffer so much?

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[0 : 00] Good morning, church. Please turn with me to John chapter 9, verses 1 to 41. That's page 1075. John chapter 9, verses 1 to 41.

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind. Neither this man nor his parents sinned, said Jesus, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.

As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world. After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes.

Go, he said, wash in the pool of Siloam. This word means sent. So the man went and washed, and he came home seeing. His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?

Some claimed that he was. Others said, no, he only looks like him. But he himself insisted, I am the man. How then were your eyes opened, they asked.

[1 : 17] 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. Where is this man, they asked him.

I don't know, he said. They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. 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. 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 science?

So they were divided. 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. They still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man's parents.

Is this your son? They asked. Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see? We know he is our son, the parents answered. And we know he was born blind.

[2 : 24] 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. His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders who had already decided anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was Messiah, was the Messiah, would be put out of the synagogue.

That was why his parents said, he is of age. Ask him. 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. 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. Then they asked him, what did he do to you?

How did he open your eyes? 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? Then they hurled insults at him and said, you are this fellow's disciple.

We are disciples of Moses. We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't know where he comes from. The man answered, now that is remarkable. You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes.

[3 : 32] We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.

To this they replied, you are steeped in sin at birth. How dare you lecture us? And they threw him out. Jesus heard that they had thrown him out. And when he found him, he said, do you believe in the son of man?

Who is he, sir? The man asked. Tell me so that I may believe in him. Jesus said, you have now seen him. In fact, he is the one speaking with you. Then the man said, Lord, I believe.

And he worshipped him. 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 are with him heard him say this and asked, what are we blind to?

Jesus said, if you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin. But now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks so much, Dina, for reading for us.

[4 : 35] Let's pray together as we come to God's word. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we want to ask now for your help as we come to your word.

Lord, we want to pray that amidst all the distractions in our minds, in the room, that you might help us to listen carefully to what you say to us.

Lord, we're hungry and we're needy. And we long to hear from your word. So please speak to us and bless us this morning, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. I wonder if probably still one of the most common objections to faith in Jesus is that if Jesus really is God and if he's doing his job properly, then why do people suffer so much?

Why did my friend die? Why are there so many wars? Why do children get cancer? Why did my parents split up? Why did my father abuse me?

Now, you have to admit at the start, that is a very difficult question to answer. And it's often asked by people who are really suffering. Maybe you're asking it this morning. Perhaps the reason that you're on the fringes of church is because you can't reconcile the suffering that you faced in your own life with the goodness of God, which is talked about in church.

[6 : 04] If God really is that good, he doesn't really seem to be doing a very good job. Does he? And what we find in our passage this morning is that it is that subject that it is tackling head on in this story of the man born blind.

Really, this story is all about what is God doing in the world? What is God's priority in the world? And it starts with a wrong answer. And the wrong answer is in the mouth of the disciples.

So look at what they say in verses 1 and 2. Notice their assumption, right?

The assumption of the disciples. In fact, as we read the story through, it's the assumption of all the religious leaders all the way through the story is that bad things have happened to this man because in some way he must have deserved it.

He sinned. Or his parents sinned. You can see how sure the disciples are about that because their question is not, is it someone's fault? That's not their question.

[7 : 15] Their question is, whose fault is it? Because they know it's someone's, either his parents or his. Effectively, this is really the doctrine of karma, isn't it?

You know, do bad stuff, bad stuff happens. Do good stuff, good stuff will happen to you. Which is the doctrine of all sorts of different religions and even agnostics and atheists dip into it from time to time. Be good or face the consequences.

But Jesus doesn't agree. He doesn't think that's an adequate explanation. Look at his reply in verse 3. Neither this man nor his parents sinned, said Jesus.

But this happens so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work.

While I'm in the world, I am the light of the world. Here it is. Jesus doesn't think that the man's blindness is his fault. Nor does he think it's his parents' fault.

[8 : 13] Nor notice does he think the man's blindness is a contradiction of the presence of God in the world. The God of light in the world. I am the God of light and I am here, he says.

Instead, Jesus thinks that this man's blindness will be the location of the display of the work of God. A work that must happen in the daytime because night is coming. I think night there is probably a reference to the darkness of the cross when Jesus, the light of the world, will be crucified.

In other words, and this is the shocking point of the story this morning. I'm going to give it to you up front and then we're going to try and unpick it together. This is the shocking point of the story. Suffering, says Jesus, is not only not a contradiction of God's goodness, nor is it necessarily a direct reflection of something that you have done wrong.

Instead, suffering in the world can be and is here the canvas on which the work of God is displayed. Suffering is the canvas on which the work of God is displayed.

You see that in this man's life. You see it in the cross of Jesus Christ. We see it in our own lives. Now, we're going to think about that some more in a moment, but let's just make sure we've got the story straight in our minds.

[9 : 26] It is a brilliant story. In verses 6 and 7, Jesus spits on the ground to make mud to put in the man's eyes. Now, theologians debate the significance of spitting here.

I don't think we really know. But what is clear is that in verse 7, Jesus sends the man to a pool called Scent. And John is so keen that you know that it is a pool called Scent that he translates the name for you.

He wants to underline, I think, for us Jesus' authority here. Jesus is the one moving people around, calling the shots. And the man goes where Jesus sends and he washes off the mud from his eyes and he comes home seeing.

Now, I think if maybe you and I were recording the story, we'd end there, right? Job done. You know, Jesus encounters a man born blind. A man who's not blind because of his sin or the sin of his parents, but rather to show the work of God.

The man is healed. The work of God is displayed. End of story. I mean, I think that's how I'd record it. But actually, that's not how John records it. Why?

[10 : 30] Well, actually, it turns out that the physical healing of the man is just the introduction. We discover that the physical healing is not actually the work of God that's on display. Instead, the physical healing is to make a point about something even more significant.

To make the point that the man born blind is in need of spiritual sight as well as physical sight. And we notice this as we retell the story because he gets pulled in front of different people at various different times.

So he starts by being pulled in front of the neighbors. Notice that. Verses 8 to 12. These are the first people that he's brought in front of. Now, if you're my age, right? Neighbors is an Australian soap opera of a slightly kind of clueless busybodies, right?

Anybody used to watch it? As a student, people used to organize their lives around when Neighbors was on, right? Actually, though, that isn't really a terrible summary of what the neighbors are like here. They are so confused when they meet the man born blind that they're not sure they've even got the right guy.

Look at verse 8. His neighbors and those who'd formerly seen him begging asked, isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg? Some claimed that he was. Others said, no, he just looks like him. They're clueless, aren't they?

[11 : 40] But he himself said, no, I am that person. I am that man. Now, despite the man's insistence and despite the story of what happened, despite the fact that they do recognize him, at least some of them do, still the neighbors choose to bring the man to the Pharisees, the religious leaders.

So then we encounter the Pharisees in verses 13 to 17. Now, like the neighbors, the Pharisees can't agree either. You notice that, don't you? But they disagree over this, a different thing. They know it is the man who's been healed.

They're divided over what kind of person has healed this man. Some think that the fact that this was done on a Sabbath is reason enough to think that it was a bad man who healed him. While others think that surely healing a man like this can only be a good thing.

A sinner is unlikely to be able to do this, they conclude. And so to settle their conflict, the Pharisees decide to ask the man himself in verse 17. They then turned again to the blind man.

What do you have to say about him? It was your eyes he opened. What kind of person do you think he is? A bad man or a good man? The man replied, he's a prophet. That seems pretty clear, doesn't it?

[12 : 44] But the answer doesn't satisfy them. So the Pharisees who've received the man from the neighbors take the man now to his parents. Notice, verses 18 to 23. Now the key to the parents' testimony is verse 22, where you're told that they are afraid of the Jewish leaders.

The Jewish leaders have made a rule that anyone caught being sympathetic to Jesus and accepting him as the Messiah would be thrown out to the synagogue. So despite the fact that they know this is their son, and they know he was blind, they know that he can now see, they know that he didn't cure himself, they're afraid.

And so they decide in verse 23 to let the man born blind answer for himself. He is of age. Ask him. You know, parents of adult children, you'll know what this is like, right?

They are adults when you want them to be, and not when you don't. At this point, he's an adult, right? He's on his own. It's not the parents' finest hour, is it?

It's self-preservation. They know Jesus is controversial. They know his miracle is undeniable, but they throw their own son under the bus rather than admit that it's true. Which brings the man born blind back to his second audience with the Pharisees in verses 24 to 34.

[13 : 59] I think this is possibly one of my favorite sections of John's Gospel. It's almost comical in the way that it's written. Listen, the Pharisees have now made their minds up, right?

Jesus, sinner. Definite. Verse 24, Jesus is a sinner. But the man born blind is not so sure, so he says, verse 25, whether he's a sinner or not, I don't know.

One thing I do know, though, I was blind, but now I seem to be able to see you all. So they ask him the story again because they're not impressed.

And verse 27 is utterly brilliant. Utterly brilliant, isn't it? Look at it. I've told you already. You didn't listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples?

Do you want to throw yourselves out of your own synagogue? Is that what you want? I mean, this is technically kind of rage baiting, isn't it? He is literally drawing them out to make them angry.

[14 : 56] And it works, doesn't it? The explosion happens. Look at verse 28. Instead of answering his argument, they just start calling him names. And very calmly, the man born blind replies in verse 30.

Now that is remarkable. You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God doesn't listen to sinners. He listens to a godly person who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind.

If this man were not from God, he could do nothing. And that's the last straw, isn't it? So the Pharisees decide that the man is steeped in sin from birth. He's in no position to lecture them as to their religious foibles.

And so they do what they threaten to do, and they throw him out of the synagogue. Get out. I think it's worth pausing just here in this point in the story just to see how tragic it is. Being born blind in the first century would have been an awful thing.

But notice he was born blind through no fault of his own and no fault of his parents. It was promised to be the location of the work of God. And now he's condemned as a sinner and excluded from his community.

[16 : 04] Blindness would have meant that he was on the fringes of his community already. But now he's received his sight and he's put out completely. It's awful. He's almost worse off now than he was at the beginning of the story.

I mean, before Jesus healed him, everyone might have thought his blindness might not be his fault, but his parents' fault. Now they're pretty sure that he's a sinner and that he's the problem. Even his parents think he's the problem.

It's a bad day for the man born blind, isn't it? You know, it's like finding 10 pounds in your coat pocket only to find that you owe the bank 100 quid.

He thought he was up and now he's down. And then comes the twist because the final encounter for the man is with Jesus in verse 35 to 41. And the section starts beautifully, doesn't it, with Jesus finding him.

I love that. Right, he's dragged in front of everybody else. But Jesus goes and looks for him and finds him because he hears that he's been thrown out of the synagogue. When he finds him, he asks him if he believes in him.

[17 : 06] The son of man, Jesus calls himself in verse 35. The man born blind is confused. He says, who is the son of man? And notice how Jesus replies in verse 37. You have now what?

You've seen him. You've seen him. In fact, he's the one speaking to you. I am the promised Messiah. I am the son of man.

I am the man in Daniel's vision. I am the king of kings and lord of lords, the one sent to say. And in verse 38, he believes in him. And Jesus explains, doesn't he, verse 39.

The works of God that Jesus has been on about from verse 3 all the way through the story are not about physical healing, but rather for judgment I've come into this world so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.

In other words, the big problem in the world is that it contains not just that it contains people who are physically blind, but that everybody in the world is spiritually blind. That's the big problem.

[18 : 06] Even though some people claim to see. The Pharisees understand, don't they, what Jesus is saying? They reply in verse 40. They're obviously eavesdropping somewhere. What? Are you saying we're blind too?

They know what Jesus is saying. And so Jesus repeats himself. Jesus says, if you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin. But now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains. Now that's a bit confusing, isn't it?

But Jesus' point is because the Pharisees claim to have spiritual sight, that means they're guilty of sin. A sin that can only be healed if they would admit they were blind. Because the works of the Son are to bring spiritual sight and forgiveness only to those who will admit that they're blind.

So there's the end of the story, right? The man born blind sees the Savior, not just with his physical eyes, but with this spiritual sight of his heart.

The eyes of faith. As Jesus opens his heart to see him as the Savior for his sin. Let me just draw out then the two lessons, I think, from this for us. The first one is this.

[19 : 09] Curing spiritual blindness is God's core business. We started at the beginning, didn't we, with that question about what is God doing? If God is good at his job, why is there so many bad things happening in the world?

If God is real and he's loving, why is there so much suffering? If God is not fixing problems, what is he about? What is he doing? And here is John's answer to that question in this story.

His point is that there is a greater trouble in the world than physical or psychological trouble that we all feel so acutely. And that trouble is spiritual blindness. And not just as in spiritual ignorance.

You know, oh, didn't see you there, God. Not that. Willful blindness. Eyes that will not see. A blindness that refuses to see. A blindness that we are born with.

And Jesus is in the business of making spiritual eyes. Not out of spit and mud that he mixes on the ground, but out of his own flesh and blood given on the cross. And the drama of the story here, and this is the mind-blowing part, isn't it?

[20 : 10] It means that it is okay. It is morally okay for God to allow a man to be born in the darkness of physical blindness. Experience the loss, the pain and the difficulty, the cast-outness of that life.

In order to display to him and to us the greater work of receiving spiritual sight. Bringing him into a relationship with him. Now, if you know your Bible, you'd know that all makes sense, doesn't it?

In the Bible, wickedness, sickness and suffering are symptoms of a broken world. The brokenness of the world that came from Adam's rebellion in the garden. A rebellion against God that left him and all his children spiritually blind.

Excluded from God's presence. So, of course, the priority of a good God is to cure the cause before dealing with the symptoms. Giving us spiritual eyes to see him before bringing us to a world remade without sickness and death.

Now, if that all makes sense, here's the problem. We forget it. We imagine, don't we, that God's priorities should be the same as ours.

[21 : 21] We have this tendency in our lives to undervalue spiritual sight and overvalue physical prosperity. And we do it all the time.

And we end up assuming, like the disciples and like the Pharisees here, that God cannot surely permit suffering because there is nothing worse. Because we've elevated physical prosperity and undervalued spiritual sight.

But God can value spiritual sight more. Why? Because, here's the point, there is something worse than the physical suffering of this world.

That is the judgment of eternal separation from the God who made us. Hell is worse. It's really difficult to get the tone of this right.

Jesus here is full of compassion, isn't he, for the sick and the suffering. Jesus took no joy in the blindness of the man. But he is full of even greater compassion for spiritual suffering.

[22 : 24] A suffering that we're so often blissfully unaware of. Cut off from God, excluded from eternal life with him. Maybe I can just ask it to you as a direct question this morning.

Maybe you wouldn't call yourself a Christian here this morning. Perhaps your life is really difficult. Maybe you're suffering physically. Perhaps you've got poor health or poor mental health. Maybe there's trouble in your family.

Maybe there's trouble at work or in school. Maybe there's trouble in the country that you're from. And you're praying. Maybe you're here because you've started praying. God, will you fix that, please?

And he's not. And so you're beginning to think, well, what's the point? God's probably not there. He's not very good at his job. John 9. Well, God, actually, not John 9.

God through John 9 is inviting you to ask a different question. He's inviting you and me to ask this morning that God's priority maybe is not my comfort and ease, but is my spiritual sight.

[23 : 22] And that for these particular challenges that I'm facing in my life are there for the purpose of driving me to him that I might see.

Perhaps you're a Christian this morning. And as hard as it is and as painful as it is to recognize, the truth is that God is so committed to our spiritual sight, our spiritual life and our spiritual health, that he will allow sickness and suffering to persist in our lives, to keep driving us to him.

God's work, his main work, his handiwork alone, the thing that he alone can do is give us sight of the beauty of Jesus. And seeing the beauty of Jesus is not clouded by tears of suffering.

In some ways, it is opened to us through the tears of suffering. So if you're a Christian this morning, don't give up. There's something else to notice here, though, before we move on.

If you look back at verse 4, you'll notice that Jesus calls these works that he's doing, the works that the disciples are also involved in. He says, we must do the works of him who sent me.

[24 : 37] In other words, this priority of spiritual sight over physical sight is not just Jesus' work. It's the work of the disciples, too. So it's our work, too, right?

So we are to care about physical needs, aren't we? Yes, we're to be involved as much as we can to relieve the physical suffering of our community and our neighbours and our friends and our family. But still, this is to be the longing of our heart, too.

That we shouldn't be so focused on physical need that we are blind to spiritual need. We are to be involved in the work that Jesus is involved in by showing people Jesus in the Scriptures, preaching his word, sharing his message, inviting people to church, reading the Bible with others.

You know, a church that doesn't do that, right? A church where those things are not the priority. They might be doing some really worthy things, but they're not doing the work of God.

Because the works of God in the world are to bring spiritual sight to the spiritually blind. That's the work of God. And that's what we must be involved in.

[25 : 44] Christians, we can spend so much of our time, can't we? And I see that sometimes we can do this as a church. We spend so much of our time praying that the Lord would relieve physical suffering and spend very little time praying that God would bring spiritual sight.

That's a wrong priority. We need to pray earnestly for our friends and our family and our community that their eyes would be open to see the wonders of Jesus. Because that will fit them for a world where there is no suffering or pain or death.

The second implication, though, is that spiritual pride is the great enemy of faith. This, I think, is just worth underlining as we finish. Look again at verse 41.

Let me read it to you again. Jesus said, Like I said before, this is all about admitting blindness.

You could clarify the verse by saying it like this. Jesus says, This is the problem for the Pharisees.

[26 : 56] The Pharisees turn to the man born blind and say, You're steeped in sin. Right? But the fact is, they are. And the sin that they are steeped in, the sin that we are all by nature steeped in, that we won't admit, is that we claim we can see when we can't.

And Jesus wants to see just the ridiculousness of this. If you're blind but claim you can see, what happens? You stumble and fall. You crash into things. You break things and come unstuck. Worst danger is ahead of you.

But if you'll admit you're blind, then you can receive the help that you need. And so it is spiritually. The truth is that you will not come to Jesus. You will not believe in him.

You will not receive spiritual life from him until you admit that without him you're blind. This is why step one to becoming a Christian is always to admit that you need a savior.

Owning your own sin. Seeing your own blindness is what you need to do. In a sense, that's all the man born blind does, isn't it? Right? The only thing he brings to Jesus is his blindness.

[28 : 05] And he receives sight. So again, I need to ask you this morning, the passage is asking all of us, have you seen that about yourself? Have you seen that you are a man born blind?

A woman born blind? That you need Jesus to open your eyes that you might see who he is. And that the first step to receiving that sight is to admit, I'm blind.

And to see, perhaps for the first time, that God is so committed to you recognizing that you're blind, that he will permit things in your life that will make you see it.

You know, the question isn't really so much the one we started with, is it? You know, we started with the question, you know, where is the good God in the midst of suffering? But actually, we see that suffering can help us see him more clearly.

I have a really good friend whose sister died in her early 30s from AIDS in a country in East Africa. She contracted AIDS from her husband who had lied to her about his sexual past and who throughout their relationship was consistently unfaithful to her.

[29 : 18] She died childless in a lot of discomfort and largely in poverty as well. My friend and I, we were sitting in the park together, just almost just in quiet, sitting, wondering why it happened.

And really, in one of those kind of just epiphany moments, he turned to me and he said, you know what? Here's the thing about my sister. She knew Jesus way better than I did. And I said to you, why do you think that was?

And he said, well, Jesus was faithful to her. Jesus never let her down. Jesus was always with her. Jesus was her promised savior. And it was like we realized for the first time that her intimacy with the Lord Jesus was not contradicted by her suffering, but it was in the middle of it that she encountered the Lord Jesus.

Jesus, not with eyes of flesh, but with spiritual sight that God gave her. Jesus was her faithful friend. He was with her, close by her.

And so he can be for you and me this morning. Let me pray as we close. Perhaps just take a moment of quiet for you to pray in your own heart.

[30 : 39] Heavenly Father, we thank you that Jesus can open the eyes of the blind.

We thank you that for many of us in this room, our experience has been that Jesus has opened our eyes, that we might see you and trust you and love you and turn from our sin.

We're sorry, Lord, that at times we're so stubborn we won't admit that we need you. Please have mercy on us and forgive us. And please we pray, might we be a church that sees this need for spiritual sight as the great need in our community, in our world, that we might commit ourselves to the work of God, your work, in bringing the news of someone who can open the eyes of the blind and who loves to do it.

So we thank you for the friend we have in Jesus and pray in his name. Amen.