

“What Did You Do?”

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¹As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

⁸The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” ¹⁰But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” ¹²They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” ¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. ¹⁷So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.”

¹⁸The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” ²⁰His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” ²²His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. ²³Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

²⁴So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.” ²⁵He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” ²⁶They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” ²⁷He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?”

²⁸Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” ³⁰The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³²Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” (John 9:1-33)

This whole story starts with a misconception – a faulty assumption that we often make. Jesus and the disciples are out on the road, and they pass a man who is obviously blind. The disciples all start pondering this man’s misfortune. Maybe they started by wondering how it happened, or perhaps when it happened. As the readers we are told he



was “blind from birth,” but unless he had a sign around his neck saying “I have been blind from birth,” I’m not sure how they could have known that. But it didn’t take them long to move beyond the what, the how, and the when and get to the big question: why? Why is this man so unlucky? Why is he burdened with this curse? And that is the answer they really want answered: **whose fault is this?**

That question is the misconception – the faulty assumption of assuming fault. If something goes wrong, we immediately start trying to figure out whose fault it is, because, come on, it has to be **someone’s** fault, right? Maybe this blind guy had done something negligent or malicious. Or maybe it was his parents. But somewhere along the line, somebody messed up or God would not have punished this man. So, instead of looking upon this man with compassion, they shook their heads and wondered, “What did you do?”

It’s the same thing that Job’s friend was doing in the passage we heard a while ago. In the span of just one day, the faithful and respected Job loses almost everything -- his livestock, his sheep, and his camels are stolen by traveling raiders, his hired hands and servants are killed, and then a windstorm comes and knocks down his house with his family inside. Every one of his children perishes in the rubble. And then, in his deep grief, Job is afflicted with loathsome sores all over his body. And the only thing Job’s friends can think of to say is to ask, “What did you do?” Eliphaz in particular says, “Come on, Job. These things don’t happen to innocent people. Evil things happen to evil people. Those who plow iniquity reap the same.”

In other words, “This has to be **your fault**, Job. It doesn’t make any sense otherwise. You must have done something to deserve all of these bad things. So, what did you do?”

I actually have some sympathy for old Eliphaz, even if he was not the most empathetic friend, because we all do what he did to some extent. When we are confronted with something painful or tragic that is difficult to understand, we often begin by asking **why** it happened. We look for a cause, because that’s the way the world works. A rock starts rolling down the mountain because I kicked it. Cancer develops in a lung because it was filled with cigarette smoke every day for 20 years. An accident happens because he was texting while driving. Cause and effect.

And then, close on the heels of the causal questions, come the moral questions. They are actually more like statements -- the “should-a” statements. She “shoulda” known better. He never “shoulda” been there in the first place. I “shouldn’a” kicked that rock. We have now moved beyond trying to understand. Now we are trying to blame. We are looking for fault.

And sometimes we bring God into it. We can even say the Bible pushes us in that direction. In the Book of Deuteronomy, as Moses gives the covenant law to the nation of Israel, he frames that law with a simple warning. “*Today I am giving you a choice,*” Moses says. “*You may choose the blessing or the curse. You will get the blessing if you listen and obey the commands of the LORD your God that I have told you today. But you will get the curse if you refuse to listen and obey the commands of the LORD your God.*”¹ In other words, if you do good things, good things will happen to you. And if you do bad things, bad things are going to happen to you. In Deuteronomy, it’s just that simple.

The problem is that the world is rarely that simple. As the people of God tried to live by this simple code, it did not take them long to figure that this formula does not always

¹ Deuteronomy 11:26-28.

work. Bad things happen to good people, and sometimes the wicked prosper. Books that come later in the Old Testament – books like Job, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, and Proverbs – talk about these struggles. They lament out loud that the cause and effect is rarely as simple as Deuteronomy suggests.

But there is still a part of us that thinks that it should. Because when bad things happen to good people, our first thought is, “That’s not fair.” It offends our sense of justice. It gives us comfort to think that an uncertain world can be made certain – that those who do good will be rewarded, and those who are evil will be punished. And even though we can tell ourselves that the world isn’t fair, we want it to be. So, when a bad thing happens to a good person, we reflexively stand with Job’s friends and wonder, “What did you do?”

Interestingly, Jesus does not play that game. Jesus knows what his disciples are thinking about this blind man – that somebody must have done something bad for this bad thing to have happened to him, because it has to be somebody’s fault. Cause and effect. There must be something he shoulda done, or something he shouldn’a done. But Jesus is not at all interested in assigning blame. *“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,”* Jesus answered. *“He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.”*

Taking this important cue from Jesus, when we are confronted with a tragedy that we cannot understand, let’s try to move beyond the question, “What did you do?” Instead, let’s focus on a more hopeful question: ***“How is God at work in this situation?”*** Or, asked another way, ***“How is God being revealed?”***

I will start by crossing off one possible answer to this question. I do not believe that God afflicted that man with blindness in order to teach him or anyone else a lesson. Can I be sure about that? No. But it just does not seem consistent with the nature of a God whose very name is love to punish an innocent person just to make a point. I see God not as One who smites, but as One who heals and redeems the smitten, One who stands with the afflicted, One who shares their suffering, and One who carries a burden that could not otherwise be carried.

No, I think we need to look in other directions, for other signs of God in this difficult situation. What I offer here are not answers, but they are possibilities...

While other people were looking for blame and fault, all Jesus saw was a person who needed help. While others cursed the man’s darkness, Jesus lit a candle and brought him light. Maybe God was revealed in that...

When we try to blame someone else for something that goes wrong, maybe a little bit of what we are doing is trying to assure ourselves that our own hands are clean. But Jesus wasn’t worried about that. On the contrary, Jesus spat in the dirt, and made mud with his hands, and spread the mud on the man’s eyes. Jesus was not afraid to get his hands dirty to help a person in need. Maybe God is revealed in that...

When Jesus knew that the Pharisees would talk about a good deed like it was a sin, that they would try to trip him up on a technicality because they cared more about religious rites than the rule of love, Jesus never blinked. He healed what was broken in spite of the danger, and let his light shine in the darkness. Maybe God is revealed in that...

The story of the healing of a man born blind begins with a mistake we make all the time -- the faulty assumption of assuming fault. But Jesus wasn’t interested in pointing fingers. So, when we come upon a person who is broken or in pain, maybe we should not be so focused on assigning blame. When we encounter a brother or sister in need, maybe the question should be, “What can we do?”

If that is the question, perhaps God's works might be revealed in us. **Amen.**