

SCRIPTURE

John 9:1-7

As he walked 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 Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. ⁴ We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

⁶ When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷ saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam”. Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

MESSAGE – PICK UP YOUR CROSS

Who sinned?

That’s an interesting question. It’s also the wrong question to ask.

This question is only about assigning blame. The man is still blind, the questions hasn’t accomplished anything of value – therefore the question is self-serving and meaningless.

The question is a weak attempt to reinforce the idea that the universe is fair; that people get what they deserve.

Quite clearly that worldview is a delusion - bad things happen to good people all the time. Bad things are happening right now.

Do people deserve it? I don’t know – maybe some of them do. Certainly we all contribute to our own suffering, but I don’t know that I’d say that anyone deserves suffering.

The point is, the universe is not fair in the way that we would determine fairness – and the sooner we come to grips with that the better off we will be.

Actually, the who sinned question is a subset of a certain kind or class of question called theodicy questions – how to reconcile a good God with a world that clearly contains evil.

Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? Why does god allow evil to exist? Perhaps some people ask this question honestly, but I suspect that most don’t. Except in rare occasions this is not even a real question; it’s an accusation.

Why is there evil?

Natural disasters are not in themselves evil. They may produce suffering, but there is no intent behind a bear, or a tsunami, or a virus – they’re tragic, but they’re not evil.

Human beings are the authors of evil – all of us. We’ve all committed evil acts – not one of us is good, not one of us is pure. If a good God should not allow evil, then are we asking for God to step in and intervene whenever we want to do something wrong? Miraculously stop us? Control our thoughts?

When we ask why God allows evil, what we’re really asking is why God allows us.

Why would a gracious God create a universe in which a twisted, evil creature like me is allowed to exist?

Is that really what we want to ask God?

There's a pointless, self-defeating, nihilistic question if I've ever heard one.

I can't see that question leading anywhere positive.

Confronting and questioning God about how he has constructed the universe isn't going to get us anywhere.

The who sinned question isn't any better. We're just looking to point the finger at someone so that we don't have to do anything – we can safely slough it off as someone else's problem.

There is a difference between blame and responsibility. Asking questions like who sinned, or why does God allow evil allows us to avoid taking action. After all, if your condition is your own fault, or God's, then there is no need for me to step up and do anything about it.

This is why we say the poor are lazy, and why we ask rape victims what they were wearing. If we can convince ourselves that they bear the fault of their own circumstance then we have no obligation to help.

But assigning blame doesn't fix the problem. Picture this: a poorly managed company goes out of business; the workers pensions have been lost and the property is an environmental catastrophe. We can assign blame, maybe even put the CEO in jail for a while.

But we are still left with hundreds of families with no income and no savings, along with a patch of poisoned earth. The one who holds the blame has no ability to take responsibility for restitution.

That is true across the board. The one at fault is not able right the wrong. It's the story of humanity. As the only authors of evil on the planet, we are unable to clean up the messes we make. Our sins accumulate and we can't eradicate them.

That's why it was necessary for God to take responsibility for our failures; God through Jesus made a path for us that leads to reconciliation and restoration. God did for us what we couldn't.

Where we should rightly have been blamed and condemned, God chose to take upon himself the responsibility for correcting the situation. Pointing the finger only adds to suffering; God opted to bring relief instead.

If we are to learn from this, then instead of accusing those suffering of causing their own downfall, which really is quite sadistic – imagine telling someone that not only is their life an unmitigated disaster, but that it's all their own fault – rather than asking who sinned to cause this misery, here's a better question.

Jesus, this man has been blind since birth.

What can be done about it?

Can you do something?

Can we do something?

These are questions that can have a positive impact – these are constructive questions that have the potential to lead to life and prosperity, rather than conviction and damnation.

When we move from asking 'whose fault this' is to 'what can I do to help' we release blame and pick up responsibility. We cease contributing to the problem and start becoming part of the solution.

This is called picking up our cross. When Jesus told us to pick up our crosses, he didn't mean that we were to suffer unnecessarily as though suffering itself is something God wants.

Jesus was innocent of all sin. He didn't cause the suffering of anyone else, so by our reasoning he didn't deserve to suffer himself. When Jesus picked up his own cross it was symbolic of his carrying a burden that was not his to carry. He should not have suffered, and yet that was his fate. Bad things will happen to good people; there is an element of arbitrariness in the universe; life will not always be fair.

Now, we can rail against fate - or God - shaking our fist at the sky and cursing the nature of being. We can allow our misfortune to make us bitter and resentful – even hopeless. But all that does is add misery on top of misfortune – it makes the situation worse.

Jesus picked up his cross, and bids us do the same. To pick up your cross is to voluntarily accept the conditions of your own existence, to acknowledge that there is a capriciousness to this world; to acquiesce to the fact that the price of your presence on this planet is unpredictability.

Picking up our crosses is our act of aligning ourselves with reality as it actually is, rather than how we would like it to be. Instead of foisting problems off on other people or God, we can start taking responsibility for fixing up our little area of the world. As we do, we will recognize that when we participate properly in life we will improve things, rather than making things worse.

This is called building God's Kingdom – being constructive, not deconstructive.

So, to wrap it all up and give us something to consider this week. In light of the turmoil surrounding us today, we might be tempted to ask – who sinned? Whose fault is all this?

Open air meat markets? Supply chain globalization? Our overly mobile populations? Lack of preparedness? Trump? Is it Trump?

Not the right questions. Not constructive questions.

Instead, let's ask 'what can be done? God, what can you do? God, what can I do? What can we do in our little corner of the world to alleviate suffering? How are we going to build God's Kingdom?'

These are the questions to ask. These are life-giving questions.

Since we are gathering in a different format this morning, I suggest that we make use of this technology. You can add comments below this video, so I'll ask you to do just that. Comment on some of the ways in which you have picked up your cross this week – ways you have shouldered a burden; taken responsibility to improve a situation that you didn't create. Every one of us has dozens of ways that we have grown God's kingdom and shown love to the least of these. Post your comments below and let's remind ourselves of the good in this world and demonstrate that we are a city on a hill, a light in the window, witnesses in Norfolk to the transforming love of Christ.

I speak to you this morning in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.