

# Rethinking God's Providence

## The Story of the Man Born Blind

John 9:1-17, 35-41

Rev. Todd B. Freeman

College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa March 30, 2014

Throughout human history there has been a tendency to connect tragedy, suffering, and hardships in life with some higher divine cause or purpose. It's the old, "It all happens for a reason," approach in trying to understand the difficulties in life. When things go wrong, many turn first to the thought that God is punishing us for some sin we may have committed. I know from which I speak, for that's what I used to believe.

This notion has been around for thousands of years, and is, in fact, built into scripture itself. Exodus 20:5, just one of several references, states, "...I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me..."

Feel free to call me a doubter of biblical inerrancy and a rejecter of a literal approach to interpreting the Bible, because I personally don't believe a word of that Old Testament verse! Do we really need any more evidence than this passage alone to understand that **these ancient scriptural texts were indeed influenced by limited and sometimes misguided human understandings of the nature and character of God?**

One of the reasons I am such a big fan of the Gospel of John is that the author, albeit through his own theological perspective, tries to correct or at least amend some of these ancient notions about God. The rather long story we heard this morning from John 9 is an excellent example.

Jesus and his disciples are walking along and they see a man who has been blind since birth. The disciples ask Jesus the following question: "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" **The assumption being made by the disciples is that there is a very real connection and link between suffering (evidently including birth abnormalities) and God's punishment for sin.** Underlying this assumption, one that is still all too common today, is that **all misfortune is somehow deserved, and that all human tragedy and suffering is the result of our or someone else's sin.**

In the case of the man who was born blind, the disciples even ask if it is a result of *his* sin – as if an unborn baby could have somehow sinned while still in its mother's womb. That this was even considered a theological possibility should be appalling to us. But if the blame doesn't lie with the baby then at least it must be the fault of the parents.

**Notice the tendency of believing that if something goes wrong in life, then someone or something has to be to blame.** For some people, it's always someone else's fault. Perhaps worse, many of us blame ourselves. If you sometimes fall into this trap (and I would suspect that we all do), then I encourage you to remember Jesus' response to his disciples: **"Neither this man nor his parents sinned"** (John 9:3).

Jesus puts to rest the notion that this man's physical disability and suffering are caused by sin. What Jesus ultimately reveals, and I am now a strong believer in this, is that **God is not the cause and author of our suffering**. Instead, I have come to believe that when we do suffer, God's love and grace can somehow be experienced and revealed through our adversity, like through the compassion shared by a loved one or friend. This theological understanding was certainly the case with the man who was born blind.

The Apostle Paul has a similar understanding of this when he states in **Romans 8:28**, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purposes." (NRSV). Other ancient Greek manuscripts read, "God makes all things work together for good." Please note that **Paul does not teach that God causes all things to happen. Rather, in whatever does happen to us in life God is right there with us, and can somehow bring good out of that suffering – whether we can recognize it at the time or not**. But as far as tragedy or suffering is concerned, I believe that it is not caused or allowed by God in order to teach us some kind of lesson – even though we can indeed learn something through that suffering.

This does bring up, however, the **often-thorny theological issue called providence**. Referring to the work of **John Calvin**, to whom we Presbyterians trace our theological roots back 500 years, he affirms that God "watches over the order of nature set by himself." Calvin went on to declare, "**God so attends to the regulation of individual events, and they all so proceed from his set plan, that nothing takes place by chance**" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.16.4).

That conviction is reflected in the 1563 document entitled the Heidelberg Catechism, written toward the beginning of the Protestant Reformation), which is one of the eleven historical creeds in our Presbyterian *Book of Confessions*. In answering a question dealing with the first line of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth," it states "**whatever evil he [God] sends upon me in this troubled life he will turn to my good**, for he is able to do it, being almighty God, as is determined to do it, being a faithful Father" (4.026).

**It's clear that lodged deep within our denomination's history is the belief that providence includes the understanding that God is intimately involved in all things that happen. This is the inevitable conclusion to the theological premise that God is in control of all things in the universe**. There are many Presbyterians today who hold tightly to this level of God's control over everything that happens.

But let me ask you in all seriousness, **do you really believe, as declared in the Heidelberg Catechism, that it is God who actually sends evil upon you and me?** Speaking from a progressive Christianity perspective, especially given the horrors around the world over the past century, **it is very difficult, if not impossible, to affirm that all events proceed from God's set plan**.

**I fully realize, of course, that this perspective throws a wrench into the orthodox and traditionally held belief that God controls all things, either by direct cause or by intentionally allowing things to happen for some divine purpose. It reflects that conundrum faced by many Christians today, who still want to believe in an omnipotent all-powerful God, yet at the same time question whether God actually intervenes in ways that either defy the laws of nature, or allow evil to occur for some divine future outcome**.

Saying that, perhaps the story of Jesus' healing of the man born blind may help us think through some of these perplexing questions concerning providence. First of all,

**this story in John 9 does NOT say that all events reveal God's works, only that in this specific individual, this particular human being, God's work – God's providence – is revealed.** Neither this story, nor any other biblical story, should ever be used to explain tragedies like devastating tornados, the Holocaust, the invasion of another country, and the like. As mentioned earlier, however, this story does assume that people make a preconceived connection between sin and suffering.

An important side note must be made, however. Even though Jesus shows us that not all suffering is caused by sin, sin can and does cause suffering – which can take the form of spiritual, emotional, or at times, physical suffering. Our sinful attitudes and behaviors – for example, forms of abuse directed towards ourselves or others – may indeed cause suffering.

Given that warning, however, it can also be stated that not all suffering in life is the direct result of sin. This is a very important distinction. More importantly, **there is indeed a monumental difference between suffering the consequences of our or others' thoughts and actions, and ascribing that suffering to be the direct result of God's judgment and punishment.**

Let's not forget that the author of John tells his stories to make profound theological declarations. Meaning, there is a metaphorical understanding of being blind that goes way beyond the understanding of literally not being able to see with our eyes, which is what we have been focusing on up to this point. For this gospel writer, in this particular story, **the biggest issue isn't our sinfulness, but rather our spiritual blindness. And for him, that meant not recognizing who Jesus is.**

In the case of the author of the Gospel of John, **spiritual blindness was a state of being that could be overcome with God's help. Speaking perhaps for many who call themselves progressive Christians today, setting aside or at least reevaluating ancient church dogma has been part of the cure for spiritual blindness. Therefore, I maintain the right of those in the progressive Christian movement to question and even doubt the theological assumptions of the past.** Or as stated best in the hymn Amazing Grace, "I once was blind, but now I see."

Go forth this day to question and ponder all these things for yourself. And remember the lessons from today's Gospel reading: perhaps we need to rethink our understanding of God's providence, and sometimes the problem is our sight – spiritual sight – not our sin.

Amen.

Resources:  
George W. Stroup, *Feasting on the Word*