

John 53 – Whose Sin?

07/27/2025

Scripture 1: (Jn. 9:1-12 ESV)

As he [Jesus] passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.

The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?"

Some said, "It is he."

Others said, "No, but he is like him."

He kept saying, "I am the man."

So they said to him, "Then how were your eyes opened?"

He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' So I went and washed and received my sight."

They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

Scripture 2: (Deut. 24:16 ESV)

Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.

Scripture 3: (Exod. 34:6-7 ESV)

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

Sermon:

Returning to our study through John's Gospel, we will recall that this incident occurs during the five-ish months between the Feast of Tabernacles and the Feast of Passover, just before Jesus's trial and crucifixion; more specifically, soon before the Feast of Dedication, or what we commonly know as Hanukkah (John 10:22). On this particular day, after Jesus and His disciples had left the Temple in Jerusalem (John 8:59), they were likely somewhere on the main thoroughfare known as the "Pilgrim's Way". This road led up to the Temple and was used by devout Jews on pilgrimage, having easy access for ritual cleansing at any one of Jerusalem's countless *mikvaoth*, ritual baths.

"As he [Jesus] passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'"

This question that the disciples asked Jesus was more important than we often immediately realize. It is important because of the attitude and assumptions that it reveals.

So long as religion has been practiced by humanity, there are certain truths about life which have been universally affirmed and, about which even Christians will agree:

- that "sin", however it is defined, is something bad and deserving of punishment; and,
- that God, or "the gods", will always punish sin, especially sins that are committed against them.
 - King Agamemnon, when he sinned against Artemis, sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia as a propitiation to appease the goddess's wrath and allow his fleet to sail against Troy¹.
 - Odysseus, after he blinded the cyclops, Polyphemus, was punished by Poseidon, leading to his lengthy journey².
 - King Uzziah, when he entered into the LORD's Temple to offer a sacrifice of incense like a priest, was immediately inflicted with leprosy. He was rendered ritually unclean, unable to enter the sanctuary for worship, and he became unfit to reign as king of Judah (2 Chronicles 26:16-21).

This same attitude and core assumptions were made by Job's friends when they came to comfort him (Job 2:11-13); when they tried to convince him of his apparent guilt and obvious sinfulness.

- Eliphaz declared, *"Remember: who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same."* (Job 4:7-8 ESV).
- Bildad asked him, *"Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right? If your children have sinned against him, he has delivered them into the hand of their transgression. If you will seek God and plead with the Almighty for mercy, if you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you and restore your rightful habitation."* (Job 8:3-6 ESV).
- While Zophar accused him, *"For you say, 'My doctrine is pure, and I am clean in God's eyes.' But oh, that God would speak and open his lips to you, and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom! For he is manifold in understanding. Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves."* (Job 11:4-6 ESV)

This is a worldly doctrine. The world teaches us that every disaster or human misfortune is blamed upon divinity's anger, while every blessing and success is attributed to divinity's favor. Thus works of religion became the means whereby divine anger could assuaged and divine favor secured, instead. Every religion became a

¹ Aeschylus *Agamemnon*; Sophocles *Electra*

² Homer *The Odyssey*

system regulating spiritual transactions, “If I do X, then I get Y from god”. Even within our modern, secular culture, this attitude still remains popular.

- Good things happen to good people.
- Bad things happen to bad people.
- If bad things happen to you, then you must therefore, be a bad person.

How many TV shows or movies have a scene where a character tries to bargain with God, somehow? There are too many varied examples to list even a few, but the basic idea goes like this, “God, if You get me out of this, then I will go to church; I will give money to the poor; or, I will try to be a good (or better) person.”

Yet this attitude is utterly wrong because, aside from simply being unbiblical, the core presupposition of all such religious systems assumes that humanity has anything that God needs. It assumes that humanity is able to give God something He desires which we alone can give. It assumes that we might choose to give Him what we all already owe Him, like our obedience, fidelity, and love. Worst of all, it assumes that God is beholden to or dependent upon humanity's will and preferences. Every example of transactional religion is wrong because it assumes that humanity has authority and power over divinity. It assumes that humanity is greater than the divinity they are petitioning. It is therefore, completely illogical and unreasonable since:

- If God needs something that only humanity could give Him, then humanity is greater than God.
- If God's activity is dependent upon our choices and will, then God is not sovereign.
- If humanity is somehow greater than God, then why do we need God?

But, just as people wrongly believe that every good thing which happens to them happens because they have somehow pleased God, so too people wrongly believe that every bad thing that happens to them happens because of something specific they have done to anger God. Both ideas are false and unjustifiable by Scripture. That kind of attitude demonstrates that we neither understand who God is nor what the difference is between justice and mercy.

Instead of being related to justice, the question that the disciples asked Jesus concerns the LORD's providence. Jesus answered the disciple's question, saying “*It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.*”. This man was not born blind because of anyone's or any one particular sin.

First, Jesus rightly pointed out that every particular human misfortune can not always be directly correlated to any particular sin. However, He also did not deny that sometimes particular negative effects are the direct product of particular sinful causes.

- The sinful cause of Cain murdering Abel directly caused Cain's exile (Genesis 4:1-16).
- The sinful cause of Jephthah's vow to the LORD directly caused the unfortunate effect of him sinfully offering his daughter as a burnt sacrifice (Judges 11:30-40).
- The sinful cause of King David's unjustified census directly provoked the LORD to inflict Israel with a plague (2 Samuel 24:1-25).
- The sinful cause of Herod/Agrippa's vanity and his acceptance of worship, directly provoked his death (Acts 12:20-23; Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 19:343-351).

While Jesus denied that direct correlation between a sinful cause and its effect was an absolute rule, every negative consequence of sin may always be attributed to Adam's sin in the Garden, the first sinful cause.

Second, Jesus reminded them that, according to God's Law, in Deuteronomy 24:16, "*Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.*". He proves their assumption false. If this man had been born blind as a punishment for sin, then it could only have been for his own sin, not for any sin of his parents since only the guilty party could be punished for their specific sins.

However, there was an important exception to that rule: the system of vicarious, substitute atonement contained within the ceremonial law of the Mosaic covenant (Leviticus 16). Technically, this system is not an exception because the animals were actually not being punished, since the sinner offered them as a propitiatory sacrifice, but they still suffered the deserved penalty for the person's guilt. Whereas Jesus, through His sacrificial death on the cross, graciously gave Himself as our substitute. While the people offered the death of an animal as their substitute, Jesus willingly chose to assume our penalty. He took it upon Himself, offering Himself in our place: forensically imputing our sin-guilt to Himself as He also imputed His righteous innocence to us.

Although only the guilty person could justly be punished for particular sins, sometimes the effect of God's judgment against sin was carried into later generations. When God declared His character to Moses on Mount Sinai, in Exodus 34:6-7, the LORD passed by him and proclaimed, "*The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.*".

But, although these two pronouncements of God are in tension: "*Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.*" and "...*visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation...*"; they do not contradict one other.

The commandment of Deuteronomy concerns punishment, while the proclamation of Exodus concerns the derivative effects which follow punishment. The idea expressed within this tension is often called "generational sin", describing the lasting effects or lingering consequences of an ancestor's sin. {See also Exodus 20:5, Deuteronomy 5:9, and Ezekiel 18 for other examples of this tension being expressed.}

Although death is the ultimate sanction for sin (Ezekiel 18:20), there is a much worse punishment that people experience for their sin: the removal of God's gracious restraint against our sin. That is the kind of punishment which Paul describes in Romans 1. God giving sinners over to their sin and allowing them to be ruled by the worst of their sinful inclinations and perversions. God withholds His grace and, in judgment, does not restrain our sinfulness. Although this most effects the sinner, the worsening of their sinfulness and depravity negatively impacts those around them, such as their spouse and children. Consider substance abusers: not only do they destroy their biologic life alongside their relational life but, in doing so, they also harm their dependents. Then, after they are gone {whether having died, been institutionalized, gone to jail or else-wise abandoned them}, if they do not process the trauma well, their dependents have a distinct probability of following their example by continuing the cycle of self destruction.

This effect is what was meant by "*visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children...to the third and fourth generation.*". During the reign of Judah's later kings, their idolatry and sinful wickedness steadily worsened. First, they worshiped their idols at the "*high places*" (2 Kings 16:4) upon the surrounding mountains. Then, they worshiped their idols at altars which they had established "*in every corner of Jerusalem.*" (2 Chronicles 28:24). Finally, they brought their idols into the LORD's Temple and worshiped them there (Ezekiel 8). Each generation built upon the sins of their forebears, joining them in their guilt and becoming guilty themselves. They saw the rebellion of their fathers, learned from it, and worsened it. Although some kings repented of their father's sins

and returned to the LORD, like Uzziah, and others repented of their own sinfulness themselves, like Manasseh, wickedness and idolatry always returned and increased. So, when the LORD sent the Babylonians against Judah in judgment, all were judged and punished for their own sin.

Third, Jesus explained that the man's blindness was neither his nor his parent's fault. His blindness was not the effect of any particular sin. This man was born blind for a particular and intentional purpose. This man's blindness, his disability and all of the suffering or misfortune he experienced on account of it, was somehow meaningful and good. His blindness had divine importance and inestimable value because, rather than being the consequential effect of sin, his blindness would become the righteous cause of a miraculous effect, "...*that the works of God might be displayed in him.*". His blindness, in the mercy of its removal, would become the cause of an increase of God's glory.

To rightly understand both the disciple's question and Jesus's answer, we need to consider the doctrine of Providence. Although we may be tempted to believe that God's Providence is simply the Christian's replacement of the pagan's idea of "good luck", it is far greater than that. Divine Providence is neither morally good nor morally evil, while it is a "good" that comes from the only good God. Providence, as a general concept, is actually morally neutral.

- Providence was what Job had in mind when he faithfully declared, "*The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.*" (Job 1:21 ESV).
- Providence was what Paul had in mind when he proclaimed our hope, "...*that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*" (Rom. 8:28 ESV)

Concerning the doctrine of Providence, the Westminster Confession of Faith (5.5) teaches us that,

The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes leave, for a season, his own children to manifold temptations, and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and, to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends.

Providence is neither good nor evil but, we each may choose whether we receive it positively or negatively. Providence is also always a gracious good from the LORD because He provides it according to His sovereign will, for His eternally good purposes, without regard for our degree of deservedness.

- The punishments we might receive as divine chastisement for our sins are providential mercies because, whatever that punishment may be, it is much less than we deserve (Genesis 2:17; Romans 6:23).
- The natural blessings we receive as divine beneficence, like the sunshine or rain, are providential graces because everybody receives them and has access to them without any regard for their moral status (Matthew 5:45).

Both types of examples are God's work on display. They are works which should lead us to know the LORD, to love God, and to justly give Him praise and thanksgiving.

- Even the negative things we experience, which are unrelated to anything that we have done, are providential. Such sufferings are inflicted upon us to encourage us and to help train us to more closely rest in the LORD and better depend upon His providential grace, instead of our own strength and efforts (2 Corinthians 1:8-10).
- The things we experience, whether we consider them as being positive or negative, will providentially warn us away from sin towards the righteousness of Christ, instead (2 Corinthians 12:7-9).

No matter what, the proper response to each example always is to bless, praise, and glorify God for the providential work He does, just like Job. “*Blessed be the name of the LORD.*”

This blindness, that the man was born with, was a work of God's Providence and the miraculous healing that Jesus was about to perform was also a work of God's Providence.

We might be tempted to suggest that if God inflicted blindness upon this man just to demonstrate His power: the power “to do” and “to undo”, to either inflict blindness or to heal blindness; then that would be a terribly unjust, wicked, and evil thing to do. However, lest we forget and misunderstand, although he was born blind, this man was blessed with life as well as a family who took care of him. Even unable to see, this man was just as blessed as many other people and, he was more blessed than some others. Being born blind, the LORD just simply had withheld the blessing of sight from him; a gracious blessing that we all take for granted until it begins to dim, fade, or is taken away from us.

We would be sinfully wrong to suggest that God did something unrighteous by not giving this man sight at birth. It would be sinfully wrong to suggest that God was somehow unjustly punishing this man by making him blind, before he even had the opportunity to sin. We would be forgetting that none of us deserve to see; none of us have a right to sight. Our eyesight is the gracious gift us God, just as is our taste, our hearing, and our sense of smell. No one has the right to call God unjust in relation to this man. When Jesus said that the man was not born blind because of either his or his parent's sin, He did not justify them as sinless. Jesus did not declare them legally righteous. Rather, He merely affirmed that the man's blindness was not the consequence of anyone's particular sin. Even if his blindness was a punishment for his sinfulness, then it would still be a just punishment because we are each guilty of sin and deserving punishment. Everyone is born guilty because of Adam's transgression and the sinful corruption of our nature that is its lingering consequence.

Fourth, Jesus next explained part of God's will concerning why this man was born blind, because “*We must work the works of him who sent me...*”. Jesus needed to do what the LORD had sent Him to do, because the LORD had prepared all of these miraculous works for Him to do, in advance. This was not the consequence of an Arminian's understanding of divine foreknowledge, such that God saw this blind man in the future and therefore, sent Jesus to heal him. Instead, this was divine fore-ordination, such that God the Father knew about the blind man because He had decreed that this man would be born blind, born without the blessing of sight, because He was sending God the Son to providentially heal him and demonstrate His divine power and authority. The Apostle Paul expresses this same sentiment similarly in Ephesians 2, when he tells us that “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*” (Eph. 2:8-9 ESV) before explaining the purpose for our salvation, “*For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*” (Eph. 2:10 ESV).

- The man was born blind so that the mercy of God, in Jesus Christ, could be displayed through this miraculous healing.
- The Elect have been saved, individual Christians are saved, so that likewise we may do good works of mercy, as we follow Christ.

Fifth and lastly, on a spiritual level, Jesus was also emphasizing and demonstrating, in a practical manner, more of what He meant when He earlier claimed, “*I am the light of the world.*” (Jn. 8:12 ESV). Jesus explained, “*We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.*”. I feel confident suggesting that His disciples did not really understand what Jesus meant at the time, especially since many Christians will likely disagree over it. I think it was yet another foreshadowing of His approaching death and resurrection.

- While Jesus, God the Son, was living and incarnate upon the earth, humanity was living in the spiritual day time because the “*light of life*” (John 8:12) was shining among them. It was easier to do good works by following the example of Jesus while He was obviously there, present and watching.
- Then, spiritual night time fell over humanity when Christ died upon the cross on that Sabbath eve, and while He rested within the tomb. Jesus's disciples scattered and fled. Everything around them was dark and frightening. They hid themselves out of fear of the world.
- But on the third day, on the first day of the week, when Jesus rose again, the light began to shine once more. Then, after He ascended into heaven to reign, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to fill His disciples with His light; to carry it with them and let it shine throughout the whole world.

Now, dwelling inside of each and every Christian, Christ's light still shines in the world. His light is how and why Christians do our many good works of mercy and grace. One of the many ways in which God works His gracious Providence in the world, is through Christian works of love, through our obedience. Even while Jesus reigns in heaven, He is still also “*in the world*” because He is living within us.

Then, after “*Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.*”. So, finally, by the merciful and miraculous Providence of God, the man received the gift of sight. Hallelujah, amen!

What should we take away from this part of the story?

First, we should remember to not allow the negative things that happen in life to make us doubt God's love for us. Nor should we assume that we are ever feeling the full force of His wrath, because we are not. But, we should examine ourselves and look for any indwelling sin that we are needing to repent of, and then do so. Repent, ask God's forgiveness, believe and trust that Christ has paid your penalty, and then “*Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.*” (Jn. 5:14 ESV). We should also look ahead and consider our future and immediate surroundings to see whether there are certain temptations or opportunities to sin approaching, which we may try to preemptively avoid.

Second, we must refrain from self righteously building ourselves up whenever we see the misfortunes of others. We may not use it as an excuse or opportunity to declare that God is punishing them for something specific, because we truly cannot know. If we do, then we would be sinfully judgmental as we condemn without knowledge and understanding, or pity and mercy. Rather, we should take those opportunities and pray for them. We should take advantage of those opportunities to offer them our help, as loving support and care for our neighbor. We should also be mindful and consider whether their present misfortunes might be also providentially intended as a warning for us (such as how the decline and fall of the Northern Kingdom should have been heeded as a warning to Judah; see Ezekiel 16:44-52).

Third, the answer to the question of “Whose sin am I suffering for?” is always “My own sin”, because the LORD will not impose punishment upon someone for the sin of another. Each of our sufferings are deserved and just, even as they are tempered with mercy, because we are all sinners needing God's grace and forgiveness. We each have sins that we need to repent of. So, asking this question should simply be the first step towards our own personal repentance.

Lastly, we need to rest in and trust God's Providence. We need to remember that, no matter how hard our sufferings might be, we deserve worse. We each deserve worse than Job. Although Job was a righteous man whose faith was in the LORD, he was still a sinner. His nature was corrupted by Adam's sin, just like everyone else. He understood, even in the midst of his sufferings, that the LORD is just and righteous; that therefore,

there must have been some holy reason for his pain. He must have deserved what was happening to him. But, Job's biggest problem really came from his insistent demand to know “Why?”.

The example of Job provides us with the best argument for why not to ask “Whose sin, or which sin, is the reason or cause of this alleged punishment?”. Job's response, after the LORD appeared to him, was “*I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me.' I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.*” (Job 42:2-6 ESV). Therefore, we should remember that since Job never received an answer to his questions, we should not expect one either; not on this side of glory anyways. We would all be much better off if we refrain from asking it.

So, let us all remember that the LORD is good and He has given us all so many blessings through His divine Providence. Let us all be satisfied and grateful that, in every circumstance, it is the LORD who gives and it is the LORD who takes away. Therefore, it is right and good that we should always praise Him, “*blessed be the name of the LORD.*” (Job 1:21 ESV).

AMEN