June 25, 2023

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WHEN THE LEAF DOES START TO WITHER

John 9

Back in the first week of February Laurie had an appointment with our dermatologist to cut a bit of basal cell carcinoma out of her ear lobe. Both of us have had previous episodes of skin cancer, so we knew it was a routine procedure. It was not a life threatening issue. It would not be pleasant, but it would also not be a huge deal. I figured we’d be at the doctor’s office an hour or two. We got a little behind so were hurrying, and in the process of rushing to get to the doctor’s office I really complicated the morning by slamming the car door shut on my right thumb. I still don’t know exactly how I managed to do that, but the pain was terrific. These days doctors tell you to rate your pain on a scale of 1 to 10. Had a doctor been there to ask me that question, I would have said, “Your scale is inadequate. A 10 doesn’t even come close to rating my pain level. On a scale of 1 to 10 I’d say it’s right around 1000.” My thumb was bleeding like it was making an attempt to pump my system dry. It was a mess. But we had to go! So we quickly taped it up and headed to the doctor’s office.

Laurie’s minor procedure proved to be more involved than we and the doctor anticipated. We ended up spending almost 5 hours there. For hours I sat in that office with my wounded thumb screaming at me as the blood soaked the bandage. It was not a fun day. That injured thumb was painful for not a day or two, but for weeks. It made my whole body less efficient. Routine tasks like tying my shoes or buttoning a shirt were beyond my ability. I needed Laurie’s help getting dressed. It cut my ability to type way down because at least for a while I had to do it mostly one handed. Playing the guitar was a problem because I couldn’t hold a pick. had to be careful to not bump my thumb on anything because it sent bolts of pain firing up my arm.

This happened when I had been struggling with the side effects of the immune therapy treatments for cancer that I had been receiving. Laurie’s recovery from her minor procedure turned out to be much more difficult than we expected. It bothered her for a week. So life around our house wasn’t all that much fun. Things have gotten better. Laurie’s ear is all healed up. The effects of the treatments I’m getting have become minimal, and my thumb is much better. It has taken a long time. It is still not completely healed, but it is not painful. However, it was a problem for months. When you go through something like that it is natural to ask, “Why, Lord? Given all that we have been going through, why did I need to slam my thumb in a car door?” It is not much help if the answer is, “Because you got in a hurry and because you are stupid.” Those things might be true, but that doesn’t help much. God could have helped me notice my thumb was in the way before I closed that door, couldn’t he? Of course, so why did that have to happen?

That is a relatively minor incident. The question of why comes up a lot when we are in pain or when we suffer, whether that suffering be physical or emotional. It is an inevitable question because everyone suffers. The question of why we suffer actually is one of theology’s toughest question. This is true for Christianity, but also for every other system of philosophy and theology. Today we are going to look at story from the life of Jesus where this issue comes up. Hopefully we will gain some perspective on how to think about and deal with suffering in the process. So the subtitle of this sermon could be, “Solving the problem of suffering in one easy lesson.” Except that’s not what I’m doing to do, because it is not possible to do that. Let’s look at this incident in John 9.

JESUS HEALED A BLIND MAN

Jesus and his followers were walking through Jerusalem when they came across a blind man. This guy was probably a young man, possibly in his teens, but also a fixture in the part of town where he likely begged for alms, for the disciples knew his story. They had seen him many times before and they knew that he had been born without the use of his eyes. They were curious about the theology behind his condition, so they asked Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

That is an attempt to understand the problem of suffering. The question is, if God is good and loving, and if he is all powerful, why is there so much suffering and pain in the world? Why are children born with birth defects at times, why is there cancer and other terrible diseases, why are there earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, fires and famines? Why do people go through so much pain? Either God is all powerful and could stop such things but chooses not to, thus is not good and loving, or he would stop them if he could, but he can’t because he is not, in fact, all powerful.

This question has been the subject of much study, debate, discussion and writing over the centuries. C. S. Lewis wrote *The Problem of Pain* and *A Grief Observed*, both of which address this question. James Dobson wrote *When God Doesn’t Make Sense*. Philip Yancey wrote *Disappointment With God*. D. A. Carson wrote *How Long, O Lord?* Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*. Sheldon Vanauken wrote *A Severe Mercy*. Gerald Sittser wrote *A Grace Disguised*. All of these and many more address in one way or another this problem of suffering.

The disciples’ question came out of an attempt to understand the problem of suffering. It was the cause and effect rationale. This bad thing happened to this man because someone deserved it. Someone had done something wrong and this was the consequence. This was the most common way for ancient Jews to get a handle on this question. It is understandable why they would have thought this way. The Old Testament is replete with sections that say God is just and treats people justly. He rewards the righteous, and punishes the wicked. He gives people the consequences they deserve.

Deuteronomy 28 promises blessings on those who obey the Lord God. Verse 7 promises “The Lord will send blessings on your barns and on everything you put your hand to.” In verse 14 he promises “You will always be at the top, never at the bottom.” That’s what we want. The health and wealth gospel types camp out on verses like that one. The chapter also says those who do not obey the Lord will be cursed. Verse 16 says, “You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country.” Verses 18-19 say, “The fruit of your womb will be cursed and the crops of your land and the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. You will be cursed when you come in and cursed when you go out.” In other words, no matter what you do, you’re screwed.

Psalm 1:3 says of a person who delights in God’s law and does it, “That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever they do prospers.” No matter what they do, it succeeds and it lasts. But verse 4 says, “No so the wicked. They are like chaff that the wind blows away.” The message is clear and consistent. Do God’s will and you will have blessing and success. Disobey God and the consequences will be certain, heavy and painful.

The problem of pain is reduced to an almost karma like equation. Do good, and you get good. Do bad, and you get bad. You get what you deserve. People drew a seemingly logical conclusion from this. If you have blessings and good in life it must be because you deserve it. If you have bad in your life, its because you’ve earned it.

The book of Job is the longest discussion of the problem of suffering in the Bible. In it you can see this thinking being debated. Job’s “friends” were theologically devout men. They believed in the goodness and justice of God. They believed he would not punish those who do good and would not reward those who do evil. Given that, they concluded that even though Job seemed to be an outstanding and upright man, he had to somehow deserve all the awful things that happened to him. There had to be some hidden terrible evil in him, because God sees to it that people get what they deserve.

In Job 22:4-5 Eliphaz, one of Job’s “friends,” says to him, “Is it for your piety that he (God) rebukes you and brings charges against you? Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless?” So he says in verse 10, “That is why snares are all around you, why sudden peril terrifies you.” This is quite a contrast to the first verse of Job where God described Job as “blameless and upright, he feared God and shunned evil.”

This was the thinking of Jesus’ disciples, but this blind man presented a conundrum. He was born blind. How could he have done something to deserve that fate before he had even been born? Did he have some horrible evil thoughts while still in his mother’s uterus? That is ridiculous, so the best the disciples could come up with was maybe his parents had been terrible people, and the consequences of their sin somehow fell on their poor son. He had to deserve his fate somehow, so maybe the problem was with them.

Jesus’ response to their question is easily misunderstood. In verses 3-4 he said, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, 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.” That sounds like he’s saying this man was born blind so that the work and glory of God could be shown in him. At first glance this seems like kind of a cool answer. Yes, a terrible thing had happened to this man, but there was a point to it. When Jesus healed the man it had huge impact. God was shown to be powerful and real and glorious. So there was a point to this man’s suffering. He would have impact in the world and would bring glory to God.

There is some truth in that. I will circle back to it later. It is a truth that gives us some hope. The hope that our suffering is not pointless but can actually be used to bring great glory to God, and that is a wonderful thing. It is really the point of our being. However, there is also a problem with that idea. Did God inflict this poor man with trouble and pain for many years just so God can look good later when he healed him? It sounds like he was sacrificing much of that man’s life to accomplish his own ends. It is more than a little disturbing, for that is not love. Yes, God is sovereign and has the right and ability to do whatever he chooses. And yes, we deserve only judgment, so if we receive some difficulty it is no more than our just due. Still, this is, at best, unsettling.

I believe that is not quite what Jesus said here. I believe the NIV, and most translations, send us off on a wrong tangent here. Yeah, I’m right and everyone else is wrong. Actually it’s not everyone else. I found this insight from a couple of excellent New Testament scholars. I believe there should be a period at the end of Jesus first statement in verse 3. “Neither he sinned nor his parents.” End of sentence. Jesus was telling them their whole premise was wrong. This blindness was not a consequence of someone’s sin. His next sentence is, “But in order that the work of God might be manifested in him it is necessary to work the work of the one who sent me.” In other words, no, this is not some curse on this guy because of anyone’s sin. But what is important is what we’re going to do about it. We need to do the work of God so his work and glory and can be seen in this situation.

The crucial point is that Jesus told them their thinking about the cause of the suffering was wrong. Their theology was off base. But what is the answer? How are we to understand the problem of pain? Jesus didn’t answer that question! His answer essentially was, “Your understanding of the problem of pain is wrong,” followed by a Forrest Gump like, “That’s all I’m going to say about that.” He did not address the theological and philosophical questions at all. He instead said the important issue is, what should we do about it now?

We don’t like that. We don’t understand why he would not reveal his divine wisdom on this most persistent and difficult problem. Get used to that. Remember that the most extensive discussion of suffering and pain in the Bible is the book of Job. In that book when Job’s “friends” trotted out their correct theology and insisted he deserved what happened to him, he protested that it was not so. This led to a debate, but also to Job wondering about the matter and questioning God about it. You see him saying, “How is this fair, God? I have not done anything to deserve all this.”

Job had done what Psalm 1 said. He delighted in the law of the Lord. He sought to obey God. Yet, in terms of the Psalm, his leaf had started to wither anyway. He wasn’t like a tree planted by a stream, bearing fruit in season. The promises of Deuteronomy 28 didn’t seem to be true, because he obeyed God and he definitely was not on top.

Here’s where we arrive at the same point Jesus came to. The problem of suffering is what that book is all about, and the questions about how this was fair to Job are raised repeatedly, and never answered! Do you recall what happened? God finally responded to Job and his protestations of innocence and his suggestions that God wasn’t being just. In Job 38:2 he says to Job, “Who is this who obscures my plans with words without knowledge?” Uh oh, words without knowledge. Not good. Who is this Mr. Smarty Pants who doesn’t know what he’s talking about? God says you want to judge me and my wisdom? Let me ask you a few questions, beginning with, “Where were you when I lad the earth’s foundations? Tell me, if you understand.” Uh, let’s see, I need to check my calendar and find out where I was that day, Lord. That first question was the only one needed, but God went on for 2 full chapters with questions like that. It was theological rope-a-dope. He had Job on the ropes from that first question and kept pounding him with body blow after body blow, until finally in Job 40:2 he says to Job, “Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him.” Job got it. In verse 3 he says, “I am unworthy. How can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth.” He admitted he had wandered into theological water that was thousands of feet too deep for him. God had told him that he was debating stuff that was way above his pay grade, and he got it.

In other words, God never explained the problem of suffering. He said, “Stay in your lane, bro. You’ve wandered into territory you can’t understand. Your job is not to figure it all out. Your job is to trust me and know that I am good and just even when you can’t see it.” This is essentially what Jesus did with his disciples that day. In his paraphrase of the New Testament called *The Message*, Eugene Peterson got it right when he interpreted John 9:3-4 to say, “You’re asking the wrong question. You’re looking for someone to blame. There is no cause and effect here. Look instead for what God can do. We must be energetically at work for the one that sent me here.”

So Jesus did just that. He did a very strange thing. He spit on the ground, made a little bit of mud from his spit, and put it on the man’s eyes. Eww, gross. Why did he do that? What a weird thing to do. He healed people who were blind just by commanding them to see. He could have done that here, so why this unsanitary little ritual, one not repeated anywhere else? I’ll give you my thoughts on that shortly. But he told the man to go wash in the pool of Siloam. He did, and instantly he could see! People were astounded. It was so remarkable some said it couldn’t be the same man. But he insisted, “I’m the guy. I couldn’t see, but now I can.”

This is astounding, for not only were the man’s physical eyes able to transmit light to his optic nerve, but his brain was able to interpret what he was seeing. That’s amazing because when the brain doesn’t have the opportunity to do that for years after birth it loses the ability to interpret what the eyes are seeing. There are interesting stories of people who have been blind for years and have had the ability for the eyes to work restored, but it is disorienting for them. Their brains can’t discern what they are seeing. In some instances trying to eat is difficult for them because they can’t differentiate between what’s food and what’s not. There are stories of people like that actually blindfolding themselves because it became to much for them to deal with. Jesus healed this guy’s eyes and brain!

THE HEALING CAUSED CONTROVERSY

People were astounded by this incredible thing they had just seen happen. Wanting to understand what was going on they brought the healed man to the people they respected the most, the Pharisees. John informs us in verse 14 that this all happened on a Sabbath, and that becomes key. The Pharisees asked the man how it came about that he could now see. He said in verse 15, “He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and now I see.” Just the facts, ma’am. He told them just what happened.

The conclusion of the Pharisees is, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.” Wait, what? He healed a blind man, performing a true miracle, and your conclusion is that he can’t be from God because he doesn’t keep the Sabbath? Are you serious? I believe this is what the business with the mud was about. The Pharisees had quite a list of ways one could violate the Sabbath. Among them was making mortar, for that is work. They extended that to wetting the ground and making mud. When Jesus spit on the ground and made mud, he was breaking that rule. I suspect that is precisely why Jesus did this rather odd thing in healing this particular blind man. He wanted to highlight the difference between him and the Pharisees. It worked. On the one hand you have Jesus blessing a man, giving him an astounding, miraculous gift of being able to see for the first time in his life. On the other hand, you had the Pharisees declaring that Jesus could not be from God because he spit on the ground and made a dab of mud.

That’s pretty stark. Jesus didn’t break the Sabbath. He just broke one of the Pharisees’ pronouncements about ways to break the Sabbath. The Law simply says one must keep it holy, that it is a day of rest. It doesn’t say anything about not spitting and making mud, which definitely doesn’t seem like hard labor on the Sabbath. In the end, the Pharisees look kind of ridiculous. You might say they end up with mud on their faces because they emphasize their trivial definition of work on the Sabbath instead of the major miracle of the healing.

This happened mostly because in the minds of the Pharisees the case of Jesus was already decided. They were already trying to figure out a way to eliminate him. They had rejected him, and at this point they are grasping at straws to justify their position. Unfortunately for them, the evidence of the blind man now seeing was quite compelling. They decided to go for the impostor idea. This really isn’t the guy who used to be blind. So they found the parents of the blind man and interrogated them. The parents were no dummies. They could see which way the wind was blowing. They didn’t want to take sides and get caught in the crossfire because they knew if they backed up what Jesus did, it could get them in a lot of trouble. So when asked if the now seeing man was in fact their son, they simply say, “We know he is our son. We know he has always been blind. But we have no idea how he is able to see now. He’s all grown up. Ask him.”

So the Pharisees went back to the man for a second interrogation. At that point he was really irked and started to get snippy with them. The Pharisees insist of Jesus, “This man is a sinner,” because obviously he doesn’t keep the Sabbath. The man said, “Whether he is a sinner or not I don’t know. One thing I do know. I was blind, but now I see.” That was about as profound a statement as he could have made. It should have settled the matter right there.

They ask, “Yeah, how again did that happen?” He answered, “Do you want to hear it again because you want to become his disciples?” That infuriated them. They started insulting him and throwing accusations at him. They said, “We’re the wise ones, the knowledgeable ones, and we have no idea where this guy is coming from. He fired back, “Now that is remarkable. You don’t know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. If this man were not from God he could do nothing.” Well that ended that. The Pharisees do what people do when they’ve lost an argument and they know it. They descended to character assassination. They yell at him, “You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us! Yeah, you were a sinner from the get go, which is why you were blind from day one. How dare you lecture us, sinner?” Jesus found the man and revealed to him his identity. The man said, “Lord, I believe.” For him that was the end of the story for that day.

IMPLICATIONS

SUFFERING IS INEVITABLE AND OFTEN INEXPLICABLE

The first full day Laurie and I had as a married couple we had an early morning flight to Hawaii to begin our honeymoon. We were tired, but excited and happy. Toward the end of our flight a flight attendant graciously gave us some extra gifts and said they were to wish us a happy honeymoon. We were surprised and asked, “How did you know we are on our honeymoon?” She said, “Oh, the cute, young, smiling couple with shiny rings is a dead giveaway.” We had a reminder of that on our recent trip back to Hawaii. One of the flight attendants was a very genial young man who seemed to enjoy talking to us. At one point he had a box of snacks that he brought to us and said, “Here, please take as many of these as you want.” They weren’t doing this for other people. Just us. I said, “That’s awfully kind of you. Thank you so much, but why are you doing this?” He said, “I enjoy getting to serve such a cute couple.” Later near the very end of the flight he came back and said, “Here, please take more of these.” We took some more, though we were running out of room in our bags for them. We chatted with him some more and thanked him profusely for being so kind to us. He said again, “We don’t often get to see such cute couples.”

It hit me that the phrasing was a bit different this time. That first flight attendant had referred to us as a cute young couple. Now we’re just a cute couple. Yeah, because young left the building quite a few years ago. You start out as a cute young couple, but then a time comes when you’re cute in a different way. You’re cute like the old couple in a greeting card commercial holding hands as they walk on the beach. Aww, look at the cute old people being lovey dovey.

The experience reminded me of the reality of life. No one is ever going to mistake me for a young husband. Father Time is undefeated. Laurie seems remarkably able to hold him at bay, but eventually he has his way with us all. The process of growing old is a graphic reminder of how life goes. In the past few years I’ve had a repeated experience. I had a torn tendon in my elbow that had to be surgically repaired. But I had no traumatic injury to it. I asked the surgeon how that happened. His explanation was, wear and tear over time. When you get old this can happen. Oh, great. Then along came the pandemic with all the warnings that people with compromised immune systems had to be careful. And anyone my age has a compromised immune system. In other words, it’s wearing out. Great. Then I was diagnosed with a rare form of melanoma that I was informed only happens to old people over a certain age. In the process of having scans as part of my treatment a few anomalies showed up. The doctors reassured me, “That’s nothing to worry about. As we get old those things just show up. They’re not a problem.”

Do you detect a theme? That’s only a partial catalog of reminders that I’m old. They are also reminders of the direction I’m going. In 2 Corinthians 4:16 Paul said, “Though outwardly we are wasting away.” Yeah, that’s life. My old chassis is wasting away. And it’s not fun. It’s hard. It is inconvenient, it is painful, and it is inexorable. That’s how life is going to go for all of us. It doesn’t end well.

Life is going to hold some suffering and sadness for all of us. There is no way around it. It is true 100% of the time. The song *Blessed Be Your Name* has the line “on the road marked with suffering.” That road is the road of life. It’s going to be marked with suffering for all of us. Not all the time, but it’s going to be a part of life for everyone of us. There is simply no escaping it. No, we aren’t born blind, but we are all going to have our difficulties and tragedies to bear.

The problem of pain asks, “Why?” If God loves us, why is it this way? Why must we suffer? Why must we waste away and experience the travails of getting older and weaker? Why couldn’t we sort of mature to a nice adult age, plateau, then just stay there until we cash in our chips? Why is life so full of suffering? Based on what I see from Jesus in this passage, the same thing we see in the book of Job, here’s the answer: We don’t know why. Wait, so your deeply thought out, philosophical answer to the problem of suffering is that you have no answer? Yeah, pretty much. God seems to say rather consistently, “That’s above your pay grade, so don’t worry about it. Instead, just trust me.”

Many people smarter than me have tried to resolve this question. And they often have some helpful insights about how God uses suffering. C. S. Lewis wrote about how God whispers to us in our pleasure and shouts to us in our pain. It is in our pain that we are reminded that this world is not our home. It is in our suffering that we come to understand that what our hearts are built for most is to know God, and that’s where true life comes from. He says God uses suffering to help people realize “If they have not learned to know him (God), they will be wretched.”

These are helpful, but still, we struggle with why. In the end perhaps the answer is so that we will learn to truly live by faith, to trust God on our darkest days, not because we have the comforts and blessings we want, but because we know the character of God.

Laurie’s and my greatest trial in life was going through the death of our son, Joel. It was devastating beyond description for us. The question of why was unavoidable. How could this be God’s good plan in Joel’s and our lives? God has used Joel’s brief life and death in powerful ways in our lives. But in the end we learned that there is no answer to why. There is only an anchor that kept us steady in the storm, and that anchor was that we know that God is good, that he loves Joel, he loves us, and is seeking our good. Living by faith meant we trusted in him and his character, and that’s what saw us through.

SUFFERING IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BRING GLORY TO GOD

The experience of this young man in this story is a case in point. He couldn’t argue theology with the learned religious men of his people. But he said something more profound than any of their arguments. “One thing I do know. I was blind, but now I see!” This guy had just been given a new life. Years of suffering were eclipsed in a burst of joy. God was honored in his life.

The honor to God won’t always be through a glorious victory like that. In fact, most of the time it probably won’t be. It will come through what I just talked about, God’s people remaining faithful to him, serving him, loving him, giving him glory, even when it seems to make no sense.

One thing I have seen in life is that suffering shuts down argument. It humbles people. When we encounter someone who has suffered terribly or is suffering greatly but doing it with faith, dignity, courage and love for others, we are all humbled by it. We know that here is something powerful, something beautiful. In 2 Corinthians 4:7 Paul said we have the all-surpassing power of God in us, in these jars of clay that we are. That sounds awesome, and we envision wielding that power in spectacular ways. But then he goes in in verses 8-9 to tell us how God’s almighty power is displayed in us. “We are hard pressed on every side, but no crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.” We are pressured, but not crushed, confused, but not despairing, hammered from every side, but not broken. This is what displays God’s power.

Many years ago in our previous church we had a men’s event one evening with a special speaker. I’ve never forgotten that event because the speaker was powerful. His name was Dave Dravecky. You likely remember him. He was a successful pitcher in the major leagues. He even pitched for the Padres. At the height of his career cancer was discovered in his pitching arm. Eventually his arm had to be amputated. He didn’t downplay how awful the experience was and how much harder his life was because of it. But he said it opened doors for him. People who wrote about him and left God out could no longer do that. He said, “It just wasn’t possible to talk about my story without naming Jesus Christ. Without him, there would have been no story to tell.” The good that came out of that awful thing was that he had, “the opportunity to take a little bit of the spotlight off Dave Dravecky and turn it toward God, for to him the glory truly belonged.”

Henry Keating of Wesley College in his book, *Studying The Old Testament*, wrote, “The book of Job teaches us that whenever humans live gallantly and cheerfully with suffering and do it in the name of God, they are somehow fighting God’s fight for him against the dark forces of cynicism and evil in the universe.”

JESUS IS WITH US IN OUR SUFFERING

The story of this young man also reminds us of another powerful truth, and that is when Jesus showed up, everything changed. His presence is what changed the whole dynamic of his suffering. The power of Jesus in his life is clearly displayed.

Jesus is all about being with us in our suffering. It is why he was Emmanuel, God with us. It is why he submitted himself to being born as an anonymous, powerful human infant, living as a child to no name parents in an oppressed people group. It is why he was willing to suffer opposition, rejection, persecution, indignity and unimaginable pain. He went through the worst that life could serve up, so that we could know that he understands, not through knowledge, but through experience, the hardest most painful things we go through. He has compassion for us, because he knows what it is like. He cares for us.

He is present with us, and that gives us hope. His presence means we can have victory over the suffering. It may be that our victory comes by enduring and being faithful to him in the face of it, or can mean that it comes by him defeating that suffering, but we must never forget that his presence is what will insure the victory.

In his book, *The Problem Of Pain*, C. S. Lewis wrote, “When pain is to be borne, a little courage helps more than much knowledge, a little human sympathy helps more than much courage, and the least tincture of the love of God helps more than all.”