

## Study Guide for the Central Church of Christ 11-11-18

To Adult Teachers:

November 11 we will study John 9:1-12. Discussion questions are:

1. What is the assumption behind the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?"
2. What is the assumption behind the disciples' question in 9:1?
3. If you were the blind man and heard the question, which of the 2 causes of suffering suggested would make you angry and which would make you feel guilty?
4. Do you like Jesus' answer in vs. 3?
5. How do you think the blind man felt about Jesus' answer?
6. In Luke 13:1-5 how does Jesus respond to the assumption that a person's suffering is a direct result of his sinfulness?
7. Look at God's questions in Job 38-41. What conclusion was God moving Job toward?

Key questions in Job 38-41:

38:4-5; 8,11; 12; 16; 19; 22; 34

39:19-20; 26-27

40:9

41:1-2; 5

8. Agree/disagree: "All suffering is to display the redemptive work of God in our lives."
  - a. If that statement is true, how are we to respond to suffering? Give some examples of how to do this.
  - b. What examples are there from the life of Christ or the words of early disciples that illustrate the truth of the statement in question 8?
9. How do you understand this statement: "Sometimes the only way to handle your suffering is to simply obey in the dark."

### Sermon: *The Problem of Suffering*

John 9:1-12

A little boy in New York was sitting at a table next to a Christmas tree in his house. A stray bullet came through the window and killed him and people asked, "Why him?" A few years ago I received a call from the hospital. They said, "We need you to come now and talk to a woman. She is from out of town and a member of the Church of Christ. They just did surgery on her baby for a brain tumor. When they did the surgery and saw the extent of the tumor they had to just close the incision, give the baby back to the mother, and tell her the baby had about 2 weeks to live." When I went into that room I met one of the angriest women I've ever met in my life. She demanded to know why God would let this happen to her baby. Hundreds, if not thousands, of such stories of the suffering of the innocent occur every day and always there is the nagging question, "Why? Why my baby, my mother, my loved one? Why does God allow a good person

to suffer and an evil person to prosper? If God is so good why does he allow it? If God is so powerful why doesn't he stop it?"

Have you seen that cynical bumper sticker that says, "Life is hard, then you die."? One of the ways you know you have grown up is when you see that and realize its true. For some people that is when they choose to become a cynic. They move from being a romantic idealist to a bitter cynic. Is there a third alternative? Absolutely there is. It is called faith. In John 9 a man is suffering and everybody is asking, "Why?" Jesus responds to that question, so we really need to pay attention to what he says.

Before we hear his answer let's take a moment and listen to some of the wrong answers that were being given back then. When they ask, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?", they are revealing 2 false views of why people suffer. Jesus wipes away both of those false views with one word, "Neither!" Let's look at the 2 false approaches to suffering and then Jesus' approach to suffering.

The 2 false views are:

THE ANGER APPROACH  
THE GUILT APPROACH

Let's look first at the anger approach. It occurs in this text when they ask, "Was it his parents who did this to him?" The anger approach works this way, "If I'm suffering, somebody out there is to blame." For the last 20 years or so it has been in vogue to blame your parents for your problems. So this passage is quite relevant. Another variation of the anger approach is to blame God. God isn't fair. There are evil people who aren't suffering like I am. Sometimes the anger approach gets worse when you become a Christian because you say; "I've given myself to him and look what I get." Another version of the anger approach is to blame another group of people. All over America people have been living above their means for a long time. Now it's finally caught up with us and we are mad at the greedy people on Wall Street who caused it. What about the symbol of greed that is parked in your garage attached to the house you can't afford?

Then there is the guilt approach. Some say, "Maybe this man is born blind because he sinned." How could you sin before you are born? They probably meant God saw that the man was going to live a sinful life and so he struck him with blindness to punish him in advance for what he was going to do. The guilt approach doesn't blame others. It says, "I'm suffering. It must be my fault."

Sometimes the anger approach and the guilt approach are combined and then it is lethal. For instance sometimes the children of divorce combine the two. Not only are the children mad at one or both parents but also they are also sure that somehow they themselves caused the divorce. When those 2 views of suffering come together the combination is just devastating.

## THE JESUS APPROACH

Listen to Jesus' view of anger and guilt. It's in John 9:1-2 – "...who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? ***Neither!***" The same question is presented to Jesus in Luke 13. Some people come to him and say, "Jesus, did you hear about the tower that fell on some people and killed them? It was a terrible tragedy. Were they worse sinners than others? Is that why the tower fell on them?" Remember Jesus answer? He said, "No, but repent unless you likewise perish!" He says, "Quit trying to equate tragedies with the sinfulness of those who suffer. Just get your life in shape so that if a tower falls on you, it won't be a tragedy for you." When people ask those kinds of questions of Jesus, he invariably says to them, "You wouldn't be asking that question unless you thought God owed you a comfortable life." There it is - God owes me an easy death not a skiing accident that leaves me paralyzed for 40 years before I die. God owes me the privilege of living to a ripe old age and dying in my sleep in my own bed, not 5 years of gradual mental deterioration in a nursing home. God owes me! The truth is I owe God everything and he owes me nothing.

The central place in the Bible where the problem of pain is addressed is the book of Job. Because of the length of the book people reading it sometimes lose track of the train of thought. So I want to take 2 minutes and help you get the simple, single message of that book. Horrible tragedies occur in Job's life. He loses all his material possessions, attends funerals for all 10 of his children, and develops an awful skin condition that makes him physically miserable 24/7. His friends come to see him. They take the guilt approach – "God wouldn't be punishing you unless you were doing something wrong." Job says, "I've done nothing to deserve this. I am a good guy." Then he takes the anger approach and attacks God, accusing him of being unfair. He challenges God to a debate saying, "If you'd come down from heaven and meet me in a court of law and debate whether or not you are treating me fairly you would lose the debate and you know it." Mercifully God allows Job to rant and rave until he has vented his spleen. Then God machine guns about 30 or 40 questions to Job, none of which he can answer. Questions like: "Where is the way to the dwelling of light?" and "Have you entered the storehouses of the snow?" and my favorite question, "Can you catch a crocodile with a hook, put it on a leash and give it to your daughters for a pet?" With every question to which Job answers, "No", God is saying, "I can." It is God's way of answering Job's question, "Why do good people suffer?" God's answer is, "I am God and I don't answer to man. Trust me. I know what I am doing."

Whatever the reasons for Christians suffering just like everyone else in the world, one thing we know for sure - God would never accept 2 payments for 1 debt. Jesus made the payment for sin. That means God is not going to extract payment from you by making you endure pain for your sinfulness. Hear the powerful words of Romans 8, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus." Listen, God does not punish us for our sins. He punished Jesus for our sins. Anger and guilt need to be replaced with gratitude.

Listen to Jesus' answer about why suffering came into the life of the blind man: "...so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." (John 9:3) So if you innumerate what Jesus says it looks like this:

1. Suffering is governed by God's will.
2. All suffering is to display the redemptive work of God in our lives.

There is always a purpose to suffering. Remember Joseph who looked like he was suffering for no reason. He was sold into slavery by his brothers, falsely accused by his master's wife, and forgotten by the man he befriended in prison. But at the end of the story he is in a unique position to save his family from famine. He makes that great statement when his brothers are sure he is going to get them back. He says, "You meant it for evil but God meant it for good." What is he saying? He is saying, "I don't blame God for the evil. I blame you for it. And yet God overruled it. He governed it!" Suffering was not in God's original design for us but God governs everything. Therefore suffering is never for nothing.

Suffering is always a way for God's work to go on in your life. When Jesus uses the word "work" ("so that the work of God might be displayed") he is talking about his work of redemption. What is the work of redemption? The word "redeem" means to buy back out of slavery. "Redeemed" - I am a slave to things that keep me from being what I need to be. What should I be? I should be free from the control of sin. I should be like Christ, glorifying God with every word and every action.

We gather here today to glorify God because of suffering. Every Sunday we have the Lord's Supper because he allowed his son to suffer on the cross. The greatest witness to the love of God is the suffering of his son. And just like Jesus, you will never have a better opportunity to glorify God than in the way you handle suffering.

It was almost 30 years ago, about one hour before the funeral of their beloved teen age son Johnny, that John Wayne and Donetta Hoggatt sat in our church library meeting with and forgiving the truck driver whose negligence resulted in Johnny's death. Did God want that tragedy to happen? Of course not but he was glorified by the way John Wayne and Donetta handled it.

You have to learn to say to yourself, "Because Jesus suffered for me I do not need to feel guilty about my suffering nor do I need to be angry about my suffering because I will never be given what I deserve." No guilt. No anger. Simply love and quiet power. It will turn you into a shepherd and people will value your counsel.

This blind person goes through a moment of trauma before he is healed. Most blind people see some light at least. Jesus makes mud and puts it on his eyes. What would that do? It would make the problem worse. He would have seen even less. Then Jesus tells him to go to the pool of Siloam and wash. The man had to obey God in total darkness. Sometimes the only way to handle your suffering is to simply obey in the darkness. You see no light at the end of the tunnel. It does not look like what Jesus is doing is making

things better. It may even seem that Jesus is making things worse. Never, never, never forget that scene of mental suffering just before the cross, "Not my will but thine be done." That prayer turned tragedy into triumph. If you learn to handle suffering like Jesus did, one day you will be able to stare death in the face and shout, "O death, where is thy victory?"