

**What the Blind Man Saw**  
**John 9: 1 – 12**  
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church  
April 9, 2017

**What the Blind Man Saw**

There was a season when my former church, The Union Church of Lima, Peru, was without a pastor. They filled the pulpit on a week by week basis. On a particular Sunday, Russ Reinert was scheduled to preach. Russ is a gifted communicator who, before his retirement, had spent his entire career working in Peru, first in the Amazon, then in Lima, at the Summer Institute of Linguistics, (SIL), more popularly known as Wycliffe Bible Translators. Russ' career with SIL was remarkable on a number of levels, certainly one of which was that as a teenager Russ lost his sight. Like the fellow in our bible passage today, he was a blind man. As mentioned, Russ is gifted, and would sometimes preach a sermon 'in character.' On this particular Sunday, Russ's plan was to preach as King David. In the program, the preacher was named, "David Jesson:" – get it? – David Jesse's son.

The head of the church board at the time was Tom Walker. Tom was an executive with SIP, the Potato Institute in Peru. (Trust me: in Peru, the potato is a big deal.) However, no one informed Tom as to the preaching plan that morning. Tom walked to the pulpit to ask if "David Jesson" was in the building. At that moment, Russ was still in an adjacent room, finishing his make-up and costume as "King David." Seeing no response to his search for David Jesson, Tom told the congregation that he, Tom, intended to offer an inspiring talk on "potatoes and the Bible." Of course, the Bible does not mention potatoes. Potatoes were developed in Peru, which explains why the Potato Institute is located there. But Tom was willing to rise to the occasion as best he could, giving it the old "Wooster Try." He began his speech on spuds.

At this point "King David" – Russ – entered the sanctuary. Both men were well known and well loved by the congregation. There was no question as to which of the two was more qualified to deliver a sermon. Tom, however, was not ready to concede the loss of an opportunity to speak to a captive audience on the virtues of the potato. He suggested that they ask the congregation, "Whom would you rather hear speak that morning?" Tom looked out to the congregation, and asked everyone present who wished to hear Russ preach, to raise their hands. After a moment, Tom looked at Russ and asked, "Do you see any hands?"

**Who sinned?**

His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

If something terrible happens to us, it is a natural human tendency to ask the question: 'What did I do wrong to deserve this?' We might ask, "Is God angry

with me?” We want to understand the world. We puzzle as to why bad things happen to “good” people. The disciples ask “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Note the presumption behind the question: somebody sinned. This man’s hardship, trial and handicap is a form of punishment. He carries this burden because somebody is culpable. You can trace the path between this man’s burden and his (or his parent’s) sin. They assume only two options: somebody sinned, was it the blind man or his mom and dad?

A key thing to note is that such a question reflects the belief that there is a moral component to life. It is a good question in that it reflects the assumption that the world around us is to be understood morally and spiritually. In contrast, note that no right thinking Darwinian could ever ask such a question. It would not make sense: there is no moral component to Darwinian evolution for the only two forces at work in the world, in secular Darwinian thinking, are time and chance. Natural selection is a blind watchmaker. There is no concept of sin in evolutionary understanding. Because evolutionary understanding refuses to acknowledge a place for God in the explanations it offers, there is no room for a moral component to life. If there is no God, there is no purpose or reason for the universe.

This disciple’s question reflects a common idea of the time. The Jews believed in God. Their understanding was that in life the good are rewarded and the bad are punished. If something bad happens to you, it is because something bad has been done by you (or those closest to you.) If something good happens to you, then that is a reward for your good and honest heart and your commendable deeds. The good get rewarded. The bad are punished.

And, many today continue to believe that this it is so. On December 26<sup>th</sup>, 2004, a major tsunami struck Southeast Asia, killing thousands. Do you recall the commentary on that disaster? The Israeli chief rabbi, Shlomo Amar said, “*This is an expression of God’s great ire with the world. The world is being punished for wrong doing.*” The Hindu priest, Pandit Harikrishna Shastri, said that this catastrophe was the result of a “*huge amount of pent-up man-made evil on earth.*” The Malaysian Muslim cleric, Azizan ABudl Razak, saw in the waves a warning from God that “*he created the world and can destroy the world.*” A leading British Muslim cleric, Sheikh Ibrahim Mogra, said, “*We believe that God has ultimate controlling power over his entire creation. We have a responsibility to try and attract god’s kindness and mercy and not to do anything that would attract his anger.*” He did not say how the people of South Asia attracted God’s anger. What was striking to me about the tsunami was that it appeared to be an equal opportunity natural disaster: in Thailand, the majority of the dead were post Christian European tourists; in Indonesia, most of the dead were Muslim; in Sri Lanka, the Hindu population suffered the hardest; and, the southern coastal population in India included many Christians. What are we to make of such devastation? Is there a message from God in the waves of a tsunami? Is it God’s punishment? Is it God’s purpose? Is there meaning to be found here? This, the sixth sign from John’s gospel helps us to understand things rightly.

Before we look at our Lord's words in response to the disciple's question, I want us to remember the four sources of calamity and trouble in our world.

### **Four sources of calamity**

#### **First source: Nature – Romans 8:18 - 22**

<sup>18</sup> I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. <sup>19</sup> The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. <sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. <sup>22</sup> We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

We live in a fallen world. However, this is not how God originally created our world. At the end of each day of creation in Genesis 1, God looks out upon his handiwork and declares that it is good. The world God created was good. But sin entered our world through the disobedience of our ancestor Adam. Adam and Eve's sin was far reaching in its impact. We call their disobedience "The Fall." When the Bible speaks of Adam and Eve being driven from the Garden of Eden after The Fall, the point is to say that our world is no longer the same as God created it. Like a knife gash on a Great Master's painting, creation itself is now flawed, marred. The corruption has gone to the bone. Creation itself bears part of the burden of Adam's sin. Creation itself is askew. The world God created 'good' is now a place of earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis, typhoons, mudslides, avalanches, flood and fire.

As Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans, creation itself groans. It experiences the pain. It feels the harm. The image Paul uses is that of the pains of childbirth. One day the pains we feel will be forgotten, when we see the glories God has in store. But that day is not today. Today we know the pain, the heartache, the suffering of a creation waiting in hope that one day God will make things right again.

That is the first source of calamity in our world. The second is ignorance.

#### **The Second Source: Ignorance – Proverbs 16:25**

<sup>25</sup> There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.

I once visited and prayed with a man who was dying from emphysema. He was a young man, in his sixties. He had spent his career working in the auto shop, primarily painting cars. He had worked in the days before masks and filters. It was clear that the disease that was so painfully killing him was the result of years of day in and day out breathing the paint and turpentine fumes of his workshop. This man's suffering was a side effect of ignorance. He and his co-workers did not know better. They did not know the damage they were inflicting upon themselves and one another as they worked without protection in that environment. The sad fact is

that some of the trial and trouble we face in life is simply a by-product of unawareness. It could be prevented, but out of ignorance it is not.

Some calamity comes from the fallen world; some arises out of our ignorance; and some is the direct result of human sin.

### **The Third Source: Sin – Romans 3:23**

<sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

Adam may have been the one to introduce the reality of human sin and disobedience to our world, but make no mistake, each of us signs his own name to that wall of infamy sooner or later. We each add our own contribution to the corruption of our world. Each of us has added to the unhappiness of others through the impact of betrayed trusts, broken relationships, harsh and uncaring words, self-centered motives, or uncaring self-centeredness.

At a higher level, any one of us can find our world upturned by acts of crime, corruption, cruelty or indifference. Two weeks ago, twelve Christians were killed in an accident between a pick-up truck and a church bus in Texas. It appears that the driver of the pick-up truck was texting, leading to his loss of control of the vehicle. Obviously, the driver did not intend to cause an accident. However, his negligence was sin. As a consequence of his sin, a church and twelve families are grieving their loss of loved ones.

Calamity can come to us from the natural world. Calamity can happen out of ignorance. Calamity is often a direct result of human sin. Finally, some calamity in our world is the result of the influence of Satan.

### **The Fourth Source: Satan – Job 2.6**

<sup>6</sup> And the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life.”

The scriptures teach that God is watching out for the good of those who belong to him. The scriptures *also* teach that Satan is loose upon the earth seeking to accuse and cause pain and mischief where he may, where God permits.

It is a curious thing that many Jews and Christians insist on believing that there is some mathematical equation that can explain the suffering or blessedness a person experiences in this world when the clear and unambiguous message of the Book of Job is that is not the case at all. Job, at the beginning of the book, is one of the most wealthy and blessed men on earth. He then loses his wealth, his family, and his health at the prompting of Satan and the acquiescence of God. Note well: nothing Job does merits either his blessed state nor his state of anguish and loss. The message of the book is plain: the greatest sufferers are not the greatest sinners. Job is caught in a spiritual contest between Satan and God that simply cannot be explained from the perspective of Job's life and sufferings. Some trials and troubles are simply inexplicable from the vantage point of life itself. The book of Job teaches that calamities, though severe, are not always punishments.

The story of Job teaches an essential point, one reinforced by Jesus' answer to the question posed to him by his disciples: calamities are not always punishments. A calamity *may be* a punishment. If you lose control of your temper, speak harshly to your boss and get fired from your job, your unemployment calamity is clearly the direct result of your unbridled tongue. But if you lose your job because the factory has ceased to be profitable and the company has gone out of business, no moral burden is laid at your door. Bad things happen in life.

The question then is this: what should be our attitude towards, on the one hand, the trials and troubles, and on the other, the blessings and advantages, we experience in life? Life is full of difficulty. Life is full of unexpected blessing and delight. What is the proper attitude in approaching each?

First, if you are blessed, be thankful.

**If you are blessed, be thankful**

<sup>3</sup>“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus,

One of the problems in the modern world is an overabundance of ‘rights’ talk. We talk about human rights, civil rights, the right to privacy, to ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,’ property rights, animal rights, disability rights, children’s rights, Medicare rights, intellectual property rights, cyber rights: the University of Minnesota even offers a ‘human rights library.’ You get the point. The difficulty with rights talk is that it obscures the fact that life as we know it is a gift. It implies that somehow we have a transcendent claim to the blessings of life. We do not. None of us deserves anything. We do not deserve goodness and blessing. We have not earned these things. Whatever rights we have – and I believe there are certain God-given rights – we have them as an expression of God’s love for and continuing care over his creation.

What this means practically for us is that if in life we have experienced rather little of trial and trouble, we have an obligation to express our thankfulness and gratitude toward God. Whatever blessings we know in life, we know them not because we are worthy of them, or have earned them in some cosmic competition. When we count our blessings, we must acknowledge our gratitude to God for his kindnesses to us. If we have escaped much suffering and loss in life it is because of God’s great kindness toward us.

The second practical application follows closely on the first. If you face trial and trouble, pain and heartache, do not accuse God of being unfair or unjust.

**If you face pain and trial, do not accuse God of being unfair.**

<sup>3</sup>“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus,

The great Russian writer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, became a Christian through the witness of a Russian Jew name Boris Kornfeld, who had come to faith

in Jesus Christ. Kornfeld was a doctor, a prisoner in the Soviet gulag, as was Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn was recovering from surgery for stomach cancer and late one night the doctor told him of his conversion to Jesus Christ. Then, reflecting upon his experience, his life in the terrible camp, Kornfeld added,

On the whole, you know, I have become convinced that there is no punishment that comes to us in this life on earth which is undeserved. Superficially, it can have nothing to do with what we are guilty of in actual fact, but if you go over your life with a fine tooth comb and ponder it deeply, you will always be able to hunt down that transgression of yours for which you have now received this blow.

Imagine: here was a man, a Jew, living in the midst of the cruelty of this camp, saying that he deserved every indignity he suffered.

Whenever something bad happens to us, our natural tendency as humans is to immediately think “What did I do wrong to deserve this?” Or, “Why is God punishing me in this way?” We think such thoughts because we know intuitively, that we are not the men and women we ought to be. What this means, what Boris Kornfeld said, is that whatever trial or tragedy that befalls us; we know that, no matter what has happened, there is an inherent justness to it. We know instinctively the truth of Boris Kornfeld’s insight. Whatever we have received, we deserve it.

If we are blessed, we must be thankful. If we face trial and pain, we must not claim that God is unfair.

At this point, I am going to pause and make a candid acknowledgement. I have noted, on several occasions, that the pastor of my daughter’s church in Chattanooga preaches two sermons each Sunday. They are both good. I am always blessed under his teaching. I am doing something comparable today. We have looked at the sources of suffering in life, but I have not examined the healing of the blind man specifically. Now we will look at the text more specifically. We note that the Jesus’ words tell us that there can be purpose in suffering. Suffering can reveal the works of God.

### **God is at work in suffering**

<sup>3</sup>“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. <sup>4</sup>As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. <sup>5</sup>While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

Is there a purpose in suffering? Jesus believed there to be. The purpose of this man’s blindness was not punishment. God had his reasons for this man’s handicap. In life, there are things we can know. And, in life, there are things we cannot know. Some things will always be a mystery. However, no matter what the trial or difficulty we face in life, the works of God can be revealed in the midst of the

hardship we face. That is clearly true in this story, for God is glorified in the physical healing of this man..

### **God is glorified for this man was healed physically**

<sup>6</sup> Having said this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. <sup>7</sup> "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means Sent). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

This is the sixth of seven signs in John's gospel. Each sign testifies to the witness of Jesus, his power and authority. When the blind man's neighbors find that he can see, that he has been healed, some of them do not believe that it is him. They think it is a case of mistaken identity. To heal someone who had been born blind is unprecedented. It testifies that Jesus is more than a mere man. Before he heals the blind man, Jesus says of himself, <sup>5</sup> "While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." The physical power to heal this man born blind testifies to the spiritual truth that Jesus is the light of the world. The physical healing is important to this blind man. The physical healing of this blind man is important for us because it points to the truth that Jesus is the light of the world. The way to understand the world is through the light of Jesus. If you wish to understand your place in the world, you must do so through the person of Jesus Christ.

God is glorified for this man was also healed spiritually.

### **God is glorified for this man was healed spiritually**

<sup>8</sup> His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?" <sup>9</sup> Some claimed that he was. Others said, "No, he only looks like him." But he himself insisted, "I am the man." <sup>10</sup> "How then were your eyes opened?" they demanded. <sup>11</sup> He replied, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see." <sup>12</sup> "Where is this man?" they asked him. "I don't know," he said.

We ended our reading of the passage today with the question asked by the blind man's neighbors, "Where is this man?" and the blind man's answer that he does not know where Jesus is at that moment. When we looked at the fourth sign, the feeding of the five thousand, I mentioned that the miracle occurs at the beginning of chapter 6 and how the rest of the chapter is an exploration of the meaning and implications of the miracle. A similar dynamic is at work in John 9. The rest of the chapter explores the implication of this healing. Jesus tells us that he is "the light of the world." By the end of the chapter, the blind man finds Jesus, telling him <sup>38</sup> "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him. The physical healing of the blind man is important. At the same time, his spiritual healing is a greater good, for God is glorified in the blind man's testimony.

### **God is glorified in the blind man's testimony**

<sup>11</sup> He replied, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see."

The man's physical healing is important. His spiritual healing is more important. Most of all is the truth that God is glorified by this man's life.

There is much suffering in our world. We cannot explain it. But we can ask, "How can God be glorified in our response to suffering?" God is glorified in the outpouring of relief aid to disaster areas. God is honored in the rescue efforts of first responders. God is honored in the work of hospital staff, doctors and nurses who treat the wounded. God is honored by those who organize and prepare the pathology reports in order to try and identify the dead. God is honored by those who bury the dead. God is honored by the military who delivered food and water. He is honored by the administrators who organize the relief efforts, attempting to make sure the resources go where the need is. God is honored by the work of on the scene chaplains. God is glorified by the financial and other donations of individuals. God is honored in the prayers that are offered to his throne.

There are many things in life that are inexplicable. Don't try to explain them. Rather, look for ways in which you can glorify God in how you live your life, here and now.

## **Close**

I will close this message with two modern stories of how God can be at work in our lives in the midst of the suffering and trials we experience.

At a fund-raising dinner for a school that serves learning-disabled children, the father of one of the school's students offered a question. "Everything God does is done with perfection. Yet, my son, Shay, cannot learn things as other children do. He cannot understand things as other children do. Where is God's plan reflected in my son?"

The audience was stilled by the query. The father continued. "I believe, that when God brings a child like Shay into the world, an opportunity to realize the Divine Plan presents itself. And it comes in the way people treat that child."

He told the following story: Shay and his father had walked past a park where some boys Shay knew were playing baseball. Shay asked, "Do you think they will let me play?"

Shay's father knew that most boys would not want him on their team. But the father understood that if his son were allowed to play it would give him a much-needed sense of belonging.

Shay's father approached one of the boys on the field and asked if Shay could play. The boy looked around for guidance from his teammates. Getting none, he took matters into his own hands and said, "We are losing by six runs, and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team and we will try to put him up to bat in the ninth inning."



In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shay's team scored a few runs but was still behind by three. At the top of the ninth inning, Shay put on a glove and played in the outfield. Although no hits came his way, he was obviously ecstatic just to be on the field, grinning from ear to ear as his father waved to him from the stands. In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shay's team scored again. Now, with two outs and bases loaded, the potential winning run was on base. Shay was scheduled to be the next at-bat. Would the team actually let Shay bat at this juncture and give away their chance to win the game?

Surprisingly, Shay was given the bat. Everyone knew that a hit was all but impossible because Shay didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, much less connect with the ball. However, as Shay stepped up to the plate, the pitcher moved a few steps to lob the ball in softly so Shay could at least be able to make contact. The first pitch came and Shay swung clumsily and missed.

The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly toward Shay. As the pitch came in, Shay swung at the ball and hit a slow ground ball to the pitcher. The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and could easily have thrown the ball to the first baseman. Shay would have been out and that would have ended the game. Instead, the pitcher took the ball and threw it on a high arc to right field, far beyond reach of the first baseman. Everyone started yelling, "Shay, run to first. Run to first." Never in his life had Shay ever made it to first base. He campered down the baseline, wide-eyed and startled. Everyone yelled "Run to second, run to second!"

By the time Shay was rounding first base, the right fielder had the ball. He could have thrown the ball to the second baseman for a tag. But the right fielder understood what the pitcher's intentions had been, so he threw the ball high and far over the third baseman's head. Shay ran towards second base as the runners ahead of him deliriously circled the bases towards home.

As Shay reached second base, the opposing shortstop ran to him, turned him in the direction of third base, and shouted, "Run to third!" As Shay rounded third, the boys from both teams were screaming, "Shay! Run home!" Shay ran home, stepped on home plate and was cheered as the hero, for hitting a "grand slam" and winning the game for his team.

"That day," said the father softly with tears now rolling down his face, "the boys from both teams helped bring a piece of the Divine Plan into this world."

Here is the second story.

During the bad old days of Communist rule in Romania, a Romanian pastor was arrested. Locked in a cell, he was isolated and beaten. His interrogators threatened his life. They mocked his faith, his belief in Jesus Christ. One of the men struck the pastor and mockingly asked, 'What can your God do for you now?'

The Romanian pastor replied, "God can give me the grace to forgive you." The work of God is revealed in this pastor's word and witness.

The disciples asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

<sup>3</sup>"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.

What are the trials and troubles you face today? Lift your trials to God's throne through Christ. Ask God, through Christ, to display his power in your life today.

Say 'Amen' Somebody

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup> His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

<sup>3</sup> “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. <sup>4</sup> As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. <sup>5</sup> While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

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<sup>8</sup> His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, “Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?” <sup>9</sup> Some claimed that he was.

Others said, “No, he only looks like him.”

But he himself insisted, “I am the man.”

<sup>10</sup> “How then were your eyes opened?” they demanded.

<sup>11</sup> He replied, “The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see.”

<sup>12</sup> “Where is this man?” they asked him.

“I don’t know,” he said.