

Who's At Fault

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Date: 17 May 2020

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- [0 : 0 0] In the New Testament, we find a story, a story of a man born blind. Now, the teachers of the law wanted to trick Jesus, so they decided to bring this man to Jesus and ask a question.
- I'm going to put a pin in this for just a moment and say, I think sometime we need to have a conversation around how scriptures like this teach us to interact with people who have experienced disabling conditions.
- But unfortunately, this doesn't get to be that sermon, and I definitely shouldn't be the one to preach it. There should be some people who have lived experience, but hopefully one day we'll have that. So back to our story.
- This man was born blind, and the prevailing of the wisdom of the day was that if there is a disabling condition like this, then it needs to be fixed, and it likely, at its source, is sin.
- So the Pharisees and Sadducees brought this man to Jesus and asked Jesus, Jesus, who sinned? Was it this man or his parents? Jesus neatly sidestepped that little trap and said, Neither.
- [1 : 1 4] But if you watch, you can see God's mercy and God's action here today. So then Jesus spin in the mud and put some clay on the guy's eyes, told him to go wash in a pool, and eventually he was healed.
- But we see in this story the same things that the friends in the book of Job experience, and we see this theology in our lives today, too.
- It's this age-old equation that equates blessings with good, upright behavior and suffering with sin.
- We're going to ask a question today and kind of wrestle with, Who's at fault when I suffer? I'm going to acknowledge that I'm punching a little bit above my weight on this sermon.
- This is some pretty meaty theological subjects, and it also deals with some things that are very deep when it comes to our own personal feelings and emotions and traumas.
- [2 : 2 3] So if there's something that I say that you don't agree with, then let's wrestle about it. Send me an email. Let's talk. Because what I would really like is for this to be part of a conversation of us growing our theology deeper and where I can also grow and learn, too.
- So we've been doing this series on Job. Pastor Anthony preached the first two sermons of these, and he looked into the nature of God, how God's character affects what God can or cannot do.
- He took us on a journey to wrestle with our approach to suffering and how God enters into this suffering today. Today, we're going to look at this problem of suffering from a little bit of a different angle.
- Today, with Job's friends, we're going to ask, whose fault is our suffering? The premise of the book of Job is that it's a wisdom book, and it's kind of written like a play with a prologue and an epilogue and has many soliloquies all the way through.

It talks about suffering and represents in many ways the accepted wisdom of the age from a number of different traditions. At the beginning of the book, God is in his court with the angels, and he talks about his man Job, who is blameless and upright.

[3 : 40] And the accuser comes and says, yeah, he's blameless and upright because you've given him many, many good things. So God allows Job to experience loss and suffering. He had this experience where within a few moments, servants from many different places came to tell him that his cattle were all gone, his servants were all gone, his sheep were all gone, his camels were all gone, and his children were all killed.

In the blink of an eye, Job had nothing. But in that, he remained a person of integrity despite his suffering. And again, we see a scene with God and the accuser where the accuser says, of course Job isn't going to curse you.

Of course Job remains upright. He remembers the blessings that you've given him, and he himself is still alive. And there could be possibilities of restoration and redemption.

So God allows Job to be physically afflicted. He's so afflicted that he's covered with sores from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. The Bible describes him as using a broken piece of pottery to scratch his body and sitting in ashes.

And it's in this scene that his wife sees him, sees how pitiable he is, and she's just had enough of it. She says, look, why don't you just curse God and die? Be done with this.

[5 : 03] It's in this space that his friends come to visit. They see him in his pitiable state and just weep. So for seven days and seven nights, they sit by his side in silence.

And after the seventh night, Job just downloads. He talks about where he is and how much he's suffering. His friends see this as an opportunity.

So they begin speaking back to Job and speaking what they believe. And then this begins this multi-chapter section of the book in verse and prose where Job and his friends go back and forth and back and forth.

Now again, these friends are pretty much espousing the wisdom of the time. The ideas about God and why suffering happens. And this overarching perspective is that God is a God of justice.

And so if things are happening, it's because he is governing his world by this principle of justice. So if something's happening to you, it's a result of this justness.

[6 : 12] It's a correct response to the action. So if you do good, you will be blessed. And if you are blessed, it's because you have been good, upright, and pure, and holy, and righteous.

But the inverse is, if you're not being blessed, it's because you did something wrong. It's because it's the result of your suffering. It comes from your actions, your sin, your badness.

This simple theological equation is how they think God works. So Job's friends call him out. I'm sure they mean it with love, but you know, they're saying basically, it stinks that you're suffering.

And we can see how great your suffering is. And trust me, they wax lyrical on that. We feel so bad for you, but it must have been because you sinned.

But they say, if you repent, God will be there for you. His friend Eliphaz says, blessed is the one whom God corrects.

[7 : 12] So don't despise the discipline of the Almighty, for he wounds, but he also binds up. He injures, but his hands also heal. So Job, I'm sorry that you're suffering, but if you just repent and understand that God is disciplining you for something you've done, God will take the things that he's done to you, and he will heal them for you.

Bildad says, that it wasn't just Job that was sinned, but probably his children as well. They did things that were not right before the Lord. Look, God is just. If you had been pure and upright, God would take up your cause.

He says this, surely God does not reject one who is blameless or strengthen the hands of the evildoers. Like Job, if you were good, God would be blessing you because God does not build up and bless people who don't do right.

Zophar, the third friend in Job 11, goes on this soliloquy that I'm just going to read for you because it's pretty intense, and I'm speechless sometimes.

He says this, can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than the heavens above. What can you do? They are deeper than the depths below.

[8 : 32] What can you know? Their measure is longer than the earth. It's wider than the sea. And if he comes along and confines you to prison and convenes a court, who can oppose him?

Surely he recognizes deceivers. And when he sees evil, does he not take note? But the witness, witless can become no more wise than a wild donkey's colt can be born human.

Yet, if you devote your heart to him, if you stretch out your hand to him, if you put away the sin that is in your hand and allow no evil to dwell in your tent, then free of fault, he will lift up your face.

You will stand firm and without fear. You will surely forget your trouble. Recalling it only as water's gone by. Job, God's ways are way above our ways.

And seriously, like, he's portraying God as this giant Santa in the sky with a naughty and nice list, being able to determine who is deceiving him and who is not, and meeting out punishment for the people who are not living a right and godly life.

[9 : 44] But, if you repent and turn back, if you make sure that there's no more evil where you are, God will be for you again.

And, he's going to make all these things that have happened to you like nothing, just like a nice faded memory. Job's friend's basic arguments are dangerous.

dangerous. And, Job counters with each one of them claiming that he is blameless. And, back and forth this goes for chapters. Midway through this, another friend, Elihu, comes along.

Elihu's a bit younger and so he just sits and listens for a while. But, finally, after Job has again refuted that he is blameless in this, Elihu steps up. He is aiming to take Job down a peg.

He starts with saying, look, I was young and I listened but you need to be quiet and listen to my wisdom now. God is so far above you and he knows a way more. Look, if you are as innocent as they say, as you claim, then maybe this is about God saving you from some sin to come or to stop something from happening to you later on.

[10 : 52] You don't know. And, again, Job protests his innocence but no matter how much he does, his friends continue to call him out. And, it's because of this equation, this understanding that God is just and if something is happening to you, the blame for it rests squarely on your shoulders.

To be real, as much as I recoil from Job's friends, I have legit heard verses from this taken out of context and used to teach people on the, this is, that this is who God is, that this is truth.

And, I see a lot of who we are in what they're saying. despite what we've seen in Jesus, despite the story of the man born blind, we still believe this equation.

We still believe that we do the right things and God will bless. And, if there isn't blessing, it's because we're not living the right life.

one of the things I notice in this story that I think really resonates with who we are, and it's a little bit of a sidebar here, but it's that we are bad at being with people who are suffering.

[12 : 08] I mean, kudos to Job's friends for being with him in silence for seven days and seven nights. But, even when that was over, they felt free to tell him what they thought should be happening.

And we are not that different from him. We have not learned that much since those friends. We find it hard to see somebody suffering without trying to fix it or them.

We give reasons or platitudes or prescriptions partly from our own discomfort. We make assumptions as to what people need without really listening. And we need to learn how to be with our friends and loved ones through times that don't make sense or feel rough, especially now.

Grief takes longer than a week to bear out. And prolonged illness or trauma can have effects that last a lifetime. We need to unlearn some of this bad theology and practice in order to partner with God to bring healing and restoration and understanding and love to this world and understand what it looks like in our world.

I would love to just stop right now and talk a lot about trauma-informed care or ring theory or other ways and tools that we can use to listen and care for one another who have been through suffering.

[13 : 31] Don't have that time right now in this sermon, but we are going to be putting some resources in the chat right now. Take some time. Read it. It's pretty easy to get a handle on and it's a great thing to be keeping in mind, especially as we are navigating through this time of COVID-19.

So sidebar side, as I reread the story of Job, it's very clear to me we haven't come very far theologically. Despite the fact that we've seen God incarnate as Jesus and despite the revelations of the Holy Spirit that we've had, we still use this logic and this equation.

That if I put in the right things, then God will respond in the right way. That if I'm godly and righteous and pure, then I will be blessed. And if I am suffering, then what?

Then I haven't put in the right things? Then I'm not pure and holy and blameless? My mother developed an illness with menopause that was pretty severe mental illness that happened.

And so for about 10 years of my life, this woman who had been a pillar of strength, a woman who had counseled many people, who had traveled across oceans to serve the Lord, this woman was really struggling with even wanting to live.

[14 : 53] And over and over again, we heard from people this mentality that clearly she must have some unforgiveness or sin in her life or God wouldn't have allowed this to happen.

or maybe it is Satan attacking her, but it's clearly something that God is allowing to teach her. These same things that we're hearing from Job's friends.

One day, my mom was in church and yet one more person told her, you know, there's clearly some unforgiveness or unrepentance saying, like if you just go to the Lord and you just repent, then God will forgive you and heal you.

And I'm sure that person meant incredibly well for my mom, but my mom was just devastated. She got in the car with my dad afterwards and she said, you know, the next person that says that to me, I'm going to say, how about I punch you in the face?

Because then I'll have something to repent for. Will God heal me then? And as amusing as that anecdote is, it just points to this bigger picture that we are still saying these things over and over again.

[16 : 00] And it is in and through our churches and it's based on an incorrect understanding of who God is. I can think of no better example for this equation in action than the rhetoric in the church around the purity movement.

I'm a single woman of a certain age. I grew up in the church going through this time pretty hardcore. And over and over again, I heard this logic that if I was godly and pure and demure and chaste that God would bring me the partner of my dreams, the person I was created to be with.

I just needed to have faith and follow through on what was my job and then God would do what he was supposed to do. This theology in action, if I do what's right, God will bless me.

This causes a lot of heartache. It causes us to be people who believe we're entitled to something. I did all these things. Why hasn't God done what he's supposed to?

It also really causes pain because what is the antithesis of this? If I didn't get a spouse, what did I do wrong?

[17 : 13] Is it my sin? Am I not holy enough? Am I not pure enough? And it informs the way we judge other people too when things don't go right, leading to victim blaming and slut shaming.

You know, she was assaulted. Was she drunk? What was she wearing? Like all those questions that are devastating and harmful. We're back to the same equation.

That good equals blessing and that evil or bad equals judgment. At large, we've heard this in the church. I remember when Hurricane Katrina happened and devastated New Orleans.

I don't know how many preachers I heard say, this is God's judgment on New Orleans because of the sin that was there.

We've heard natural disasters proclaimed as God's judgment on abortion and homosexuality. When the opposite of blessing is present, the assumption is that sin must be the cause.

[18 : 18] This is also like the pernicious underbelly of the prosperity gospel. I mean, just think, some of the reasons why people go into massive amounts of debt to seem like they're prosperous has a lot to do with this idea because if I'm not exhibiting blessing, then it's tantamount to admitting that there's sin in my life.

And that leads to judgment. This theology is harmful at the best of times, but it's so damaging when we are applying it to suffering and pain.

And if we look at Jesus' character and actions, it contradicts this. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that sun rises on the evil and the good and rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous.

So contrary to this equation, suffering and blessing happen to all of us, not as a consequence of being good or evil, but as a consequence of being a human in this world, a world where God has committed to freedom and choice and where God bound their self to creation and humanity and where God is love and does not control.

So welcome to my TED talk on binary language. We often use this. Black, white, good, evil, righteous, sinful.

[19 : 42] In my experience, life has always been more complex than this. And binary language ends up being pretty unhelpful because we rarely are completely one or the other.

Mostly we are more complex than that. But by not acknowledging this, not acknowledging that we are generally not binary, it can often lead to blind spots or justifications that are not helpful.

A good example of this is around race and privilege. We can classify what Nazis did as evil. Slavery was evil. Lynching is evil. Hardcore racism is evil.

Generally, we see ourselves as good. So if I see myself as a good person and I'm called out for doing something that is racist, I'm creating cognitive dissonance.

Good did something evil. Those two cannot exist in the same space. We hear it all the time. He can't be racist.

[20 : 43] He's a good person. He serves on that charity. She can't have implicit bias. She's such a good person. Look at the way she is with those people. Living in the binary allows us to reject truths about ourselves that can reflect who we are.

And it does it to maintain the belief that we are on the whole good people. And it inhibits our ability to admit when we get it wrong. To see ourselves with sober judgment just like the book of Romans asks us to do.

And the reverse can be true too. If I inherently see myself as bad, then I can see everything that happens to me as evidence that I am unlovable and unworthy.

Binary talk enables us to stay blind to some of the truths about who we are and what we do. Because truth is we are often much more complex than binary.

That concludes my TED talk. Now back to the regular sermon. We are complex people. We are not perfectly good or perfectly evil.

[21 : 52] All of us has parts that are good and parts that are not so much. I try hard to be a kind and caring and empathetic person but to be real there are moments where I am flat out selfish.

Where I put myself first and I don't want to listen to anybody else. We all have things that trigger us, that cause us to react in some ways we wish we didn't, have secret places that we are ashamed of and none of us is truly completely 100% good.

We are an amalgam of the good and not so good and God loves all of us. And here's where the logic of Job's friends falls apart.

All of us experience blessing and suffering and our equation for blessing and suffering doesn't work when we all experience these things because none of us is blameless.

God doesn't work according to this equation which is a good thing. God loves us enough to be working in and through us to help us become who we were created to be and not stay who we were.

[23 : 07] And this doesn't come through punishment but through God's essential nature of love. God doesn't cause us to suffer in order to grow us but instead God meets us where we are and calls us loves us to something better.

But this requires us to step out of that neat binary simple equation theology and step into the mess of complexity with God.

Because if what we have been talking about over the last couple weeks is true then God isn't controlling or manipulating or domineering. God doesn't make things happen just to teach us or punish us or to stop evil but God's partnership to humanity God's essence of love means that God does not control us.

We aren't chess pieces he moves we are beings with choice and God is in the midst of suffering with us working for us all of us all the parts of us the good and the not so good.

Look at the example of Jesus where we see God's character in practice. When there was a woman caught in adultery he didn't condemn he didn't call out her sin instead he called her to something higher.

[24 : 33] When Peter betrayed God Jesus sat down with him and gave him a chance to re again affirm his commitment. and in there Jesus said feed my lambs feed my sheep this is the calling on you and it hasn't changed just because you messed up.

Jesus himself said to his disciples I have come that you might have life and have it to the full abundant full life. Jesus character is showing us that God isn't waiting for us to repent to begin the healing process but that God is working in and through our sufferings and our blessings and all points in between to bring healing and restoration and growth to call us further into who we were created to be.

Our level of faith our goodness doesn't determine whether or not God is working for our good. God is already at work already present. In this moment we don't have to pray hesitant if it's your will prayers God wills God wills wholeness and healing and abundant life.

Instead our prayers can be about aligning ourselves with what God is doing and where God is moving and partnering in restoration. When I was talking about this sermon with Joss Stephenson one of the other elders here she shared a story about a woman who had experienced a catastrophic loss.

And people would say to her over time your loss will become less powerful for you. She didn't like hearing that.

[26 : 17] She said imagine you took a two inch by two inch post-it note and almost covered it with a dark black smudge. That's what my grief is like right now.

It is all consuming. Almost the entire paper is covered by that grief. I don't want that to suddenly be like less than or taken away.

But instead I want to grow myself in relation to that grief. So let's imagine that same smudge is on a five by seven paper or an eight and a half by eleven paper or a legal pad or draft paper.

who I am and the capacity for who I am changes in relation to that grief although that grief is still there and still just as potent.

That's how I see Jesus have come that you might have life and have it to the full. This abundance. It's not like Job's friends that say suffering is forgotten when you come back to Jesus and God heals you and blesses you again.

[27 : 27] Instead it says allow God to work in and through you to enlarge your capacity so that you can grow in relation to your suffering grow into relation to everything that you've experienced to redeem and enter into the possibility of what can be.

If we live in the simple equation of blessing and suffering we leave out God's redemptive work of love. It leaves out the way God works in all things for our good to grow to help us expand to live to the full.

So we can make that choice to live in the simple binary equation where good equals blessing and suffering is our fault because of our sin and our failings and it means God has to punish us or we can choose to dive into this messy mystery and partner with God to restore and to grow and become through blessing and through suffering and all points in between who we were called to be.

Let's pray. God in this time when we're struggling to understand what it is you're doing help us choose to align with you to put away the old theology and listen to what you are doing to hear your love resonate and grow and expand us and call us to be who we could be Lord be with us in this time and as we come to your table show us again who you are to us we