

Come and See: Encounters with Jesus in the Gospel of John

A Christian Response to Suffering – John 9: 1-11

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What's the WORST thing that could happen?

As we live out our day to day lives, we probably hear, say, or think the expression, "*Oh, that's the worst!*" more than we may realize. Sometimes it may feel like we are living in a never-ending cycle of pain, suffering and misfortune. At some point in your life, you may have found yourself gasping "Is this ever going to end? When will my turn for joy, peace, healing come? – This is just the WORST."

But, in reality, while many unfortunate, or undesirable occurrences/outcomes will take place on a regular basis, which ones can truly be lumped into a category of awful, terrible, THE WORST?

It comes down to a matter of perspective doesn't it. But when you are in the middle of a serious health crisis where the diagnosis is unknown – or known, and terminal – Or when you lose a loved one, whether expectedly or unexpectedly – Or when a relationship falls apart – Or you lose your job, your home, your hope – there are hours and days and maybe years that can legitimately feel like the absolute worst. Jesus didn't mince words when he said, "In this world you WILL have trouble."

There are several different thoughts about suffering in our world today. Among world religions, there are a wide variety of responses about suffering. Some of the most popular world religions from Hinduism, Buddhism, Muslim, Sikhism to Animism view suffering as:

- *Punishment* for deeds done in a previous life and that a great deal of suffering is simply accumulated "karma" catching up with people.
- A result of *spiritual ignorance* and our inaccurate perceptions of the world and of what it means to be human and that there is a direct correlation between suffering and human attachment to worldly things and self-centeredness.
- A *way to submit* to the will of their god - that good works gives rise to the feeling that the more we suffer now, the greater our reward will be in the next life.
- Emanating from a *hex or curse* put on us by others or by the spirits toying with us or punishing us.¹

¹ <https://home.snu.edu/~hculbert/suffer.htm>

But let's look at what a Christian response might look like:

Read *John 9: 1-11*

What do we notice first? The disciples want to know WHY? Why was he born blind? Well, actually – they seem to think they know why – to them it's clear that it's a punishment for someone's sin. But whose?

The disciples' perspective was very common in 1st century Palestine and, as we've seen, is still widely accepted as a valid religious response to suffering today. But is it accurate?

Of course, there are some obvious direct '*cause and effect*' scenarios. Someone who gambles away their savings and loses their house. Someone disregards their wedding vows and loses their family. Someone steals from their employer and loses their job. Don't ask Why? Some actions have direct consequences.

But often, the cause of undesirable circumstances, or suffering, isn't so clear, is it?

In our modern day north American culture, the idea of *Karma* is still a prevalent and often attractive thought. The ideology that doing good things leads to good things happening and bad behaviour leads to bad outcomes, seems to help us make sense of the world. And even if we don't embrace this belief, we have a strong tendency to want to know WHY things happen the way they do.

Have you ever questioned; *Why this? Why now? Why me?* It's probably fair to say that we all have.

But there are inherent problems with the need we have to know WHY.

The problem that exists in the affluent and comfortable areas of the world, which we and most people we know call home, is that we often tend to view ourselves as the victims, and, if so, who is the culprit? In philosopher Charles Taylor's book, *A Secular Age*, he indicates that, while the struggle for humanity to comprehend God's ways and justice has always existed, this inclination to question God because of any suffering we perceive or experience is a relatively recent phenomena brought on by, not only our wealth, but a sense of entitlement that accompanies our wealth. Taylor recognizes that historically, people understood the weaknesses and shortcomings of humanity. Nowadays, our arrogance leads to the assumption, the demand for a comfortable, pain-free lifestyle with zero tolerance for anything or anyone that threatens that expectation.

"Moreover," Taylor argues, "we have become so confident in our powers of logic that if we cannot imagine any good reason that suffering exists, we assume there can't be one."² This thinking is based on a dangerous and limiting assertion that the loving, almighty, omniscient God should think like us, respond like us, and be understood by us. This seriously underestimates the gap between Creator and creature and unfortunately results in harmful human responses including frustration, disillusionment, and anxiety. We can become so consumed with trying to find a reasonable answer to our WHY, that it paralyzes us, preventing us from humbly coming to God recognizing, as King David did;

*"Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me."
- Psalm 23:4*

May we hear and respond affirmatively to Jesus' gentle rebuke to any preconceptions or notions we have that we need to understand the WHY.

What was Jesus' response to the disciples' question?

"Neither he nor his parents sinned."

And he follows that by offering a growth opportunity. A Christian response to suffering.

Jesus shows us here that when we face suffering – either our own or that of another, getting bogged down with answering the WHY is unnecessary and often pointless. Rather, the right questions to ask are, "How am I going to respond in way that brings glory to God? What would God have me do to show his love in this situation? How can I shine Jesus' light into this darkness?"

Jesus himself admitted in John 5:30, "By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me. We need to look to and listen to the God who promises to never leave us or forsake us (Heb 13:5).

God's sanctifying work in our lives isn't necessarily going to play out in the way we want it to, or the way we are comfortable with, or in a way we can explain or understand. But as the great cloud of witnesses referred to in Hebrews 12 could attest to, when we run with perseverance, fixing our eyes on Jesus, God is at work, accomplishing His good purposes in us. C.S. Lewis refers to this painful transformation:

² Taylor, "A Secular Age," 123.

"Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself."³

While hardships and suffering are not necessarily desired human experiences, we rest in the assurance of knowing that the creator of all things is with us and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love, who have been called according to His purpose (Rom 8:28).

"The dance of life finds its beginnings in grief. It is the way in which pain can be embraced, not out of a desire to suffer, but in the knowledge that something new will be born in the pain." – Henri Nouwen

Leslie Newbigin writes, "The only thing which can 'make sense' of a dark world is the coming of light, and the light does not come from below but from above, not from the past but from the future...like the dawning of a new day." When it comes down to it, the actual WORST thing that could happen would be to live and die without coming to recognize Jesus as the Light of the World and putting our faith, our trust, our hope in Him alone. Yes, Jesus said "In this world you will have trouble," but finished that statement with the assurance, "I have overcome the world!"

Our Christian response to suffering is that there is something better coming. That hope – that assurance – frames and shapes the way we handle hardships – and our deep and enduring hope in that is a witness to a watching world because we get the distinct privilege to shine light into darkness.

³ C.S. Lewis. Mere Christianity.

Discussion Questions

Open Up

Has there been a particularly difficult situation or season in your life where you spent maybe much time wondering and asking questions like “Why this?” “Why now?” “Why me?”

How productive or unproductive or debilitating were those questions?

Dig In

Read John 4:1-5

1. How does the phrase “but this (a man being blind from birth) happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him” make you feel?

The original Greek text lacked punctuation, and many biblical scholars suggest that a more accurate translation of this verse would read, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but so that the work of God might be displayed in his life, we must do the work of him who sent me while it is still day.”

2. How does this interpretation change the interpretation and application for you?
3. When you are in the middle of a season of suffering, hearing someone say, “Wow! God must really be doing a good thing in you” isn’t necessarily helpful. Have you experienced or offered some unhelpful ‘Christianise’ feedback? What would a more sensitive, helpful response be?

Pray

Maybe you’re dealing with a season of suffering right now – your own, or someone in your life – and if not, there is likely one upcoming (sorry – but it’s true). Pray for eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart to respond to how God would like you to show His love and shine Jesus’ light in a way that gives glory to God and strengthens His church.