

I am leading off this morning with one of the most political statements I have ever made in a sermon. Here goes. Hillary Clinton is guilty, guilty, guilty. FBI Director Comey did not declare her innocent but he may as well have done so. And what purpose was there in sharing his conclusion the day after the Fourth of July? This one has me hotter under the collar than anything has in a long time.

Admittedly, it's been a horrible news week with the shootings in Baton Rouge, St. Paul and Dallas. When you combine it with the Clinton-Comey debacle, this past week became one of the craziest, saddest weeks in a long time. There's more than enough to be frustrated, angry and even afraid from the events of this past week.

I face an interesting conundrum as a pastor. Some of you want me to talk about politics more and some want me to talk about it less. But this is no doubt true of all kinds of subjects. I rarely talk about hot button topics like abortion and homosexuality but if the text before me clearly teaches about it, I will never back down from preaching about it.

So why am I talking about the Hillary email scandal when such a modern-day topic clearly does not appear in the gospel of John. Or does it? Obviously this exact scenario is not in our two thousand year-old inspired Scripture. But that is the job of the preacher—to take this wonderful ancient text and show its continual relevance and power in our lives.

John chapter nine is the story of the man born blind who was then given sight by Jesus. It's one of the best known miracles in the gospels and the story takes up the entire chapter. But one of the results of the miracle of healing occurred when the man appeared in a trial before the Pharisees, where justice was the last thing on their mind. The Pharisees were the highest court in the land for the Jews. Of course the Jews were under Roman rule but the Romans gave them a great deal of religious freedom to operate as they pleased. For the Jews, the Pharisees were the powerful elite of their day.

So how is this story like the Hillary Clinton story? In John 9, a group of politically powerful men decided that an innocent man was guilty. Sound familiar? Do you see, it's the same story but turned on its head. Clinton was essentially declared to be innocent by the powerful elite and this man who had been born blind was declared to be guilty by those in power. They are both stories of power corrupting justice.

But let me be clear. This is not the reason this story appears in the Bible. This message will not be an anti-Hillary or anti-democrat rant any more than it will be a pro-Trump, pro-Republican tirade. Far too many pastors take the Bible and twist it to prove their political points. Have you seen the list of names on Trump's Evangelical Advisory Board?¹ I would not have trusted most of the people on this list but now I am sure not to do so. I have seen the most insane, ridiculous sermons and blog posts by pastors that have nothing to do with the Bible let alone the text they were attempting to preach about.

At the outset I wanted you to see the relevance of this passage to the daily headlines. As Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes, there is truly "nothing new under the sun." This passage is extremely relevant to last week's headlines but my application will not be that we need a better justice system. Those are possible side applications of the passage but they are most certainly not the main point. The big idea here is how to respond to great injustices. The big idea is to know who is in control when injustice continues to rear its ugly head. Should we be angry at all of the events of this past week? For certain, if you are extremely careful with it, there is room for anger. As Ryan reminded us, there is also a tremendous need for lament—for true sadness that comes from a broken heart living in a broken world. But what about fear? Naturally fear will also arise but what do we do with it? What truths do we apply to our fears, and to our anger and to our laments? Other questions also arise for this text? Why is there so much evil and suffering in the first place? Who is to blame? I trust these will become clear as we walk our way through this chapter in John.

1 As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. 4 We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. 5 As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." 6 Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud 7 and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.

Let me stop there and highlight some things. The story begins by simply seeing a man who had been born blind. I love this because the entire story began with a simple incident of noticing someone in pain. We don't know his name but we know he was blind and a beggar. What else could he do? To my knowledge, there was no culture in the first century that took care of disabled people. And that remains true for most cultures throughout the world. If you are a blind person in India, you have very few options. I know a husband and wife who are both Certified Vision Rehabilitation Therapists. The husband had been a Chiropractor but he gave that all up to pursue this career with his wife. They spend every day of their lives figuring out to help blind

people live as independently as happily as possible. They do amazing work for people who truly need help. But all this man could do was beg.

If he wasn't born into a Jewish family, he probably would have been killed. The famous Greek philosopher Aristotle was very clear about what do in such instances. "As to the exposure of children, let there be a law that no deformed child shall live."² So had he been born into a non-Jewish family it was quite likely he would have been left to die as soon as they realized he was blind.

But his Jewish parents refused to kill him. The Roman historian Tacitus recorded that the Jews "regard it as a crime to kill any late-born children."³ The Jewish historian Josephus recorded that Jewish practice "forbids women to cause abortion of what is begotten, or to destroy it afterward."⁴ His parents refused to kill their blind son. They did what they could when he was young but as an adult blind man, begging was his only means of survival.

No doubt Jesus and the disciples passed by disabled people every day. It was a common occurrence and of course Jesus healed many of them but his purpose was not to heal all of them. But for some reason, this man stood out to the disciples, so they stopped and asked Jesus a question. "*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*"

Being born blind was an example of unusual suffering so the disciples assumed it was caused by an unusual sin. Being blind was bad enough but being born blind was especially bad. Did they pull Jesus aside and ask him quietly or did they ask the question in front of the man? One can picture the disciples gathered around the blind man and engaging in this theological question in a sort of detached, clinical manner, not unlike a very sick person in a teaching hospital. You know the scene, right? The physician is followed by a dozen medical students asking questions about the patient as if the patient did not exist or else was some lifeless form on the bed. Sometimes it's just not what questions we ask but how we ask them that matters. I can only hope they asked this question in private. But the question they asked was an extremely important one. "*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*"

You see the assumptions in their question, don't you? The assumption underlying their question is that all suffering is a result of sin. Tell me—is that a true assumption? Let me work it out for you in a diagram format.

First, the Bible is clear that all suffering is caused by sin, but not in the way that the disciples meant. The only reason any suffering exists at all is due to the Fall. Adam and Eve brought sin, death and decay into the world. Suffering exists because human hearts are sinful. We steal and kill and lie to one another because we are born with sinful natures and our natural bent is to love darkness. We hardly need a reminder of this after the week we all experienced. Suffering exists because we grow old and because we get cancer and Alzheimer's and a whole host of other diseases. So put another way, all suffering is our own fault. We have to own this as ours. All suffering that exists or ever will exist is a result of sin. There is no suffering that exists outside of the large box of sin—that is, general sin in the world.

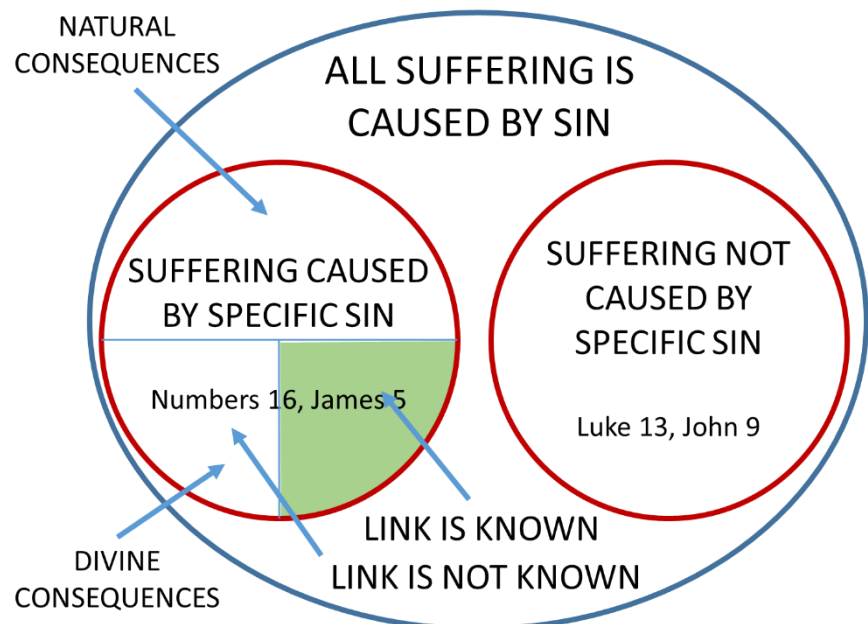
But within this larger arena, suffering can be broken down into two separate areas: suffering that is caused by specific sin and suffering that is not caused by specific sin. For example, in Numbers 16, what is called Korah’s rebellion, a leader named Korah led a revolt against Moses. The result was that the earth literally opened up and swallowed him, his entire family and anyone associate with him. When David numbered his fighting men even though he knew it was wrong, God sent an angel of the Lord who killed 70,000 men. These are examples of direct judgment for very specific sins, so we know this is a definitive category in Scripture.

But it is also very clear that not all suffering is caused by specific sin. The most obvious example is this very passage. In reply to their question, Jesus said, *“It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.* The other well-known example comes from Luke 13:1-5.

There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? 3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. 4 Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? 5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

Next, the suffering caused by specific sin can be broken down further yet. Some is a result of natural consequences and some results from divine consequences, like the example of David numbering the fighting men. Natural consequences are something like smoking. If you smoke cigarettes, the whole world knows that eventually you will suffer the natural consequences of filling your body with all of that nicotine and chemicals. If you are addicted to heroin, you will suffer obvious natural consequences.

Finally, suffering resulting from divine consequences is sometimes known but often is not known. David knew that his own sin caused great suffering. The same thing happened when his son born from his adulterous affair with Bathsheba died. But unless God specifically reveals this knowledge to you, we may never know if something we suffer is meant to be a direct divine consequence of a specific sin of ours.

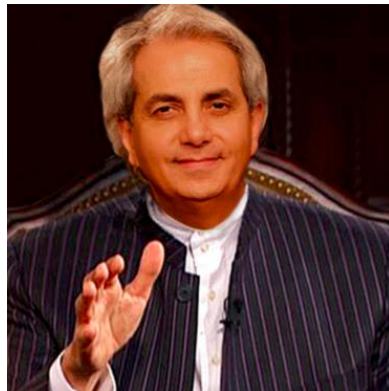


So with all of these categories in mind, can you see where the disciple's question belongs? Let's read it again. *"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"* They were assuming three things in this question:

1. That all suffering is caused by specific sin.
2. That all sin is caused by divine consequences.
3. That Jesus would know the divine cause of this man's suffering.

This is a very narrow view of suffering but one which was common in Jesus day and long before. Now I do have to point out one good thing about their question. They naturally assumed that Jesus would know the exact cause of the man's blindness. And who could know such a secret thought except God alone? This was not like asking the doctor if your sickness is caused by a virus or bacteria. This not like asking if your knee pain is caused by bursitis or torn cartilage. Those are clinical diagnoses that can be determined by scientific inquiry. But their question assumed that Jesus had divine knowledge about the man's suffering. Most of their theology about suffering is wrong but on this one point they get it exactly right. Jesus did know the exact cause of the man's suffering. The answer is very different from what the disciples believed, but at the very least they had confidence in Jesus' ability to know this secret knowledge.

You might recognize that the disciple's question is the same view shared by proponents of prosperity theology. They promise health and wealth for all who have faith. So how would they answer the disciple's question? They might just blame both the man and his parents, but especially the man. This warped theology is disgusting at every possible level. If you haven't discovered the Christian satire site, The Babylon Bee, you really have to check it out. Generally, the headline is all you need to get a good laugh. I really like this op-ed piece by Benny Hinn!



***I Honestly Can
Not Believe I'm
Still Getting
Away With This***

Op-ed by
Benny Hinn

He opines, "When I started this racket, so many years ago, I imagined getting a solid five or six years out of it before reality hit and I was shut down. I figured it was worth a try, and worth the risk. But here I am now, all these years later, and wow—still flying around the world, multiplying my net worth on the backs of a new generation of desperate people." If he wasn't actually devastating the faith of so many it might be even funnier.

You might also recognize that the disciple's question is the same view shared by Job's so-called friends. They gathered around him and pummeled in with this narrow view of suffering that made Job responsible for all of his suffering. "You did this Job! It's all your fault. God is punishing you!" Do you remember what Job called his friends? Miserable comforters are you all (Job 16:2). The disciples were just like Job's friends. You can imagine that the blind man had heard this same blame casting for his entire life. The disciples assumed that there had to be a guilty party. "Who was it Jesus—was it the man or was it his parents?" Have you ever stopped to

think about the implication of the first option? If the man's sin was the cause of his blindness that would mean that he would have had to sin while still in his mother's womb. Jewish thought allowed for such an absurdity.

I am afraid that we are sometimes also like Job's miserable comforters. We don't always do too well when we are around people who are suffering. A Christian counselor wrote a list of what not to do, based on Job's miserable comforters.

Be like Counselor Eliphaz.

- Automatically assume that sin is the cause of your friend's suffering and, therefore, God's hand of corrective discipline is upon him, thus implying that even the death of his children was somehow his fault (Ch. 4-5).
- When your spiritual friend, who is experiencing deep suffering, tries to explain his situation to you, assume he is just putting spin on his story in order to justify himself. Tell him he is full of the wind and will ultimately come to destruction anyway because he is so wicked (Ch. 15).
- Be sure to remind him that he is a great sinner who is greedy, cruel, and needs to get right with God. Leave no room for grace (Ch. 22).

Be like Counselor Bildad.

- Conclude that—because the wicked do not ultimately prosper—your friend is wicked and be sure to tell him...just in case he has forgotten (Ch. 8).
- Only use fear to motivate him to repent by repeatedly drawing his attention to the future destruction of the wicked (Ch. 18).
- When you run out of things to say then resort to name-calling; Maggot is always a pretty good choice (Ch. 25).

Be like Counselor Zophar.

- Have no mercy upon the sufferer and don't empathize with his difficult situation. If he dares to open his heart to you—revealing his deepest doubts and fears—don't give him a patient listening ear followed by gentle, probing questions. Instead, tell him he talks too much (after all, he is just whining), is lying, and only getting half of what he deserves anyway, therefore, he should repent (Ch. 11).
- Be sure to remind him that he will suffer the fate of the wicked man. Whatever you do, don't give him hope (Ch. 20).⁵

If we are to endure suffering or help others through the pain and challenges in life, we must have a right theology of suffering. But I think we might be harder on ourselves than we are on others. What I mean is that when trials come our way, often our first thought is that "God is out to get me. What did I do to deserve this situation?" We may not cast blame on others like the disciples did but we are quick to do it to ourselves.

But the answer to our pain and the answer to the Hillary Clinton and all of the shootings blazed across the news this past week is found in Jesus answer to the disciple's question. The disciples essentially asked the same question we are asking about our own trials or the brokenness of the world around us. "Lord, why all of the pain? Who is to blame for it all?"

Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. But this means that God made him be born without sight and suffer into adulthood. Or if he didn't directly cause it, he at least allowed it to happen. Why would God do that? So "that the works of God might be displayed in him."

This is a powerful answer to pain and suffering. "Why Lord? Why is this happening to me?" The Lord's answer is, "So that the works of God might be displayed in you." This is the purpose. This is the reason.

But did Jesus really mean this for all believers or just this blind man? His exact purpose for you will be different but there is always a purpose. Remember that the man's blindness was not directly related to specific sin. We would have to put it in the non-specific category. Honestly, that is probably where the majority of our pain and suffering is located as well. It's not punishment or discipline—though some will be that for sure—but there's always a purpose.

Finally, notice how the Lord speaks about some evil men in the Old Testament.

Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him also the beasts of the field to serve him (Jeremiah 27:6).

It is shocking to see that Nebuchadnezzar was called God's **servant!**
I am the Lord...who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose'; saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.'" (Isaiah 44:28).

Not only was King Cyrus the Lord's shepherd, he would also fulfill God's purposes. So if the Lord can fulfill his purposes through two pagan kings (though Nebuchadnezzar did come to faith), then he can display his works through ordinary believers like us.

Rich Maurer
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¹ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/warrenthrockmorton/2016/06/21/donald-trump-announces-religious-advisory-board/>

² Dunn PM (2006). "[Aristotle \(384–322 bc\): philosopher and scientist of ancient Greece](#)". *Archives of Disease in Childhood - Fetal and Neonatal Edition* **91**: F75–7. [doi:10.1136/adc.2005.074534](https://doi.org/10.1136/adc.2005.074534). [PMC 2672651.PMID 16371395](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/16371395/).

³ Tacitus (1931). *The Histories*. London: William Heinemann. Volume II, 183.

⁴ Josephus (1976). *The Works of Flavius Josephus, "Against Apion"*. Cambridge: [Harvard University Press](#). pp. II.25, p. 597.

⁵ <http://counselingoneanother.com/2012/01/17/how-to-be-a-miserable-comforter/>