

Why Was This Child Born Blind?

by John Piper

The Bible teaches that God is sovereign, wise, and purposeful in His control over conception and birth, and that He has a good design in disability.

Duration: 48:22

Scripture: John 9:1

Topics: "Suffering And Pain", "Gods Sovereignty"

Description

This sermon delves into the profound topic of suffering, disability, and God's purpose in the midst of hardships. It emphasizes the importance of valuing God above all else, recognizing suffering's ultimate meaning in relation to God, and understanding that God's works can be displayed through various circumstances, including disabilities. The message highlights the need to trust God's sovereignty and wisdom, even in the face of challenges, and encourages a perspective that sees suffering as an opportunity for God's glory to be revealed.

Transcript

Let's pray. Father, it's manifest from this passage of scripture that a prior exaltation of yourself as supremely valuable is necessary in order for Jesus' answer to the question to make sense. And therefore, I pray that what we have been doing together here and what is happening right now, the Holy Spirit would use to deepen and enlarge and raise and strengthen a great majestic vision of yourself as more valuable than life and more valuable than health.

I ask this in Jesus' name, amen. One of the reasons I love the Bible and believe the Bible is because the Bible deals so directly and unashamedly with the hardest things in the world. Nothing is swept under the rug in the Bible.

Not the shocking things, not the perplexing things, not the controversial things. In fact, it seems to me, especially in the Gospel of John, Jesus goes out of His way to create controversy, like doing things on the Sabbath when He could have done them on Monday. I think the reason He does that is because hard things, controversial things are moments when more of Him is revealed and more of sin is revealed.

And in that double revelation of more of Him and more of darkness, He can warn us about darkness and He can woo us to His glory. He knows what He's doing. The Bible is God's Word.

It knows what it's doing when it doesn't sweep hard things away, but just faces them and deals with them. So I love the Bible for many reasons, and that's one of them. One of the hardest things in life is the suffering of children and the suffering of parents who watch them suffer, especially when that early suffering is stretched out into a lifetime of endured loss.

Few things have brought me more satisfaction in my 31 years here than the emergence of a disability ministry with a large focus on children. It wasn't always there, and that it came into being without my twisting any arms has been profoundly gratifying to me, and I thank God for the coordinator of the disability ministry, Brenda Fisher. And I thank God for parents, dozens of parents, I'm tempted to say hundreds, who have had a heart, a mind, lips, and hands to conceive and to put forth a vision for how to understand and how to minister to disabilities, especially children born with disabilities.

But I'm going to read you a couple of paragraphs from the vision statement on our website, hopeingod.org. If you go to the disability section, you can read this. It's written by Bob Horning and John Knight, and why they wrote it will become obvious, I think, as I read these two paragraphs. So this is the kind of thing that when I read it, everything in me as a leader at Bethlehem says, thank you, thank you, thank you.

Our vision is that Bethlehem would display the supremacy of God in disability and suffering. We want our lives to reflect an unshakable joy in the Lord that allows us to embrace a life of suffering and disability for his purpose and glory. We want to shout that life with a disability and with Jesus is infinitely better than a healthy body without him.

We say with Paul that this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. We want this to be true as individuals and in the church as a body. Is disability hard? As fathers of children with rare disabling conditions, we can attest to the struggles men in particular face when their child has a disability.

Disability is expensive financially, emotionally, relationally. It seems neither light nor momentary. The male myth of self-determination, control, and independence is exploded in the face of needing to turn to medical professionals and social workers and educators on issues we never dreamed of facing.

To this we say, thank you God for not allowing us to live the lie that there is anything good or worthwhile apart from you. Thank you for showing us how much we need you. And the struggles of our wives is perhaps even deeper.

End of quote. One of the spinoffs of the ministry, as you've seen before, but I must hold it up again because it embodies so much, is this book called *Just the Way I Am, God's Good Design in Disability* by Krista Horning, one of the young ladies of our church, forward by Johnny Erickson Tata, published by Desiring God. And what this is, is simply a gathering together of passages of scripture and pictures of the disabled kids of Bethlehem.

Passages of scripture and these children who live at our church and live among us. And it is one of the most powerful things I've ever taken in my hand. So this is in our bookstore.

We're not, I'm not trying to sell anything. I'm just trying to say this is awesome. This is awesome.

And for yourself and anybody you know who may have a precious little one who's broken, the issue may be autism or Down syndrome or FASD or spina bifida or blindness or any number of rare and unpronounceable conditions, each having its own peculiar sorrows and its own peculiar way of turning

decades into what you never dreamed of. Or planned for. Married life will never be the same again, ever.

Everything is irrevocably changed. And nobody asked you or got your permission. It's not what you bargained for when you got married or had a baby.

What would I do as a pastor if I had to face these things, these children, these parents, with a Bible that said nothing about it? What would I do? What if I were just catapulted into relationships in which I just had to come up with ideas opinions, thoughts that maybe would have some remote possibility of bringing a little encouragement or comfort? What if it was just me who would care? And I am so thankful that's not the condition I'm in. This book is permeated with suffering. It's permeated with pain.

And in it, God says hundreds and hundreds of things about that and his relation to it and its origins and purposes and nature. I'm not left alone, neither are you. God has spoken something about this broken world in which we live.

What a privilege to know it. And this text is just a little piece of it that we're going to look at here. We will find--I'm going to probably spend three weeks on this chapter, so I'm not going to get very far in this message.

Like, verse 4 is as far as we'll get. There's 41 verses in this chapter. We will find that the statement in verse 5, I am the light of the world, is not a dangling, meaningless statement in this particular context.

A man born blind. We are not left in the dark about the meaning of darkness. I'm the light.

I shine on darkness, and I blast it out of existence eventually. But in the meantime, I'm all over it with light. So, this is not a throwaway sentence.

I am the light of the world. He hasn't left us alone to despair in meaninglessness. We don't look at horrors in the world and say, it's just meaningless.

Nor has he left us to create meaning. I'll just make it meaningful. He has spoken meaning.

He has interpreted darkness with his light. So, my prayer as we get into this text is very much like the message on John Knight's blog this morning. Thank you, John, and thank you, Jesus, where he said, I see what's coming in this sermon.

John has a blind son. I see what's coming in this sermon, and I'm praying. I'm praying.

I'm praying because I hated what John Piper was going to say once upon a time, and now I love it, and all I can say is God was gracious to me. So, God, would you open hearts' eyes--open hearts' eyes--in all these services so that deep-seated resistance and rebellion and anger and misunderstanding and confusion about the sovereignty of God in the little ones who are so broken won't drive us away, but draw us in where there's meaning, where there's hope. I'm glad I'm surrounded by parents who believe that because God's been pretty gentle with me.

Okay, here we are, and this text begins with Jesus seeing a man born blind. Verse 1, as he passed by, he saw man blind from birth. Now, the man is a man now, so he's been blind all of his life.

It didn't go easy for him. We know that. We'll meet his parents in verse 18.

I'm not sure what to say about them. I'm still thinking about it. I don't want to over-interpret, but we do know he was a beggar, so the parents couldn't afford to take care of him.

We see that in verse 8. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, is not this the man who used to beg? So all he could do was sit blind on the side of the road with a basket or a cup and mercy, mercy on the blind. That's all he could do, and he made enough to eat, I suppose. Jesus saw him as he passed by, and the disciples saw him see him.

So they say in verse 2, his disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Now, that question is crucial, but notice first, before we go there too quickly, notice first, this story did not begin with that question. Could have. It didn't.

This story began with Jesus seeing a blind man. That's what it says. So they saw him see him.

They saw him attend to him with a glance or a look or something, and then they're on it. That's the way it begins. It begins with Jesus seeing, and then they see him see, and they're into the question about what's the meaning of this blindness.

And so I'm going to pause here for just a moment and plead with you, and I'm thinking children, teenagers especially, and adults, see disability. See it. Not like the Levite and the priest who see the Samaritan and, I mean, the Jewish person beat up on the side of the road, did a massacre, and then just walked to the other side.

This is so in us, is it not? We don't know what to say. So we see, and we cross the road. We see, and we look away.

We see. You're not seeing the way Jesus saw when that happened. So my plea is, trust God to give you what you need in that moment, and don't turn away.

See, see, move toward, not away. This is, we're, it's natural to move away. We're not natural.

We're Christians. We have the Spirit of Christ within us. That's what it means to be Christian.

We are counter-natural. We resist natural. So I'm preaching to myself here.

Lean toward and see. Go ahead. Make the mistakes.

I'm going to see what happens when they do. So they saw Jesus' attention to the blind man, and they ask for an explanation, right? Verse 2, Rabbi, we see you seeing this man. Whose sin, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Now, that's probably not the most compassionate thing to say at this moment, and you're not going to say the right thing either.

You're not. This, this church is full of parents who will have mercy on you. They will forgive your mistakes.

If you run away from every opportunity to make a mistake, you will be the most isolated, safe, boring, uncaring person imaginable. We're Christians. We believe in forgiveness.

We believe in making lots of mistakes on the way to becoming a loving person. So they blew it, I think. I don't think that was a good thing to say at that moment.

There were lots of other things that would have been more, more caring than that, but Jesus was so merciful to them. He didn't say, shut up. There's a suffering person here.

You're asking me to explain his suffering right here in front of him? He didn't say that. He just took them where they were. So they wanted an explanation, and he's going to give them one.

He's going to turn their categories around. He's going to answer their question, but not in the terms they asked it. Jesus does this a lot, just takes us where we are.

We ask our question, and he says, okay, I think I can see deep into where you're coming from, and here's the way to ask and answer that question. So he answers their question in different categories. What are their categories? Their categories are, what caused this? We want an explanation in terms of causes, right? Who sinned, this man or his parents? What was the cause in the past that this baby was born blind? Is it punishment for the parent's sins, or is it punishment for the baby who somehow inherited the sin and was sinning in the womb somehow? Which of those is causing this? We want an explanation in terms of causes, but Jesus isn't going to go there, and the way he answers that is very helpful.

Oh, it's something to learn here. There's so many things to learn here. Jesus says to their question, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? He answers, in effect, present suffering doesn't correlate with past sinning, often.

I'll say it carefully. Here's his answer. It was not, in verse 3, Jesus answered, it was not that this man sinned or his parents.

So just stop there and let that sink in. You've given me two possibilities. Neither is right.

I cannot answer your question, because neither is right. That means this suffering, this disability cannot be correlated with a parental sin or a child's sin. I just said so.

It is not that this man sinned or his parents. Now, pause here and think. We know from other passages in the Bible that sin is the cause of suffering, but not specific sins in your life correlated with the specific sufferings in your life.

Had there never been any sin, there never would have been any suffering in the universe. That there was sin coming into the world through Adam brought suffering with it. Catastrophic suffering at every level.

And we are to learn from the nature and the horrors of physical suffering about the nature and the horrors of moral evil. Oh, he could have expatiated a long time on where this blindness came from, and he doesn't go there at all. That will not be helpful here.

He disconnects this blindness from that sinning. He would be very happy to say, I'm sure, that had Adam not sinned, this baby would not be blind. He would say that.

But that's not the question. The question is, I want a specific person's sin, parent or child, correlated with a specific disability, and he says it's not there. That's important.

Ministering to each other, that's very important. You can't walk into anybody's life and say with a certainty, because you did this, this is your suffering. Now there's some obvious ones, like if you tried to steal a bank and they shot you in the arm and had to be amputated.

Okay, that missing arm for the rest of your life would be owing to robbing that bank. Those kinds of things are pretty clear, and there are others that are clear. Most of them are not clear, and Jesus is saying, watch out.

Don't go there. It's not the decisive explanation. So he has an explanation.

Oh, he does, but he's not going to give them the one they thought was the explanation. What Jesus does is say, I'm not going to deal with explanation in terms of causes. I'm going to deal with explanation in terms of purposes.

Okay, the categories are going to shift. You've asked about causes. I'm going to tell you about purposes.

It was not, I'm at verse three again, it was not that this man's sin or his parents, now here comes his answer, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. So the explanation lies not in past causes but future purposes. Now let me raise an objection here that I don't think I've ever tried to answer.

I've preached on this text before, at least once, and I didn't read that sermon, so I prepared a new sermon. I'll see if I can learn something new, and I didn't try to answer this objection before. So here's, I want to answer an objection.

Here's the way it goes. There are untold numbers of pastors, teachers, and lay people who cannot stand what this text seems to say. Namely, that God willed for this baby to be born blind with a view to demonstrating the works of God through this child decades later.

They can't stand that, this abomination to believe that God would do that. And to escape from the conclusion that that's what this text says, they draw attention to the fact that maybe Jesus is not talking about a purpose but simply a result. I've read this objection.

So when he says, it was not that this man sinned or his parents, but, instead of reading the next clause as a purpose, he would just read it as a result, but the result of the blindness will be used by God to show His work. God didn't do anything to bring about the blindness for a purpose. He just found the blindness and showed His work.

He used the blindness. He used the blindness. He didn't bring it about.

He used it when He found it because it just goes so deeply against their preferences that their kind and loving God would ordain that a baby be born blind. Now, I have three responses to that objection, and I hope they will take us deeper into what Jesus is saying. It won't work.

That's my response. That way of interpreting verse 3 won't work for three reasons. Number one, the disciples are asking for an explanation of the blindness.

They're asking for an explanation of the blindness. But if you say God had no purpose, no design, no plan in that baby being born blind, but only found it later and put it to use for His glory, you have not answered their question. It's not an explanation.

It's the avoidance of an explanation, which isn't what this text is doing. This text is giving an explanation. That's my answer, number one.

Number two, God knows everything that's happening in the formation of a fertilized egg. He knows everything. He knows the chromosomal, genetic makeup of every sperm and the egg.

He's totally in charge of what eggs get planted and what don't. He's totally in charge of what sperm successfully fertilizes the egg. He can see it all, and He can see if there's a little glitch in this DNA spiral that's going to result.

If it matches with this egg, it's going to produce blindness. He knows that. This is not--we're talking about God here.

He knows the genetic condition of the sperm and the egg, and He can simply say, don't go there. We're not going to conceive this time because it would make a blind baby. He can say that.

And if He doesn't say it, then we could use words like permit. He permitted this natural sadness, brokenness to happen. But ponder the word permit for a moment.

If God sees and knows blindness is on the way here, and He says, I could stop it, and He decides not to, is He deciding for a reason? Or is He just saying, I've got no reason. I know what I'm doing. I'm just doing it.

This is God. This is God. God doesn't do things willy-nilly.

If God permits this union, knowing it will produce blindness, whether you use the word permit or cause, it's purposeful. It's purposeful. I am going to let it happen because I have a design.

I have a plan. I have a purpose for this life. That's my second answer.

He knows. He knows. You cannot make Him a finder of blindness.

Like, oh, here's a blind person. Have no idea where he came from, and I had no design in it. You can't do that.

That will not work in the Bible or in this text. And here's my third response. If you try to deny God's sovereign, wise, purposeful control over conception and birth, you have a head-on collision with Exodus 4.11 and Psalm 139.13. I'll read those to you.

The Lord said to Moses, Who made man's mouth? Who makes him mute or deaf or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Or Psalm 139.13. You formed my inward parts. You knitted me together in my mother's womb. I am not going to walk up to any of these children at any stage in their life and say, He didn't mean you.

You could shoot me dead before I'll say that. He meant you. He loves you.

He's got a purpose for you. God's good design in disability, written by Christ. So there's my objection answered.

I don't buy it. I think it's weaseling. I think it's wrong.

I think it's unhelpful. I think this text in time will be felt and received as sweet, even if it feels hard at certain stages, just like it did for John when he said, I hated it. I hated it for years.

And now it's my life. Why do you think his blog is called The Works of God? It's straight out of verse three, that the works of God might be manifest. As he walks with his what now 16-year-old son, whom we all remember, and Pauly was born without any eyes.

Now, this is not the whole explanation of suffering or of disability. There are dozens of relevant passages in the Bible and so many more important points to make. But in this passage, verse three, and this purposeful word is massively important.

Let me draw out one or two other things as we move toward a close. We're going to pick up in the coming messages, questions like, why did he spit on the ground? This is really gross. Why did he make mud? What puts the mud thing? Why did he tell him to go wash in a pool called scent? Why did he say we must work while it is day? Night comes when no one can work.

Why are there 41 verses of controversy unleashed by this event? Those are the kind of questions I'm still working on for the next messages on this text. So, I want to say one more main thing. The main truth in verse three, second half of the verse, the main truth in these words, the blindness is that the works of God might be displayed in him.

The main truth of that verse is suffering can only have ultimate meaning in relation to God. That's the way I'd say it. You can say it a lot of different ways.

The blindness is that the works of God might be displayed in him means suffering can only have its ultimate meaning in relation to God. Jesus says the purpose of this blindness is to put the works of God on display. Now, for that to work as an explanation, you have to value God above everything.

You have to value God above your health and your kid's health. You have to value God above life because you're going to lose kids, grandkids. It's just an argument that won't work.

It won't work. It carries no weight for many people because they don't have God as their supreme all-encompassing anything. Hallowed be your name.

May your glory fill the earth like the waters cover the sea is the main point of my life in this universe. That's the most important thing in the world to me. If that's not where you're moving this argument, I don't care if his works are shown in my baby.

God is so patient with us. That's the meaning of John Knight's life. He's just so patient with us.

There's not a person in this room who doesn't have blind spots, theological blind spots. That may be yours, may not. You may have another one.

If I knew what they were, I'd get rid of them, but you have to show me what mine are. God doesn't blow you away. He doesn't write you off.

There's so many words spoken by suffering people that we call around here words for the wind. That's a text from Job 6 where you say things and you're standing in a hospital room. You don't have to correct those words.

This is all wrong. You don't need to correct them. Just let them go.

Eight years later, they're going to change their mind. I met a man who had a 17-year-old son about the mind of a six-month-old. He had a van built for him and a wheelchair.

This 17-year-old kid's the life of the party. Just all smiles, radiant, couldn't talk at all, but happy. I asked him, how long did it take you to be okay with this son? He said, eight years.

So, we need to really cut a lot of slack and let a lot of words go and just keep leaning in. Jesus meant when He said, in order that the works of God might be displayed, He meant, I'm going to heal him. Now, be careful here.

I don't think there's anything in verse three that requires that He heal him. This blindness is so that the works of God might be displayed in him. In this text, it's going to be healing.

Is it always? Let me read you another very similar situation. This is Paul's thorn in the flesh, as you are familiar with in 2 Corinthians 12. And now, Paul, we don't know what it is, and I'm so thankful God didn't tell us what it is.

It's just a thorn in the flesh. And so, it's fleshy, and it's thorn, it hurts. I want to get rid of it.

And so, he says, Father, please heal me, heal me, heal me three times, big, strong, faith-filled prayer. And here's the answer in verse nine of 2 Corinthians, my grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness. Now, that's exactly the same purpose as John 9, 3, minus healing.

My power is going to shine all over you as I sustain you in your thorn. We might wish that the works of God were always works of healing. Often, they are.

I think you should pray for every sick person you know to be healed. Ask kingdom grace to be brought in and gifts of healing to be spread in the church. Totally, God will be magnified in healings.

Let there be more. But woe to us if we think that the works of God that are to be displayed in and through disabilities are only works of healing. There are more majestic works.

Yes, there are. At least from our standpoint, healing is a piece of cake because God does it all. But if God doesn't heal my son, then the miracles involve something so deep in me.

It's a lot harder than healing. I'm going to close like this. Why, in verse 4, do Jesus say, we must work the works of him who sent me while it is day? Night is coming when no one can work.

Why do you say that? Two reasons that I see. One, I am going to do the works of God. We must work the works of him.

We just said we want his works to be displayed. And now he says, we, we must do the works of him who sent him. So Jesus is saying, I'm going to make the mud.

I'm going to put it on his eyes. I'm sending him to the pool. And when they ask who healed him, he's going to say, Jesus healed me.

And he'd be right. The works of God are the works of Jesus. That's the first meaning of we must work.

Here's the second one. While it is day, night is coming when no one can work, which has probably layers of meaning. Here's the most important one.

Very soon, I'm finished with my healing work, and I do my dying work. I cease to do my rescuing from suffering work, and I enter into the enduring of suffering work. I leave the day work of deliverance and go into the night work of being handed over by my father to some amazing works of God, like wrath removal, guilt removal, sin removal, hell destruction, death destruction, Satan defeat.

I'm moving into night where I have ceased to heal anybody, and I will heal every disease that will come to me in due time. It's an amazing thing. Night comes when nobody can work.

So, picture this. It struck me. So, Jesus now moves away from triumphant healing work to apparently defeated death work and being lacerated and being crowned with thorns and being spit upon.

And his disciples say, who sinned that this man would experience that? And the answer is not, he did, because he didn't ever. We did. That's the answer.

It's not a bad question. Who sinned that Jesus should suffer this way? He didn't. I did.

So, he does his work for me in doing no more work, removing wrath, lifting guilt, providing righteousness, defeating death, and finally removing all suffering for those who trust him. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, not some, and death will be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

Revelation 21, 4, that was bought at Calvary. We are healed by his stripes, just not right away, every time. All pain, all of it will be gone, because he ceased to do his work and went into the night of suffering.

And over every sorrow and disability and loss that has been embraced with faith, for the glory of God, will fly this banner. This slight, momentary affliction is working for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

So, may God grant you eyes to see the display of his works in his son's suffering, your suffering, your children's suffering. See them as an expression of his love. Let's pray.

That's the miracle, Lord, of all the miracles I could ask for in this room right now. I ask for the miracle of seeing the works of God in our suffering as love. Your purposes for us are not evil.

We embrace your sovereign wisdom and goodness. Oh, give strength, give strength to those who suffer most. Give compassion to those who suffer less.

And build this church, oh God, into a very compassionate, outreaching, enfolding of every kind of person, including the disabled around whom we sometimes don't know what to say. I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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