

GOOD AND BEAUTIFUL GOD SERMON SERIES

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR SMALL GROUPS

5 & 6 JUNE 2021

GOD IS GOOD... ALL THE TIME?

Scripture: John 9:1-4, Romans 8:14-23

The recommended time allocation for your group meeting is:

If you meet weekly :

- Worship through song (10 mins)
- Discussion - 1 session worth of core questions (40 mins)
- Discussion - 1 session worth of additional questions (30 mins)
- Sharing, Prayer, Fellowship (30 mins)

If you meet fortnightly :

- Worship through song (10 mins)
- Discussion - 2 sessions' worth of core questions (60 mins)
- Optional - additional questions (10 mins)
- Sharing, Prayer, Fellowship (30 mins)

Core Questions for Discussion

(If your group meets fortnightly, combine Core Questions of two sessions and choose one Further Question from either session.)

1. In John 9, we read that even Jesus' disciples thought that the blind man's sinfulness led to his disability. However, Jesus denies this incorrect assumption, and uses the man's blindness to address a theological point about salvation.

A) From v1-4; According to Jesus, why was this man blind? What did Jesus subsequently do for him and what was the blind man's response?

- Jesus' response (v.3) has two elements. First, he emphatically states that this man's disability is not a consequence of his sin nor of his parents' sin. Second, Jesus states that this man's disability does not fall outside God's wise and good purpose, but rather, that "the works of God might be displayed in Him"
- Subsequently, Jesus healed the man of his blindness and the man spread the word of his healing (his neighbours and subsequently the Pharisees heard about it)

B) What wrong ideas about suffering does v.1-4 dispel?

- This passage explains that a specific instance of suffering is not directly a result of an act of sin (not your sin, nor your ancestors' sin). While the Bible does draw a link between sin and suffering at the general or universal level, this passage makes clear that there is no guaranteed, direct, one-to-one correlation between an individual's sin and an individual's suffering. (See sidebox for further explanations).

- The absence of a one-to-one link between individual sin and individual suffering is reiterated in Luke 13:1-5. In that passage, the Bible makes clear that those who suffer more terribly are not necessarily more sinful.

The disciples assume, like most Palestinian Jews of their day, that sin and suffering are intimately connected. In one sense, they are correct; they are simply working out the entailments of the fall (Gen 3). If rabbis argued that there is no death without sin (Ezek 18:20) and no suffering without guilt (Ps 89:32), Paul in the New Testament would certainly agree (Rom. 1–2; 3:10ff.). The Bible does give such generalizing statements about the origin of the human race’s maladies.

However, it is beyond biblical evidence to make tight connections between the sins and the sufferings *of an individual*. Yes, a specific illness or experience of suffering *may possibly* be the direct consequence of a specific sin (see John 5:14, 1Cor 11:30, or Miriam’s revolt in Num 12). At the same time, numerous biblical texts flatly deny that an individual instance of illness or suffering is *invariably* due to a specific sin (Job; Gal. 4:13; 2 Cor. 12:7).

In this instance, the disciples erroneously presuppose the tightest possible connection – this specific individual is suffering from blindness, therefore some specific, individual sin must have been the antecedent cause. Because he was born blind, it must be that either he sinned in the womb (certainly regarded as possible by some Jews), or his parent sinned in some way that implicated him (e.g. when a pregnant woman worships in a pagan temple). These assumptions are shown to be incorrect. On this point, the disciples have not progressed beyond Job’s ‘miserable comforters’.

Jesus responds differently. He does not disavow the *generalizing connection* between sin and suffering, but Jesus does completely disavow the *one-to-one connection* between an individual’s suffering and an individual’s sin. Ultimately, the blindness from birth was not outside the sweep of God’s control, and therefore not outside of God’s purpose.

- adapted from D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, pp.361–362.

Further notes on John 9

- A major emphasis in John 9 is that Jesus is the light of the world (v.5) who gives true sight (vv.39-41).
- The irony in vv.35-41 is that the Pharisees, who accused the blind man of being a sinner, thought that they could see and regarded themselves as spiritually superior. However, they were actually the ones who were sinners and spiritually blind.
- The blind man, who was considered by the crowds to be a sinner, was given the gift of both physical sight and spiritual sight. He was the one who could truly see Jesus for who he really was - the Son of Man (v.35).
- Through the healing of the blind man, Jesus drives home the point that He is the one who is in charge of salvation and grants spiritual sight - and that is a very good thing.

2. Let's look at Romans 8:14-23. Paul isn't a stranger to suffering especially for the gospel, yet he consistently affirms God's goodness even in the midst of suffering.

A) What is the basis of our confidence in God's goodness amidst suffering (vv.14-18)?

- Those of us who have yielded to and are led by the Spirit have been adopted as God's children. It is through the Spirit that we can call God our Abba Father (vv.14-16).
- As children of God, we are joint heirs with Jesus, the Son of God (v.17).
- As co-heirs with Christ, it is expected that, like Christ, we will experience both present suffering and impending glory (v.17). And while we experience both of these, the suffering is of little worth compared to the glory (v.18).
- We can be confident because Jesus' death and resurrection is the shape of the Christian life - just as we are certain that Christ has risen in glory, we can also be certain that we too will be made alive in our mortal bodies (8:10-11), and that there is glory that awaits us.
- "The suffering of the present obscures the status of God's children that believers currently possess. In this period of suffering, however, believers can nevertheless be confident that they are God's adoptive children because of the presence of God's Spirit among them. The Spirit serves as the "firstfruit," or guarantee, of the glorious bodily resurrection, of the restoration of all creation, and of the status of believers as God's children (8:23, 29). The Spirit also helps believers in their weakness in various ways, but prominent among them is the Spirit's intercession in the midst of their suffering (8:26-27). Although believers will not fully experience the benefits of being children of God until the future resurrection, therefore, God's love is nevertheless evident to them in the troubled present through the assistance of God's Spirit." -Frank Thielman, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p.397.

B) What else, apart from humanity, experiences suffering? Is this suffering meaningless? (see vv.19-23)

- All of God's creation is suffering in the present, being subjected to futility and decay as a result of the Fall of Humanity (Genesis chap. 3) (vv.20-21).
- The imagery of creation groaning as in childbirth (v.22) shows that suffering is not hopeless or purposeless. Rather, the suffering and pain caused by birth pangs is temporary, and gives way to a far greater joy in the arrival of a newborn child. As John 16:21 succinctly states, "When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world".
- In the same way, though we observe creation presently suffering and groaning, Scripture assures us that a birth is taking place, that soon all creation will go forth into a glorious freedom (v.21).

C) Should we as Christians seek to avoid suffering at any cost? Is there a legitimate place for suffering as we live out our lives before a good God?

- We should not.
- V.17 draws a close link between suffering with Christ and being glorified with Christ. As co-heirs with Christ, we should expect to suffer as Christ did, and likewise we will be glorified as Christ is.
- Suffering as Christ suffered is a normal and expected part of Christian life. For instance:
 - Jesus affirms that his disciples will face trouble in this present life; but we need not fear for our Master has already overcome (John 16:33).
 - The call to be a Christian is a call to deny ourselves even to the point of taking up a cross, which is a Roman instrument of judicial punishment and torture (Mark 8:34-38).
 - As Jesus faced persecution from his opponents, so we as his disciples should be prepared to share in Christ's sufferings and standing firm amidst hostility from those who oppose Jesus and his gospel, i.e. sharing in Christ's sufferings (John 15:18-29, Philippians 3:8-11, 2Timothy 3:12, 1Peter 2:21, 4:16).
- The examples above refer to suffering that arises because we are followers of Christ. This is suffering due to persecution or opposition from human or spiritual forces, by virtue of being Christians.
- Suffering may also arise simply from the fact that we are humans living in a fallen world (8:20-21). This includes suffering due to illnesses, natural disasters, and other troubles of life - these come upon both Christians and non-Christians.
 - V20 indicates that creation has been subjected to this by God. The brokenness of this present creation results from God's just judgment on human sin and rebellion. This is the generalizing connection between sin and suffering (see Q1 and box above).
 - For clarity, this is not to say that God specifically wills certain disasters, e.g. COVID is not God's specific judgement on a specific country. In other words, there is no guaranteed one-to-one connection between a particular sin and a particular experience of suffering.

D) Based on Scripture, what attitudes toward suffering should we adopt?

- We can mourn suffering and feel anger and grief and lament - because this is not the way the world was created to be.
 - Genesis 1:31 & Revelation 21:1-5 explain that God made this world very good, and he will bring about a marvelous and beautiful new creation
 - In John 11:35, Jesus wept over Lazarus' death. He had compassion over, and recognized the pain that death caused for his friends. We get a glimpse of how our Father feels over the affliction and pain we experience. Even in the hope of our resurrection, we can grieve death
- Recognizing that while suffering is an unavoidable part of life, we hope in a better future
 - As we saw in 8:22, present suffering is labour pains, part of a process that leads to unspeakable joy as a mother finally sees her child.

- The future glory that awaits us as God's children is incomparably greater than the sufferings we presently face (8:18, 2Cor 4:16-18)
- As we experience these sufferings as part of the general fallen human condition, Scripture assures us that:
 - Our God, Jesus, also suffered and knows our pain (Isaiah 53:3-6)
 - God can use suffering to mould and refine our character (Romans 5:3, James 1:2-4)
 - We are not to pass through suffering as solo individuals, but are to share in one another's sufferings as one body united in Christ (1Cor 12:26).

3. Have you encountered God's goodness even in the presence of suffering? How will you respond differently to suffering after today's study and discussion? Share with your group.

Further Questions for Discussion

(Optional question for discussion if time permits. Do allocate adequate time for prayer and fellowship.)

4. If the way I live doesn't lead to any suffering in my life, does that mean I'm not really a Christian?

- We have seen in Q2c above that suffering may be (i) due to the fallenness of the human body, mind, and soul, and the brokenness of the world, or (ii) due to opposition from forces which hate and reject Jesus and his followers. Note that the suffering of (i) applies to all human beings, while the suffering of (ii) applies to Christians.
- Suffering is not a prerequisite to be a Christian. Salvation is purely a gift from God which we receive by placing our faith and trust in Jesus as Lord and Master.
 - Since this is a gift, we do not earn it, for example by punishing our own bodies or proactively seeking out ways in which to suffer.
- At the same time, salvation is not simply getting a passport to heaven. Recall last week's sermon, in which the Bible calls us to work out our salvation as God works in us (Philippians 2:12-13).
- Such "working out" involves obedience to Jesus, whom we have acknowledged as Master and Lord.
- So, if our priorities and choices are focused on our own comfort, security, and pleasure - are we then truly obeying our Master's command to deny ourselves and take up our cross?
 - Are we too comfortable in our jobs, our social status, our relationships?
 - What are we unwilling to risk or to lay down for our good God?
 - If there is some part of our life that we are unwilling to surrender before God, then is Jesus truly our Master, our Lord?

5. Doesn't the Old Testament say that obedience always leads to blessings, and disobedience always leads to curses? Doesn't this mean that good people should not suffer?

- Indeed, Old Testament passages as Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 7:12-24 and 28:1-68 do promise blessings for obedience and punishment for disobedience.
 - But notice that these texts promise blessing for those who diligently obey all God's commandments. Is there anyone who can 100% obey God?
 - There is none, but Jesus. No one can fully obey and claim the blessings; we have all disobeyed and suffer the penalty.
 - The consequences of disobedience simply show that God's judgement is just, for we all have failed to fully and diligently obey God.
 - The good news is: Jesus the fully obedient and sinless Man took upon Himself these punishment, so that we could receive the blessings of his obedience (2Cor 5:21, Gal 3:10-14)
- In addition, the Old Testament wisdom literature (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes) show that there is no guaranteed one-to-one correspondence between obedience/disobedience and blessings/curses.
 - Eg in Job, his friends try and convince him that he must have sinned to deserve all the suffering (from Job 4 - 31), but that is clearly not the case as seen in Job chapter 1.
 - Eccl 7:15 laments how the righteous perish and the wicked man prolongs his life.

6. Suggested Spiritual Workout: SILENCE and AWARENESS OF CREATION

For each session in this sermon series, a spiritual workout will be suggested for you to exercise on your own or together as a group. We encourage you to try this spiritual exercise, then share at your next small group meeting how it has impacted you.

(The following is extracted from *The Good and Beautiful God*, by James Bryan Smith)

SILENCE

Our world is noisy and hurried, and few of us stop to be still. The God who is good can only reach us when we are quiet. To paraphrase the psalmist, we must be “still” to know that God is “good.” This week I encourage you to try to find five minutes each day to sit in silence. Get a cup of something warm and delicious, find a comfortable chair, and just sit quietly. That’s all. It is not terribly difficult, but it yields great benefits. Some tips:

- Look for little free spaces in your day, such as a break between activities.
- Get up a little earlier or leave for your next appointment a little sooner so that when you arrive you will have extra time to find a quiet place and “just be.”
- A lot of people find that their thoughts run to and fro during this time of silence. This is normal. Your mind is used to helping you solve problems; it is not used to being still. Here are two tips that will help with the crazy “thought monkeys” that plague the discipline of silence:
 1. Have a notepad nearby to jot down things that may come to your mind, such as a phone call you need to make or the laundry that needs to be done. This will help quiet your mind.
 2. You may want to “ease in” to the five minutes by reading the Bible for a minute or two.

It may seem challenging at first, but with a little effort you should be able to do this easily every day. I suspect that soon you will find this exercise increasingly important to your daily life. It will help you slow down and become present, more able to focus on God in your midst. It might lead you into a regular practice of developing “rests” that make the notes (your actions) in your life become beautiful music.

AWARENESS OF CREATION

Historically, great theologians have cited the created world and its beauty as the first sign of God’s goodness. Paul said as much in the opening chapter of his epistle to the Romans. Creation speaks of the goodness and glory of God through dazzling colors and intoxicating scents. The sunrises and sunsets are grand spectacles that happen twice each day and are seldom noticed by people too busy to look. God could have made an ugly world; he was not obligated to make a world that inspires awe. Beauty has a lot to do with order. Simply gazing at a daisy reveals the mind of God.

In her book *Experiencing God’s Tremendous Love*, Maureen Conroy advises us to “become deeply absorbed in creation” as a way of experiencing God’s goodness and love. She advocates this exercise experience: take a walk outside and pay great attention to the sights, sounds and colors of nature. If you have access, go to a park or some place that is relatively untouched by humans. Take something to write on and act as if you are on a mission to canvass a small area,

jotting down everything you see. Pretend you're trying to communicate what you are seeing to someone who has never been able to go outdoors and experience the beauty of the created world. Note the color of the birds, the symmetry of the leaves and the sounds of the wind. Think of God as a great artist and yourself as the art student, paying close attention to the detail of the artwork.

7. Prayer Suggestions

- a) For the persecuted church and the suffering Christians around the world. The website <https://www.opendoors.org/> is a good place to learn more about a country and pray for them.

- b) That we ourselves will have the right understanding of suffering and that God will give us the strength to face it

- c) That we would be willing to risk all for Christ and His gospel