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Series: The Gospel of John
Message: God's Purpose in Suffering

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John 9:1-5

One of the most frequently asked questions in the arena of apologetics is also one of the most challenging questions, isn't it? And it's really this question, why does a good God allow suffering? Why does a good God allow suffering? And I suppose that question becomes even more intense and more challenging and more difficult when we understand it in the context of a child, of children, and those that are caring for them when they have certain challenges and disabilities and experience a level of suffering that many of us do not. Well, that's part of this story in John chapter 9. We come to it this morning and we want to see this matter of God's purpose in suffering. We're certainly not going to get an answer to all our questions. This is not a comprehensive answer to the matter of suffering. But it is unique in the insight that it gives to us. What we do want to see is that God's purpose in suffering is not always known, but it is never without eternal significance. I guess if we don't get anything else out of this, I hope it would be that. Because we're not going to have all our questions answered. We're certainly not going to have them all answered this side of glory. But I think the consistent message of the Word is that suffering does have eternal significance. And what we see in the life of our Lord is what we need to be doing as well, right? Jesus moved towards those that were suffering, those that were hurting. And I think he calls for us to do the same.

So, an introduction to this ninth chapter, which is, as I said, an amazing chapter. It's the apex of John's Gospel. I look at this ninth chapter and say, this is really the chapter that brings everything together from this point and on into the chapters that are ahead. It's just an amazing chapter. It's just like there are layers upon layers of stuff that's going on. And you kind of get to peel back and see some of the things that are happening. Some of the things are going to be astonishing as we look at them. But we're in the last six chapters of the life of our Lord. We've said that now for a little while. When you get to the 11th chapter,

we begin the last week in the life of our Lord, just contextually to understand where we are in his life and ministry.

The second thing is, and we've said this repeatedly, John is the master of irony. John's the master of irony, and this chapter probably shows it like no other chapter. We are going to get to see this over and over again. The word "know" appears, I think, 10 or 11 times in this chapter. And it's almost like there's this interplay going on of what did you know? When did you know it? How did you know it? Who did you know? And it's almost like John is writing from the perspective that there's a group on the inside who is in the know, they understand, they see with some measure of clarity. And then there's a group on the outside that has no idea of what's going on. And so we get to see that.

Then the third thing, John, and I think all the writers of Scripture, and we can be grateful for this, is that they are not afraid. They don't avoid the hard stuff, the hard questions of life. We don't get all the answers that we want, but the Bible doesn't hide things from us. And in this context of hard things and human suffering, Jesus is going to say again, I'm the light of the world. So, when we find ourselves in a dark and broken world, and we find ourselves in a world that's filled with suffering and heartache and pain, and I look out and see many of you having walked through those kinds of life circumstances over the years, it's so reassuring to know that even though in this world there is this darkness, there is the light of the gospel, and the light of Christ, we are not left to despair. That's the thing. We are not left to despair. We have the light that shines. And so, every question is not going to be answered, but we don't need to move towards a world of despair and hopelessness.

So, let's look at this man born blind. And I want us just to stop right at that point. Before we even read this first verse, just stop and think about those words. A man was born blind. Now we don't know how old this man was at this point, but you have to think that he's probably at least in his late teens, maybe he's in his 20s, maybe he's in his 30s. We don't have any of that information. But he was born blind. That means this man that Jesus is going to interact with had never seen a blue sky. He'd never seen a sunrise. He'd never seen a sunset. He'd never gone out at night and seen a universe of stars by the hundreds of millions. He had no idea what his mom looked like. He had no idea what his dad looked

like. He had no idea what his siblings looked like, if he had siblings. He didn't know what food looks like. He doesn't know when people are around him and mocking and ridiculing him. He doesn't know as he's begging if somebody's handing him something that's helpful or something that's hurtful. He doesn't have any of that. He's never seen anything with his eyes.

And so we come to verse 1, and Jesus' attention to this man should strike us immediately. As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. The first thing we want to know is how—John just throws that in there, and he does it like five times in this chapter, telling us that this man has been blind from birth. We don't know how it is that everybody knows that. John doesn't give us any of that information. It's likely that this man has been in this position of begging for so long, for so many years that it was just common knowledge in the community. This man was blind from birth. Everybody knows his story. And so that's a part of it.

But then what we also see here is that Jesus is walking by him in chapter 9, verse 1. And what we want to know is what is the time correlation between the end of chapter 8 and now chapter 9? John doesn't tell us that either. We don't know if it was the same day. We don't know if it was the next day. We don't know if it was a week later. He doesn't tell us sequentially as to when this happened. But this is what is important with that in mind. The first thing I want you to see is when we last saw Jesus, he had disappeared. Now that's my attempt at some irony. When we last saw Jesus, he had disappeared, right? The whole issue with the religious leaders and the matter of antagonism and conflict is just now totally out in the open, right? In the last encounter, Jesus had claimed something that they were certain was blasphemy. It was deserving of death. And now no longer taking it from anybody, they literally pick up stones at the end of chapter 8 and they're going to kill him on the spot. So, we're at that level now of open hatred towards Jesus on the part of these religious leaders.

That's all a part of this storyline in some way because here is Jesus and what do we see him doing? We see him with this absolute resolve, with this absolute certainty that he's just going to keep doing what he does. He's just doing his ministry and his mission. And

what you see is there's no sense of panic. It's not like he's looking over his shoulder to see if these guys with rocks are pursuing him, if they're still after him, if they're still going to attempt to kill him. I think it just speaks again to how it is that our Lord lived his life. Just this absolute sense of mission. And it occurs to me that's this sense of mission that Jesus had. The understanding that as he walked in the purposes of his Father, as he does the will of his Father, as he's conducting his ministry, he knows that what he's doing is never going to be frustrated by man.

Just think about that. You and I are on a mission. We're called to a mission, aren't we? We're called to live our life every day for the glory of God, to walk in such a way that we know him, that we love each other well, that we live out this gospel with a determination and a steadfastness and a resolve and without a sense of panic about all the craziness of our world because we understand that our God is in control. And that's what you see in Jesus in these opening comments here. If we're doing the things that God's called us to do, we can walk in that same confidence just as Jesus says.

Now, what is it that Jesus sees? Verse 1, what is it Jesus saw as he passed by? He saw a man. I think we should just stop right there and say he saw a man. Now, he saw a man who was blind, but the whole point I think John would want us to see is he noticed this man. He noticed this man. He saw him. It's fair to say that this man had hundreds and thousands of people walk by him, maybe daily, but certainly within a week, and they paid no attention to him at all. They never saw him, but some of them walked by him probably every day, going to where they were going because he was likely in some of the same places day after day. They never saw him. They never noticed him. They never paid attention to him. It was a common thing, of course, to see someone in this situation, in this condition, but John wants us to see that Jesus saw him, and I like the way John says he saw a man. He saw a man.

I have little, if any, experience with disability. With families that deal with this daily, I am certain, though, that one of the things that they want for themselves and for their children is that their children be seen, right? That they be observed, that they be noticed, that we move towards them, that we acknowledge them for who they are, and here's this

man, and in this day, and in this encounter, this is what's happening in his life. Jesus notices him. He has been consigned to the lowest level of existence known in the first century because he's a man who has been blind from his birth. The story would be to us that at some point, his parents said to him, son, we just can't do this any longer. You're on your own. You're going to have to go out into this world, and you're going to have to join with all the other people who are begging because we just can't do it anymore. Go for it. And to be in that circumstance, to be in that place, is literally to be consigned to the lowest place of this society that you could function in. He is a beggar, yes, but you know, some of the other beggars with their limitations and infirmities could at least see where they were going, right? They could at least interact with people who were around them. He had no ability to do that. And so, he's at the lowest place of life.

Here's just two observations, just in general, in the context of Scripture with that. There are no biblical accounts, as far as I know, of restored sight until you get to the Gospels. I don't think there's an example in the Old Testament Scriptures of a miraculous healing in the giving of sight to the blind. It's not until you come to the Gospels, and it's not until the ministry of our Lord that we see this happen. And here's what I want you to understand, and here's what I want you to see, because I think it's significant, that of all of the miracles that Jesus did in the lives of people, the one that is mentioned the most with specific people is Jesus healing those that were blind. Now, we have many, many comments in just a general way in which they brought to Him those who were sick and lame and with other infirmities, and He healed them all. We have many examples like that.

So, I'm not saying that the most prevalent miracle that Jesus ever did was healing people who were blind. But it is the miracle that is mentioned most with regard to specific people. That's kind of fascinating. And I think in this context of John 8 and 9, it is Jesus as the light of the world, isn't it, that is being underscored in all that that means. So that's part of it.

Then the second thing is this. In the Old Testament, giving of sight was always linked to the divine messianic work. So, in Isaiah, for instance, in chapter 28, in Isaiah 35:5, in Isaiah 42, when there are references to sight being given to those who are blind, it is in

context of messianic divine work. So clearly, as we have seen before, the Old Testament saw a day and time when God would come as Messiah and He would give sight to those who were blind. That's what's going to happen here.

Now, we come to verse 2 and the disciples' question. And His disciples asked Him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Now, what do the disciples want to know? They want to know what all of us want to know in the midst of suffering. They want to know why. They want to know why this is happening. They want to know the cause behind this man's blindness. And so that's what they're asking here. There's no sense of compassion. There's curiosity. There's theological inquiry, right? But let's talk about how this man is in this condition that he is, Lord. I mean, obviously something has happened here. Why do bad things happen to good people? And you almost know that because this man is blind and because his other senses are heightened, that he most certainly hears this question being asked. I mean, they're walking right by him, the text says. They walk by him and the disciples, not acting on the compassion that our Lord is getting ready to exercise, but more out of a curiosity about why this has happened, ask this question and no doubt this man heard it.

I would say to you is this is simply a case of bad theology, isn't it? It's a case of bad theology. The disciples at this point aren't any better than Job's friends. I mean, remember when Job had these catastrophes happen to him. Job is the poster child, isn't he, for the suffering that comes into the life of a good man, if we understand it in the language that we do. And so Job's friends immediately come and say, Job, this is a time for you to do some real soul searching because it's clearly obvious that God doesn't like you very much. And there's got to be something going on in your life that indicates that this is the result that's happening to you. And so they're just like Job's friends.

The first thing that we learn and the first thing that we want to point out is this fallacy of the either-or question, right? Always be cautious when someone approaches you with the famous either-or question. Is it this or is it that? It's got to be either this or it's got to be that. No, Jesus is going to say something different, isn't he? It was C.S. Lewis who said, the problem of pain is atheism's most potent weapon against the Christian faith. Because it

simply brings to the forefront the question of either God is all-loving but He's not all-powerful, or God is all-powerful but He's not all-loving. And that's the either-or question, isn't it? Which of it is it? Is He loving but just unable? Or is He able but He just doesn't care that much? Remember Rabbi Kushner in his book, *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People*, said that as a Jewish rabbi teaching from the perspective of the Old Testament. God is just as taken with suffering as we are. He just can't do anything about it either. He loves us, He's compassionate but He's impotent. Now that was a very common view of the first century. It was a common view in Job's day, wasn't it?

There's an immediate linkage between sin and suffering. And we know from the Bible that there are instances where there is immediate linkage between sin and suffering but you can never universalize that principle because that simply will not stand. We want to know why, they want to know why. Jesus could have said at this point, that's a good question. I want to tell you the answer. Because there is an answer to it, isn't there? Who sinned, this man or his parents? And Jesus could have stepped into that theological inquiry and said, well it was Adam. It was our buddy, Adam. It was Adam and Eve that did it, and we all in him. So, I mean He could have gone that way, but He didn't.

And today we still have this bad theology. We still have this bad theology today. We see it in this word "karma". This word "karma" is everywhere today, isn't it? And people speak of it with this cause-effect understanding of our world and their worldview is that there's this correlation between these things that happen that are bad and something that we've done. I think that what some of the most recent and horrific examples of this were when Charlie Kirk was murdered and social media was filled with vile comments. And if you had done a Google search on karma and Charlie Kirk, you would have seen thousands upon thousands of comments of people relating karma to his life experience and to what happened to him.

We see it within the Christian world in health, wealth, prosperity gospel teaching, don't we? Where preachers literally go out and their message is regularly one of God wants you to be healthy and if you're not healthy, then there's something wrong with you. there's likely sin in your life because it is absolutely clear that God wants all of His people to be

healthy, to be wealthy, and to be prosperous in all things. And that's simply a lie. It's simply bad theology.

Or they twist it to say if you just had enough faith, you would be healed. The fact that you are suffering the way that you are is evidence of a lack of faith. I think even to some extent, misunderstandings about generational sin and generational curses fall into this. I don't believe in generational curses. I don't believe in generational sin as it's sometimes taught. We know that the Bible says very clearly in Exodus that the sins of the fathers are going to be visited on the sons. But we know God also very clearly says in other places in the Old Testament that the fathers will not die for the sins of the sons, nor will the sons die for the sins of the fathers. And so what do we do with that? Well, what we do with that is to understand that yes, if the children walk in the sins of their fathers, they're going to suffer. Just read your Old Testament, right? Israel gave themselves over to idolatry, the sins of their fathers, and they came under the discipline of God. But there is nothing to suggest in Scripture that says because your father sinned or your mother sinned, you are now implicated in some way, and you are going to be given over to that. I don't believe that at all. I believe that Paul says in Galatians :13, we are all freed from the curse of sin through the redemptive work of Christ. So, there's all kinds of ideas.

Here's the point. There are no easy answers out there, are there? When we think in terms of this matter of suffering, there are no easy answers, but the Bible gives us some insight. The Bible gives us some help, and I would just suggest very briefly that sometimes suffering is corrective in nature, isn't it? Sometimes it's corrective. There's nothing wrong when we're sick and suffering and going through a hard experience in life. There's nothing wrong. In fact, there's great value in just stepping back and saying, God, search my heart. Show me, is there something that I need to deal with? That's a very good response. But there's no one-to-one corollary. There are examples where suffering is corrective. Paul says in Hebrews 12, our father who loves us as he does disciplines and corrects his children when they need it.

But we also know that it's not just corrective, we know it's constructive. In James 1, James says, consider it all joy when you fall into various types of trials and suffering and difficulty. So, it can be constructive as well, can't it?

But here's the thing that we're going to see in this passage this morning. It can reveal God's grace. It can reveal God's grace. I'm going to come back and just speak to 2 Corinthians 4 and 2 Corinthians 12, but those give us clear key insights into this whole matter.

Let's look then at Jesus's answer in verses 3 through 5. And Jesus is going to very simply say it's not this man who sinned or his parents. He's going to say something else. He's not going to answer the question of cause and why. He's going to give us a sense of purpose and meaning. The answer, I believe, is nothing short of astounding. What Jesus does in verse 3, Jesus answered, it was not that this man sinned or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. What Jesus does, he points us in the midst of this question about suffering, he points us to the sovereign purposes of God. He points us to the sovereign purposes of God. Negatively, we could say that this man's blindness and his suffering are not punishment for sin, but they are also not irrational and given over to hopelessness. There is something here. It's not bad luck. It's not bad karma. It's not happenstance that's gone awry. It's not a world that has no meaning or significance. What Jesus is going to say positively is, this man's circumstance is within the sovereign purposes of God and is going to allow for the display of the glory and the power of God.

There's a key little word in this third verse. There's two key little words. The first one I would point out is the word "but". Jesus answered, it was not that this man sinned or his parents, but. So, he's introducing an adversative and he's teeing up something that we want to be attentive to. And he's teeing up this little Greek word, *hina*. And it's translated, "that".

It's not either or. It's not that this man sinned or that his parents sinned, but that the glory and power of God can be put on display. There is result and there is purpose. God knows all things before they happen. God is aware of everything. There are no accidents with God. There is God's purpose. There's God's control. There's the glory of God.

So, what Jesus is going to speak to is going to come right into our life and ask us this most vital question. And that is, what is it that you value more than anything else in all the world? What is of greatest value to you? Because you see, it's important for us on this side to understand that in the midst of suffering, we value our health and we value our prosperity. And we value things sometimes more than we value the glory of God. So, in effect, Jesus is drawing us into this understanding of the sovereign purposes of God. Get this. Listen to this. God in his divine sovereign providence in eternity past, before this man was ever born, before Jesus ever came into this world, before this world was even created, this man was in the mind of God. God knew of this man's circumstance. He knew of this man's suffering. He, in fact, allowed for all of this to transpire and take place, Jesus says, so that the works of God might be displayed in him. God in eternity past knew that on this day recorded in John 9, that Jesus was going to walk down this path and he was going to walk by this man, and he was going to walk by this man who had been blind from birth. He knew all of that. He had all of that in his control.

Exodus chapter 4 and verse 11 and God is in that interaction with Moses. Moses doesn't want to go and be God's spokesman. You know what God says to him? Moses, not only did I create your mouth, but God says ... Let me just read it because it's so critical. It's so important for us to hear. This is what he said. Then the Lord said to him, 'Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord.'" Do you see? God knew. Psalm 139. He knits and he forms in the womb, and sometimes in the sovereign purposes of God, that knitting is different than it is at other times. But God's still the designer. He's still the knitter. He's still the creator. He's still the maker. Because even in those hard, difficult circumstances of disability and challenge, there is the sovereign purposes of God.

Do you get that? That's what he says to his disciples. This man is not here because of bad luck, because of bad karma, because of some accident. It's God's purposes for us. Oftentimes they are unknown. In this case, Jesus tells us it is that this man would be healed.

I mentioned 2 Corinthians chapter 4, because in John 9, there's a healing. This man was born blind, but Jesus is going to heal him. In 2 Corinthians, Paul is going through all manner of suffering, and he's crying out to God, a man that God used to perform miracles in many other people's lives, and Paul is asking, God, what about me? Can I have a miracle? And God says, well, actually, Paul, no. No, you can't. But here's what I'm going to tell you. I'm going to tell you that my grace is sufficient for you, even in the greatest moments of your weakness.

And then Paul's testimony is going to be in 2 Corinthians chapter 4, that these are light afflictions. These light afflictions. They don't seem very light when we're in them, do they? They don't seem light at all. They seem incredibly heavy. But even then, Paul says in testimony to the glory and the grace of God, that these light afflictions are but for a moment. And in every case, and in either case, what is lifted up ultimately is the glory of God.

And we're right back to where we were moments ago in answering the question, what is it? What is it that we value more than anything else in this life? And if it's not the glory of God, then something else has taken its place. Because the chief end for which we were created is that we would glorify God and enjoy Him forever. And that's what's happening here. The stewardship of man.

Look at these closing verses, 4 and 5. We must work the works of Him who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world. Just look at three things briefly. There's necessity here, isn't there? He says, we must. Now, if you had done your journal work this week, you would have looked at that verse and it says, we must. And I would say to you, what in the world are you looking at here? And why does it say what it says? What do you expect it to say at that point? What do you expect Jesus to say in that third verse? Don't you expect Him to say, I must do the works of the Father? That's what I expect Him to say. He doesn't say, I must. Of course He must, but what does He say? He says, we must. It's amazing.

He obviously is including His disciples, but He's including us as well. And He's saying, we must. This is an imperative. He includes us and He's speaking to the fact that

we must be doing the will of God. We must be walking in this mission of living for the glory of God every day.

Then notice, secondly, this matter of works. The works that are to occupy us. You know, we've been talking about grace all morning and singing about grace. For by grace are you saved through faith that is not of yourselves. It's the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast. Verse 10 says what? For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has ordained that we should walk in them. So there are literally good works ordained by God for our lives that we're to be walking in and stepping in every day. And if we're not, then we're missing what God wants for us for that day, right? God has prepared good works for us to walk in today. The question is, are we going to be walking in them or not? Are we going to be walking in what we want?

And then notice urgency. We must work the works of Him who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work. We can work in the day is what Jesus means, right? We can work when it's day. When it's night, you can't work. This corollary between the daytime gives us the opportunities. When it's night, it's too late. The opportunity is gone. This is perfectly pictured in the life of our Lord. It's day. John chapter 9, it's day. He's doing the works that the Father has called Him to do. There's coming night, and that night is going to engulf Him on the cross. And the night, the suffering of the world, and the sin of the world is going to be poured out upon Him. He Himself will suffer when it is night.

What do we take away? There's a day coming. There's a day coming. We look forward to it. There's a day coming when sin and suffering are no more. Until then, brokenness and suffering, those are the opportunities for the works of God to be displayed, aren't they? That's why we're called to live for His glory. Instead of asking, why is this happening to me? We call upon the Lord to help us understand: how can I bring glory to you in the midst of this circumstance?

The cross, my friends, stands as the greatest example of the work of God taking the worst, most heinous, most evil thing that has ever happened, and that is the death of Christ. And yet, Peter can say in Acts 2 that out of that work, which was so evil in its nature, God in fact brings the greatest good. Because through the death of Christ on the cross, and

His paying for my sin and for yours, He has made it possible for us to live life with meaning and purpose and eternal significance. He's made it possible for us to have our sins forgiven. He's made it possible for us to be in fellowship with Him. He's made it possible for us to live with Him forever.

There isn't any better news that you're going to hear today or any other day than how it is that you can know that you can live with God forever because of what Jesus did for you on the cross. And the amazing thing is it's all of grace. He's not asking us to do anything. He's not asking you to be here every Sunday. He's not asking you to give to the poor. He's not asking you to be nice to your neighbor. He's not asking you to do anything, be baptized, join the church, none of it. He's asking you to believe that what Jesus did on the cross was all that needed to be done. And when you and I believe that, we're healed. We're spiritually healed. We're given new life. We're given forgiveness.

Would you enter into that truth this morning? Would you believe that this morning, right where you're sitting in these closing moments, just say, yes, God. I believe that what Jesus did for me on the cross was all that needed to be done. I believe that He paid the penalty for my sin, and I want the gift of eternal life.

Let's pray. Gracious Father, we thank You for our Lord. We thank You for His incredible ministry. We thank You for the way in which He moved towards those who were broken and hurting and suffering. Lord, give us that same heart. Give us that same compassion. Give us that same clarity for how it is to live life well. Let us live life for Your glory. Let us live life for Your honor. Father God, by Your Spirit, if there's someone here this morning listening or watching that has never put their trust in Jesus as their Savior, would You, by Your Spirit, open their blind eyes spiritually to see the truth and the wonder of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We pray in Christ's name, amen.