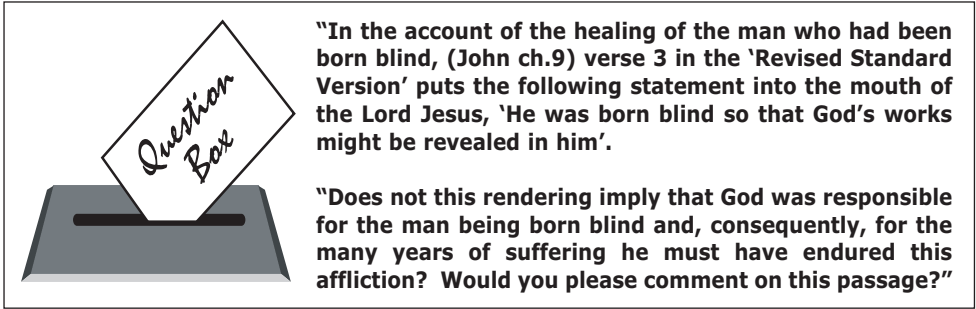


THE QUESTION



I have no doubt that this particular statement has troubled a great many Christians who also have found difficulty in reconciling it with their belief in a loving, caring God. But I suspect that if they hope to find a version of the New Testament, which offers a more acceptable rendering, they are likely to be very disappointed.

- The 'New International Version' offers us, "*This has happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life*".
- The 'Living Bible' tells us that the man was born blind "*to demonstrate the power of God*".
- The 'New American Standard Version' also states that it was "*in order that the works of God might be displayed in him*".
- The 'New King James Version' reads, "*that the works of God should be revealed in his life*".
- And the 'Authorized Version reads, "*that the works of God should be made manifest in him*". In fact, none of the many translations and commentaries that I have checked offers us anything very different.

So what are we to make of this passage?

THE CONTEXT

Well, let us first put this puzzling verse into its proper context.

John 9 records that it was the Lord's own disciples who drew his attention to this blind man, probably as he sat at the place in the Jerusalem, where he was accustomed to eke out a living by begging. The comments in verses 8 and 9 make it obvious that he was a quite familiar figure in the city, and that it was common knowledge that he had been blind from birth. The disciples certainly knew about the man, as the question they put to the Lord reveals. Verse 2, **"Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?"**

We can accept, I am sure, as understandable, the disciples' suggestion that the man may have been born with this grave handicap as the consequence of sin committed by his parents, because even today, children frequently come into the world suffering physical or mental disability as the result of the reckless lifestyle of their parents. But in their question, they also implied that the man might have been born blind because he had *personally* sinned *before* he came into the world; in other words, in a pre-existent state, and this is not an idea with which you and I are familiar, nor is it one that we can accept, because it is not even suggested anywhere in the entire Bible.

It was, however, a belief held by certain Jews in the time of Jesus, the Essenes, for example, and also found in the 'Cabbala', which contains mystical Jewish interpretations of the Old Testament scriptures, along with ancient Jewish traditions. The Lord's disciples apparently had heard about the theory; hence their question. I am personally struck by the fact that;

- a) his disciples believed that Jesus was able to answer their question, even though to know the innermost details of the lives of the man's parents would imply supernatural power; and,
- b) that he was capable of pronouncing on the man's personal behaviour in some real or imaginary 'pre-birth' existence!

THE LORD'S RESPONSE

We see, however, that the Lord firmly – almost curtly - dismissed the question and the notion it expressed. He declined to discuss the subject with them, because the problem of sickness and suffering in human life cannot be resolved or explained as easily as the disciples seemed to suppose.

They asked, "Whothis man or his parents?"

He replied, "Neither.....this man or his parents!"

"Who?" "Neither!"

1. Notice that the Lord did not say that the parents were *sinless*. He simply said that, in this particular case, neither sin that they may have committed, nor sin committed by the man himself, had anything to do with his having been born blind.
2. Nor did the Lord deny that sin, which is either failure or refusal to live in harmony with the will of God, is, in fact, the root cause of all human suffering. Rom.5: 12 tells us how sin came into the world and what its consequence has been ever since.
3. Instead, he declared that he had a mission to fulfil. By submitting to the will of the Father who sent him, he must deal conclusively with the cause of the world's sickness, suffering and death, by dealing with the world's sin.

AN EXPLANATION OF THE VERSE

It is my personal view, that in verse 3 the translators have misunderstood the Lord's response. As I have shown, many translations suggest that the man had been born blind, so that a miracle could be performed on him, in order to reveal and demonstrate the power of God.

But we must bear in mind the very important fact that the original language in which the New Testament was written, like other ancient languages, did not have a system of punctuation marks as we have in our own language. There were no 'full-stops' or 'commas', etc., in N.T. Greek, and the way in which translators chose to punctuate a passage has often influenced its meaning.

Look again at John 9:3 again and notice the full stop that has been placed at the end of that verse. Now, if we move the full stop and place it after the word '*parents*', and then read on without a break into the next verse, you will see the very significant difference that is made. This is how it reads: -

"Neither this man nor his parents.

But that the works of God may be manifested in him I must work the works of

Him who sent me while it is day; the night cometh when no man can work”.

Do you see how briefly Jesus dealt with their two-part question? He dismissed it in just six words! He declined to discuss any theory as to the cause of the man’s blindness and summarily dismissed the subject, stressing, instead, the real and more urgent purpose of his ministry – a ministry that would fulfil the will of the Father.

The account of his life and ministry that we have recorded in the Gospels, reveal very clearly that the accomplishing of the purpose for which he came into the world, was always before him. Remember that the first thirty years of the life of Jesus are virtually hidden from us, and his actual ministry lasted for only about three years. Consequently, he was always fully aware that his time was limited. Verses 4 and 5 of John 9 reveal this. **“I must work the works of Him who sent me while it is day; night comes, when no-one can work”.** Even earlier, (John 5; 17), he had expressed the same profound sense of urgency, **“My Father is working still, and I am working”.**

Furthermore, the fulfilment of his ministry, culminating in his sacrificial death, was something about which he spoke on several occasions and which he described as *‘My hour’*. At the beginning of his ministry when he performed his first miracle at Cana in Galilee, he said to Mary, who apparently hoped he would do something that would reveal his true identity, **“My hour has not yet come”** (John 2:4)

Near the end of his ministry, in John 12, shortly before he shared the Passover with his disciples before instituting his own Supper, he said, (v.23), **“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified’**. At verse 27 of the same chapter we read that he asked, **“... what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? No! For this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify thy Name!”**

CONCLUSION

We should not look to the story in John 9 for an explanation of the problem of human suffering. This has to be sought in other New Testament passages; and, even then, it is unlikely that we shall find a solution that is completely satisfactory.

What we can say, on the basis of that passage, is that God did not cause this man’s affliction whatever may have been the reason for His blindness. Nowhere in the scriptures are we taught that God directly causes sickness or suffering. On the contrary, in Luk.13: 16 Jesus declared that a woman whom he healed of a physical disability had been ‘bound for eighteen years’ by Satan. Her condition was not the work of God, but of Satan.

And even Paul, the apostle, writing about the ‘thorn in the flesh’ from which he prayed to God three times for release, described his own affliction as ‘a messenger of Satan’. The Lord’s response to their question must surely have brought the disciples back from the misty realm of surmise and speculation, to the world of hard, painful reality, in which the distressing effects of sin could everywhere be seen, by reminding them that he had a work to perform and a death to die, in order to make it possible for God to offer all mankind a full redemption and, finally, a total healing when the consequences of sin are removed for ever.

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