

Did He Hear What They Said?

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1 Samuel 16:1-13, Psalm 23, Ephesians 5:8-14, [John 9:1-41](#)

Did the blind man hear it when the disciples started talking about him to Jesus? They say that if you lose one of your senses, the remaining ones become sharper and more sensitive to compensate. So, I imagine his hearing was quite good.

He must have heard the disciples say, **“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”** It was a question about him, but they did not have the nerve to speak to him directly. I have always found it much more wounding to overhear someone say something bad about you behind your back. Wouldn't you all just prefer that they say it to your face?

What the Question Meant

And note that their question had nothing to do with anything that was under his control. They did not raise any concerns because he had blocked their way on the sidewalk or had dared to ask them if they had any spare change. The question was provoked by his mere existence. Why did this man exist with his disability?

What's more, it was not even really a why question. They were not asking Jesus *why* this man was blind; they knew *why* he was blind. He was blind because somebody had sinned.

That was obvious to them. Somebody had done something that meant that this man *deserved* to go through his entire life never seeing the light of day, never seeing the beauty of a sunset, never seeing the smile on a loved one's face.

They were certain of that. The only question in their minds was *who* had sinned and made it so that his affliction was deserved. And they had narrowed down the suspect list to two.

He'd Heard It Before

Yes, I am pretty sure he heard them. He immediately understood all of the assumptions that they were making, because they were hardly the first. He heard this kind of question all the time – so often that there were days when he almost wished his hearing wasn't so good.

How do I know that he heard it all the time? Well, I am not blind, nor do I suffer from any other visible disability. I'm not sure that I would call my hearing excellent; it is probably not as good as it used to be. But even I have heard enough people making those very assumptions to know that it would have surrounded him constantly.

How We Ask Today

Now, today you don't really hear people use the kind of religious language that the disciples use here; I don't hear people speculating literally about “who sinned.” But I know very well that when people see any tragedy – whether it be a disability or a trauma or an injustice – they immediately jump to questions that mean the same thing.



You hear about a woman assaulted or raped, and people ask, “What was she wearing?” Or, “What was she doing there?” Are they not essentially asking who sinned that this terrible thing happened. And are they not implying, at least in part, that it was the victim who sinned?

And, once you realize that, you begin to hear that question everywhere. We’ve heard it many times this year already. “Why did she move her car forward?” “Why did he bring a legally permitted and licenced handgun to a protest?” “Why did the people of Gaza elect a Hamas government that came to power before many of them were born?” “Why did those schoolgirls in Iran live under a dictatorship for so long?”

Social Issues

The same assumptions are often brought to the discussion of social issues such as poverty or lack of shelter. It is always easier for people to talk about these problems in terms of the faults or shortcomings of the poor than it is to talk about the structural issues in society that perpetuate such problems.

We don’t ask questions about who is profiting from the crisis or why wealth has moved upward so radically in recent decades. We ask questions that assume that the poor are lazy or lacking in initiative. Who sinned? Not the rich! It must be the poor who sinned!

Hurtful Questions

Such questions are often very hurtful because they send a message to those who have suffered a tragedy that they somehow deserve the terrible thing that have happened to them. It is an additional attack against someone who has already been wounded. And it is especially hurtful when the question centres on something about the person that is beyond their control, as is the case of the blind man.

It can also deny the dignity of people who have suffered. Take the blind man for example. The disciples’ question reduced the man to nothing more than his disability. His very existence became a tragedy. Are they not suggesting that the world would be a better (or at least a less troubling) place if he did not exist?

When all you see is someone’s disability, you miss all of the things that make them a rich and full person. The blind man had an inner life, deep thoughts and passions. He had people he loved and people who loved him. To reduce him to a moral problem cruelly stripped him of the value of his human being.

Not to Be Cruel

I don’t really think that people do this because they are trying to be cruel. They do it because they are afraid. When they see sickness, tragedy or disability, they must come to terms with the simple truth that terrible things happen in the world all the time.

When people see that, it reminds them that such terrible things could happen to them or to the people that they love. That is terrifying. And so, people need some way to reassure themselves that they are safe, that tragedy does not happen arbitrarily. The world seems a safer place if there is some moral logic to it.

Blaming the victim, figuring out who sinned so that the tragedy is a deserved thing, gives us that feeling of safety. If bad things happen because people sin, then I can be safe if I don’t sin. And, yes, of course, that feeling is false; it is based on a lie. But people have been comforting themselves with lies since forever.

Internalized Question

So yes, the blind man heard them. What's more, he had heard the question formulated in various ways so often that he had internalized it. He too spent way too much time wondering what he had done to deserve the darkness that he lived in. And to the extent that he had internalized it, the darkness had spread beyond his eyes to affect his very soul. But that was all about to change in dramatic fashion.

He heard the disciples' question, but surely he could hear Jesus' response as well. And if what the disciples said was just more of what he heard all the time, he definitely perked up his ears to what Jesus said. **"Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."**

The Rest of the Story

And I actually don't want to go any further than that in our reading today. I know that Jesus' opening words are usually overshadowed by what comes next. The story after that quickly becomes a miracle story, and everyone loves a good miracle story.

This one especially has all kinds of memorable details. Who can forget the image of Jesus playing in mud made with his own spit? It is a callback to the story of God making *adam* in the Book of Genesis out of the mud. It is such a hands-on image of Jesus' healing ministry – like literally hands-on.

And sure, the miracle is also such a wonderful parable of the key point of this chapter, that Jesus has come to be the light of the world. And we can rejoice in the light that came into that blind man's life – not just into his eyes but into his entire soul.

The Healing Before the Healing

But before we move on to all of that, let's talk about the healing Jesus performed for that man before he knelt down and started playing in the dirt.

"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," Jesus said. With just a few words, Jesus tore apart the message this man had heard all his life. No, his disability was not something that he deserved. His blindness was not a curse. And he was more, much more, than his disability.

And this is not just Jesus' message for that man. It is for all of us. He is giving us all the message that terrible things do happen in this world, and we may never know why. That is a hard and perhaps frightening truth, but we do ourselves no favours by refusing to face up to it.

Jesus' Message to the Victims

Even more important, Jesus is telling us that our common reflex of blaming the victims for their tragedies is not only wrong, it also is cruel and as destructive to ourselves as it is to the victims.

This becomes plain as Jesus continues. **"He was born blind,"** Jesus declares, **"so that God's works might be revealed in him."** Now this one is a bit trickier because people sometimes misunderstand it.

Sometimes people take that to mean that, if you have suffered in some way, it is because God has willfully afflicted you in order to bring some good out of it. But I don't accept that. The God I know through Jesus does not willingly afflict anyone with anything. God weeps at anyone's suffering. That's the God revealed to us through the crucified Christ.

No, what this is saying is that sometimes tragedy will happen. We may never know why. Perhaps God knows, but if so, I doubt we have the capacity to understand such reasoning on a godly level.

Don't Make the Struggle Worse

Because of this, I would strongly encourage you, when you are struggling with some tragedy, that you do not cause yourself pain by agonizing over the question of why God let this happen to you and what you are supposed to do in order to bring something good out of it.

If you have been hurt, you have been hurt. I will not pile on top of that any obligation to figure out why. I will not ask you to manufacture some positive spin on it. Tragedy is tragedy. Whatever you feel about it is only your natural and very human reaction, and there is nothing wrong with it.

Seeing His Value and Worth

So, if Jesus is not saying that God willfully afflicts people with terrible experiences, what is he saying? He is looking at this blind man and not defining him by his disability. He is looking at him and seeing him as a human being who has value and worth because he is a child of God.

In other words, it doesn't matter what you have suffered. It doesn't matter what lack others see in you. It doesn't matter what shortcomings you see in yourself. God's works can be revealed in you.

Revealing God's Works in Him

And, yes, I am very aware that God's works were revealed in that particular blind man with the healing of whatever was wrong with his eyes. But if you think that is the only way, then you are not reading this story right.

God's works were revealed in the light that came into his soul and not just his eyes. They were revealed in the testimony he went on to give to the community. They were shown in the extraordinary wisdom and courage he demonstrated while doing it. The potential for all of that was already in that man before Jesus ever put mud on his eyes. He already had the potential to reveal God's works before Jesus came along.

Revealing God's Works in Us

And it is important that we keep that in mind because we may not always receive the kind of healing we crave most. Jesus never promises that. But all of us have within us that same potential. That is why Jesus went on to say, **"We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work."**

And, as I said, I'm sure that the blind man had great hearing and that he heard that too. And hearing that had as much to do with how he revealed God's work as did the application of mud to his eyes.

So, I guess that only leaves us with one question. The blind man heard it, and he did something about it. What about you? Do you hear what Jesus is saying? And what are you going to do about it? How will you make sure that God's works are revealed in you?