

Individual Suffering

In John 9 Jesus addressed the issue of personal suffering. When His disciples assumed that a man's blindness was the result of the man's sin, Jesus answered, "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him" (John 9:3). Jesus did not consider the man's suffering to be wasted or unpredictable, because God would be glorified in the man's life.

The book of Job tells the history of a righteous man who pleased God but nevertheless suffered the loss of his wealth, his ten children, and his health. His friends were sure his sufferings represented judgment for some secret sins, but God denied this accusation. Many people have taken comfort simply in knowing that their personal tragedies did not necessarily represent personal judgments.

Jesus demonstrated that His love is not incompatible with personal suffering when Lazarus was sick: "When Jesus heard that, he said, This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby. 5 Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus" (John 11:4-5).

Jesus clearly loved Lazarus and his grieving family, but He was able to see a purpose to suffering that they could not see. Christ clearly revealed to them that He had power over death (by raising Lazarus from the dead), even prior to His crucifixion and resurrection.

Jesus commented on the purpose of tragedy after the Siloam tower collapsed, killing 18 people: "Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:4-5).

These examples show that it is not necessarily an individual's sin that leads to suffering, but sin in general already has. God may use suffering as a reminder that sin has consequences — and perhaps for other purposes. But the presence of suffering does not mean God does not love us. Quite the opposite — Christ came and suffered with us when He did not have to.

In times of suffering, Christians honor the Lord by trusting Him and knowing that He loves them and has a purpose for their lives. The presence of suffering in the world should remind us all that we are sinners in a sin-cursed world and also prompt us to tell others about the salvation available in Christ — after all, that would demonstrate love. We can tell people the truth of how they, too, can be saved from this sin-cursed world and live eternally with a perfect and good God: "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

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