

WHO SINNED?

FAITH BOWERS



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JOHN 9 IS OF PARTICULAR INTEREST TO THOSE CONCERNED WITH DISABILITY. IT GIVES UNUSUAL DETAIL OF REACTIONS AROUND A HEALING MIRACLE. The whole chapter is fascinating, leading up to his confession of faith, with the new sight of belief.

On seeing the blind man, the disciples ask, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned"; "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (v. 2–3). The neighbours cannot believe he is healed. The religious authorities summon the parents, who vouch for their son's blindness and now his sight, but that is all they will affirm. "Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself" (v. 21).

This has a familiar ring to parents of disabled children. "Who sinned?" is still heard, though perhaps couched in terms of "Who was guilty?" "Who was at fault?" The religious question comes as "Why does God allow suffering?" But questions there will be. Some the parents ask themselves; others are thrown at them by well-meaning but insensitive acquaintances.

"Ask him ... he will speak for himself." The Gospel writer explains that the parents of the man who had received his sight were afraid of the authorities and reluctant to name Jesus (v. 22–23), and doubtless that was true. But parents will hear the note of exasperation. Surely there is a touch of "Does he take sugar?" They know how people overlook the person with a disability as though a failure in one part of the body invalidates the rest. This man was blind not dumb: he could always speak for himself. He too is exasperated by the Pharisees and a touch of asperity is evident in verses 30–33: "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes ... If this man were not from God he could do nothing!"

Back in verse 3, we have Jesus' enigmatic answer to "Who sinned?" Wrong question, replies Jesus, "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (v. 2–3). From a parent's perspective, that begs more questions than it answers.

WHO SINNED, THIS MAN OR HIS PARENTS?

The disciples' question has a familiar ring to parents of disabled children. Such questions are trotted out in traumatic situations, along with stock phrases of consolation. Not knowing what to say, people fall back on phrases heard in similar contexts. The disciples reflect the thinking of their day, though they may have expected an enlightening answer. It is a relief to have

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► Jesus' word that it is nothing to do with the sins of parents or child.

"Who sinned?" "Why does it happen?" "Are you guilty in any way?" My son has Down's Syndrome and the questions are singularly sharp where disability dates from conception. Ours was a wanted child, loved and prayed over even before he was conceived, yet something still "went wrong". The instinct is to blame someone – but whom? The doctors were keen to assure us we were low risk – it was little consolation! The sense of guilt lingered on.

For parents, this is part of grief, for they feel bereaved. They have a baby but with hopes dashed from the outset. They experience shock, disbelief, anger, etc. They wonder why it happens. For people of faith, the question is perhaps harder: Why does God let it happen? For Christians, it is sharp indeed: How can a loving God let it happen?

While parents struggle with this, friends – and strangers – express sympathy, often with understandable clumsiness. No one knows what to say. That results in vulnerable parents having to cope with assumptions and questions that they could do without. The idea of punishment for sin lurks under remarks like, "How could this happen to you? You're good people, you don't deserve it."

Some make pious efforts: "This is a special child given to special parents" – which might be more convincing if others with less spiritual resources were not struggling with worse disabilities. Some comforters develop this sentimentally: "such children" are "holy innocents", "angels unawares", and so a special blessing. This may help some parents, but I was not alone in finding it disconcerting. I did not want my child dehumanised. Mothers of such children share instances of deliberate naughtiness. A bit of "original sin" affirms something normal and human: they are not holy innocents! Other people try to be more positive, murmuring, at least of Down's children, "they are always so affectionate, gentle, musical". Even the child's virtues can be reduced to the stereotype! Too often parents have to make allowances for others who do not think through what they say. I fear the main use of the clichés is in helping observers to cope, saving them from real engagement with the pain.

With many conditions, parents slowly realise that their child is not developing normally, but the eventual diagnosis of severe disability will trigger a similar process of grief. They have a chance to bond with their child

before disability enters into the conscious equation, but this may make the blow more bitter.

Either way, there will be constant fresh reminders of impeded development, coupled with the daily demands of care. The more severe the disability, the slower will be the rewards and the heavier the demands on parents.¹

Questions about suffering recur. My instinct is that these are the wrong questions because they are unanswerable. Although it is unfashionable, I find it more convincing and more scriptural to believe in powerful forces of darkness abroad in the world, seeking to thwart God's purposes. I read modern books of theology on disability but strangely find more comfort in contemplating Bunyan's fiends or the wiles of Screwtape. "Bad" things happen in a "fallen" world. The sharp question for me is whether there is a conflict between God's love and his omnipotence. I see God's sovereignty revealed where good emerges out of apparent bad.

Parents wrestle with such questions, even parents not normally given to theological reflection. Within the Baptist network concerned with learning disability we have held day consultations of a theological nature, originally expecting to draw perhaps a dozen of the theologically articulate. Numbers have always been much higher, including some parents who would never attend such a meeting on any other subject. People who are not academically-minded slog through books of theology in advance and come ready to discuss. They share insights from their experience and ask searching questions. It has been a challenging dynamic!

HE WAS BORN BLIND SO THAT GOD'S WORKS MIGHT BE REVEALED IN HIM

My instinctive reaction to Jesus' words is one of revulsion. Initially I was using the Revised English Version which has "so that God's power might be displayed in curing him". My minister observed this was a poor rendering which changed the sense. That sent me back to the Greek as well as other English translations. But in any version I cringe at the idea. Does the revelation of God require so much human suffering?

Does my son's disability reveal anything of God? Well, yes, I believe it does, but it is easier to perceive that now than in the early days. Then I shoved away the doubts and despair by singing hymns, especially, "How firm a foundation", with its splendid line, "Sanctify to me my deepest distress" – a lifeline while reason floundered in the depths.

The lifeline is tied to the cross. There pre-eminently we see the cost of the revelation of God spelled out in terms of human suffering. I have been drawn repeatedly to three lines of Scripture: Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane; Psalm 139.8, "If I make my bed in [hell], you are there"; and from the cross the cry of dereliction. A dismal trio, perhaps, yet a glory of the Christian faith, that our God has experienced and understands human suffering. God did not forsake Jesus – but it felt like that, as it can do to us. The hands that draw us forward are disabled by nails, and the more powerful for that.

As Christian parents with a Down's baby we struggled to find the right prayers. We had been given a curiously gloomy prognosis. Thanksgiving was muted. An evil voice whispered that rearing him would be a futile waste of effort. The best we managed was to ask God somehow to make his life useful. It felt inadequate, but we have seen it answered. Slowly, Richard learned to do far more than was predicted. He is a man of character, happy, friendly, caring. God has given him and us opportunities to help churches respond to other people with disabilities.

Where parents cope, finding rewards in the slow progress of their child, their friends admire them. If they are Christians, they may be extolled as models of perseverance and faith. However gratifying, this is not comfortable. One may smile and smile but still weep inside. Observers think all is well, while parents suffer the constant ache of sorrow for their child.

For twenty-five years I knew that sorrow daily. Relief was sudden and dramatic, a "Damascus Road" experience. A man with Down's Syndrome took the part of Jesus in a passion play mimed at a Baptist Assembly by actors with disabilities. As the nails were driven home, projected live on to a huge screen I watched those Down's features contorted in agony and they became the face of Christ for me. It is hard to define such an experience, but within the hour I realised that my pain over the condition had been lifted and it has never returned. I cannot theologise about this, only say with the ex-blind man, "Lord, I believe."

The blind man was healed, but usually severe disability is there for life. Miraculous cures are rare. Down's Syndrome is an integral part of our son. In his teens he lamented this. It was painful to hear him ask God to "change his face" to make him like other people. As an adult he accepts it in a matter-of-fact way. When he heard of a baby born with Down's, he advised us, "tell the parents it's all right. I don't mind having it. It's not the end of the world."

In Christian life, belief is followed by the call to serve. Richard believes in Christ and finds plenty of ways to serve the church. He is very good at welcoming people at the door, his warmth and interest in people offsetting the oddities of his speech. Many people with a variety of disabilities undertake work for the church, although they have a good excuse to opt out. If people give their lives to God, he can use them – sometimes in the very roles for which they seem least fitted. Who but God would see a man, stone deaf from early childhood, as equipped for ministry as a pastor-preacher? Curing disability is not the only way God works miracles.

It has much to do with affirming people just as they are. God will not stereotype by disabilities: he calls each person by name. When the church proclaims each individual's value by word, attitude and action, that is liberating. It frees people to be themselves and it frees others to see their gifts rather than their limitations. In this we may detect a revelation of the power and glory of God.

LET HIM SPEAK

The man with restored sight spoke out. Those with learning disabilities find that difficult as language is usually affected too: some have no speech, few achieve full clarity and fluency. They depend heavily on the physical senses, especially sight and hearing. Abstract ideas are accessed, if at all, through things known by experience. Many, however, read body language brilliantly, and sometimes they grasp intuitively things with which reason struggles.

The Word became flesh – and the church devotes much effort to putting it back into words! To proclaim the gospel to some of our friends, the Church has to be Christ's body in visible, tangible ways. These friends learn about God's love through the love of God's people, they learn about worship through atmosphere: the lesson has wider application. Then what do they understand? That is another common and unanswerable question. The actor could never explain the atonement, yet he made Christ's suffering come alive for me.

Another mother was watching the news while her child with learning disabilities played at her feet. Pictures of a motorway pile-up came on screen. The child got up, spread his arms out sideways, and declared "Jesus cross; Jesus cross" until the report ended. Had he really grasped something of Christ's presence amid human suffering? How else can one explain such a response?

Let's keep telling the Jesus story and leave the understanding in God's nail-pierced hands. ■

NOTES

1 In many cases, for "parents" read "mother", because fathers often fail to cope and leave. Where a child has a severe disability, the incidence of single mothers is high.