

Dear friends in Christ,

Why? This is the age-old question that is asked when suffering of any kind comes into our lives. Why did God allow me to be afflicted with this? Why did God make me have to suffer like this? Why did God take my loved one at an early age? God, I had my life planned out. I planned to work hard, retire, enjoy my family and all that I have built up so I can serve you. Why would you ruin these plans by allowing this devastating illness to come into my life? Why would you send this terminal illness to take my life way earlier than I had planned? I love you. I've worked hard for you. I've trusted you and served you all my life and this is how you repay me? Why God, what have I done? You've heard this question asked before. Perhaps you have been the one uttering this question and trying to search out the answers to this question. It's a natural question for people to ask when suffering comes into their life, especially when it is sudden, out of the blue and difficult in nature.

But for God's people, asking why is the wrong question. While it's natural and it's the question easily asked by most people, it's the wrong question. Asking "Why?" takes God's people away from God and directs their attention back on themselves. It asks a question for which there may not be an answer. It assumes there must be some cause in the past which brought this effect in the present. It places blame on God and may even accuse him of wrongdoing. It can assume God had some evil, wicked purpose for which he allowed this suffering. It causes doubt of God's love and care for his people. Even worse, it may assume God doesn't exist at all and if he does, that he doesn't care for his people at all. Let's look at the text before us today and make sure that we ask the correct question when suffering comes into our lives.

You and I certainly are not the first to ask this question. Jesus and his disciples came across a man who was blind from birth. The disciples asked this question of Jesus: Why? Actually they asked, *"Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"* But that's asking why. They assumed that such a terrible physical defect must have been caused by some particular sin. But they were confused. If it were this man's fault, how could he have sinned in the womb to have caused this blindness from birth? And if it were the parents' fault that this man was blind, how unfair that was that this man was being punished for his parents' sin. They didn't understand so they asked Jesus to help them in their confusion. The problem is that they lived in a cause and effect world. Every affliction needs an answer. Where there is an affliction, there must be God's displeasure. Where there is God's displeasure there must have been sin. For mortals living in a cause and effect world, every affliction needs an answer. Otherwise God is just being arbitrary in dealing out suffering. Even more so, God is being unfair and may not be anything more than a mean, cruel God who enjoys watching people suffer. So if God is seen to be truly just, then there has to be a reason—an answer—to the question, "Why?"

We live in this same cause and effect world. To everything that happens, we want to look for a cause behind it. When we are in good health, we're tempted to think the cause is our clean living. When we are prosperous, we tend to think it is because of our hard work. When life is just going along fine with no major challenges, we're tempted to rely on how pleased God must be with us for the kind of people we are. You see how easy it is to forget about God when we live in a cause and effect world? The hard part is when things are going bad. When we are suffering, there then is this nagging thought in the back of our minds that it's due to God paying us back for something wrong that we did. This is especially hard when we can find nothing in our past that in our minds would justify the suffering that we face. Then we find ourselves upset at how unfair God is to us for paying us back for all of our good service to him with suffering that we don't deserve.

Jesus helps us to understand how "Why?" is the wrong question. *"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him."* Jesus wasn't saying that neither this man nor his parents had ever sinned, but that there isn't any specific sin which caused this suffering. He is also saying that this man wasn't suffering because of God's displeasure at him. What he does say is something that blows our minds: *"this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him."* This man's suffering wasn't about him at all. It was about God being able to display his work in the life of this man. So "why" isn't the question we should be asking at all! The question we should be asking is: Where do we see God in this? For the Christian who trusts in God's love and care, for the Christian who trusts in God's promises to always work for the good of those who love him, for the Christian who trusts God will never give us temptation which is too hard to bear but will always provide a way out under it, the question we ask when suffering comes into our lives is this: Where are we going to see God in this suffering? How will God work through this suffering to let his light shine into this world? When we look at our afflictions, the question "Why?" always leads us in the wrong direction. It takes our focus off of Christ and places it completely on us. Satan loves for us to ask this question. He wants us to look backwards into the darkness of the past. He wants us to doubt God's love for us and to see God's anger and punishment being handed out justly for those wrongs that we did. He wants us to think that God doesn't love us and is punishing us unfairly for things we didn't do. The question, "Why?" leads us further away from God as we look back into our past wondering what we should have done differently.

But there is a bigger problem with the question, "Why?" If God were handing out punishment on what we have done in the past, who could stand? If God were to act fairly with us, he would not only let us face suffering here on this earth, but he would leave us to face our eternal suffering because of our sins. If we are tempted to think that God should treat us according to what we have done or not done, then God would cast us away from his presence forever. Based on our own track record, if God were to deal justly with us, this physical suffering that we are enduring would be far too light of a sentence. The devil would have us to blame God and ask Why? But if God were to deal justly with any of us under the Law, we would have no leg to stand on.

So Jesus directs the disciples and us not to look backwards for cause and effect, but to look forward and ask, "Where is God in this for me?" This question directs our attention to our relationship with God which he established in Christ Jesus. When that is our focus, then we see God's love shining through even in the midst of our affliction. What we see when we ask,

"Where is God in this for me?" is first and foremost Christ on the cross. Then we are reminded that God doesn't punish us for our sins. He punished Jesus for our sins once and for all. There we are reminded that God is not some mean, cruel God who deals unfairly with and cares nothing for his people but enjoys watching them suffer. At the cross, we see that God is a God of love, the God who loves us enough to sacrifice his own Son for our salvation. There we see Jesus unjustly suffering all the afflictions which are rightly ours. There we see God handing out the due punishment of hell for all of our sins on Jesus so that as bad as our track record might be, he will never, ever in this life or eternity hand them out to us. The problem with cause and effect is that it leaves no room for grace. Jesus reminds us that even in our sufferings, God in his grace works through them to display his glory to his people.

We experience these pains, afflictions, illnesses and diseases, even if they are chronic or terminal because we live in a sinful, broken world. We will experience them, but not as the result of God's wrath. The area of suffering is not an area where things just happen haphazardly beyond God's control. Our God is so great that he uses sufferings as an opportunity for his people to see his divine work and purpose. For this man, God used his blindness to arouse faith in his heart. Even though the Pharisees throughout refused to see it, this whole episode allowed this man to see Jesus as much more than prophet. Not only was his physical blindness healed, but his spiritual blindness as well. Now by faith, he saw exactly who Jesus was—his Savior, the promised Messiah who came to take away not only his sins but the sins of the world. Because of this man's blindness, God was able to reveal Jesus as his Savior and rescue him eternally.

So rather than asking "Why" when hardship comes into your life, God wants you to ask, "Where do I see God in this for me?" God allows hardships to come into our lives to make our faith stronger. Hardships are trust exercises. It's easy to trust in God and rely on him when things are going well and smoothly in life. It is much more difficult when hardship comes. Time and again we are knocked down by our hardships but then discover every time Jesus is there to catch us. Time and again Jesus brings us through our hardships. Time and again, he proves he works all things, even the difficult things that we face, for the good of his people. Even if that hardship ends in death, God works his good by bringing his people to heaven. Right now, God's work is being displayed in your life. One day, the work of God will be displayed in your death. One day, God will call you from this world to stand before his throne. Through faith, you will stand before God forgiven all your sin by the blood of your redeemer. One day you will see Jesus face to face. Then all of the work which God did for you will be fully on display when you spend your eternity in his presence in heaven.

There is one other thought we should consider. The next time a hardship enters into your life, it may not be about you at all. Maybe God allowed this to come into your life so that his word and work might be displayed to others in your life. Your hardship might be a chance for you to witness to others of God's love for you and the importance of your faith in Jesus. A number of years back, a colleague in the ministry had a son who was born with many issues and ended up living only a few weeks. At a time like that, one is tempted to ask, "Why?" Yet this colleague was able to see God at work in this young boy's short life. He once stated that his son did more ministry in the few short weeks of his life than he had done in an entire year. There were postings on their web page from people they had never met. They received emails from old friends comforting them with the gospel. There were people praying across the country that God's will be done. There were children asking about heaven and parents teaching about Jesus. There were nurses that watched and listened as Christian parents told their young child it was ok for him to go home to Jesus. It seems this young boy's hardship had little to do with him or his parents but rather to display God's work to the world.

God may have the same in mind for you. Maybe God allowed that terminal illness to come into your life to give you an opportunity to preach a sermon to your family and friends which would be louder and have more impact than any of my 20 minute sermons ever could. People don't think much about God when things are going well. But they do when things aren't. Maybe this terminal illness is a chance for you to give testimony to your grandchildren about how important faith will be in their lives. With children, far more is caught than taught. This time of suffering may give you the chance to show them what it means to put your faith in action and lean on God during a difficult time. It reminds you that what is most important is not teaching them to fish or being at their wedding, but making sure they know their God and know how to lean on him at all times. Maybe God is giving you the opportunity to leave a legacy for them which they will never forget and which will influence them throughout the rest of their lives. Maybe God is giving you the chance before you die to lead them closer to him rather than away. The question that you ask as you face suffering will have a long term effect not only on you but on those around you. Are you going to ask "Why?" and take the focus off of Christ or are you going to ask, "Where do I see God in this?" and let the light of Christ shine through you?

Our loving and perfect father in heaven may allow us (and perhaps even cause us) to experience difficulty, hardship and disease in order to be glorified through us. It may be his plan to perform a miracle in your life. It may be his purpose to grant you grace to withstand such testing of your faith and to give you insight into how he is powerfully, mercifully and graciously working in your faith and life. And, it may be so that others can see the faith which sustains you while you are here and God's glory in delivering you to the joys of heaven where you will be free from pain and suffering forever. Don't let yourself ask, "Why?" Rather, ask, "Where do I see God in this for ?" Whatever you do, **Make Sure You Ask the Correct Question.** Amen.