

“Is Covid-19 God’s Judgment?”

John 9:1-7, 39-41

March 29, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

As many suffer either from the Covid-19 virus or the effects of fighting it, one of the questions people have is whether or not this pandemic should be interpreted as God’s judgment upon us. We often bring a personal bias to this question that affects the answer given to it. The self-righteous tend to answer the question affirmatively, regarding themselves as the righteous ones who don’t deserve God’s judgment. So they want God to get those other people, the wicked ones, who do deserve this judgment. The godless and immoral also bring their bias to this question, either removing God entirely from the question and reducing it to a medical or scientific issue, or angrily denying God any right to judge.

So is Covid-19 God’s judgment? As in so many matters, we must go to the Bible to answer such questions. In today’s passage, the disciples come to Jesus with a similar question to the one we are seeking to answer about God’s judgment. They encounter a beggar who has been blind from birth. The view common in their day was to attribute such maladies directly to personal sin. So the disciples give Jesus two possible answers to their question. The question is, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” The patience of Jesus is impressive here, because his disciples were repeating the error of Job’s friends. I would have been exasperated with them and probably would have had some choice words, were I Jesus. Thankfully, Jesus is not like me and answers with gentleness, “None of the above” and attributes his blindness to something else.

In a general sense, it is true that suffering has its roots in the presence of sin in our world. The Covid-19 virus is here because we live in a fallen world, a world that is not the way God created it to be. But it is not true that personal sin leads to personal suffering in a proportional way. So Jesus rejects the disciples’ view of suffering and judgment. What does he offer in its place? **“It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him”** (v. 3). In a way, Jesus is telling them that they are asking the wrong question. They should have asked, “What is God doing through this man’s blindness?” Had they asked that question, they would have come to the answer Jesus offers in verse 5. **“As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”** God did not cause this man’s blindness, just as he did not cause the Covid-19 virus. But he is such a good and a sovereign God that he can use such evil things to bring about good. And what is that good? It is that Jesus might be displayed as the light of the world. I believe he is doing the same today with Covid-19.

I. The Light of the World Displayed to a Blind Man

Jesus and his disciples encounter this blind beggar at the temple, prompting the disciples' question about the source of his blindness. After answering their question, Jesus turns his attention to the blind man in an odd way. He spits on the ground and makes a little mud ball with the spit and dirt. He then applies this concoction to the man's eyes with the instruction that he should go to the pool of Siloam and wash off the mud. He does so, after which he can see for the first time in his life. It's not certain why Jesus chose this particular form of healing. He could have simply spoken words to accomplish the restoration of sight, or any number of other actions. Perhaps it harkens back to Genesis, where we read that God formed man from the dust of the ground by his word. Here again, God gives sight to a man from a combination of dust and what comes forth from his mouth.

In any case, what proceeds in the rest of the chapter is growth in two directions. The healed blind man grows in his faith, while the Jewish leaders grow in their unbelief. This development takes place in three scenes. Scene one is among the neighbors and those familiar with this blind beggar. It must have been a shocking sight to see him walking around like every other sighted person. One can imagine double-takes and questions like, "Wait a minute, isn't that the blind beggar we always pass on our way into the temple?" A debate ensues among them with two different positions being taken. One group insists that he is the same man while the other says that he only looks like that man. The whole time, the healed man is among them and keeps insisting, **"I am the man."** So they give him the floor and ask him to recount how it was that he came to see, and he tells them the story of his encounter with Jesus.

Apparently, not all were convinced, so they brought the man to their religious leaders, the Pharisees, to get their judgment on the matter. This begins scene two, and the same division emerges among the Pharisees that existed in the first scene. One group comes to the conclusion that Jesus cannot possibly be from God because the miracle he performed was done on the Sabbath. They conclude that he is a sinner because he has violated Sabbath law. The truth is that Jesus had not violated Sabbath law, only their corrupted interpretation of the Old Testament Sabbath laws. The second group of Pharisees is not so quick to write Jesus off. **"How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?"** (v. 16). Then, as happened in the first scene, they turn to the healed man for his opinion on the matter. In answer to their question of what conclusion he has drawn about Jesus, he declares, "He is a prophet."

We then begin to see the hardness of heart present among the Pharisees. They are grasping for any reason they can find to discount the miracle, and they land on this possibility—this man was never blind to begin with. His

parents would know about that, so they call them in and ask, **“Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?”** (v. 19). The man’s parents are very careful in their answer, reporting only the barest of facts and refusing to say anything about Jesus. They said, “We can testify for a certainty that this is our son and that he has been blind from birth. How he can now see, we can’t say. Why don’t you ask him?” John tells us the reason for their careful answer and their avoidance of saying anything about Jesus. They were afraid, because the Jewish leaders had made a declaration that anyone saying that Jesus is the Messiah should be put out of the synagogue. In this religiously saturated culture, a sanction such as that would have the effect of cutting someone off not only from religious life, but from the social and economic life of the community as well.

So the Pharisees call the man in a second time for questioning. It seems that they have already made up their minds about the matter, because they begin with their conclusion, not with an inquiry designed to arrive at the truth of the matter. They say to the man, **“Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner”** (v. 24). But, as they say, facts are stubborn things. The former blind man simply recounts the facts that are now indisputable. **“One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see”** (v. 25). But the Pharisees don’t want to accept the conclusion to which this fact would lead them. So they ask him to tell the story of his healing again, probably hoping that he will contradict his former telling of the story in a way that will allow them to discount his credibility. He responds with some pluck and sass as he taunts them, **“I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?”** (v. 27). He then goes on to state the obvious conclusion that they should have drawn from this miracle but have resisted because of their unbelief. **“Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing”** (v. 32-33). When presented with this clear and obvious conclusion, they further harden their hearts and turn their wrath on him, kicking him out of the synagogue.

Scene three brings Jesus back into the picture, as he finds this man after hearing of his ill treatment by the Pharisees. Jesus asks him if he believes in the Son of Man, to which the man replies with his own question. **“And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?”** Jesus says that he is that Son of Man, to which the formerly blind man responds, **“Lord, I believe,”** and he worshiped him. Note the growth in this man’s perception of Jesus. He referred to Jesus initially as “the man they call Jesus” (v. 11). Next, he concludes, “He is a prophet” (v. 17). Then, he is “from God” (v. 33), and finally, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him. The Pharisees go the other direction, growing progressively hardened toward Jesus.

II. The Light of the World Displayed to a Covid-19 World

So let's review where we are. Jesus is asked the reason for a bad thing that happened, a man born blind. He responds that the reason is to display the works of God through Jesus, the light of the world. He heals the man, which results in faith in Jesus for the man healed and hardening of heart for others. I believe the same thing is happening with the Covid-19 virus. God is so big and so good that he can bring good out of something very evil. Covid-19 is God's call to us to put our trust in Jesus rather than in all the empty things we easily look to.

Someone sent to me a blogpost by Trevin Wax. He wrote of going to the grocery store with his wife to get the things they needed as they prepared to stay at home during this virus shutdown. They walked to the produce section and found it empty of all produce. Both the refrigerated meats and frozen meats were completely sold out. On the flour aisle, he said the only flour he saw was some that had been spilled on the floor. The same was true on the aisle holding rice and beans. Then he went to the candy aisle and found it completely stocked. There was no shortage of kit kat bars, M&M's and all other sweets. A pandemic has a way of clarifying the difference between what we really need and mere momentary pleasure.

I believe that by God's grace Covid-19 is doing the same thing, displaying the mighty works of God through Jesus. He is the One we really need. Everything else is mere momentary pleasure that doesn't really satisfy. The biblical category for these momentary pleasures that we tend to put our trust in is idolatry. An idol is a good gift of God that we make ultimate. We use our idols to do for us what only God can do, and this pandemic is stripping us of all such idols in order to lift up Jesus as the one who can truly satisfy.

I've noticed how Covid-19 reveals the emptiness of so many culturally popular idols in our day. There's the idol of money. And now the stock market has lost trillions in value and jobless claims have spiked. There's the idol of sports. At all levels, from the highest professional level down to youth sports, everything has been shut down. I read this week that Kirk Herbstreit from ESPN has said that he would be shocked if we are able to have a football season this fall. If he's right, our state religion of college football is going to suffer a major blow this fall. Then there's the idol of entertainment and leisure. It looks like nobody in our state will be enjoying dinner out and a movie any time soon. How about the idol of security? Middle class America has been lulled into thinking that we can have protection from most of the things that threaten our safety and security. We have health insurance, disability insurance, property insurance, liability insurance and even life insurance. There is nothing wrong with any of those. But it is easy to fool ourselves and think that such things can bring us complete security. They cannot, and we are beginning to feel our vulnerability. Technology is another such idol. We

think that human inventiveness can take care of all problems. Well it's not taking care of this one, at least not yet. Please don't misunderstand me. I am not saying that there's anything wrong with any of these things. Money, sports, leisure and technology are all gifts of God to be received with thanksgiving. But when we put our trust in them, we are guilty of idolatry, of trusting in things that will let us down. Jesus will never let us down.

III. The Light of the World Displayed in Judgment

Jesus interprets this whole event in the last three verses of the chapter. **“For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.”** The blind man came to see. The religious leaders, so confident in themselves and who thought that they saw things as they were, came to be blinded.

So is Covid-19 God's judgment? Ultimately, you will be the one to answer that question. If it serves to deepen your trust in Jesus, then it is God's mercy to you, not his judgment. It is the opposite of God's judgment. Romans 1 tells us what God's judgment looks like in this present age. It is God giving people what they want, and letting them drift along trusting in idols. When God shows up as the light of the world, revealing the true nature of these idols as empty and powerless, it is his mercy.

But if the response to Covid-19 is to get angry at God or to take refuge in still another idol, then it is God's judgment. How do you respond?

CONCLUSION:

I've been singing to myself this week Fernando Ortega's "Give Me Jesus." "In the morning when I rise, give me Jesus. You can have all this world; just give me Jesus. And when I am alone, give me Jesus... And when I come to die, give me Jesus. You can have all this world, just give me Jesus."

I notice that's where this blind man ended up. He was cast out of the synagogue. And when Jesus heard that he was cast out, Jesus went in search of him and found him. Jesus goes in search of outcasts, of those who have nothing left to trust in. He finds them and invites them to himself. And when we come to Jesus, we can sing too, "You can have all this world, just give me Jesus."

Small Group Discussion Questions
John 9:1-41

1. What have you missed the most during this Covid-19 pandemic?
2. Can you think of a time in your life when you didn't get what you wanted and it turned out to be a very good thing?
3. How has this time served to bring you closer to Jesus?
4. Pray for one another concerning the challenges Covid-19 is bringing into your lives.