

“Invading the Darkness”

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John 9:1-7

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Read the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

Blind from birth! What’s with that, Jesus?

“*Who sinned, him or his parents?*” ask Jesus first disciples. What’s with that?!

Of course, I doubt they knew about congenital rubella syndrome, or Leber's congenital amaurosis, or primary juvenile glaucoma, or the other diseases and genetic mutations that can cause blindness in newborns. Now we have clinical diagnoses and pathologies of how such blindness happens.

Except, that’s not what those disciples were asking about. They weren’t looking for an account of medical mechanisms.

They were asking “Why?”

Why do things like this happen? Diseases, tsunamis, genocides, and so on. Cruelty, suffering and death. Not, “How do they happen?” Why? What is their reason? Their purpose? Their meaning? If any. These disciples are trying to make sense of it. So do we.

We could simply accept that this is the way the world is. Whether these are biological (like diseases), meteorological (like hurricanes) or geological (like earthquakes), these are all natural. Even human mess-ups and human cruelty are natural, because we are part of nature. We could just leave it at that. It’s the way it is.

But we can’t leave it at that. Yes, that’s the way it is. But we believe in our bones that’s not how it *ought* to be. We have a deeply-felt sense that things are wrong.

II

So we try to make sense of them.

What I’m going to do is offer two ways folks try to make sense of suffering. These two explanations are quite common. However, I don’t think either is what Jesus says.

The first explanation we hear is what Jesus’ first disciples suggested — it was because the man or his parents had sinned. Let’s call this the “What Goes Around, Comes Around” explanation.¹ It is the idea that, though something seems deeply unfair, it is, in fact,

¹ This explanation is formalized in “eastern” spiritual traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. A variant of it can be found in modern ‘New Age’ thought; for example, [‘the law of attraction’](#) posits that good or

perfectly fair.

Often we can easily see a connection between a bad decision, or misstep, or wrongdoing and the suffering that results. But a baby born blind? No one blinded him. An earthquake? No one shook the ground. All manner of suffering happens when no one did anything wrong.

Or, no one seemed to. This “What Goes Around, Comes Around” explanation says that someone actually did wrong. It says there is a cosmic calculation being carried out. Maybe God is doing it. Maybe it’s some impersonal force, like karma. An invisible thread of responsibility spins through time and space, tying together a wrongdoing done with a suffering suffered.

No, we can’t see it. Still, this explanation says there is a cosmic balancing of accounts. Commit a wrong. You might not pay for it right away, but you will someday. In spiritualities that twin karma with reincarnation, the account books are not closed when we die. We are in a cycle of lives. We carry our debts and credits from one lifetime to the next.

Remember, this “What Goes Around, Comes Around” explanation is trying to make sense out of suffering that makes no sense. Its answer? It does make sense. The world is fair. Goodness gets rewarded and wrongdoing punished. Suffering is justice

If this explanation is right, and many believe it, then there is no innocent suffering. Suffering is always deserved. Someone suffering is always paying for something they did, in this life or some other. This explanation is tightly moral, an uncompromising justice.

But it is not what Jesus says.

III

Here is another, very common explanation.² Let’s call it the “Good Sparrow” explanation.

God is in charge. This explanation says that God is in charge in such a way that every single thing that happens, God makes happen. Now, of course, people do things. Natural processes unfold. But this explanation says that they all happen because God wants them to happen. Nothing happens without God wanting it. It’s God’s will. Everything is God’s will.

bad things happen because people are thinking about those things. However, this explanation is also commonplace in ‘western’ popular consciousness, and was clearly readily at hand for Jesus’ disciples to employ.

² This second explanation characterizes the Calvinist tradition in Christian theology, as well as Islamic thought. For a relatively brief, though dense, philosophically sophisticated and devastating critique of it, few can do better than David Bentley Hart in his Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami? (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005). See especially pp. 82ff. For Islam, again in the context of the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, see Bruner, 572.

Not only does God see the little sparrow fall. God pushes it off the branch.

But there is more to this explanation than that. God is good, perfectly good. So in this “Good Sparrow” explanation, everything that happens God makes happen for a good reason. Everything that happens — including suffering — has a good purpose. It is part of God’s good plan for everything.

Of course, we cannot always see it. Still, we can always trust God. So, in this “Good Sparrow” explanation, we are assured that even the worst things we know have meaning, because they are in God’s hands and God’s plans.

I agree with a lot of this “Good Sparrow” explanation. I agree that God is in charge, and God is shaping all things that happen toward God’s good purposes, and we can always trust God, and we are always in God’s hands.

Here’s the problem I have with the “Good Sparrow” explanation. Doesn’t it mean that God makes evil happen? God makes sin happen? God makes wrongdoing happen? It’s not just saying that God brings good out of bad things. That’s true, and thank God! The “Good Sparrow” explanation implies God makes the bad things happen.

The “What Goes Around, Comes Around” explanation says that bad things happen, and that’s justice. This “Good Sparrow” explanation says that bad things happen, and that’s godly. Neither, though, is what Jesus says.

IV

Jesus talks about darkness.

Not the nighttime sky. “Darkness” as a way of talking about what is wrong.

This darkness is around us. This darkness is among us. This darkness is within each of us. It is the tragic darkness of suffering. It is the moral darkness of sin. It is the intellectual darkness of ignorance. It is the fearful darkness of despair.

God is not the darkness.

The Bible says, in the 1st Letter of John, that God is light, and in God there is no darkness at all.³ God does not create this darkness. God does not use this darkness. God does not compromise with this darkness.

Sometimes, suffering is deserved but much suffering is not. Sometimes, suffering serves a good purpose but much suffering does not. I’ll even say that sometimes God brings

³ 1st John 1:5.

suffering, but much suffering is not of God.

When a child suffers blindness. . . . When a child suffers abuse. . . . When a child suffers hunger. . . . When a child suffers genocide that's the darkness. It is not God.

O yes, this is God's world. It is God's good world.

David Bentley Hart is a theologian who wrote a great book, The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami? He was talking about the Christmas 2004 catastrophe centred in the Indian Ocean that killed about a quarter million people, a third of them children. He wrote, ". . . *all of nature is a shattered mirror of divine beauty, still full of light, but riven by darkness.*"⁴

Yes, because this is God's world, and because God is sovereign, then nothing will ever, ever stop, thwart, or defeat God's good purposes. Nothing is lost to God, even in the darkness. Thank God!

But Jesus does not explain the darkness. He does not justify the darkness. He does not excuse the darkness. He does not make the darkness seem like light. His disciples ask him the "Why?" question about that blind man's darkness. Jesus does not answer it!⁵

V

Jesus invades the darkness.

He confronts the darkness. He denounces the darkness. He condemns the darkness. He mocks the darkness. He exposes the darkness. He confounds the darkness.

Jesus defeats the darkness.

Jesus does not answer "Why?"

He says, "Watch! See! Look at what God is doing!"

⁴ Hart, 102.

⁵ Reflecting on many of the *Christian* responses to the tsunami, Hart observes: "And almost nothing was said regarding — and this can scarcely be emphasized enough — the triumphalism of the gospel or the Johannine and Pauline imagery of spiritual and cosmic warfare; no obvious notice was taken of the strange absence of any metaphysical optimism in the New Testament, or of the refusal of any final reconciliation with death — indeed, the mockery of its power. Yes, certainly, there is nothing, not even suffering and death, that cannot be providentially turned toward God's good ends. But the New Testament also teaches that, in another and ultimate sense, suffering and death — considered in themselves — have no true meaning or purpose at all; and this is in a very real sense the most liberating and joyous wisdom that the gospel imparts." Hart, 35.

Then, the Light of the world heals the man's eyes.

Then, for the first time ever, his darkness lifts and he can see.

The Light invades the darkness. The darkness will never overpower the Light! This is the good news of Jesus! Amen.