

What Jesus Thought About Universal Victim Blaming (John 9 & Luke 13)

“I don’t trust Christians,” said Pascal. “They know too much about God.” Of course he spoke sarcastically, since he knew that what we think we know we most likely don’t know at all, especially since what there is to know about God is too big for our small minds. It was probably to our small mindedness – claiming to know more than we know – that the philosopher objected.

Most of us are uncomfortable with perplexity and unresolved issues when it comes to God and the life we have here in his world. We want everything to line up with logic, for every problem to conclude with a logical solution. It’s the most immature faith that assumes everything can be reduced to reason and formulas. Our need for spiritual formulas that work more like magic spells than Scriptural principles is evidence of a childish approach to the spiritual. Faith can’t be reduced to the formulaic. Don Miller wrote, “Formulas seem much better than God because formulas offer control; and God, well, He is like a person, and people, as we all know, are complicated.”

A man was born blind. He’d lived his entire life in the dark. It was obvious to those with a faith of formulas that either his parents were bad or God knew he would be a bad person when he grew up, so he punished him ahead of time. A vicious dictator sent troops to a religious service and murdered the worshippers in the middle of their liturgy. No doubt, something must have been wrong with their religion for God to allow such brutality during their service. Eighteen people were crushed to death when a tower collapsed on them. It was widely assumed that they were probably a collection of particularly immoral people for this “act of God” to happen to them.

Bad people have bad things happen to them. That’s the way it works. If you’re good, God always protects you from disasters. There’s obviously something wrong with you if God brings or allows these kinds of judgments into your life. What goes around comes around. It’s Karma, a Christian version of it of course.

Agreed?

The elite agents of such fortune cookie platitudes and prefab answers for every occasion were Job’s friends. (I use the term “friends” in the least literal way possible.) Though God himself said Job was the most righteous man on earth at the time, those guys, who were allergic to theologically untidy circumstances, repeatedly found creative ways to blame him for his trials. Everything was cause and effect. To spiritually constipated God experts, A plus B always equals C. Theirs was a God-in-a-box theology, out of which, though allegedly all powerful, the divine could never fight his way out. “Any snappy explanation of suffering you come up with,” wrote Anne Lamott in regard to Job’s counselors, “will be horses**t.”

Twice, in John 9 and Luke 13, Jesus was approached by religious people whose mantra was “Suffering is universally caused by sinfulness.” Regarding specific sufferers they posed to him their standard philosophical query: “*Who sinned?*”

This is a brief look at both of those passages, the only such times in the Gospels where he addressed a correlation between suffering and sinfulness. People asked him in these two scenes about disabilities, disasters, and deaths by murder. His replies tell us a lot about what Jesus thought about *universal* victim blaming*.

**It would be silly to claim that no suffering is caused by bad behavior. The connection between the liver’s cirrhosis and the abuse of alcohol is widely known, for instance. Breaking God’s laws has*

repercussions in the short run as well as in the long. Therefore, I use the term “universal” in order to denote all victims and their blameworthiness. My objection here is about the notion that all sufferers have incited God’s disapproval and therefore deserve the bad circumstances in which they find themselves.

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John 9:1-7

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

Having said this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. “Go,” he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam” (this word means Sent). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

“Of all the preposterous things nothing exceeds the criticisms of the habits of the poor by the well warmed, well housed, and well fed.” Herman Melville

“Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Whose fault is this? Who’s to blame? Those are the first things to come to some people’s minds when bad stuff happens to other people. People tend to say things like this when they’d rather philosophize than actually get involved. They’re more interested in *diagnosing* a problem than *dealing* with it in some practical way. Job’s delightful diagnostician friends specialized in this sort of analysis. Instead of lightening his load, they added to his burdens by blaming him for everything that happened to him. “You must’ve done something bad to make God so mad at you. It’s obvious that you’ve been bad since bad things only happen to people who do bad things. You should repent and maybe things will get better for you.” Simple. “They’re like theological buzzards,” wrote Oswald Chambers, “sitting on their perch of massive tradition, preening their ruffled feathers and croaking their eloquent platitudes.”

Of course, sociologists and psychologists have to do a certain amount of diagnosis. In order to constructively alleviate human suffering they are trained to identify and analyze its root causes. I don’t know anything about those fields but my guess is that most people didn’t get into them in order to assign blame and leave it at that. They, at least the best of them, see something messed up and they jump into the middle of it to try to bring some order to it. They went to school to learn how to help people, not just blame them.

But those of us who are not interested in or qualified to repair broken psyches or social systems might do well to leave the theorizing to the “experts” and the convicting to the Spirit, and simply do our part to help one person at a time one day at a time.

“Who sinned? Was it he or they or someone else?” Unless the Holy Spirit leads us to delve into such issues in order to point our friends toward shedding a particular toxic behavior, we would probably be more effective by exposing the good news that – even in their suffering – Jesus knows them thoroughly and yet loves them completely.

I don't deny that rebellion against God is the root cause behind of all human suffering. No doubt, our failure to trust him enough to stay away from the forbidden fruit is the problem and Jesus is the answer to our problem. But when we encounter the suffering of others it's advisable to leave the diagnosis to God, and if we can do something to alleviate it, we should!

The disciples were steeped in *Jewish thinking* and new at *Jesus thinking*, so they delayed the solution with deliberation – “*Who sinned? Whose fault is this?*” This sort of musing is a favorite Christian delay tactic to avoid any sense of responsibility we might have to help someone in need. We waste lots of time and energy with case studies where we treat victims more like lab rats than like people. We tend to be more concerned about the *theological problem* than our *neighbor's problem*. We set up committees to analyze issues to death and often never get around to doing anything about them. Fortunately Jesus came to *solve* problems, not *study* them.

If not analyzing the *problems of the world*, we Christians are dissecting the *particulars of the Word*, and never quite get the two (the world and the Word) close enough to each other for the one to impact the other. Jesus spit, said, “*We don't have time for this!*” and made the man see.

Later in the narrative Luke tells us: ***His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, “Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?” Some claimed that he was. Others said, “No, he only looks like him.” But he himself insisted, “I am the man.”***

It's always wrong to talk about someone like he's not even there! “*Excuse me! I'm the guy!*” The disciples wanted to *dissect* him, his neighbors wanted to *discuss* him, and the Pharisees wanted to *debate* about him. Jesus seemed to be the only one who actually wanted to do something to help him. Like these people, instead of doing something about the problems and pains of people around us, we're often stuck in the “paralysis of our analysis.” We sit around conference tables in our suits and argue about the causes for poverty or immorality, when we should don our work clothes and get out and get involved. “It's getting dark!” Jesus said, “Do you want to talk about it, or do you want to fix it?”

I wonder if he used saliva-soaked mud to heal the man in order to take the whole scene even further out of the realm of the theoretical. Maybe he wanted to show them that not only was the *cause* of the man's problem a mystery, but so was its *cure*.

I've heard preachers theorize about this scene and the connection between the mud and the miracle. But my guess is that there wasn't one. Maybe he just wanted us to know that our *faulting and figuring* are simply *foolish*. He showed us that people are the point, and their needs are our mission. The goal of goals is the glory of God and the good of people. Our analysis addiction stands in the way of us getting around to acting in such a way that glory is ascribed to God and good comes to people. Maybe we should get into rehab and go to “Analysis-aholics” meetings to break the dependence.

When they interrogated the formerly blind man, “*How did he heal you?*” he confessed he had no idea. It just worked, and that's all he cared about. How it worked, why it worked, will it work again? It didn't matter. He could see! His focus was on the effectiveness of the work, not the method. “All I know is, I used to be blind and lost. Now I'm not!” If you're waiting till you know more before you'll work for God, you might be waiting longer than you've got. In my experience, God tends to let me know more when I use what I already know.

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.”

The puzzling part of his answer is that it sounds like the guy's been blind his whole life so this moment could arrive, Jesus would heal him, and God would be glorified. But that doesn't sound quite right to me. Think about how it might've sounded to the guy who suffered in blindness all his life till that fateful day when he was finally fixed so God could take a bow. I'm not inclined to think this is an accurate depiction of what Jesus was saying here.

The answer might be in the wording itself. Not to be too technical about this, or bring up any residual pain you may have from Middle School grammar, but let's talk about punctuation. Since the original Greek text didn't include punctuation, the translators had to add it as they saw fit. In most versions it sounds like the man had to just endure blindness until the best time came for him to be healed in front of an audience so that God could be glorified. And while there may be times when something like this is true, I don't think it's the best way to understand this particular passage.

Some of the experts suggest that a better translation of this might be something like this:

“Neither he nor his parents brought this on. But so the work of God could be displayed we must work the work of him that sent me, while it's still day.” In other words, *“It was neither his sins nor theirs that caused his blindness. But if you want God's work to be displayed, you'd better get working. The sun won't stay up forever. You have to do these things while there's still sunlight.”*

You might prefer an excerpt from *Wiget's Free Translation*:

“It's getting dark, you guys! Do you want to talk about it, or fix it? You want to know whose fault it is? Let that go and get to work! We don't have time for fault finding. We can argue or we can act! That's what brings glory to God.”

“As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

In Jesus' day when the sun went down they went to bed. They didn't get cable in Galilee and Internet connectivity was sparse, so what could they do at night except sleep? When they saw dusk arriving it was time to wrap up the day's labor, eat dinner, wash the dishes, and go to sleep. There was no working late at the office, so if you didn't finish you were out of luck, at least until the next day. His point was that their allotment of sunshine was about to run out, so they had to get on with doing what they had to do.

He used the twelve-hours of daylight as a metaphor for how much time the disciples had with him on board to show them how to do the work of God. In our case, it's our lifetime, however long it might be, that corresponds to the period of time that the sun shines in one day.

The point is we don't have enough time to, so let's clock in and get to work!

Onto the next, and only other recorded teaching Jesus gave about universal victim blaming.

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Luke 13

1 Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. 2 Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? 3 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. 4 Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on

them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

In the previous scene it was the disciples who presumed that bad behavior led to the man’s congenital blindness. In this one it was a number of unnamed moral critics who equated the suffering of fellow Jews with their sin. It seems they believed that the ones who were slain by sword or crushed by tower got what they deserved. They must have been “worse sinners” than everyone else who were exempt from these catastrophes. The ones who narrowly escaped Pilate’s blade or Siloam’s tower must have been more virtuous than they. That’s the way it works. Bad stuff happens to bad people and good to the good.

It’s not clear whether Jesus read their thoughts or they actually said them out loud, but it is evident that they had their minds made up when Jesus challenged their faulty thinking. “*Do you think...?*” Jesus pushed back. Their simplistic premise was, “*Just as prosperity is proportionate to one’s piety, misfortune corresponds with God’s displeasure over impiety.*”

I honestly think that in order to sound spiritually superior some people claim that disasters, whether by nature or at the hands of sinister individuals, come as a result of the evil behavior of the victims. I’ve heard ludicrous statements like these:

“Hurricane Katrina was obviously God’s judgment against the wickedness in New Orleans.”

“God was tired of their sorcery and sent an earthquake to Haiti.”

“The reason the Jews suffered the Holocaust was because of their rejection of Jesus in the first century.”

“Hinduism is the cause of starvation in India and God judged Indonesia with a tsunami for its Islamic majority.”

These may sound “spiritual” to some, even prophet-like, but they’re biblically uninformed and simple-minded – not to mention, in light of these two passages (John 9 and Luke 13), in sharp contrast to Jesus’ way of thinking.

A lot of Christians rush to attribute calamities to divine judgment. But I’ve noticed that if similar disasters were to happen to them or to people they love they call it “persecution.” Maybe it makes them feel better about their own pitiful spirituality when they can point to someone else whose life they judge to be more defective than theirs. Maybe they think they’re being saintly when they get together and carp on the evil state of the world. “Abortion, twisted sexuality, divorce, addiction, gambling, terrorism – God isn’t having it anymore!” they say with a swagger. But Jesus’ response in this passage counters that elitist attitude and flawed philosophy.

“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! ... Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no!”

Among the most fundamentalistic Jews of Jesus’ day Galileans were just one rung above Samaritans, who were one rung above Gentiles – quite a caste system to be sure. Most of these religionists had very little going for them spiritually so, like most of us, they felt better if they had someone below them on which to tread. When tragedy visits we say, “It’s because they’re Catholics, or Mormons, or environmentalists, or Muslims, or New Agers, or worse – Democrats!”

When we disagree with or disapprove of someone it’s easier to assume that their misfortunes are a direct result of their guilt. I’ve observed that until we experience our own tragedies we tend to assign

blame to all the other bad people of the world. I suppose we're trying to make sense of suffering in the world, and since we have such a hard time saying, "I don't know," the easiest alternative is to assign it to God's wrath.

"I tell you, no!" said Jesus disagreeing in no uncertain terms with their premise. Spiritual blamers of all types might be well advised to take his word for it. He knows what we don't.

Interestingly, in this case he didn't actually posit an alternative explanation for the source of this man's suffering. He didn't lecture them about God's sovereignty or about the devil's role in human tragedies. The point he chose to make that day was that those who were so apt to assess the relative quality of others' spirituality should do their own self-analysis. He used their opinion of other people against them and told them to do what they recommend for everyone else – repent. *"Speaking of people whose behavior could very well lead to disaster, you guys should look at yourselves in the mirror and repent!"*

He changed the focus of the conversation. Instead of judging the sufferer, he told that they should evaluate their own lives and be forewarned of their own inevitable judgment, that is, unless they change. Everyone will face his or her own "performance review," and as it stood that day, they had some serious repenting to do in order to face that day with confidence.

But unless you repent, you too will all perish.

While the Galileans died at the order of a murderous dictator, the 18 people in Jerusalem perished due to an unpredictable misfortune, what some people call an "act of God." The one was a crime perpetrated by a ruthless tyrant and the other a random accident, a fluke of nature. The tidy explanation of the assembled crowd involved blaming the victims. Jesus, on the other hand, assigned no blame, but rebuked the blamers. The God-experts needed to eliminate the plank from their own eyes before attempting meticulous eye surgery on others.

Jesus had an opportunity to play the part of the apologist and defend God against charges of mismanaging the world. Instead, he warned them against instinctively equating tragedy with divine punishment. Sinful behavior is not always – even not usually – to blame when atrocities come. They just come. Life is fragile and we're way over our heads when we try to judge every catastrophic circumstance as karmic payback. But life's fragility gives it urgency, urgency to repent and live close to God.

Jesus turned our attention away from disasters, victims, and playing the blame game to address those of us who thus far have survived the hazards of a random universe and human cruelty. We shouldn't mistake our good fortune necessarily as evidence of God's special blessing. We're advised not to misinterpret *divine protection* as *divine approval*. He makes his sun rise over the heads of both the good and the evil. Because we've not been victimized by wicked people or maimed by calamity doesn't mean he approves of the way we live.

Notice too that Jesus didn't promise them that if they'd repent they would never be the victims of tragedy. He didn't promise them protection from suffering, but from God's judgment. If they didn't change their self-righteous ways, they would face the kind of judgment that they nearly seemed to wish on others.

Jesus didn't explain tragedy or blame the victims. He didn't defend creation or the Creator. In this case he offered no theological speculation, but simply asked: *What about you? How will you live your lives?*

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If when we observe the sufferings of others our first thought is to assign blame for it, we haven't heard Jesus. If we assume off hand that victims of disaster are at fault and that God is punishing them, we prove that our faith is at best, immature or at worst, toxic. Instead of silly speculation and victim blaming, we should concern ourselves with our own relationship with God (Luke 13) and pry ourselves from our judge's bench to serve the sufferer (John 9). We should humble ourselves and get to work while there's still time to get to it. When we ask, "Why did God allow this tragedy or that travesty?" we're asking the wrong question. Instead we should say, "In light of these incomprehensible cataclysms and horrific injustices, how must I live my life? And Lord, what would you have me do?"