

**March 15, 2026 • The Fourth Sunday in Lent**  
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## **Who Sinned?**

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” So, Jesus’ disciples see a man with a disability—actually, I’m not sure they see a man at all, they see a disability, they see his blindness and not much else. And they jump to the conclusion that this blindness before them must be the work of God—and specifically, that this blindness must be God’s punishment for some sin that was committed. Their question doesn’t even make sense, if you think about it—how could this man’s own sin have caused him to be born blind? Do they think he sinned in the womb? Are they asking about reincarnation, and whether he’s paying for the sins of his past lives? That seems unlikely, though not impossible. Maybe they’re thinking about how God, through the prophet Ezekiel, declared that children should not suffer for the sins of their parents, and so they’re trying to make sense of why someone could be born blind.

Really, I think that’s what it comes down to. That’s what it always comes down to. They want to understand why people suffer. If God is good and righteous, why would a child be born blind? Why are children suffering? Why should people who love God get cancer? How does any of this make sense?

So, the New Revised Standard Version of this passage, which I read this morning tried to clarify Jesus’s answer to this question. I mean, he very clearly says, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.” Then the translators inserted the phrase, “he was born blind” before “so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” Which makes it sound like Jesus is saying, “Yes, people suffer, but it’s not because of sin, people are disabled so God can cure them.” And that’s a bad answer, at least if you try to apply it beyond the specific case of this one man. It’s a bad answer because it denies the full humanity of everyone who is disabled. It assumes disability exists to be fixed and the only way to live a full, abundant life is with a whole and functional body. Which is bad news for all of us, whether we’re disabled now or temporarily able-bodied until age or injury takes its toll.

Fortunately, that’s not what Jesus said. His answer is not quite as clear as our translation makes it sound. The phrase “he was born blind,” which the translators not-so-helpfully inserted, doesn’t appear in the Greek text of the Gospel. What Jesus literally says here is something like, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; but rather that the works of God might be made manifest in him.” In other words, what matters is not why he was born this way. He just was. It’s not the start of his story that matters, but what story he’s going to tell with his life—what he does with the life he’s been given as the works of God are revealed in him. People suffer, Jesus is saying, and the glory of God’s works is revealed in people. Both of those things are true.

And the works of God are revealed in this man when Jesus puts dirt and spit on his eyes and tells him to go and wash. There’s a delicious earthiness to this miraculous healing that’s rather unlike the other signs recorded in the Gospel of John. Most of the time, Jesus doesn’t do anything but speak to turn water into wine or heal the sick or call Lazarus out of his tomb. I like picturing Jesus down on the ground literally getting his hands dirty. It reminds me of the story in Genesis of God creating people out of the dust of the earth—“the human from the humus,” in the words of scholar Phyllis Trible. It’s almost like Jesus is making new eyes for him out of clay, re-creating him, giving him a new birth. So the man goes and washes and comes back able to see, like he’s been born a second time, born of water and the Spirit.

And now the Pharisees get involved. Their response to this miracle, this clear demonstration of the works of God, is to say, “Hmm, nah. This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.” All of a sudden the conversation has shifted from whether the blind man or his parents were sinners, with blindness as his punishment, to whether Jesus is a sinner, despite the clear evidence of God’s presence and power. And unlike Jesus’ disciples, the Pharisees here aren’t really interested in hearing explanations. They’ve made up their mind already, and all the questioning they put the man and his parents through really boils down to

trying to get them to confirm what the Pharisees already believe: that Jesus is a sinner, and the man's miraculous healing—if that's really what it was...—was the work of God alone. They were so caught up in their narrow understanding of sin—that Jesus sinned by making mud on the Sabbath, that this blind man was “born entirely in sins”—that they could not see or comprehend the presence and power of God right in front of them. So they say, “We don't know where Jesus comes from,” and the man who used to be blind finally snaps, like “*Really?* You don't know where he comes from? He opened my eyes!” Now they're confronted with an irrefutable argument that Jesus must have come from God, and their response is to drive the man away.

So then, after all this argument about who is and is not a sinner, Jesus finally weighs in. He's already said that sin had nothing to do with the man being born blind. And now here he refutes what the Pharisees have been saying about him: making mud and curing the blind on the Sabbath isn't what makes somebody a sinner. Sin is when you see the good work of God, plain as day, right in front of you, and you call it evil. Sin is when you look a miracle in the face and call it something wicked, so confident in your own understanding that you can't acknowledge something outside it. Sin is when you see the glory of God revealed in a person in front of you, and you shrug and say, “Nothing to see here.” That's what makes Jesus say, “Your sin remains.”

The glory of God's works revealed in us rarely looks quite so dramatic as the healing of a man born blind. I have my story of how Jesus sang to me and gave me an infusion of hope I'm still holding on to. It doesn't sound like much, but it's just one of a bunch of similar stories of times when I heard God's voice more clearly than I usually do. And I know many of you, maybe most of you, have your own stories of how God has worked in your life. Some of them are stories of healing, of being set free from suffering. I think more of them are stories of how we discover that God is with us even in the midst of our suffering like a good shepherd who revives our souls, who spreads a table for us, and fills our cup to overflowing.

I sometimes wish Jesus had given a clearer answer to the question behind the question that the disciples asked him: not “Who sinned?” but “Why?” Especially now, when so many bad things are happening to so many innocent people. It would be nice to have a better understanding of why all that suffering is going on. But I think the answer Jesus does give, as mysterious as it is, is better. He could have helped me wrap my brain around what's going on in the world. But instead he helped me wrap my heart around the people who are suffering, and that seems like it's a lot more important. Yes, people suffer, and it's not through any fault of their own. And the glory of God is revealed in people. Both of those things are painfully, beautifully true.

May we never be so caught up in looking for God wherever we think God should be that we miss the glory of God revealed in the people right in front of us. And even without understanding the Why of our suffering and the suffering around us, may we find comfort in knowing the What: “you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me... Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of God for ever.”

Amen.