

Our Gospel reading is very familiar. So many times Jesus helps someone in need. The blind are given sight; the deaf, hearing. In this instance Jesus healed a man who had been unable to walk for thirty-eight years. Jesus helping people is such a prominent theme, that it goes a long way towards explaining what it means for Jesus to be the Christ. God sent his Son to help people.

But there is a problem. If you are like me, then there is a part of you that thinks, "What about now?" We still have people who are blind, deaf, and disabled. There are a few members of our congregation that the pastors visit who are probably worse off than this man we heard about in our Gospel reading. Not only are they unable to walk, they are unable to speak. They are reliant upon others for practically everything.

This can be troubling. Why doesn't Jesus do for them, what he did for the man at Bethesda? Our criticism could go deeper. Why did God make them like that? God can do anything. Why did he do that?

Many have attempted to answer these questions from a Christian perspective, but their answers have always struck me as being like a blanket that is too short. Short blankets can either cover your feet or your chest and your arms, but they can't do both. That's how I feel about those answers. Maybe they can explain a part of what bothers me, but another part of me is left feeling cold.

We will return to this in a few minutes, because I'd also like to talk about something else. I think it is important to realize that suffering and disability is not just a problem for those who would like to believe in God. It is a problem for all people at all times. Many answers have been tried, but as we look at a few of them, I think you will find that their "solutions" have also been deeply unsatisfactory.

For example, in the ancient world, people would expose disabled infants. If the newborn had defects it would be taken out into the wilderness to be left to fend for itself. The cries would be too distant and faint to be heard. The child wouldn't survive long. The benefit of this disturbing action was that the parents and the society wouldn't be burdened by the care of a weak person.

Weak, sick, and disabled people can be seen as "dead weight." Perhaps you've heard before of what the Nazis did. They employed a cold kind of logic. The War had made food scarce. Why should these worthless people eat the food that could be sent to the troops instead? After they murdered them the resources that they once had squandered were put to good use in winning the war.

However, we must not look for the speck in our neighbor's eye, while a log is in our own. The brutal logic of ending suffering by killing the one who is suffering seems only to gain ground. Unborn babies—especially those with defects—are aborted. You might be surprised as to the kinds of people who make this difficult choice. They can be otherwise very decent people. No one ever needs to know except them and the doctor. Understandably the parents become frightened by the heartache, stress, and financial burden a disabled child would bring, so they terminate the pregnancy.

People have been fighting for the right to die. If suffering people will die anyway, why can't they be helped along? We have discovered drugs that can bring death painlessly. We put beloved pets to sleep, why shouldn't such compassionate care also be given to humans?

And we might say something about money too. Nobody likes taxes, but the way our society primarily takes care of the especially weak, sick and disabled is through taxes. Among the hordes of lobbyists who haunt the halls of government there are precious few who fight for dollars for the disabled. It's like no one cares.

We can pull together some threads in these examples we've talked about. The natural man's strategy for dealing with those who suffer seems to be: Avoid them, ignore them, blame them, neglect them, even murder them, but always being careful not to use the word "murder." Lies and murder. Remind you of anyone? We do, indeed, seem to be chips off the old block.

Whatever complaints people might have about God and suffering, it's obvious that the natural man's strategy for suffering is hardly any kind of cure-all. The Scriptures tell us that God is altogether different than our attitudes and actions. The Scriptures say that God has a special concern for those who suffer. He cares especially for the powerless, penniless widow, and the lonely, defenseless orphan.

Remember Jesus's parable about judgement with the sheep and the goats. The sheep visited, helped, and comforted those who were suffering. The goats did not. Interestingly, the goats seemed to be peeved by the judgement rendered against them because they can't remember neglecting those who were suffering. Perhaps it is because they got so good at avoiding, ignoring, neglecting, and banishing from their mind those who suffer.

So if we return those questions that I left off with a few minutes ago—questions like "Why is there so much suffering, why does God do that?"—I have to admit that I have difficulty answering those questions head on. However, when I compare the natural man's strategies with what God commands and encourages us to do in the Scriptures, I can see that one is clearly better than the other. The natural man is cowardly, cold, and calloused. The child of God is supposed to be different—a chip off a different kind of block. As Jesus said, "**Be merciful, as your heavenly Father is merciful.**"

The Bible is very clear about what our heavenly Father is like. He loves righteousness and justice. He also loves mercy and forgiveness. He wishes to give joy, laughter, and confidence. He fights against fear, sadness, pain, and falsehood. You could sum everything up by saying he is the one who helps in time of need.

It is no coincidence that the Gospels testify over and over again that Jesus helps people. He is God's Son. If you want to know what the Father is like, look to the Son. And what you see him doing over and over again is helping people who are suffering.

The Gospels leave no doubt about who God is and what Jesus came to do: He is the God who helps. But here's where faith is tested. It's one thing to believe God *can* help; it's another to believe that he does or he will—to be *certain* that he will. Does faith survive even when healing doesn't come, when prayers seem unanswered, when suffering lingers. We're tempted to demand answers—"Why this pain? Why did you do this?"—and yet, Scripture never promises us explanations. Instead, it points us to a Person: Jesus, the exact image of the Father's mercy. From the Bible's perspective the challenge isn't to unravel

the mystery of suffering, but to believe. As Paul is fond of saying: **“Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”**

So where does that leave us? We still have unanswered questions, suffering that lingers, and a world that groans under the weight of brokenness. But we’ve also got Jesus.

The paralyzed man at Bethesda didn’t receive a theological treatise on suffering; he received the outstretched hand of Jesus. He didn’t save himself by becoming like God, figuring everything out. He trusted in Jesus, and Jesus did more than he could have ever hoped or dreamed. Believe, therefore, even when the night is long, and help seems far away.

And don’t be seduced by those who would make clever arguments about God and suffering. The natural man’s wisdom will always lead us away from the weak, away from the suffering, away from the costly love that Christ demands. The cross, on the other hand, stands as God’s answer—not to satisfy our curiosity, but to cure every last one of our deepest needs.

The difference couldn’t be clearer. Whereas the natural man lies and murders, God speaks the truth, and lays down his life for the sheep. So believe in the foolishness of the cross instead of the wisdom of man. In Christ God doesn’t just give us answers. He gives us himself, and that is more than enough.

