

Is the man paralyzed because of his sin? Do sins cause suffering?

A question arising from Mark 2:5

The passage

Mark 2:1-12 “And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. ² And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them. ³ And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. ⁴ And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay. ⁵ And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “My son, your sins are forgiven.” ⁶ Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷ “Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” ⁸ And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, “Why do you question these things in your hearts? ⁹ Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’? ¹⁰ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”- he said to the paralytic- ¹¹ “I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.” ¹² And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We never saw anything like this!” (ESV)”

The answer

No, and no. Jesus is *not* trying to say that this man was sick because he sinned. Jesus is simply trying to teach the crowds that he is God himself, who alone can forgive sin. He is not *merely* a healer. Our greatest need is not merely to be made well physically, but to receive his forgiveness and be made new spiritually.

Jesus elsewhere discourages his disciples from seeing a “tit-for-tat” connection between personal sin and personal suffering in chapter nine of John’s gospel. In John 9:2-3 the disciples find a man born blind and ask Jesus “ ‘who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.’” After denying that sin *caused* this disability, Jesus then heals the man.

In Luke 13:4-5, Jesus proves a similar point by using a major headline of the day. The tower of Siloam had recently fallen, killing 13 people. Jesus asks people, essentially, “do you think they died because they were worse sinners than others?” Before anyone can answer, Jesus tells them not to equate disaster with sin, but to examine the sin in their own hearts and repent of it. According to Jesus, neither sickness, nor disaster (either natural or man made) come to people who “deserve it” more than others. Jesus discourages his disciples and others from trying to discern a connection between someone’s suffering and their sin. He encourages a better question, “how will I deal with *my* sin, regardless of my suffering?”