

A BIBLICAL VIEW ON DISABILITY

STUDY 1: Making meaning of disability
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How to approach this Bible study material

This Bible study contains enough information for three separate meetings or group discussions. Each group should therefore decide what would be the most suitable approach in their specific context. It is possible to go through the content in one session. However, it is suggested that the group consider the option for three sessions.

The content of this study can be separated into three levels for discussion:

Session 1: Contemporary issues regarding disability. Looking at our own context.

Session 2: What can we learn from the Bible? Reading the Bible on the issue of disability.

Session 3: Interpreting the Bible. Applying the Bible to our lives.

Session I - Contemporary issues regarding disability.

1 Reading our own context. Views on causes of disability.

1.1 Some people view disability from a religious point of view.

- They explain the cause of disability as a result of sin.
- This view sees disability as punishment or curse by God.
- It is linked to some wrong done in the past - by the disabled person or his family/parents.

1.2 Do you know people with this view on the cause of their disability?

- Reflect on this question - formulate your personal experience and thoughts (by journaling or reflective discernment)

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- Discuss this question with other people and hear their understanding of this matter. Make notes on the insights

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1.3 Stories from real life....

"It seems people find it difficult to accept me with my disability. They don't understand that I come to church as anybody else for spiritual nourishment. When it's time for prayer, they all focus on me and want to pray for my disability to be healed." – a lady who had polio and now lives with a mobility impairment.

"I have been told that personal sin is the cause of my child's disability. The church expects of me to confess, then they will pray for the child to be healed. I don't know what sins I have to confess. Why don't all people have a disability as a result of their sins?" – a young mother of a child with intellectual disability.

"Why do so many churches connect disability and sin? What about all the other people who have sinned but did not get a disability? – Zulu speaking young man who has hearing impairment.

1.4 And also stories from the Bible.....

- What can we learn from John 9:1- 12?

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- Read the whole chapter and formulate your initial response to the story.

Session II - What can we learn from the Bible?

2 Reading the Bible on the issue of disability.

2.1 Further engagement with the story of the unnamed blind beggar John 9:1-12.

2.1.1 Read verses 1-5 and reflect on:

- The situation Jesus found himself in (v 1; read also John 8:48-58).
- The question by Jesus' (Rabbi – Teacher) disciples in verse 2.
- What the text tells us about the cause (reason) for the man's blindness.
- What you would have answered them if you were present.

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2.1.2 See how Jesus rephrases the issue in verses 3-5.

- Hear his response to the argument of sin as cause for the blindness.
- Think about Jesus' explanation for the blindness of the man as revelation of God's work.
- Reflect on your insights (in writing or verbally) in discussion with a friend or group

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2.1.3 Jesus introduces the theme of good works and the image of day and night.

- Hear what Jesus says about the relationship between himself and God who sent him.
- Reflect on Jesus' identification of himself as "light of the world" (thus as God).
- Formulate your own understanding of the image of light and the relationship between Jesus and the Father. This will enable you to communicate it to others.

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2.1.4 Reflect on the point of this story by engaging the following statements:

- The man's blindness as opportunity to reveal Israel's spiritual blindness.
- The transformation from blindness to seeing as indication of who Jesus is.
- Restoration of the man's sight as revelation of the power and authority of Jesus.
- Give your personal view on what you see as the point of the story.

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2.1.5 Do you think that life as a whole (disability included) exhibits God's work in us?

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2.2 A few notes on the flow of the rest of the story (John 9:6-41)

2.2.1 Jesus opened the man's eyes and the neighbours responded to it (verses 6-12).

2.2.2 The people were divided about Jesus (verse 16). See their understanding of him.

- They think he is not from God (verse 16), but a sinner (verses 16, 24);
- He was a prophet (verse 17) and the man gave glory to God (verse 24);
- People who acknowledged Jesus as the Christ were put out of the synagogue (verse 22);
- The Jews could not believe the healing miracle (verses 18-21);
- Disciple of Jesus versus disciples of Moses (verses 27-28).

2.2.3 Give your own view on what you think about God's will and the good deed done by Jesus (verses 31-33).

Session III - Interpreting the Bible. Applying the Bible to our lives.

3 Some guidelines for reading John's gospel.

The Gospel author repeatedly applies an interesting literary technique to convey Jesus' teaching in certain situations. He moves from an everyday experience and human need to a message from God to human beings. It is as if He draws His audience into a practical situation, in order to confront them with God's will. In chapter 9 Jesus uses the sufferer's blindness and the disciples' question about whose sin caused the blindness, to highlight the public's lack of insight. Jesus points His disciples as well as the religious leaders to the Source where their most profound need can be satisfied. The author applies the technique of initially creating misunderstanding among the story's characters, so that when the misunderstanding is cleared up, they will see God. In this particular story, it means correcting the erroneous idea that the man's blindness was caused by somebody's sin.

The position of our text in John's Gospel stands out within the following summary of that gospel:

- 1:1-18 Prologue
- 1:19-12:50 His miracles and wonders
- 13:1-20:31 His glory
- 21:1-24 Epilogue

Chapter 9 forms part of the miracles and wonders. In chapters 1-12 seven wonders are narrated, preceded or followed by explanatory argument. The dialogue connects the various instances. It is typical of John's Gospel to contain signs and wonders, followed by argumentation and the 'I am' pronouncements of Jesus. In the section devoted to His miracles and wonders and His explanations, as part of His public ministry, He introduces His Father.

- In the narration of the seven wonders, there is a unique emphasis in each case of the new life beckoning through faith in the revealed Son of God.
- Three of Jesus' self-revealing 'I am' pronouncements emphasizes the meaning of the miracle narratives (6:35; 8:12; 11:25),
- The other four also emphasize that a new life arrives with Jesus (10:7,9; 10:11; 14:6; 15:1).

3.1 Faith in the Son of Man and life as a person with a disability

3.1.1 Reflect on the turning point in the story about blindness and faith in Jesus Christ (verses 35-39).

3.1.2 The Pharisees are depicted as the blind because they do not believe in Jesus (verses 4-41).

3.2 Jesus embraces all people...

3.2.1 Think about your personal experience with regard to social life and exclusion of people.

3.2.2 Describe your own experience of exclusion from any sector of social life today. Formulate your personal experience and feelings in this regard.

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3.2.3 Give your own understanding of what you think Jesus expects from the church/faith communities with regard to being inclusive and creating a hospitable environment. What can each member (able-bodied and disabled persons) do to create such an environment?

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3.3 According to John’s Gospel...

3.3.1 Jesus came to establish a church open to all - disabled (5:1-9), sinners (John 8:1-11), those who were unwelcome in society (John 4:40-42), the socially excluded (John 9:35).

3.3.2 How does this view of church, impact on the argument that disability is the cause of sin? Give your understanding on this matter at this point.

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