

JOHN AND THE BOOK OF SIGNS
(7) THE HEALING OF SOMEONE BORN BLIND

John 9:1-41

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SCRIPTURE

¹As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. ²“Rabbi,” his disciples asked him, “why was this man born blind? Was it because of his own sins or his parents’ sins?” ³“It was not because of his sins or his parents’ sins,” Jesus answered. “This happened so the power of God could be seen in him. ⁴We must quickly carry out the tasks assigned us by the one who sent us. The night is coming, and then no one can work. ⁵But while I am here in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶Then he spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and spread the mud over the blind man’s eyes. ⁷He told him, “Go wash yourself in the pool of Siloam” (Siloam means “sent”). So the man went and washed and came back seeing!

⁸His neighbors and others who knew him as a blind beggar asked each other, “Isn’t this the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹Some said he was, and others said, “No, he just looks like him!” But the beggar kept saying, “Yes, I am the same one!” ¹⁰They asked, “Who healed you? What happened?” ¹¹He told them, “The man they call Jesus made mud and spread it over my eyes and told me, ‘Go to the pool of Siloam and wash yourself.’ So I went and washed, and now I can see!” ¹²“Where is he now?” they asked. “I don’t know,” he replied. ¹³Then they took the man who had been blind to the Pharisees, ¹⁴because it was on the Sabbath that Jesus had made the mud and healed him. ¹⁵The Pharisees asked the man all about it. So he told them, “He put the mud over my eyes, and when I washed it away, I could see!” ¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, “This man Jesus is not from God, for he is working on the Sabbath.” Others said, “But how could an ordinary sinner do such miraculous signs?” So there was a deep division of opinion among them. ¹⁷Then the Pharisees again questioned the man who had been blind and demanded, “What’s your opinion about this man who healed you?” The man replied, “I think he must be a prophet.”

¹⁸The Jewish leaders still refused to believe the man had been blind and could now see, so they called in his parents. ¹⁹They asked them, “Is this your son? Was he born blind? If so, how can he now see?” ²⁰His parents replied, “We know this is our son and that he was born blind, ²¹but we

don't know how he can see or who healed him. Ask him. He is old enough to speak for himself.”²²His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who had announced that anyone saying Jesus was the Messiah would be expelled from the synagogue.²³That's why they said, “He is old enough. Ask him.”²⁴So for the second time they called in the man who had been blind and told him, “God should get the glory for this, because we know this man Jesus is a sinner.”²⁵“I don't know whether he is a sinner,” the man replied. “But I know this: I was blind, and now I can see!”²⁶“But what did he do?” they asked. “How did he heal you?”²⁷“Look!” the man exclaimed. “I told you once. Didn't you listen? Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?”²⁸Then they cursed him and said, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses!”²⁹We know God spoke to Moses, but we don't even know where this man comes from.”³⁰“Why, that's very strange!” the man replied. “He healed my eyes, and yet you don't know where he comes from?”³¹We know that God doesn't listen to sinners, but he is ready to hear those who worship him and do his will.³²Ever since the world began, no one has been able to open the eyes of someone born blind.³³If this man were not from God, he couldn't have done it.”³⁴“You were born a total sinner!” they answered. “Are you trying to teach us?” And they threw him out of the synagogue.

³⁵When Jesus heard what had happened, he found the man and asked, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”³⁶The man answered, “Who is he, sir? I want to believe in him.”³⁷“You have seen him,” Jesus said, “and he is speaking to you!”³⁸“Yes, Lord, I believe!” the man said. And he worshiped Jesus.³⁹Then Jesus told him, “I entered this world to render judgment—to give sight to the blind and to show those who think they see that they are blind.”⁴⁰Some Pharisees who were standing nearby heard him and asked, “Are you saying we're blind?”⁴¹“If you were blind, you wouldn't be guilty,” Jesus replied. “But you remain guilty because you claim you can see (John 9:1-41 NLT).

INTRODUCTION

Jesus and his disciples had been attending the Feast of Tabernacles – the most popular of the three annual festivals prescribed in the Old Testament. In fact, it was so well liked that it was often referred to simply as “The Feast.” It commemorated the time God was providentially with his people in the wilderness after he had freed them from bondage in Egypt (Exodus).

A tabernacle is a type of tent or portable dwelling.¹ It is interesting to note that John describes Jesus as the “Word [which] became human and made his home among us (John 1:14 NLT). Other translations say something like, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us (John 1:14 NIV). The word John chose to speak of Jesus “dwelling” among us is the word for tabernacle, which simply means to “dwell in a tent.” Jesus is the One sent by God to “tabernacle” among us.

In Jesus’ day the feast featured a spectacular celebration that involved torches that lit up the city. Crowds reacted to it much the way we react to a really good fireworks display. According to John, as recorded in chapter 8, it was at this particular Feast of Tabernacles that Jesus first said, “I am the light of the world” (8:12).

The idea is repeated in chapter 9 only this time a personal story is used to explain what it means for Jesus to be the light of the world. It is the story of the healing of a man who had been blind from birth – The only time in all four Gospels when an entire chapter is devoted to a miracle.

1. THE LIGHT OF UNDERSTANDING

This story shows us that Jesus is the light of understanding.

“Rabbi,” his disciples asked him, “why was this man born blind? Was it because of his own sins or his parents’ sins?” (9:2).

Many ancient Jews believed that suffering was always the result of wrongdoing. If the sufferer was very young then it was pointed out that one could suffer for one’s parents’ sins or even for a sin committed by mother or fetus during the pregnancy. The disciples of Jesus held this view at first. Some Jews and Christians think this way today. If we are going through some terrible ordeal we tend to think God is punishing us.

But Jesus gave a surprise answer:

“It was not because of his sins or his parents’ sins . . . This happened so the power of God could be seen in him (9:3).

Jesus told his listeners that neither the man nor his parents had caused his problem. The whole line of questioning was wrong. God didn’t make this man blind as a punishment. But here was an opportunity for God’s work to be revealed.

¹“Tabernacles” and “booths” are attempts to translate the Hebrew term *sukkot* into English. A *sukkah* is a makeshift shade from the sun made from readily available materials.

God is not the author of suffering. The prophet Jeremiah has said, "for [God] does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone" (Lam 3:33 NRSV). This is an affirmation I have clung to more than once in my life.

To be sure, sometimes bad things happen as a result of our actions. If you get shot while robbing a bank then there is definitely a connection between your pain and wrongful behavior. And generally speaking, the fact of suffering in the world is tied to the fact that it is a fallen world. But we must be very cautious about attributing our suffering, or even someone else's suffering, to God's punishment.

We read that the next thing Jesus did was spit on the ground. In the ancient world some religious groups believed that the saliva of a famous person had healing properties. But spittle was still more widely considered vulgar and gross, and its use would have made the man uncomfortable if he knew what it was.

Jesus took the saliva and dirt and made it into a doughy clay. He placed the clay on the man's eyes and told him to go wash in the Pool of Siloam. He did so and was healed.

Siloam was a spring-fed pool in Jerusalem. Water was drawn from this pool to be used in the Feast of Tabernacles. Every morning a priest would take a golden vessel to the pool, fill it with water, and bring it back to the altar amid the shouts of the people. This ritual was probably to illustrate Isaiah 12:3, "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." But no one had more joy than the man who washed his eyes and then, for the first time in his life, he could see!

The man's affliction had raised the whole question of the nature of suffering. Jesus rejected the popular beliefs about suffering and replaced them with understanding and empathy. Jesus understands our sufferings. As the prophet says, "He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Is 53:3).

David Bork was a high school friend of mine. He was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis during his junior year. Cystic fibrosis creates lung infections and limits the ability to breathe. In David's day, those who had been diagnosed with cystic fibrosis seldom made it into their 20's.

David asked God to use him through this difficult time. Of course, he prayed for healing – we all did. But come what may he wanted God to be revealed in his life.

David was not one to give up easily. He loved sports. He continued to golf. He was active in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

Whenever David was hospitalized, which was fairly often, he always requested to be put in the children's ward (remember those?) even after he turned 18. He liked to cheer the kids up. He read them stories. He made them laugh.

David touched so many lives. But eventually the terrible disease took its toll. He died at age 23.

God had not given cystic fibrosis to David. But God used it and worked through it and brought much good from it. David invited God to use his suffering and so his suffering took on meaning – his affliction had purpose. Although this is difficult to say, it is no less true, we can do the same. We can invite God to use our suffering and bring good from it. With God's help we can find strength to bear it and sometimes even find unexpected joy in the midst of it. It is Jesus who brings us this understanding.

THE LIGHT OF COMPASSION

Jesus is the light of understanding. He is also the light of compassion.

After the man who been born blind was healed, a huge fuss was made of it. The neighbors, the parents, the religious leaders, and the man himself all got involved. The neighbors weren't sure if it was the same man or not – that triggered a lot of idle discussion. The parents were as annoyed as they were apprehensive. The more vocal of the religious leaders² were angry because this was the Sabbath and not only was it against the law to heal on the Sabbath, it was even against the law to make clay on the Sabbath. (Oh my! That Jesus was such a reprobate!). The religious leaders ended up calling pretty much everybody a liar and a sinner including Jesus and the man he healed.

But something is missing in this narrative! Except for Jesus, nobody but nobody seems to have any compassion for this man. Nobody is excited that he can see again – not even his parents. There is concern for gossip. There is concern for reputation and status. There is concern for legal minutia. But there is no concern for a flesh and blood human being. How sad.

Something else is missing. Jesus is missing. After he tells the man to go wash in verse 7 and until he meets up with him again in verse 35, there is no record of Jesus saying or doing anything. This part of the narrative is the longest section in the gospels where Jesus is absent. He is mentioned but he himself is not involved. It's almost as if John is trying to make a link between the absence of compassion and the absence of Jesus.

²John notes that not all of the Pharisees were antagonistic (9:16).

William Barclay points out that it is not only our own suffering that can reveal the works of God but we can display the works of God when we have compassion on those who suffer. He says:

To help a fellow man in need is to manifest the glory of God, for it is to show what God is like.”

This is an echo of Jesus’ teaching:

In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father (Matt 5:16).

Our aim then is to look for opportunities to reveal the works of God. Lack of compassion tells the world that Jesus is not real. Caring for others adds credibility to our witness. We are to be living sign posts that point to God’s love. We are to shine the light of compassion on all who are in need.

3. THE LIGHT OF SALVATION

Jesus is the light of understanding. He is the light of compassion. He is the light of salvation.

Throughout this story the man who was healed displayed a remarkably lucid mind. He put two premises together: 1) Only the good power of God could heal a man born blind. 2) He was such a man and Jesus healed him. Therefore, the one who healed him must be from God – at the very least he must be a prophet. This angered the religious leaders even further because they could not refute his logic.

Nor could they refute his experience. He told them in a matter-of-fact manner what had happened. Jesus put clay on his eyes and told him to wash in the Pool of Siloam. He did so and gained his sight. In other words, he could assert, “I once was blind but now I see.” Seventeen centuries later, a former slave trader turned Christian by the name of John Newton used these same words in a poem that became the world famous hymn, “Amazing Grace.”

So they threw the man who had been healed out of the synagogue (9:34) but not before a parting shot at him.³ They charged him with being born a total sinner. Ironically, this

³This was likely not a formal excommunication. It would not have stood up under official inquiry. The Pharisees had strict rules about cross-examining witnesses fairly and without prejudice – rules which this particular group violated.

was, a tacit admission of his blindness from birth and thus they completely undermined their own position.

Meanwhile, reason and experience told the man that Jesus was someone sent by God. In his mind he recognized and believed a measure of truth about Jesus. But this was not quite faith.

When Jesus heard what had happened, he found the man and asked, “Do you believe in the Son of Man? (9:35).

John had already presented Jesus as the Son of Man in whom God reveals himself (1:51). The man’s response was straightforward:

“Who is he, sir? I want to believe in him” (9:36).

Jesus then said:

“You have seen him and he is speaking to you!”

The man then said:

Yes, Lord, I believe!” and he worshiped Jesus (9:38) .

It was not enough to believe in his mind. He also gave his heart to Jesus. This is faith. His story is a powerful example for the readers of John’s Gospel and is intended to lead us to similar faith, which is the whole point of the Gospel (20:31).

The chapter ends with a final exchange with the Pharisees. Jesus remarked:

“I entered this world to render judgment—to give sight to the blind and to show those who think they see that they are blind” (9:39).

The prophets Isaiah (Is 42:16-19) and Jeremiah (Jer 5:21) both spoke of the difference between physical and spiritual blindness. Jesus also makes this distinction. Physical blindness is an impairment. Spiritual blindness is a choice. Anyone can see the light of Jesus if that is what they truly wish.

CONCLUSION

The man born blind, John Newton, David Bork, and countless others have discovered that when we trust in Christ our spiritual eyes are opened and we find new life in his name. In

light of this I offer you the opportunity to respond to one of these three invitations⁴:

1. If you are suffering then understand that this is not a sign of God's displeasure. Invite God to use your suffering for good purposes. Allow God to be revealed through you.

2. If you see someone suffering then show compassion. Make real the presence of Jesus by showing the love of Jesus to those in pain.

3. If you know in your mind who Jesus is but never said "Yes" to him with your heart I invite you to do that today.

⁴Inspired by a sermon by Adam Hamilton.