

PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS

John 9:1-7, 13-41

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Amarillo, Texas
March 17, 2019

Introduction

Before we begin our story about blindness and healing, a few observations will help us place this story in the Jewish context. First, we should know there is no story of the giving of sight to the blind anywhere in the Old Testament. Second, in the Old Testament, the giving of sight to the blind is only associated with God himself (Exodus 4:11; Psalm 146:8). Third, the ability to create or restore sight also has messianic overtones (Isaiah 29:18; 35:5; 42:7). Therefore, from the Old Testament we can conclude that giving sight is both a divine function and, even, a function for God's Messiah. In this Jewish context, therefore, we see the extreme significance of Jesus' ability to cause the blind to see!

The very act of giving sight to the blind, therefore, is a declaration that Jesus is the Holy One of Israel, the Son of God—the Messiah. In fact, outside of the strange story where Ananias lays hands on Saul of Tarsus “and immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight...” (Acts 9:18), the ability to restore sight to the blind is a prerogative of Jesus alone in the New Testament. While the apostles seem able to perpetuate many of the messianic powers after Jesus ascends to heaven, no apostle has the ability to heal the blind. Interestingly enough, there are more miracles of giving sight to the blind recorded of Jesus than any other type of healing (Matthew 9:27-31; 12:22f.; 15:30f.; 21:14; Mark 8:22-26; 10:46-52; Luke 7:21f.).

Who Sinned? (9:1-5)

Innocent suffering has never been easy to explain—not in the first century, not now! What we want is a hard and fast equation whereby good behavior results in blessings, and, conversely, poor behavior results in curses. While that is the equation we want, it is not the equation we get! From the Jobian dilemma of the Old Testament to the myriad of images in the modern media today, we cannot escape the fact that innocent people sometimes do suffer. Trying to solve the problem of innocent suffering, like the rape of a child or the gunning down of worshipers in a country church, is no easy task. If God is all good and all powerful, why do innocent people suffer? Many of us will spend a lifetime pondering that puzzle, a puzzle called “theodicy.”

What we can say for certain about the relationship between sin and suffering are the following:

(1) Sin and suffering are intimately connected. Clearly, the complex relationship between sin and suffering is the working out of the tragic results of the fall (see Genesis 3; Ezekiel 18:20; Psalm 89:32; Romans 1-2; 3:10ff.). Before Adam sinned, suffering did not exist—neither did death! R. Ammi once wrote, “There is no death without sin, and there is no suffering without iniquity.”

(2) Sometimes, specific sin does result in specific punishment (Numbers 12; John 5:14; 1 Corinthians 11:30). In fact, in our previous lesson from John 5, Jesus actually warns the man whom

he has just healed from lameness, saying, “Do not sin anymore, so nothing worse may befall you” (5:14)—a clear indication the man’s sin contributed to his malady.

(3) Sometimes suffering is not related to a specific sin, but to the very purposes of God (the whole book of Job; Galatians 4:13; 2 Corinthians 12:7; John 9:1-5).

(4) Jesus’ acts of healing, whether causing the lame to leap or the blind to behold light, are all part of the cosmic redemption of God, re-winding the fall and restoring the innocence that existed before man’s disobedience brought brokenness.

(5) We can be sure that innocent ones sometime suffer because the Christ, the perfect Son of God, suffered in the worst way—he was crucified! Therefore, we know that God is not removed from our suffering, peering down from a great distance upon the suffering of innocents. On the contrary, God puts on flesh (John 1:14), has a back which can bleed, skin that can be broken, so that he, as an innocent, can suffer along with his people.

(6) Finally, as my good friend Dr. Jim Denison often says, “God redeems all that God allows.” While we cannot see the purposes of our suffering in this life, in the next we will know that no suffering was wasted. If we die with him, we also rise with him; if we suffer with him, we also are glorified with him (Romans 6; 1 Peter 4:12-19; John 9:3).

In verse 4, we have two interesting word choices. Jesus says “we” and “must.” Jesus is not only speaking of what he must do, but, rather, speaking of the heaven-sent works that require his followers to be his co-laborers. “Must,” in addition, reminds us that our labors are not only what is advisable, but will be absolutely necessary. The works that we are to do are compelled by God, and we are to be busy about kingdom work with a real sense of urgency because “the night cometh,” meaning the present opportunity will be lost. “The day” refers, most likely, to the length of a man’s life. Jesus himself is “the light of the world,” whose departure means “the coming night.”

Clay to His Eyes (9:6-7)

Jesus heals whomever he wishes, however he wishes. Efforts to force Jesus’ healing events into a predictable formula will always fail. Sometimes the healing requires faith upon the part of the one healed; sometimes it does not. Sometimes Jesus simply gives the command of his voice; other times he touches, spits, and/or requires some activity on the part of the one graced. Often the healing is instantaneous; other times it is a process.

In this particular story, Jesus spits on the ground, kneads the clay with the dust of the earth, and applies the clay to the man’s eyes. Finally, he commands the man to go wash in the pool of Siloam. As result of this multi-step miracle, the man is able to see.

First, it is well-known that the ancient world attributed curative powers to saliva. Furthermore, it was perhaps helpful for the man to participate in his healing by actually doing something—washing in the pool of Siloam. Third, and most interesting, the early church fathers saw the mention of clay as a reference to Genesis 2:7, where man is, indeed, formed/made out of the dust of the earth. If the church fathers are right, then Jesus is doing a work of creation—God’s work—in giving sight to the blind.

The pool, interestingly enough, is named Siloam, which means “sent.” Originally the name came from the fact that the water was sent into the pool by a channel. Given the fact that John often wants us to know that Jesus is the one “sent” by God (20:21), we cannot miss the fact that blindness is removed with reference to and with the aid of the “sent.”

Interrogation of the Healed (9:13-17)

The fact that Jesus has healed on the Sabbath is not new to this Gospel (See John 5, where Jesus commands a paralytic to rise and walk on the Sabbath.). Beginning in verse 13, the once-blind man now enters into a spirited discussion with the powers that be—the Pharisees. This discussion can be easily arranged into three sections: verses 13-17, the Pharisees first examine the healed man; verses 18-23, the Pharisees continue the conversation by focusing on the man’s parents; and verses 24-34, they turn to re-examine the man’s testimony. Most likely, when the “neighbors” themselves could not figure out the case of the man’s miraculous cure, they decided to bring him to the experts, the Pharisees (read background text in verses 8-12).

The man’s testimony actually divides the Pharisees into two parties. The first party (more likened to the religious authorities in John 5) is most concerned that Jesus breached the Sabbath by performing the work of healing. They are, therefore, certain that Jesus is, in fact, not sent from God. The second group, however, focuses on the miraculous healing itself. Apparently they hold minority opinion, for we do not hear from them again. This second group is quite certain that Jesus must be sent from God—not be a sinner—because he has performed signs. Reaching a stalemate between the majority and the minority reports among the Pharisees, they turn, once again, to the once-blind man and ask him what he thinks about his healer. This time he calls Jesus a “prophet” (v. 17).

By now, we can see a progressive understanding of the identity of Jesus by the blind man. Notice, in verse 11 he calls his healer, “a man called Jesus.” By verse 17, he progresses to say that Jesus is “a prophet.” By verse 38, he calls Jesus “Lord,” believes in him, and even worships him. In some ways, therefore, his healing was both instantaneous (he washed and came back seeing) and gradual (he slowly gained spiritual insight). His eyes were eventually opened to the spiritual light that Jesus is the Lord.

Parents Who Pass the Buck (9:18-23)

While the son seems courageous and even confrontational with the Jews, the parents want no part in challenging the religious authorities and their understanding of Jesus. Timidly and cowardly, they both fail to rejoice at the healing of their son and to be grateful to the one who healed him. Rather than stand up and rejoice over their son’s redemption from blindness, they pass the buck, declaring, “He’s a big boy; let him speak for himself” (v. 21, author’s paraphrase). Lest we misunderstand the purpose of the parents’ hesitation to get involved in the whole affair, John explains that they refuse to stand beside the one who healed their son because they are afraid of excommunication, for the Jews had already agreed that should anyone confess Jesus as the Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue (v. 22).

Once Was Blind, But... (9:24-34)

Verse 25 must surely be one of the highlights of all of John's Gospel. While the Pharisees insist that Jesus is a sinner, the healed man brings his testimony down to the essentials. He reports the facts, just the facts. He is not qualified to debate with religious experts over Jesus' standing before God, but his testimony cannot be denied. He once was blind, but now he sees!

What is your testimony? We can all say, "I once was _____, but now I _____."

In verses 26-27, the Pharisees question the man all over again. Their inquiry reminds us of a police interrogation whereby the subject is asked to rehearse the facts yet another time in hopes that there might be some inconsistencies in his story. But the man's testimony is all the more emphatic, "I already told you, and you did not listen...."

With a masterful stroke, John bears witness with his words to the deafness of the religious authorities. God has spoken through his Word, his Son, but they are deaf to God's message.

So vigorous is the man's answer that he is actually mocking the Jews just a bit. "Do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?" Like a skilled debater, he forces his foes into a corner. "If Jesus is truly not from God, then how did he open my eyes" (v. 30).

Noting the rarity of giving sight to the blind, the man testifies all the more: "Since the beginning of time, it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind" (v. 32). Unlike the Jewish leadership, the man testifies that, indeed, "this man," meaning Jesus, is from God because he does the acts of God. As a result of the uniformity of his unwavering testimony, the Jews excommunicate him from the synagogue (v. 34).

Believe and Worship (9:35-38)

To be "put out" of the synagogue would be no small matter. In a culture where community was everything, the once-blind man was now all alone, separated from the synagogue and, thus, separated from Jewish community. Interestingly, Jesus goes searching for the man healed from blindness in much the same fashion as he went searching for the man who had been healed from his paralysis (compare 5:14). As is the fashion with John's Gospel, Jesus gets straight to the point: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" (v. 35; cf. 3:3 and 4:10).

The words "Son of Man" paint a great messianic picture (drawn from the book of Daniel), for the Son of Man is the one seated alongside God who brings judgment to the world. Recognizing the voice of his benefactor, the man is ready for obedience: "Who is He that I may believe in him..." (v. 36). Once again identifying himself as the long-awaited one, the one upon whom the ages meet, Jesus answers candidly, "You have both seen Him, and He is the one talking to you" (v. 37). Yes, the blind man has SEEN him!

John's irony is thick. The man who was born blind, the very one who had never seen, could now see Jesus for who he is—the Son of Man. John has moved from the creation of physical sight alone to, more importantly, spiritual sight. The man both sees Jesus with his physical eyes, but he also now sees him with his soul. As evidence of his keen spiritual eyesight, the man, once blind, now declares, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him (v. 38).

Interestingly enough, this is the only time in John's Gospel when anyone is said to "worship" Jesus. The verb for worship, *proskyneō*, means to prostrate oneself before, to do obeisance to. Jesus is, indeed, worthy of worship, the light of the world, the very Son of Man.

Blind as Bats (9:39-41)

When the light comes into the world, those who live in darkness will not be able to see. Isaiah 6:10 says, "...their eyes dim, lest they see with their eyes..." Mockingly, the Pharisees taunt Jesus, "We're not blind too, are we?" Jesus' response is interesting. The irony cannot be missed. We begin the story with the man who is born blind, and we end the story with the Pharisees who mockingly tease that they are the ones with great insight and could never be considered blind.

Jesus' response is clear. "If you had been blind, that would have been an excuse. But you do have understanding of spiritual things. Therefore, you will be held accountable for your sins" (v. 41, author's paraphrase). Tom Wright describes, "Not only are they wrong, but they have constructed a system within which they will never see that they are wrong." This premier New Testament scholar is saying that the Pharisees had created a closed world, like a sealed room, in which no light could possibly enter from the outside. The light came, and they missed it.

Conclusion

No one has to be a theologian to share his or her testimony. We, too, can speak boldly like the healed man. Perhaps our testimonies also speak for God's grace: I once was addicted, but now I'm free; I once was captive to past sin, but now I look to future glory; or I once was afraid of death, but now I have the hope of eternal life. Speak up. Speak boldly. Jesus has passed our way and we, too, now see that he is the Messiah!