

The Man Born Blind

John 9:1-41

*"For judgment I have come into this world,
so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." (John 9:39)*

In scripture we see that Jesus healed the blind on several occasions, two instances of which we studied this past week. There are two notable aspects about the particular healing we are looking at today. First, the blind man has been so since birth. This is not a miracle of restoring sight to eyes that at one time could see. The blind man's eyes never worked at all. He never had use of his eyes. The second notable aspect of this healing is that it takes place right after Jesus proclaims himself to be the Light of the World during the Feast of Tabernacles which had just come to a close. This miracle is a very public demonstration of his claim to be Messiah.

Throughout the Gospel of John, light and dark(ness) are metaphors illustrating the spiritual state. Light symbolizes the understanding of Truth, the truth that Jesus is sent by God and that God's message is one of love and compassion for all. Darkness is the failure to recognize and accept that Truth. Sometimes the darkness, which is lack of spiritual understanding, retreats in the presence of Jesus' miracles -- as it does for the man born blind. Other times those who encounter the Light, the Truth in the person of Jesus, retreat further into their own darkness, shrinking back from the light.

The story of the *Man Born Blind* reveals to us that spiritual blindness can only be removed by God. When we allow God to work in our life *and* accept (acknowledge, believe) who he is, we allow that light into our lives. We must *choose* to accept it, and change what the light reveals to be incompatible (i.e. sin, or that which separates us from God) with its presence.

Traditional Jewish beliefs of Sin vs. Blessing

Perhaps a little bit of background information will shed some light on these beginning scriptures making them more readily understandable. Traditionally Jews believed unrepentant sin manifested itself in calamity such as blindness, deformity, sickness, or adversity of all types. A life of adversity was believed to be a life accursed by God. Adversity was God's judgment against unrepentant sin in a person's life. God does not listen to the prayers of a sinner. A sinner is believed to be rejected and unloved by God. Our passage today is somewhat reminiscent of Job's friends persisting in advising him to repent of his sin to return to God's favor. If you recall, Job's faith was tested in the loss of his family, his wealth, and his health -- according to Job's friends this all came about because Job must have had some hidden sin. According to this way of thinking, this blind man in our scripture passage was accursed by God for some hidden sin. God rejected him, and so did most of society. He was left to live a life of abject poverty, begging alms for survival.

It was believed that God's favor manifested itself in wealth, health, and all manner of blessings. To this way of thinking, a man favored by God, must be a "godly" man. God would hear his prayers and

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answer them with many blessings to show his favor. This attitude is exemplified and held up as true by the Pharisees who were considered “godly” men. Their reputation for righteousness appeared to be affirmed by God’s abundant blessing of wealth, power, and position. Christ came into the world to reveal the fallacy of that belief. God sent the Messiah to point to the way of God’s love and salvation, his blessing. The circumstances of life have nothing to do with God’s cursing or his favor. They are the results of sin in the world. The world groans under the effects of sin and anticipates when all will be restored to its rightful order.

“All creation is eagerly waiting for God to reveal who his children are. Creation was subjected to frustration but not by its own choice. The one who subjected it to frustration did so in the hope that it would also be set free from slavery to decay in order to share the glorious freedom that the children of God will have. We know that all creation has been groaning with the pains of childbirth up to the present time. However, not only creation groans. We, who have the Spirit as the first of God’s gifts, also groan inwardly. We groan as we eagerly wait for our adoption, the freeing of our bodies [from sin].” (Romans 8:19-23, God’s Word translation)

The Man Born Blind



Read John 9:1-13

Jesus tells us two things about this man’s blindness: He says, *“Neither this man nor his parents sinned...but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him (John 9:3).”* This man’s blindness was not the result of anyone’s sin. It is the result of a fallen world. Secondly, his blindness now has purpose: it will reveal the work of God in their midst. Not only are these two points true, but this healing will accomplish two more things in the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah. The healing of a man blind from birth will fulfill messianic prophecy and thereby mark the *healer* as God’s chosen Messiah. The fulfilling of prophecy is the sign that the Kingdom of God is in their midst. And Jesus will also reveal that God’s plan is one of mercy and restoration, not cursing and judgment.

The method Jesus uses to heal the blind man tells us exactly who he is. We are told in verse 7, *“he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes.”* In this action we are meant to see a parallel with the creation of Adam: *“the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being”* (Genesis 2:7). The method of the blind man’s healing reveals that Jesus is the Creator of all things. Only God can heal in this manner. And not only can he restore use to eyes (and limbs, and body, and mind), he can *create* sight where none had been. Humans create something out of something all the time. God gave us a creative ability. He gave us knowledge and understanding of how to create new things out of what is provided in the world around us. Only God can create something out of nothing. Interestingly, light is the first thing created in Genesis! Read Genesis 1:1-3, notice that the earth is described as formless and empty, darkness covering the surface. God’s creation knew nothing of God. His light had not yet touched it. When God graces the earth with his light, Creation itself comes to reveal God’s Light and understanding. Creation itself imparts an understanding of who God is. Romans 1:19-20 says: *“what may be known about God is plain to [mankind], because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without*

excuse.” In other words, creation itself reveals God to mankind. God’s qualities – his eternal power and divinity are clearly on display for all to see so that mankind are without excuse as to who God is – all powerful creator of the universe, creator of all of that surrounds us in its infinite beauty, design, and power. Just as God created our world and all that is in it, including human beings, Jesus *created* sight for the blind eyes of this man. Jesus did this to show God’s love and Glory. God’s mercy and love are revealed in this miracle. What does this miracle point to? It points to a God of love, not of judgment and condemnation.

- Out of love God sent this man Jesus to show love to a man who suffered – not judgment for sin
- God’s love heals and restores sight, not condemnation and punishment for sin
- God’s love restores life, there is no longer a reason this man should be excluded from life within the community and worship of God
- God’s love opens his senses to spiritual truth, he can recognize God at work in his life

Four Reactions

As always, Jesus’ miracles reveal different reactions by those who observe his actions. Those reactions reveal the observers’ spiritual understanding of who Jesus is, and what they *choose* to believe about Jesus. We have four distinct witnesses (or groups of witnesses) to this miracle, each with their own response and spiritual state of blindness or sight.

The Neighbors (v.8-12)

The neighbors of the blind man are very much like lost sheep. They reveal an attitude of surprise, skepticism and ultimately indecision. First they questioned, was this the same man? They doubt what they have seen with their eyes. Some said he must be someone else; it cannot be the man who has sat among them begging for years. Others are taken by surprise by the miracle that has happened in their midst. They could not comprehend what they were experiencing. They were looking for direction. Who do they turn to? The Pharisees. After all, the Pharisees were the experts on anything having to do with God. They were sheep without a shepherd. The neighbors were lost spiritually. They couldn’t decide for themselves. They couldn’t make a commitment to believe in the miracle without someone with “authority” telling them to do so. They would prefer to depend on someone else to make that decision for them, rather than consider it for themselves and come to their own decision. They take no responsibility for themselves. They are ambivalent, neither for nor against, neither hot nor cold. Their reaction is reminiscent of Ezekiel 34:4-6:

“You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.”

Who are the wild animals? We are about to see...

The Pharisees (Vv. 13-34)

So not knowing what to make of this matter, the neighbors brought this man before the Pharisees to determine if this healing actually occurred. Pharisees, bent on destroying Jesus' credibility and popularity latched on to the fact that Jesus broke the Sabbath law first by making mud, (an injunction against brick making on the Sabbath); and then by healing on the Sabbath. Anyone who would break the Sabbath must not be a man of God. They named him a false prophet leading the people of Israel away from God. Not everyone bought into this line of thinking. Some were amazed that anyone could heal a man born blind – it was too great and impressive of a miracle for someone “not of God” to have performed it.

There was division among the ranks (v. 16), not enough evidence to proceed one way or the other, so they asked the blind man what he had to say for himself. All he had to say was, “*He is a prophet.*” -- A man of God. This is not what the Pharisees wanted to hear, their intention was to discredit the healer, the miracle worker. They wanted to prove the miracle to be a hoax to trick or deceive the people. They called for the healed blind man's parents to testify to his being born blind. Verse 22 reveals something important for us to make note of: the Religious Leaders were already persecuting anyone who followed Jesus by excommunicating them. They used fear tactics to gain control of the people. The parents were too afraid to stand up to the Pharisees any further, but they did attest to the fact that their son who was healed had in fact been born blind. The Pharisees could not deny that the miracle did happen – it probably annoyed them to no end!

Their next tactic was to get the man to recant his story. They tell him to give the credit of the healing to God, not to the man Jesus. They resort to calling Jesus a sinner – again to weaken his credibility. The man stands by his testimony. He knows who healed him – the man named Jesus. The Pharisees persist in refusing to believe the miracle before them. They refuse to believe that Jesus is from God. Their disbelief is *willful*. At this point they are clearly choosing not to believe the truth set before them. There is no other explanation. The blind man sums it up clearly in verses 30-33:

“The man answered, ‘Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.’” John 9:30-33 (NIV)

Not to be upstaged by a beggar and outcast, the Pharisees resort to insulting the formerly blind man and ban him from the synagogue. These false shepherds exclude him from the sheepfold. By verse 27, it becomes clear that the Pharisees interrogating the formerly blind man have no interest in fairness or truth. They are pressuring the blind man to recant his faith in Jesus' healing abilities and affirm what the Pharisees believe to be the truth – Jesus is not who he claims to be. The formerly blind man is astounded that the Pharisees, who are God's representatives to the Jews, failed to recognize the work of God. They saw and heard testimony of this miraculous event and could not attribute it to the hand of God. Furthermore, they could not recognize that Jesus must come from God if he could restore sight to someone who never before had the capacity to see. The formerly blind man was coming to “see” that these supposed men of God really understood nothing about God. If Jesus hadn't been sent by God, been a godly man doing God's work, he would not have been able to restore his sight. The formerly blind man's final statement in verse 33 testifies to the power of God present in Jesus and asserts that this unique healing could only come from God. This is what the Pharisees have failed to understand.

The Pharisees refused to accept the evidence before them not because it was insufficient, but because they were jealous of Jesus' popularity and influence among the people. They were blind to the hand of God because their vision was blinded by pride and jealousy. Romans 1:25 says, *“They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator”*. What are those created things? Money, power, prestige, position, wealth, these things are their idols, the gods they have created for themselves and serve.

The Pharisees are the wild animals preying on the scattered flock of the Ezekiel passage. They prefer darkness to devour and control the wayward sheep. They lead the flock of Israel deeper into darkness and blindness so they can retain their power, position, and reputation. They are false shepherds. They are wolves in shepherd's clothing. This is the “wicked generation” that we will hear Jesus prophesy against later. These are the men Jesus described to Nicodemus in our homework this week:

“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed”. (John 3:19-20)

And of whom Paul describes in Romans 1:18: *“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.”* The wrath spoken of here implies the judgment of spiritual blindness at the end of our story.

The Parents (v. 18-23)

The parents believe in the miraculous healing of their son, how could they not? But their belief leads no further. They aren't willing to say anything on behalf of the one who healed their son. Their fear of the Pharisees is greater than their faith in the man who healed their son. They fear being thrown out of the synagogue – expelled from society, which could and likely would lead to financial ruin. They are more concerned about the circumstances of their life than their spiritual life. They recognize the healing, and must therefore recognize that there is something special about the one who performed the healing, but they put their trust in what they know – that the Pharisees are the ones who can make or break their lives. They chose to ignore the spiritual truth in front of them, rather than risk the “comfort” and relative ease of a life they know and understand.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Romans 1: 21)

These, the parents and any who choose to bow to what they fear rather than step out in faith, are wayward sheep who do not hear or recognize the voice of the shepherd. They choose to wander in darkness.

The Blind Man

The once blind man comes to represent consistent and growing faith. He is the sheep that knows the Shepherd's voice and responds to it (of John 10:3-5, 14). After experiencing healing he was able to proclaim the truth he knows about Jesus. In verses 25 and 30-33 he understands that Jesus

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must be from God if he was able to give him sight. He seems to know the scriptures better than the Pharisees. This insight is provided by Jesus himself. The physical healing points to a spiritual healing – he is given insight into the things of God (verses 25 & 27). He recognizes Jesus as a prophet (verse 17b). His new-gained insight gives him fortitude – inner strength – and he is able to firmly and vehemently stand up to the Pharisees and eloquently proclaim the truth despite their counter attempts to dissuade his belief, through insults and threats (v22, 24). We will see that in the course of Jesus' teaching on spiritual blindness in the next section, the blind man recognizes that Jesus is the Messiah, proclaims his faith and then worships him (v38). He willingly accepts persecution as the cost of following Christ.

Spiritual Blindness (Vv. 35-41)

Jesus says in verse 39: *"For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind."* The Pharisees were absolutely shocked that Jesus would say they were (spiritually) blind (v40-41). Their blindness was their willful stubbornness and stupidity. If they would recognize that their mistake, their sin – pride and fear – had prevented them from seeing the Truth before them, then they too would gain spiritual insight. Instead of recognizing their sin for what it is, they chose to stand behind it and reject the truth Jesus was showing them. They chose not to believe, they chose to reject the truth. They chose to set their lies up as truth instead. Those who are satisfied and complacent in their sin and choose to persist in darkness and blindness reject Jesus and all he has to offer.

Jesus, his work and his words, force those who encounter him to make a decision about him. Either they encounter the truth in who he is and accept it; or they reject it. He gives sight to the blind – those who are open-hearted and choose to accept him. The ones who accept him are the ones who recognize their own helplessness and inability. They need Jesus to heal and save them. The ones who reject him, their sight darkens and they become blind by their own choosing. Those who reject him rely on their own strength, understanding and ability; they do not recognize their need of him. Jesus does not condemn anyone to blindness. Blindness is what happens with rejection of truth. 2 Corinthians 4:4 says this regarding blindness: *The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.* The Pharisees encounter the light and retreat further into darkness (or spiritual blindness) because of their fear of the light of truth revealing their sin. They have no intention of addressing or even acknowledging their sin because they have chosen to live a life focused on the power, wealth and prestige of their position rather than serving God from that position of power given to them by God. Jesus in this story has left a lasting message for all Christians who have to face persecution and exclusion from the powerful in the world that demand conformity not to God but to human traditions.