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Luke 18:31–43

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OH SAY CAN YOU SEE?

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Last month I went in my yearly eye exam. Growing up I used to pride myself that I had perfect 20/20 vision and that I was the only one in my family who didn't wear glasses or contacts. But as I got older, I gradually noticed I couldn't read as well. So I broke down and bought some cheap reading glasses. And instantly everything came back into focus. But it wasn't long before the letters on the page lost their clarity and became a blur again, and I had to buy new and stronger lenses. Finally, I elected to go for the permanent solution and I underwent Lasik surgery. So now I have one eye that focuses far and one near. But I still wear glasses, 6 pairs in fact. I have three pairs for reading to correct my farsighted eye—one for the computer, one for study, and one for travel. I have two pairs of sunglasses; one for biking, to correct my nearsighted eye; and another to correct my farsighted eye for reading outdoors. And I have a sixth pair of glasses for driving at night. What is lesson in all of this? Without the proper lens, you can't see.

As we approach the climax of Jesus' final pilgrimage to Jerusalem, he takes his apostles aside to prepare them for what will happen to him when they arrive in the city. His first word *idou* ("see, look, behold") emphatically sets forth the theme—it's all about the necessity of "seeing." There are many levels of sight and different ways of seeing. Some are nearsighted, and can't see far; others are farsighted, and can't see near. Some have tunnel vision and can't see outside the box. Others see everything, but can't stay focused long enough to see beyond the surface of anything. And then there are those who are totally blind and are dependent on their other senses to "see."

Luke's dramatic contrast of Jesus' disciples, who are blind, with a blind man who sees, will confront us with the question whether we, who think we see, are actually blind. And if so, what is process by which we will be able to recover our sight?

I. Blind to His Way (Luke 18:31–34)

And taking the twelve, he said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished." (Luke 18:31 ESV)

This is the third time in Luke's gospel that Jesus spells out the fate that awaits him in Jerusalem (9:22, 44; 18:31). His initial statement that "everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished," brings all of Israel's national hopes and dreams to the surface. The prophet Daniel prophesied that after Israel's exile, wicked gentile superpowers would arise out of the sea like dreadful, grotesque beasts—the first like a winged lion (the Babylonians); then a hulking bear (the Median-Persian empire); then a four-winged leopard (Alexander the Great, followed by his four successors); and finally a fourth too terrible to describe (the superior, brute power of Rome)—ravaging nations and devouring their prey at will.

After this frightening vision of bestial superpowers, Daniel sees "one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven" who "was given authority, glory and sovereign power... (like the first Adam

in the garden, it takes a human being to tame wild beasts)... His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed" (Dan 7:13–14, 18 NIV). This is crowning glory and future destiny of the Son of Man, one that all Israel longed for. If Israel had a national anthem, they would have sung "O say can you see by the dawn's early light, the Son of Man's victory through the perilous fight" before every baseball game.

It's critical for us as believers to have a clear understanding of our future hope, which the apostle Peter describes as "a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you" (1 Pet 1:3–4 ESV). Jesus had a clear vision regarding his future glory, and was not shy about applying Daniel's vision to himself—some twenty-five times, to be exact, in the gospel of Luke. But what no one in Israel's leadership could "see" was the "way" the "son of man" would achieve the glory for which he was destined. What comes next is shocking.

For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise. But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said. (vv. 32–34)

Jesus is quoting a verse from one of Isaiah's Suffering Servant Songs.¹

**I gave my back to those who strike,
and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard;
I hid not my face
from disgrace and spitting. (Isa 50:6)**

Jesus not only has clear vision of his future, but his near vision is also 20/20. He is not naïve about the *way* to glory. But just as in Jesus' previous three announcements, this saying falls on deaf ears. The verb "understand" (*sunieōmi*) means "to bring together," "to perceive, comprehend." No one in Israel's leadership could put these two texts from Daniel and Isaiah together. It was utterly inconceivable that Israel's messiah would achieve victory over pagan nations and be exalted to God's right hand by suffering shame, unrelenting torture and a horrific death. And the disciples are no different. They hear the words, but they can't see the truth, because as Luke says, "this saying was hidden from them." In effect they are blind and without a divine miracle, they will never see.

Often when we encounter a paradox or mystery that doesn't fit in our system of belief, we feel threatened and disoriented. So we either deny it, or as Brian McLaren suggests, we try:

to shrink them into our existing constructs, paradigms, world views or thought systems...to resolve its tensions, [rather than simply living in the tension to] stand in silence, in awe, and see—both sides of the paradox and not need to explain one side away.²

Our story would end as a tragic repeat of Israel's story were it not for the fact that God promised that after Israel's exile in Babylon he would do something for his people that he had never done before—he would cause the blind to see on a massive scale. *Blindness* and *deafness* were striking metaphors that the prophet Isaiah used to describe Israel's spiritual condition in chapters 40–55. Instead of trusting God for her salvation, Israel had continually turned to idols. It's an interesting thing about us humans: we become what we worship, and if we worship an idol long enough we will take on the image of that idol. Idols can't see, or hear, or feel. This is Israel's condition, she has become just like the idols she worships—blind and deaf. But days were coming when God would send his people a “servant,” who would open the eyes of the blind and lead them in a new “way”.

**I will give you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness. (Isa 42:6b–7)**

And as a result...

**And I will lead the blind in a way they do not know,
in paths they have not known I will guide them. (Isa 42:16)**

It is against this background that Luke portrays Jesus' climatic miracle before he and his disciples make their final ascent to Jerusalem. As they enter Jericho, Luke tells us they encounter a blind man, who was sitting “beside by the way” begging.

II. A Blind Man Sees (Luke 18:35–45)

A. A blind man hears

As he drew near to Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside (lit. “by the *way*”) begging. And hearing a crowd going by, he inquired what this meant. (vv. 35–36)

The setting takes place near Jericho, reminiscent of the days of Joshua and the faith of Rahab, the harlot. She became a glowing example of one saved by faith in the God of Israel and one who had no shame in publicly identifying with his people. By the time of the New Testament there were two Jerichos, one old and one new. “In Jesus' time the old Jericho was largely abandoned, but the new one extending to the south was an attractive city. It had been built by Herod the Great who had his winter palace there.”³ It is as Jesus is leaving the old and approaching the new that Luke focuses our attention on a blind beggar who is sitting “by the way.” Feeling the energy of the crowd passing by, he discerns that something out of the ordinary is happening, and asks those in the passing crowd what all the excitement is about. Ken Bailey suggests that the crowd was most likely a delegation from Jericho going out to welcome Jesus into their town, rather than those accompanying Jesus from Galilee. He writes,

In the Middle East, village people show honor to an important guest by walking some distance out of town to the guest and escort him or her into the village...some of the crowd with Jesus may have followed him from Galilee, but the majority greeting him were most likely from Jericho. This public attention signals to the reader that a banquet was prepared in Jericho, where the famous rabbi would be expected to spend the night.⁴

B. Unrelenting cries for mercy

**They told him,
“Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.”**

And he cried out,

“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

And those who were in front rebuked him, telling him to be silent.

But he cried out all the more,

“Son of David, have mercy on me!” (vv. 37–39)

Unable to see where Jesus is, he lets out a piercing cry, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” This sends shock waves through the crowd. Those who are in front rebuke him and tell him to shut up. But the more they tried to silence him, the louder he cried, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” This is the only time in Luke (other than his genealogy in 3:31) that Jesus is addressed as “son of David.” In Jewish thinking it was synonymous with Messiah (or “Christ”), a confession that Peter made in 9:20, and that God confirmed on the Mount of Transfiguration (9:35). But immediately after Peter's confession, Jesus banned his disciples from using it, because of the distorted national aspirations attached to it. It is incredible that a blind beggar outside the circle of the twelve would have the insight that no one else has been able to grasp.

And there is more beneath the surface; these two motifs of **passing by**, and **divine mercy** take us back to the book of Exodus. When Moses feels overwhelmed with the task God has given him to lead his people out of Egypt, he pleads with God to “show me now your ways” (Exod 33:13). God agrees. Then Moses summons the courage to ask God for one final request, “Please show me your glory.” God replies that no man can see God's face and live, but “while my glory **passes by** I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have **passed by**. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen” (Exod 33:22–23).

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD (“I AM”), the LORD (“I AM”), a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...” (Exod 34:6)

I am not suggesting the blind man had this text in mind, but I have no doubt that Jesus made the connection. How can one with no education living as an outcast of society come to that spiritual insight? I have observed that many, who have gone through intense suffering, rejection, or abuse and have become marginalized by society, are often able to grasp deep theological insights intuitively, with little to no theological training often before the theologians do. And when they get this insight, it is in their heart, not in their head. It is transformative, not merely intellectual.

What happens next is even more remarkable.

C. The blind man asks to see

And Jesus stopped and commanded him to be brought to him

And when he came near, he asked him,

“What do you want me to do for you?”

And he said,

“Lord let me recover my sight.” (vv. 40–41)

Notice how differently Jesus treats this man. Bailey writes,

In sharp contrast to the crowd's attempt to marginalize the beggar, Jesus stops and “commanded him to be brought.” The very people who are insulting the beggar are ordered to escort him to Jesus for an “audience,” (a nice touch). They become the “servants of the king” bringing a guest into his presence.⁵

When the blind man is brought into his presence, Jesus asks him the ultimate question, “What do you want me to do for you?” The

question seems odd to us, but it is significant. What do you ask for when God gives you a blank check? Jesus is seeking to probe beneath the surface of the blind man's request for mercy and uncover what he really wants. What did you mean by "mercy"? Typically, passers by would show mercy to a beggar by giving him money. And, in so doing, the beggar would reward their generosity with public praise, as one who proved faithful to God's mandate to protect and care for the poor. As Bailey writes,

When a beggar receives money, he usually stands up and in a loud voice proclaims the giver to be the most noble person he has ever met and invokes God's grace and blessing on the giver...Such public praise is surely worth the small sum given to the beggar.⁶

But this beggar is different. He believes that God has endowed the Son of David with the power to heal his blindness. Addressing Jesus as Lord, he goes right to the heart of the matter, "I want to regain my sight!" His request may seem obvious to us, but when we consider the future financial implications it will impose on the man, it is remarkable. As Bailey further explains,

A blind man, such as the beggar in this story, has no education, training, employment record or marketable skills. If healed, self-support will be extremely difficult. Indeed, is it not in his interest to remain blind? The grace of God, mediated through Jesus, is free but not cheap, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer has affirmed. Is the blind man ready to accept the new responsibilities and challenges that will come to him if he is healed?⁷

D. The blind see

And Jesus said to him, "Recover your sight; your faith has made you well" (Lit. "saved you"). And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God. (vv. 42-43)

The cure is as immediate as his request. He is healed with just a word (*anablepson* – "recover your sight"). But his faith grants him more than he asked. He asked only to "see" and instead Jesus says, "Your faith has made you "well" (lit. saved you)," a term pregnant with meaning lifted right out of Isaiah 35:4. The prophet Isaiah spoke of a coming day when the LORD would come in person to restore Zion. In response to that promise the faithful are to encourage one another.

Say to those who have an anxious heart,

"Be strong; fear not!

Behold, your God

will come with vengeance;

with the recompense of God,

he will come and *save you*."

**Then the *eyes of the blind* shall be *opened*,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped (Isa 35:4-5a)**

Our text opened with a blind beggar, sitting alongside "the way," crying out for mercy; it ends with the man seeing, glorifying God, following Jesus "in the way" (as Mark 10:52 adds in his gospel). And the crowd, who earlier marginalized the beggar by hindering him access to Jesus, receive Jesus' public rebuke and humble themselves and become servants to the beggar, escorting him to the King. And what's more, "seeing" the man in his new state, they enter into his newfound joy, giving praise to God. More than one healing took place this day.

III. Can You See?

So here is the question: do you see? Luke uses this blind man as a mirror to help us see our blindness and fan the flame of our faith.

A. A mirror of our blindness

First, the blind man was a mirror of the disciples' blindness. Luke tells us he is "**alongside** the way," but not yet following Jesus "**in** the way" (an important phrase added by Mark). He confesses that Jesus is the Son of David (i.e. the Messiah), but he is still blind, groping in the dark. So too are the disciples. They have confessed Jesus as Messiah, but when it comes to understanding "the way" of the Messiah—that God's rule on earth is established through suffering—they are still groping in the dark.

So how does the blind man come to see?

B. A mirror for our faith

The blind man is a mirror of faith that breaks through his blindness. First, it is **desperate**. His plea for mercy is not polite, rehearsed. It is a gut-wrenching cry from the depths of his heart. It is his absolute helplessness that gives his cry intensity; "Son of David have mercy on me!"

Second, his faith is **relentless**. He takes no note of obstacles. Many in the crowd are embarrassed by his outburst and harshly rebuke him. But he will not be deterred by embarrassment or protocol. His need is too great. He knows this window of opportunity will not be open forever; the time to act is now. So the more they rebuke him, the greater becomes his cry.

Finally, his faith is **reckless**. In Mark's account the crowd tells him "Take heart. Get up; he is calling you," and the Mark adds this wonderful detail, "And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus." (Mark 10:50). His outer cloak was probably all that he owned and served as a bedroll or blanket by night, and a cushion for begging by day. But he is so overcome with emotion at the possibility of seeing Jesus, that its value is diminished to a "throw away." What a contrast to the rich young ruler who, when challenged to sell all that he had and follow Jesus, went away grieved because he owned much property. Genuine faith casts everything away for the new life. Richard Rohr comments on this kind of faith:

Trusting is not a passive dependency, a handing over of responsibility that says, "Okay God, you can do it."...Faith is an active empowering of the other to be everything he or she can be for you...Those who are parents can probably relate to this definition. That little baby you were holding looked up at you with total faith and expectation. It had faith in you. You became a mother because the child made you into a mother; the child actively empowered you to be everything you could be for it. Between the years when your children were one and six, you became capable of almost totally losing yourself in them. It's unbelievable what mothers go through, running constantly all day. Would you have ever thought you could lose yourself that way? You did it because you were the object of your child's faith. Only a child's faith in you could bring that incredible power and dedication out of a human being."⁸

C. What does our faith promise?

But the miracle begs the question: do miracles still happen? Some say that if the Church was alive you'd have the same phenomena – physical healings and demonic exorcisms – as occurred in Jesus' ministry and the early Church. Others argue that miracles were solely to authenticate Jesus' identity and the Apostles' commissioning and

are no longer pertinent to the life of the Church today. For my part, I do believe miracles happen today, not because God is obligated, but as simple gifts of grace. The miracles we see today are described in the Gospels as “signs, wonders and miracles,” and it is this word, “sign,” that is so instructive. It means that what we observe is not the real thing, but rather a pointer to a greater reality, a reality that is promised to all of us. It takes a miracle of divine grace for someone to come to see that Jesus is the Messiah. But it takes what I think is even a greater miracle to remove the scales from our eyes so we can see that the *way* of Messiah is the way of suffering, rejection, humiliation, persecution and even death. This is the greatest miracle there is; it is the reality for which the sign points.

When my son got sick at only three days old, I lay on the ground, prostrate, and prayed for a miracle until I could pray no more. And the leaders of our church conducted an all night prayer meeting. He died six days later. I did the same thing, a year later, as my daughter became sick. We prayed for a miracle and she died too. But God did a greater miracle. He took an arrogant heart and broke it, and then he gave us children as a gift, and then opened a whole nation of children to receive from us the loyal love of the Father as their own. Emily, my wife, prayed that God would help doctors find a cure for our enzyme deficiency, and six years later he did. So God heals, God recovers the sight of the blind, accomplishing miracles that become signs to point us to a deeper, wider reality if we have eyes to see it.

D. Where will we find it?

Unlike the blind beggar, most of us aren't desperate. We struggle to see through the veil of our own wealth, isolation and privilege. But God in his grace does for us what he did with the crowd in our story. Once the crowd is willing to come under Jesus' authority, they reverse roles from being bully bodyguards to priests, who gently escort the beggar into the presence of the King. And now, with the blind man taking center stage, they become eyewitnesses to faith that gives birth to sight. When they see with their own eyes what desperate faith does, they join in the celebration giving praise to God. This is the means by which he removes our blindness. He yokes us to the marginalized, the hurting, and the poor so we witness their faith and they become a mirror of what God wants to do in us. All our ministries to the poor – they are for us! As a church, if we don't continue to reach out to the poor and marginalized we will die.

As a leader I often hear reports of people leaving our church and a constant theme running through those reports is that PBCC is too academic. You know what? They are right. But I see signs of the Spirit moving among you. As a leader, I'm an idealist and a teacher and I don't have the gifts to organize massive connections with the broader community, with the marginalized and oppressed, so God raises up others. I am so appreciative of Grace Kvamme who took me with her to Washington D.C. to learn about the global scourge of human trafficking. In response, we partnered with International Justice Mission to support one of their teams in India, and in two weeks we are having an event, “24 Hours of Justice” not just to raise money, but to learn, to become educated, to open our eyes and learn from the faith of others fighting this great evil.

When I was 37 years old, God took me to Romania to meet one poet, Traian Dorz, who spent 17 years in prison, and to hear the one sentence that sent shock waves through my soul: “You teach about the Cross,” Dorz said. “We live under the Cross.” We kept going back because we were blind and wanted to see. We wanted to learn from their faith, a faith taught and lived in the crucible of suffering.

What's it like to live under the Cross? You can go almost anywhere in the world now and discover this. You can't be a follower of Jesus today in most countries without the threat of real persecution and violence, even death. Instead of bulking up with weapons or trusting political and state solutions, as Christians we are supposed to enter into the fellowship of their sufferings, and as we do, our faith will grow.

So what is the greatest miracle of the gospel? It's when the blind see. It's when the scales on our eyes fall away and we see that the way of the Kingdom is suffering, and, like the apostles, we go our way “rejoicing that we are counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (adapted from Acts 5:41).

May God do his miracles among us. Amen.

1. The Servant Songs are found in Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:1-13, 50:4-10, and 52:13-53:12.
2. Brian McClaren, *Naked Spirituality: A Life with God in 12 Simple Words* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 203.
3. Walter W. Wessel, “Mark” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8, Frank E. Gaebelin ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 721.
4. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 172.
5. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 173.
6. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 173.
7. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 174.
8. Richard Rohr, *The Good News According to Luke* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 177-78.

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