



A QUESTION OF BLINDNESS

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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John 9:1-41

Twentieth Message

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The gospel of John records the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, the most radical and revolutionary figure in human history: Jesus, the one who spoke with thunderous authority, yet loved with childlike humility, the one who claimed to be older than time and stronger than death. Someone has well said "Christianity is nothing more than seeing Jesus . . ." As we continue our studies in the gospel of John this morning, I pray that you will catch a fresh glimpse of Jesus, and that his words will touch your innermost heart.

It is paradoxical that we can spend our entire lives surrounded by things we don't really see. We pass by a garden every day and yet never really see the splendor of a flower. I can testify that a man can spend years living with his wife and yet never pause to look into her soul. In the same way, one can be all that goodness calls him or her to be and still never see the Author of life. Being honest, moral or even religious, as our story today will demonstrate, doesn't necessarily mean one will see him.

Is your vision blurred? Has it been a while since you came face to face with Jesus? Your prayers seem stale. You may be struggling with the pain of separation or divorce. You may have lost your job. You may feel pressured just surviving in this fast-paced valley. You may still feel numb from writing that check to the IRS on April 15. You may struggle with habits you long to be rid of; despite your best efforts you continue to fail. Perhaps you are a single parent feeling the pressure of raising children alone. If you can't face your problems, than it is time to face Jesus once more.

There is a strong Jewish flavor to this gospel. Its first 12 chapters are structured around the Jewish feasts and Jesus' fulfillment of all the expectations inherent in those celebrations. We have already learned that he is the bread of life (chapter 6), the water of life (chapter 7), and the light of life (chapter 8). As we pick up the story of Jesus today in chapter 9, it is helpful to note its connection with chapter 8. There it is recorded that in a dramatic moment during the Feast of Tabernacles, he declared, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Here in chapter 9, Jesus illustrates this truth. His encounter with a man born blind portrays what happens when the light of Christ shines: some are made to see, like this man born blind, while others who think they see turn away, blinded, as it were, by the light. This is a story of progressive illumination and progressive darkness.

This account is simple, yet it is very powerful. The healing itself is recorded in the opening seven verses, while the rest of the chapter reports the different reactions of people to the blind man's life-changing encounter with Jesus. Thus we have the disciples' reaction to the man's initial blindness (verses 1-2); the astonishment of his neighbors (verses 8-12); the bewilderment and fear of his parents (verses 19-23); and the hostility of the Jewish leaders (verses 13-34); finally, Jesus reveals the message to which this physical sign points

(verses 35-41).

The incident opens with the disciples questioning Jesus about this man who was blind from birth. Chapter 9, verse 1:

And as He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?" Jesus answered, "(It was) neither (that) this man sinned, nor his parents; but (it was) in order that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of Him who sent Me, as long as it is day; night is coming, when no man can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

As Jesus was leaving the temple he observed this man. He must have fixed his gaze upon him because his disciples were also drawn to the man. They had a question for Jesus: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?" The Jews believed that such physical defects had immediate hereditary causes — that human hurt was the result of human sin. Some, as was the case here, even traced physical deformities to sin in the womb. Though Jesus doesn't deny the general connection between suffering and sin, he makes it clear that suffering cannot always be traced to personal sin. Scripture does teach that in some instances it is, but, according to Jesus, this was not the case with this man. Jesus doesn't become involved in a profitless theological discussion. His purpose was that a divine work would be accomplished and the divine glory revealed. The glory of God that Jesus would display in changing this man's physical condition would be a sign for all time of the glory of God which shines in every life, whenever he opens the eyes of the spiritually blind.

As I tried to imagine what life must have been like for this blind beggar, this one who had never known light, I remembered something that Helen Keller once said: "Gradually," she said, "I got used to the silence and darkness that surrounded me and forgot that it had ever been different, until she came — my teacher — who set my spirit free." Here was a man who had no conception of blue or red. A million glories of nature were hidden from him: the green of the spring grass, the majesty of a sunset. As a child he felt the softness of his mother's face, perhaps even a tear on her cheek, but he could not tell what she looked like. Had he heard the callously insensitive question of the disciples? He probably had heard such questions before. Had he heard Jesus say, "While I am in the world, I am the light of the world"? We don't know.

John next records the strange thing Jesus did.

When He had said this, He spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and applied the clay to his eyes, and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which is translated, Sent). And so he went away and

washed, and came [back] seeing.

John describes the miracle in very brief terms: "so he went away and washed, and came [back] seeing." Obviously, John is not calling attention to the physical miracle alone. As the rest of the chapter makes clear, there is something deeper going on here. These strange actions of Jesus — spitting on the ground to make clay, anointing the man's eyes with it and sending him to the pool to wash — are symbolic. John even gives the meaning of the name of the pool. This is a parable in action. Jesus is not merely interested in restoring the man's physical sight alone. These symbols help us understand what is going on here.

While we are not told why Jesus used clay to heal the man's blindness, some scholars trace this to the Genesis account where God formed man from the dust of the ground, from the clay of the earth. This symbol is used in many places in Scripture. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels," says Paul in Corinthians. We are clay pots. Clay is a malleable and weak substance. As such it symbolizes the weakness and fragility of human nature. We are clay pots. (Some of us may even be a little cracked!)

In the act of smearing clay over the man's eyes it is possible that Jesus is saying there was something hindering not just the man's physical sight, but his spiritual sight too. That something was the clay of his humanity: his fallen nature hindered him from seeing spiritual truth and reality. The process of healing spiritual sight involves a difficult, obstacle-filled journey. It is only when the man gets to the pool of Siloam ("the sent one") that his inner sight is granted. This story is an object lesson on what it takes to open blinded spiritual eyes.

As the man started back toward the temple he gained speed and confidence. How happy everyone would be, he imagined. But it didn't turn out that way. He could not find Jesus, so he went home, where he met his neighbors. Verse 8:

The neighbors therefore, and those who previously saw him as a beggar, were saying, "Is not this the one who used to sit and beg?" Others were saying, "This is he," {still} others were saying, "No, but he is like him." He kept saying, "I am the one." Therefore they were saying to him, "How then were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man who is called Jesus made clay, and anointed my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam, and wash'; so I went away and washed, and I received sight." And they said to him, "Where is He?" He said, "I do not know."

They were astonished, to say the least, at what had happened to him. So accustomed were they to seeing him begging, there was some reluctance to believe he was the same man. But he assures them, saying, "I am the one." He is quite definite about it. They wanted to know everything that happened, but all he could tell them was the bare facts. He refers to the one who gave him light as "the man they call Jesus." He had heard his name, but he knew nothing more about him. He hadn't even seen him!

The neighbors didn't know how to handle this apparent miracle so they called in the experts. Verse 13:

They brought to the Pharisees him who was formerly blind. Now it was a Sabbath on the day when Jesus made the clay, and opened his eyes. [There's the clue that tells us there is trouble ahead]. Again, therefore, the

Pharisees also were asking him how he received his sight. And he said to them, "He applied clay to my eyes, and I washed, and I see." Therefore some of the Pharisees were saying, "This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath." But others were saying, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And there was a division among them.

Once more, the Jews' petty regulations concerning the Sabbath have landed Jesus in trouble. The Law of Moses held that the Jews were to keep the Sabbath and not do any work on that day, so the rabbis came up with 39 ways by which the day could be violated by certain types of work. And Jesus had violated at least two of their regulations. One could not spit on the ground on the Sabbath. On a rock yes, but spitting on the ground made mud and that was defined as working. Nor could an act of healing be done on the Sabbath unless a man's life was in danger. With such infinitely narrow, petty regulations, the Pharisees had surrounded the Sabbath with such legalism that one could hardly breathe without breaking the law. Hence their excuse for rejecting Jesus: "He doesn't keep the rules," they said. Their logic may have been correct, but it was the Sabbath they didn't understand. Jesus was not breaking God's rules, but theirs. Others of them were a little more cautious, however. They said, "These are wonderful things he does, and God seems to endorse them." There was division and doubt among them.

Now it was the man's turn to be amazed. This was the first true Sabbath he had known in his life. He could hardly believe the Pharisees were more concerned with how he was healed than with the fact that he could see. Notice the effect the discussion had on him. Verse 17:

They said therefore to the blind man again, "What do you say about Him, since He opened your eyes?" And he said, "He is a prophet."

He immediately sides with Jesus. A work of God had been done in his life. His eyes were opening wider. He still sees Jesus as a man, but now he says he is God's man, a gifted man. He is beginning to see ever more clearly, while the eyes of the Pharisees are becoming clouded in a blinding, theological mist.

Since the Pharisees were not unified on the matter, they decided to go over the facts again, hoping to unearth a mistake that would resolve their dilemma. Had the man really been blind from birth? They called in his parents to find out. Verse 18:

The Jews therefore did not believe [it] of him, that he had been blind, and had received sight, until they called the parents of the very one who had received his sight, and questioned them, saying, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? Then how does he now see?" His parents answered them and said, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but how he now sees, we do not know; or who opened his eyes, we do not know. Ask him; he is of age, he shall speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed, that if anyone should confess Him to be Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue. For this reason his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

Paralyzed by fear, his parents miss the opportunity to stand with their son on the greatest day of his life. They should have fallen on their knees and thanked God for

what he had done for their son who had never seen the light of day; they knew who had healed him. But their fear of excommunication from the synagogue was too strong. All they could say was "he is old enough to speak for himself." So the clay of fallen, fearful, weak humanity continues to blind the eyes of those involved.

The resistance of the Pharisees becomes more pronounced as they interrogate the man a second time. Verse 24:

So a second time they called the man who had been blind, and said to him, "Give glory to God;

They are not asking him to praise God for what he had done in his life. Their words, in fact, form an oath. They still feel something has been hidden from them so they command the man to tell the truth, saying, in other words, "Before God, own up and tell the truth."

...we know that this man is a sinner."

This is what they wanted to hear confessed: that Jesus was a sinner. They were seeking information they could correlate with the conclusion they had already drawn. But the man refused to become involved in a theological argument.

He therefore answered, "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see."

He is growing in courage and in life. What a great model he is to help us share our faith! Many Christians are afraid to say anything about the Lord, fearing being dragged into a theological argument that will be over their heads. But this man simply describes what Jesus did for him: "Once I was blind, now I see!" You are the world's greatest authority on what happened to you. Someone has said, "A man with an experience is never at the mercy of a man with merely an argument." The power of the testimony of a transformed life is incalculable. We have much to learn from this man.

And the amazing thing is that, apart from Jesus, he is the only one in the story who is free. Everyone else is in bondage. All his life he wished he could see like everyone else — his parents, his neighbors, the religious leaders. Now, for the first time, he can see, and what he sees is that the people around him had nothing to offer. They were weak, fearful and blind. The more I read this story the more impressed I am with this man. He is one of the most refreshing characters in the New Testament.

The Pharisees, however, continue their questioning. Verse 26:

They said therefore to him, "What did He do to you? How did He open your eyes?" He answered them, "I told you already, and you did not listen; why do you want to hear [it] again? You do not want to become His disciples too, do you?" And they reviled him, and said, "You are His disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses; but as for this man, we do not know where He is from."

They remind the man that they are the theological experts. They claim to know God's revelation ("we know"), but at the same time they reject the one who revealed it. The thing they admit to not knowing is the one thing they should have known.

The man is quick to seize on their admission. Verse 30:

The man answered and said to them, "Well, here is an amazing thing, that you do not know where He is from, and [yet] He opened my eyes. We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing, and does His will, He hears him. Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, He could do nothing."

How he has grown! He has come a long way in his view of Jesus. He began by referring to him as "the man called Jesus" (v. 13); then he referred to him as "the prophet" (v. 17); now he says Jesus is from God.

They answered and said to him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you teaching us?" And they put him out.

Oh, the arrogance of the Pharisees! They despised the uneducated, the blind and the poor. Stung by the impertinence of this untrained commoner who had bested them at their own game, they resort not to evaluation but to personal abuse, calling into question the legitimacy of his birth. In the end they excommunicate him.

Jesus heard about their action. Verse 35:

Jesus heard that they had put him out; and finding him, He said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered and said, "And who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?" Jesus said to him, "You have both seen Him, and He is the one who is talking with you." And he said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshipped Him.

What a beautiful scene! Notice he didn't have to find Jesus. After the Jews cast him out, Jesus immediately found him. Jesus, the Light, came seeking the man who had not denied the light that he had. One commentator said, "The Jews cast him out of the Temple, and the Lord of the Temple found him." We leave this man on his knees in worship, while the Pharisees remained in their self-imposed darkness.

Jesus himself summarizes what has taken place. Verse 39:

And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see; and that those who see may become blind." Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things, and said to Him, "We are not blind too, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

Light always drives away darkness. Light drove these blind Pharisees further into darkness. If you overturn a boulder that has lain in the same spot for a time, all the creeping, crawling life forms that have taken up residence on its underside will beat a hasty retreat into darkness, fearing the light. It was the same with the Pharisees.

The basis for spiritual growth is an awareness of the natural darkness of our hearts and our need for the light of Christ.

This awareness came home to many high school students during the ministry in Mexicali a few weeks ago. One evening, as a few of them spontaneously shared what God was doing in their lives, I interviewed Amy, a 16-year-old high schooler from Sacramento. With tears in her eyes she confessed before a thousand high school students how her ar-

rogance and selfishness were revealed to her, and how her eyes had become opened to her need for God to change her. She had seen God working in her friend's lives all week, but it was a little 7-year-old Mexican girl whom God finally used to open her eyes. On the last evening of the week-long ministry, the girl had given her a letter saying, "I love you so much. I will miss you." This little girl had none of the material things Amy enjoyed, yet her heart was filled with love and appreciation for her new friend. Amy said, "I thought I was the one who was supposed to give, but she had much more to give me. I would like to ask Jesus to change me." Her eyes were finally opening. She was beginning to see.

Charles Spurgeon said,

It is not our littleness that hinders Christ; but our bigness. It is not our weakness that hinders Christ; it is our strength. It is not our darkness that hinders Christ; it is our supposed light that holds back His hand.

Remember Jesus' words as he began the Sermon on the Mount, the manifesto for how his Kingdom would operate, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" Blessed are those who realize they have nothing within themselves that commends them to God. The distinction in this story is not drawn between those who were blind and those who could see, but between those who *knew* they were blind and those who *claimed* they could see.

It is significant that the man in this story was born blind and that he was a beggar. He is representative of us all. This story is about all of us. In a very real sense we are all blind, we are all beggars from birth, incapable of freeing ourselves from our predicament. Theologians have two terms for this. They talk about "original sin" and "total depravity." Original sin doesn't mean that we sin in original ways. Most of us sin like everyone else. Original sin means that we are sinful in our origins. We come into the world with a proclivity for wrongdoing. We're like a baseball with a spin on it: eventually we break, and the break is down and out. Total depravity simply means that sin touches the totality of our being. If sin were a color, we would be a shade of sin all over. We sin because we're sinful!

"The one spiritual disease," G.K. Chesterton wrote, "is thinking that one is quite well." This was why Jesus reserved his harshest words for those would not admit there was something wrong with them; those who believed there was something good about them that God ought to accept. Amazingly, it was the clergy of Jesus' day who could not see their own need. Hypocrites, Jesus called them. The term

seems harsh unless we understand what it means: a hypocrite is a person who is outwardly correct but inwardly corrupt. The Pharisees taught about decency and decorum, but their hearts were defiled. Their rules could not correct the state of their own hearts, nor could they correct the hearts of others.

The problem with sin is that it comes from within. Nothing external can cure it. Rules don't work; they won't change us. They only make matters worse. And yet we keep hearing that traditions and rites and rituals will modify our behavior. They won't. Even our disciplines won't. In our determination to right some wrong we may read the Bible more, pray more, and go to church more often, but as good as these activities are they can't change us. They can only draw us closer to the One who can. The way to change is to ask him to change us by his own working — from within.

Despite our best intentions to live right, we fail. We have gone very wrong. We may believe that God can't love people like us, but he does. And he loves not the person you think you are, but who you really are! The psalmist said,

**The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
Slow to anger and abounding in love.
He will not always accuse,
Nor will he harbor his anger forever;
He does not treat us as our sins deserve,
Nor repay us according to our iniquities. (Ps. 103:8-10)**

God suffers fools gladly. He has compassion on those who fear him. Even if we are on the run, trying to get away from him, he will pursue us. The footsteps we hear behind us are his, and he is gaining on us. Though we take flight, he will pursue us because he loves us.

I can identify with these Pharisees who adopted an external appearance of having dealt with sin in their lives but had never confronted the darkness of their hearts. This, too, is my natural bent. I fear failure. I have spent far more time wanting to be right than wanting to be well. For years, I expended a great deal of energy trying to create an image and living up to it, too frightened to admit my need. But Jesus says we don't have to live like that. He is the light of the world. His came to heal, not to condemn.

This story of the blind beggar is the story of each one of us. We all need to wash in the pool of Siloam. We all need to have our eyes opened, to have the clay of our fallen humanity — our pride and our arrogance — dealt with. Are you a sinner, in need of his grace? Then today can be the day when you, too, can "see" for the first time. Would you allow his light to penetrate your darkness today?

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