

Message #36

Kurt Hedlund

John

9/2/2018

JESUS AND THE MAN BORN BLIND

JOHN 9:1-12

I.

I have had two friends in my life who were blind. Tony was two years ahead of me in seminary. He was single, like I was, but he lived in a different dorm. We had a mutual friend, through whom we were brought together. I got to know him fairly well, and we did a few things together, but I was not in his inner circle of friends.

Al was on my floor in the dorm in college. We were the same year in school, and we had involvement in the same Christian group. In our senior year, we shared a house together with five other Christian guys. So I got to know him quite well. I learned about some of the challenges that are involved in being blind.

The story before us today involves another blind man. The challenges that he faced were greater than what most blind people have today. He did not have access to government financial assistance, or schools for the blind, or parchment in braille, or protections from the Americans with Disabilities Act. The broader issue is suffering and God's purposes in it. Our passage describes the work of One who came to do something about this suffering.

We are working our way through the Gospel According to John. The Apostle John organizes his biographical material about Jesus around seven sign miracles. Today we come to sign number six. All of Chapter 9 relates to this miracle involving a blind man. This incident follows after events that revolve around the Feast of Tabernacles in Chapters 7 & 8. Tensions are rising between Jesus and the religious leaders based in Jerusalem. The miracle before us today adds to this tension, but it also tells us important things about Jesus and the place of suffering.

I.

In vv. 1-3 of #9, which is p. 895 in the black Bibles under many of the chairs, we find that GOD WANTS US TO REGARD SUFFERING AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO GLORIFY HIM. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. GOD WANTS US TO...) According to v. 1, **“As he [Jesus] passed by, he saw a man blind from birth.”**

The time setting is not completely clear. The placement of this story after #7 and #8 and the events connected to the Feast of Tabernacles could mean that this incident happened while Jesus was still in Jerusalem for this feast. We left off last time with the Pharisees trying to stone Jesus for claiming that He was equal with God and Jesus getting away in the crowd of religious pilgrims. It is possible that the story before us began while Jesus was exiting the temple. It could have happened the next day, which, in my reckoning would be day eight of the eight day religious feast. That was the day that events wound down, and religious pilgrims prepared to go home.

In v. 8 we will find out that this blind man was a beggar, which was the typical means of support for blind people. It was common for Jewish beggars to hang out by the temple. (JERUSALEM TEMPLE 8) Especially at feast times there would be thousands of people going in and out of the temple. Judaism taught that it was important to give alms to the poor.

Blindness was probably more common in the ancient world than it is today. (PROJECTOR OFF) Venereal disease and other diseases as well as genetic abnormalities can produce blindness. There were no effective treatments back in that day for most of these medical conditions. The support systems for people with these conditions were pretty limited. My friends Al and Tony both went to state schools for the blind. They learned to read Braille. They were both able to go to college. There were government resources that provided free books in braille and audio recordings. There were financial grants that were provided for them to have people record on audio tapes other printed material. There were disability laws that gave them certain protections.

There are a couple of brief statements in the Old Testament about not leading blind people astray. There are also exhortations to give to the poor. But other than that, it was a tough situation for the blind in ancient Israel and Judea.

We read then in v. 2, **“And his disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’”** Jesus seems to take a lead in connecting with this blind man. In other incidents involving the blind in the Gospel accounts, they cry out to Jesus for help. The impression we get here is that the blind man is oblivious to the presence of Jesus and His disciples, until they stop by him. It seems clear as the story develops that he also has no clue about who Jesus is.

There is some significance to the note that this guy has been blind from birth. There are some medical conditions that involve temporary blindness. We don't know how the disciples learned about this man's blindness. Jesus or His followers may have asked him about his condition. Perhaps someone nearby filled them in. There are other references in the Gospels to Jesus healing the blind. This is the only specific healing in the Gospels where we are told that the blind person was blind from birth.

The underlying assumption of the disciples is that the cause of this man's condition was sin. A Jewish rabbi by the name of Ammi, whose teaching was known in the first century, is quoted (PROJECTOR ON---RABBI AMMI QUOTATION) as saying, **"There is no death without sin, and there is no suffering without iniquity."**

There are indeed certain statements in the Old Testament that could have been interpreted as promoting this perspective. In the commandment forbidding worship of idols (EXODUS 20:5), the Lord says, **"You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, vising the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me."** Thus the Pharisees made the interpretation that one explanation for suffering like this was that the parents or grandparents were guilty of idol worship.

Rabbis also pointed to the story in Genesis where Jacob and Esau, the sons of Isaac, struggled together in the womb of Rebecca. (GENESIS 25:22) According to Genesis #25 v. 22, **"The children struggled together within her, and she said, 'If it is thus, why is this happening to me?' So she went to inquire of the Lord."** The interpretation of many of the rabbis was that Esau sinned against Jacob in the womb. That is why the Lord favored Jacob over Esau in the course of their lives.

Even in the story of the healing of the lame man at the Pool of Bethesda, recorded in #5 of this book, Jesus makes a correlation between his condition and sin. (JOHN 5:14) According to v. 14 of #5, **"Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, 'See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.'"** We don't know what the particular sin situation was here. But it is common sense that when we do bad things, there are natural consequences that often follow. Maybe this guy had a drinking problem and fell off a bar stool. If someone robs a bank, they may get shot or end up in jail. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In a general sense it is true that death and suffering are a result of the Fall. Bad things happen to us because of man's rebellion against God. But there is also Biblical evidence that suffering and difficult circumstances are not necessarily the result of specific sins. In the Old Testament, Job is described as the most righteous man in all of the earth. Yet terrible things happened to him. Many of the most noble of the Biblical heroes experienced more than their fair share of suffering.

Keep in mind also that this blind man was not deaf. Probably this conversation between Jesus and the disciples was going on within earshot of him. What do you suppose that he thought about all of this? Probably he had heard these same theological explanations about suffering. It was probably the prevailing theological opinion, given the fact that the disciples were promoting this perspective. How do you suppose that this affected the blind man's self-esteem? How did it affect his view of God? Jesus gives His take in v. 3.

“Jesus answered, ‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.’” The theology of Jesus is that individual suffering is not necessarily the result of any particular person's sin. The disciples and the rabbis have a wrong premise in their theological reasoning. They should have understood from the Hebrew Bible that suffering of godly individuals sometimes happens.

Jesus also gives the comforting assurance that there can be a divine purpose for suffering. The works of God can be displayed in these situations. In view of what happens next, it would seem that the miracle of healing for this man is evidence of this.

This is the perspective that God wants His people to have on suffering. Sometimes we know that we have done things wrong which have produced a negative result in our lives. But we often will not know the cause for suffering that we experience. God always wants us to see suffering as an opportunity to glorify Him.

My friend Al was always a positive guy. He developed his hearing and his musical ability such that he could do a beautiful job of playing the piano. Sometimes he did piano tuning. After college, He got a job working for the IRS. Tony was the first blind individual to ever graduate from my seminary. He decided to get more education after this. He went to law school and became a lawyer. Eventually he became a circuit court judge in Alabama. He also became a member of a presidential commission on disabilities. Two years ago he published a book about his life entitled *Living Beyond Barriers*. This past spring he died. Our mutual friend was involved in leading the funeral service. Al and Tony and the blind man in our

story demonstrate that our sufferings can have a purpose. We ought to regard them as opportunities to glorify God.

II.

In vv. 4 & 5 in #9 we learn that GOD WANTS US TO WORK FOR HIM WHILE WE HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. GOD WANTS US TO...) Jesus tells His disciples in v. 4, **“We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work.”** Notice that Jesus uses the plural pronoun “we” in v. 4. It would appear that He is implying that His disciples have a role with Jesus in doing this work, whatever it is.

In ancient times it was difficult to do many jobs after dark. We take modern lighting for granted. In ancient times people might have oil lamps which could be used to accomplish certain indoor tasks. But much work was limited by the presence of darkness at night.

It is evident that the night which Jesus is describing is not literal. It is not obvious here as to the meaning of the reference. Jesus did say a similar thing about darkness later in this book. In #12 v. 35 Jesus was speaking to crowds of people gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover feast. It was a few days before His crucifixion. (JOHN 12:35) Verse 35 reads, **“So Jesus said to them, ‘The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going.’”**

It would seem that this verse supports the understanding of v. 4 in our passage that Jesus is referring to the events that are involved in His coming death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. (PROJECTOR OFF) The disciples of Jesus will experience a certain darkness when Jesus leaves them. They will be unable to accomplish much of any value. It is only when the Holy Spirit comes upon them at Pentecost that they will again be able to accomplish the works of God.

The broader application that we can make out of v. 4 in our passage is that as long as we have life and breath, we have the opportunity to do the works of God. The specific plan for each of us in doing that will vary according to our talents and situations in life. But the basic encouragement is to serve God and to serve people.

Jesus continues in v. 5, **“As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”** One of the central features of the Feast of Tabernacles was the lighting of the huge candelabras in the Temple. It was in this setting that Jesus first declared Himself to be the light of the world. That was #7. The miracle that Jesus is about to perform in bringing light to this blind man will demonstrate the truth of His claim.

Jesus will soon physically leave His disciples. But earlier Jesus told those who would follow Him that they would become lights to the world because of their connection with Him. In the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Matthew Chapters 5-7, Jesus spoke about light. In #5 v. 14 He told His followers that they were the light of the world. (PROJECTOR ON--- MATTHEW 5:16) In v. 16 He said, **“In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”** The point is that we are to work for Him while we have the opportunity.

III.

In the remainder of our passage, vv. 6-12, we learn that GOD WANTS US TO RECOGNIZE THE MIRACLES OF JESUS AS EVIDENCE THAT HE IS THE MESSIAH. (III. GOD WANTS US TO RECOGNIZE THAT...) According to v. 6, **“Having said these things, he [Jesus] spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man’s eyes with the mud...”**

This is a fascinating healing method. All kinds of suggestions have been made as to why Jesus used this technique in His healing of the blind man. Some suggest that this is intended to point us back to God’s creation of the first man from the dust of the ground. Others argue that saliva was popularly regarded to have curative powers, and Jesus was seeking to develop faith in this man that Jesus could cure His blindness. Others argue that saliva was regarded as ceremonially unclean and that Jesus was reversing the effects of the curse originally placed upon Adam and Eve.

I don’t know that we should try to make much out of the method that Jesus used to heal this man. There are four other specific instances in the Gospels where some detail is provided in regard to how Jesus went about healing blind people. Each one was different. To modern Christianity this may seem frustrating. We are always looking for a formula and a plan that we can package and sell in order to do the works of Jesus. But it does not seem like there is one to be found here. If nothing else, perhaps we should come away with the appreciation that Jesus customizes His approach to every individual who is suffering.

We should also notice here that the initiative in this miracle lies entirely with Jesus. There is no indication that the blind man knows that Jesus is passing by, until He stops and talks with His disciples. There is also no indication that the poor beggar knows anything about Jesus, other than what he overhears being spoken from the mouth of Jesus and His disciples.

You should also notice from v. 14 later in this chapter that the Apostle John points out that this is a Sabbath when this miracle takes place. It seems as if Jesus intentionally does miracles on the Sabbath to irritate the Pharisees. The fact that it is a Sabbath could also fit with the chronology that I have suggested about this happening at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles described in the previous two chapters. For the Old Testament specifically said that the first and the eighth days of the Feast of Tabernacles were to be treated as Sabbaths. Remember, the Jewish Sabbath began at sundown. So it is possible that Jesus was leaving the temple at the end of the day--- day seven of the feast--- after the Pharisees had just tried to stone him. The Sabbath began as the sun set. Or it could have been the next morning or afternoon when this incident occurred.

Verse 7 says, **“...and [Jesus] said to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.”** (POOL OF SILOAM 2) The pool of Siloam was south of the temple compound. This was the place from which the priest got the water and brought it back to the temple on each day of the Feast of Tabernacles and poured it out on the altar of burnt offering. It was probably on day seven of this feast when Jesus declared in the temple when this water was poured out that He was the source of living water. He invited His listeners to come to Him and drink.

In His conversations with the religious leaders at this feast, Jesus repeatedly claims that He is the One sent from God. Now Jesus tells this blind man to go to the pool of Siloam, which is Hebrew for “sent.” Perhaps Jesus is wanting us to recognize that there is spiritual truth being pictured in these actions.

(POOL OF SILOAM 1) The pool of Siloam was fed by an underground tunnel that came from the Gihon Spring on the east side of Jerusalem. King Hezekiah in the Old Testament built this underground tunnel. So this water that filled the pool of Siloam came from an invisible source. Jesus, too, came from an invisible source. He claimed to be living water who was sent by the Father to provide for the needs of His people. So it was that Jesus sent the blind man to the pool of Siloam to have his eyes restored as a result of the work of the One who was sent by God.

(PROJECTOR OFF) The blind man seems to have followed the instructions of Jesus without any questions or objections. Whether he found his way himself, or had help from someone, we are not told. My friend

Al was able to navigate from our house eight blocks from the college campus to school and around the campus by himself. He did it with his cane and the map in his head.

It is also interesting that neither Jesus nor the disciples went with the blind man. Last week we saw in the earlier passage that Jesus said that He did not seek His own glory. Certainly this would have been an opportunity to receive glory. But Jesus is not physically present when the guy experiences vision for the first time.

Verse 7 says that the guy came back seeing. The word “back” does not actually appear in the original text. So where did he go after receiving his sight? Verse 8 says, **“The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, ‘Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?’”** He apparently went home, to the place where he lived. Note that this is the first place in the story where he is specifically identified as a beggar.

Jerusalem was the center of power for the religious establishment. The rabbis probably had more influence here than any other part of the province. They were clearly opposed to the claims of Jesus. So the testimony of this beggar from Jerusalem has the potential to have great influence. The people who are closest to him are amazed by the transformation.

Verse 9: **“Some said, ‘It is he.’ Others said, ‘No, but he is like him.’ He kept saying, ‘I am the man.’”** The guy’s transformation begins to attract attention. We hear the first words from his lips. The blind man presents the basic model for a Christian testimony. This is who I was. This is who I am now. This is how the change happened.

Verses 10 & 11: **“So they said to him, ‘Then how were your eyes opened?’ He answered, ‘The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ So I went and washed and received my sight.’”** It is a simple but effective testimony. The guy simply tells what happened to him. It is hard to argue against our true personal experience with Jesus.

Verse 12: **“They said to him, ‘Where is he?’ He said, ‘I do not know.’”** The blind man knows little about Jesus. His eyes have not yet even seen Him. His knowledge of Jesus may be limited to the conversation that he heard with Jesus and His disciples.

Some have referred to this as a Calvinistic miracle. The guy had a real need. He was not seeking Jesus. But Jesus sought him out. He made the guy well. The only thing that the blind man had to do was to follow instructions, to go to the pool of Siloam and wash out his eyes.

This miracle is the sixth of the seven sign miracles recorded by the Apostle John. It is powerful evidence that Jesus is the Messiah. Supernatural healing of people blind since birth just doesn't happen. I had a charismatic friend who tried to convince my blind friend Al to let him try to heal him. This guy got together with Al a couple of times in the college dorm to pray over Al fervently for his eyesight to be restored. It was to no avail.

The Old Testament describes a number of miracles. But there is no record in the Old Testament of a blind person gaining sight. Yet Jesus does it many times. There are several general references to Jesus healing the blind. There are also five specific references in the Gospels to situations where Jesus healed individual blind people. We have detailed descriptions of the healing of this physical problem more than Jesus' healing of any other malady in the Gospels.

The Apostle John recognized that this healing of the blind man was a proof of the claims that Jesus made during the Feast of Tabernacles. On day seven the priests took water from the pool of Siloam back to the temple and poured it out upon the altar. (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 7:37) It was in this setting that we read in #7 vv. 37 & 38, **"On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. (JOHN 7:38) Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'"** Jesus becomes the source of life for this blind man. He is sent to the same pool of Siloam and is healed by the Sent One.

Also on the last day of this feast, probably by one of the giant candelabras, (PROJECTOR OFF) Jesus declared that He was the light of the world. In this healing of the blind man, Jesus brings light to the dark world of this man. Jesus is the Messiah who is offering to bring spiritual light to a world in spiritual darkness.

The Old Testament declared that healing of the blind would be a distinguishing feature of the true Messiah. This prophecy receives a special emphasis in the Book of Isaiah. In #29 the Lord speaks of the coming of the messianic kingdom. (PROJECTOR ON--- ISAIAH 29:18) In v. 18 He says, **"In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see."**

In #35 vv. 4 & 5 (ISAIAH 35:4) Isaiah the prophet says, **“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.’ (ISAIAH 35:5) Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped...”**

In Isaiah #42 the Lord speaks of His coming servant (ISAIAH 42:6) and says, beginning in v. 6, **“I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, (ISAIAH 42:7) to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”** Jesus quoted these words in the synagogue at Nazareth when He spoke there. But the Galileans would not believe that He was the Messiah. The people of Jerusalem will not believe Him either, despite the clear evidence that He is the fulfillment of these Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The blindness of the blind man is a picture of the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees--- and of the spiritual condition in which every person is born. We all need Jesus to transform us and to help us to see reality. Our responsibility is to put our faith in Him.

There is a story told about what happened to Robert Louis Stevenson when he was twelve years old. He was looking out of his upstairs window one night into the darkness. He watched a man light the lamps in the street below him. Stevenson’s governess came into his room and asked what he was watching. He replied, **“I am watching a man cut holes in the darkness.”** That is an apt description for what Jesus was doing in Jerusalem. It is an apt description for what He does when He transforms our lives.

God wants us to recognize the miracles of Jesus as evidence that He is the Messiah. He also wants us to regard suffering as an opportunity to glorify Him. Then He also wants us to work for Him while we have the opportunity. C. T. Studd was a missionary in China for many years. He wrote a poem that contains (PROJECTOR ON--- CT STUDD QUOTATION) these lines: **“Only one life, ‘twill soon be past; Only what’s done for Christ will last.”** May we have that same conviction.