

Thru the Bible: Gospel of John 9

Introduction: The Healing of the Blind Man (John 9:1-41): In this chapter the gospel writer continues his pattern of relating significant personal encounters between Jesus and others which result in a controversy with the Jewish religious leaders. This story is the sixth “sign” in the *Book of Signs* (chs. 2-12) and illustrates by means of a healing miracle another important “I am” declaration given in the previous chapter, “*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life*” (8:12). The theme of light versus darkness is of course central to John’s connection of Jesus with the “Word of God” and creation and the present story builds on descriptions introduced in the Prologue:



❖ “*The life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it...The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world*” (Jn. 1:4-5, 9); “*I am the light of the world*” (9:5)

A. The healing and the response of the People (9:1-12): In contrast to the Synoptic Gospels, John only includes three healing stories (4:46-54; 5:1-18), but it is the healing of the blind man that occasions a longer development of the controversy which often follows Jesus as he engages with various individuals and groups in Israel. In this opening scene, John goes deeper than a typical gospel healing story and includes issues of theological debate as well as traditional healing rituals.

1. The relationship between sin and sickness: The disciples bring up two common religious interpretations to explain the condition of the man who was “blind from birth”: *either* he sinned or his parents sinned. While scripture and even life experience (general revelation) can testify to a *general* connection between sin and disease (as introduced with the Fall), it does not permit us to pronounce judgments on the origin of *individual* cases or presume on the sovereignty or providence of God. Jesus can make that connection, as he does earlier in the healing of the lame man, “*Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you*” (5:14), but we can’t. Biblical and theological misunderstandings of this issue typically arise from “proof-texting.”

“A text without a context is a pretext for a proof-text”

Essene Charter: “*No man who suffers from a single one of the uncleannesses that affect humanity shall enter their assembly...no man with a physical handicap – crippled in both legs or hands, lame, blind, deaf, or possessed of a visible blemish in his flesh – or a doddering old man unable to do his share in the congregation...If one of these people has something to say to the holy congregation, let an oral deposition be taken, but the man must not enter the congregation, for he has been smitten*” DSS 1QSa II.3-10

2. The theological corrective of Jesus: Jesus does not accept the two options suggested by the disciples and turns the conversation away from the speculative topic of “who sinned” to the positive opportunity for healing the broken creation that was part of his mission. The disciples are co-commissioned to join in that vocation, “*We must do the works of him who sent me*” (9:4). In John’s gospel, the “work(s) of God” is the work God is doing *through* Jesus (4:34; 5:36; 14:10; 17:4), but to be carried on by his followers after his departure, through the power and leading of the Holy Spirit: “*The one who believes in me...will do greater works than these*” (14:12)

❖ **Translation Issue (9:3-4):** Most translations add words and punctuation that are not in the Greek in v.3 and this affects how one understands what Jesus is implying about the man’s crippling condition in relation to the purpose and will of God. Whereas these translations can leave the reader with the impression that God allows people to endure lifelong congenital conditions and suffering *for the purpose* of a later healing “showpiece” – the “so that” clause (Gr. *hina*) can be taken as *result* rather than *purpose*, and connected to the following sentence of the necessity to do God’s works of healing and restoration.

B. The healing and the response of the Pharisees (9:13-34): The extraordinary healing miracle sets into motion a vigorous controversy and verification effort on the part of the Jewish authorities, with interrogations of the man, his parents and then the man a second time. The concern of the Pharisees seems to be more on whether Jesus broke the Sabbath laws than on whether he is truly a prophet or the Messiah, and there is no thought of praising God for the man’s life-changing restoration.

1. Jesus and the Sabbath laws: By mixing dirt with his saliva, Jesus would be seen by the Pharisees as having broken the Sabbath laws forbidding any kind of work, in this case “kneading.” And he had already been attacked earlier for healing a disabled man on the Sabbath in 5:1-18, where the religious authorities sought to kill him, “*because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal with God*” (5:18). Following that encounter Jesus rebukes the religious authorities in the temple for inconsistency, since they will circumcise a child on the Sabbath (7:19-24).

“But Jesus answered them, ‘My Father is still working, and I also am working’” 5:17

“When we ‘rest’ on the Sabbath, we recognize [God] as the author of order and the one who brings rest (stability) to our lives and world... If we have to be reminded or coerced to observe it, it ceases to serve its function. Sabbath isn’t the sort of thing that should have to be regulated by rules. It is the way that we acknowledge that God is on the throne, that this is his world, that our time is his gift to us. It is ‘big picture time.’ And the big picture is not me, my family, my country, my world, or even the history of my world. The big picture is God.
John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, p.57

2. The threat of expulsion from the synagogue: 9:22 is the first of three passages in John that speak of the possibility of those who confess Jesus as Messiah being “put out” of the local synagogue. As discussed in the our opening study of the background and setting of the gospel, this would be especially relevant for Jewish Christians in John’s day who face that real threat of expulsion from their traditional place of worship. The synagogue is the local representation of the “congregation of Israel” and to be cut off from it would also mean alienation from the entire communal network of social, political and religious life. This is what the Pharisee Saul was actively pursuing in his campaign against early Jewish Christians, “*Lord, they themselves know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you*” (Acts 22:19; note also 26:9-11)

3. The blind man teaching the blind: In verses 30-34 the man healed of blindness responds to the Pharisees with almost sarcastic astonishment that they, as the leading representatives of God and interpreters of Torah, can’t recognize or acknowledge a divine miracle even after verifying all the facts. They, in turn, can only respond with derision, repeating the bad theology the disciples had put forward earlier, “*You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?*” (9:34)

“The genuine realist, if he is an unbeliever, will always find strength and ability to disbelieve in the miraculous, and if he is confronted with a miracle as an irrefutable fact he would rather disbelieve his own senses than admit the fact.” Fyoder Dostoevsky

C. The healing and the response of Jesus (9:35-41): As is typical in John’s narrative, Jesus often has the final word, which often centers on recognition of his divine identity, and involves a decision about that identity from those who encounter him. The revelation of that identity is often connected to traditional messianic and Christological titles, as here with “Son of Man” and “Lord.” And the interplay of physical versus spiritual blindness in Jesus’ final words to the Pharisees is one of the best examples of John’s use of irony and paradox, expressing the importance of a reversal of attitudes in the “upside-down” kingdom of God.

❖ Jesus’ mention of *judgment* in v.39 is a special theme in the Gospel of John and is tied to the authority given to the “Son of Man” figure in Daniel 7 by the “Ancient of Days” – which is echoed in John 5:22, “*The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son.*” And in John final judgment is already anticipated by acceptance or rejection of Jesus in the present.

Application: There are of course a number of important take-aways or implications we could consider from this story.

1. Physical versus spiritual blindness: The statement of the blind man in 9:25, “*I was blind but now I see*” is later echoed in the famous hymn, *Amazing Grace*. The healing of his blindness moves from the physical to the spiritual, as he comes to recognize Jesus as Lord and then “*worshipped him*” (9:38). When a person encounters Jesus on both levels there is always a change that takes place. Each of us should be able to fill in the blanks, “*I once was _____, but now I _____.*” And as with those who knew the man before, people should be saying of us, “*Is that the same person? I’m not sure I recognize them*” (9:8-9)

2. Striking a balance between faith and medicine: So what happens when God doesn’t heal? According to the ‘Health and Wealth’ gospel, “*Doctors are God’s gracious gifts to unbelieving sinners*” and Jesus’ atonement was not just for sin but also for physical healing. Gloria Copeland tells followers to proclaim, “*Flu, I bind you off the people in the name of Jesus. Jesus himself gave us the flu shot. He redeemed us from the curse of the flu.*” Well, besides being wacky, this is of course completely unbiblical and goes against the principle of “general revelation” as embodied in the Wisdom Literature of Scripture, which affirms that even unbelievers can study God’s creation, including the human body, and learn how it works and develop healing principles. Another Rabbi named Jesus, two hundred years before Jesus of Nazareth, standing in the OT wisdom tradition of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, has a wonderful chapter on the balance between prayer and using doctors and medicines (below).

“Honor physicians for their services, for the Lord created them; for their gift of healing comes from the Lord Most High... The Lord created medicines out of the earth, and the sensible will not despise them... and he gave skill to human beings that he might be glorified in his marvelous works. By them the physician heals and takes away pain; the pharmacist makes a mixture of them... My child, when you are ill, do not delay, but pray to the Lord, and he will heal you... [but also] give the physician his place, for the Lord created him; do not let him leave you, for you need him. There may come a time when recovery lies in the hands of physicians, for they too pray to the Lord that he grant them success in diagnosis and in healing, for the sake of preserving life. He who sins against his Maker, will be defiant toward the physician” Sirach 38:1-15