

John 9

© David H. Linden University Presbyterian Church, Las Cruces, NM, USA revised August, 2012

The sign of healing the man born blind is loaded with great significance. John does not tell us just when this happened or where in Jerusalem they were when Jesus passed by the blind beggar. (In John 5 we do have the location of the healing.) The time is not clear, but the connection to chapter 10 is. (See the notes on John 10.) No doubt this sign occurred between the Feast of Tabernacles and the early winter Feast of Dedication mentioned in 10:22.

Of all the passages in John, this is the one that has in it traces of humor. The formerly blind man, uneducated though he was, expressed his thoughts in a way far superior to those who sought to intimidate him. He was articulate, and they were dumbfounded. He is a remarkable example of a man set free by the truth. I look forward to meeting him.

The chapter opens with a question that is wrong in its assumptions. By the end of the story, I am certain it is one the disciples never asked again, but others retained it. The story is one of a healing followed by the great discomfort it generated among those who sought yet again to withstand its implication that Jesus is the Christ. They were willing to make a sinner of the holy Son of God. Jesus' "sin" was doing a man a great favor on the Sabbath. The Lord could have arranged to heal him on a different day and did not. Eventually the unnamed man was rejected not only with disgust, but by official expulsion from the synagogue. The Apostle John signaled by this that confessing Christ has consequences. This persecution was not at the political hands of the Romans, but by the religious hands of fellow Jews. The Lord did not leave that brother, rejected by his own people, to languish in solitary suffering. Jesus went and found him, leading to one of the most sublime yet brief conversations that has ever occurred between Christ and a sinner.

A man blind from birth was healed in an unusual way and in a location away from Christ. It led to an investigation whether he was ever really blind at all, then to great pressure on all to declare Jesus a sinner, to the excommunication of an innocent man, to a revelation of Christ as the Son of Man, and finally to God's judgment against the clergy of Israel for willful blindness.

Sometimes a truth is taught in abstract words, and sometimes it is played out in events. In this chapter both happen. Children learn from fascinating stories. This one has a theological script with it, and it should be told and retold. It shows Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing in Him, our blindness is healed, and we have eternal life.

As John 9 continues into John 10, the Apostle develops a stark contrast between kinds of shepherds. On one side were the abusive shepherds of Israel, who in hostility threw out one of their own for affirming truth about Christ. On the other was Jesus the Good Shepherd, Who loved His sheep so much He would lay down His life for them. The best defense in facing a hostile world is to know and love the Lord Who loves us.

9:1-3 The Question This simple narrative tells of a blind beggar (v.8) that Jesus and His disciples were walking past. For the disciples it was not, "Lord, why not do something for this needy man?" Rather it was more like "how do you explain this one?" The Lord had compassion; they had curiosity and readiness to blame. Their question provided two possible answers, both of which were wrong. Jesus denied the underlying premise. Often our intellectual trouble is with our presuppositions. Here is one example.

The question had in it the seeds of error. If the Lord said it was the man who sinned, how could such a devastating punishment fall on him for some transgression committed before his birth? If the Lord said it was his parents, how could such a punishment fall on the innocent baby? Either way, the justice of God would be impugned. Thankfully, both were wrong! What is clear in this setting is the human tendency to make ignorant judgments on God. All tragedy is traceable to Adam's sin as the ultimate cause, but tragedy is not specifically traceable to individuals, unless God has so informed us. We are not qualified to make such judgments. The innocent may suffer apart from a corresponding disobedience traceable to them. Yet humans are not innocent of the sin imputed to us from Adam. Man does not stand before God in purity or innocence. We do not become sinners by sinning; we were born sinners. So we are caught in a general suffering affecting the entire creation (Romans 8:18-25). The world was part of a perfect creation over which God had placed the first man with the status of righteous and in a condition of righteousness. Then came the fall. From this suffering, God has since graciously delivered many to whom He owed no mercy whatsoever. I am sincere in what I have written here, but please note that I have already delved into the subject in a way the Lord did not in John 9. We have other

Scriptures that bring us light on this, but John 9 shows our inability to apply all truths specifically in explaining why certain people suffer.

The Lord sidestepped replying to the disciples with a theodicy. (A theodicy is a defense of God from an accusation of wrong.) The Lord did make a brief tantalizing response, one that is most encouraging. We should remember that Jesus may have said much more to his disciples than this, but the apostle was led by the Holy Spirit to report only v.3 and no more. Christian submission means that we accept the Lord's decision of every kind, including short answers. In the providence of God the man was born blind, and the works of God would be displayed in this man in a way they would not have been if he were not blind. Some may fret about the mystery of God's providence, but the man healed that day in Jerusalem would not be among them.

9:4 Jesus connected God's work in that man with what He would soon do in giving sight. Jesus' work was so tied to the disciples' participation that He said, "We must work" the works of God. Christian service is a form of fellowship with the Lord in His redemptive activity. Note that *we* work together with God (2 Corinthians 6:1). Though we contribute nothing to any atoning work (which has been accomplished by Christ alone), we are privileged to represent the Lord in His message *and* to show mercy that comes from His heart and ours. The work of Christ in communicating truth was not isolated from His expression of compassion in John 9. Was there ever a needy suffering person with any disease or affliction that Jesus turned away? Did anyone end up with nothing after coming to Him in hope? None.

9:5 See the notes at 11:9,10. The Lord indicated that time was limited. It was only "as long as" He was here that He would directly show Himself to be the Light of the world. How did He show Himself as the Light on this occasion? By making the man in darkness able to see. The works of God in John 9 included the removal of physical and spiritual blindness. John, more than others, wrote of Jesus as the Light in chapters 1,3,8,9 & 12.

9:6,7 The brevity of this surprises us. There is no indication of asking the man if he wanted to be healed. God does not need permission to bless anyone. Some teachers point out that we were made from the dust of the earth, and the Lord used the mud of the earth, so this is a miracle of creation! How the Lord healed is not uniform in Scripture, nor how He has saved different people. He *told* the man to go wash, not as a suggestion, not asking if he wanted to. The man obeyed and came back seeing, but did not find Jesus in the same place.

By translating the Hebrew word "*Siloam*" as "*Sent*", John provides a verbal link with the mission of Christ. Jesus was the One *sent* by the Father. Perhaps that is why the Lord told the man to wash there. Ever since, that man must have had Siloam on his mind, and so do we centuries later. *Sent* shows that Jesus did not come on His own authority. Jesus was not independent, nor the Father detached.

9:8–12 The neighbors' reaction John established quickly that this was the same man and that he had been born blind. The man knew who he was. The simplicity of how it happened hardly fits such a dramatic miracle. People expected a weighty explanation, more than washing off some mud! The man explained it in this way, "I did this and now I see." There was nothing to add except that "some man they call Jesus" made the mud and sent him to wash. Upon his return he did not know where Jesus was, and of course he had never seen Him! The man was unwavering, and this trait continues in this story. Note that John often reported differences of opinion. (See 7:30,31,40-43.) Was it the same man? Some said Yes, others No. In this simple way, John prepares his readers to expect that in evangelism there will not be a uniform response.

9:13–17 The Sabbath verdict John does not say why they took the man to the Pharisees, but the next fact given is that the miracle happened on the Sabbath. (See the notes of chapter 5 for more on Sabbath healings.) If going to the Pharisees was to see what they thought of the miracle, the Sabbath issue overshadowed it. It does not say whether making mud or applying it on the Sabbath was what they thought was the violation, comparable to carrying one's bedroll home as in 5:10. The questions to the man were not whether He had been blind but *how* it was that he had received his sight. Maybe giving or receiving the gift of sight was not in itself evil, so the focus changed to what *work* preceded it. Maybe mud making was the big crime! Some Pharisees

concluded Jesus was a lawbreaker, and so their conclusion: “*This man is not from God*”. Both the disciples’ question in v.2 and now this deliberation about Christ reveal faulty reasoning. It is important to think clearly, and that comes from a mind guided by the revelation of Scripture.

The distinctly Messianic flavor of this miracle Demons do not open the eyes of the blind (10:21). Just as in 5:19, the Son was working as His Father worked, doing the works of God (not Satan) while it is day (9:4). Some vocal Pharisees judged Jesus a sinner for this Sabbath work, but in this very sign the Bible presents Him as the Messiah, God’s Anointed One (Isaiah 61:1). Two significant factors are related to this healing:

1.) The exclusive role There are no healings of the blind in the OT, and none performed by the apostles. In Scripture, *Jesus alone gave sight to the blind*.¹ To heighten the significance of this miracle, Jesus’ healings of blindness outnumber other kinds of healing in the Gospels. This one in John 9 is the only report of a recipient being *born blind*. “*Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind*” (v.32).

2.) Messianic prediction A healing of this kind is a strong indicator that Jesus is the Christ. This was John’s chief purpose in choosing which signs to include (20:30,31). God had promised a day when the blind would see (Isaiah 29:18 & 35:5). That day had arrived. According to Matthew 12:18-21, Isaiah 42 is a Messianic prediction. It says:

I am the LORD; I have called you [Christ] 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, *to open the eyes that are blind*, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison *those who sit in darkness*. I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols (Isaiah 42:6-8).

God was broadcasting the Messianic office of Jesus by means of this healing. Jesus said, “*I am the Light of the World*”² (8:12) and then gave light in the form of sight. The *I am* of 8:12 was God the Son speaking as God. Psalm 146:8 says “*the LORD opens the eyes of the blind*.” And that is another way that Jesus showed Himself as Lord.

9:16,17 the minority view The prevailing view of the Pharisees was that Jesus was a sinner. In their conscience, some other Pharisees wondered how He could do such a wonder as this miracle. Not all were convinced of the majority view of the clergy of Israel. When the blind man was asked what he thought, his reply that Jesus was a prophet went far beyond saying He was not a sinner. Maybe the man said what others were thinking – something most of the leaders did not want expressed. (See the notes of 6:14,15.) There was a division among the Pharisees, but those not willing to say “He is a sinner” are not heard from again.

9:18-23 further investigation Those opposed to Christ as a true prophet of God had a serious problem on their hands. They would be relieved if it could be established that a miracle had not occurred. In v.17 they admitted that Jesus had opened the man’s eyes. Their research established that a genuine miracle had happened. They were disappointed. In the four Gospels, when the facts could not be overturned, the only recourse was to give those unwelcome miracles an explanation intended to prevent any conclusion that Jesus was God’s Son, or Messiah, or Prophet. God did not make it easy for them to dismiss Christ. The investigation was very rational: a) Is this your son, b) was he born blind, and if so, c) how is it that he can see? The parents answered the first two in such a way that the miracle was no longer in dispute. From this point on the heated debate was about Christ.

The intimidation that so often surrounds an investigation of truth is here seen plainly. Of course the parents knew how their son could see. The only viable explanation was their son’s. He knew what had happened, and he made no secret of it, but for the parents to repeat his testimony would be to resist the pressure of the authorities. They could escape persecution if they pretended to be ignorant of how the miracle happened, and so they did. The apostle did not write that if anyone said Jesus gave the man sight, he would be put out of the synagogue. Had it

¹ The unusual situation with Saul of Tarsus in Acts 9 does not change this observation. Saul received his sight when Ananias came to him. The blindness was temporary, brought on by the vision of Christ the Lord on the Road to Damascus, and removed when Saul met this Christian leader. It was not a healing of the blind, but the restoration of sight to a man who ordinarily could see. Further, in 2 Kings 6 the Syrian army was blind briefly, and Elisha’s servant was made to see the unseen army of the Lord. These are special circumstances, different from sight for persons ordinarily and permanently blind.

² He used a similar expression in 9:5, but not as ἐγώ εἰμι (ego eimi) i.e., “I am”, as in 8:12.

said it this way, it would have fit the context in an obvious way! But here we see the thinking of John. He said “If anyone should confess Jesus to be the Christ,” he would be expelled. But that was his real point, and it was the Pharisees’ real fear: To say Jesus did it was to admit Who He was. They failed to prove there was no healing, and they have failed to disprove that Jesus had done it. They had one more strategy.

9:24-34 The Pharisees do not give up. They tried harder. They could not deny the healing, but with their hard hearts perhaps they could deny the Healer and turn the people against Him. The conversation is back to their major accusation: that Jesus must be a sinner! I think they began in confidence, but they certainly ended in frustration, bested by an uneducated man whose simple reasoning was superior to theirs. I daresay they wished afterwards they had said nothing to him at all. This was like a mouse and an elephant having a wrestling match, except that every time the elephant stomped his foot, he missed the mouse and hurt his foot! See below: [Notable Lessons from this Narrative](#).

9:24,25 Before asking their question, the Pharisees supplied the desired reply and added a religious reason for adopting it. Perhaps they could go home after this miracle of a man seeing for the first time, with a little diabolical comfort, if at least that man would agree that Jesus was a sinner! How strange to read a plea to give glory to God by declaring the Holy One of Israel a sinner! (The demon of Luke 4:34 was a better theologian than the Pharisees of John 9.) In spite of their eminent position, the man did not adopt their appraisal of Jesus. When asked earlier, he said Jesus was a prophet. No prophet was sinless other than Christ. The man did not know enough to say that Jesus is the Lord. He made no commitment whether He was sinless. He stayed with what he knew. He knew he was blind and then he could see. Coercing him into a denial of Christ was not working.

9:26,27 They repeated themselves, but they were desperate. Maybe they hoped for a discrepancy in his story. Suppose he said, “I ran away from that Jesus after He put that mud on my eyes without my agreement, and I cried to God to give me sight and He did.” A different version could give the leaders some escape from the truth. However, they could no longer deny Jesus had done it; the man was steadfast, offering them no way to avoid the facts. By this continued questioning, they allowed the man to have the ear of all again, and he pointed out their repetition. His account of events did not budge, but their question provoked his: Why were they so eager to go over this again? The miracle was loaded with implications. It did show who Jesus was. They had not been Jesus’ disciples, but were they wavering a little in their persistent denial? (This miracle happened late in the span of Jesus’ public ministry.) Did they want to become His disciples? Obviously, one key element in discipleship is a proper affirmation of Who Jesus Christ is.

9:28,29 They did not like any suggestion that this miracle might be a factor in changing their minds. Miracles do not save, and without the new birth they do not convince those who prefer not to see. So they reviled the man. Reviling is not a rational reply, but it is a useful cover when a real reply might endanger their position. His question to them was returned in the form of an accusation, a very nice one! They said he was one of Jesus’ disciples, and very soon that would be true. They also had to be someone’s disciples, and they claimed they were disciples of Moses. Moses gave the commandments of God which included the Sabbath. In their minds Jesus was disobedient to that commandment. As the Lord Who gave that commandment to Moses on Sinai, if there was anyone on earth who understood it, it was Christ.

Rejecting truth without a viable alternative to it had the Pharisees again in difficulty. There was persistent nagging – even in their minds – for some closure. It is insufficient to maintain only denials. Jesus did give this man sight; so then, Who is He? They fall into a very selective agnosticism. They said what they knew God had spoken through Moses. Then they stumbled; they said they did not know where Jesus was from. In my estimation, that was dishonest. (See the related notes at 7:41-52).

9:30-33 The simple soul, an uneducated man, saw the contradiction. Often God had authenticated prophets like Moses and Elijah by means of miracles. It was a way to make known who those men were. Jesus had just performed a notable sign that captured much attention, and demanded an explanation, so then, Who is this man?

The experts said they did not know. This was a way of escape that they would use again in Matthew 21:24-27. The novice then pointed out how *amazing* that they (of all people), the knowledgeable ones, the teachers of the people, did not know! (The Lord used a similar rebuke with Nicodemus in 3:10.) Rejection of truth is rejection of knowledge; such a course always replaces truth & knowledge with error & ignorance. The uneducated man knew more than the ones with much training in the law of God.

He continued, “Yet He opened my eyes!” He could have added, “So how do you account for that?” This miracle demands more than denial. At this point the roles are reversed; he is teaching them. Their arguments were inconsistent; his words were so sound they did not dare to engage him further. They had promoted the view that Jesus was a sinner. He took up that subject and refuted their view of Jesus as a sinner. He seemed to know Psalm 34:15, “*The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry*”. Maybe he knew the words of Psalm 66:16-20 and Proverbs 15:8 & 29, and 28:9. But why would he mention prayer at all if Jesus had not prayed? John 9 does not mention any prayer. (The narratives in the Gospels are brief summaries of events and conversations.) Before he was sent to the Pool of Siloam, possibly Jesus prayed audibly and the man heard that prayer. Then when he could see, he knew his sight was an answer to Jesus’ petition. If so, the confident way he argued about God hearing Jesus makes sense, and Jesus’ real connection with God became clear to him.

If God has not rejected someone as a sinner, then certain things must fall into place. Such a person must be a worshipper of God and obedient to Him. Since Jesus was not in rebellion, God listened to him. For anyone else this would be a description of salvation. For Jesus, this was the relationship He had eternally. His prayer, worship and works were accepted. The man is reasoning very well about Christ from the little he knew, because he sensed that truth is by nature coherent. Jesus was not a sinner with God listening to His prayers. Later John quotes the Lord, “*Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me...*” (11:41,42). If Jesus were not of God, He could do nothing. The man’s explanation of Christ from the little He knew and the much He had experienced, had a soundness the Pharisees could not withstand. Though cowardly, it was better for them to cut the conversation short. All they did was lose their arguments and any fair-minded listeners as well. For v.32 see above, The distinctly Messianic flavor of this miracle.

9:34 His “excommunication” was preceded by a judgmental insult. Sinful leaders, who avoided facing issues they themselves had raised, were quick to declare as sinners the Lord Jesus and also the man who defended Him. They knew this man was born blind, so they gave their answer to the disciples’ question in v.2 – one different from the Lord’s. They said he was born in sin, which in their view was probably the cause of his congenital blindness. Thus, they reasoned he was unqualified to teach them, yet what he said made sense; what they said did not.

They then applied one of the most severe penalties a human being can face; they *cast him out* of his people. This is the opposite of what Christ does with all who come to Him (6:37). The expulsion meant, “You are not one of us!” And he was not. The Israel of that time was turning against Christ and thereby rejecting their King, the Son of David. With the little he knew, this man confessed Christ as truly from God. Socially the blind man was an abused member of the flock of Israel, cast out by its shepherds. But very soon the Good Shepherd would seek him out and ensure that he was added by faith to the flock of Christ. In this way John moves from abusive shepherds in John 9 to the Good Shepherd in John 10. (There should be no chapter break; chapter 10 ought to be read with John 9 as the background.)

9:35-39 The Lord sought and found him after the miracle – a rare thing in the Gospels. Here is the Lord as the Shepherd finding one lost sheep (Luke 15:4-7). Jesus asked him if he believed in the Son of Man and the man was eager to hear that it was Jesus. He was already certain that Jesus had come from God (v.33). His early conclusions from the miracle were good; thereafter his faith rested on the word of Christ. The Apostle John, very much an evangelist at heart, was delighted to be able to write the man’s reply, “Who is He, Sir?” (The Greek noun can be translated either as “Lord” or “sir”.) Jesus’ words, “You have seen him” shows that both physical and spiritual sight entered that life that day. His heart had been opened. When He asked Jesus Who this Son of Man was, he was not speaking out of curiosity but waiting for the answer so he would know Whom to acknowledge as Lord. This is the response the Apostle John wanted for all of us reading his Gospel: “Tell me

that I too may believe in Him.” Many have been saved just reading this Gospel. Not only did the man say, “Lord, I believe”, he worshipped. Faith is more than agreement with truth. The revelation of Christ transformed the eyes of his heart (Ephesians 1:17), and he became an example of the working of God in conversion, just as the Lord said it would be in v.3. God’s “work” brought him to Christ. The work of God really was displayed in him.

9:39-41 The Shepherd told this newly acquired sheep Who He was (the Son of Man) and why He had come. He came so the blind (like him) might see, a mission of compassion and salvation. On the other hand, Jesus had been so thoroughly rejected by the false shepherds of Israel that His coming had another effect. Those who thought they could see, i.e., people “wise in their own eyes” according to Proverbs 26:12, would be blinded. How did Christ come for judgment? D. A. Carson says: “...In order to bring grace it [the revelation of Christ] must also give offense, and so can turn to judgment. In order to be grace it must uncover sin; he who resists this binds himself to his sin, and so through the revelation sin for the first time becomes definitive” (p. 377).

Some overheard Him. The blind man admitted how little he knew, but in contrast the Pharisees were arrogantly certain that Jesus was a sinner, and they fortified each other in their mutual rejection (5:44), or they deferred dishonestly to the majority view (see 12:42,43). In self-confidence, shunning much evidence in Scripture (5:38-40) they prided themselves that “We see” and locked themselves into blindness. Guilt remained because sin remained (8:21-24). Willful blindness made them prefer the darkness (3:19-21), so they came under judgment for rejecting the One Who came not to condemn but to save (3:17), and make the blind to see.

Notable Lessons from this Narrative

The Setting: Here in advance of the discourse in the Upper Room is an example of the persecution to come (16:1-4). Perhaps it is fair to call the *casting out* of this man the first NT excommunication! However, expulsion from one flock for Christ’s sake meant he was brought in as one of Christ’s sheep (10:14-16).

Methods: We observe that false shepherds in John 9 employed:

- An attempt to settle propositional questions with intimidation (vv.24,28,29).
- Coercion from authorities: teachers of the law of God abused their legitimate role (vv.24-34).
- They Invoked the Name of God with overtones of religious loyalty (v.24).
- They applied community and family pressure (vv.22,23). Thus the pressure was intellectual, psychological, authoritarian, social and religious. It ended, after failure to persuade him, in overt excommunication.
- The Pharisees deny much but affirm little in this chapter. Denials are easy; they require very little thought.
- There was a passion to find reasons to deny truth (vv.18,19). Emotion replaced reasoning.

Corollaries: There are timeless lessons in this narrative:

- Discipleship is impossible without doctrine. To say Who Christ is requires theological propositions (vv.17, 22,35-38)
- False arguments may be made by using (or misusing) the Word of God – in this case it concerned the Sabbath (v.16).
- In spite of the clarity of the OT Scriptures, willful blindness failed to recognize the Messiah in their presence, in spite of astounding Messianic ministry, predicted in detail in God’s Word.
- The Lord’s children were not left to suffer alone; His own have the comfort and presence of Christ (vv.35-39).
- An uneducated man who had never read a book, testified effectively. He was careful to affirm only what he knew. No one is ever asked to do more.
- It is not un-Christian to refute bad arguments (2 Corinthians 10:3-6). The Lord often refuted error, made defenses of His teachings, and of His Person. Arguing can be done appropriately as a fitting element of the ministry of the Lord and for Him (8:34, 42, 49, 54, 58).
- The man did not reply with recrimination. (Note 1 Peter 2:23).
- This incident in John 9 is only one example, but the antipathy shown to the new believer proved in time to be typical. We should *expect* reviling, ridicule, and rejection.