

“Hope for the Blind”

John 9:1-41

July 31, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

We're considering the miracles of Jesus that appear in John's gospel, and we come today to this miracle in which Jesus healed a man who had been blind from birth. The healing of the blind is rare in the Old Testament. I can think of only one occasion when such a miracle occurs. That happened when the Syrian army came to capture the prophet Elisha and the prophet asked God to strike them with blindness (2 Kings 6:8-23). When he did so, Elisha led them straight into the capital city of Israel and then prayed that God would open their eyes to see that they were now captives of Israel. That experience was more eye-opening for the Syrian army than it initially appeared to be. They were given a front row seat to the mercy of the God of Israel, because instead of being killed on the spot, Elisha ordered that they be fed and given drink and then released.

There are more occasions of the blind being healed in the New Testament, all of them being accomplished by Jesus, as far as I can recall. This miracle is unique, though, in the fact that this is the only place in the Bible where it is recorded that a man was healed from congenital blindness. Notice that John devotes a great deal of text to this miracle, more than any other miracle with the exception of the raising of Lazarus. He does so because he finds in this miracle a unique picture of what it means to believe in Jesus.

In a spiritual sense, we are all blind from birth. As blind people, we don't see reality as it is. Most tragically, we don't see God as he truly is, and this blindness leads to great trouble for us. Just as blind people easily hurt themselves by bumping into things, we bring harm to ourselves by our blindness to God's true nature. On the other hand, when our eyes are opened to see God as he truly is, everything changes. It is a Copernican revolution by which we see the world differently. I occasionally have nightmares in which I dream that I am married to someone other than Wendy. I can remember thinking in my dreams, "What happened to Wendy? I thought I was married to her." My dreamlife is filled with a sense of dread until I wake up and realize it was all a nightmare. Life looks very different and much better when I wake up to reality as it is. That's what happens to this man Jesus heals here. He not only sees the world around him with new eyes, but more importantly comes to see both himself and God with fresh eyes. The result is new life and hope.

I. The Blind See – v. 1-7

While Jesus is back in Jerusalem, he encounters a blind beggar. Something easily missed in these opening verses is the fact that Jesus takes the initiative and pursues this man. The blind are forced to be somewhat passive, awaiting others to move toward them. Jesus does and engages this man in a dialogue. We know that because of the question asked him by the disciples. **“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”** (v. 2). How would they have known that his blindness was congenital unless someone cared enough to hear something of his story? Since the disciples are still speaking of him in the third person, I don’t think they were engaging with him. It was Jesus who did so. It is customary today to speak of those who don’t believe in Jesus as “seekers.” But that is really not accurate. Jesus is the ultimate seeker of the lost, while the lost are the ones sought.

When the disciples notice Jesus paying attention to this blind man, they take the opportunity to invite his input on a theological matter of that day. It concerned a perpetual question about the explanation of suffering in the world. In spite of the clear teaching of the book of Job, it was widely believed by the Jews of this era that suffering is caused by personal sin. If you saw someone suffering, you could count on it that there was some personal sin in their lives for which they had not repented. But the man who was blind from birth posed a unique challenge to this view. When was the sin if he was blind from birth? Can a person sin in the womb? Or was it perhaps the sin of the parents? But that didn’t seem fair, and Ezekiel 18 seems to refute that idea anyway.

Jesus rejects both possibilities for a more God-centered view, **“that the works of God might be displayed in him”** (v. 3). I don’t think Jesus intends that to be an explanation for the presence of all suffering in the world, but it does explain this case. This man’s blindness would showcase the goodness and power of Jesus, not only for this man, but for any who would hear of this miracle. So Jesus proceeds to heal him in a rather curious way. He stoops down, spits on the ground and begins to form a little mud patty with his hands. He then puts the mud on the man’s eyes and tells him to go and wash it off in the pool of Siloam. As the mud is washed away, the man can see for the first time in his life.

Jesus could have healed directly, by laying his hands on the man’s eyes or simply by speaking a word that would bring sight to this blind man. Instead, he involved the man by asking him to take a step. And it would not be an easy step to take. He was still blind, and now had his eyes covered with mud and would have to find his way to the pool. Perhaps the man needed to be involved in his healing. And why the mud cake? An old interpretation is that this was done to reflect the creation account, when man was formed from the dust of the ground. Jesus is here laying claim to be the Creator, able to fashion seeing eyes from dust. Calvin says that the mud served to increase the intensity of the miracle by increasing the blindness, much as Elijah did when he ordered the water poured on the altar prior to calling upon God to bring fire upon it.

Whatever the reason for the mud, it is clear that a great miracle has been done on this day.

II. The Seeing Become Blind – v. 8-34

The story could easily have ended at verse 7, but John is just beginning in his telling of this story. The reason is that he finds here a great lesson about believing in Jesus. We are all spiritually blind from birth, and just as Jesus was able to give sight to this blind beggar, he is able to open our eyes too. But not everyone has their eyes opened. Why not? That's what this long middle section is about. It turns out that there are two kinds of blind people. There are the blind who know they are blind and are therefore willing to receive the gift of sight from Jesus. And there are those who are blind but won't admit it. This long middle section is about this second category.

The healing of this blind man caused quite a shock. Beggars become familiar fixtures, and this man had undoubtedly become a well-known sight around Jerusalem. But now they see him moving around without a guide and acting like any other seeing person. A dispute arises among those who knew him, with some saying that this was the same person who used to beg and others claiming that he only looked like that man. Strangely, the man himself is present during these discussions, and **“he kept saying, ‘I am the man.’”** The handicapped often suffer doubly, the first time for the handicap itself and the second time because of the way people cut them off from normal relationships. I think we see that here in the way he is initially not included in the conversation. He has to insert himself repeatedly to be included. When he is finally included, he is allowed to tell some of the details of how it happened.

The crowd seems still not to be of one mind about this healing, so they decide to take him to the experts and let them decide about this miracle. So he is delivered to the Pharisees for their take on the matter. After questioning the man, the discovery is made that this miracle took place on the Sabbath, which then becomes the main obstacle preventing the Pharisees from seeing what is about as plain as anything could be. Jesus hadn't really violated the Sabbath with this miracle, but he had violated their narrow views of the Sabbath. As a result, they were blind to the presence of God among them.

Their blindness becomes increasingly evident. In spite of hearing the man's clear testimony of his healing, we read that these Jewish leaders didn't believe that he had been born blind (v. 18). So they call in his parents to testify and ask them three questions. **“Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?”** (v. 19). We learn later that these parents are afraid because the Pharisees had already said that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. So in their fear they avoid the last question, even though the answer is obvious. They stick

with what they know for sure and what no one can fault them for saying. “Yes, this is our son, and he was in fact born blind.”

The Jewish leaders still don’t want to believe that a miracle has been done on this day, especially by Jesus, so they call the man back in a second time and ask him the same questions again. He sticks to the facts and says, **“One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see”** (v. 25). The Pharisees want to escape the obvious conclusion, so they keep examining him. I like this man’s response to them. It was both clever and mocking at the same time. **“I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?”** (v. 27). They didn’t much appreciate his answer and ended up casting him out of the synagogue. When you don’t like the message, kill the messenger.

We like to think that we are all objective and that we keep an open mind to wherever the evidence might lead us. The truth is, however, that we are all led more by our hearts than our minds. The Pharisees stubbornly refuse to draw the obvious conclusion that Jesus is the Messiah, not because the evidence won’t support such a conclusion, but because their hearts stubbornly resist such a conclusion. Why do people buy lottery tickets, and why do more people buy the national lottery tickets when the jackpot increases when no winner comes forth for a few weeks? Do they buy lottery tickets because the evidence leads them to conclude that a good use of their money would be to spend it on a one in 45 million chance? People buying lottery tickets actually try to put that information out of their minds and focus instead on matters of the heart. “Wouldn’t it be great, they dream, to have that kind of money? Think of all the good I do with that.” It is the heart, not the evidence, that leads them to such a poor financial decision as purchasing a lottery ticket.

The same is true with Jesus. People may say that they don’t believe in Jesus because they deal only with facts, and the evidence, they claim, doesn’t warrant giving their lives to Jesus. What’s really going on, however, is the same thing that was happening with the Pharisees here. They find the evidence, no matter how strong it might be, less than compelling because it contradicts what they really want to do. Do you think this tendency lies within your heart as well? The greatest blindness is not to see your own blindness. Let me point out three heart matters I see in this story that keep us in blindness.

The first one is love of power and control. That’s what the Sabbath laws did for the Pharisees. The religious leaders were the ones in control of this complex system of Sabbath laws. To serve as a Sabbath policeman gives power and authority, and that’s what they loved, and that’s what blinded them from seeing Jesus as the Messiah. Let me give you an example from my world, the world of preaching. It is quite an easy thing for a preacher to lift up Jesus week to week in his sermons, but to do it actually as a way to look good to others. Exalting Jesus becomes a means of exalting oneself. I have seen that motive in

my own heart all too often. I praise God that he has shown it to me, even though it's ugly.

The second heart matter that keeps us from seeing Jesus is fear. That was the attitude of the blind man's parents. They held back from giving the obvious explanation of their son's healing, attributing it to the mighty hand of Jesus, out of fear of the consequences of doing so. Fear blinds us by focusing us on the large size of the enemy and keeps our attention off the one who tells us we need not fear anything because of him.

The third heart matter that keeps us from seeing Jesus is the pride of heart by which we think ourselves better than others. The Pharisees despised this blind man, though he was beginning to see things to which they were blind. They resented the fact that he would dare to lecture them, regarding him as well below them.

III. The Blind Believe – v. 35-41

The story ends with faith. The man who started off as blind from birth not only has his physical eyesight restored, but sees Jesus as he truly is. Once again, it is Jesus who initiates everything. After the man is thrown out of the synagogue, Jesus, the great seeker of the lost, finds him. Jesus invites him to faith as he identifies himself as the Messiah. The former blind man then says, **“Lord, I believe”** (v. 38). Notice how his eyes have gradually been opened to Jesus. He began by saying, **“the man they call Jesus”** (v. 11), and then moved to **“He is a prophet”** (v. 17). He then credits Jesus as the one **“from God”** (v. 33) who opened his eyes, and then finally **“Lord, I believe.”**

The end of the chapter finds Jesus still seeking the blind Pharisees. He is always the God seeking the lost. Their hearts have not been open to seeing him through his merciful and miraculous works, so now he resorts to a warning for them. They suspected Jesus was including them among the blind that he said he came to judge. So they asked him scornfully, **“Are we also blind?”** Jesus said, **“If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains.”** In other words, blindness can be healed. But blindness to one's blindness cannot.

CONCLUSION:

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.” I invite you to confess your blindness and to repent of a heart that doesn't see Jesus because you don't want to see Jesus.