

ONCE WAS, BUT NOW...
John 9:1-7, 13-41

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Amarillo, Texas
December 8, 2024

Mrs. Cramer was in her birthday suit – just about to step into the shower – when the doorbell rang. She hollered, “Who is it?” A voice shouted back, “It’s the blind man.” She figured it was safe, so she opened the door. He looked at her in shock and asked, “Where do you want me to hand these blinds, lady?” (Ann Landers, 10/13/1998)

Art and Sandy were roommates at Columbia University in the early 1960s. Soon after starting college, Sandy experienced a medical crisis. His vision suddenly became blurry. The doctors diagnosed his ailment as temporary conjunctivitis, but the problem grew worse. Finally, he saw a specialist, who delivered devastating news: severe glaucoma was rapidly destroying his optic nerves. The college student, Sandy, would soon be completely blind.

Sandy fell into depression. He gave up his dream of becoming a lawyer and moved back to Buffalo, where he worried about being a burden to his financially struggling family. He cut off contact with his college friends, refusing to answer letters or return phone calls. That is, until Art showed up at his front door one day, unannounced. Determined not to let his roommate give up on life, he purchased a plane ticket and flew to Buffalo. Art convinced Sandy to give college another try. He promised he would be right by his side and wouldn’t let him fall – literally or figuratively.

Art kept his promise, faithfully escorting Sandy around campus and effectively serving as his eyes. Although Sandy’s disease had plunged him into a world of darkness, Art was determined that his friend would never feel alone. Art took to calling himself “Darkness.” He’d say things like, “Darkness is going to lead you now.” Art organized his whole life around helping Sandy. “Darkness” helping Sandy in his darkness.

One day, Art was guiding Sandy through Grand Central Station when he suddenly said he had to go. He left his blind friend alone and petrified. Sandy stumbled and bumped into people. Then he fell, cutting a gash in his shin. After a couple of hellish hours, Sandy finally got on the right subway train. After exiting the station at 116th Street, Sandy bumped into someone who quickly apologized. Sandy immediately recognized Art’s voice. His friend had followed him all the way home, making sure he was safe and giving him the priceless gift of independence. Sandy later said, “That moment was the spark that caused me to live a completely different life, without fear, without doubt. For that I am tremendously grateful to my friend.”

After Sandy graduated from Columbia, he worked for a time in the Johnson White House before earning graduate degrees from Harvard and Oxford. He married his high school sweetheart and

founded a company called Electronic Data Processing, or EDP, that made him millions. He became a successful entrepreneur and philanthropist.

Before he achieved that success, though, while still at Oxford, Sandy got a call from Art. This time Art was the one who needed help. He'd formed a folk duo with a high-school friend, and they desperately needed \$400 to record their first album. Sandy and his wife Sue only had \$404 in their bank account, but, without hesitation, Sandy gave his old friend what he needed.

Art and Paul's first album wasn't a success at first, but then one of the songs, "The Sounds of Silence," shot up to #1 on the pop charts. The opening line, Hello darkness, my old friend," echoed the way Sandy had always greeted Art. Simon and Garfunkel soon became folk-music royalty. (Adapted from Sanford D. Greenberg's memoir: *Hello Darkness, My Old Friend: How Daring Dreams and Unyielding Friendship Turned One Man's Blindness into an Extraordinary Vision for Life*, Post Hill Press, 2020)

Blindness, now and back in biblical days, is so devastating that it can drive one away from the everyday joys of life's journey. The man born blind in John 9 is forced to beg for his daily bread. The question for the blind man of John 9 and for us today is: "Do we want our eyes opened to the truth?"

Introduction

Before we begin our story about blindness and healing, a few observations will help us place this story in the Jewish context. First, we should know there is no story of the giving of sight to the blind anywhere in the Old Testament. Second, in the Old Testament, the giving of sight to the blind is only associated with God himself (Exodus 4:11; Psalm 146:8). Third, the ability to create or restore sight also has messianic overtones (Isaiah 29:18; 35:5; 42:7). Therefore, from the Old Testament we can conclude that giving sight is both a divine function and, even, a function for God's Messiah. In this Jewish context, therefore, we see the extreme significance of Jesus' ability to cause the blind to see!

The very act of giving sight to the blind, therefore, is a declaration that Jesus is the Holy One of Israel, the Son of God—the Messiah. In fact, outside of the strange story where Ananias lays hands on Saul of Tarsus "and immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight..." (Acts 9:18), the ability to restore sight to the blind is a prerogative of Jesus alone in the New Testament. While the apostles seem able to perpetuate many of the messianic powers after Jesus ascends to heaven, no apostle has the ability to heal the blind. Interestingly enough, there are more miracles of giving sight to the blind recorded of Jesus than any other type of healing (Matthew 9:27-31; 12:22f.; 15:30f.; 21:14; Mark 8:22-26; 10:46-52; Luke 7:21f.).

Who Sinned? (9:1-5)

Innocent suffering has never been easy to explain—not in the first century, not now! What we want is a hard and fast equation whereby good behavior results in blessings, and, conversely, poor behavior results in curses. While that is the equation we want, it is not the equation we get! From the Jobian dilemma of the Old Testament to the myriad of images in the modern media today, we cannot escape the fact that innocent people sometimes do suffer. Trying to solve the problem of innocent suffering, like the rape of a child or the gunning down of worshipers in a country church,

is no easy task. If God is all good and all powerful, why do innocent people suffer? Many of us will spend a lifetime pondering that puzzle, a puzzle called “theodicy.”

Here [in John 9] we see people talking *about* a person with a disability; they are not entering into a conversation or a relationship *with* him. It is as if he is a nobody, without a voice, hope, or needs of his own. People with disabilities are often treated as nobodies. Why are they pushed aside like that? Why are we so full of prejudices concerning them? Can a handicap be a punishment from God for some secret sin? Such an idea can only come if we think that God acts like us: “You hurt me, so now I will hurt you. Eye for eye and tooth for tooth.”

We often feel that if people have success, wealth, good work, good families, it is a sign that they are blessed by God, while failure, broken relationships, and bad health are a sign of something wrong, something bad in their lives.

No. That is why [Jesus] answers the disciples’ question: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him” (John 9:3).

Frequently it is only when those who are powerful experience failure, sickness, weakness or loneliness that they discover they are not self-sufficient and all-powerful, and that they need God and others. Out of their weakness and poverty they can then cry out to God and discover God in a new way as the God of love and tenderness, full of compassion and goodness. (Vanier, p. 171-173)

Clay to His Eyes (9:6-7)

Jesus heals whomever he wishes, however he wishes. Efforts to force Jesus’ healing events into a predictable formula will always fail. Sometimes the healing requires faith upon the part of the one healed; sometimes it does not. Sometimes Jesus simply gives the command of his voice; other times he touches, spits, and/or requires some activity on the part of the one graced. Often the healing is instantaneous; other times it is a process.

In this particular story, Jesus spits on the ground, kneads the clay with the dust of the earth, and applies the clay to the man’s eyes. Finally, he commands the man to go wash in the pool of Siloam. As result of this multi-step miracle, the man is able to see.

First, it is well-known that the ancient world attributed curative powers to saliva. Furthermore, it was perhaps helpful for the man to participate in his healing by actually doing something—washing in the pool of Siloam. Third, and most interesting, the early church fathers saw the mention of clay as a reference to Genesis 2:7, where man is, indeed, formed/made out of the dust of the earth. If the church fathers are right, then Jesus is doing a work of creation—God’s work—in giving sight to the blind.

The pool, interestingly enough, is named Siloam, which means “sent.” Originally the name came from the fact that the water was sent into the pool by a channel. Given the fact that John often wants us to know that Jesus is the one “sent” by God (20:21), we cannot miss the fact that blindness is removed with reference to and with the aid of the “sent.”

Interrogation of the Healed (9:13-17)

The fact that Jesus has healed on the Sabbath is not new to this Gospel (See John 5, where Jesus commands a paralytic to rise and walk on the Sabbath.). Beginning in verse 13, the once-blind man now enters into a spirited discussion with the powers that be—the Pharisees. **This beggar is the first person in the gospel to be rejected and persecuted because of Jesus. He bears witness to Jesus, and, in this way, he is the first martyr. The Greek word for “witness” and “martyr” is the same. (Vanier, p. 177)**

This discussion can be easily arranged into three sections: verses 13-17, the Pharisees first examine the healed man; verses 18-23, the Pharisees continue the conversation by focusing on the man’s parents; and verses 24-34, they turn to re-examine the man’s testimony. Most likely, when the “neighbors” themselves could not figure out the case of the man’s miraculous cure, they decided to bring him to the experts, the Pharisees (read background text in verses 8-12).

The man’s testimony actually divides the Pharisees into two parties. The first party (more likened to the religious authorities in John 5) is most concerned that Jesus breached the Sabbath by performing the work of healing. They are, therefore, certain that Jesus is, in fact, not sent from God. The second group, however, focuses on the miraculous healing itself. Apparently they hold minority opinion, for we do not hear from them again. This second group is quite certain that Jesus must be sent from God—not be a sinner—because he has performed signs. Reaching a stalemate between the majority and the minority reports among the Pharisees, they turn, once again, to the once-blind man and ask him what he thinks about his healer. This time he calls Jesus a “prophet” (v. 17).

By now, we can see a progressive understanding of the identity of Jesus by the blind man. Notice, in verse 11 he calls his healer, “a man called Jesus.” By verse 17, he progresses to say that Jesus is “a prophet.” By verse 38, he calls Jesus “Lord,” believes in him, and even worships him. In some ways, therefore, his healing was both instantaneous (he washed and came back seeing) and gradual (he slowly gained spiritual insight). His eyes were eventually opened to the spiritual light that Jesus is the Lord.

Parents Who Pass the Buck (9:18-23)

While the son seems courageous and even confrontational with the Jews, the parents want no part in challenging the religious authorities and their understanding of Jesus. Timidly and cowardly, they both fail to rejoice at the healing of their son and to be grateful to the one who healed him. Rather than stand up and rejoice over their son’s redemption from blindness, they pass the buck, declaring, “He’s a big boy; let him speak for himself” (v. 21, author’s paraphrase). Lest we misunderstand the purpose of the parents’ hesitation to get involved in the whole affair, John explains that they refuse to stand beside the one who healed their son because they are afraid of excommunication, for the Jews had already agreed that should anyone confess Jesus as the Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue (v. 22).

Once Was Blind, But... (9:24-34)

Verse 25 must surely be one of the highlights of all of John’s Gospel. While the Pharisees insist that Jesus is a sinner, the healed man brings his testimony down to the essentials. He reports the

facts, just the facts. He is not qualified to debate with religious experts over Jesus' standing before God, but his testimony cannot be denied. He once was blind, but now he sees!

What is your testimony? We can all say, "I once was _____, but now I _____."

In verses 26-27, the Pharisees question the man all over again. Their inquiry reminds us of a police interrogation whereby the subject is asked to rehearse the facts yet another time in hopes that there might be some inconsistencies in his story. But the man's testimony is all the more emphatic, "I already told you, and you did not listen...."

With a masterful stroke, John bears witness with his words to the deafness of the religious authorities. God has spoken through his Word, his Son, but they are deaf to God's message.

So vigorous is the man's answer that he is actually mocking the Jews just a bit. "Do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?" Like a skilled debater, he forces his foes into a corner. "If Jesus is truly not from God, then how did he open my eyes" (v. 30).

Noting the rarity of giving sight to the blind, the man testifies all the more: "Since the beginning of time, it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind" (v. 32). Unlike the Jewish leadership, the man testifies that, indeed, "this man," meaning Jesus, is from God because he does the acts of God. As a result of the uniformity of his unwavering testimony, the Jews excommunicate him from the synagogue (v. 34).

Believe and Worship (9:35-38)

To be "put out" of the synagogue would be no small matter. In a culture where community was everything, the once-blind man was now all alone, separated from the synagogue and, thus, separated from Jewish community. Interestingly, Jesus goes searching for the man healed from blindness in much the same fashion as he went searching for the man who had been healed from his paralysis (compare 5:14). As is the fashion with John's Gospel, Jesus gets straight to the point: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" (v. 35; cf. 3:3 and 4:10).

The words "Son of Man" paint a great messianic picture (drawn from the book of Daniel), for the Son of Man is the one seated alongside God who brings judgment to the world. Recognizing the voice of his benefactor, the man is ready for obedience: "Who is He that I may believe in him..." (v. 36). Once again identifying himself as the long-awaited one, the one upon whom the ages meet, Jesus answers candidly, "You have both seen Him, and He is the one talking to you" (v. 37). Yes, the blind man has SEEN him!

John's irony is thick. The man who was born blind, the very one who had never seen, could now see Jesus for who he is—the Son of Man. John has moved from the creation of physical sight alone to, more importantly, spiritual sight. The man both sees Jesus with his physical eyes, but he also now sees him with his soul. As evidence of his keen spiritual eyesight, the man, once blind, now declares, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him (v. 38).

Interestingly enough, this is the only time in John's Gospel when anyone is said to "worship" Jesus. The verb for worship, *proskyneō*, means to prostrate oneself before, to do obeisance to. Jesus is, indeed, worthy of worship, the light of the world, the very Son of Man.

Blind as Bats (9:39-41)

When the light comes into the world, those who live in darkness will not be able to see. Isaiah 6:10 says, "...their eyes dim, lest they see with their eyes..." Mockingly, the Pharisees taunt Jesus, "We're not blind too, are we?" Jesus' response is interesting. The irony cannot be missed. We begin the story with the man who is born blind, and we end the story with the Pharisees who mockingly tease that they are the ones with great insight and could never be considered blind.

Jesus' response is clear. "If you had been blind, that would have been an excuse. But you do have understanding of spiritual things. Therefore, you will be held accountable for your sins" (v. 41, author's paraphrase). Tom Wright describes, "Not only are they wrong, but they have constructed a system within which they will never see that they are wrong." This premier New Testament scholar is saying that the Pharisees had created a closed world, like a sealed room, in which no light could possibly enter from the outside. The light came, and they missed it.

Conclusion

No one has to be a theologian to share his or her testimony. We, too, can speak boldly like the healed man. Perhaps our testimonies also speak for God's grace: I once was addicted, but now I'm free; I once was captive to past sin, but now I look to future glory; or I once was afraid of death, but now I have the hope of eternal life. Speak up. Speak boldly. Jesus has passed our way and we, too, now see that he is the Messiah!

Scripture is the story of God's encounter with the world, with people and with the history of humanity. Revelation flows from events that are given meaning through the prophets and holy people who see God's presence in these events.

Some of these Pharisees deny the truth of this healing and refuse to discern whether God is present in it or not. They have a pre-judgement concerning Jesus, whom they have already determined cannot be from God.

We [too] cling to our own ideas, laws, doctrines or religion, refusing to recognize the manifestation of God in reality.

Why are we blinded to these manifestations of God? Is it because we are comfortable and secure in our way of life, our certitudes and our feeling of elitism and do not want to change? Are we frightened of anything that might disturb us? The God of Love and the love of God are calling us to go forth on this journey to union with God. That means deepening our interior life – which is our only real security – in order to walk more confidently into the things God may be calling us to. (Vanier, p. 178-79)

Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*)

