

John 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] John chapter 9. As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth, and his disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day. Night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world. Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud, and said to him, Go wash in the pool of Siloam, which means scent. So he went and washed and came back seeing. The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, Is this not the man who used to sit and beg? Some said, It is he. Others said, No, but he is like him. He kept saying, I am the man. 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. They said to him, Where is he? He said, I do not know. They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes.

So the Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And he said to them, He put mud on my eyes, and I washed and I see. Some of the Pharisees said, This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath. But others said, How can a man who is a sinner do such signs? And there was a division among them. So they said again to the blind man, What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?

He said, He is a prophet. The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight, and asked them, Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see? His parents answered, We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind. But how he now sees, we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes.

Ask him, he is of age, he will speak for himself. His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, He is of age, ask him.

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, Give glory to God, we know that this man is a sinner. He answered, Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see. They said to him, What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes? He answered them, 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? And they reviled him, saying, You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses. But as for this man, we do not know where he comes from. The man answered, Why, this is an amazing thing. You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshipper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing. They answered him, You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us? And they cast him out. Jesus heard that they had cast him out. And having found him, he said, Do you believe in the Son of Man? He answered, And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him? Jesus said to him,

[3 : 44] You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you. He said, Lord, I believe. And he worshipped him. Jesus said, For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind. Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, Are we also blind? Jesus said to them, If you were blind, you would have no guilt. But now that you say, We see, your guilt remains. In John chapter 9, we have the sixth of the signs that Jesus performs in his ministry in the Gospel of John. The first half of the Gospel of John has been described as the Book of Signs. It's a book in which we see a series of significant events and actions that Jesus performs that help us to understand who he is and the character of his mission. The point of a sign is not just the demonstration of power or the pyrotechnics of a great miracle or healing or exorcism. A sign helps us to understand something more about the character of Jesus' mission and identity. In the turning of the water into wine in the wedding feast at Cana, Jesus demonstrates something about who he is as the bridegroom. A number of the signs in the Gospel of John provoke conversation afterwards. The turning of the water into wine provokes a conversation between the master of the feast and the bridegroom. The healing of the royal official's son provokes a conversation between the royal official and his servants. The healing of the infirm man at the sheep pool provokes a conversation about the Sabbath and the work of Christ. The multiplication of the loaves and fish leads to Jesus' discourse concerning the manna and the bread from heaven. Within the Gospel of John,

I believe that there are seven signs as part of the book of signs. The first is the turning of the water into wine. The second, the healing of the rich nobleman's son. The third, the healing of the infirm man at the sheep pool. The fourth, the multiplication of the loaves and fish. The fifth, Jesus' walking on the water. The sixth, the healing of the blind man in this chapter. And the seventh, the raising of Lazarus. I think it's possible that these signs might be related together in a panel structure, with the first, second and third mapping onto the fourth, fifth and sixth, with the seventh as a climactic sign. If this were the case, the turning of the water into wine would naturally correspond with the multiplication of the loaves and fish. The healing of the rich nobleman's son would correspond with the walking on the water. And the healing of the infirm man by the sheep pool would correspond with the healing of the blind man in this chapter. Both healings involve a healing pool, take place on the Sabbath, and give rise to a conversation concerning work upon the Sabbath.

If we are connecting this with the sixth day of creation as the sixth sign, we might also observe a parallel with the creation of man on the sixth day. Here is a man being created anew, as a new creation. We should recognize some already familiar themes from the Gospel of John at the beginning of this chapter. Jesus, as he did in John chapter 8 verse 12, refers to himself as the light of the world. In chapter 1 verse 9, he is described as the true light which gives light to everyone coming into the world. The question about whether the man was born blind on account of his own sin, or on account of his parents' sin, also emphasizes the theme of birth, which has been an important one to this point, particularly in chapter 3, but also in chapter 8 concerning the question of the true heirs and children of Abraham. Jesus responds to his disciples' query by saying, it was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.

Ramsey Michaels suggests that we might see in the background of this statement, John chapter 3 verse 21, but whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God. If this were the case, then the works of God that are displayed in him are not the works of Christ in the miracle, but the true character of the man who is working the works of God. Once again, we might think of John chapter 6 verses 28 to 29. Then they said to him, what must we do to be doing the works of God? Jesus answered them, this is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent. This is precisely what the man born blind goes on to do.

Reading the sign in the light of these themes, it will help us to understand that it is a demonstration of what it means that Christ is the light of the world. It will also unpack what it means to respond to Christ in the right way. Surprisingly, there are two different stages to Jesus' healing. He spits on the ground, makes mud with the saliva, anoints the man's eyes with the mud, and then, as a secondary stage, instructs him to go to wash in the pool of Siloam. He washes and comes back seeing. The hearer of the account should register the strangeness of this. Why doesn't Jesus just immediately heal him of his blindness? Why does it take two stages? Recognising that this was a sign can help us to understand why economy of action is not the most important thing. Christ's goal here is not merely to heal the man of his blindness, but also to reveal something about the truth of his mission and the character of a proper response to him. Once again, here we see the importance of Jesus' words. Jesus performs his signs not primarily through great acts of power, but through giving instructions that are obeyed. He instructs the servants to draw from some of the water and give it to the master of the feast. He instructs the royal official to go home. He instructs the infirm man by the sheep pool to pick up his bed and walk. He instructs his disciples to distribute the loaves. And here he instructs the man born blind to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. In all of these cases, the miracle occurs as people obey Christ, as they accept his word. The power of the sign is the power of Jesus' word. But as people believe Jesus' words, these signs are fulfilled for them. Jesus performs a strange action on this blind man and then instructs him to do a strange thing, to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. However, the man obeys Jesus' word and as a result he is healed. We might recall the story of Naaman the Syrian, who questions the instruction to go and wash in the Jordan. He wonders why he can't wash in one of the greater rivers of his own land.

[9 : 48] The parallel with chapter 5 should also be looked at in more detail. The most obvious similarity is that they both involve healing on the Sabbath that provokes controversy with the Jews. In both cases, a man who has had his disability for an exceedingly long period of time is healed. In both cases, a healing pool is part of the story. Throughout the Gospel of John, we see a specific focus upon Jesus' engagement with individuals. In the Synoptic Gospels, a lot more attention is given to his public teaching. However, Jesus' interactions with specific individuals in the Gospel of John invite us to recognise paradigmatic encounters of the individual with Christ. In chapter 3, we have Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, a member of the Sanhedrin, a man of the highest religious standing and greatly respected among his people. He meets with Jesus secretly by night. In the next chapter, Jesus meets with a woman in the very middle of the day, and this woman is at the other extreme of the social hierarchy. She's a member of the heretical Samaritans. She's someone who likely carries a lot of social shame. The two men of chapters 5 and 9 are both healed by Jesus, cross-examined by the religious authorities, and then encountered again by Jesus. In the first case, the man, after meeting with Christ for the second time, goes back to the Jews. In the second case, the man responds by believing in Jesus. The entangled themes of light and blindness are playing throughout this passage. We have the physical sight of the man that is restored. We also have his spiritual sight that is revealed as we go through the whole of the chapter.

He's not just able to see with his physical eyes. He's able to perceive something of Jesus' true identity. There's a spiritual sight that he enjoys, and the conflict that he has with the Jewish leaders is characterised by irony and humour. There is something of a playfulness to it, where he can't be recognised at first, and people are speculating about his true identity. To this point in the Gospel, we have seen numerous examples of Jesus himself being subject to failures of recognition, and here the healed blind man starts to receive the same sort of speculation about his identity. The mud made with saliva might recall the creating of humanity out of clay in the original story of man's creation. A man is being newly created, and then he is sent to the pool to wash. Christians have long perceived in this an image of baptism. It is also another example in the Gospel of a sign that occurs in Jesus' absence. His word is powerful, even when he is not physically present. The blind man is a paradigmatic believer. He's someone who's brought to a new awareness. Jesus performs a work of new creation upon him, sends him to be washed, to be baptised, and after that the text focuses upon his membership of the synagogue and the religious community. He will be cast out of the synagogue, but will become part of the community that surrounds Christ. This, of course, is a pattern that is familiar for many Christians down through the ages. Christ performs a work of healing in their lives. They are baptised, they enter a new community, but they are cast out of old ones.

However, as they are faithful in their testimony to Christ before men, Christ will be present to and with them. A question to consider. Can you identify the ways in which this chapter uses humour, sarcasm, and irony to express its point? How do these help to reveal something about the character of faith in contrast to unbelief?