

Ultimate Questions: “Who’s To Blame Here?”, John 9, BCF 2010.11.7

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 spat 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 Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing. (John 9:1-7 ESV)

This is the sixth “sign” of John’s gospel. John reports fewer miracles, but in greater detail, and relates each miracle to the character and work of the Lord Jesus. Thus the miracle is not just a work of power but a sign pointing to some aspect of the power and goodness of God’s Son. This miracle follows Jesus’ claim in chapter 8 to be the Light of the World.

The question: “Who’s to blame here?” (9:1-2)

It is Jesus first who sees this man in need. It was probably a wrenching sight: a man blind from birth, all of his life not seeing what others see, incapable of making a living, feeling worthless in the community, living on people’s handouts. When the disciples see him, however, they see a theological issue. Jesus sees *the man*, but the disciples see *a problem*.

What do they ask? Most people of Jesus’ day believed the principle found in the rabbinic saying of Rabbi Ammi, “There is no death without sin, and there is no suffering without iniquity.” (*Shab. 55a*) And so, they ask, who is to blame for this sad condition? The man’s parents? (If so, why does *he* have to suffer?) Or the man himself? How does that work? Some have wondered if any Jews of that day believed in pre-existence of souls or in reincarnation, and there may be some evidence for a small minority believing so, but for most it was the widely-held view that people could sin *in utero*, pre-birth, in the womb. Genesis 25:22 was cited as evidence, namely, Jacob and Esau as pre-born infants wrestling in Rebekah’s womb, demonstrating an ongoing conflict that would extend to their descendants.

Jesus answers (9:3-5)

He does not say there is no blame and fault in the world. He himself said that he would judge the world, and we are all accountable before God for our sin. But any instance of suffering is not always due to sin, nor to a specific sin that can be determined.

There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them,

"Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." (Luke 13:1-5)

The disciples are asking for how this situation came about, and he is telling them where it's going. Using philosophical terms, they are asking the *efficient cause* of this man's suffering. That is, what did he or somebody else do wrong that he should be this way? And Jesus answers with the *final cause*, that is, what is to be the intended result from this suffering?

Why? Because their question is more speculative when they are faced with a serious human need. We ask such questions too! Why does this person go through so much suffering? How is it fair that these children bear the consequences of the parent's folly? It's easier to *speculate* about suffering, and assign blame, than it is to *do something* (work the works of God) which will bring joy to people and glory to God.

Deuteronomy 29:29 "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law."

A lesson here: the danger of theorizing in the face of human suffering. Christianity does involve loving God with our minds, and thought is vitally important. But we do not stop there, we need to know the limits of our thinking and be doers of God's word. This is a weakness in my life, to want to understand something fully before I take action.

This man is here, Jesus says, that "the works of God might be displayed / revealed in him." Christ himself is revealed/manifested (1:31); and his glory is revealed (2:11); works in the light are made manifest as from God (3:21); Jesus reveals / manifests God's name (17:6); and he is revealed in his resurrection (21:1, 14).

Here the distinctiveness of Christianity is seen. All religions are not the same! In the face of suffering and pain the differences between worldviews shows up clearly. Some would say there is no god, and there is no reason or purpose to why things happen. Ultimately the universe doesn't care. Some would say this is the man's fate, an iron decree from a far-removed deity. Some would say this is his karma, he has sinned in a former life and is working his sentence off by begging. In all of these scenarios you *could* be justified in walking away from this man in need. (Not that such people don't show compassion, but they get this impulse from somewhere else than their worldview.) The Judeo-Christian worldview says that there is an eternal and sovereign God, and he is a God of justice and compassion and providence. He

sends rain upon just and unjust. There is no chance, no karma, no fate in life. There are things we don't understand, but we are called - because of the nature of our God - we are called to do the works of God which bring healing. So, Jesus does not turn away from this man.

Jesus heals the blind man (3:6-7)

Nobody knows for certain why he makes mud and heals this man this way. He doesn't *need* this to heal others. In fact Jesus could raise the dead from a distance just by his spoken word. (See Lazarus, John 11:43-44) The dust (Heb., 'adamah) that Jesus uses is most likely an echo or reenactment of the creation account, where God makes man from the dust of the earth. Jesus, like God, is creating sight for this man who has never seen. It is more than a restoration of something he had. Like God at the beginning, Jesus is creating something new, not just restoring something lost.

And so he sends him to wash off in a large pool in Jerusalem. John notes that the name of the pool is Siloam, which means "sent". In the gospel of John over 25x Jesus makes reference to the "Father / him who sent me." This is a significant word to Jesus' self-identity. He was sent. He was sent to this man. And now he *sends* the man to his healing.

Here is another lesson for us. If you are waiting upon the Lord for some healing or work in your life, then seek to act upon and obey what the Lord has already shown you. Healing sometimes comes in the first movement of faith and obedience. (See the healing of the lepers in Luke 17:14) The road we walk on provides healing for the lame:

"Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed." (Hebrews 12:12-13)

The blindness of the Pharisees (9:8-34)

The ensuing drama and dialogue that John records (vv. 8-34) would be a sort of Jewish comedy of errors if it were not for the blindness of the key characters. In contrast to Jesus, who is compassionate and active, the Pharisees are insensitive, questioning, speculating, accusing, and stumbling about in irrationality. They are spiritually blind as to what is going on in their midst.

This is fulfillment of what Jesus says to them at the end, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind." Their position and pride served only to harden them in their blindness. John Owen wrote, "*The most tremendous judgment of God in this world is the hardening of the hearts of men.*" The last verse of John 9

answers the question at the beginning, “who sinned that there would be such blindness?” And the sobering answer is, these Pharisees are rebellious and blind.

But this gives occasion for the now-healed man to give simple testimony and confound the religious intellectuals... “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” (9:25) While the Pharisees become angrier and the man’s family more cowardly, he himself becomes bolder in his testimony. His basic testimony, “I was blind but now I see” confounds the worldly wise at that time, and also throughout history, as it has been memorialized in John Newton’s timeless hymn, “Amazing Grace.”

Jesus returns and is seen (9:35-38)

Jesus returns for a face-to-face meeting with the man...

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, “You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you.” He said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him. (9:35-38)

Why does he do this? Is it not enough that he has his sight and gives Jesus the credit? Yet, he went in obedience to wash his eyes and never saw the one who touched his eyes and sent him to be healed in the pool. He saw, but he never saw the face of his Savior.

So Jesus comes back to him. This man now gets to see the face of the One who gave him sight, who is the Light of the World. Do we realize how personal Jesus is? In John 1:1 the Son is with the Father, who beholds him face-to-face. He talks to Nicodemus and the woman at the well personally and face-to-face. He is the Shepherd who knows and calls his sheep by name (Jn 10). He weeps for his friend Lazarus before he calls him forth from the grave (Jn 11). At the end of his earthly ministry Jesus prayed, “*Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.* (17:24) Jesus wants his people to see him and his glory.* This once-blind man was not only to be the recipient of God’s healing gift of sight, but also to see the very face of God and to hear his voice. It was important that this man *see*, but more important that he *see Christ*.

He says “do you believe in the Son of Man?” This phrase, the Son of Man, was Jesus’ favorite name for himself, taken from the book of Daniel (ch 7) for the King who comes from the heavens, who is contrasted with the beastly rulers of the world: the Messiah is human, just and compassionate. But he does not arise *from the world*, but comes *from God’s presence*, and so is divine.

And here is another reason Jesus returns to the man: Jesus work in the man is not done yet. There is a second miracle, a second work of God displayed in this man. If you look back to verse 3, you will notice that Jesus said the works (plural, see footnote**) of God would be manifest *in him* (singular). One man, but more than one work of power. And so he answers, "Lord, I believe." (πιστεύω κύριε)

Saving faith in Jesus Christ is a miracle, the greatest "work of God". Coming to faith in Christ is a receiving of sight to behold the beauty and power of Jesus Christ. Earlier, after he fed the 5000 miraculously, the people asked what they could do to do the miraculous works of God. *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.*" (John 6:28, 29)

Peter, one of the disciples present that day, would later write, (1 Peter 1:7)
"... the genuineness of your faith--more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire--may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

Paul, who saw the glory of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, would also write, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." (Romans 1:16) And, "...faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." (Romans 10:17)

And so, coming to see and trust Christ as our Savior and Lord is a kind of healing from blindness, a receiving of new sight, a coming to life from death, a sort of soul-resurrection. As C. S. Lewis wrote, "*I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.*"

And so, immediately following his confession of faith, the man bows down in worship. Real faith in Christ ultimately results in worship. The kind of faith that the Bible presents, and the gospel calls for, is not something that is merely doctrinal, or only a mental assent to facts or theology... but it is experiential and real and living and active. Faith is the fountain of worship, a new love and humility before Christ.

Is this true of you? Can you say that you have seen and felt something of the glory of Jesus Christ? Have you seen the beauty of Christ and tasted the goodness of the Lord? Have you felt the reality of it all? Do you realize this is a miracle, a work of God? Do you realize this is the premier, THE work of God? You may think you've never seen a real miracle... but if you've been turned from darkness to the light, from deadness to life, from ignorance and hatred and rebellion to the love of the Lord, you've received the greatest miracle, the greatest healing in this life! Some of you, who are yet to believe upon Christ,

are holding back because you are fearful of losing something, of giving up something. But the only thing you lose and give up is your blindness!

Even if it has and you are a miraculously-born believer, is this true of you now? Are we alive, seeing the glory of God, worshiping him, loving, serving and working for his glory? Are we confessing our belief in him? The simple truth is that you and I - when we are not worshiping, not praying, not joyful, not working for the glory of God - we are at that moment not believing. We may be believers, but for whatever reason at that time we are acting like unbelievers. When we are fearful, or cowardly, or uncaring, or without power and hope and joy, then at that point we are not seeing Jesus!

We need to be reflecting again and again upon Christ revealed in the Scriptures that we might be continually refreshed with the sight of his glory. The evangelist Gypsy Smith, who preached the gospel to multitudes over half a century (in the latter part of the 1800s and early 1900s), saw many come to Christ in power. When he was asked the secret of his ministry, he said, "*I have never lost the wonder of it all.*" We need the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit to touch our eyes again and again to see Jesus, as the hymn says...

*O send Thy Spirit, Lord, Now unto me,
That he may touch my eyes And make me see.
Show me the truth concealed Within Thy Word
For in Thy book Revealed I see Thee, Lord
("Break Thou the Bread of Life")*

We also see here the vital importance of proclaiming the gospel to the world and not merely helping to ease physical suffering. There is a needed emphasis today in ministering to the whole person, in seeing that there are enough physical resources for people to live, and this is good.

Jesus did both. He met this man's physical need, but he both privately (to the man) and publicly (to the crowds, to the Pharisees, to his disciples) proclaimed the gospel, the truth, and why he did everything that he did. He was not ashamed that he did everything he did out of honor to his Father in heaven. He ministered by deed, but also by word. We would do best to follow his example.

Do we realize how much the world needs the gospel? Do we really feel that the most important, most vital, most critical thing that our world needs is the gospel that proclaims Jesus Christ? Medicine is not enough for healing what ails humanity, or education, or democracy, or technology, or cultural exchange ... all of these things are temporary and ultimately to no avail without the soul transformation and dignity and hope and purpose and righteousness and compassion which the gospel brings! Wherever the gospel has gone, orphanages have been established, hospitals built, schools organized... but this

is done that God, not man, gets the glory. It is the gospel that changes us, gives us love, and the gospel alone gives hope to the world. I am thankful for ministries like Samaritan's Purse and the Pregnancy Resource Center which combine humanitarian concerns with spiritual healing.

Sometimes I am asked to pray in civic gatherings, and sometimes even asked not pray in Jesus name, lest I give offense to people of different religions. But I don't do generic prayers to a generic god because I am not a generic believer. I believe in Jesus Christ, who through his perfect life, his suffering and atoning death for me, and his resurrection, has made the way I may enter into God's presence for prayer. The Lord taught us to pray, "*Hallowed be your name...*" that is, may God's name be honored among the nations. And, (Colossians 3:17) "...whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything *in the name of the Lord Jesus*, giving thanks to God the Father through him." So I cannot *not* pray in Jesus name, since he is the only reason I can approach God and pray in the first place. (I think it might be wiser to offend people rather than offend God... and so you can imagine I am not invited a lot to pray at public functions!)

So, finally, back to the beginning for a final application. (9:4) Are "we" doing the works of God... do you see the first-person plural? *We*. He is speaking to his disciples, to us. Are we involved in bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to the world? Do we work for the physical healing and health of our fellow men, women and children in suffering and pain? Do we bring comfort, meet needs, care, and get involved face to face? Do we show that God cares for the whole individual? More, do we proclaim the gospel of the glory of Jesus Christ? Do we believe the critical need of the gospel? That what the world needs most is the gospel? Do we believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God for salvation? Are we ourselves gazing upon our glorious Savior?

"We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work." (John 9:4)

For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:5-6 ESV)

To conclude, let's sing two stanzas from "Be Thou My Vision", and as you sing, make this your prayer:

*Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art.
Thou my best Thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.*

*Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise,
Thou mine Inheritance, now and always:
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart,
High King of Heaven, my Treasure Thou art.*

-----footnotes -----

*John 17:24 is the basis of the last published essay by John Owen before he died. It is called “Meditation on the Glory of Christ” and the thesis is as follows, along with a few other helpful quotes from the work:

“One of the greatest privileges and advancements of believers, both in this world and unto eternity, consists in their beholding the glory of Christ. This, therefore, Christ desires for them in this solemn intercession, as the complement of all his other requests in their behalf: ‘That they may behold my glory’... ‘that they may see, view, behold, or contemplate my glory.’ This glorious privilege is not only for the heavenly state, but also for believers living in this world.” (John Owen, *Meditation on the Glory of Christ*, 1684, chap 1, edited)

“The person who never meditates with delight on the glory of Christ in the Scriptures now will not have any real desire to see that glory in heaven. What sort of faith and love do people have who find time to think about many other things but make no time for meditating on this glorious subject?” (ch. 3)

“If we do not have some knowledge by faith of the glory of Christ here and now, it means that we have no real desire for His presence in heaven.” (ch. 7)

“There is only one way to be revived and healed from our backslidings so that we may become fruitful even in old age. We must take a steady look at the glory of Christ in His special character, in His grace and work, as shown to us in the Scripture.” (ch. 16)

** The NIV takes liberty to translate the plural τὰ ἔργα (*ta erga*, “the works”) in 9:3 and 4 as “work”, since in modern language we often use the singular term “work” in a plural way, like “going to work” or, “you’re doing good work”. The NIV is a more dynamic translation, that is, it attempts to make the biblical text more readable to contemporary audiences. And generally, the NIV is a good translation, especially for reading. But for more in-depth study, some details can be overlooked. In my opinion, the plural “works” is an important feature in the unfolding of the John 9 healing. The man blind from birth receives sight twice, first at the pool of Siloam, and then the face of Christ, which leads to his confession “I believe”. This particular work (singular in the Greek) is the work referred to in John 6:29. The point is, coming to faith in Christ is a miraculous giving of sight to the spiritually blind. So there were two miraculous works in John 9. The more literal translations, ESV, NASV, CSB, KJV and NKJV all correctly translate *ta erga* as “the works” of God. For your ongoing Bible studies I would suggest that alongside of the modern, dynamic translations like NIV or New Living (NLT), you should also have - for comparison purposes - a more literal translation like the English Standard (ESV) or New American Standard (NAS).