

JOHN 9

I Saw the Light

Full disclosure, chapter 9 of John's Gospel is my favorite story in the four Gospels. It is full of wit, drama, sarcasm, and, of course, highlights the four themes consistent throughout the Gospel. On the one hand, there is nothing unexpected here. The themes of light, for example, have dominated the first half of John's story. On the other hand, Jesus confronts religious norms and presumptions by demonstrating that the so-called blind see, and the so-called seeing (the religious elites) are blind.

The Miracle

While walking with his disciples, Jesus encounters a man born blind which leads to a broader discussion on sin and suffering. The Jews believed that all suffering was tied to personal sin. This man's blindness, they reasoned, is the result of either personal sin or inherited sin from his parents. Either way, sin equals suffering.

To be clear, this is inconsistent with biblical revelation even though similar tropes remain popular today. Good things do not always happen to "good" people and bad things do not always happen to "bad" people. Such a theology is more reminiscent of eastern Karma than biblical truth. "Many are the afflictions of the righteous," (Psalm 34:19a) says the Psalmists. Countless Scriptures affirm the same sentiment. Suffering can be the cause of sin, but suffering is also the result of a broken, fallen world.

Nevertheless, Jesus explains the man was born blind to demonstrate the power of God through him (vs. 3). He then adds, "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (vs. 4-5) Right away, the theme of light and darkness are put in bold letters. The motivation behind the miracle is to point us to who Jesus is. What matters most in this narrative is Christ.

The local community noticed immediately that something had changed. The neighbors begin talking (vs. 8) and rumors begin to spread. John gives these details to demonstrate that this private moment was verified publicly. There can be no denying that the man, known to be blind from birth, could now see after encountering Jesus. However, when asked where Jesus was, the man is unaware. He was, after all, blind when Jesus anointed his eyes.

The “Meeting”

At this point the religious elite get involved. John described the unnamed man as “the man who had formerly been blind” (vs. 13) – that is, he was in darkness (remember Nicodemus) but now was in light. Like the narrative in John 5, the Pharisees are concerned with the timing of the miracle. They cannot deny a genuine miracle took place, they must, therefore, criticize its timing. Since Jesus violated the Oral Law, they conclude, “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?” (vs. 16) The division becomes over Jesus’s identity, not the man’s testimony (for no one can deny it). Is Jesus a sinner or Savior?

The Pharisees conclude he must be a sinner (vs. 24) and thus could not have performed the miracle (see vs. 18). Yet later testimony (his parents in vs. 19-23) demonstrates otherwise. Regardless, they refuse to believe any evidence. The man formerly blind concludes Jesus must be a prophet (vs. 17). The man’s reasoning is powerful, “Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

The man then quizzes the Pharisees. “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?” (vs. 27) A stinging rebuke. His testimony is simple and profound. Jesus opened his eyes and those who refuse to believe him (despite all the evidence) must be blind. He, therefore, adds, “Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ... ³²Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. (vs. 30, 32)

The Message

The man now encounters Jesus and sees him face-to-face. He affirms his faith in him, “Lord, I believe” (vs. 36). Jesus then interprets the event, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.” (vs. 39) In other words, the gospel of Jesus opens the eyes of the blind (for they know they are blind and need a Savior) and to closes the heart of those who believe they see (for they do not know they are blind).

In this story, everyone but Jesus is blind. The disciples adopted a false worldview of suffering (shared by the Pharisees in vs. 34), the man is physically blind, and the Pharisees (and parents) refuse to believe what their eyes are telling them. The difference is that the blind man seeks Jesus who opens his eyes. He humbly believes and so is re-born (birth is a major theme in this chapter) again.

This is made clear when the Pharisees respond to Jesus’s message, “Are we also blind?” they ask (vs. 40). Of course, physically they are not, but Jesus is addressing spiritual blindness. They cannot see the Light of the World. Therefore, “Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains.’” (vs. 41)

So then, Jesus confronts spiritual blindness head-on. What keeps sinners from their Savior is not their intellect or experiences or upbringing, but blindness. It takes a genuine miracle for such blindness to be resolved. Let us pray more will see the Light of the World.