

AWAKENED FROM BLINDNESS

GOD'S DEALINGS WITH THE MAN BORN BLIND

by Steve Zeisler

I had an appointment with an ophthalmologist the other day to see if I have reached the point in my life where I need glasses. In order to prepare for examination, chemicals are put in the eyes, and the pupils stay wide open and unresponsive to the changes in light and dark for several hours afterward. I had had enough trouble seeing in the artificial light inside the building, but I did not realize the extent of the difficulty I would have outside. I walked out of the doctor's office into the bright sunlight and walked right into a post. I could not see a thing. So I felt my way to the car, put on some sunglasses, and drove carefully home. It made me aware of a circumstance that I would like to call your attention to in the ninth chapter of John's gospel that we will study today.

PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS

I have not often experienced the condition of sightlessness as I have just described. To me, blindness was an obvious condition that was not open to debate. A person either could or could not see. John describes a circumstance, however, in which Jesus' disciples raises questions about blindness and sin. The Lord finally answers them saying, "The man who was born blind was not the blind man in fact." The real blindness that we will encounter in this story comes on the part of virtually everybody else except the man whose physical vision was denied him from birth.

We are in the midst of a series of messages centering on the theme of life-changing encounters with God. We have talked about Ezekiel, Nebuchadnezzar, Miriam, and others who have had the Lord personally meet them at a time when they needed to be corrected or encouraged. In their new experience with the Almighty they found that God's investment in their life made them radically different people. Again, we will see that the man who is our focus in John 9 was not merely a blind beggar on the roadside. In the end, he was transformed into a worshiper of Christ who had spiritual as well as physical eyes.

Let me set the scene by reading the opening and closing paragraphs of John 9. Verse I:

And as he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?"

Jesus answered, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me, as long as it is day; night is coming, when no man can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

The story concludes with verse 39 and following:

Jesus said, "For Judgment I came into this world that those who do not see may see; and that those who see may become blind."

Those of the Pharisees who were with him heard these things, and said to him, "We are not blind too, are we?"

Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

SIN AND BLINDNESS

A point made at the beginning and at the end of this story that needs to be understood is the relationship between sin and blindness. The disciples' question that called Jesus' attention to the blindman was, "How is it possible that someone can be born blind? Who sinned, this man or his parents?" In the minds of the disciples, people suffered physical maladies like blindness as a direct punishment of God for sin. They were puzzled:

"How can someone who is born blind have committed sins enough to receive this sort of judgment?" Could it be some kind of indescribable prenatal sin? They thought that another possibility might be that it was God's judgment on the beggar's parents. Nevertheless, sin and blindness went together in their thinking.

Jesus corrected them saying that it was not the result of anyone's sin that the man was born blind. In fact, the Lord did not look at the past to determine the cause of blindness but at the future for the results. God would be glorified because of this man's condition. By the end of the account the Lord again made the connection between sin and blindness and the guilt that remained on those who were blind. The tables had been turned around entirely. It was not the person born blind who was at risk, but someone who chose blindness. He was speaking to the Pharisees who were indignant at the implication of his words. He was saying, "You are blind by choice, and therefore are guilty. You have rejected the work of God through me. I have come as judge, and your blindness is evidence of your guilt. You could have done otherwise, but you have chosen your own condition."

BLINDNESS BY CHOICE

We pick up the account in verse 6:

When Jesus had said this, he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and applied the clay to his eyes, and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which is translated, *Sent*). And so he went away and washed, and came back seeing.

The neighbors therefore, and those who previously saw him as a beggar, were saying, "Is not this the one who used to sit and beg?" Others were saying, "This is he," still others were saying, "No, but he is like him." He kept saying, "I am the one." Therefore they were saying to him, "How then were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man who is called Jesus made clay, and anointed my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam, and wash'; so I went away and washed, and I receive sight." And they said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

We will look at three categories of people in this story who have interaction with the blind man. These people had a form of blindness by choice. They did not see what was happening in front of them, and did not apprehend the purposes of God precisely because they made choices that prevented them from seeing.

The first group of people were the blind man's neighbors. Presumably, these are people who grew up near this man's home. They had known him for years, and had seen the course of his life to his present condition as a beggar. At first, these onlookers were unwilling to believe that something dramatic had taken place. They assumed a case of mistaken identity. Yet the man insisted, "No I'm the same one, the one you've known for all these years."

As we look at the words and the responses of these neighbors we realize that they had emotionally distanced themselves from this man. Although he was their neighbor, no one spoke his name. They described him as the "beggar", the man who used to sit and beg. It was as if he had become part of the background, someone who was not worthy of their recognition and concern.

IGNORING "UNIMPORTANT PEOPLE"

I think their blindness is one that we are prone to as well. We get preoccupied with ourselves, our own interests, and daily experiences. We have worldly decisions to make, places to go, people to see, and appointments to keep. There are categories of people we do not see anymore: the nameless, ordinary souls; the

little people; the common workers; the poor; the needy. It is almost as if it is uninteresting to us that God might be at work in those people. Our self-absorption and unwillingness to empathize with those who are not like us deprives us of experiencing the depth of God's caring and concern for his people.

The neighbors observed that the man was just a beggar, but he had claimed that a remarkable thing had happened. To them it was only mildly interesting, even if it had taken place as claimed. There was a bored, semi-engaged concern on their part. Unfortunately, these neighbors missed the greatest of opportunities because they were preoccupied with themselves.

In verse 12 they asked about Jesus: "Where is he?" The man said, "I don't know." In effect, these onlookers lost interest and then sent the former blind man off to the experts, the Pharisees, to be interrogated. They wandered off and are lost to us for the rest of the story. If the neighbors had seen the man as more than a nameless beggar they might have seen the joy on his face, and sensed that God was at work. They could have been with the man when he heard Jesus identify himself as Messiah. Their self-absorption was a type of blindness that denied them the opportunity to have life as only God can give. If we are unconcerned for what God is doing in the people around us we may miss opportunities in our lives as well.

Until his death last year, we had a delightful person on our church staff named Tom Hill. A victim of cystic fibrosis, Tom once told me that doctors all over the world had called to talk to him because he was somewhat of a medical phenomenon. Most people suffering from the disease die as children, yet Tom survived to 45 years of age. The disease left Tom a tiny man with a slight build. He labored in his breathing, coughed frequently, and did not have a loud voice. There was nothing remarkable about him in the way he dressed or acted. He was the kind of person that people could walk past without noticing.

Yet those people who missed knowing Tom Hill, missed a treasure. In his suffering and rebellion, the Lord found Tom and gave him something more than what physical life could offer. He was a sensitive man of God, and his story was a triumph of God's grace in a life. Tom ministered among us kindly and generously. He was a magnificent person to be influenced by, and yet he was someone many people missed because they were too preoccupied and did not take the time to see the beauty there.

That same form of blindness cost these neighbors the greatest opportunity they would ever have to know life itself. I submit that we also may be too preoccupied, we may not see what God is doing nearby. Concerning ourselves with worldly demands can inure us to the spiritual realities that God places in our own neighborhoods.

BLINDED BY FEAR

The second group of people who have a form of blindness are the parents of this man. Beginning in verse 13:

They brought to the Pharisees him who was formerly blind. Now it was a Sabbath on the day when Jesus made the clay, and opened his eyes. Again, therefore, the Pharisees also were asking him how he received his sight. And he said to them, "He applied clay to my eyes, and I washed, and I see."

Therefore some of the Pharisees were saying, "This man is not from God, because he does not keep the Sabbath." But others were saying, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And there was a division among them. They said therefore to the blind man again, "What do you say about him, since he opened your eyes?" And he said, "He is a prophet." The Jews therefore did not believe it of him, that he had been blind, and had received sight, until they called the parents of the very one who had received his sight, and questioned them, saying, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? Then how does he now see?" His parents answered them and said, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but how he now sees, we do not know; or who opened his eyes, we do not know. Ask him; he is of age, he shall speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed, that if anyone should confess Him to be Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue. For this reason his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

The form of spiritual blindness that the blind man's parents had was their fear. These parents had an opportunity to stand with their son on the greatest day of his life. They had an opportunity to fall to their knees and thank God for what he had done for their son who had never seen the light of day. They could have rejoiced and identified with their son, the former blind beggar, for love's sake. From their answer to the Pharisees, they did not know Jesus' full impact on the circumstances. However, had they chosen to stand with their son instead of distancing themselves from him, they would have been with him at the end of the story when Jesus confronted him. They would have had opportunity to give their lives to Christ, and thus pass from death to life. In their blindness they withdrew from their son because they were afraid of the social consequences of countering the Pharisees.

Once again, I think we can see parallels to ourselves. A courageous expression of love for people or for God will often contradict the selfishness of the world and result in threats and rejection for us. The man's parents were faced with the possibility of excommunication from the synagogue and all of its ramifications. They would have lost their friends, their standing in the community, and suffered economic dislocation. It was a serious threat and they crumbled under the weight of it because they did not love enough.

Aren't there times when we choose to do what is acceptable to the world? We make expedient choices, keep quiet when we should speak, and agree to sinful behavior to escape the consequence of isolation from our peers.

One week every year Stanford University celebrates Gay and Lesbian Freedom Week. They have public speakers, position papers and dorm discussions all promoting the cause of gay liberation. Official pronouncements made by the administration, the school newspaper, etc., insist that lesbianism and homosexuality are not sinful choices. Over the years a backlash to the gay rights movement has developed on campus, evinced in angry, semi-violent antagonism. Christian students find themselves stuck in the middle. They are not homophobic or "gay bashers," yet neither are they able to embrace the gay liberation point of view because they believe in the Scriptures. Doug Goins, our college pastor, observed that it has been difficult for Christian students to have the clarity and courage to stand up and say that there is another option-to love people and hate sin. Taking a public stand on the issue is to live with certain disapproval from both sides.

That was the tension that these parents faced. They were unwilling to do what was right for love's sake and suffer the consequences as they would come. Their fear and desire for security was a blindness, and the blindness cost them intimacy with Christ that their son ultimately experienced. When we fail to trust God for the consequences of our righteous choices, and love the world's approval more than our Father's, then we are blind in the same way as these parents.

BLINDED BY ARROGANCE

The last group to consider here is the Pharisees. They dominate the story beginning with verse 24:

So a 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 therefore answered, "Whether he is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see."

They said therefore to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

He answered them, "I told you already, and you did not listen; why do you want to hear it again? You do not want to become his disciples too, do you?"

And they reviled him, and said, "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 is from."

The man answered and said to them, "Well, here is an amazing thing, that you do not know where he is from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not hear

sinners; but if anyone is God fearing, and does his will, he hears him. Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

They answered and said to him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you teaching us?" And they put him out.

The Pharisees had a form of blindness that is the most deadly of all. Their blindness was self-love, arrogance, and pride. The neighbors lost an opportunity because they were too complacent and preoccupied to see what God was doing. The parents of the blind man likewise lost an opportunity because they were too afraid of the consequences to their security. The Pharisees' blindness was their refusal to listen to anyone's voice except their own. Pride and arrogance would keep them from Christ.

What were some of the characteristics of arrogance in the Pharisees? One of them was enthusiasm for legalism. The Pharisees devoted themselves to practicing a religion of rules. The people took advantage of the rules to elevate themselves while degrading others in contrast. Jesus' healing of the blind man on the Sabbath, for instance, allowed them to vaunt their superiority and label him to be anathema to their code of conduct.

Another characteristic of arrogance was the Pharisees' unteachable spirit. Their voices were dripping with derision (in verse 34) when they said to the man, "We are the judgment givers, sinful beggar, would you teach us?" The people brought the blind man to the Pharisees so that they could render judgment. These holy men loved their position of making pronouncements and determining what was acceptable. They would meet to gloat together at their exalted status and the lowliness of everyone else.

We see this prevailing attitude of pride and arrogance, for example, among those with superior educations who disdain the uneducated. It is evident among those with wealth and those who arbitrate social standing. Sadly, we see it in churches as well.

The Pharisees loved to dictate, but they were utterly unteachable. They would not examine themselves. We know from Jesus' words in Matthew 23 that the arrogance of the Pharisees included insistence on perquisites, high positions and status. Jesus spoke to his disciples, in Matthew 23:5:

"Everything they do is done for men to see. They make their phylacteries wide, and the tassels on their garments long. They love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogue. They love to be greeted in the marketplace and have men call them Rabbi. But you are not to be called Rabbi; for you have only one master, and you are all brothers... The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled; and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

In all of their arrogance the Pharisees were blind to what God was doing, and their blindness cost them their lives. Jesus said if they would not admit their need, they would remain in their guilt.

JESUS' PERSONAL CONCERN

Verse 35:

Jesus heard that they had put him out (of the synagogue). [The Pharisees had done what the parents had feared.] **And finding him, he said, "do you believe in the Son of Man?"** [Notice that the Lord had taken the initiative to find the man after all of the various interviews, all of the antagonism. Jesus sought him out when he was by himself.]

He answered and said, "And who is he, Lord, that I may believe in Him?"

Jesus said to him, "you have both seen Him, and he is the one who is talking with you now."

And he said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him.

Jesus' statement to the former blind man in verse 37 was remarkable: "You have seen him." The Lord had asked the man before him if he had faith in the predicted Messiah. The man openly replied, "I long to believe. Who is he?" To a man who had never experienced sight until this day Jesus said, "You see him now. The one standing before you is the one of whom I speak."

The blind neighbors, the blind parents, the blind Pharisees had lost the opportunity to be there at the moment when Jesus found the man and offered him life. I am convinced the Lord deliberately set the circumstances in that way. He had healed other blind individuals with a word, and they were immediately able to see. This man, however, got clay put on his eyes. He had to hike across town, presumably with someone guiding him to the pool of Siloam. He washed off the clay, and was given his sight at a distance from Jesus. I think the Lord deliberately performed the healing in that way so that he could stand on the sidelines and allow the various conversations that occurred.

THE BLINDNESS OF THOSE WITHOUT CHRIST

When the man returned from the pool of Siloam, no one knew exactly where Jesus was, so the man went through the ensuing cross-examination to determine what had happened. The former blind man saw how blind in fact the world around him was. All of his life he had wished he could be sighted like the people in his environment. His neighbors increasingly had treated him like a rock of the side of the road, but he had thought, "Oh if I could only be like them." The parents who bore him and presumably loved him were more afraid of losing their social standing than they were of loyalty to him. Every Jew looked up to the Pharisees who sat in the seat of Moses as lawgivers. Yet those Pharisees made fools of themselves trying to deny what God had clearly done. The Lord gave this unidentified man an opportunity by letting the world pass in front of him. For the first time in his life, he could see, and what he saw was that the people around him had nothing to offer.

There was an obvious progression in this man's understanding of Jesus. In verse 11, he described the Lord as the man Jesus. In verse 17, the man said he was a prophet. In verse 33, he said Jesus was from God. Finally in verse 38, the man worshiped him as God. This man had seen beyond the miracle of his healing and realized that Jesus was due his worship. It was an extraordinary thing that no one saw more clearly than this newly sighted man. Everyone else had a spiritual blindness that caused them to lose out on forgiveness and healing. Yet the Lord would say that they were blind by choice, and therefore their guilt remained.

In verse 39 Jesus said,

"For Judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see; and that those who see may become blind." [That is those who insist they see, those who are proud of their insights].

Jesus said [to the Pharisees], **"If you were blind, you would have no sin."** [If you were needy, I would minister to you) **But since you insist 'We see,' your sin remains."**

Since the Pharisees had not seen their need of a Savior, they could not be transformed by him. Thus, both their spiritual blindness and their guilt remained. They had chosen it.

LOST OPPORTUNITY

The last point to make is Jesus' statement in verses 4 and 5 that opportunity will not last forever. Jesus said,

"We must work the works of him who sent me, as long as it is day; night is coming, when no man can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

The light will not always be available to shine in a person's experience. The opportunity to know Christ will not remain constant. There are times when God makes himself available to us, when the light is shining, but it won't last forever because the night comes. The appeal I want to make is this: If we have decisions to make about our complacency, our preoccupation, our fearfulness, or our arrogance, then we must respond to the Lord because the opportunity will not last forever. The night is coming, and we who know Christ must do his

work now. There is no time to waste.

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