

The Sixth Sign: The Healing of the Man Born Blind
John 9:1-41

The festive background for this miracle is the Festival of Booths/Feast of the Tabernacle. (See **John 7:2**) The festival was held five days after the Day of Atonement for a period of eight days during the autumn. Jerusalem would be filled with pilgrims during this time to celebrate God's care for Israel during their sojourn in the wilderness. In accordance with **Leviticus 23:42** and **Deuteronomy 16:13** many would build shelters near Jerusalem as a means of remembrance and celebration. Jews would live in the booths they built and remember how their forefathers lived as they wandered in the wilderness. Today Jewish people still celebrate this occasion by building a shelter.

Another feast closely associated with the above feast was the Feast of Lights, initiated by Judas Maccabeus around 164 B.C.E. when the Temple was defiled by the king of Syria. During this time the Temple was cleansed and rededicated to God. Israelites met in their synagogues, carried branches and held services of celebration. In addition children were told of the stirring deeds of the Maccabees in order to arouse them to similar behaviour.

Following Jesus' encounter with the woman caught in adultery (not in the earliest manuscripts) Jesus proclaims that he is "the light of the world" and he goes on to say that those who follow him "will never walk in darkness." Instead they "will have the light of life." (**John 8:12**)

Jesus' messianic claim is transparent in this miracle because of the clear connection of the miracle with Israel's messianic expectations. Jews believed that the messianic age would be accompanied by the blind receiving sight. (See **Isaiah 29:18; 35:5**)

Jesus teaches his hearers in this chapter that the light brings salvation to the blind but judgment to those who will not see.

Taken together, the connections with these festive occasions indicate that the miracle is a demonstration of providential care, recovery, the presence of the long anticipated kingdom, salvation, and judgment.

to explain the relationship between our mortality and the reality of our sin but this does not mean that specific cases of human suffering can be rightfully connected to the sin of the one who suffers as in the case of the blind man. This fact Jesus makes plain in verse 3.

It is obvious, on the basis of simple observation, that some suffering is recognizably related to a specific sin. The damaged liver of an alcoholic is the result of his drinking and the suffering caused by broken relations is often the consequence of sinful behaviour. Many other examples can be provided to show that some suffering is related to sin but it does not follow from this that all suffering can be explained in this way and herein lies the significance of Jesus answer to the question.

In the end, however, we must remember with humility that “in a fallen world, exhaustive explanations (of suffering) are in principle not available.” (Bruce Milne, *The Message of John*, page 138)

John 1:1-2

The sign begins when Jesus and his disciples notice a man who has been blind since birth. Because of their preconceived notions concerning the relationship of illness to sin, they ask Jesus a question. “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Jews believed that personal suffering was due to sin. Their assumption was that either this man had sinned in the womb (This must be the case since he was blind from the very beginning of life) or that his parents’ sin had led to his blindness. Obviously, they are unable to explain blindness without assigning personal responsibility to someone. **The question raised here is an important one.**

Sin and Suffering. Any Connection?

While there is some truth to their belief, it is incorrect to make the generalization that personal suffering is the result of personal sin in every case. Such a point of view is unnecessarily harsh, cruel, and inconsistent with the teaching of scripture.

The story of Job is traditionally understood as a lesson on patience but in fact the story actually presents a rejoinder to the notion that Job's suffering was due to some sin he has committed. Job, in spite of demands for his repentance from his friends, insists that he is innocent. The story unfolds in a manner that is supportive of Job's claim; he is innocent. Job's story rejects the notion of material retributive justice and any other simplistic theology of suffering.

However, the Bible does teach a general relationship between suffering and sin but the general principle must not be applied specifically to every situation. Jesus' response to the question supports this position. Two particular Biblical texts deserve a close examination; **Genesis 3 and Romans 5:12**.

Genesis 3 contains the story of Man's fall from grace in the garden. The garden was perfect in that it contained every good thing needed for human life to be lived in perfect relationship to God. Adam and Eve were given only one restraint; they were told by God that they could take the fruit from any tree except the one in the middle of the garden. (**Genesis 3:2-3**) This command of God asked them to recognize the fact that they were 'created' but not 'creator'. They were to obey this command out of their recognition that all of their lives were to be lived according to a vertical relationship with God that was to inform and provide a norm in their lives. However, they declared their independency from Him by their disobedience.

The apostle Paul is responsible for our understanding of this story and he gives us its meaning in **Romans 5: 12-19**. He argues the case that sin entered the world through Adam and that his sin is inevitably repeated by everyone since Adam. The entire human race is guilty before God of doing just what Adam did because everyone, like Adam, defines their own existence by living without the vertical referent that God intended when he created human life. If this was not the case there would be no need for a suffering Messiah. The result of sin is devastating; all men and women die.

All human mortality is a result of the sin begun by Adam and repeated in the lives of his descendents. In this general sense suffering (death) is directly related to sin and disobedience before God. In other words, suffering can only exist in a fallen world. Thankfully, the apostle goes on to say the Good News that the ravages of the Fall are reversed by the death of one man. “..... just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.” **(Romans 5:18-19)**

In this passage Paul has established a general principal
John 9:3-5

Jesus answer is plain. He said that neither sinned. He must mean that there is no sin for which the blind man is being punished because, in reality, both the blind man and his parents were sinners (It is a universal condition) but this fact does not explain the blindness.

This writer believes that what Jesus said in verse 3b means that the blindness of this man is an occasion for God to show his love and mercy through the healing while at the same time, revealing the true nature of His Son. Like wise, the apostle Paul found his own suffering to be the opportunity for God to demonstrate how He uses suffering for His own divine purposes. He writes: ” To keep me from being conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations there was given to me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’.” **(2 Corinthians 12:7-8)**

Suffering exists. Sometimes God removes the cause and sometimes He does not but in every case He uses it to display His love and faithfulness to those who suffer by offering His presence in the suffering. This biblical truth is the reason that Paul can say, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who have been called according to his purpose.” **(Romans 8:28)**

Followers of Christ are not to remain passive and unresponsive to the suffering in the world. In verse 3 Jesus plainly said that all his followers are to join him in the work that relieves suffering because it is God's work and since life is short, there is an urgency to act as he acts. There are some things that will not keep for the time when life is over. **(See the parable in Matthew 24:45-51)**

Whether or not they accept the invitation to do the work that he has given will not prevent him from continuing his work because he is "the light of the world." (5b) The work Christ does is in total harmony with who he is so there is no situation or condition that can prevent him from doing his Father's work.

The Miracle

John 9:6-7

John describes the miracle succinctly. Jesus spit on the ground, made some mud, placed it on the man's eyes, and told him to wash his eyes in the pool of Siloam. (sent) Immediately he could see and his newly acquired sight was confirmed by his neighbours.

It is interesting to see that in the previous miracles Jesus only needed to speak so **(John 4:50,53)** what Jesus did here must have a significance that John wants his reader's to see and this is the reason he included these details. In the ancient world there was a superstition that the saliva of heroic people had healing powers but it is difficult to imagine any reason why Jesus would make use this superstition. Several scholars suggest that it is a reference to the creation story when God used the rain softened soil to form Adam and Eve. **(Genesis 2:5-7)** Therefore, John's intended purpose could be to show symbolically that the healing constitutes a re-creation of the whole person. Paul used a more theological formula to say the same thing. 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation'. **(2Corinthians 5:17)** **John's understanding is that Jesus is the one who recovers the entire creation and restores it according to God's original intention.** Again, the apostle Paul stated the same truth when he wrote; "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not

by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in the hope that creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God". (Romans 8:20-21)

The Neighbour's Reaction and Jesus Reply

John 9:8-12

When the formerly blind man was seen by his neighbours so complete was his healing that they were unsure that it was the man they knew. **Is this a subtle expression of the new creation theme contained in this healing?** They asked him what had happened and he told them but he was unable to give the name of the healer. They also wanted to know where Jesus was but even this he could not tell them.

The Pharisees Investigate

John 9:13-34

His neighbours were so dumbfounded and anxious for an explanation of Jesus powers that they took him to the religious experts to get an answer. There, a three part interview with the healed man, his parents, and again the man himself was carried out.

Remarkably, the Pharisees looked past the man's healing because they were more concerned about their rules of Sabbath keeping which forbade healing on the Sabbath because healing on the Sabbath was permissible only to save life. Secondly, the kneading of the mud was also forbidden because it constituted work as did the application of the mud on the man's eyes.

Some of the Pharisees were impressed and they wondered how a sinner could do such things while others concluded that Jesus must be a sinner by virtue of his Sabbath breaking. At this point their minds were so rigid that the good work that

Jesus had done provided no adequate ground for them to re-examine their dearly held religious traditions. **Is it possible that we too are sometimes blinded by long held religious beliefs and denominational distinctions that give us a sense of identity but in reality have no ground in scripture?**

John 9:17-19

The blind man must have understood their objections to what Jesus had done so he was quite courageous in his response when he said that Jesus was a prophet. Even though this designation fell short of the full truth, it was a very exalted term to apply to the one who had healed him so his spiritual eyes were beginning to open as well. The Pharisees were still unconvinced so they asked the man's parents to provide some evidence that he had been, in fact, blind since birth.

John 9:20-23

Fearing their expulsion from the synagogue, they turned the interview back to their son because they were unwilling to give any indication that they believed any good thing about Jesus although they did confirm his life long blindness. They were only too aware of the serious religious and social consequences that would result if their membership in the synagogue was revoked. **(See Acts 2:36) The modern reader should be slow to condemn these people. We all know the fear of social rejection that comes when we claim a faith in Christ regarded by the world as nothing more than an ancient artifact. Moderns assume that no intelligent, educated person could possibly believe unless they had a need for easy answers which provide a childish security blanket not required by more able people. Furthermore, our culture is highly critical when we take positions that are biblically informed by the witness of the apostles. Often Christians keep their faith private for fear of ridicule. Do you agree?**

John 9:24-25

Because of their failure to find an ally in the man's parents, they interviewed the healed man again in order to prove that Jesus was a sinner. The context of verse 24 clearly indicates that they were demanding that the man agree with them by declaring that Jesus was a sinner because he healed on the Sabbath. His answer to them is remarkable in its forthrightness as he responded on the basis of his own dramatic experience. The facts were that he was blind but now he could see. There is an important lesson here. There is no excuse for the modern Christian to have a poor theological and biblical knowledge that he/she can call upon when it is appropriate. However, we must also be able to tell others what Jesus has done for us with a confident humility that points others to him.

John 9:26-27

The healed man did not attempt to hide his frustration when they asked him again how he was healed so he sarcastically asked them if they too wanted to become one of Jesus' disciples.

John 9:28-29

The answer the Pharisees received aroused extreme anger in them so they accused him of being a follower of Jesus in contrast to their loyalty to Moses. The statement that they do not know where Jesus came from is ironic because it made apparent the spiritual blindness that prevented them from seeing that Jesus had fulfilled the messianic expectations contained in their own scripture.

They were correct to say that God had spoken to Moses but they had seriously distorted the meaning of the law that had been given through him. The law was given as part of God's covenantal relationship with them and it was intended to inform Israel's life by teaching them how they were to express this relationship in everyday life. The law that Moses had mediated to them was not given as a vehicle to establish merit before God. The strict legalism that resulted from their

misunderstanding of the law had resulted in a loveless attitude that was nothing more than a pretender to faith. One must admit that similar attitudes have existed in many Christian traditions where rules and regulations are given a status they do not deserve in order to promote a sense of denominational pride and feelings of superiority.

John 9:30-33

Finally the man born blind came to a true conclusion even though it fell short of a full blown confession of Jesus as Messiah. Jesus could not be a sinner because only one who had come from God could do what had never been done before - restore sight to the blind.

John 9:34

By now the Pharisees had had enough. The one they were questioning was now lecturing them so they kicked him out of the synagogue because they were unable to dispel the prejudices that kept them from the light so clearly seen by him.

A Faith Completed

John 9:35-36

The healed man has been condemned by the most important institution in his life so his future was bound to involve difficulties that the modern reader can barely imagine. Jesus found out what had happened so he went looking for him. He made no effort to console him or to deny the serious social consequences that he will experience. Jesus simply asked him a question that was intended to take him to the brink of a fuller faith. "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" (35)

This title is one which would have been familiar to Jews but we cannot say for sure what this particular man understood by it. However, it is quite plain that Jesus assumed that the term would be a meaningful one to use and that it would be

associated with dramatic intervention by God into human history. Actually, this title appears in Daniel 7 where Daniel's dream is reported. At the end of the dream he saw a figure which he called "the son of man". (13) In Daniel's vision this figure is given authority over all nations as he establishes a kingdom that will never end.

In effect, Jesus was asking this man if he believed that God would one day act in this decisive way to establish a kingdom that would bring judgment. The answer Jesus heard indicated that the man he had healed was willing to listen to his personal declaration that he (Jesus) was the one that Israel hoped for.

Every person who has heard the Gospel must answer a similar question- Who is Jesus? Only two responses are possible. Jesus is who he said he was or he is a complete lunatic. His claims are either true or he had delusions only a disturbed mind could contain.

The reader has no way of knowing whether or not the openness of his response to Jesus' question was the result of the miracle but it is difficult to imagine such an expectant attitude if he had remained trapped in his blindness. He wants to believe in the one that God has sent. "Tell me so that I may believe in him." (36) Jesus' touch had opened more than his physical eyes because he was ready and willing to say yes to the light that lights every man's heart.

John 9:37-38

When Jesus announced that he was the son of man the man believed, worshipped, and committed himself to Jesus as Lord and Saviour because he was able to see the deeper meaning of the miracle that had restored his sight and enabled him to see the true nature of the one who had encountered him so convincingly. John has told this story in a manner that makes the act of worship entirely appropriate and accepted by Jesus.

John's Christology is consistent with Old Testament expectations but it goes beyond it at the same time. Jesus is the one sent by God to restore sight to the blind and the only proper response to him is worship. This is simply another way for John to say that Jesus is the word that had become flesh.

At first the healed man could not explain where Jesus was (12) and later he declared that Jesus could not be a sinner. (30) Eventually he testified that Jesus was a prophet from God. (17, 33) Finally, he was able to demonstrate his faith through an act of worship that demonstrated a new orientation that embraced Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

John 9:39-41

The story ends as Jesus speaks a word on judgment that seems to contradict what John has said in 3:17 where he wrote, **“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”** Why then would Jesus say that he has come into the world for the sake of judgment? Did he not come primarily and specifically to save sinners? The clue to the answer lies in the prologue where John wrote that the light shone into a darkness that did not comprehend it. (1:5)

What Jesus said means is that the light he brings, by its very nature, casts a shadow of judgment because it offers an invitation that is rejected by some even though it is God’s desire to save all men and women. God’s invitation is universally given but it is not universally accepted.

In 39b he goes on to give the dire consequences of unbelief. Rejection of him results in a darkness of a greater kind in contrast to the enlightenment of those who come to faith in him.

In search for an excuse for their unbelief, the Pharisees ask if they have been born blind. It is as if they are saying that faith for them is impossible since they live in a state of blindness that renders them guiltless before God because they have no capacity for faith. Jesus ended his encounter by telling them that such a point of view is wrong. They are responsible for their rejection of him and their “guilt remains.”

Theological Implications

1. The blind man is a representative of all mankind. All people are spiritually blind and this condition renders them hopeless before God and incapable of saving themselves. The only hope is God's divine initiative whereby He seeks the lost by sending his Son into the world.
2. Faith is a process whereby an individual embraces Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Faith results only from an encounter with Christ. Faith cannot ultimately be acquired by human speculation and it is not the result of human insight. Faith is not a natural human capacity; it is a gift of God.
3. The offer God makes in Jesus Christ brings a judgment that holds all men and women responsible for their unbelief.
4. The miracle that Jesus performed is a messianic claim. Jesus is the one expected by the prophets.