

## John 9:1 – 41. Jesus heals a man born blind

Last week at Twickenham in the six nations rugby match between England and Wales there was a moment of controversy in the first half when Wales claim to have scored. The decision of the referee on the field was no try, and the television match official agreed, much to the delight of the English fans. But a couple of days ago the International Rugby Board said that both referees had got it wrong. Now this is not unusual in sport is it. We are used to managers and players seeing the same event and coming to completely different conclusions. Was it a penalty or did he dive? Was it a goal or did the goalkeeper prevent it crossing the line? Technology can help us decide, but the debates still rage on regardless.

But those debates pale into insignificance when compared to the greatest debate of all time: who was Jesus? Was he simply a good man, a great teacher, a prophet, or was he all of those and something more. John wrote his gospel to answer that very question, and as we've been looking at these seven signs in John's gospel I hope you have seen that limiting Jesus to the category of an astounding human being does not do him justice. The miracles of Jesus that John records for us point far beyond that description, but I wonder if you can see that for yourself. Have you seen who Jesus is? And are you willing to accept the truth and live with the consequences?

As we come to the last of our series today, those questions are front and centre. So, turn with me to John chapter 9 on page 1075 and let's look at this passage together.

Jesus and his disciples were in Jerusalem and walking along the road they saw a blind man begging. Somehow the disciples knew that he had been blind from birth and so they asked a question, it's there in verse 2: "*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*" Like many people today the reason for suffering is at the front of the disciples' minds. They want to know why this man is suffering.

I haven't got time this morning to deal with the whole issue of suffering, but let's look at the point that the disciples raise here. Is suffering always our own fault or the fault of someone else?

In this case is hard to see how this man's blindness was his fault since he had been born blind, but apparently some Pharisees did teach that if a pregnant woman took part in idol worship, then the child inside her womb was guilty as well, having been present at the time. Now of course that is incredibly far-fetched, and there is no basis in Scripture for those kinds of thoughts at all.

But sometimes we are personally responsible for our own problems. If we gamble our money away we will be destitute. If we cheat on our spouse our marriage will be in trouble.

Sometimes our suffering is directly the fault of someone else. A drunk driver, a dishonest boss, an abusive partner, all directly cause suffering to others that is not their fault. At other times groups of people cause harm to others: the greed and consumer driven policies of the West do, I'm sure, contribute to the poverty in other parts of the world

But oftentimes suffering can only be put down to the fact that we live in a broken world. When our first parents rebelled against God sin, like a virus, sin didn't just distance us from God, it infected our relationships with each other and corrupted God's perfect creation. Pain, suffering, disease, disasters, and death are all results of the fall. In some ways that means we are partly responsible for the state of the world.

Now of course without God, the situation is hopeless and helpless. Without God, suffering is pointless and has no meaning. Without God our only recourse is to say grin and bear it. Without God we can't even say suffering is morally wrong, because without God there are no moral absolutes.

But the God of the Bible doesn't leave us alone in suffering, he not only comes in the person of Jesus and endures it with us, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus he shows us that suffering will not go on forever. But God is also powerful enough to use our sin and foolish decisions, even this man's congenital blindness to reveal his glory and transform our suffering now. God did not deliberately capriciously cause this man to be born blind so that Jesus could come along and undo it. But in God's hands times of suffering can be doorways to faith and glory because they shatter our illusions of indestructibility and help raise our eyes to the heavens to seek God. That has certainly been the case in my life, and I know that has been the case for many of you as well.

And that's what happened here. Jesus is the light of the world after all, and he was about to bring light both to this blind man's eyes and to his soul.

Verse 6 tells us how Jesus did it. He spat on the ground, made some mud with the saliva and put it on the man's eyes and then told him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. The word "Siloam" means sent, as verse seven tells us. The blind man was sent by Jesus who himself was the one God had sent into the world. And the man did as he was told and he came back seeing, his sight restored. As you can imagine, this caused quite a stir in the neighbourhood! Some of the locals doubted his identity, but bit by bit they came to the conclusion that the sighted man before them really was the same man who had been born blind and who used to sit and beg in their streets

In view of the amazing events, it's not surprising that the people took the man to the Pharisees. This event obviously had religious overtones to it, miraculous healings are the purview of God after all, and so the Pharisees conducted their own investigation. Verse 15 tells us what the man told them: "*he put mud on my eyes and I washed and now I see!*" In normal circumstances you might have expected the Pharisees to throw a party and to praise God for his goodness, but there was a problem; the healing had taken place on the sabbath.

As you know, the Pharisees took sabbath observance very seriously. God had commanded a day of rest, and rest there would be! In fact, the Jewish lawmakers had worked out a list of thousands of minor activities that were banned on the Sabbath. One of them, strange as it may seem, was healing, unless someone's life was in danger, and that wasn't the case here. Another was kneading dough to make bread. Now Jesus didn't make bread but he would have had to knead the mud and the water together before he applied it to the man's eyes. Two strikes against Jesus! And all of a sudden, this wonderful miraculous healing has the Pharisees divided.

One group started from the letter of the law. They saw that Jesus had broken the rules and deduced that he must therefore be a sinner. As a result, they would not acknowledge that this miracle was the work of God.

Another group started from the healing, and saw an astonishing act of power and might that only someone sent from God could perform. They still had questions about the sabbath, but they were secondary.

The two groups were at an impasse, so they called the man's parents. Perhaps the man wasn't born blind after all. Perhaps it was some kind of deceit, designed to attract attention for Jesus. Perhaps then the Pharisees could be united in their decision.

The trouble was the man's parents confirmed that he was their son and that he was born blind. Do you notice how they failed to give an opinion on anything else? They may have been delighted that the son could now see, but they didn't want to get in any trouble with the religious rulers.

It seems that in Jerusalem at least these Jewish leaders had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. For a Jew, that would have been like losing your family, losing your place in the world. And the man's parents didn't want any part of that for them or their son. *"He's of age! Ask him!"* They said. What a great way to pass the buck!

When the man comes in again the Pharisees go over the same ground and you can sense the man's exasperation growing because the Pharisees aren't really listening. In verse 24 they say that they want to know the truth, but they have already made up their minds what the truth is. They had already decided that Jesus must be a sinner. They are only interested in evidence that backs up their preconceived ideas. So they asked him again in verse 26, *"What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"* At this point the man gives a rather sarcastic reply *"I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?"*

But the Pharisees are not in the mood for cheek and from this point on their façade of truth seeking went out of the window and they hurled insults at him. But the man was not put off. In fact, it seems that as he recounted his experience again the wonder of it started to sink in. He got bolder and bolder. Verses 30 to 33 are a wonderful riposte to their stubborn hearts. Whoever he is, wherever he is from, Jesus had performed a wonderful miracle and therefore must be from God! Well, that was it! The Pharisees had heard enough and after one final barrage of insults they threw him out. They wanted nothing more to do with this man who was now 'one of those Jesus followers!'

I hope you'll agree that was a shameful way to respond to such a wonderful moment of grace and healing. But the Pharisees are not alone in ignoring the compelling evidence right before their eyes. And for us here today, with the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus right before our eyes, the challenge is the same. Will we acknowledge Jesus? Will we accept his power, will we recognise who he is and will we bow before him as our Lord? You see this passage isn't just in the Bible to show us that Jesus can heal, we've seen that already. The challenge here is about how we respond to the evidence. In other words, it's not about physical blindness, but spiritual blindness. And that's where verses 35-41 come in.

For a few verses the narrative continues. Verse 35 tells us that when Jesus heard that the man had been thrown out of the synagogue he went and found him. And when he did, he asked him if he believed in the Son of Man? The Son of Man is a title Jesus often took for himself, and it comes from the book of Daniel. In Daniel chapter 7, the prophet is given a glimpse into the throne room of heaven and saw *'one like a Son of Man'* approaching God who gives him all authority and glory and power. When Jesus uses that term, the Son of Man, he is claiming that authority and power for himself. He is claiming that he is the Messiah, that he is God, that he is the one the Jews were waiting for, the one Isaiah had foretold would restore sight to the blind and free the oppressed: *"Who is he sir? Tell me so that I may believe in him."* The man replied.

Now of course the blind man had never *seen* Jesus, but he had heard his voice and he knew the one talking to him now was the one who had healed him. Perhaps he thought Jesus would point to someone else as the Messiah but as with the woman at the well, Jesus revealed his true identity: *“You have seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you!”*

At that point it was as if all the pieces came together and the man made his decision. He declared his faith in Jesus and worshipped him as Lord. The word *‘worship’* implies that the man prostrates himself before Jesus, giving him the kind of worship that only God deserves.

If the restoration of his physical sight was amazing, the opening of his spiritual eyes is much more so. And the contrast with the Pharisees couldn’t be starker. And I think that really is the point John is trying to get us to as he retells these events. This isn’t just about the restoration of physical sight, wonderful though that is, this is about spiritual sight as the next few verses make clear.

As John goes on to explain, there were some Pharisees standing nearby, and they heard Jesus speak those words in verse 39: *“for judgement I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.”* The Pharisees seem to understand what Jesus is saying, and they are deeply offended. *“What? Are we blind too?”* And despite the fact that they knew the Old Testament Scriptures better than anyone alive, despite their devotion to the temple and their determination to try and live the right way, the stunning response of Jesus is yes. *“Yes, you are blind. Yes, you are guilty of sin.”* And his reason? They are blind and guilty because they are claiming to be able to see whilst actually denying the truth.

To understand this, let’s contrast the spiritual journey of the man born blind with the spiritual journey the Pharisees go through.

At the beginning of this chapter, the blind man met Jesus. Almost certainly he’d heard a little about him, but from the way he later answered the Pharisees it is clear that he didn’t know very much. Perhaps he’d heard that Jesus had done some other amazing things and he was desperate enough to try anything, so when Jesus made the mud and put it on his eyes and told him to go and wash he was willing to take the chance. But as the chapter continues he moved from being grateful to Jesus to someone who defended Jesus against the Pharisees to someone who, if you read between the lines of verse 27, might actually have already decided to be a disciple of Jesus, to the point where he bowed down and worshipped Jesus as Lord.

That’s a huge journey in just a few short hours, but having experienced God’s power at work in his own life, I hope you can understand why he did not rest until he knew the truth about Jesus. Despite the fact that he could now see physically, he knew that he was still spiritually blind, that he didn’t have all the answers, that he had to find out the truth. Jesus had demonstrated that he had the power and authority of God to bring sight to the blind, and when Jesus revealed his true identity to this man, he was willing to commit himself, his life, his all, to Christ.

But the Pharisees went in the opposite direction. Given the fact that they had already decided to exclude from the synagogue those who claimed Jesus was the Messiah, it’s clear that the Pharisees had heard of Jesus, and it’s possible they had even heard him teach or witnessed him perform miraculous healings on a number of occasions. But whatever they knew before they were now faced with compelling evidence about the power and authority of Jesus. But rather than acknowledging the gaps in their understanding and seeking to find out the truth, they were only interested in finding out the facts which confirmed their

doubts. Their minds were already made up. Whatever Jesus did, whatever Jesus said, they were going to find fault with it, they were going to doubt it, and they were going to reject him. And that's what we see isn't it. They interviewed the man on a number of occasions, they interviewed his parents, all the facts were pointing in the same direction but they would not believe. Both physically and spiritually the man born blind walks into the light, seeking truth, accepting the evidence that is before him, but the Pharisees do the opposite. Whatever happens, however compelling the evidence, they would not believe. Although they thought they could see clearly, although they thought they had all the answers, they were blind. And the longer they rejected Jesus the darker the darkness they inhabited.

I don't imagine there are people exactly like the Pharisees here this morning, people who have rejected Jesus completely, and who would still not believe even if a blind relative of theirs was miraculously healed. People like that don't tend to come to church, at least not very often.

But I wonder if you are a little like them? Are you someone who has heard the truth of Jesus many times, who has heard the evidence, who can see the difference that Jesus makes in the life of those who believe, but who won't believe? Does that describe you? I've met a number of people over the years who look as if they are examining the claims of Jesus but they've always got more questions to ask, more issues to work out, and actually they have already made up their minds. Like the Pharisees in this passage they are looking for evidence to back up what they already think, rather than seeking the truth. Are you like that? Perhaps you came to the film night or the concert or have been on an Identity course, you've heard the claims of Jesus, you know the evidence but it's not enough.

If so, you need to be honest and ask yourself what it would take for you to believe in Jesus and commit your life wholeheartedly to him? And you need to be honest with yourself because in my experience the level of proof people often demand for Christian faith is far above that which they demand in other areas of their lives. We don't know everything about our employers but we trust them to pay our salaries month by month. We don't know everything about our fiancés but we are prepared to commit ourselves to them in marriage. Don't expect you'll ever know everything about God, of course you won't! But the evidence of creation, that inner voice, the Scriptures and the person of Jesus offer you all you need to know, if you are truly seeking, to recognise the truth and put your trust in Christ.

Seek the truth, ask difficult questions, wrestle with the evidence, yes, yes, yes! Make sure you do it honestly, with a mind that is ready to believe if that's where the evidence points, because if you do you will find the truth. You will find Jesus. And he will open your spiritual eyes.

For those of us who have had our eyes opened, there is no cause for pride or conceit. We were once blind, helpless and wretched but in his mercy God opened our eyes. And if that's you, then let me encourage you this morning not to be satisfied with the understanding of God and his ways that you have already. Too many Christians satisfy themselves with the things they learnt in Sunday school. That's like paddling in the shallows when there is an ocean to explore, or staying in the airport when our plane is ready to depart. There is so much of God's glory and might and power and wisdom and purposes for us to be discovered and enjoyed, and as we walk in his light and seek more of Jesus, then like the man in this story, our faith in God, our confidence in Jesus, our knowledge of him, our relationship with him grows and deepens and transforms us. We are called from darkness to light and then we are called to walk in the light all the days of our lives. May we do that. Amen.