

John 9:1-12

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] This morning we were grappling with the problem of suffering in the light of the tragic circumstances of a man born blind, begging on the streets of Jerusalem.

The event recorded for us in John's Gospel in the chapter that we've read this evening. And this morning we suggested that there are three key questions to be asked in the face of suffering. What do you think? What do you feel? And what do you do? And this evening I want to pick up on the third and very critical question.

What do you do? But ask that question of Jesus in His dealings with the blind man. What did Jesus do in the face of the suffering of this man born blind?

And in examining what Jesus did, this morning we obviously made reference to the fact that the man was healed, but we spent no time actually thinking about the miracle itself.

[1 : 05] But as we examine what Jesus did, I want to do so in the light of what we also noticed in the morning concerning the miracles of Jesus serving an immediate time and space purpose and a broader symbolic or sign purpose, revealing His glory and inviting or indeed producing faith as John makes clear there in the second chapter of his gospel in reference to the first of Jesus' miraculous signs.

So with this in mind, we can examine the problem of blindness, as is the case here, of suffering, taking it extended more broadly.

And we can examine that problem that Jesus is about to tackle in a broader manner. So what is the problem that Jesus deals with in this incident?

Well, He deals with the problem of one very real man suffering from congenital blindness, a man born blind. But what does this very real problem symbolize?

Well, it symbolizes the spiritual condition of all men and women without exception. We are by nature blind. We are indeed born blind.

[2 : 35] We are blind from birth. This is the necessary implication of what Jesus is recorded as saying to Nicodemus in this same gospel in chapter 3 and in verse 3.

What is it that Jesus says to this Pharisee? Well, we know the words. I tell you the truth. No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.

No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. Why can no one see the kingdom of God? Well, nobody can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again because we are blind. We are born blind. We are spiritually, congenitally blind. We can't see the kingdom of God. We can't understand the things of God in our own nature unless we are born again.

We are born blind, but we are born again with sight and able to see. So, as we consider what did Jesus do, we do so on these two dimensions, if that's the best way of putting it.

[3 : 50] The immediate blindness or suffering of the blind man and the symbolic lessons to be drawn with regard to what Jesus can do for those who are spiritually blind.

Well, having introduced the manner in which we want to think about this, we can now note that we can consider what Jesus did under three headings.

First of all, I want us to notice briefly the initiative that he takes. The initiative that he takes. But then, in a sense, the heart of the matter, the miracle that he performs.

And then, finally, close with the example that he gives. So, the initiative that Jesus takes, the miracle that Jesus performs, and the example that Jesus gives us.

First of all, then, the initiative that he takes. I want to make a simple point in few words. It's not always the case that I make simple points in few words, but I'm going to try and make a simple point in few words.

[4 : 52] And it is simply this, that the initiative is all of Jesus. In the healing of this blind man, the initiative is all of Jesus. Jesus is not responding to a cry for help from the blind man.

There were other occasions when that was so, but on this occasion, he is not responding to any request, to any cry, to any plea that is directed to him by the man himself or by any others advocating on behalf of the blind man.

It seems reasonable to imagine that in all probability, the man, the man born blind, is oblivious to Jesus and his disciples passing by. He is blind after all.

The blind man is focused on one thing and one thing only, getting through one more day, begging his way to a few meager shillings. Jesus is the one who, in the exercise of his own sovereign, gracious prerogative, reaches out to the blind man to shine his light into this man's dark world. We could maybe speculate and ask, well, if the man had known that Jesus was passing by, might he have cried out for help?

[6 : 12] Well, we don't know. We don't know if he would have or not. But what the blind man goes on to say later on in this incident is revealing. Notice in verse 32 what he says.

When he's in this dialogue, this debate with the Pharisees, he makes the point, nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. That was obviously his understanding of his condition.

Indeed, it was the understanding of everybody. So, given what he says, it seems highly unlikely that even if he had known that Jesus was passing by, that he would have cried out for help.

It simply didn't figure in his worldview. It simply wasn't on the panorama, even the remotest possibility, that he would recover his sight.

He knew that he was doomed to remain blind until death. He had no hope or prospect or expectation of any other eventuality.

[7 : 16] So, he doesn't cry out for help. He doesn't even imagine that help is available for him in his condition. And I say all of this simply to emphasize the simple point, that the initiative in the healing of this man is all of Jesus.

Now, if the miracle is a sign, as it is, what does this aspect of the miracle teach us concerning the hope that there is for the spiritually blind?

And as we've made clear, we are all, by nature, spiritually blind. Well, what it does make very clear is that as those who are spiritually blind, we are wholly dependent on the grace of God to take the initiative on our behalf.

We are not even able to cry out for help of our own initiative. We depend wholly on God taking the initiative on our behalf.

And of course, that is precisely what God has done. It's precisely what God has done in the person of his son, Jesus. We think of the words that Paul writes in his letter to the Romans.

[8 : 27] But God demonstrates his own love for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

While we were still sinners, while we were lost in our sin, while we were dead in our sin, while we were blind spiritually, in that condition, God takes the initiative through his son, Jesus Christ dying for us in our place.

So in the grand scheme of things, in the outworking of God's redemptive purposes, God is the one who takes the initiative. But also in the application of salvation to sinners blind from birth, it is God who continues to take the initiative.

The point I'm making is that it's not just in the grand scheme of things that God took the initiative in scheming a plan of salvation for sinners.

Yes, he did. But in the application of that salvation, in our life experience of God, there too, it is God who takes the initiative. It is God who comes out to the encounter.

[9 : 39] It is God who finds us rather than we who find God. Again, we think of the words that we find in John's first letter and in chapter 4.

We love, yes, we love, because he first loved us. Or we could personalize that, each and every one of us who are believers. I love because he first loved me.

It is Jesus who takes the initiative in bringing healing to this blind man, in bringing light into his dark world. That's the first thing we wanted to notice.

The second thing I want us to notice is the miracle that he performs. Now, the how of the miracle, that is, how Jesus healed the blind man, proved to be a great fascination for many, even in the

incident as it is recorded.

We'll notice that on repeated occasions, the question that is posed is, how did this happen? Then in verse 10, the neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging, they approach him and they ask the question, how then were your eyes opened?

[10:50] And then in verse 15, when he's brought to meet with the Pharisees, the same question is posed. Therefore, the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight.

And of course, we know, and the blind man mocks them for their repeated questioning, but this question is then repeated in verse 26. Then they asked him, what did he do to you?

How did he open your eyes? Though there's a bit of coming and going and swaying on the part of the Pharisees, throughout, really, there is a recognition that a miracle had been performed.

Though at times they stubbornly try to even question whether a miracle had been performed, but I think at heart they know that a miracle has been performed, but they have this fascination. How did he do it?

And there is a continuing fascination as regards the how of the miracle. Why the spitting on the ground and making of mud as it's described for us here?

[11:55] Why the instruction that Jesus gives that the man should go to the pool of Siloam and wash the mud away? Why the use of means at all when a word would have been sufficient?

We know that a word would have been sufficient to grant this man his sight. Why the use of means at all? Well, I'm going to leave those questions, fascinating though they may be, genuinely so, I'm going to leave those questions unanswered and focus rather on what the miracle reveals about the identity of Jesus, the character and attributes of Jesus, and the purposes of Jesus.

In other words, how the miracle reveals his glory. See, we're very much focusing in on this aspect of the miracle's purpose as a sign.

Well, what does it tell us? What does this sign tell us about Jesus, about who he is, about what he's like, about what he came for? First of all, then, the identity of Jesus.

What does the miracle tell us about who Jesus is? The healing of the man born blind is not just another miracle, if that kind of language could be used of any miracle.

[13:09] But it is a very special miracle. In the Old Testament, there is not a single recorded instance of the healing of a blind man.

I always feel a bit nervous when I make such a bold statement, because I'm sure somebody will come up to me afterwards and say, Well, what about? But you can search if you wish. As far as I'm aware, not a single recorded instance of the healing of a blind man.

And yet, though that is so, the Old Testament repeatedly attributes to God the giving of sight. We're not going to look at all the occasions when it does so.

I'll just mention one of them this evening, and we'll sing from this psalm to close our service. But in Psalm 146 and verse 8, what is it that the psalmist there declares?

Psalm 146 and verse 8, The Lord gives sight to the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down. The Lord loves the righteous.

[14:12] And take my word for it that there are several references in the Old Testament to this being a divine prerogative. That's something that God can do, and only God can do, which is give sight to the blind.

But it is curious that that would be repeatedly stated in the context of it not actually happening, or certainly it not being recorded as happening.

As we move into the New Testament, even the apostles who are recorded as raising the dead, certainly by the power of God, but nonetheless in God's power, raising the dead, they're not recorded as ever giving sight to the blind.

And all this is intriguing. Why is this? What does this point to? Well, as we return to the Old Testament, and of even greater significance, is that the giving of sight is presented in the Old Testament as a messianic activity.

If we look in Isaiah chapter 42, we'll just look at a couple of references to confirm that. There are many more. But we'll just notice a couple in Isaiah chapter 42 and verses 5 to 7.

[15:33] And then we'll just move forward to Isaiah chapter 61, which will then take us through to the reading that we had in Luke's gospel. Isaiah chapter 42 and verse 5.

This chapter is about this messianic figure, the servant of the Lord. This is what God the Lord says. He who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spreads out the earth and all that comes

out of it, who gives breath to His people and life to those who walk on it.

I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness. I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

And then we move to chapter 61 and the first two verses of that chapter. Chapter 61 of Isaiah and the first two verses.

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.

[16:47] Now there is a lot of debate as to what is being said there, released from darkness, whether this is a reference to the giving of sight or not, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. But though there may be some debate as to what Isaiah originally intended, when we go to Luke's gospel, which we read, where Jesus takes to Himself these words of prophecy in Isaiah 61, what is it that we read there?

We've read the passage already, but we'll just quickly read it again. And we'll simply read the relevant verses in Luke 4 and from verse 18.

Jesus has unrolled the scroll that He has been given there in the synagogue in Nazareth, and He reads, The Spirit of the Lord is on me because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. And then as they are all on the edge of their seats waiting to see what He will say, He says what causes such scandal in their midst.

Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. Well, if the Scripture was fulfilled by Him, by Jesus identifying Himself as the one who would do these things, how much more was it fulfilled when He actually went out and did these things, and granted sight to the blind?

[18:19] So this miracle points to the identity of Jesus. It is a sign revealing His glory. He is the Messiah. He is the divine Messiah.

He is the one who can and does grant sight to the blind, who brings light into the darkness. He did so in the life of the man born blind, and He continues to do so in the lives of those born spiritually blind.

Just as a very brief aside, it's not really aside, but just of anecdotal interest for you to ponder on and see what you think, but it might be that even His enemies were aware of the messianic implications or the messianic significance, or in any case the potential messianic significance of this miracle of the granting of sight to the blind, and hence we read what we read in verse 22 of chapter 9.

The context of this is the parents being asked, well, what do you say about what's happened? And they're very cautious about what they say because they're afraid of the Pharisees. And why are they afraid?

Well, we're told why they are afraid. There in verse 22, His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for already the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ, that Jesus was the Messiah, would be put out of the synagogue.

[19:44] Now, we don't know when that was decided, and there's great debate as to whether that was the case at all. Clearly it was, because the Bible says so. But it may have been just this particular synagogue. It may have been a decision that was taken immediately on discovering that a blind man had been granted his sight, because they say, well, hang on.

If a blind man has been granted his sight, this is scary. Who could he be? Now, if anyone says that he's the Messiah, well, they're out of the synagogue.

See, you see where I'm coming from. You see this possibility that even his enemies were saying, a blind man receiving sight, a man born blind. Well, this is significant now.

Foolishly, instead of embracing Jesus as the Messiah, they are made ever more stubborn in their opposition and hostility to him. But I leave that with you for you to come to whatever conclusion you may wish to on that.

So, the miracle he performs helps in giving us an insight into his identity, but it also points to or reveals the character and attributes of Jesus, or in any case, some of them.

[20:55] And this is just very, very obvious in many ways. In the performing of the miracle, Jesus is revealed to us as the one who is merciful and compassionate.

He deals mercifully with the man born blind. Jesus is concerned is not only to reveal his glory. It's not only to say, well, look who I am. I'm the Messiah. No.

Yes, that was part of the purpose, but it was also his purpose to grant relief and sight to this poor man. He showed mercy and compassion to this poor man.

And so, the miracle reveals something of his character. It reveals something also of his attributes as the one who is powerful. He is able to grant sight to the man born blind.

He is able to do what nobody else can do, precisely the point that the blind man himself makes in his dialogue with the Pharisees. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind.

[21 : 58] This is without precedent. Such is the power of this man. It's interesting when you have some notion of just how huge this particular miracle is.

It sheds light on other parts of Scripture. Remember when, on the occasion when Lazarus died, and there's some murmuring and grumbling about why Jesus hadn't come and why he hadn't done what was necessary to save Lazarus from death.

And one of the comments that is made is, surely this man who gave sight to the blind could have saved Lazarus. It's almost as saying, well, you can't find somebody more powerful than that.

As if this is the bar being set so high. This guy, he can give sight to the blind. If he can do that, he can do anything. And so, the miracle reveals the character of Jesus as a merciful and compassionate Messiah, but also as the one who enjoys this great power.

The miracle he performs also throws light and sheds light on the purposes of Jesus. In his coming into the world, he is the light of the world. He was sent by the Father to bring light into the darkness, to bring sight to the blind, to bring salvation to the lost, to bring hope to the hopeless and joy to the downcast.

[23 : 23] This great purpose of Jesus is revealed or light is cast on it by this miracle that he performs. He did so for the man born blind.

He brought light into his dark world, and he continues to do so even today. So, we thought of the initiative that Jesus takes, the miracle that he performs and what it reveals of himself, but finally, the example that he gives.

Is there in the granting of sight to the blind man an example for us? Have we not already stressed that this is the work of God, that this is a sign of the Messiah, and there is but one Messiah.

Jesus is the Messiah. But remember what we noticed this morning of what Jesus says in verse 4. We must do the work of him who sent me.

And the we, we stress, includes the disciples. The disciples, too, are to be involved in the work of God that Jesus has been sent to do. This was so for the disciples who walked the dusty paths of Galilee and the busy streets of Jerusalem.

[24 : 34] But it is also true for the disciples of Jesus who daily commute to Dice or Altans or West Hill or who serve as disciples of Jesus on North Sea platforms or in shops in town or in schools or hospitals or care homes across the city and beyond.

For such disciples, it is also true that Jesus includes us as those who are to be involved with him in the doing of the Father's work.

If you are a Christian, you are included in the we of, we must do the work of him who sent me. But how can we? Can we bring sight to a man born blind?

That is something we cannot do. But we can bring help and comfort and company to the suffering. We can even more critically bring the light of the gospel to the spiritually blind, as we would tell others of Jesus, the light of the world.

We can do these things, but do we? Is this something that you do? Is this something that you will do? What about this week that has begun? So the initiative that Jesus takes, the miracle he performs, and the example that he gives.

[25 : 53] But a final word concerning the blind man. We will be thinking of the blind man again, but a final word for this evening. A final word concerning this blind man, or perhaps we should call him the formerly blind man.

What does he do? What does he do? What does he contribute to his healing? Well, he contributes nothing to his healing. The healing is, as we have stressed, all of God.

But we can identify two things that the blind man does that takes nothing away from all that we have said of God's sovereign initiative, and his, the blind man's utter inability, but that serves as an example for us, who are also formerly blind.

What does he do? Well, he trusts, and he obeys. There in verse 7, he has given instructions by Jesus. Go, he told him, wash in the pool of Siloam.

So the man went and washed and came home seeing. Now, we're not told at all how he went, with what expectation, if any, he went.

[27 : 02] We're simply not told. We can speculate. We can imagine. But we don't know. We don't know what it was he was thinking as he went to the pool.

We don't know. But what we do know is that he went. He was told to go, and he went. He trusted in the instructions that he was given.

But he does something else. Having received his sight, he testifies to the incredulous. You see, immediately following his coming home, seeing there's this debate that is generated, his neighbors and those who had formerly seen him are wondering, well, what's going on?

Is this the same man who used to sit and beg? Again, this stresses just what a huge miracle it was, because when you think about it, it's a very strange question to ask. Like, he basically looked the same.

You know, and if these were his neighbors, how could they possibly say, well, maybe it's somebody else? It doesn't make sense. But the reason why they genuinely thought, well, maybe it's somebody else, is because blind people didn't see again.

[28 : 10] And yet he did see. So you can understand their confusion. But anyway, there's this debate that is generated in the light of his healing. And how does he involve himself in this debate?

Well, very refreshingly. As they squabble and debate, clearly in his presence, what do we read that he did? But he himself insisted, I am the man.

I don't know if there's significance in the insisted. Did he have to say it several times? Look, I really am. I am the man. You're trying to work out, is he or isn't he? Look, I'm here. It's me.

I am the man. I am the one who was blind, and now I can see. Well, as we think of ourselves, as we would reach out to the spiritually blind, we don't do so from a position of superiority, but we do so as those who were also blind, whose eyes have been opened, and who can testify to the skeptical.

I am he. I am he. I was blind, but now I see. Let us pray.