

John 9

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[0 : 0 0] I want to tell you a story this morning. We could call the story Dust to Dust. Now, the title of the story may sound a little somber, evoking memories of the graveside, but far from being a story of the journey from life to death, it is a story of a journey in the opposite direction, from death to life. The story begins with a man, tragically and pitifully, in the dust, and ends with the same man, wonderfully and joyfully, in the dust. Well, enough of these riddles. We first meet the man born blind, begging in the dusty streets of Jerusalem. We read there in chapter 9 of John's gospel, his neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging, asked, Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg? Begging in the dust on the streets of Jerusalem. That is where we first meet this man. But we meet him for the last time, certainly until glory, prostrate on the same dusty streets of Jerusalem. In verse 38 we read,

Then the man said, Lord, I believe. And he worshiped him. And the word there means he fell prostrate before Jesus. Dust to dust. Dust as a stage for misery and dust as a stage for worship. And this is some journey. And we want to explore his journey as a case study in belief or coming to belief.

Remember that last week we considered the Pharisees as a case study in unbelief, and we made the point that as a case study, we ought not to imagine that unbelief always looks the same. Well, in the same way, belief, and especially coming to belief or faith in Jesus will not always look the same. And we must bear this in mind as we consider this particular journey of this particular man from dust to dust.

There is another matter to comment on by way of introduction. We have made the point previously, as we've been thinking about this chapter, that the miracles of Jesus serve as signs pointing to spiritual truths concerning the work and person of Jesus. In this miracle, the man born blind symbolizes the spiritual blindness of all men and women, while the capacity and willingness of Jesus to grant this man's sight points to what Jesus is able and willing to do for the spiritually blind. As such, as a sign, the moment that the blind man is granted physical sight symbolizes the granting of spiritual sight.

But, and this is the point I want to stress here by way of introduction, that point, that moment, where he receives physical sight symbolizing spiritual sight does not coincide with the moment the man himself receives his spiritual sight. I hope that's clear. It sounds a bit, perhaps not as well explained as I would have liked. The man is granted spiritual sight, but the manner in which he comes to see spiritually is a more gradual process than the manner in which he, in a moment, receives his physical sight.

[4 : 0 4] That's something just to bear in mind also as we enter into this account. So, let's follow this man on his spiritual journey from dust to dust. And as we drew, as we do, draw lessons or parallels with those on a similar journey to faith, or indeed those who are yet consciously to embark on such a journey.

Well, we begin at the beginning with this man begging on the dusty streets of Jerusalem. And I ask you the question, what do you make of this question? At this point, what opinion does this man hold concerning Jesus? At this point, what appreciation does he have of his own spiritual condition and need?

Well, I think we can answer the question on the basis of the evidence that we have in front of us in the chapter. We can answer it by saying that this man knows nothing, or at best, he knows very little concerning Jesus. Then in verse 11, this is following the miracle, but it, I think, reflects the knowledge that he had before the miracle. When he is asked about the one who had healed him, notice how he replies.

He replied, the man they call Jesus. The man they call Jesus. It's possible that he had heard of Jesus before his encounter that resulted in his recovery of sight, or it may be that these words are simply a reference to what others had said to him about the identity of the one ordering him to go to the pool of Siloam. You can imagine the scene. This man tells him, go to the pool of Siloam. He's put mud on his eyes.

Go to the pool of Siloam. And maybe he's asking, well, who is this guy? And others are saying, it's Jesus. It's Jesus. So for him, it's the man they call Jesus. The man others call Jesus. I don't know who he is, but others call him Jesus. So he knows very little, it would seem, about Jesus. What about his understanding of his own spiritual condition and need? Well, we don't know, in fairness, the answer to that question, but it seems reasonable to conclude that for this man, his big problem, overshadowing all others, was his physical blindness, a problem that, as far as he could tell, had no solution. His spiritual need, though real and urgent, was not perceived as such by the man himself, or so it would appear.

[6 : 50] His starting point, then, if that is a fair description of this man at the beginning of this journey, his starting point is remarkably similar to the place where so many folk are today.

We are, you are, surrounded by people who, like this man, know little or nothing of Jesus. He is, for them, no more than the man they call Jesus. The man others call Jesus, the man others seem to be interested in or speak about, but he's the man they call Jesus. No more, no less.

Like this man, they have their problems, all kinds of different problems, but by and large, by and large, very little perception or awareness of their own spiritual need.

But though the blind man is unaware and uninterested in Jesus, the reverse is certainly not the case. Jesus sees the man and has big plans for the man. That becomes clear in what he says to his disciples in verse 3 in the context of this man's blindness and suffering. Jesus declares to them, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. We see that in verse 3.

So, the man doesn't know Jesus. He has little interest in Jesus, but Jesus has a great deal of interest in this man. And of course, again, when we fast forward to our own day, do we not believe that that is true of many here in our city, here in Aberdeen, a city of which God can say, as He did of Corinth, of old, I have many people in this city, many who currently know nothing of or little of the man they call Jesus, and yet known by God, men and women for whom God has big plans. Well, this is the starting point of this journey from dust to dust. But then we have the first encounter and its impact on the man. Now, his first encounter with Jesus is a very dramatic one and involves the miracle of the man being granted physical sight.

[9 : 20] And the question we pose is to what extent does this take him any further on his spiritual journey to faith in Jesus? It is, as we noted a moment ago, it is after the miracle that he speaks of Jesus as the man they call Jesus. After the miracle. I think it reflects what he thought before the miracle, but it remains his opinion after the miracle, the man they call Jesus. And so it would seem that even following this encounter, even following this great miracle that he was the object of, even following his being granted sight, it is still the case that the man has very little appreciation for who Jesus is. And of his further need of Jesus to attend to his spiritual needs. That said, we certainly can say that the man now has a very positive view of Jesus as a man who has shown compassion to him, as a man who has been able to help him in a very dramatic and powerful way.

He is certainly thinking about Jesus with a view to something, coming to some kind of conclusion, but as things stand at this moment, he doesn't even know where Jesus is. When the question is posed to him there in verse 12, where is this man? They asked him, I don't know. Now, of course, that's simply a factual answer to a question. He didn't know where he was. But it perhaps speaks a little more of his lack of knowledge about this man called Jesus. Now, we'll think a little bit more about this first encounter when the man receives his sight and the impact of that on the man. We'll think about it a little more in terms of its significance in his own spiritual journey when we consider his own words of testimony that are recorded in verse 25. Very dramatic words, maybe the most famous words in the chapter. And we'll come to that in a moment, and there we'll pick up again this first encounter and the impact that it seemingly had on the man. But following his first encounter, and really following the chapter and the order in which the material is presented in the chapter, following his first encounter, the man is then taken to the Pharisees. We read of that from verse 13.

And partly, I imagine, as a result of the debate that he is witnessed to and ponders on, the man comes to what we could call an initial conclusion concerning Jesus. You know, he begins knowing nothing about Jesus or very little about Jesus, the man they call Jesus. Then there's this miracle, and obviously that makes him think, well, who is this guy? And then he's brought to the Pharisees, and he's part of this discussion. Maybe at the beginning, a very silent part, but he's hearing the Pharisees discuss, well, he did this on the Sabbath, so he can't be from God. And others say, well, no, but he did this miraculous sign, so he must be from God. And he's listening to all this debate, and all of this is informing, molding his own thoughts about, well, who is this Jesus? And he comes to an initial conclusion.

And we're told what that conclusion is in verse 17, when he is challenged. The Pharisees can't agree, and so we read there in verse 17, finally they turn again to the blind man. What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened. The man replied, he is a prophet. He is a prophet. And he certainly moved on from where he began. He began by thinking of Jesus simply as the man they call Jesus. The man they call Jesus. But now he's moved on. Now he says, no, he is a prophet. I've come to that conclusion.

I didn't think that before. That wasn't my opinion yesterday, assuming that a day has passed. But it's my opinion today. He is a prophet. And he says it with a great measure of confidence and assurance. He is a prophet. And of course, his conclusion is spot on. It's true that Jesus is more than a prophet.

[13 : 38] Yes, indeed. But he is a prophet. And so what he says is spot on. He is a prophet. He is a messenger of God, bringing the Word of God. He represents God. He is one who is known and blessed by God.

He is a prophet of God. He really places Jesus in the highest place that he knew. For this man, there could be no higher designation. Given the knowledge that he has, this is as high a place as he can accord to Jesus. He is a prophet. And so his spiritual sight, though still blurred, is becoming clearer. And again, as we think of today and the experience of many, perhaps our own experience as we look back on our own experience or as we think of others for whom we are concerned that they might come to know and believe in Jesus. Is it not the experience of many in coming to faith in Jesus that it is seldom a dramatic and momentaneous road to Damascus experience, but rather a growing understanding and appreciation of who Jesus is? Now, I made the point at the beginning, and I stress it again. The experience of those coming to faith can be very different.

We are very different. There are, of course, shared essential elements, but the manner in which we come to faith is very different. We're looking at one particular individual. In his case, though it wasn't a long drawn-out process, nonetheless, it is a process, a growing understanding of who Jesus is. So, he comes to that initial conclusion. He is a prophet. But we can move on as we simply follow the passage as it unfolds before us. We can move on and consider also his honest testimony to his experience of Jesus. And here I am referring to the second occasion that the man is summoned by the Pharisees, and he is exhorted to give glory to God. Then in verse 24, a second time, they summoned the man who had been blind. Give glory to God, they said. We know this man is a sinner.

You'll notice there in the footnote that this expression, give glory to God, really is a means of very solemnly exhorting the one exhorted to tell the truth. You're before God. Tell the truth.

You need to tell the truth. We know this man is a sinner, and we want you to concur with our opinion. Give glory to God. And so, he is given this opportunity. He is really given the opportunity in a very threatening way to give his own testimony concerning Jesus. And his reply is a classic, and by far the most memorable of all his words. Not, I would suggest, the most significant of all his words, but certainly the most memorable of all his words. Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know.

[16 : 59] One thing I do know. I was blind, but now I see. And the words are stirring. The words are powerful, and they resonate with the experience of a new believer who, unable to answer many questions and accusations, is able to echo these words. One thing I do know. I can't answer all your questions, but one thing I do know. I was blind, and now I see. I was lost, and now I'm saved. I was hopeless, and now I have hope. And indeed, it is so, and wonderfully so, that the new believer is able to, as it were, take these words and take them for himself as a description of his own experience.

But the question I want to pose and to invite you to consider with me is, are these the words of a new believer? Yes, they can be used by a new believer, but are they the words of a new believer on the occasion in which they were pronounced? Is the man speaking of how Jesus has granted him spiritual sight? No. Is he rejoicing in his salvation in the face of mocking tongues? Well, no.

What he is doing is giving an honest testimony to what has happened to him. He can see. He was blind. Now he can see. That's what he's doing. He genuinely doesn't know if Jesus is a sinner.

The experts, the religious leaders assure him that Jesus is a sinner. He doesn't know. We know that in the language that he uses in this conversation, in this dialogue with the Pharisees, there is a great deal of irony and sarcasm. And you might say, well, do we have that here? I don't think we do. When he says, whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know, I think he's being genuinely honest about his degree of knowledge, he doesn't know. He doesn't know. But one thing he does know, he had been blind, physically blind, and now he can see. He is certainly impressed by Jesus. He's certainly deeply grateful to Jesus, and evidently, as the incident unfolds, very open to finding more about Jesus. And why? Why is he so positive about Jesus? Why is he so open to finding more about Jesus?

Why is he so predisposed to faith, if we want to use that expression? Well, because of his restored sight. It's his restored sight that has produced this man willing to listen and to find out more, this man very favorably disposed to Jesus. And as we think of that, and if that is a fair description of what is going on here, what is the application for us? Well, let me stress, I have no difficulty, I have no problem with the words of this man, these very memorable words being applied to the experience of a new believer and being used as an encouragement for a new believer who is under fire from all sides and can do no more than cling to his experience. One thing I do know, I was blind, but now I see.

[20 : 21] I can think of occasions when I've had conversations with somebody in that kind of situation, and I've made reference to this very incident and say, well, don't be too concerned if you can't answer all the questions, if you can't respond to all the accusations that are being leveled at you, but you hold on to your experience. You hold on to what you know to be true, that you were blind, but now you see. And that's, I think, a legitimate application of these words. But I don't think that it's the primary application for us. Rather, these are the words of one who has been brought closer to faith because of a powerful act of compassion performed by Jesus. And how does that apply today, given that Jesus is not, as far as I know, walking the streets of Aberdeen, granting sight to the blind, or indeed showing compassion in any other way to the good citizens of our city? Certainly not in the way that He was doing as He walked the dusty paths of Galilee and Jerusalem. Well, does that question not bring us back to the words of Jesus that we have already noticed at the beginning of this chapter, noticed on another occasion, in verses 4 and 5?

As long as it is day, we must do the work of Him who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world. Jesus there speaks of the work we must do. And He includes the disciples as those responsible for doing this work with Him. He recognizes that He will not always remain in the world in the manner that He was then. And the implication and the sobering challenge is clear.

On His departure, His disciples, and that includes us, are to continue to do the work of Him who sent Jesus. We are to continue to do the work of the Father. And as we show the love and compassion of Jesus towards men and women, like the man born blind, we will, by so doing, like Jesus, bring them closer to faith in the one we represent and whose love we reflect. The parallel then today of these words is not so much the stirring testimony of the new believer, but the tentative testimony of the man or woman who is being brought closer to faith, who is being drawn to Jesus by the acts of compassion and kindness and kindness and service of the disciples of Jesus. As such, an individual is challenged by others. As such, a man or woman is being dissuaded from going any further by those who are suspicious of or hostile to the gospel. What is their reply? Well, perhaps along these lines, if the Bible is full of myths, I don't know. One thing I do know, I was lonely and they came alongside me.

If Christians are bigots, I don't know. But one thing I do know, I was hungry and they gave me something to eat. If the church is full of hypocrites, I don't know. But one thing I do know, I was homeless and hopeless and they listened to me and helped me. If heaven and hell exist, I don't know. But one thing I do know is that I was a stranger and they befriended me.

Do you see the challenge? Do you see the challenge that is laid there before us? In the example of this man? Well, if we see the challenge, we must also grasp the opportunity.

[24 : 08] So, we have the man's honest testimony, but that honest testimony can also be described as courageous testimony. His knowledge is limited, his faith is at best nascent, but he courageously confronts and even mocks his mockers. They insult him viciously and he mocks them sardonically.

Do you want to become his disciples too? Do you want to become his disciples too? A taunt that we might just mention in the passing does not imply, as often it is taken to imply, that he already considers himself a disciple of Jesus. There's no reason to imagine that because he taunts him in this way, he considers himself already a disciple. He's conscious that there are disciples of Jesus.

He's conscious of the great interest they're showing in Jesus, and very sarcastically and ironically, he says to them, do you want to be his disciples too? He's not saying, do you want to be a disciple like I am? He's insulted by being described as a disciple of Jesus, but there's nothing to suggest.

At least we certainly can't definitively conclude that he considers himself to be a disciple of Jesus. But there is this courageous testimony in the face of the attack that he is enduring.

Well, we're coming to a climax of sorts, but before we get there, we can note that the journey of this man also involves what we might call some suspect theology. The two affirmations that he makes in the course of this conversation with the Pharisees, the two affirmations that he makes in verses 31 and 32 are, at best, questionable. Notice what he says there in these verses. In verse 31, first of all, he says, we know that God does not listen to sinners. Well, is that true? I can see where he's coming from, and I suppose at some level you could see some validity in what he's saying, but can we say definitively that that is true, what he affirms that God does not listen to sinners? But if that's questionable, what he goes on to say is certainly questionable to a greater degree. Notice what he says there in verse 33. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing. Is that true? Is it not the case that in the Bible we often find men who are not from God doing wonderful things, miracles even?

[26 : 38] Remember Moses and before Pharaoh and how Pharaoh's magicians could do amazing things. They weren't from God. Is it true what he says that if this man were not from God, he could do nothing? Well, I'm not going to spend time examining the validity or otherwise of these effectively doctrinal statements of the man formerly blind, but suffice it to say that it ought not to surprise us if those who are coming to faith will often give evidence of very suspect theology and wrong notions about God and the gospel. It could hardly be otherwise. Of course it's going to be like that. If somebody is only just beginning, is only just learning, there's so many things that as yet have not been taught and instructed. And of course there will be things that they believe and imagine and say that are not true, that are not right. As I say, it's hardly surprising and certainly not disturbing.

Well, the man is finally thrown out by the Pharisees, and we pick up the story with Jesus coming center stage. He was center stage at the beginning in performing the miracle, and he's kind of gone off stage as the man debates with the Pharisees. But Jesus returns to center stage, and he does so at a very poignant moment and in a very poignant way. Notice the very significant, very moving contrast in the language that we have there in verse 35. The man has been dismissed by the Pharisees, and we read there in verse 35, Jesus heard that they had thrown him out. He heard that they'd thrown him out. And then we read, and when he found him. So he's thrown out by the Pharisees, and he's found by Jesus. Thrown out by the Pharisees, found by Jesus. Jesus finds the outcast. He finds the one who has been thrown out.

And in the conversation with Jesus, we can notice a further step on his journey, followed by his simple but eloquent confession of faith. Even before his confession of faith, we have this step that we can identify, and that is, the man displays a humble desire to believe. He displays a humble desire to believe. Let's just notice the question and answer there in verses 35 and 36. Jesus says to him, Do you believe in the Son of Man? Who is he, sir? The man asked. Tell me so that I may believe in him.

His whole demeanor is changed. Are you struck by the contrast in his whole demeanor? Before the Pharisees, he is bold and feisty. Isn't he? Bold and feisty before the Pharisees. But before Jesus, he is meek and mild and humble. But most of all, leaving aside his demeanor, we find a man who wants to believe. Tell me so that I may believe in him. Tell me. Tell me who he is that I may believe in him.

I want to believe. I'm ready to believe. I'm willing to believe. Tell me who he is. The work of God has prepared him to believe. The miracle of Jesus, the compassion of Jesus, the miracle has prepared him to believe. The compassion of Jesus has opened the door of his heart to believe. In a real sense, he already trusts in Jesus as he declares his willingness to believe in the one Jesus identifies for him, the Son of Man. That in itself is evidence of great trust.

[30 : 11] What he says to Jesus is, you tell me who I have to believe in, and I'll believe in him. Is that not trust already? You know, there is already a great deal of trust in the opinion of Jesus. You tell me in what direction to go, and I'll go in it. You tell me who I have to believe in, and I'll believe in him. He already trusts in Jesus in a very real way.

And when Jesus declares that he himself is the one in whom the man must believe, the man responds, and we're not surprised that he does. He responds immediately and eloquently, Lord, I believe. And hand in hand with the words of confession, he falls prostrate into the dust and worships Jesus. Dust to dust. He was in the dust begging, a poor, pitiful, blind man.

And now he's in the dust again, but there's nothing pitiful about him. This is a man prostrate in the dust rejoicing, a man who is worshipping Jesus. He lies before Jesus, and he worships him.

Is this the end of his journey? Well, by no means. Does the man understand the significance of Jesus' self-identification as the Son of Man? Does he appreciate that the one speaking to him is the eternal Son of God? Does he worship him, to use that word, with a full appreciation that before him stands the one who is very God of very God? We surely have to answer in the negative to all of these questions. He doesn't have that level of understanding and insight and discernment yet.

He still has much to learn and much to discover, but his faith is genuine faith, and it is saving faith. He has been found by Jesus and brought to faith by Jesus, and so he lies prostrate before Jesus, the dust of Jerusalem, a stage for this man's worship. Well, it is quite a story, dust to dust.

[32 : 30] And one final thought to ponder on. We've described this as a journey to faith, and indeed we have just said that his journey was far from over. So, we might be intrigued by the question, when did this man become a Christian? To use the language that we use, when was he converted?

I don't know. I don't know. There is clearly a distinct point in his experience when he is enabled to declare, I believe, but there's also evidence of an embryonic or nascent faith before that point. I would ask another question, and it is this, does it matter? Is it really that important for us to be able to identify the moment, the point at which he was converted? What really matters is not the moment in which he is converted or the moment in which he was born again, but what really matters is that he does believe that he is trusting in Jesus. That's the most important thing. We don't need to dissect it with such detail. And of course, that is still the most important thing for us today. It's the most important thing for you today. If I could apply this in the context of the forthcoming Lord's Supper and Communion Weekend, in a couple of weeks we will be celebrating the Lord's Supper, and that is an occasion that provides an opportunity to publicly profess our faith in Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Perhaps you have yet to profess your faith in that way. Perhaps you're uncertain as to whether you should join with the Lord's people at the Lord's table. Well, I would say this to you. The important question for you to answer is not, when did you become a Christian, or when did you first put your trust in Jesus? The important question is, do you believe in Jesus?

Are you trusting in Jesus? Now, there may be many here who are able to identify a moment, a day, a time when they became Christians, and that's fine. That's great. But that isn't the most important thing. The most important thing, indeed, for all of us is to answer the question, are you trusting in Jesus? Do you believe in Jesus? And if you are trusting in Jesus, if you do believe in Jesus, however nascent and however tentative that faith might be, well, your place is with the Lord's people at the Lord's table. Well, this is a story that the Bible shares with us this morning, the story of this man, dust to dust. Let us pray.