

**THE RADICAL RABBI:
“A RADICAL BLINDNESS”
(John 9:1-41)
4.3.22**

INTRODUCTION

This is one of the more amazing stories to look at in the life of our “radical rabbi.” It touches on matters of God’s sovereignty, power, timing, grace, compassion — among others. So as we get into it, **let’s start with a moment of prayer to the amazing God behind this incredible story!**

TEXT

As [Jesus] went along, he saw a man blind from birth — John 9:1.

As far as we can tell, while no longer at the temple courts, Jesus is at least still in Judea, if not still in Jerusalem. It is very likely that, when Jesus saw this guy for the first time, he was begging. That was really the only existence that a person disabled in that way at that time could know, and they were likely helpless to know any other life. And, as we’ll see, Jesus is going to use this man’s lifetime of blindness and helplessness as a metaphor for the spiritual blindness into which we all are born and within which we all are helpless.

His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” — John 9:2.

One of the more consistent themes in Judaism was that of cause-and-effect, that sin would result in a person’s suffering, conversely assuming that those with riches and goods must be good people enjoying the blessings of God due to their goodness. Of course, there was a historical root for this idea. When he was sharing with the people of Israel at the end of his life, Moses told them: *See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse — the blessing if you obey the commands of the Lord your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the Lord your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known — Moses, Deuteronomy 11:26-28.* And of course, just knowing the ebbs and flows of Jewish history would have seemed to confirm that idea. Yet Jesus presents this moment in a completely different way.

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works 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” — John 9:3-5.

Jesus immediately corrects the perception the disciples had of this moment. This moment is not about sin; rather, it is about God displaying his glorious works. God has a plan, and that plan includes this man — along with his blindness. Jesus is literally saying, after

denying anybody's specific sin: I must do the works of him who sent me so that the works of God can be seen in this man.

When Christ says, "As long as it is day," the word "day" is actually illustrating the light of spiritual day existing with Jesus present in a world struggling in the dark "night" of sin in much the same way that the words "life" and "death" in the Scriptures illustrate the profound difference between a life surrendered to Christ and a life lived outside of Christ. This concept actually circles us back to the opening lines of John's gospel: ***In [Jesus] was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it — John 1:4-5.*** The window for enjoying and working in that amazing spiritual "daylight" — the actual physical presence of God on earth in the person of Jesus Christ — was not far from closing. Now was the time to do and be a part of the work that Christ had been sent to do. There would be a time of the intense darkness of evil which would not allow for such work. But, as Jesus reiterated, while I am here, the light is now.

After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means "Sent"). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing — John 9:6-7.

Note that Jesus often used different physical actions to associate with his healings. The point was that his healings were not a matter of process but of power — his power. And after washing his eyes in the waters of the Pool of Siloam — part of a water system developed by King Hezekiah some seven centuries earlier — he came home seeing. Can you imagine what a joyous homecoming that must have been! But the pure joy of the moment did not have a chance to last very long.

His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?" Some claimed that he was. Others said, "No, he only looks like him." But he himself insisted, "I am the man." "How then were your eyes opened?" they asked. He replied, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see." "Where is this man?" they asked him. "I don't know," he said — John 9:8-12.

For as tight as communities were back in the day, it seems very odd that there is no agreement on if this was even the same guy they saw begging for basically all his previous life. And there seems equal uncertainty about Jesus of Nazareth — particularly concerning his works.

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "He put mud on my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is

not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.” But others asked, “How can a sinner perform such signs?” So they were divided — John 9:13-16.

This man’s neighbors along with others who thought they had remembered seeing him begging in previous days weren’t sure what to make of his story of healing, so they sought out the leadership of the Pharisees for advice.

Now it wasn’t God’s Sabbath law that had been violated by Christ in performing this healing — obviously not, for Jesus never sinned — so what they were all in a fuss about was his breaking of the sabbath laws of their oral traditions. Unfortunately, their oral traditions had grown to be seen on a par with the laws God gave to Moses. That said, they would have seen violations by Jesus on several points: (1) performing a healing when a life was not in immediate danger, (2) the act of making the mud that Jesus applied to the man’s eyes, and (3) the actual applying of the mud to the eyes. If this was all true, which is what is behind their increasingly intense interrogation of the healed man, then Jesus would be seen as a sabbath lawbreaker and therefore as a sinner. And, if that was true, how could this Jesus guy be from God? How could one such as he do such a miracle?

But some in the likely growing crowd asked a really relevant question: So if he is in fact a sinner, how could God allow a sinner to do such things as this? And, as John wrote, they were divided in their opinions of this radical rabbi.

Then they turned 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.” They still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man’s parents. “Is this your son?” they asked. “Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?” “We know he is our son,” the parents answered, “and we know he was born blind. But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don’t know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself.” His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. That was why his parents said, “He is of age; ask him” — John 9:17-23.

When upon questioning this man concludes that Jesus is a prophet, he is not necessarily speaking of either the Messiah or even a spokesman for God, but is rather just giving his conclusion that this Nazarene seems to have special insight. Finally, as their investigation continues, the Pharisees call for the man’s parents, but they are petrified of giving the “wrong answer” for fear of being thrown out of the synagogue, which would be the equivalent of being ostracized from the entire community. So they tell what they feel comfortable saying: “Yes, this is our son and, yes, he was born blind. But we don’t have a clue how he got his sight.” But they feel the need to distance themselves from this investigation so they tell the leaders to ask him themselves; after all, he is of age — which means he is at least 13 years old, old enough to be able to give legal testimony.

A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. “Give glory to God by telling the truth,” they said. “We know this man is a sinner.” He replied, “Whether he is a sinner or not, I don’t know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!” Then they asked him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” He answered, “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?” Then they hurled insults at him and said, “You are this fellow’s disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don’t even know where he comes from.” The man answered, “Now that is remarkable! You don’t know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” To this they replied, “You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!” And they threw him out — John 9:24-34.

Now this guy might have been a “nobody” as far as the Pharisees are concerned, but he was a pretty bright guy, and pretty quick on his feet, too. All the Pharisees want to hear from this guy is agreement with their pronouncement that Christ is a sinner; in fact, they’re so anxious for that that they put him under oath — to tell somebody “Give God the glory” was a Jewish form of promising “to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth — so help me God!” Only the guy they’re so busy interrogating isn’t particularly intimidated by this flexing of judicial muscle. All he rightly wants to talk about is how he once was blind but now he sees. But because Jesus is attached to how this happened, they don’t even care about this wondrous event. It really does show how blind the stubborn, resistant heart of anybody can be.

And yet for all their intensity, by their own admission, they don’t even know or understand where Jesus comes from — not so much physically but spiritually. Is he in league with the devil, which they themselves have suggested? Is he somebody else come back to life, which others have suggested? Exactly who or what is he? But the guy who experienced Christ’s healings has some definite ideas he is happy to share — mainly that, since we all seem agreed that God doesn’t listen to sinners and yet he opened my eyes, and since you say he can’t be from God and yet he did something he couldn’t do apart from God, where does that leave us? There was a Scripture that those Pharisees likely knew very well: *If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened — Psalm 66:18.* The Pharisees have a problem: If Jesus is a sinner, then that Scripture is false. But if that Scripture is true, then Jesus is working and speaking through God — exactly as he says he has been. So what are they supposed to do with all that?

But this healed man also makes the absolutely valid point that nobody in their national history had ever given somebody their sight. Through all the miracles recorded in their scriptures, what had just happened to him had never happened to anybody else ever

before. Through hundreds and even thousands of years, this had never happened. And yet, just moments before, it had happened. But at the end of all their careful investigation, they had no answer for what to do with Jesus, this miracle, this guy, or anything.

Finally, likely more from very pent-up frustration than anything else, they very rudely and abruptly dismiss him — from their presence, from that conversation, and from the synagogue itself. This was a big deal, which is why his parents were so fearful of this whole process. To be kicked out of the synagogue meant being cut off from family and friends, and being looked at by other Jews as the equivalent of a tax collector, street worker, or other “sinners.” But while the Pharisees and other were done with this guy, the story for this man and Jesus still had more story to tell. Remember when John, at the end of his gospel, tells his readers why his gospel was written and why stories such as this one of a blind beggar being healed were included: ***Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name — John 20:30-31.***

And so we continue: ***Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” “Who is he, sir?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.” Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him — John 9:35-38.***

So after the dust settles, Jesus returns to find the man. He had heard what the leadership had done to him. So, as he came up to him, he asked him the most important question he had ever been asked: ***“Do you believe in the Son of Man?” — Jesus Christ, John 9:35b.*** The man is ready to entrust his very life, and I love his response: ***“Who is he, sir? Tell me so that I may believe in him” — the healed man, John 9:36.*** I would have loved to see Christ’s face in this moment, but I suspect there was a smile there as he responded: ***“You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you” — Jesus Christ, John 9:37.*** And then the beautiful two-fold response: First, the confession in words — ***“Lord, I believe” — John 9:38a,*** and then the subsequent confession in action — ***he worshiped him — John 9:38b.*** This man could finally see, but he saw Jesus in more ways than one — as the healer of his eyes but, more importantly, as the healer of his soul!

And then the conclusion: ***Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.” Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, “What? Are we blind too?” Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains” — John 9:39-41.***

Now Jesus of course came into the world to bring salvation, but a consequence of his bringing salvation was judgment on all those who would not believe, all those who would turn down his gift — those who were confident in their own viewpoint, in their own perspective, in their own goodness, in their own truth. Jesus was, and is, the light of the world (John 8:12). But to receive Christ’s light, you must admit your own blindness. On the whole, the Pharisees and other members of the leadership refused to do so. They were content with their own vision.

APPLICATION

Helplessness. That is the bottom line for so many of the situations we study through the gospel accounts of Christ’s life on earth:

- 1) The countless number of people who experienced healing at the hands of Jesus.
- 2) The countless number of people who were raised from the dead.
- 3) The two times Jesus calmed storms on the Sea of Galilee, allowing the disciples to escape.

In all those cases, along with so many others, Jesus brought health or life or rescue to people completely unable to change their situation. He changed their circumstance from “disabled” to “enabled,” from an old, broken, wounded creation to a completely new creation. And, not only is Christ’s power overwhelming, but also his love and grace to apply that unlimited power is equally beyond measure.

In our world, that is one of the hardest lessons to get people to comprehend — that, apart from Jesus Christ, we are just as completely disabled to change the most defining circumstance in our lives, and that circumstance is sin. We are spiritually blind and deaf and mute and leprous and withered and bleeding uncontrollably; we are spiritually dead; we are spiritually storm-tossed. Whatever metaphor you want to use, we are helpless — and that is why Christianity, apart from any other faith, declares itself best in two words: “I can’t.” We are helpless, completely unable in any possible way, to change that circumstance — which means that our only hope lies in somebody outside of ourselves, completely outside of sin, to change that circumstance.

Folks, that’s what Jesus did at the cross — the most awesome moment in human history — that we will be looking at over the next few weeks. God saw our helplessness and, at just the right time, God sent us Jesus — his only begotten, eternally beloved Son — to offer us a chance to have that spiritually debilitating and unyielding circumstance of sin changed forever.

That’s why looking at instances where Jesus completely changed the life circumstances of somebody completely unable to walk, or completely unable to hear, or completely unable to be healed from leprosy or, like today, completely unable to see, is so

completely necessary. Our ability to change ourselves by ourselves is as hopeless as this guy thinking he could somehow make himself see again. There is no way!

That's why that message keeps coming up over and over and over again so that whoever is listening finally comes to understand how eternally important is the point of all these gospel stories — helplessness apart from Jesus Christ. As Jesus himself said to the disciples: “[A]part from me you can do nothing” — *Jesus Christ, John 15:5b*. That's why his “I AM” statements are so important — that we understand that, while we are helpless apart from Christ, *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me* — *Paul, Philippians 4:13 (NKJV)*. Why? Because his “I AM-ness” alone is more than enough to meet every need we will ever have, and give us a life beyond our helplessness that we could otherwise never live.

CONCLUSION

Do you know him? He is our one, and only, rescue from the helplessness in which every human being finds themselves at birth — separated from God by sin. Do you know him?

We don't believe in universal salvation here, that Jesus' death on the cross automatically saves everybody. No; what we believe here is that Jesus' death on the cross is an offer to save everybody who realizes that the cross is their only opportunity. They will never be good enough, rich enough, powerful enough, charitable enough, wise enough, to do anything that will be enough in God's perfect eyes. God's offer of healing is found in only one place — the cross — where you'll find God's Son. It's not the Romans or the Jews that held him there, nor the nails that held him there. What held him there was his love for us, and his understanding that our only chance to be saved comes through his blood, his death, and his resurrected life.

Do you know him? Let's pray!