

Jesus, the Light of the World

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Within God's word, there are few ideas more important than light. This is true in a literal sense. After all, the very first words spoken in the Bible are, "Let there be light!" Without the light of the sun, life on earth would quickly perish. However, figurative light is even more important in the pages of Scripture than literal light. Inspired writers constantly use light to represent understanding and darkness, its lack.

As with all Biblical themes, the theme of light reaches its highest expression in Jesus. When Jesus healed the blind, He acted as a literal bringer of light. Similarly, whenever He spoke, He brought figurative light—enlightenment—to those who listened to Him. Even today, anyone who lives without Jesus dwells in darkness. Let's spend this morning, then, looking at what John tells us about Jesus, the light of the world.

Healing a Blind Man

Our text, of course, will be the story of Jesus healing the man born blind, which appears in John 9. Its first context describes **MEETING THE BLIND MAN**. Let's read John 9:1-5. Jesus and His disciples are leaving the temple, where His enemies have just attempted to stone Him. As they go, they pass a blind beggar. This was probably a pitifully common sight. In the time of Jesus, there was no governmental safety net. The blind didn't get monthly disability income. Unless they came from a rich family, either they begged, or they starved. This man may well have been near the temple to benefit from the charity of the religious.

As Jesus and His disciples pass the man, they ask a revealing question. They want to know who sinned that he should be born blind. This was perfectly in line with Jewish religious thought of the day. Despite the book of Job, Jews of Jesus' time believed that a man's earthly fortune reflected his relationship with God. Those who prospered were clearly righteous, while those who suffered poverty or various other calamities must have sinned in some way. This outlook was popular with the rich Pharisees and Sadducees.

Even today, the outlook is still popular. It's behind the so-called prosperity gospel. There are untold thousands of false teachers out there who claim with varying degrees of subtlety that if their hearers will follow Jesus, Jesus will make them rich. When that predictably fails to happen, the disillusioned followers often lose their faith entirely as a result. In a less extreme form, it appears on the lips of Christians who reassure those who have suffered some earthly misfortune by saying, "God has a plan for you." While this is true, God's only plans for us that we know about involve things like salvation and eternal life, not here-and-now blessing. If we put our spiritual focus on the here and now instead, we too will be disappointed.

Jesus points out the unknowability of God's will in His reply to the disciples. God allowed the man to be born blind because He knew that one day, Jesus would happen along and heal him. No one, not even the man himself, could have guessed this until Jesus revealed it. So too, God's interactions with our earthly future, as well as His purpose for acting or not acting, are fundamentally unknowable. Nor can we even assume that some event in our lives is the result of God's will. Chance is a Biblical concept too. Generally speaking, we're better off trusting in what God has promised and allowing the rest to be His business.

Jesus speaks of these promises in His self-description as the light of the world. There are many things that God does not enlighten us about, but He does enlighten us about the important things. I don't have the foggiest idea how the rest of my life will go, but I do know that if I am faithful throughout it, then at the end of my life, God will reward me with an enduring life in heaven. That should be our focus.

Next, though, we see Jesus intervene in the life of the blind man with **A MIRACLE OF HEALING**. John tells the story in John 9:6-7. As is often the case, this miracle is worked in a unique way, and it sheds some light on God's other workings in our lives. This man was clearly healed by the power of Jesus and the power of Jesus alone. There was nothing he could do to heal himself.

However, his healing was still dependent on his obedience. When Jesus made the clay and put it on the blind man's eyes, at that point he still couldn't see. Only when he obeyed Jesus' instructions to wash in the pool of Siloam did he come back healing. In a similar way, our spiritual healing depends on our obedience. If Jesus had told us, "All you have to do is believe in Me," then simple belief would have been enough to accomplish our salvation. However, that's not what He said. All throughout the New Testament,

forgiveness of sins is linked to baptism. Like the blind man, if we want Jesus' power to work in our lives, we must obey the commandment to go and wash. If we do not obey, we will never receive His grace.

Next, John relates **THE FIRST REACTIONS** to the healing of the blind man. Read with me from John 9:8-12. One of the reasons why I find the account of John 9 particularly interesting is that it gives us a different perspective on the miracles of Jesus than we see anywhere else in Scripture. As I think all of you know, I read a fair number of fantasy novels in my free time, and a sub-genre of fantasy is the what-happens-next novel. At the very beginning of the book, the knight in shining armor slays the dragon, delivers the kingdom from ultimate evil, and marries the princess. Then, the rest of the book explains what happens next. Often, the plot revolves around the way that his heroic acts have all kinds of unexpected consequences.

I think it's fair to describe John 9 as a what-happens-next story too, and it gives us a very different picture of what life was like for a recipient of one of the miracles of Jesus than we would otherwise expect. Normally, the recipient exits stage left, and that's the last we see of him. Here, the blind man stays on stage, and we see the bafflement that his healing causes. Even some of his neighbors, the people who presumably know him best, cannot believe the evidence of their eyes. Even though he looks just like their neighbor the blind man, he can't possibly be the same person, because he sees and the other guy is blind. Finally, after the man who was blind insists enough, everybody settles down. Understandably, they want to know how it happened, and he gives the credit to Jesus. This too is going to have a lot of unforeseen consequences.

The first of these consequences is that the man is brought to **THE PHARISEES**. Look at John 9:13-17. Obviously, the neighbors don't know what to make of this miracle that has been plopped down in their midst, so they take the formerly blind man to the local religious experts. He tells the Pharisees the same story he told his neighbors—that Jesus healed him. Simple soul that he is, he draws the correct conclusion from this. If Jesus was able to miraculously heal him, then Jesus must be a prophet.

For the Pharisees, however, this poses a conundrum. The miracle of healing took place on the Sabbath, and the Pharisees were so dead-set against working on the Sabbath that they conclude that Jesus isn't from God. After all, they reason, if Jesus were from God, He wouldn't have worked on the Sabbath by performing a miracle. Other Pharisees point out, and quite rightly, that if Jesus isn't from God, then His ability to work miracles is inexplicable. As always, the Pharisees' problem here isn't ignorance. It's the wrong kind of knowledge. They are so set on what they think they know that they don't consider the evidence.

This can easily be a problem for us too. All too often, people within the church as well as outside it know what they know about the Bible, and don't let anybody confuse them with the facts! Friends, no matter what our religious background may be, we must never discount the possibility that we have been taught wrong. The pure truth about God is not found between our ears. It is found only between the covers of the word. If we reject the word for what we've always thought, we're making the same mistake as the Pharisees.

Let's reflect on these things before the Lord's Supper. Let's first of all remember Jesus, bringer of both enlightenment and grace. He reveals the things of God to us, and He offers spiritual healing to all who are willing to obey Him in faith, even though our healing comes at the price of His own life. All of us who are Christians have known that healing. Let's ask also if we know His enlightenment. Let's ask ourselves which is more important to us: our beliefs or His word. Let's consider this as we partake.

Controversy Over Healing

The controversy over Jesus healing the blind man continues when the Pharisees take the case to **HIS PARENTS**. John relates the ensuing conversation in John 9:18-23. It's pretty obvious what the Pharisees are up to here. They're convinced that God wouldn't allow a miracle to be worked on the Sabbath, so they're looking for proof that no miracle actually occurred. They go to the formerly blind man's parents because they're hoping that Mom and Dad will say that Junior wasn't actually blind at all, that this is all some kind of fraud. Of course, they come away disappointed. Mom and Dad tell them point blank that Junior was born blind and has been blind ever since. However, even though the man's parents have probably heard him attribute his healing to Jesus, they aren't about to repeat that to the Pharisees, because they know that anybody who confesses Jesus is going to get kicked out of the synagogue, and they don't want to be.

From this, there are two points to raise. First of all, it shows once again the irrefutability of the miracles of Jesus. Even when His enemies investigated, they found nothing but proof that He wielded supernatural powers. This gives us reason to believe in Him even now, but it also tells us how we should deal

with those who claim to work miracles today. A genuine miracle checks out. It will be corroborated not only by those who initially accept it, but also by unbelievers and skeptics. If a purported miracle offers anyone reason to disbelieve, it isn't actually a genuine miracle.

Second, this story shows us the chilling effect of social pressure. The formerly blind man's parents knew the truth about his healing, but they didn't want to repeat it because they feared the consequences. This same phenomenon appears today in the pseudo-scientific study of the theory of evolution.

The evolution of the human race from the primordial slime is not an observable fact. However, these are observable facts: Any scientist who writes a paper championing the evidence for creation is not going to get that paper published in any scientific journal. Any scientist who tries to build his career on creationism is not going to get academic tenure. Scientists are people too. They are subject to the same social pressures as the rest of us, and when pressured, will react to that pressure the way that people normally do. They will protect their standing by repeating the party line, regardless of what the evidence really says.

Next, the story displays **THE PHARISEES' DISHONESTY**. Consider John 9:24-27. As we look at the first part of this text, we need to remember that like any other language, the Hebrew-dialect Aramaic of Jesus' day had its idioms. Here, we encounter one of them. When the Pharisees tell the formerly blind man, "Give glory to God," they are not inviting him to engage in an act of worship. Instead, "Give glory to God" means something like "Come clean". It's an attempt to extract a confession. In effect, the Pharisees are saying, "OK. We know that Jesus is a bad guy, so we also know that you and He have to have faked this miracle together. We don't know how you faked it, but we know you did. Why don't you tell us?"

The formerly blind man isn't having any of it. Another one of the things that I enjoy about the text is that at about this point in the story, he gets mad at the Pharisees for doubting him and starts sassing them, which makes for some pretty funny dialogue. We should read everything that he says from this point on with a healthy helping of sarcasm, and his exasperation is plainly evident in his reply. He recognizes the characterization of Jesus as a sinner as the red herring it is. It doesn't matter whether Jesus is a sinner, an angel, or a ten-foot-tall space alien from Mars. That's not the issue. The issue is that Jesus worked a miracle to open his eyes, which had never functioned before, and the Pharisees don't want to address it.

Now, the Pharisees start to treat the formerly blind man as a hostile witness. They're going to cross-examine him to try to create inconsistencies in his story that they can use to trip him up. They want him to tell it all again, right from the top. He won't do it. He is perfectly aware that his questioners aren't being honest. They've already heard the truth, and their asking again shows that they don't want the truth. He also knows that they don't want to become disciples of Jesus. He's just asking to get a rise out of them.

The dialogue between the formerly blind man and the Pharisees continues with **A STATEMENT OF FAITH**. We find it in John 9:28-33. Clearly, the Pharisees don't appreciate the formerly blind man's verbal sally. They use it as an opportunity to brag about their devotion to Moses and coincidentally take another shot at Jesus. The Pharisees proclaim that they know that Moses is from God, because the Scripture tells the story of all the mighty miracles that Moses worked. Jesus, on the other hand, this guy's sketchy. They don't know where He's from because He healed on the Sabbath!

This in turn opens the door for one of the great sarcastic rants in Scripture. Whatever respect the formerly blind man used to have for the Pharisees, he certainly has none now. He recognizes that they are willfully refusing to see the truth, his blood is up, and he lets them have it. The formerly blind man knows and has told the Pharisees repeatedly that Jesus healed him. In that context, their refusal to admit the truth is indeed amazing. Jesus has to be from God because only God's messenger could have opened his eyes.

Clearly, John's point is that there is more than one kind of blindness. The man used to be physically blind, but the Pharisees continue to be spiritually blind. Because of their preconceptions, they simply cannot see the truth about Jesus. The incontestable miracle right in front of them proves—proves!—that Jesus is everything He claims to be, but they won't admit it. As the saying goes, there are none so blind as those who will not see. In our efforts to teach the lost today, this should provide us with some consolation. When people flatly will not listen to the truth, even though we establish it with a dozen different passages, we should remember that the Pharisees didn't believe Jesus, even when they were confronted with the working of His divine power. Some people, perhaps most people, are impossible to convince. They'd rather go on believing what they have always believed rather than be persuaded by the truth.

Finally in this section, the story reaches its conclusion with **THE BLIND MAN'S REJECTION**. John explains succinctly in John 9:34. Apparently, the Pharisees haven't read the book of Job either, because their comments echo the original comments made by Jesus' disciples. Like the disciples, they believe that for this man to have been born blind, SOMEBODY had to have sinned. The formerly blind man's parents have ducked the controversy, so only the man himself remains as a target for their scorn. Besides, he's been lipping them, and now they're mad at him too. He's clearly been a wretch since the day he was born, and now he has the nerve to tell the holy Pharisees that they're wrong? Fat chance that they let him get away with that! They'd already decided that any self-confessed disciples of Jesus were going to get thrown out of the synagogue, this man is asking for it, so out he goes! This was a big deal, more so than our withdrawal process. For this man to be put out of the synagogue meant that he was put out of Jewish society too. He was now officially a dreg like the tax collectors and prostitutes, all for telling the truth about Jesus.

In case we were in danger of forgetting it, this should remind us that standing for the Lord can have consequences. God does not promise us protection if we forthrightly proclaim the truth and forthrightly call out the blindness of others. Indeed, the opposite is true. The Scripture tells us that all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. Sometimes, when we do the right thing, we pay for it.

However, there's a flip side to that coin. Just as there is a price to be paid for forthrightness, there is a price to be paid for ducking the question like the man's parents did. Just as there is a price to be paid for confessing our faith, there is a price to be paid for denying our Lord. When we're in that situation, when we're given the choice of standing for God or not, no matter which choice we make, we're always going to make somebody mad. The question is, "Whom would we rather offend?"

Jesus and the Formerly Blind

In the last part of John 9, we see the interaction between Jesus and the formerly blind man. This begins with **HIS RECOGNITION OF JESUS**. Read with me from John 9:35-38. One gets the feeling that this takes place right after the Pharisees finish with the man who had been blind, that he's sitting on a flight of steps somewhere, wondering what has just happened to him. Remember: this is the first time that the man has actually seen Jesus. He didn't receive his sight until he went and washed in the pool of Siloam, by which time Jesus had gone on to somewhere else. Also, Jesus has only said half a dozen words to him, so he probably doesn't recognize His voice either. His question, "Who is He, Lord?" is entirely sincere.

After Jesus explains, though, the formerly blind man figures things out, and he clearly decides that as long as he has already lost his place in society for sticking up for Jesus, he might as well go all the way. On the basis of the sight he has received, he worships Jesus, and Jesus accepts it. Before we take this for granted, we need to remember that it isn't what usually happens, even among those who receive miraculous healing from Jesus. When Jesus healed ten lepers, only one of them came back to thank Him for it, and that one wasn't even a Jew. The Bible reveals that human nature hasn't changed any in 2000 years, and sadly, human ingratitude is one of the things that hasn't changed. In simply being appreciative of what was done to him, the formerly blind man shows that he's a cut above the norm.

Finally, we come to one of the mainstays of the gospels, a discussion between **JESUS AND THE PHARISEES**. Let's look together at John 9:39-41. Jesus begins with a startling statement. He came not merely to give sight, but also to blind. The preceding chapter shows what Jesus means. As a result of his interaction with Jesus, a blind man came to see both physically and spiritually. On the other hand, when Jesus behaved in a way that challenged the Pharisees' preconceptions, they refused to look at the truth He was showing them. Even today, the gospel of Christ both gives sight and blinds. It gives sight to those who are willing to accept it, but it blinds those who would rather be blind than see the truth.

Some Pharisees are with Jesus, but they quickly decide that they don't want to be in either category. They don't want to be among those who are spiritually blind and need Jesus' healing, but they also don't want to be among those whom He will make blind. They insist to Him that they really belong in a third category, the category of those who see and will keep on seeing. Jesus, however, doesn't allow them their illusions. By their very refusal to acknowledge that they need His help, they will continue to need it.

Really, even the people who think they see without Jesus don't actually see. They just think they do. People who think they're righteous without Jesus aren't actually righteous. They just think they are. We are all blind. We all need spiritual healing. The only question is whether or not we are going to admit it.