

John 9

JESUS, THE EYE OPENER

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New Day Church

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As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. 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."

Having said 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. 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 demanded.

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.

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 do such miraculous signs?" So they were divided. Finally 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."

The Jews 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 Jews, for already the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue. That was why his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God," 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 man 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.

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.

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."

(NIV)

It was 1976 when the first Freaky Friday movie came out. It was the story in which Jody Foster's character and her mother switched places. They woke up one morning and found that their minds had somehow flip flopped and they now were living inside each other's body. The story was just updated and remade this year with new people, experiencing the same shock. And they are left to wonder, "How did this happen?"

If John were naming each of his chapters, he might have called this one Freaky Sabbath. Somehow a man who is blind ends up seeing and some Pharisees who start out seeing end up being called blind. They have switched places by the end of the story. And we are left to wonder, "How did this happen?"

As the story unfolds, two distinct progressions can be seen. The blind man moves closer and closer to Jesus, and the Pharisees become more and more angry about him. The blind man sees more; The Pharisees see less. They are headed in opposite directions.

Jesus takes an event about physical blindness and sight and turns it into a discussion about spiritual blindness and sight. We've seen him do this before with other examples of human need. He talked about he is the only kind of water that will quench our deepest thirst. He showed how people are hungry for more than food – they're hungry for him as the bread of life. Now he shows that people who are blind and in the dark need the light only he can shine. He is the eye opener.

Feeding hunger and quenching thirst are one thing. Restoring sight to a blind person is something else. There is a much more radical quality to the change. I'm grateful for food and water, and I couldn't live without them, but they feel like the basics. When you talk about being able to see for the first time, that is a whole new dimension.

When he was 3 years old, a guy by the name of Shirl Jennings simultaneously contracted polio, meningitis and something called cat-scratch-fever. His eyesight quickly deteriorated to the point that he could distinguish only between light and dark. Doctors concluded he had retinitis pigmentosa, a rare and incurable eye disease. As he got older, doctors considered removing the cataracts from Jennings' eyes, but feared the surgery would further damage his retinas.

So he did nothing and continued to live in blindness until he was 51. Then he went to see an ophthalmologist who questioned that original diagnosis. He believed Jennings had thick cataracts but that both retinas were still intact. So he underwent the surgery. And after 48 years of blindness, he was able to see again for the first time. When the bandages came off, he couldn't stop laughing at everything he saw.

And even though he could now see, he couldn't tell what he was looking at. He was unable to distinguish between an apple and an orange, for instance, or even a banana and

a tomato, without touching them. He had no visual memory and no depth perception, and it took him a long time to adjust to his new condition.

Getting sight for the first time is a revolution. It's more than just a healing – it changes everything. It is a new way of experiencing the world. And in this story John shares with us, even though all the different characters aren't going through the same transformation as the blind man, they all help reveal how radical it is to move from blindness to sight.

So what does it mean? The disciples are the first to learn a lesson. As Jesus sees the blind man begging outside the temple, the disciples use it as an opportunity to understand suffering better. Here was a man who had always been blind. Was God punishing him for something? Was he punishing this man's parents?

That's a universal human question. We see pain and suffering all around us. I saw a blind boy here at the bazaar yesterday with his mom. You don't see a blind child very often, and when you do, you wonder what caused it. There's hurt everywhere you look. And sometimes we can find a direct correlation to someone's own actions. As much as we don't like suffering, we prefer that kind. We like to be able to trace cause and effect. Somebody drinks too much and suffers a hangover. Somebody racks up a lot of debt and goes bankrupt. Somebody fools around and catches a disease or becomes pregnant.

That kind of suffering is hard and ugly but understandable to a degree. It's the "You reap what you sow" principle. But there's a whole lot of senseless suffering in the world and plain old evil. The inexplicable pain, whether ours or someone else's, is hard to accept. Lesslie Newbigin wrote that *if a good reason could be found for evil, then either the evil is not evil or the reason is no good.*

The disciples wanted to know, "Whose fault is this man's condition?" And Jesus responds with "Don't focus on whose fault it is. Focus on what can come of it."

The first step in moving from blindness to sight is **looking forward for purpose – not backward.**

We always want to find the cause in our search for meaning. But cause and meaning aren't necessarily the same. We dig and dig, we rack our brains for what we did wrong. Or we assume when we see somebody else's problem that there's a logical reason they're in bad shape. We think they must deserve it, because we need to find purpose in suffering. That desire for purpose is good – we're just looking in the wrong direction for it. We may never get to the cause of some things. But Jesus can still infuse them with meaning, because he approaches our circumstances from our future – not our past. He is looking at what good he can work out of a bad situation, what glory can be given to the God who alone is powerful enough to open the eyes of the blind. He has the perspective of knowing what the world will look like when complete justice is worked out someday, and then seeing our lives in relationship to that.

One of my favorite seminary professors used to say that when hard times knock on the door, our first question shouldn't be "Why did this happen?" but "Who's there?" Rather than becoming consumed with a riddle we can't solve, we can look to see how God will transform the bad for his good in our lives.

Working in a business like advertising that is full of deadlines, it's only a matter of time before something goes wrong. Sometimes a major typo slips through in an expensive brochure. Sometimes packages get sent to the wrong place. And sometimes they are very costly mistakes that create a mini crisis.

One of the things I appreciate most about my boss is that in those tense moments, her focus is never on whose fault it was. She is always busy problem solving. How will we make it right and move on? Energy is directed forward.

The same is true with personal pain. It is not necessarily our task to find out who or what was responsible for any predicament. But we can concentrate on what God might generate through that predicament.

In the healing process, Jesus reorients us and shows us that no matter how blind we have been, or how long we have been blind, he has a whole new world to open up for us. The meaning is in the future, not the past.

The blind man is going to have a very bright future, much brighter than he would have imagined. This healing was really all Jesus' idea. There's no record of the man asking for anything. Jesus just jumps in and goes to work.

This highlights the truth that the move from blindness to sight means **Jesus is the start, not the end of the process.**

There are no questions from Jesus about the man's faith or desire to be healed. He doesn't have to demonstrate any particular level of goodness before Jesus puts mud on his eyes. Jesus is the one who initiates the healing – not the man.

1 John 4:19

We love because he first loved us.

That's the heart of the message. Out of his own goodness, God reaches out to us in Jesus. It isn't because we've done anything to deserve it. It isn't even because we've shown an interest in him. He just starts working in our lives on his own, with or without our invitation.

Of course, he's working for our good. Eventually the blind man caught on that this was an incredible thing. But it didn't depend on him.

Jesus isn't the end result of a long process of searching for him. He's the one who makes the first move. Just like he noticed that blind man, he's the one who notices us.

That man wouldn't have even thought to ask Jesus to open his eyes. He even said to the Pharisees a little later, "Who has ever heard of a blind man receiving his sight?" He had resigned himself to a life of begging.

It was from that spot that he learned another important message: Moving from blindness to sight **means accepting change – not just help.**

A few coins from Jesus would have made the man happy. He would have been content as long as he could eat each day. The plan that Jesus had for him meant an end to begging. There would be no more handouts.

Physical sight is a wonderful thing, but it changes the way you live. It's the same with spiritual sight. As God opens up our eyes, it will bring change. We've got to be willing to do more than accept his help.

I have a bad habit after the kids go to bed of crashing in front of the TV and not wanting to move again. I'm spent at the end of the day and want to just zone out. But I end up staying there for too long and going to bed late, which only makes me more tired the next day.

I could just continue to wake up each morning after watching TV too late and pray for God to give me strength to overcome my tiredness. But he expects me to change what I'm doing. I need to quit begging for a handout and act on what I know to be true. Seeing brings change.

Actually, change began happening for the man even before he could see. After Jesus put the mud on the man's eyes, he asked him to go and wash in the pool. From the recorded conversation, it doesn't look like Jesus gave much explanation for the instruction. He expected the man to act on his words without full disclosure of the results.

That pool is still there today. I'm sure it took some doing for him to reach it. Getting a blind man moved around in those days, in and out of a pool that was down a long flight of stairs, would have been a bit of work. It took significant action on his part even before he could see. When we move from blindness to sight, sometimes it means **obeying while it is still dark, not light.**

I have a strong desire to know everything before doing anything. A college buddy of mine described it as the paralysis of analysis. Where I noticed it the most was when we were deciding whether or not to plant this church. I agonized for years, which meant Karin agonized too. Could we do it? What would it be like? What if it didn't work? What about other choices we would give up? And I remember reaching a point where I realized I couldn't think everything through.

Actually, I was listening to a song written from the perspective of another blind man in the Bible. And there was a line that said, "I know I'm broken, but you can heal me."

And I realized that my inability to decide what to do was a sign of my brokenness more than it was a God-given safety feature. And I realized that I needed to obey as much as I knew God was telling me to do – even though I couldn't see everything completely.

Sometimes we hold back, wanting total clarity first. But often God brings the clarity as we are moving forward. Eugene Peterson talks about God's light being like lightning rather than sunshine. Like lightning, it illuminates the path in front of us for a little, but we have to walk forward in the dark, trusting what we've seen is still true.

As he progressed along, the blind man who could now see physically also began to see spiritually. He moved from talking about "the man they call Jesus" to saying "He is a prophet" to believing he was God's Son. Each discussion with people reinforced his belief and brought new levels of insight.

On the other hand, the Pharisees grew progressively close-minded. They started out not knowing where Jesus came from to knowing he was a sinner and throwing out the former blind man for believing in him. They were becoming blind. When you are really moving from blindness to sight you will be **admitting the need for God, not denying it.**

I think this is one of the most disturbing elements of the story. We would like to identify primarily with the blind man, or maybe the disciples. But to tell the truth, I can see an awful lot of myself in the Pharisees. They were the church-going types. They were the ones who studied their Bibles the most. They were the ones trying to live good lives. They should have been the ones who saw most clearly what God was doing.

So why didn't they? They couldn't bring themselves to see that they were in the same position as the blind man. They said he had been steeped in sin at birth. It's back to the question the disciples posed to Jesus at the beginning. Is this man being punished because he's more evil than others? The Pharisees answer was yes. But it wasn't just, "This man is evil." It was "We Pharisees are not evil." They may have been right that the man was steeped in sin at birth. The point was — so were they.

Jesus said they wouldn't have been guilty if they had admitted their neediness. But they couldn't bring themselves to face it. I like what the writer Herman Ridderbos had to say about it: *"It is not sin that cuts a person off from what Jesus wants to give; it is the illusion that one can manage without Jesus as the light of the world."*

Karin's Uncle Rick was a pastor for many years and part of his training was counseling alcoholics. He had a moment that was a turning point in his career when he realized, "I am more like these people than I am not like them." We're all in need of God's recovery program.

For the Pharisees, it only got worse. Things escalated to the point where they could no longer even stand to hear any more about Jesus. So they kicked the man out of the synagogue.

Isn't it perfect that Jesus chose that moment to return to the man. He sought him out. He looked for this one who had been such a faithful witness in the face of hostility and he revealed himself more fully.

The man finally understood.

Moving from blindness to sight means **new relationships, not old rituals**.

Look at the very end of the story again:

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.

It's very telling that the man encountered Jesus outside the synagogue. The religious leaders kicked the man out to lock him out of worship, to protect their traditions. And the first thing he ends up doing is encountering Jesus as God out in the world and worshipping him. He now sees him more fully than they ever did, worships him more wholeheartedly than they ever will.

Complete sight for him culminated in coming face to face with Christ and having to answer the question: Do you believe in me? And he was able to say yes. That was when his true worship began. It wasn't in whether or not he went to the synagogue. It wasn't because he had lived his life according to all the rules. He saw Jesus for who he was and he experienced his strength and healing.

The Pharisees missed out by making it all about the religious system. Somehow by trying to obey God's rules, they couldn't see God himself when he was right in front of them.

Trying to be perfect on our own, going through the motions of getting involved in church will never be good enough to make us right with God. Like Paul said, we've all sinned and we come up short of reaching God's glory. There's no way we can do it.

It is only by establishing a new relationship with the living Jesus that our eyes will be opened and we will truly see God.

Some thoughts as we close:

1. Ask God to reveal the blind spots in your life. Where would he want you to be seeing him more clearly?

2. Where can you begin to obey him now, even if it is still dark?
3. Do you believe? Have you come face to face with the pointed question of Jesus?