

**John 9:1-41**

<sup>1</sup> As he passed by he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup> His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered, “Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him. <sup>4</sup> We have to do the works of the one who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work. <sup>5</sup> While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” <sup>6</sup> When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva, and smeared the clay on his eyes, <sup>7</sup> and said to him, “Go wash in the Pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). So he went and washed, and came back able to see. <sup>8</sup> His neighbors and those who had seen him earlier as a beggar said, “Isn’t this the one who used to sit and beg?” <sup>9</sup> Some said, “It is,” but others said, “No, he just looks like him.” He said, “I am.” <sup>10</sup> So they said to him, “(So) how were your eyes opened?” <sup>11</sup> He replied, “The man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and told me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ So I went there and washed and was able to see.” <sup>12</sup> And they said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I don’t know.” <sup>13</sup> They brought the one who was once blind to the Pharisees. <sup>14</sup> Now Jesus had made clay and opened his eyes on a sabbath. <sup>15</sup> So then the Pharisees also asked him how he was able to see. He said to them, “He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and now I can see.” <sup>16</sup> So some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, because he does not keep the sabbath.” (But others said, “How can a sinful man do such signs?” And there was a division among them. <sup>17</sup> So they said to the blind man again, “What do you have to say about him, since he opened your eyes?” He said, “He is a prophet.” <sup>18</sup> Now the Jews did not believe that he had been blind and gained his sight until they summoned the parents of the one who had gained his sight. <sup>19</sup> They asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How does he now see?” <sup>20</sup> His parents answered and said, “We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. <sup>21</sup> We do not know how he sees now, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him, he is of age; he can speak for himself.” <sup>22</sup> His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone acknowledged him as the Messiah, he would be expelled from the synagogue. <sup>23</sup> For this reason his parents said, “He is of age; question him.” <sup>24</sup> So a second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, “Give God the praise! We know that this man is a sinner.” <sup>25</sup> He replied, “If he is a sinner, I do not know. One thing I do know is that I was blind and now I see.” <sup>26</sup> So they said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” <sup>27</sup> He answered them, “I told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?” <sup>28</sup> They ridiculed him and said, “You are that man’s disciple; we are disciples of Moses! <sup>29</sup> We know that God spoke to Moses, but we do not know where this one is from.” <sup>30</sup> The man answered and said to them, “This is what is so amazing, that you do not know where he is from, yet he opened my eyes. <sup>31</sup> We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if one is devout and does his will, he listens to him. <sup>32</sup> It is unheard of that anyone ever opened the eyes of a person born blind. <sup>33</sup> If this man were not from God, he would not be able to do anything.” <sup>34</sup> They answered and said to him, “You were born totally in sin, and are you trying to teach us?” Then they threw him out. <sup>35</sup> When Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, he found him and said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” <sup>36</sup> He answered and said, “Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?” <sup>37</sup> Jesus said to him, “You have seen him and the one speaking with you is he.” <sup>38</sup> He said, “I do believe, Lord,” and he worshiped him. <sup>39</sup> Then Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see might see, and those who do see might become blind.” <sup>40</sup> Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not also blind, are we?” <sup>41</sup> Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you are saying, ‘We see,’ so your sin remains.”

**Context**

Our narrative begins with the simple phrase “As he passed by...” It lacks the general markers (time, geography, etc.) that indicate a break in continuity, suggesting that John intends the story of the blind

man to be read in continuity with the preceding chapters. So what was in the preceding chapter? The primary narrative in Chapter 8 is the “woman caught in adultery,” Jesus’ self-identification as the “light of the world,” and a long discussion between Jesus and the “Jews” about the very nature of what it means to be of the covenant people – a dialogue that occurs in the context of the Feast of Tabernacles.

Jesus’ claim to be the light of the world (8:12) is repeated in 9:5, and the healing miracle in John 9 stands as a demonstration of this claim. In addition, the *Mishnah* identifies Siloam, the water in which the blind man bathes (v.7), as the source of the water for the water libations of the Tabernacles feast, strengthening the connection. Finally, John 9-10 build on Jesus’ denunciation of the “Jews” in John 8. The intense conflict between the healed man and the Pharisees (esp. 9:24-34) dramatizes the theological arguments of the earlier debate. Clearly, there is continuity – and we will encounter more of these “echoes” as we study the gospel narrative. There are also key Johannine ideas that must be kept in mind as we move forward. Key among them are: miracles and sin.

### Miracles

The standard NT word for miracle is *thauma* (wonder), *dunamis* (mighty work), and *terata* (portent). John does not use any of these words – he simply says *sēmeia* (sign) a word that is unique and distinctive to Christianity.

The seven miracle accounts in the Fourth Gospel are all found in chapters 1–12 (from AYBD):

- (1) water into wine (2:1–11) – unique to John
- (2) healing of an official’s son (4:46–54) – see also Matt 8:5–13 and Luke 7:1–10
- (3) healing of a paralytic at Bethesda (5:1–15) \*
- (4) feeding of a multitude (6:1–14) – see also Mark 6:32–44, Matt 14:13–21 and Luke 9:10–17
- (5) walking on water (6:16–21) – see also Mark 6:45–52 and Matt 14:22–33
- (6) healing of a blind man (9:1–41) \*
- (7) resurrection of Lazarus (11:1–44) \*

\* similar in type to miracles reported in the other gospels

Though the number of miracles in John is fewer than in any of the Synoptic Gospels, their importance has long been recognized by scholars, even while their meaning, function, and source have been much discussed and disputed, beginning with the distinctively Johannine terminology for miracle. Aside from one instance, miracles are called either *sēmeion*, “sign” (2:18; 4:54; 6:14, 30; 10:41; 12:18), in the plural *sēmeia*, “signs” (2:11, 23; 3:2; 6:2, 26; 7:31; 9:16; 11:47; 12:37; 20:30) or, *ergon/a*, “work,” a word consistently used by Jesus. *Ergon/a* is a broader term that can embrace Jesus’ words (14:10), his whole mission (17:4) as well as his miracles (e.g., 7:21; 10:32, 7:3; 9:3–4; 10:25, 32, 37–38; 14:10–12; 15:24).

In the gospel of John the *semeia* themselves are extraordinary and point beyond themselves to the divine – not just the divine as a vague power, but to a person. They identify Jesus as the light (8:12; 9:5; 12:46) and life (11:25; 14:6) of the world, the bread of life from heaven (6:35, 41, 48, 50, 51), and the Logos who, through the *semeia*/signs, reveals his own glory (1:14; 2:11; 11:4), which is also the glory of God his Father (11:4; 11:40), since he and the Father are one (10:30, 38; 14:3, 10, 11, 20; 16:15, 32; 17:21) and since he does the Father’s will (4:34; 5:30; 6:38) and works (*erga*: 4:34; 5:36; 9:4; 10:25, 32, 37; 14:10; 17:4).

And those *semeia*, not surprisingly, evoke a variety of responses as we have seen in earlier chapters of the Fourth Gospel and as we will see here in John 9. The responses can be generalized as follows:

- (1) For some, Jesus’ wonderworking endorses him as prophet sent by God (2:11, 23; 3:2; 4:39, 45–47, 49, 53; 6:2, 14; 7:31; 11:45–48; 12:11, 18). Jesus is critical of this type of response. When

you consider what is being revealed, “prophet” is a cautious response at best. Jesus characterizes the response as untrustworthy (2:24) and wrongly motivated (6:26); ultimately, it fails (12:37). Those who give this tepid response are described as “the Jews.” A term which has a very mixed use in this gospel.

- (2) There are many places in the gospel where “the Jews” is a negative term designating those Jews who are skeptical toward or reject the *sēmeia* and/or the claims Jesus makes in connection with them (2:18, 20; 5:10, 16; 6:41, 52; 9:18; 10:24–25, 31–33; 12:11). Sometimes the those who reject the *sēmeia* are specified further as “the Pharisees” (7:31–32, 47–48; 9:13, 15–16, 40–41; 11:46–47; 12:18–19) or “the rulers” (7:48), though the latter term more often designates persons in the first category (3:1; 7:26, 50; 12:42). The hostility between Jesus and Jewish authorities in his day is reflected in these passages; but equally, if not more, important, they reflect antagonism between the evangelist’s community and the Jews of his day.
- (3) But there are those who see Jesus’ miracles for what they are, signs identifying him as the life and light of the world, the bread from heaven, the one sent by the Father (2:11; 6:69; 9:38; 11:41–42) to do his works (5:36; 10:25). Jesus can therefore invite belief in his works as a way to perceiving that he and the Father are one (10:38; 14:11). This last group reflects the clearest division in the body of the faithful:
  - a. Those who believe, and
  - b. Those who do not believe and the quite understandably charge Jesus with blasphemy (10:33; cf. 5:18; 8:58–59; 19:7).
  - c. *NB.* Even his disciples fail to comprehend his relation to the Father (14:8), eliciting an astonished reaction from Jesus (14:9) and, later, the prediction that the faith they profess (16:30) will not stand the test (16:32)—not surprisingly, for to believe such claims requires a deeper and true understanding.

### Sin in the Gospel according to John

John seems to understand sin in a way that accents a singular aspect in a way that deserves mention. Words for “sin” occur often in our text: *hamartano* = “to sin” (9:2, 3; elsewhere in John: 5:14 & 8:11); *hamartia* = “sin” (9:34, 41); *hamartolos* = “sinner” (9:16, 24, 25, 31 -- all the occurrences in John). The question is does John’s discussion match the discussion of *hamartia* in the other gospels?

In our passage, the concept of sin will be quickly introduced via the disciples’ question in v.2 : “*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*” This reflects traditional Jewish speculation on the relationship of illness and sin (cf. 5:14). In 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, people commonly assumed that disease and disorders on both the personal and national level were due to sin, as summarized in the rabbinic saying from around 300 CE that “there is no death without sin and there is no suffering without iniquity” (*b. shabbat* 55a).

Consider the biblical text underlying 1<sup>st</sup> century thought: (a) Based on Ex 20:5 and Dt 5:9 where God promises to punish “*children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation,*” e.g., a birth defect must have been the result of parent’s (or grandparent’s) sin. (b) Based on Ezekiel 18:20: “*A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own*” – a birth defect must have been the result of sins committed in the womb by the child. The rabbis debated whether fetuses could sin, some arguing they could (for example, *Genesis Rabbah* 63:6) and others that they could not (*Genesis Rabbah* 34:10) – a line of reasoning because of the enmity between Jacob and Esau in the womb. These seem to have been two views present in Jesus’ day.

But Jesus’ words in vv.3-5 turn the conversation away from the disciples’ conventional theodicy concerns. In the Fourth Gospel, “sin” is not a moral category about behavior, but is a theological category about one’s response to the revelation of God in Jesus (8:21, 24; cf. 9:39-41; 16:9) – which

for John is the heart of the *semeia*. The man's blindness is not an occasion for reflection on sin and causality, but is an occasion with revelatory significance. The "need" that evokes the miracle, then, is not the man's blindness, but the need for God's works to be made manifest. It is interesting to compare Jesus' words in v. 3 with the framing of the Cana miracle story in 2:1-11. In that story, the revelatory dimension of the miracle is brought out explicitly at the end (2:11), but here the reader is told what to look for before the miracle occurs.

In a number of ways, Jesus challenges the common perception of sin:

- First of all, Jesus challenges the thinking that suffering was the direct result of sin. He says that it is neither (v.3; although 5:14 seems to suggest that sin and suffering are connected). Neither can it be assumed that because the Pharisees are healthy and have normal vision, that they are sinless.
- Secondly, he challenges the thinking that sinfulness is directly related to obeying the sabbath laws. Jesus does what is expressly forbidden – kneading; yet we know he is not a sinner. Neither can it be assumed that because the Pharisees perfectly obey the sabbath laws that they are sinless.
- Thirdly, he challenges the thinking that neither God nor the righteous (Pharisees) should listen to sinners (v.34). Certainly God listened to the supposedly sinner Jesus and the Pharisees should have listened to the formerly blind man. Neither can we assume that because the Pharisees (or clergy!) appear to be righteous, that God listens to them more than to sinners or that they speak for God any more than sinners can speak for God.

### Healing the Blind

On a final note, before we begin, Brian Stoffregen wrote the following and it is worth repeating here: "It has been suggested that the origins of denominations occurred when the healed blind men met each other. At first they were all excited about the miracle of sight that Jesus had given them, but as they talked about how Jesus had healed them, they began to discover some significant differences. For some, the healing came with simply a touch from Jesus (Mt 9:29 ; 20:34 ). Another proudly boasted that he had enough faith so that Jesus didn't have to touch him to perform the miracle (Mk 10:52 ). Another meekly exclaimed that Jesus not only touched him twice, but also "spit on his eyes" in order for him to see clearly (Mk 8:23 ). The final one really felt embarrassed to admit that even though a touch wasn't part of his healing, Jesus' "spit" wasn't enough. Jesus had mixed his saliva with dirt and put the mud on his eyes and then told him to go and wash in some pool of water (Jn 9:6-7 ). Since each one thought his healing was normal and better than the others, they divided into spittites and non-spittites; muddites and non-muddites; touchites and non-touchites. Denominationalism was born."

---

### Commentary

If you wanted a one sentence summary – here it is: "*I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see might see, and those who do see might become blind*"(v.39). Or: as a sign that he is the light, Jesus gives sight to a man born blind. But there is a richness to be gained in a detailed look at the text and narrative. The Johannine scholar, Fr. Raymond Brown suggests the following outline:

- A. Setting (9:1-5)
- B. Miraculous healing (9:6-7)
- C. Interrogations of the blind man (9:8-34)
  1. Questioning by neighbors and acquaintances (9:8-12)
  2. Preliminary interrogation by Pharisees (9:13-17)
  3. The man's parents questioned by the Jews (9:18-23)
  4. A second interrogation of the man by the Jews (9:24-34)

D. Jesus leads the man born blind to that spiritual sight which is faith (9:35-41)

### ***The Setting***

Verses 1-5 narrate the situation of need that evokes the miracle, but they provide an interesting twist on the traditional miracle story form. The man's blindness is stated as a fact in v.1, but he is not an active character in the story until v.7. He makes no request of Jesus to be healed (cf. 4:46.-54), nor does Jesus engage in any conversation with him about his healing (cf. 5:1-9a). Rather, the blind man's initial narrative function is as the catalyst for the conversation between Jesus and his disciples in vv. 2-5. This is the first appearance of Jesus' disciples in the Gospel since 6:60-71 and their first mention since 7:3. The disciples would have been an unessential presence in chaps. 7-8, where the focus was on establishing the lines of conflict between Jesus and the Jewish religious authorities.

The metaphorical use of "day" and "night" in v. 4b signals the contingency of Jesus' presence as the *Logos*. Day will come to an end with the arrival of Jesus' hour (see the use of "night" in 13:30). Day and night are paired in 11:9-10 with a similar metaphorical meaning. Verse 5 makes the metaphor and its contingency ("*as long as*") explicit: Jesus' presence in the "world" (*kosmos*) is the light that makes God's work possible (cf. 8:12).

### ***The Healing***

The sign/miracle is simply told. Many ask why Jesus used the mixture of earth/dirt and saliva to make clay and then put it on the eyes of the man? There is no simple answer. Some find an echo of the Creation story (Gen 2) – although there God breathes life into the human being. There is an part of John's gospel (John 2-3, "*the next day...the next day...the next day...the third day*") where the inspired author lays out a new creation account – one that comes to fore in the sign of broken humanity being made whole – all seen as metaphor via the man born blind. But that is theological musing and has brings with it its own problems.

After Jesus made mud and anointed the blind man's eyes, he told him: "*Go wash in the Pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). So he went and washed, and came back able to see.*" Unlike Naaman who objected when Elisha sent him to wash in the Jordan (2 Kgs 5:10-14), the man born blind responded with unquestioning obedience when Jesus sent him to wash in the Pool of Siloam.

Water for the Pool of Siloam was channeled through Hezekiah's tunnel from the Gihon spring. The Pool of Siloam was the source of the water used in the water-pouring ceremonies during the Feast of Tabernacles. The evangelist explains that Siloam means 'Sent'. The consonants of the Hebrew verb 'to send' (*šālah*) are the same as those of the Hebrew for Siloam (*šilōah*), which allowed popular etymology to make the link. Perhaps the evangelist added this explanation to connect the name of the Pool with the fact that Jesus sent the man there to wash, so as to make clear that the miracle occurred because Jesus sent him, not because of any healing qualities in the water itself.

It is notable that the miraculous healing does not occur in the presence of Jesus himself (cf. 4:46-54).

Throughout the millennia, many have seen a possible connection with washing in the pool of Siloam and Baptism. The most common parallels notes are that

- the man has been blind since birth || we are sinners from birth; and
- *epichrio* ("smeared" in vv. 6 & 11 -- its only NT uses) literally means "to anoint" (*chrio*) + "on" (*epi*). (*chrio* forms the basis for words as "christ," "chrism," "christening," -- it seems to refer to Jesus' baptism in Acts 4:27 and 10:38 and possibly our baptisms in 2 Cor 1:21 and in 1 John 2:20, 27 where the noun *chrisma* is used.)

### ***The Interrogations***

If there is a “typical” pattern to any miracle account it is: (a) the situation of need, (b) the miracle, and (c) the attestation/witness to the miracle. It is here that John’s telling of the story has unique features – patterns outlined in the introductory comments of miracles and sin (in John’s writing). Be attentive to simple categories such as true witness, equivocating witness, unbelievers, accommodator, or similar categories that are other than one who believes and is willing to live/act based upon that belief.

*Questioning by neighbors and acquaintances (9:8-12)*. Jesus’ healing of the man born blind produced an immediate visible transformation: he no longer sat and begged. Confronted with this evidence, his neighbors and those who knew him as a blind beggar asked whether this is the man who used to sit and beg? Just as in John 8, there is division. The answers were various: some claimed that it indeed was the man they knew to be a blind beggar. Others said, “*No, he just looks like him.*” They thought it was impossible for a man born blind to be healed, and so distrusted their eyes—the man before them must be someone else. No one bothered to ask the man about his identity whether he was the one who used to sit and beg, but the man (born blind) himself insisted that he indeed was that man.

Once they have established that he is indeed the blind beggar they had known, they ask the obvious question of how he came to have his sight (v. 10), and he recounts what happened (v. 11) – and is so doing becomes witness. This question will be asked four times in this story, stressing that something highly unusual has taken place, something that cannot be explained in the categories of this world. Unlike the man by the pool of Bethesda, this man realizes from the beginning that Jesus is the one who has healed him (v. 11; cf. 5:12-13), but he does not know *where* Jesus is (v. 12). This ignorance will be resolved soon enough. The deeper ignorance of the opponents, who do not know where Jesus is from (v. 30), does not improve as a result of this act of mercy and glory on Jesus’ part. The man’s admission of ignorance is an attribute of a true disciple, revealing him to be honest and humble. He stands in marked contrast to the Jewish opponents in this story, for they claim to know what in fact they realize they do not really know (v. 24; cf. v. 16). It is precisely this lack of integrity and self-awareness that Jesus criticizes in his conclusion to this story (vv. 39-41).

*Preliminary interrogation by Pharisees (9:13-17)*. What follows is puzzling: the neighbors *brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind*. This action might have arisen from a desire on their part to bring to the Pharisees’ attention evidence of the great miracle Jesus had performed. However, the next words foreshadow difficulties their action would create: *Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man’s eyes was a Sabbath*. Mixing saliva and dirt was regarded as kneading, and applying an unusual salve was regarded as healing. Both these actions were prohibited on the sabbath according to Pharisaic tradition (see **Notes** 9:6 below). As in 5:1-18, the concern with sabbath violation reflects an issue current in Jesus’ time. To violate the sabbath law was to challenge the laws that bound the Jewish covenant community together and the Pharisees’ authority as interpreters of those laws. Whether intended or not, the neighbors’ action provided the Pharisees with evidence against Jesus, and brought the man born blind under Pharisaic scrutiny.

Hearing the miracle was performed on the Sabbath “*the Pharisees also asked him how he was able to see.*” They were not interested in the miracle that had occurred, nor the benefits it procured for the man. They wanted only to know ‘how’ it was done, because they wanted evidence to use against Jesus. The man responded more cautiously to the Pharisees than he had to his neighbors. His narrative does not mention “kneading” or that Jesus sent him to the Pool of Siloam; only that he washed, with the result ‘now I see’.

Jesus’ violation of a sabbath prohibition is thus seen by some of the Pharisees as evidence of Jesus’ distance from God (v. 16a). This conclusion resounds with irony (as the blind man will point out in v. 33), because the correct interpretation of the healing is as the revelation of God’s works (v. 3). Some of

the Pharisees, however, link this healing with other miraculous acts Jesus has performed (note the use of the plural “signs” (*semeia*), v. 16b). This schism among the Pharisees (v. 16c) echoes the divided response of the blind man’s neighbors (vv. 8-9; cf. 7:12, 25-27, 31, 40-43).

Like the preceding scene with the neighbors (vv. 8-12), the Pharisees’ interrogation of the man provides an opportunity for the blind man to bear witness to his healing (v.15). There is a progression in the man’s witness: earlier, he identified his healer simply as “the man called Jesus,” but in this scene he identifies Jesus as a prophet (v. 17; cf. 4:19). The man’s growing awareness of the truth of Jesus’ identity (cf. vv.30-33, 36, 38) underscores one of the story’s central theological themes: blindness is not determined simply by seeing or not seeing, but by recognizing the revelation of the works of God in Jesus (cf. vv.3,41).

*The man’s parents questioned by the Jews (9:18-23)*. The religious authorities are divided about Jesus and the meaning of his miracles/signs. The point of division is Jesus’ disregard for their sabbath regulations and the idea that God would work through such “lawlessness.” One possible way to resolve their impasse and division is to challenge the testimony of the man about his former condition – was he really blind from birth? “*Now the Jews did not believe that he had been blind and gained his sight....*” And so they summons the man’s parents and ask three questions: (a) Is this your son? (b) Was he born blind? And (c) How is he now able to see? The parents respond that he is indeed their son who was born blind, but they refuse to speculate on how he gained sight.

This is now the third time the question of “how” has been asked. But here the parents understand the question to be asking for more than what mechanism enabled him to receive his sight – and they answer cautiously: “*Ask him, he is of age; he can speak for himself.*” A Jewish boy comes of age at 13 years (*m. Niddah* 5:6) and one day and is then able to give legally viable testimony. The parents pointed out that since their son was of age he could answer for himself.

The evangelist explains why they were so cautious: “*His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone acknowledged him as the Messiah, he would be expelled from the synagogue.*” This is the first of three occasions in the Fourth Gospel where belief in Jesus as the Christ is linked with the threat of expulsion from the synagogue (v.22; 12:42; 16:2).

*A second interrogation of the man by the Jews (9:24-34)*. In the third and final interrogation scene, the authorities are identified only with the pronoun “they.” They are clearly the same group identified as the Pharisees who interrogated the man in vv. 13-17, but the motivation for the second interrogation is also clearly linked to the parents’ testimony and their rebuttal: “*...he is of age.*” The man is recalled before the elders.

Twice in this interrogation scene the authorities hold *their* knowledge up to the man and expect him to accept their positions (vv.24, 29). Each time, however, the man counters with his own experience (vv.25, 30-33).

#### **The authorities**

*We know that this man is a sinner*

*We know that God spoke to Moses, but we do not know where this one is from.”*

#### **The Man Born Blind**

*“If he is a sinner, I do not know. One thing I do know is that I was blind and now I see.”*

*“This is what is so amazing, that you do not know where he is from, yet he opened my eyes. <sup>31</sup> We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if one is devout and does his will, he listens to him. <sup>32</sup> It is unheard of that anyone ever opened the eyes of a person born blind. <sup>33</sup> If this man were not from God, he would not be able to do anything.”*

The fact that the man holds his ground in the face of the Jewish authorities gives this interrogation scene a markedly different cast from the preceding two (vv. 13-17, 18-23). The authorities try to intimidate the man with their status and knowledge, but he will not be intimidated.

The Jewish authorities' renewed interrogation could be seen as a fulfillment of their responsibility to gather as much evidence as possible in order to decide a case (cf. Nicodemus's request that Jesus be granted a full hearing in accordance with the law, 7:51), but their opening words make clear that their minds are made up: "*Give God the praise!*" (v. 24).

This expression is a traditional oath formula, through which a person is enjoined to tell the truth (e.g., Josh 7:19) or confess one's sin (e.g., 1 Sam 6:5; Jer 13:16) as evidence of one's worship of God. He is not even intimidated by their opening "salvo." Ironically, the man will acknowledge God's glory in the healing work of Jesus (vv. 30-33; cf. 1:14; 2:11; 11:4), while the authorities will turn their backs on this manifestation of God's glory.

The man does not engage the Jewish authorities in the category of their expertise (what constitutes sin according to the law; v. 25a), but instead contrasts their claim with the reality of his experience and hence his understanding (v. 25b). His refusal to bend to their knowledge is in itself a challenge to their authority, as is the content of his words. The man's insistence on what he knows confronts the Jewish authorities with a contradiction inherent in their definition of sin; their focus on the violation of the law precludes a focus on the healing (cf. 5:10-15; 7:21-24).

Verse 27 reveals that the man has not been fooled into believing that the authorities' repeated questions have anything to do with a judicious search for information. The mock earnestness of the man's response is a skillful example of Johannine ironic understatement, as he cleverly turns the authorities' inquiries against them. For the first time in this series of interrogations, the Jewish authorities become the one under examination, rather than the examiners (v.27 b-c). The man's final comment: "*Do you want to become his disciples, too?*" is calculated to taunt the authorities. One can imagine the pleasure with which the audacity of the man's question would be read by a community who saw its own story being played out in these verses.

The dialogue of John 8 is clearly echoed here as the authorities respond to the taunt that they are "*disciples of Moses.*" In Jewish literature, "disciple of Moses" occasionally appears as a designation for the rabbis. By using this designation of themselves here, the Jewish authorities stress their faithfulness to the Mosaic law. The disdain with which the authorities contrast the man's status as a disciple of Jesus (v. 28, lit., "you are a disciple of that one") with their own status makes clear that to them, one can be either a disciple of Moses or a disciple of Jesus, but not both. From the perspective of the Fourth Gospel, however, in order to be fully faithful to Moses and the promises of God to Moses, one must be a disciple of Jesus. Discipleship of Jesus as the true enactment of Mosaic discipleship was suggested in 5:45-47, where Moses was shown to be a witness to the revelation of God in Jesus. For the Fourth Gospel, faithfulness to the grace and truth available in Jesus, not faithfulness to the law, is the decisive mark of true discipleship (1:17; see also 7:21-24).

The authorities continue their rebuke of the man by pointing to the superiority of Moses' relationship to God (v. 29). That God spoke to Moses is a mainstay of the Pentateuch narrative (e.g., Exod 33:11; Num 12:2, 8). This assertion by the authorities becomes an ironic claim for the reader of the Gospel, however, because while God may indeed have spoken to Moses, Jesus is the Word of God made flesh (1:14). The authorities' self-professed ignorance of Jesus' origins continues a theme that was prominent in John 7-8 (e.g., 7:28, 41-42; 8:23). They assume Jesus' origin is simply a matter of geography and do not perceive the theological dimension of Jesus' origins, that he comes from God (cf. 8:14). Through their assertion of their knowledge in v. 29 (cf. v. 24), the authorities in reality reveal more about their ignorance than they intend. Interestingly, one of the most vivid depictions of

Jesus' origins occurs in the reworking of the Mosaic traditions in John 6, in which Jesus is identified as the true bread from heaven (6:32-35, 49.51, 58).

<sup>34</sup> *They answered and said to him, "You were born totally in sin, and are you trying to teach us?" Then they threw him out.* The Jewish authorities correctly characterize the man's words to them as teaching; he has indeed taken over their role as teacher of the faith. The authorities reject his teaching on the same grounds that they attempted to dismiss Jesus' healing: The man is a sinner. In the case of the man, however, the case for his sin is not built around sabbath violation, but around the traditional linkage of sin and illness (cf. 9:2). Jesus had dismissed this linkage as the appropriate category through which to interpret the man's blindness (9:3-5), and the authorities' continued adherence to this category is further proof of their distance from the revelation of God in Jesus. The expediency that drives the authorities is also exposed in this charge, because while earlier they rejected his blindness as a way of dismissing the miracle (vv. 18.19), now they accept his blindness as a way of dismissing the man as a sinner.

### ***Being Lead to Decision: Faith or Disbelief***

Where the authorities drive the man away (v.34), here Jesus finds the man (cf. 6:37) and asks: "*Do you believe in the Son of Man?*" Just as the Samaritan woman was confronted by Jesus with the possibility of the anticipated Messiah's being already present (4:25-26), so also the healed man is confronted by Jesus with the possibility that the future judge is already present. To this point in John 9, the theme of the judgment evoked by the light of the world (9:5; cf. 3:17-21; 12:31-36) has largely been implicit. Jesus' question makes this theme explicit as he asks the man whether he recognizes in his healer the one who brings of salvation. As v.36 indicates, the man is ready.

Jesus' words of self-identification in v. 37 (cf. 4:26) lead to the man's confession of faith (v. 38). This confession is the culmination of the man's progression in faith that has run throughout chap. 9. He first acknowledged Jesus simply as the man who had healed him (v. 11), then identified him as a prophet (v. 17), then as a miracle worker from God (vv. 30-33). This progression marks a deepening of the man's gift of sight, from the gift of physical sight to spiritual and theological sight. He now knows who and what he sees in Jesus. "Worship" (*proskyneō*) is used in John to speak of the worship of God (4:20-24; 12:20). When the man worships Jesus, then, he is acknowledging the presence of God in Jesus and thus ironically fulfills the authorities' demand that he give glory to God (v. 24). With this act of worship, the man's role in the story is completed and he disappears from the narrative.

In the final dialogue scene (vv. 39-41), the focus shifts from the healing miracle itself to the purpose of Jesus' ministry as revealed in that miracle. As noted in the Overview, this scene has a double function. The direct conversation between Jesus and the Jewish authorities concludes the controversy over the healing that dominated 9:13-38, but the new focus also introduces the discourse that follows in 10:1-18. In v. 39, Jesus defines the eschatological purpose of his incarnation ("I came into this world for judgment so that ..."). As in 3:18-21, Jesus' coming into the world as the light (9:5; cf. 1:9; 12:46) is the moment of judgment, the moment of division.

In the final dialogue scene (vv. 39-41), the focus shifts from the healing miracle itself to the purpose of Jesus' ministry as revealed in that miracle. Jesus defines the eschatological purpose of his incarnation ("*I came into this world for judgment, so that ...*"). As in 3:18-21, Jesus' coming into the world as the light (9:5; cf. 1:9; 12:46) is the moment of judgment, the moment of division.

Jesus says his judgment both enlightens and blinds. He has not come for judgment in the sense of condemnation (3:17), but such condemnation does take place as he who is the light of the world is revealed. When the light shines, judgment takes place; however, salvation comes as well, for when the light of the world dawns hearts are revealed and the truth about individuals' relationships with God is brought into the open. The same sun that melts wax, hardens clay (Origen *On First Principles* 3.1.11).

The opponents have hard hearts--they reject God's offer of mercy and his call to repentance that come through his chastisement (cf. Jer 5:3; 7:25-26; 19:15; Zech 7:11-12; Rev 9:20-21; 16:9-11). Such hardness of heart darkens their minds and alienates them from the life of God (Eph 4:18). The sight they think they have must be taken from them if they are to receive true sight, which sees the true light (Jn 8:12).

Jesus' response was not what they expected. "*If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you are saying, 'We see,' so your sin remains.*" If they, like the man born blind, had been prepared to acknowledge ignorance, they, like him, would not be guilty of sin. Because they claimed to know and were unwilling to learn, their guilt remained. Their presumption of knowledge kept them from seeing the truth. They were like the one described in Proverbs 26:12:

Do you see a man wise in his own eyes?

There is more hope for a fool than for him.

The Pharisees were guilty of unbelief, the cardinal sin in the Fourth Gospel

## Notes

**John 4:1 *blind*:** Restoring sight to the blind is considered to be a messianic activity in the OT (Isa. 29:18; 35:5; 42:7). Both Matthew and Luke set Jesus' healing of the blind in the context of the ministry of Isaiah's Servant of the Lord (Luke 4:18-19; Matt. 11:5/Luke 7:21-22; Matt. 15:30-31; 21:14; cf. Isa. 35:4-6; 61:1-2; see also Isa. 29:18; 42:7). John too patterns Jesus' ministry to a significant extent after Isaiah's portrait of the Servant of the Lord (see esp. 12:38-41). In the context of this Gospel, the healing is cast in terms of "light/darkness" imagery. Just as Jesus is the light of the world by fulfilling Tabernacles symbolism (see 8:12), so also he shows himself to be the light of the world by giving sight to the blind man.

**John 9:3-4 *works*:** "Works" (*erga*) has two ranges of meaning in the Fourth Gospel, both of which occur in vv. 3-4. First, as in v. 3, "works" describes what Jesus does as the one through whom God's works are accomplished (cf. 4:34; 10:25, 37; 14:10; 17:4). Second, the Fourth Evangelist also defines God's work as belief in Jesus (6:28-29; 14:12; cf. 8:39-42), and this is the usage in v. 4. The manuscript evidence is divided on whether v. 4a should read "We must work" or "I must work," and this may reflect a confusion over which meaning of "works" is intended here. The oldest manuscripts support "we" instead of "I" and thus confirm the turn toward the disciples' work in v. 4. Some manuscripts correct "the one who sent me" to read "the one who sent us" in order to make the two pronouns in v. 4a agree, but "me" is the preferred reading. "The one who sent me" is Jesus' most frequent way of speaking about God in the Fourth Gospel (cf. 5:24, 30, 37; 7:16; 8:16), and its use here affirms the disciples' share in God's work.

**John 9:4 *Night is coming when no one can work*:** Clues appear later in the Gospel as to when this "night" occurs. As Jesus approaches his Passion he will warn the people, "You are going to have the light just a little while longer" (12:35). When Judas leaves to betray Jesus it is said, "And it was night" (13:30). This is the beginning of the Passion, when Jesus will be taken from them for three days (cf. also Lk 22:53). When the light is absent it is night, and the night for John is when Jesus is absent, as Jesus himself says in verse 5: While I am in the world, I am the light of the world. Thus, the night seems to be the time when Jesus is absent from the world between his death and resurrection, since thereafter the Spirit will be present (20:22) who will continue Jesus' work through the disciples. Through this strong warning, which regards such a limited period of time, we are led to see the enormity of the darkness of those three days in salvation history.

**John 9:6 *made clay with the saliva*:** The use of saliva for medicinal purposes was common in the ancient world and Jesus himself uses it in his healings at times (Mk 7:33; 8:23). Clay also could have

associations with pagan healing practices, in particular with the cult of Aesculapius. But for the healer to make clay out of spittle and use it for healing is unusual. John emphasizes this mud in the repeated recounting of the event by the former blind man (9:6, 11, 15) and also by including it where it is unnecessary (v. 14). Some suggest that this emphasis may be intended to draw a contrast with Aesculapius, but more likely the allusion is to the biblical picture of God as a potter and human beings as clay (for example, Job 10:9; Is 45:9; 64:8; Jer 18:6; Sirach 33:13; cf. Rom 9:21). **smear**: The verb translated ‘smear’ is *epichriō*, which means ‘to anoint’. It is found only here and in 9:11 in the NT. According to the Mishnah, normal anointing such as one might do on weekdays was allowable on the sabbath, but anointing with special substances not normally used was forbidden because that constituted a healing activity that was not allowed (*Šabbat* 14:4).

**John 9:22 that if anyone acknowledged him as the Messiah:** There are some scholars who hold that this issue is primarily out of the experience of the Johannine community many years after Jesus’ life – but this is not to exclude the issue from Jesus’ own day – simply that it became very pronounced after 70 CE when the Pharisaic movement stamped its influence and perception on the post-Temple rabbinic Judaism. **expelled from the synagogue:** The word used in each case is *aposynagōgos*, a word found in the NT only in the Fourth Gospel. J. Louis Martyn proposed that the agreement to put out of the synagogue those who confessed Jesus as the Messiah refers to the “Benediction Against Heretics” that was introduced into the synagogue liturgy sometime after 70 CE and probably between 85 and 95 CE. Such an expulsion could take two forms: *temporary* for remedial purposes (Heb. *niddâ*) and *permanent* (Heb. *ḥērem*), although it is not clear whether this distinction existed among the Jews in NT times. That some form of excommunication was practiced is evident, not only from the three texts in the Fourth Gospel, but also from the beatitude in Luke 6:22 (‘Blessed are you when men hate you, / when they exclude you and insult you / and reject your name as evil, / because of the Son of Man’). Paul called for remedial excommunication for the incestuous person in 1 Corinthians 5:4–5, 6–7, 13, and permanent expulsion may be implied by references to cursing or anathematizing people, found in Mark 14:71; Acts 23:12, 14, 21; Romans 9:3; 1 Corinthians 12:3; 16:22 and Galatians 1:8–9.

**John 9:24 Give the glory to God:** The Pharisees’ exhortation to the formerly blind man constitutes a solemn warning to tell the truth (some scholars suggests “Tell us the truth” as a suitable idiomatic translation) and to make a confession, with the implication that the person so exhorted has done something wrong. The Pharisees’ words echo Joshua’s exhortation to Achan to confess his wrong in Josh. 7:19 (see also 2 Chron. 30:8 LXX; Jer. 13:16; *m. Sanh.* 6:2).

**John 9:31 We know that God does not listen to sinners:** The formerly blind man’s major premise in 9:31–33, that God does not listen to sinners but rather to those who fear him and do his will, has ample OT substantiation. The Hebrew Scriptures establish a clear link between a person’s righteousness and God’s responsiveness to that person’s prayers (Job 27:9; Ps. 34:15; 66:18; 109:7; 145:19; Prov. 15:8, 29; 21:27; 28:9; Isa. 1:15; cf. John 14:13–14; 16:23–27; 1 Pet. 3:7; 1 John 3:21–22). Later rabbis shuddered at the thought of God listening to sinners (cf. *b. Sanh.* 90a; *b. Ber.* 58a) and affirmed God’s responsiveness to the prayers of those who fear God (cf. *b. Ber.*; *Exod. Rab.* 21:3; see also Isa. 65:24).

**John 9:32 It is unheard of that anyone ever opened the eyes of a person born blind:** This claim is correct. In the OT the opening of the eyes of the blind was limited to unusual circumstances (e.g., 2 Kings 6:8–23), and instances of blind persons being healed in Jewish tradition were extremely rare (Tob. 11:10–14; cf. 2:10). Yet there is no evidence for the healing of a person born blind. The man’s conclusion in 9:33, “If this man were not from God, he would not be able to do anything” (cf. 3:2), likewise is firmly in keeping with Judaism at large, which regarded miracles as answers to prayer.

## Sources

- G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007). 459-61
- Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, vol. 29a in *The Anchor Bible*, eds. William Albright and David Freeman (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 368-82
- Neal M. Flanagan, "John" in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, eds. Dianne Bergant and Robert J. Karris (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1989) 995-98
- Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003) 217-29
- Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 4 in *Sacra Pagina*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998) 289-99
- John J. McPolin, *John*, vol. 6 of the *New Testament Message*, eds. Wilfred Harrington and Donald Senior (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989) 135-42
- Gail R. O'Day, *John in the New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume 9, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996) 652-65

## Dictionaries

- David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996)  
Harold Remus, *Miracle* (NT), 4:856-70

## Scripture

- Scripture quotes from *New American Bible* by Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC. © 1991, 1986, 1970 at [www.usccb.org/nab/bible/index.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/index.shtml)

---

## *Addition Material on the Johannine Understanding of Sin*

Consider Gail O'Day's (*John*, NIB, pp. 663-64] reflection on sin in our gospel narrative.

John 9:1-41 redefines sin by showing that it is exclusively a theological, not moral, category. The key to this redefinition is found in Jesus' words in v. 41. The Pharisees' assertion of their own sight is the basis for Jesus' judgment of them as sinners. The Pharisees do have physical sight; the sight they lack is the ability to see God revealed in Jesus (cf. 9:3), and their refusal to acknowledge this "blindness" on their part proves that they are sinners. Why? Because in the Fourth Gospel, sin is defined not by what one does, but almost exclusively by one's relationship to Jesus, and more specifically, by whether one believes that God is present in Jesus.

Jesus "takes away the sin of the world" (1:29) by the fact of his coming into the world. By giving the world access to the light and love of God, Jesus takes away the world's sin because he makes it possible for the world to redefine its relationship with God. For this reason, "sin" occurs almost exclusively in the singular in John (see Commentary on John 8:21), The world's sin is its refusal to believe in Jesus (16:9). There is a circular logic to the Johannine notions of sin and salvation that John 15:22 and 24 articulate explicitly: "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin... At I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not have sin."

The Johannine notion of sin is thus intimately tied to its understanding of judgment and eschatology as expressed in 3:18-21. Sin only occurs in response to Jesus. If the Pharisees

of John 9 had not been given the opportunity to see, then they would not be blind. But because they had seen Jesus' works and still refused to receive God's revelation in Jesus, they remain in sin. They have turned down Jesus' offer of salvation and so bring themselves under judgment.

Johannine soteriology cannot be understood unless interpreters of John allow "sin" to be heard in Johannine terms without automatically subsuming it into other NT definitions of sin. The Johannine understanding of sin and salvation contributes an important voice to Christian theology, because it provides an alternative to what is often posited as normative in discussions of salvation. In those discussions, sin is used primarily as a moral category to refer to people's actions that are opposed to the will of God, and Jesus redeems people from their sins through the expiation of his death. The Johannine understanding of sin opens up to a very different understanding of the salvific function of Jesus' death. Salvation from sin is primarily a result of Jesus' *life*, not his death, because it is the very life of Jesus as God's Son and incarnate Word that makes it possible for people to move from sin to eternal life.

This Johannine view of sin and salvation can be a difficult one for contemporary Christians to grasp, because the expiatory view of sin and the exclusive linkage of salvation with Jesus' death so dominate conversations within the church. Yet the church loses a powerful witness if it ignores or silences this Johannine voice. First, the Gospel of John invites Christians to reevaluate the criteria by which one defines sin and by which people are judged. The Fourth Gospel, as dramatized in John 9, reduces sin to its christological, and hence *theological*, essence. Sin is fundamentally about one's relationship with God, and for the Fourth Evangelist, the decisive measure of one's relationship with God is one's faith in Jesus. This flies in the face of views that want to define sin in relation to right actions and thereby establish the norms for judgment. To the Fourth Evangelist, these norms for judgment are very lean: Believe in the revelation of God in Jesus. Judgment is therefore based not on what people do, as the disciples and the Pharisees in John 9 assumed, but on people's embrace of God in Jesus. The only way to be excluded from Jesus' offer of salvation is to turn one's back on that offer. This is a radical and liberating notion of sin and salvation, one that not surprisingly makes many people uncomfortable, because it removes the establishment of norms of behavior from the category of sin. From the Johannine perspective, it is not the Christian community's responsibility, just as it was not the Pharisees', to judge anyone's sins, because the determination of sin rests with God and Jesus, and the individual and is determined by faith, not actions. The Johannine Gospel is thus the most radical example of salvation by grace anywhere in the NT.

Second, the Johannine understanding of sin and judgment invites the Christian community to reexamine its understanding of salvation and redemption. The Fourth Gospel quite explicitly relocates the offer of salvation to Jesus' life and moves away from a narrow focus on Jesus' death. The Gospel is unequivocally clear: Jesus' incarnation, not the expiation of his death, brings salvation from sin. This, too, can be discomfiting to people who think that an expiatory understanding of salvation is the "only" Christian view. Yet again, to overlook the Johannine view is to miss a powerful witness and resource for the life of faith. The Gospel of John invites Christians to recognize the transformative power of the love of God made manifest in the incarnation and to shape their lives accordingly. This is why Johannine eschatology puts its primary emphasis on Jesus' coming into the world. To reject Jesus is to reject the love of God in Jesus and so to pass from the possibility of salvation to judgment (cf. 3:16-17). Therefore, the Pharisees' announcement of their sight,

when in fact they have not seen God in Jesus, marks their sin and the “blind” man’s embrace of Jesus as the Son of Man marks his salvation. Judgment and salvation are not lodged with Jesus’ death; they belong to Jesus’ life. (Gail O’Day, 663-4)