

John 9:1-17, 24-38 I Was Blind but Now I See! March 6, 2005

A Sermon by Pastor Brad Smith

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The Sermon in a sentence: Everything that happens to us individually or congregationally has within it the seeds of blessing.

Why I am preaching it: So that individually and as a congregation we will learn to see God at work in our suffering and disappointments.

How you say something is at least as important as what you say if you want to have an impact on others. I can say, “God takes care of everybody who follows him. In fact, he takes care of them so well that their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs will all be met.” That statement is true, but it doesn’t really grab anybody’s attention. But did you know that what I just said actually does appear in the Bible? It is expressed in a different way, but the meaning is there. Do you know where it is? Listen to it again, and you will recognize it immediately.

“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” Same information, but it touches us more deeply, we remember it. Reflecting on God as my faithful Shepherd is a far different experience from reading a list of the characteristics of God.

In the same way, I can say, “God always gives us the best, even if the way to that blessing might include suffering.” What I just said is true, but again it doesn’t touch us.

So instead of putting that sentence in the Bible, the Holy Spirit says the same thing through the story of this man and his encounter with Jesus. The story of a man who started out suffering from blindness, suffered rejection by the religious leaders of his day, and ended up not only with physical sight, but with better spiritual sight than all the religious leaders around him. This account has moved people for centuries. The former blind man’s exclamation “I was blind but now I see!” which I used as my sermon title, touch John Newton and appears in his beloved hymn “Amazing Grace.”

It’s a wonderful little story. Just in these few verses you laugh at the man’s gutsy answers to the religious power structure. You feel an affection for him

by the end of the chapter. But this morning we will look at him more from the perspective of what he suffered, and how it changed him. I don't know if we can actually meet and talk with characters from the Bible when we get to heaven, but if we can, he is one that I would like to find. I would like to hear his story in more detail.

The scene opens with the man blind both physically and spiritually—unable to see physical reality, and unable to see spiritual reality. The disciples wanted to know whose sin had caused the man's blindness—his own, or his parents' sin. Some Jews believed that our spirits inhabited other bodies before our births and could sin in their former lives, and some thought that babies could sin in the womb. But here's how Jesus answers. [Read v. 3.] Suffering is not necessarily a punishment at all, but may be an opportunity to see God at work in our lives.

I wonder what physical blindness was like for him. Did he hate it? Had he asked himself a million times why this had happened to him? It had certainly caused him suffering in many areas of life. Physically, he was dependent on others to get him where he needed to go. Economically, he was reduced to begging. How had it affected his sense of personal value? Just a few days ago in the paper there was a story about a 26-year-old man who has about 150 epileptic seizures a year. Since graduating from high school he has filled out about 200 job applications, and has not been interviewed even once. He commented, "I wish somebody would give me a chance. I'd be a hard worker." What has that done to him? This blind man could certainly have identified with that sense of being considered second-class by others.

And then, out of the blue, the most unexpected thing happens. Jesus approaches him and gives him some simple instructions, and suddenly he is healed! Apparently he got his physical sight back instantaneously. At this point, we have a man who has perfectly normal vision, what we call 20/20 vision physically, but his spiritual vision remains foggy—we might say 20/400. [Read vv. 8-12.] Did you notice that when his neighbors ask who healed him, the best answer he can come up with is, "The man they call Jesus"? Not The Messiah. Not The Son of God. Just, "The man they call Jesus." He has a little spiritual sight at this point. After all, he had obeyed Jesus when he was told to go wash in the pool. But still, obtaining 20/20 spiritual sight was a much slower process than gaining 20/20 physical sight.

After the healing, the story takes a strange and unexpected twist. You would expect that everybody would be shouting with excitement and joy. You would think that the Pharisees would be rushing up to congratulate the man on regaining his sight and praising God for the miracle. But no. Just moments into what should have been the happiest day of his life, this man is already the center of controversy.

And we have to blame that controversy partly on Jesus. He had the power to heal in all kinds of ways. He could have spoken a word. He could even have healed from a distance, and the man would never have known why he could suddenly see. That way, he could have gone home joyfully and begun his new life. But the way that Jesus healed, using the mud, ended up getting this poor man into more trouble than he had ever faced as a blind beggar.

The reason for the controversy is not obvious to us. In our society, all the stores are open seven days a week, and some churches have Friday or Saturday services to accommodate those members who are working or otherwise busy on Sunday. We have pretty much lost a weekly day of rest and worship. But for the Jews in general and the Pharisees in particular, being a faithful follower of God revolved around not working on the Sabbath, which ran from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown.

Rabbis devoted their lives to defining what was work and what wasn't. Spitting on a little dust and rolling it around constituted work because it was making clay, and Jesus had done it on the Sabbath. So the Pharisees were furious with Jesus, and with this man who dared to stand up for him.

And so the inquisition begins. [Read verses 13-17.] Things are getting a little tense. The pressure is building for the man to renounce Jesus as a sinner who breaks the traditions of the Pharisees regarding the Sabbath. But as he faces opposition, some things become clearer to him. Whoever healed him is more than just, "the man they call Jesus." He must be a prophet.

We all remember the prophets from the Old Testament—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, and so on. A prophet was a person who was anointed by God's Holy Spirit, and who spoke from God's perspective. The man does not yet understand fully who Jesus is, but he's getting there. We might say that his spiritual vision has improved to 20/100.

But the better his vision gets, the uglier the opposition gets. [Read verses 24-33.] Apparently the Pharisees who were defending Jesus earlier have gone away or have been bullied into silence. All we have left are the ones who insist that Jesus is a sinner because he does not follow their traditions. This poor man is really in hot water by now.

I wonder what the healed man was thinking about all this. Last week Pastor Wayne preached on Exodus, where the Israelites started complaining almost as soon as they were freed from slavery in Egypt. Egypt began to look pretty good once they faced the challenge of no water in the wilderness.

If the healed man had been like them he would have said something like, “This is worse than being blind. At least before I had some sympathy. Now everybody hates me. I never asked for this, Jesus!” But he doesn’t complain. As he struggles on with the Pharisees against unfair odds, his spiritual vision continues to improve. He begins to understand that Jesus is not only a prophet, but a unique one. God has given him power to do what nobody else has ever done in the history of the world. We might say that the man’s spiritual vision is at 20/70 by now.

But the pattern continues: better spiritual vision, uglier attacks from the opposition. He gives a spirited defense of Jesus, and the Pharisees respond with, “‘You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!’ And they threw him out.” In a way you have to pity the Pharisees. They couldn’t deny the miracle. They couldn’t even counter this untrained layperson’s arguments. So all they could do was to threaten, bully, and shout—all signs of weakness and defeat. But they did have certain power in their society, and they were able to expel him from the synagogue.

Different commentators have different ideas about exactly what this throwing him out meant. Was it a temporary exclusion from the synagogue, or was it permanent, like our excommunication? We don’t know. But it certainly would have isolated him.

He must have been in shock by now. When he woke up that morning, it had been a day like any other day. He got his begging cup, and was left at his familiar spot. Perhaps he didn’t have much of a life, but he didn’t have any enemies, either. Now by the end of the day he had experienced the unbelievable thrill of gaining his sight. But that joy had been marred by ugly attacks against him. He had tried his best to stand up for his healer, but the

only reward he got was to get expelled from the synagogue. The end of one kind of suffering, but the beginning of another.

And once again, Jesus approaches him. Although the man was not aware of it, Jesus had maintained an active interest in what was happening to him. [Read vv. 35-38.] At the beginning of the chapter, we met a man both physically and spiritually blind. At the end he can see, and he can see Jesus. Jesus was no longer, “The man they call Jesus,” nor even a prophet. Now Jesus was the Lord, the One worthy of worship. Finally the man has come to know Jesus. He has 20/20 spiritual vision to match his 20/20 physical vision.

This man had been through a lot of suffering and opposition, and it had not been his fault. What do you think of a God who allows people to go through tough times through no fault of their own, just so that they can learn what God is like?

God could have allowed the man to be born with normal sight. It is not certain, but quite likely he would have lived and died just vaguely aware that there was a rabbi Jesus who went around healing. Even if he had been born blind, Jesus could have healed him the day before or the day after the Sabbath, and he could have continued happily along as a member of the synagogue. But he never would have come to know Jesus. Amazingly, the Bible records incidents of Jesus healing people who show no particular spiritual change at all.

Do you see how everything this man suffered, and all the opposition he faced, drew him closer and closer to Jesus? If at the end of his life somebody had asked him if he had any complaints about the way God had treated him I bet he would have said, “I wouldn’t have had it any other way.”

Once we are clear that God wants to reveal himself to us in every circumstance, we will see our sufferings and disappointments quite differently. God drew this man closer to himself through the suffering and opposition he endured, and we will find God doing the same thing with us.

If you ever become a pastor and need sermon illustrations, here’s a tip. Make hospital visits. You will hear terrific stories of how God reveals himself in the most powerful ways. I never use these illustrations without asking the person first and obtaining their permission. In this case the patient encouraged me to use it.

This Christian man was hospitalized, facing major surgery. He lived alone. He had purchased long-term care insurance, and was making arrangements to stay in a care home until he could recover fully. Everything seemed to be proceeding smoothly.

But after the operation, all his plans began to fall apart. The hospital was ready to release him, but he was too weak to go home and to care for himself. His insurance company claimed that he was not sick enough to need a care home, and anyway, there were long waiting lists for the homes. He felt that the hospital staff was not being very responsive to his plight. He began to feel anxious, and to feel betrayed by his insurance company.

Then he made the decision to let go of his anxiety and feeling of betrayal, and to pray. He asked his church to pray as well. He left his situation in God's hands. Within a day his doctor came and told him, "We have what is called a progressive recovery unit in our hospital. Instead of discharging you we will transfer you there. You will have the time you need to gain strength, and the therapists will prepare you for being able to live at home. Your insurance will cover it all."

He told me, "I'm seeing more and more clearly how I can pray and trust myself to God no matter what." He is so grateful that he had that opportunity to trust God before knowing how it was all going to work out. His story strengthened not only his faith, but the faith of others in his church who learned about it.

God works in the same way with congregations. Tony Robinson, who used to be the pastor at Church of the Crossroads, has written a book. He talks about his experience at a Board meeting in a Mainland church where he served. Although their church had gone through tough times and had lost members, the congregation had committed itself to raising major funds to repair the church buildings. Here is what he writes: "It was a great moment. We knew, even without quite being able to articulate it, that our own strength was not sufficient, that our own resources were not enough. We knew our need for God. So that night we prayed. Not the formal nods of prayer with which most meetings begin, but earnest, heartfelt, and somewhat desperate prayer. Aware—perhaps for the first time—of our own inadequacy, we gave God a chance to use us. We gave ourselves a chance to

depend on God.” [*Transforming Congregational Culture*, by Anthony B. Robinson, p. 102. Eerdmans]

Let us pray.