

Seeing Is Believing

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[0 : 0 0] Carl Barth, the famous theologian, was on a streetcar in Basel, Switzerland, where he regularly lectured. And a tourist came and got on the streetcar and sat down next to Barth, and they began to chat. And Barth asked him, are you a tourist visiting the city? And the man replied, yes, yes, I am. Barth said, well, is there anything in particular that you would like to do or see while you're here in Basel? And the tourist replied, well, actually, yes, I would love to meet the famous theologian, Carl Barth. Do you know him? Barth smiled, and he responded, well, as a matter of fact, I give him a shave every morning.

The tourist gets off the streetcar, and he goes back to his apartment, delighted, thinking to himself, I just met Carl Barth's barber. I love that story because it sort of illustrates something that I found to be true in my own life, which is this reality, and I wonder why it is, that sometimes the thing that we're most looking for can be right in front of our eyes, and yet we fail to see it. We fail to recognize it for what it is. And that's what's happening here in John chapter 9. Throughout his gospel account, John is taking from the...there's a huge list of miracles that he could have told us about that we never hear about, and you ask, well, why does he pick certain miracles? And in John's case, John picks certain miracles, and he tells us about those miracles because in those miracles, we see something about who Jesus is and why Jesus came, his identity and his ministry. And so, here in chapter 9,

John recounts this experience in which Jesus heals a blind man. And this becomes a metaphor that teaches us something not just about physical sight, but about spiritual insight, the ability to see things clearly as they are. And it's a rather long chapter, but you can really look at it by looking at three groups of people or sort of three reference points. And each group or each, in the man's case, individual, they have a different kind of vision. So, first we're going to look at the partial blindness of the disciples. They're partially blind. Then we're going to look at the total blindness of the Pharisees.

And then finally, we'll look at the perfect vision of the man born blind. So, let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you that you're a God who can open the eyes of the blind.

And we pray that this morning, as we look at your word, you would open our eyes, you would open our hearts, that you would make it possible for us to receive what you have for us this morning.

[2 : 5 7] Lord, we pray this, that we would be blessed and strengthened and encouraged, and ultimately, Lord, that you would be glorified. We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen.

So, first of all, let's look at the partial blindness of the disciples. Jesus and His disciples are going along. They see this man who was born blind. None of the resources existed back then that we have today. So, a person like this would be forced very often to beg in order to survive. So, they see this man sitting there. He's blind. He's got his cup out. He's asking for money and assistance. And so, this provokes the disciples to ask Jesus a question. They say, Rabbi, who sinned? Was it this man or was it parents, his parents? Who sinned that caused him to be born blind? And you need to notice the assumption they're making there. They assume that this man's suffering is a direct consequence of somebody's sin. And they're simply trying to figure out whose sin caused it, right? The fact that he's born blind makes it a bit hard to know. Either his parents were so sinful, so notoriously sinful, that God had cursed their child with blindness, or God maybe somehow knew that this man was going to be particularly sinful. And so, he preemptively cursed him with blindness from birth. But this is the debate the disciples are having. And this really illustrates,

I think, the reaction that many of us tend to have when we see suffering either in somebody else's life or in our own. We always kind of want to know why. Why the suffering? Why is this happening?

Why me? Why now? We ask this question, why? Because we're desperate to find a cause. We're desperate to understand what made this happen. And so, very often, people, and especially I think this applies to religious people, very often, people assume that suffering is a form of punishment for bad things that we've done. All right? So, if something bad happens, it means I must have done something bad to deserve it. If my life's going well, if I'm relatively free from suffering, that means the opposite. I must be doing pretty well. I must be a pretty good person because look at my life.

And I think that we're hardwired as human beings to operate this way, which is why this kind of thinking shows up in most of the major religions of the world. In the West, there's this focus on suffering as a kind of divine retribution for bad things that we've done. In the East, there's the idea of karma, facing consequences for bad things that either I've done previously in this life or in previous lives. But either way, there's this idea that the suffering that I'm experiencing is the result of bad things that I've done. And, you know, actually, I think ideas like this are very attractive because they give us the illusion of control over our lives and over the suffering that we experience. But the thing that we need to see is this. The fact that the disciples even ask this question shows us that even after traveling with Jesus, even after hearing Him teach and preach extensively about the kingdom, even after seeing Him do amazing things, they still fail to see who Jesus really is or what He really came to do. They still don't get it. And Jesus answers them essentially by saying, you've got it all wrong. It wasn't this man's sin. It wasn't his parents' sin. In fact, you're looking at this entirely from the wrong angle. And so, we then ask, well, okay, well, why is there suffering and is there a connection to sin? And what you see if you take this and you look at it in the context of all of Scripture, you see that God originally actually created a world that was free from suffering. God didn't intend for suffering to be a part of creation. And it was only after human beings chose to rebel against God that suffering became an ever-present reality. So, the connection between suffering and sin is a lot more nuanced than we like to think. On the one hand, suffering is a consequence of human sin, generally speaking. In other words, God allowed us to experience the consequences of human rebellion. You know, parents, a lot of times we talk about the natural consequences. You know, our kids do something and then they experience a natural consequence from this foolish decision they made. In a way, suffering is the natural consequence of human rebellion. And God has allowed us to experience that. So, we would say, yes, the world and everything in it is profoundly broken. This is why we have crime and poverty and violence and cancer and natural disasters.

[8 : 21] It's a result of human rebellion. But we also would say that sort of on the other hand, there is not necessarily a direct connection between any specific suffering and any specific sin.

And actually, Jesus makes it very clear that in this case, the case of this man, the fact that he's blind, the fact that he's forced to beg, is not directly connected either to his sin or to his parents' sin. This is a reality. This is a part of what it means to live in a broken world.

Sometimes people are born with congenital blindness. Right? So, this encounter is not about assessing blame. This encounter is, in fact, about the fact that God has set in motion a plan to restore all of creation.

And to bring an end to suffering. To establish a world where no one is ever born blind again. And that's why Jesus says, essentially, hey, listen, you're asking the wrong question.

Right? You're looking in the wrong place. Yeah, this man is born blind because the world has been plunged into darkness. But I am the light of the world. And now that I'm here, there is work to be done.

[9 : 38] And that's the focus that Jesus takes. This is an opportunity for the works of God to be displayed. So, I think for those of us who are here, who are Christians, take note of this.

These disciples, they believe in Jesus. They follow Jesus. But there's still a lot they don't see because they're looking in the wrong places. And they're asking the wrong questions.

You may have heard about the recent Asbury Revival. A chapel service at Asbury University turned into this 24-hour prayer and worship time that lasted for over two weeks.

And people flocked from all over to try to be a part of and experience what was happening there. And other schools started trying to generate their own praise and worship and prayer times.

And it was this thing that for a while, the whole community was buzzing about. And then it eventually came to an end. And I was reading one article where they were talking about the kind of aftermath of this revival.

[10 : 50] And they were talking about all the people that had wanted to come that weren't able to make it in time. And this one person they were interviewing said, quote, I just met so many people who didn't get to Asbury who wanted to get there.

People who were filled with so much regret because, quote, God did something and I missed it. Right? God did something and I missed it.

The works of God were on display and I missed it. And, you know, on one level I get what that person is saying. You know, it would have been cool to drive down there and to see what was happening firsthand.

But also, as soon as I read that, it made me think, you know, God is constantly at work all the time doing all kinds of things all around us. And it made me think about myself and I wondered, you know, if there were an opportunity for the works of God to be displayed right in front of us, would we even see it?

Or would we be like the disciples? Would we be asking the wrong questions and looking in the wrong places, oblivious to something that God wants to do right here, right in front of me?

[12 : 04] The works of God were on display and I missed it. Why did you miss it? Where were you looking? So the disciples are partially blind. But the next group we're going to look at is the Pharisees and they're totally blind.

They're totally blind. That's what Jesus actually says at the very end of the chapter. The Pharisees claim to be able to see, but the truth is they're spiritually blind. And that becomes more and more apparent as we see how they respond to this man who's been healed.

Jesus heals the man using, you know, things, symbols that were common in the day. The saliva was thought to have medicinal properties. And so he heals this man.

The neighbors have no idea what to make of this situation. Note, by the way, they've walked by this guy every day for years and years and years. They don't even really recognize him.

Right? That makes sense. How many people do I walk by every day and I couldn't pick them out in a lineup? You know, they've never even really looked at this guy. They don't know what to do with it.

[13 : 11] So they bring this man to the Pharisees. These are the local religious leaders. They think, well, if anybody can make sense of this man and his healing, they're going to know what to do. So what do the Pharisees do? Well, they interrogate the man and then they interrogate his parents, who essentially throw him under the bus, by the way.

And then they bring the man back in and they interrogate him a second time. And that leads to this remarkable exchange between this blind man and the Pharisees. The Pharisees say essentially this.

They say, come on. Tell the truth. We know that this man, Jesus, is a sinner. And this man says, well, whether or not he's a sinner, I don't know. All I know is this.

I once was blind and now I see. And they say, well, what did he do to you? How did he do it? And the man says, I already told you once and you didn't believe me.

Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples? And then they begin to revile him, which is they verbally abuse him. They hurl insults at him. And they say, you may be his disciple, but we follow Moses.

[14 : 20] We know that Moses was from God. But as for this man, we have no idea where he comes from. And then listen to what this man says in response.

He says, well, that's amazing. You claim to know nothing about him, but the fact is he opened my eyes. Now, obviously, God doesn't take orders from sinners, but he does listen to those who worship him and serve him and follow him.

And that man was able to do something that no one in history has ever been able to do. If he wasn't from God, he wouldn't be able to do anything. I mean, this is a clear, rational, compelling argument based on firsthand eyewitness testimony about Jesus.

I mean, that's about as good as it gets. There's a guy saying, this happened to me, and here's the theological rationale that would suggest the only way to interpret this is that this man is from God.

It's almost a watertight argument. It's about as good as you can get. But here's what the Pharisees say. You were born in utter sin. How dare you presume to teach us anything?

[15 : 32] And they cast him out of the synagogue. That was his parents' fear. They're like, well, if he starts saying that he's the Messiah, they're going to kick him out. It's going to be social disgrace for our whole family. Well, that's what happens.

The truth is right in front of their faces. But they're blind to it. And so this forces us to ask, why? Why don't they see it? It's so obvious. And the answer is pride.

Pride. Look at what Jesus says at the very end of the chapter. Verse 39. He says, For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.

Now, obviously, he's not just talking about physical sight here. He's not literally saying, I'm going to come, and if you can see, I'm going to strike you blind. He's talking about spiritual insight.

In other words, he's talking about the ability to see and to admit the truth about our own spiritual condition. That's what this is really getting at.

[16 : 37] Here's the point. The people who are able to see Jesus clearly, the people who are able to recognize Jesus as God's Messiah, are not the smart people.

They are not the religious people. They are not the good people. They are not the upstanding people. It's the people who realize how much they need his grace.

It's the people who see their need. It's the people who realize that they're spiritually bankrupt. It's the people who see through to the heart of their motives and realize their motives are not nearly as clean and tidy as they like to believe they are.

It's the people who see the truth about themselves. It's the people who realize that unless God is willing to give them grace, meaning give them something that they didn't earn, don't deserve, and could never repay, unless God is willing to give them that, they have no hope.

So Jesus is saying, listen, there are a lot of people in the world with all kinds of advantages and privileges. People who have great jobs.

[17 : 54] People who are smart. Who are well-educated from the best universities. People who are well-respected in their communities. People who have lots of friends. People who have great families.

People who do a lot of good in the world. The people, when you think about who are the best people I know, you think, man, that person. That person is the most amazing person. There are a lot of people like that.

And what this is saying is it's going to be extremely difficult for someone like that to ever recognize their need for grace. It's going to be extremely difficult.

Because their sense of pride and self-sufficiency will very likely blind them. But people like this man, people who struggle, who suffer, people who the world looks at as a failure, people who the world says he must have been cursed, he must have done something really bad, his parents must have done something really bad, the kind of people that you might walk by for ten years and never really look in the face, those are the ones who most readily recognize Jesus when he comes.

Why? Because they already know they have nothing and deserve nothing. They have no illusions about what they are entitled to. No one can be argued into faith in Jesus.

[19 : 26] You can present the clearest, most rational, compelling argument based on the eyewitness testimony of the Gospels, but if someone doesn't see their need for grace, they will be blind to the truth, even if it's right in front of their eyes.

And this is actually one of the main ways that God uses suffering and struggle and hardship in our lives. One of the ways that God redeems brokenness is he uses suffering to open us up to our need.

It humbles us. It strips away whatever sense of entitlement we may have. And in some of us, it opens us to the truth of our need for grace. That's why when they first see this blind man, Jesus says, hey, this is an opportunity for God's works to be displayed.

He's saying, this is the kind of person who's going to get it. So this is why the Pharisees are totally blind, right? So we have partially blind disciples.

We have totally blind Pharisees, blinded because of their pride. Now look at the blind man. The man born blind, right? Now we're going to look at the perfect vision of the man born blind.

[20 : 44] Jesus heals this man, and his physical eyesight comes back immediately, but his spiritual eyesight actually comes back gradually.

And you can actually see it happen. As the story progresses, we had to cut... The lectionary cuts out part of the reading just because it's a long chapter, but if you walk through the entire chapter verse by verse, you see this gradual opening of this man's spiritual eyes.

At first, in verse 11, he refers to Jesus as simply the man called Jesus. Really nice man. Did something really amazing, right? Then, in verse 17, he calls him a prophet.

Not just a man, he's a prophet. Then, in verse 33, he says essentially that this man is clearly from God. He's a special prophet who's been sent directly from God.

He has God's power. And then after he's cast out of the synagogue, Jesus finds him, and Jesus says, Do you believe in the Son of Man? Which is a messianic title.

[21 : 51] Do you believe in the Son of Man? And this man is wide open. He says, Where is he? Where is he? I'll worship him. You know, I'll believe in him. Just point me in the right direction. And Jesus says, I am he.

And then it says, and this is very important, he not only says to Jesus, I believe, but he says, it says in verse 38, that he worships him.

So he goes from the man Jesus, and he finally arrives at, he worships him. Just want to make it clear that no first century Jewish man readily worships another first century Jewish man.

Right? That kind of thing didn't happen. So what this is showing us very clearly is that this man comes to see fully who Jesus is. This is God's Messiah worthy of my worship.

Falls on his face. And this is often how conversion happens. It's not so much a one-time experience, just bam, you know, immediately, but it happens over time.

[22 : 52] It's a gradual coming to see Jesus more and more clearly over time. But the key, the real key, is not just seeing Jesus.

It's choosing to worship Jesus. In other words, it's choosing to make Jesus the Lord of our lives. Which means we have to finally let go of our pride, our autonomy, our self-sufficiency, and turn our lives over to him.

If pride is the thing that blinds me, if self-sufficiency is the thing that blinds me, then I'm only going to be able to see Jesus clearly if I'm willing to let those things go.

And the extent to which I'm trying to hold on to my pride and autonomy is the extent to which I will not see Jesus. But the more I'm willing to let that go, the more and more clearly we will begin to recognize Jesus not only as a great man, as a great prophet, as a great teacher, but as the one worthy of our worship.

I recently heard a story from a man named Stu Fuldendorf. And Stu Fuldendorf has this amazing story of how he came to faith.

[24 : 06] For a long time, his wife was a Christian, and he says that he would make fun of his wife. She actually would hide her Bible because whenever he saw her reading it, he would make snide comments.

And just kind of look down on her and generally was pretty condescending about her faith. And really about faith in general. And he was a part of this company, and they were about to go public, and they were about to all overnight become millionaires on paper.

And so they're celebrating. They're in New York for this week of meetings, and they have this long day of about nine meetings. And then they go out for this long extended dinner with lots of food and cocktails and multiple bottles of wine.

And they're just basically celebrating the reality that all their lives are about to change. All their work is about to pay off. All their dreams are going to come true. And after this long, boozy dinner, they're walking back, and they start to have this conversation about how religion is pathetic, about how religion is the opiate of the masses, how religion is a crutch for weak people who can't make it in life.

And he's sort of agreeing with everything that's being said. And then he gets back to his room, his hotel room, and he feels troubled. He feels disturbed, and he doesn't know why.

[25 : 20] And he thinks about having another drink, but he decides, no, this is something I actually want to think about. So he sits down in a chair, and he starts thinking about Jesus. And he starts thinking about what would the world be like without Jesus?

What would the world be like if he had never come? And then he starts thinking about his own life, and he starts thinking about this quest that he's been on as long as he can remember for self-sufficiency and autonomy.

He starts realizing, you know, he says, you know, I've invested everything in the idea that there is no God. I've put all my hope in my business acumen.

That's where all of my hope resides, is that one day I'm going to be so successful in business that I won't have to worry anymore. And he begins to realize, he begins to get this insight.

He begins to realize, actually, this quest for self-sufficiency has enslaved me to the pursuit of wealth. I thought I was becoming more free, but in fact, all I do is work.

[26 : 24] All I do is to try to achieve this self-sufficiency. And then he starts thinking about his wife, and he starts thinking about the fact that she seems to have this joy that comes from somewhere else.

She seems to have this joy that she didn't earn, and it's always there no matter what. And then listen to what he says here. This is a direct quote. I felt a warm wave of energy surge through me, and my eyes welled up with tears.

I couldn't stop it. A feeling of joy, but also regret. A feeling of deep and unending love, but also a deep sense of the need to repent. It seemed like a light had come on, even though the room was still dark.

See, that's what it looks like when the light of the world comes into your life. It seemed like a light had come on. And then he says he realized that he had Christianity all wrong.

He says he realized that even though the world was a dark and broken place, that Jesus had come to heal people, and to forgive people, and to transform people. So then he says that there from the floor of his hotel room, in the middle of the night, he cries out, and he says, Jesus, I've worshipped myself, but it's empty.

[27 : 45] I don't want to live another moment apart from you. I give myself to you. Please forgive my pride. God, make me one of yours, and adopt me into your family. And that, my friends, is what it looks like for a spiritually blind man who has been blind from birth to have his eyes opened by the light of the world, where he comes not only to believe in Jesus, but to worship Him and to call Him Lord.

And the same thing happened to another man named John Newton, which is what moved him to write these words that we all know. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that the core truth here is that we can't do it on our own.

We can't open our own eyes. We can't open the eyes of anyone else in our lives. No matter how good our arguments, Lord, no matter how persuasive we may be, only you can open the eyes of the blind.

Only you can give us sight. So, Lord, we pray that even as we meditate on your word, as we pray and sing, as we come around your table, that our eyes would be opened.

[29 : 13] We are here to behold you. And we pray that in beholding you, we would be given the courage to let go of our desire for autonomy. And that we would cling to you and in doing so, see you more clearly.

We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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