

## (5) The scandal of religious knowledge

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Reading today can be found in John chapter 9, verses 1 to 41. That's page 1079.

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth, and his disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?

Jesus answered, it was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the work of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day. Night is coming, when no one can work.

As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world. Having said these things, he spat on the ground, and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud, and said to him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam, which means sent.

So he went and washed, and came back seeing. The neighbours, and those who had seen him before as a beggar, were saying, Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?

[ 1 : 2 0 ] Some said, It is he. Others said, No, but he is like him. He kept saying, I am the man. So they said to him, Then how were your eyes opened?

He answered, The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes, and said to me, Go to Siloam and wash. So I went, and I washed, and I received my sight.

They said to him, Where is he? He said, I do not know. They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind.

Now, it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. So the Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight.

And he said to them, He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and I see. Some of the Pharisees said, This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.

[ 2 : 2 4 ] But others said, How can a man who is a sinner do such signs? And there was a division among them. So they said again to the blind man, What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?

He said, He is a prophet. The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received a sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received a sight, and asked them, Is this your son, who you say was born blind?

How then does he now see? His parents answered, We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind. But how he now sees, we do not know.

Nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him. He is a sage. He will speak for himself. His parents said these things, because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue.

Therefore his parents said, He is of age, ask him. So for the second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, Give glory to God.

[ 3 : 4 5 ] We know that this man is a sinner. He answered, Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.

They said to him, What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes? He answered them, I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again?

Do you also want to become his disciples? Then they reviled him, saying, You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know what God has spoken to Moses.

But as for this man, we do not know where he has come from. The man answered, Why, this is an amazing thing. You do not know where he comes from, and yet he has opened my eyes.

We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshipper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind.

[ 4 : 52 ] If this man were not from God, he could do nothing. They answered him, You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?

And they cast him out. Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him, he said, Do you believe in the Son of Man? He answered, And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?

Jesus said to him, You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you. He said, Lord, I believe. And he worshipped him.

Jesus said, For judgment I came into this world, and those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind. Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, Are we also blind?

Jesus said to them, If you were blind, you would have no guilt. But now that you say we see, your guilt remains. Jackie, thanks very much indeed for reading for us.

[ 6 : 04 ] I'd be grateful if we keep our Bibles open on page 1079, John chapter 9. Well, why don't we pray together and ask for God's help as we look at John 9 together this morning.

Heavenly Father, we thank you very much that the Lord Jesus Christ reveals your character perfectly. And therefore we pray that as we look at John chapter 9 this morning, please help us to grasp more of what you're like, of the work that Jesus does, and of the way in which that might impact our own lives.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. At times, Christian belief can be very puzzling.

Perhaps you've been on the receiving end of astonishment, as you've explained to a friend or neighbour, or a colleague at work, that you're a Christian. Or maybe you're someone who is frankly puzzled by the sincerity with which Christians hold their beliefs.

But of course, for the Christian, unbelief can be equally puzzling. How could you possibly not believe in Jesus when the evidence is so compelling?

[ 7 : 18 ] When people are offended by what they hear about Jesus, or when they won't even come and listen to a talk about Jesus, or when they do come and seem to understand no more afterwards than beforehand, it can all be very perplexing to us.

How can this be the case, we think to ourselves? Well, John chapter 9 is a really helpful chapter for us, because it explains why it is that some people do believe in Jesus, and why it is that others simultaneously don't.

Now, as we've been looking through John chapter 7 and 8 over the last few weeks, we've seen, haven't we, that Jesus is in confrontation with the religious authorities of the day.

The coming of Jesus should have been a time of huge rejoicing. God had been preparing his people for the coming of his king for hundreds of years. Now, in the first century, he has arrived.

Jesus demonstrates by his teaching and by who he is, that he is indeed God's king. It must have been a wonderful time, wasn't it, to be alive as God's king arrived on earth.

[ 8 : 25 ] Yes, how is it that many people reacted to Jesus? We'll have a look at the last verse of chapter 8. Chapter 8, verse 59. So they picked up stones to throw at him.

It's an extraordinary thing, isn't it? That faced with the claim to be God in the flesh, certainly those we looked at in John chapter 8 last week, want to kill Jesus.

And therefore, you see, we come to the beginning of chapter 9 here with a sense of despair. Why is it that they won't believe in Jesus? If they won't believe, how will anyone believe?

Well, by the end of the chapter, we'll have the answer. So do turn to the outline of today's talk on the back of the service sheet. And first of all, we see in John chapter 9 that Jesus does God's work of granting belief.

Jesus does God's work of granting belief. Have a look again at verses 1 and 2. As Jesus passed by, he saw a man blind from birth.

[ 9 : 30 ] His disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind. Now, I guess that's not the question which we would immediately ask, is it, when faced with the man who is blind from birth.

And certainly the answer is rather different from what we might expect as well. Because this miracle, you see, of Jesus giving sight to this man who was born blind is totally unique in John's Gospel.

and Jesus explains its purpose in verse 3. It was not that this man sinned or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.

In other words, this whole miracle, this sign is here in order to demonstrate the works of God in this man's life. And so Jesus goes on in verse 6, to heal the man.

He spits on the ground, he makes mud with the saliva, he puts it on the man's eyes, he says to him, go and wash. He comes back having washed and he can see. Now I think that one of our popular misconceptions in the 21st century is that we can quickly imagine that miracles like this one were commonplace in the 1st century.

[ 10 : 46 ] But it's simply not true. Have a look over the page for a moment at verses 32 and 33 and see what the blind man himself has to say.

Verse 32, Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man, speaking of Jesus, were not from God, he could do nothing.

Do you see what the man says after the events? No one's ever heard of anything like this. I haven't been able to see since the day I was born and now I have 20-20 vision. You see, people in the 1st century were just as amazed by a miracle like this as we would be.

I think sometimes we can imagine, can't we, that somehow they were kind of more gullible or something like that and that they just kind of took these things for granted. But no. And the reason why they were amazed is because the 1st century Jew was steeped in the Old Testament and they knew that the giving of sight to the blind was a prerogative of God alone.

So I put, for example, Exodus chapter 4, verse 11 on the outline which some of us looked at in our study groups a few weeks ago, who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute or deaf or seeing or blind?

[ 12 : 06 ] Is it not I, the Lord? However, there's more to it than that because the point is that just as Jesus gave the man his sight, so he gives him his belief or his faith.

back to verse 3 again. The works of God are demonstrated in this man as he comes not only to be able to see physically properly but also to see spiritually properly.

To see who Jesus is and to come to believe in him. Because in the Old Testament, although the healing of blindness was a demonstration that God was at work, it was also far more than that because blindness in the Old Testament is often used as a picture of separation from God and of being under God's judgments.

Conversely, being given sight is a picture of rescue and of being brought back to God. Again, look on the outline to Isaiah chapter 35 where 750 years earlier, the prophet Isaiah is looking forward to the day when God's Son, when the Messiah will come and this is what he says as he looks forward to that day.

Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, be strong, fear not, behold, your God will come.

[ 13 : 38 ] And what will it look like when God comes to his people? Well, he goes on, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God, he will come and save you.

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstought. When God comes to save his people, the eyes of the blind will be opened.

So when here in John chapter 9 we see Jesus giving sight to this blind man, it is far more than a humanitarian gesture. He is saying that he is the one who has come to save his people and to grant them rescue and belief in him.

In other words, the sign of giving sight to the blind is a visual aid, if you like, of Jesus doing God's work of granting belief.

Which of course is just what happens, isn't it, in this man's life? Did you notice as Jackie read how Jesus opens the man's spiritual eyes as well as his physical eyes?

[ 14 : 48 ] He opens his spiritual eyes to understand who Jesus is. So have a look at verse 10 just for a moment. So they said to him, then how your eyes opened?

He answered, the man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes. Here's the first glimpse of understanding.

It's the man called Jesus who did this, he says. He's the one who opened my eyes. But then look over the page to verse 17 because we see his understanding has advanced a little bit further.

So they said again to the blind man, verse 17, what do you say about him since he's opened your eyes? He said, he is a prophet. You see how his understanding has advanced a little bit more?

Now it seems that the man has at least grasped that Jesus must at least be a prophet. But then look on to verse 33 where he's saying something more.

[ 15 : 53 ] If this man were not from God, he could do nothing, he says. In other words, that Jesus must be from God. And then comes the climax in verse 35 when Jesus catches up with a man who by this stage has been thrown out of the synagogue.

And Jesus asks him, verse 35, do you believe in the Son of Man? Now in the Bible thinking, the Son of Man is the figure in the Old Testament to whom God gives all authority over all people for all time.

And Jesus notice is not just asking whether he thinks the Son of Man exists, but whether he believes in him, whether he'll put his trust in him. And how does the man reply?

And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him? Jesus said to him, you've seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you. He said, Lord, I believe, and he worshipped him.

So can we see that just as at the beginning of the chapter Jesus gives this man his physical sight so he can see physically, actually by the end of the chapter he has also given him his spiritual sight as well.

[ 17 : 08 ] that is how people will come to believe in Jesus. They need to be given belief. They need to be given spiritual sight just as this man was.

And I hope we can see it is a gift that only Jesus can give. You see, real faith in Bible terms does not consist of forcing ourselves to believe in the impossible.

people. Rather like me looking at this empty space here next to me and saying, well there's a chair here, when clearly there isn't. It's just floorboards. And kind of forcing myself to believe the impossible like that.

Genuine Christian faith is not wishful thinking like that. Nor does it consist in pointing to a chair, a real chair, and kind of agreeing, well yes it is a chair, it's kind of blue, it's got a back and a seat and all those kinds of things.

But simply leaving it at that. Because real faith exercises faith. It is not simply belief in an academic way, oh there's a chair over there.

[ 18 : 12 ] It is belief that then sits down on it and exercises faith. And that is the kind of faith isn't it, that this man demonstrates here. It's faith which not only says, oh yes I do believe the Son of Man exists, no he sees Jesus and he falls prostrate before him, he worships him as his Lord.

So then Jesus does God's work of granting belief. And therefore I take it this chapter shows us that we mustn't underestimate what needs to happen in order for someone to follow Jesus and to recognise him as Lord.

Unless Jesus grants us belief in him, we cannot believe in him. Now I think it's important we don't misunderstand the implications of this teaching.

It doesn't mean for example that I don't have responsibility myself to listen to Jesus and to understand his message. But it does mean that at the same time as listening and understanding, why I need to cry out to Jesus, that he would grant understanding belief.

Because no amount of self-effort will do that unless Jesus is the one who is opening my eyes to grasp who he is. I take it this chapter humbles us.

[ 19 : 40 ] It means that we can't take any credit ourselves for following Jesus as if we kind of managed to work it all out for ourselves and aren't we clever to have been able to do that.

Now the only reason anyone believes in Jesus is because Jesus has worked a miracle in them of opening eyes and granting belief.

So that's our first point this morning. Jesus does God's work of granting belief. But secondly, Jesus does God's work of granting genuine belief.

Turn back to John chapter 8 verse 31 which we looked at last week. Where Jesus tells us what genuine belief looks like, genuine belief perseveres.

Chapter 8 verse 31, if you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples. And that is precisely what we see this man doing in John chapter 9.

[ 20 : 45 ] He is interviewed twice by the religious establishment and eventually in verse 34 they throw him out of the synagogue. It's always hard standing up to the bullying tactics of the establishment.

It's tough standing up to the educated, to those who others look up to. He is even rejected by his parents. But the fact is that he perseveres and throughout the whole chapter we see him growing in his belief.

faith. And notice it all happens in the absence of Jesus. You see it's not as if Jesus is kind of holding his hand and standing right next to him all the time encouraging him saying go on stand up to him.

No it's only at the very end of the chapter in verse 35 that Jesus comes back. Occasionally you hear people don't you saying that faith is simply a psychological crutch.

something to help those who can't cope with real life. But it's hardly the case with this man is it? It would be much easier for him not to follow Jesus and simply to go with the crowd instead.

[ 21 : 59 ] But I take it that is the point that genuine Christian belief, genuine Christian faith, the faith that Jesus grants perseveres. It keeps on going in Jesus' absence.

resistance. It keeps on going in the face of opposition and rejection. I met someone a couple of years ago who was trained to be a doctor.

Actually he came and introduced himself to me and he reminded me that we had met before four years previously. We had met one evening after he had just heard a talk at a university explaining the relevance of Jesus Christ for today.

And I remember then that actually on that previous occasion when we had first met we got talking and I very much got the impression as I was talking to him that he was a million miles away from ever taking the claims of Jesus Christ seriously.

But this time we met the second time. The reason he introduced himself to me was because now he was a follower of Jesus. He told me how that initial talk had got him thinking, how a few months later he had gone to a little discussion group rather like the Christianity Explore groups that we run here considering the claims of Jesus and that sometime after that he had decided to follow Jesus for himself and that now he had been following Jesus often in the face of opposition from his medical friends and family for three years.

[ 23 : 29 ] That is the genuine belief that Jesus grants. Belief that perseveres, belief that grows in the face of opposition. I take it it means we can have great confidence that Jesus will keep those who believe in him.

You see, perhaps we just started following Jesus or perhaps we're thinking about following Jesus and we think to ourselves, well how will I ever keep going? It can be difficult following Jesus in the face of the sniggering at work or an unbelieving family at home.

Or perhaps when a friend or colleague or one of our own children comes to put their trust in Jesus, we can wonder how they'll keep going. New Christians can often look very wobbly and unsteady at times.

Well here is the great promise, that the belief that Jesus grants is genuine. It perseveres. So Jesus does God's work of granting belief.

Jesus does God's work of granting genuine belief. But then thirdly, and here is this thing in the tale, Jesus does God's work of judging as well as saving.

[ 24 : 48 ] Because here is the sobering truth in this chapter that as well as giving spiritual life to the blind man, at exactly the same time we see Jesus acting in judgment on the Pharisees and the religious establishments who will not believe in him.

Just have a look at verse 39, which in many ways is the key verse of the whole chapter and certainly the summary verse as Jesus explains what is going on. Verse 39, for judgment I came into this world that those who do not see may see and those who see may become blind.

blinds. You see, just as Jesus progressively enables the blind man to see and understand who he is, so too John recalls how Jesus progressively blinds the Pharisees.

Now I wonder if you noticed that as well as the passage was read out to us, how that attitude of Jesus steadily hardens as we go through the chapter.

It is very sobering. So look, for example, at verse 16 where we see them divided about Jesus. Some of the Pharisees said, this man is not from God for he does not keep the Sabbath.

- [ 26 : 07 ] But others said, how can a man who's a sinner do such signs? So they then asked the blind man himself, verse 17, what do you say about him since he's opened your eyes?
- He said, he is a prophet. But notice in verse 18 they still don't believe in him. Do you see how slowly they are beginning to be blinded to what Jesus is doing?
- Then look on to verse 24 where we see that by then they are united in their rejection of Jesus. Verse 24, so for the second time they called the man who had been blind and said, give glory to God.
- We know that this man is a sinner. That rejection then hardens. Verse 28, they reviled him saying, you're his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.
- We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, Jesus, we do not know where he comes from. And finally, verse 34, they throw the man who was blind out of the synagogue.
- [ 27 : 18 ] Do you see just as the blind man grew in his belief in Jesus, so the religious authorities are slowly blinded in their understanding of Jesus.
- Their hearts are hardened. And look back again to verse 39, that key verse, because that is the explanation, isn't it?
- That Jesus has actively blinded them so they are unable to believe in him. It's a shocking thing, isn't it? But it's a reminder that Jesus came both to judge as well as to save.
- I take it that is why near the beginning of the chapter in verse 5, Jesus describes himself as the light of the world. Because that very bright light can do two things, can't it?
- As you drive along country lane at night, not along the south circular, but along a country lane at night with your headlights on full beam, they give brilliant light and you can see exactly where you're going. But of course those same headlights can blind a rabbit or a fox, perhaps you've had that experience in your car headlights.
- [ 28 : 27 ] The same thing can blind as well as to give sight. But of course it begs the question, well what sort of person would Jesus blind like this?
- Well it is those who like these Pharisees refuse to listen to Jesus because they imagine they have no need of him. Have a look at verse 22.
- So the Jews said, will he kill himself? Sorry, I'm in the wrong chapter. Verse 22, his parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be the Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue.
- Now you see, their inquiry into the miracle is hardly an open one, is it? When you read verse 22. They then resort to insults, verse 28, as they revile him.
- You see, they have here the eyewitness accounts of the man, they have the testimony of neighbours, they have the witness of his parents, despite all the evidence, they reject what Jesus has done.
- [ 29 : 46 ] It is willful rejection, which I take it explains Jesus' comments, verse 39, for judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.
- And then verse 40, some of the Pharisees near him heard these things and said, are we also blind? Jesus said to them, if you were blind, you would have no guilt. But now that you say, we see, your guilt remains.
- What is it that Jesus says about them? What is their crime, so to speak? Well, it's that they claim to see, verse 41. Now that you say, we see, your guilt remains.

If they acknowledge their spiritual blindness, why, they'd cry out to Jesus for understanding. but tragically they claim they can see by themselves. They think they have no need of Jesus and the rescue he offers.

They reject him, and so they are blinded. So then here are people who reject Jesus' teaching. It's as if, isn't it, they themselves have shut the door on Jesus.

[ 30 : 59 ] And so what Jesus comes along to do is that he then bolts the door, which they have shut in his face. As he actively steps in to do that.

Now I guess many of us will have seen that in practice, and it is a very sobering thing to witness. It's a real warning, isn't it, to those of us looking on the Christian faith, that Jesus does hold us accountable for the way in which we listen to him.

If we reject Jesus, then in the words of verse 41, we are guilty before him, because we are claiming that we can see already, that we don't need him, that we don't need the rescue and forgiveness that he offers.

And so Jesus will blind us. That door that we have closed, he will then bolt as well. I'll take it it shows it's a risky business, listening to Jesus' teaching, because either of these two things could happen.

Either we'll reject what we hear, and we'll be progressively blinded, or we'll be given more and more understanding as we follow Jesus. As for those of us who are Christians this morning, well, it certainly makes me grateful that Jesus has opened my eyes.

[ 32 : 23 ] It prevents us, doesn't it, from taking belief in him for granted. But it shows, too, I take it, that we must expect one of these two responses as people to listen to Jesus' teaching.

I guess some of us may have experienced that this week, as we brought people along on Thursday lunchtime, to hear Mary Davis speaking at the women's lunch. There'll be those who recognised their spiritual blindness, who began to see their need for the rescue that Jesus offers.

But there'll also be those who, despite having heard of their need, failed to see their needs. and so have begun to reject the rescue that Jesus offers.

I guess some of us may be rather discouraged after Thursday lunchtime, in which case I hope John chapter 9 is a great encouragement to us, because it's here to reassure us and to encourage us to persevere in telling others about Jesus.

Because there is real promise in this chapter, isn't there, as well as real warning. the promise that Jesus does open blind eyes, the promise that he does grant genuine belief to those who will come to him, and that he does so wonderfully even in his absence.

[ 33 : 48 ] And I take it as a great encouragement to us who live without the physical presence of Jesus. We can be confident this is the same work that Jesus is still doing today as he did on that day in John chapter 9.

Which leaves us asking the question of ourselves, will we then persevere in inviting people to hear the gospel? Will we take a part of those Christmas carol invitations and invite everyone we can?

It always seems to me that carol service is the easiest thing in the year to invite people along to. And will we pray that as they come they would recognize their own spiritual blindness, that they would be those who would cry out to Jesus for sight and that he would grant them sight and belief.

Let's pray together. It was not that this man sinned or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.

Heavenly Father, we praise you very much for this wonderful chapter where we see the work of the Lord Jesus, both giving sight and blinding.



[ 35 : 10 ] Thank you, Heavenly Father, that you are a merciful God, that you open the spiritual eyes of those who are blind and unbelieving and that you grant spiritual sight.

and we pray, Heavenly Father, that you would humble us as we meditate and think about that for ourselves. We pray that you would change us as a result of it.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen.