

PDF version of the lesson notes.

## I. Structure of John 9

- John 9 is one continuous story involving the healing of a blind man. I will try to deal with the story as a whole because I think it is remarkably constructed. The literary features are very interesting, and I think play an important role in terms of how we understand and our affected by the story. I think the combination of the Savior's actions and John's retelling of the story is quite beautiful. Before we dive into the actual text of the story, let's think about the story in outline form:

9:1–7	Jesus heals the blind man
9:8–12	The confused and questioning neighbors
9:13–17	The pharisees interrogate the former blind man
9:18–23	The pharisees interrogate the parents
9:24–34	The pharisees interrogate the former blind man, again
9:35–38	Jesus seeks out the blind man; confession of faith
9:39–43	Conclusion: Judgment

## II. Healing the Blind Man

- Read John 9:1–7:

(1) And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth. (2) And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? (3) Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him. (4) I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work. (5) As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world. (6) When he had thus spoken, he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay, (7) And said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam, (which is by interpretation, Sent.) He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing.

### A. Theological: Sin, The Blind Man, and His Parents

- First, let's talk about the theological backdrop of the disciples question. *Why would the disciples ask such a question?*

- *What about the presumption that it is possible that the blind man was responsible? Does this imply a belief in a pre-existent state? Are there other explanations than that the disciples were asking if the man sinned in a pre-existent state?*
- It is quite possible that the disciples' question reveals an understanding or belief in a pre-mortal existence. However, we should be careful because there is at least one other possibility. The disciples may have believed that it was possible for a person to sin in the womb. The idea that a person could sin in the womb does appear in rabbinical thought.[1]
- Also, I think that an important backdrop to the question is Exodus 34:17 (see also, Exodus 20:5 and Deut 5:9):

(7) Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.

These verses seem pertinent in terms of helping us understand why the disciples believed that it was possible that sins of the parents caused the man to be born blind. *Do you think the disciples have a flawed understanding of the verse in Exodus? Does the answer by the Savior suggest their understanding is flawed?*

- I think in general, we as modern readers tend to view Exodus 34:17 as reflecting the effects that bad parenting or the bad choices of parents can have on their kids. Bad choices can lead, in a very natural way, to bad circumstances for future generations. This line of thinking may bring to mind people like King Noah, or Laman and Lemuel. However, I don't think this is true that pre-modern people understand these verses or the underlying theology of these verses the same way we do. I think the response of Job's friends to his misfortune is a good example of the difference. Additionally, Jewish Literature, such as the Jerusalem Targem (an Aramaic translation and interpretation of the Hebrew Bible) reflects a similar understanding.[2]
- *How generalizable is the Savior's answer? Is the answer incomplete in some sense? Are you left wishing he said more? Why don't you think he gave a more complete theological answer?*
- The answer doesn't seem very general to me. It seems very specific to the situation at hand. Jesus refers specifically to "this man" and "his parents." Jesus changes the focus of the question fundamentally. I see the disciples question as broadly theological, but I think the Savior refuses to accept that focus. He instead makes the focus about compassion and in doing the work of God. *Is this shift in focus from the disciple's question to the Savior's response generalizable?*
- I think it might be; I am not sure this pericope give us much general insight into how or why people suffer, but I think it gives us insight into how we should respond, deal with it,

or help others to deal with it.

### ***B. literary: Sin, The Blind Man, and His Parents***

- *How is the question by the disciples important to the story? Does it introduce themes or motifs that show up throughout the chapter? What sort of things does the disciples' question entice or lead you to reflect on personally?*
- The first thing that pops in my head is the theme of judgment. The disciples are asking about judgment: who should be condemned or who is accountable for the state of the blind man. *Is judgment an important theme in the story? How does it show up elsewhere in the story?*
- Judgment seems to be an important theme throughout. The pharisees' interviews with the man and his parents are very judgmental. They judge him, his parents, and certainly they judge the Savior. For example, in the pharisees' second interview with the blind man (verses 24–34) the pharisees judge both the Savior and the blind man pretty viciously. for the sake of time let's just read verse 34:

(34) They answered and said unto him, Thou wast altogether born in sins, and dost thou teach us? And they cast him out.

- Second, it reminds me that compassion and judgment are intertwined. *How are the two concepts intertwined in this story? Do you think this story's use of compassion and judgment motifs is similar to the way we often talk about justice and mercy?*
- Second, it personally causes me to think about suffering; Why is there suffering? The question of theodicy? As I mentioned before, I do think the pericope deals with this issue, but in a pretty limited and indirect way.
- I also think it gives us a real sense for what a big deal it was to be blind from birth in Palestine during this period. Not only does the man lead a difficult life physically, but people clearly view him as spiritually blind or handicapped.

### ***C. Themes, Motifs, Contrast, and Irony***

- *What themes, contrasts, images, metaphors are introduced? How do these things play out in the rest of the story? Does it result in irony?*
- That's one of the things I really like about this story. There is so many beautiful and moving images, themes, and contrasts. Irony runs throughout the story, and its use is particularly strong and moving at the end of the story. Here are few motifs that I noticed:

◆ Revelation

◆ Judgment

◆ Blindness and Sight

◆ Day and Night

◆ Light and Darkness

- How are these motifs important to the story? How do they affect your understanding of the story?

#### ***D. Light***

- In verse 5, Jesus says, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." *What is meant by this? Why does light get connected with the ability to do work (verse 4)?*
- I guess I am not sure. I certainly see a connection from the perspective that it is difficult to do work without light. It seems like in some sense light enables us to do work. I also think it can be mapped into discussions of grace and works. It nicely reminds us that our ability to do work (where work here refers to the work of the Father) depends on the light or grace of Christ. *Does that seem like the right connection or is it something different?*
- *How does the motif of Jesus as the light develop in the story?*
- Well, the story definitely focuses on the blind man's encounter with the light. He starts off in complete darkness, and in the end he emerges fully into the light when he declares, "Lord, I believe," and then worships Jesus. *What do we learn about coming fully into the light from this story? How do the different parts of the story emphasize the journey? Does this tell us something about the nature of conversion?*
- First, I think it is interesting that by itself the "sign" does not result in the blind man declaring that Jesus is the Messiah and worshipping the Savior. All the sign does is elicit a matter of fact statement that he was healed by Jesus and he doesn't know where Jesus is. On the other hand, this shows a lot more awareness than the paralytic man in chapter 5. As the man is questioned, his witness grows stronger. In verse 17, he declares that Jesus is and prophet. In verses 27–33 he boldly contends with the pharisees and witnesses that Jesus must be sent from God. However, it is not until verses 35–37 that the man fully enters the light:

(35) Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when he had found him, he said unto him, Dost thou believe on the Son of God? (36) He answered and said, Who is he, Lord, that I might believe on him? (37) And Jesus said unto him, Thou hast both seen him, and it is he that talketh with thee. (38) And he said, Lord, I believe. And he worshiped him.

- Note, the Greek phrase underlying the translation, "He worshiped him," might specifically involve prostrating oneself and kissing the feet of the person worshiped.[3]

- *Why does the blind man's faith seem to strengthen as he is questioned?*
- *Is it notable or important to the story that Jesus is not involved directly in the middle of the story (the interrogations by the pharisees)? Is it important that the blind man doesn't fully enter the light until he converse with the Savior?*
- I think it is pretty cool. He is not involved at all in the discussion and we don't know where he is at all. Yet, at the same time he is the center of everything. The whole narrative revolves around him. The blind man, the neighbors of the blind man, his parents, and the pharisees are all affected by Jesus and his actions even though he is now absent. I think it goes very nicely with the "light of the world" metaphor.
- *How is the blind man's journey into the light linked to the idea of compassion, mercy, or grace? How is it linked to the idea of revelation?*
- I think the role of grace and compassion is very interesting here. Grace in this context doesn't compensate the man for his failures or shortcomings (although I don't deny that grace has that role (2 Nephi 25:23)). Here, grace or the light transforms (transformative grace). The blind man is transformed both physically and spiritually. The focus is on how the compassion, mercy, and grace of Christ leads to the transformation of the man.
- *What about the pharisees? How is their role linked to the light and how is it developed in the narrative? Does the light judge them or in some sense lead to judgment?*
- It seems to me that the pharisees' path is an exact contrast to the blind man. Their journey reverses the process, and the reverse leads to judgment. They start off by simply rejecting that Jesus is from God. This escalates into commendation of Jesus and the blind man as sinners. Finally, in verses 39–41, Jesus proclaims that they are blind and judges them as sinners. *Does this point to a dual role for the light? Does it lead to both mercy and judgment?*

### ***E. John 7–8: Images Reused***

- Why the pool of siloam? The pool of Siloam is the pool of water where the priests drew the water for the water drawing rite that is the backdrop for John 7 and the proclamation (verses 33–34) by Jesus that, "He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water." *Is this an important backdrop? Does it affect how you understand verse 7? We now have references to the two proclamations that Jesus makes during the Feast of the Tabernacles (John 7–8): light of the world and living water. Why would the Savior make reference to both of these proclamations?*
- I think it strongly suggests continuity in his message. In chapters 7–8 he proclaims that he is the Messiah. In this story he shows the people and us what it means to be the Messiah. He shows us what it means in a concrete way to be, "the Light of the World."
- *The pool was probably a considerable distance from the man's present location.[4] Why*

*would the Savior make him undertake a long, difficult walk (having mud on his face couldn't have made the walk more fun either)?*

- *Does this remind you of the healing of Namaan's skin ailment by Elisha in (2 Kings 5:10–14)? Do you think it is purposeful allusion on the part of Jesus and John?*
- *Why does John go out of his way to insert parenthetically that Siloam means "Sent?" Does "Sent" refer to Jesus in same way? Is he the "Sent One?" Or Something else?*

#### ***F. The Wrap-Up***

- Read John 9:39–41:

(39) And Jesus said, For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind.

(40) And some of the Pharisees which were with him heard these words, and said unto him, Are we blind also? (41) Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth.

- *In light of the rest of the story, how do you interpret these verses? Do they echo the themes we talked about today?*

#### **Endnotes**

1. Breasley–Murray, George R., 1988, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Word Books, 154–155.
2. Breasley–Murray, George R., 1988, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Word Books, 154–155.
3. Breasley–Murray, George R., 1988, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Word Books, 159–160.
4. Gaebelien, Frank E. (editor), 1981, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: John–Acts*, Regency Reference Library, 101.