

Though I Was Blind, Now I See, Part 2 (John 9:1-41)

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In surveys of western thought, the 17th and 18th centuries are often referred to as the Age of Enlightenment, a time when human reason began to escape the dark confines of religion in determining what is true about God, about ourselves, and the world in which we live. Hello science. Hello philosophy. Hello human autonomy. Truth, beauty, and meaning are not revealed to us by God. We can discover them for ourselves.

Some call it the turn to the subject. The ultimate authority does not lie outside of us. It's found within us. Theology, the study of God, isn't something we do from above by starting with what God says is true about himself. It's something we do from below. We start with what makes sense to us, what we are capable of grasping through the observational power of the mind.

The Enlightenment or Age of Reason profoundly altered the course of western thought. But the impulse to privilege our own understanding, relying on human reason and human wisdom in the quest for truth is far older. There's something deep within all of us that desperately wants to believe we are capable of discovering the truth with the light of our own wisdom and reason. The desire to know the truth, including the truth about God, is both necessary and good. In fact, it's hardwired into us by our Creator. The problem is where we go looking to find it.

One of the most frequently repeated words in Jn 9 is the word "know." It's not accidental. The entire chapter wrestles with how we can know the truth about God, specifically the identity of Jesus, and what tends to get in the way. The story begins with a single blind man. By the end, we realize he wasn't alone. A whole group of people couldn't see, not because they lacked physical sight, but because they were spiritually blind to the truth about Jesus.

We focused last Sunday on the experience of the blind man and how Jesus gives sight to those who are blind – both physically and spiritually. We'll circle back to his response to Jesus at the end. But we're going to spend most of our time lingering on the experience of the Pharisees and how Jesus blinds those who think they can see.

Like them, we are prone to lean on our own understanding. We fancy ourselves objective arbiters of the truth when in reality, we are nothing of the sort. For until we exchange the darkness of human reason for the light of faith seeking understanding, we will never see Jesus for who he really is. We will remain spiritually blind. V. 39, "Jesus said, 'For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.'" And that raises a critical question. How do those who are so convinced they know the truth about God remain blind? What gets in the way of seeing Jesus for who he really is? I think there are at least 5 answers in Jn 9.

1) WE REDUCE THE LAW OF GOD TO WORKS WE CAN ACHIEVE

After Jesus heals the blind man, his neighbors bring him to the Pharisees, the local Jewish religious leaders. Their response is informed by a crucial piece of background information in v. 14. "Now it was the Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes."

In Ex 20:8-11, the Lord told his people through Moses, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work... For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day."

The command itself was pretty straightforward. Don't treat the Sabbath like every other day. Express your reliance on me through resting from your normal labor. The problem was that the Pharisees took that general principle and created 39 classes of prohibited activity, including kneading dough to make food. The law was designed to reveal Israel's dependence on God and kindle her trust in the Lord. The Jews turned it into a list of man-made rules any careful Jew could achieve.

It's easy to do. For example, we pat ourselves on the back for not watching porn or films with nudity and forget the Lord's claim on our thought life is far more comprehensive. Phil 4:8, "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Or we tell ourselves, "I'm good on the 6th commandment. I've never committed adultery and don't plan to!" forgetting the warning in Matt 5:28, "Everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

God's laws are always more difficult for us to obey than our own. Why? Because they go after our hearts and ultimately reveal just how much we need a Savior, someone who can make us right with God and empower us to do what is utterly impossible for us to accomplish.

It's easy to add all kinds of external criteria to God's Word just like the Pharisees, evaluating someone's relationship with God as they evaluated Jesus based on whether they dress like us, talk like us, parent like us, eat like us, vote like us, or keep their grass like us. And all of those conscious and unconscious "additions" to God's law don't just destroy our relationships with other people. They blind us to seeing the truth of God.

Think about it. To the degree we turn the law into something we can keep, something we have achieved unlike all those other people out there, we stop see ourselves for who we really are – sinners who desperately need a Savior – and we stop seeing Jesus for who he really is – the Son of God who came to rescue us from sin and death.

The Pharisees were preoccupied with trying to save themselves, earning forgiveness and love from God through obedience to God, and didn't recognize Jesus as a result, even though he was standing right in front of them. Why not? Because they weren't looking for a Messiah like him. "Why should we? It's not like we need God to come in human flesh and deliver us from sin. We've got this. We can keep God's law, at least more than we disobey it. We're good, unlike this "sinner" over here who apparently "healed" someone on the Sabbath. What a piece of work!

V. 16, "Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.'" In reality, he was more "from God" they could have imagined.

2) WE CHOOSE TO FEAR MAN INSTEAD OF GOD

In v. 19, the Pharisees summon the parents of the man Jesus healed to determine whether he really had been born blind. "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" V. 20, "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..." It wasn't an honest answer. It was a calculated answer, a

politically correct answer, an answer carefully crafted to minimize offense and preserve their social status.

V. 22 reveals the root issue. “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.” To confess Jesus as your Savior and follow him accordingly has always meant choosing a counter-cultural path of enmity and scorn. Sadly, many decide it’s not worth the cost, that approval from people in general or one person in particular matters more than the smile of God. It’s a bitter exchange.

“If I refuse his sexual advances, I might never get married.” So we decide the “truth” is that the sexual morality the Lord insists upon in his word is culturally bound or outmoded. “If I tell her what I really think about her lifestyle, I might lose the friendship, so I’ll just keep my real thoughts to myself.” Instead of humbly and graciously contending for the truth we start hedging, compromising, and go silent. Concern over what people will think or how they will respond twists and corrupts much of what we “decide” is true or say is true.

If you would see the truth about God and keep your spiritual eyes open to his character and ways, you must choose every day to fear him above all else. If not, you will inevitably blind yourself and others to who he is and what he requires of his people because you’ve already written off any acts of “obedience” with negative social repercussions.

3) WE DENY EVIDENCE THAT FAILS TO SUPPORT OUR CONCLUSION

John adds a key detail at the beginning of v. 18. “The Jews did not believe that he had been born blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight...” What’s their intellectual starting point? The miracle didn’t happen. There’s no way Jesus opened his eyes. Why not? V. 24, “We know that this man is a sinner.” Translation? Jesus has nothing to do with God. He’s not from God or connected with God in any way.

Though their questions feign a genuine desire to know the truth about Jesus’ person and works, there’s no underlying objectivity. To the contrary, they are simply looking for data to support their conclusion.



Leon Morris, "The first tact attempted by Jesus' enemies is that of discrediting the miracle. They held that Jesus did not come from God. It followed that he could not have done a miracle. Therefore, this miracle did not happen. They do not examine the evidence with open minds, but in the light of their firmly held prejudices seek to discover the flaw that they feel must surely be present."

Have you ever noticed in a relationship with a spouse, sibling, or close friend, that whatever you "decide" is true about them beforehand determines what you "see" or "don't see" when you interact? If I decide they're a jerk, then am I going to see evidence of God's grace in their life? Of course not. Because I'm not interested. I've already made my decision and am only open to evidence that confirms my initial assumption.

Friends, we do the exact same thing when it comes to our supposed "search" for the truth about God. We like to think we're objective. In reality, we're nothing of the sort. Every single one of us is born into this life wanting to be God. It's why you don't have to teach kids to disobey. We want to be in charge. We want to be our own authority and not submit to anyone else.

The natural man never approaches Jesus with a truly open mind. The Pharisees didn't. I don't. You don't. We can't. We start with a sinful heart, a heart that does not want Jesus to be God, and concludes he is not God, because that would mean no longer living as if we are God. Like the Pharisees, we wade into spiritual conversations hearing only what we want to hear because our spiritual discernment has been ravaged by sin.

Rom 1:21, "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened."

Sometimes we try to hide our deep-seated antagonism to his authority in a veil of sophisticated uncertainty. The answer is that there are no answers. Only questions. As Paul says in 2 Tim 3:7, we are "always learning but never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth." Why not? Because like the Pharisees, we refuse to accept the simplest explanation for the signs Jesus performed and the words he spoke because we don't like the moral implications.

They all confirm God is real, we are accountable to him, and faith in Christ is our only hope for salvation from the wrath of God. And then finding an intellectually satisfactory alternative proves maddeningly difficult, we settle for spinning our wheels. We'll accept anything as "true" as long as it keeps us from having to step off the throne of our heart.

When the Pharisees ask the man for a second time in V. 26, "What did [Jesus] do to you? How did he open your eyes?" his reply cuts like a knife through the postmodern fog. V. 27, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again?" Why do you keep asking the same questions over and over again? Are you looking for a different answer? Or do you want a different answer?"

He recognized the impurity of their motives. They didn't want to know what was actually true. They wanted him to say something that would line up with what they had already decided was true. Only the Holy Spirit can open our minds and remove our spiritual bias, the willful blindness that keeps us from seeing Jesus for who he really is.

4) WE FAIL TO HEED TO THE WITNESS OF GOD'S WORD

The Pharisees claimed God's Word was on their side in denying the deity of Christ. V. 28, "And they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.'" Here's the problem. If you read the first five books of the Old Testament, the books of Moses, everything in them points forward to Jesus. What did Jesus say to two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus?

Lk 24:25-27, "'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself."

If you humbly read the Word of God, not imposing an anti-supernatural grid or a history of religions framework, but taking it at face value, on its own terms and in its own categories, you'll recognize Jesus is the centerpiece of the entire story. If you're going to sincerely weigh the claims of Christianity, do not hold the Bible at

arm's length, looking for contradictions or objections to faith. Listen to what it says about Jesus.

5) WE PREFER THE IRRATIONALITY OF UNBELIEF TO THE RATIONALITY OF FAITH

V. 30 is dripping with sarcasm. In response to the Pharisees' persistent denial that Jesus has anything to do with God, the healed man declares, "Why this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes." On the outside of the Christian faith, people who believe Jesus is God look like people who have taken a leap in the dark.

"Wait, you're devoting your entire life to serving someone we can't see, who supposedly walked the earth when you weren't alive, so you will be "saved" on a future day of judgment that has never happened before? And you're denying yourself a host of tangible pleasures because you believe Jesus is better? Have fun with that. I think I'll stick to what I know."

One of the problems with that perspective is the assumption it makes. You are assuming the choice to not believe in God or functionally deny the deity of Christ by refusing to submit to his authority, is a more reasonable conclusion, given the available evidence, than what Christianity says is true.

Does it make more sense that all the intricacies and splendors of the natural world came about completely by accident or that they are the product of an all-wise Creator? Does it make more sense that hundreds of eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection banded together to sell a lie or that they laid down their lives for him and testified to his glory because they could not deny the truth of what they had seen and heard?

Does it make more sense when Jesus heals the blind, stops the storm, raises the dead, and casts out demons that he is God or that he is a delusional man? If God is infinitely holy and just, does it make more sense that he will weigh your deeds against your neighbors and give you a pass? Or that all of us will be found wanting in the courtroom of his majesty and need a Savior who can obey for us, die in our place, and deliver us from the death we deserve.

The man's entire point is that the most incredulous, scarcely believable fact in the entire situation is not that God would come to earth and heal someone born blind.

If Jesus is who he says he is and he created the earth, including the first man and woman, out of nothing, nothing is too hard for him! What's truly scandalous, what doesn't make sense, is that when confronted with an undeniable miracle only God could perform, the Pharisees still refuse to believe Jesus is who he says he is.

The Christian faith is not irrational, friend. It is grounded in well-attested historical realities that make perfectly good sense of the world in which we live. What flies in the face of the entire historical record of Jesus' words and deeds, Jn 9 included, is a refusal to believe him. Nothing is more rational in God's universe than faith. And nothing is more irrational in God's universe than unbelief. We have plenty of reasons for our unbelief. But there are immeasurably better reasons for faith in Jesus.

CONCLUSION

In v. 12, the man doesn't "know" where Jesus is. In v. 21, the parents do not "know" how the man sees or who opened his eyes. In v. 24, the Pharisees say they "know" Jesus is a sinner. The man says in v. 25 he doesn't "know" if Jesus is a sinner. He does "know" he once was blind but now he sees. The Pharisees retort, we "know" God spoke through Moses. We don't "know" where this man (Jesus) comes from. And the man mocks their supposed "knowledge" in v. 31 when he reminds the Pharisees of what they should have known of the character and ways of God.

All of that makes Jesus' question to the healed man in v. 35 all the more striking. "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" V. 36, "And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" For the first time in the entire chapter, someone doesn't focus on what they know or don't know according to the wisdom of man. They ask Jesus to tell them what they need to believe. It's the first time someone postures themselves as a revelation receiver, modelling the humility of faith seeking understanding.

The man clearly cares about knowing the truth. He's not looking to make a leap in the dark. He wants to know who the Savior of the world is. He wants to understand. But unlike the Pharisees, he looks to Jesus in an act of trust, believing he is able to show him what he cannot see (or know) on his own. And the Lord rewarded his decision to exchange confidence in the words of men for reliance on the Word Made Flesh with true knowledge and saving faith. V. 37, "You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you.' He said, 'Lord, I believe,' and he worshiped him."

The Jews “did not believe” (v. 18) and were confirmed in the blindness of their supposed knowledge. The blind man believed (v. 38) and his faith was rewarded with understanding. The same choice lies before you, friend? Which example will you follow? The spiritual blindness of human reason apart from faith in God? Or the spiritual sight of faith seeking understanding?

The whole point of Jn 9 is that we will never truly know Jesus apart from faith in Jesus, apart from a poverty of spirit, a humility of heart and mind, that lays down the pride of human reason in all its self-deception, and says, “God, reveal yourself to me. Open my eyes to see you in the pages of your Word. Forgive me for demanding you pass muster in the courtroom of my understanding. Help me to see Jesus for who he really is.”

The Christian faith is eminently rational. But God will not be known through human reason. He can only be known through the humility of faith seeking understanding. And the true test of whether genuine faith, and the knowledge of Christ it affords, is alive and well in the soul is whether it results in adoration of Jesus.

Plenty of people say they believe in Jesus. But only those who follow the example of the blind man in worshiping him, living for him, exalting him in your thoughts, words, and deeds, can rest in knowing their faith is real. The ultimate result of faith in Jesus is gratitude and affection for Jesus.

The question is not whether he will be exalted through our spiritual blindness, but how. If you know you are spiritually blind and look to Jesus, he will enable you to see. If you think you’ve already figured out who he is through the power of your own understanding, then whenever you encounter Jesus, your heart will be spiritually hardened even further. Jesus gives sight to the blind and blinds those who think they can see.

So confess your blindness, friend. Ask the Lord to show you his glory. And then turn your eyes to Jesus, for it is in the Son of God – living, dying, rising from the grave – that the Lord causes all his goodness to pass before us. And as he does, may you say in the words of Jn 9:25, “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”