

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN - PART XII

THE CURE OF THE BLIND MAN

I. This event continues showing Jesus' role in the light of the world, through the symbolism of curing a blind man. There is also an indication of baptism.

A. The healing comes on the heels of the forgiveness of the adulterous woman and the discourse regarding Jesus as the light of the world who shows forth the glory of God.

1. There the cure begins with the disciples asking Jesus whose sin caused the man's blindness, and Jesus focuses attention (for the moment) away from sin.

- The Old Testament does say that illnesses can be caused by sin. See, e.g., Duet. 28:15-69 (especially 19:28-29); Ps. 38. There are also several instances of temporary blindness as a prevention for additional sin. See, e.g., Gen. 19:11, Ex. 4:11, 2 Kings 6:18. But there was also a notion that even the just could suffer. See, e.g., Job, Ps. 41. In addition, under the old dispensation, God was said to have inflicted punishment to the third and fourth generations, although grace to the thousandth. See Ex. 34:7. Ezekiel, however, prophesied of a time when children would no longer suffer for their parents' sins, nor parents for their children's. See Ez. 18:1-20.

- Some Jews also believed that one could sin even in the womb. And, with better justification, it was generally acknowledged that some sin afflicted the whole human race. See, e.g., Ps. 14:3, 51:7; Job 4:16-17, 25. In addition, it was generally accepted that the sin of Adam and Eve introduced physical infirmities into the world.

2. Thus the disciples ask whose sin caused the blindness, believing it either that of the parents (or possibly a generation or more back) or the sin of this person. By proposing the sin of the blind man caused his blindness, they may mean either personal sin, or that general sinfulness of humanity.

3. But Jesus wishes to refocus attention on suffering as showing forth the work of God, the blind man being a first example.

- Indicating that the cure of the blind man is an example of showing forth the work of God in general, He goes on to say that "we" must do the works of the Father while it is still day.
- The night can have several meanings. It could mean the death of Jesus, the light of the world. In other words, Jesus is indicating that He must teach the full Gospel before His death. It could also mean the death of each person, indicating that each person must act now, for he does not know when the time for acting will end. See, e.g., Is. 38:10. Another is that the night is the loss of faith that will come if one does not walk by the light of Christ. See John 12:35-36. The idea is that if one does not act upon one's faith, the night of doubt will come. In any case, it emphasizes the importance of acting when the opportunity arises.

B. Jesus then cures the blind man by means of mud made of dirt and saliva and having him wash in the pool of Siloam.

1. The use of such mud as a curative (including for blindness) was attested to in the ancient world. See, e.g., Tacitus, Histories 4:81. Thus, the action was not as strange as it may seem now. In Tobit, Tobias uses fish gall and his own breath to cure his father's blindness.
2. However, there is still something noteworthy about Jesus doing so, given the fact that He usually cured with simply a word.
3. One possible reason is they indicate the curative powers of the sacraments. The idea is that if even Jesus used symbols to perform His works, surely He would have His Church do the same. In particular, the catacombs have a number of images of this event connected to baptism, emphasizing the aspect of baptism as opening one's spiritual eyes to the light of faith. Part of the idea is that, as God created man by dust and breath, so too He recreates man through dust and water. Another possible idea is that the mud is a symbol of the recognition of man's sinfulness and the waters of Siloam the washing away of that sinfulness that gives one the light of faith. This passage is now the Gospel reading for the fourth Sunday of Lent, and the second Sunday of the "scrutinies" for those entering the Church. The forgiveness of the adulterous woman is the reading for the first of these scrutinies, and the raising of Lazarus the reading for the third. The focus is on forgiveness of sins, illumination of the mind, and raising to supernatural life.
4. By sending the man to the pool of Siloam, Jesus also indicates that some response to God's cure is required.

- In a remarkable feat of engineering, workers under King Hezekiah created the pool of Siloam by digging an underground tunnel from the spring outside of Jerusalem the location of this pool. The idea was that, if the city was besieged, there would still be a supply of water. See 2 Kings 2:20, 2 Chron. 32:30. The waters that supplied this pool were considered to be a sign of divine favor, and the rejection of them the rejection of God's protection. See Is. 8:6. Thus, Jesus is symbolically sending the man to the waters of God's favor for the cleansing of sin.

- The man had to stumble through about six hundred yards to wash in the pool. There was a humility and faith in doing so.

II. The cure was on the Sabbath and thus violated the prevailing rules on keeping the Sabbath.

A. The Pharisees ask whether the cure is from God, for it is on the Sabbath, which they considered to be wrong, although other works on the Sabbath were permitted. See, e.g., 1 Macc. 2:39-41. On the other hand, Isaiah had spoken of such cure of blindness, both literal and figurative, as a sign of the Messiah. See Is. 9:1, 42:6-7, 18, 43:8. As with the previous cure on the Sabbath in chapter 5, they do not go to Jesus for an explanation, but instead questions the man.

B. As the questioning continues, the formerly blind man becomes more certain in faith, going from understanding Jesus as a man doing good works to a prophet to a prophet able to do what no prophet had done before, to the Son of Man, to one worthy of worship (i.e. God Himself.) The authorities meanwhile go from doubt to an adamant refusal even to consider Jesus' claims.

C. The man first begins to see Jesus as a prophet, for the prophets sometimes had the ability to cure illnesses. See, e.g., 2 Kings 5; Is. 38:1-8.

D. The authorities then question the parents. But they, while affirming the fact of the cure, refuse to take a stance out of fear. They know that affirming that Jesus can cure blindness would be considered evidence that He is the Messiah, and support of this proposition was strictly forbidden. The whole atmosphere is one of a fearful, totalitarian state.

- To be thrown out of the synagogue meant not only expulsion from that place, but shunning by the people. There were at least three degrees of this punishment: one week, thirty days, or permanently. It would appear that the threat here was of permanent exclusion.

E. The authorities then go back to the man, apparently wanting him to change his testimony. Despite the lack of any additional evidence or discussion, they claim to know that Jesus is a sinner.

1. There is an irony in the phrase "Give God the praise," for it is a call to speak the truth, see Joshua 7:18, Jer. 13:16, but here there is a lack of concern about the truth.

2. They then demand an explanation another time, asking how Jesus cured him. They could either be trying to see if there is some inconsistency in his accounts, or possibly asking him how Jesus got the power to perform miracles, a question he clearly could not answer.

3. The man, likely sensing a trap, asks them for their motives, whether they are really interested in being disciples of Jesus.

4. The man refers back to the sensible point that never in Jewish history is it recorded that one was able to open the eyes of a blind man. Tobias found a cure for his father's blindness, but that was a later blindness. And blindness that was a punishment for sin after birth was also cured. See 2 Kings 6:14-17. But this level of cure was unique.

5. The man argues that the cure must be from God and, therefore, Jesus must be from God, for otherwise His prayers would not have been answered. See, e.g., Ps. 66:18, Prov. 15:29, Is. 1:15; see also James 5:16. The authorities could have argued, as they did elsewhere, that miraculous powers can come from dark forces, see Duet. 13:1-5, Matt 2:24-27, but doing so would probably lead to a demand to question Jesus and lead to a lengthy inquiry, which is what they were eager to avoid. In addition, the curing of the blind and the lame was especially a sign of the Messianic reign, see Is. 29:19, 35:5, and a divine prerogative, see Ex. 4:11, Ps. 146:8. Thus it would be difficult to argue that the cure is a sign of evil powers at work.

6. Generally, the man is trying to draw the leaders to a simple recognition of the facts that they are eager to avoid. There is a dramatic contrast with the simple honesty and courage of the man and the evasiveness and anger of the authorities, as well as a certain cowardice in not going to Jesus Himself.

7. Their response is simple insult and expulsion without any fact-finding. The authorities are starting to show their hand.

F. There is an overall theme that this and other miracles increase the understanding and fervor of those willing to believe, but do

nothing for those unwilling to believe. See also Luke 16:31. This theme will be continued with the raising of Lazarus.

III. Once the man has been rejected by the authorities, he becomes an even greater object of Jesus' power and compassion, for now Jesus reveals even more to him.

A. Jesus again defies the law by immediately associating with the excluded person. He then calls upon him to believe in the Son of Man. When the man indicates his willingness to believe, Jesus reveals Himself as the Son of Man. This reference seems more to Jesus as the judge referred to in Daniel 7.

B. The man takes this revelation a step further and "worships" Him. Worship is reserved for God alone. See Ex. 34:14, Dan. 3:28. Thus, the man goes from recognizing Jesus as the great judge to implicitly understanding Him to be God Himself, although he may not have fully understood the implications of that idea.

C. Jesus then spells out His role as judge, opening the eyes of those who understand they need His help and blinding those who believe they understand everything. Isaiah had said that those who reject God's ways are blind, see Is. 56:10, 59:10. Here, Jesus points out that, precisely because He is bringing the light of God into the world, those who reject Him are confirming their blindness, and therefore, entering sin.