

THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION

John 9:24-41

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“Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said,
“Do you believe in the Son of Man?” (Jn. 9:16).

In studying John chapters 8 and 9, I have occasionally wondered why the apostle devoted so large a portion of his Gospel to this unpleasant controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees. I found the answer in the Gospel’s prologue, in chapter 1. There, John emphasizes not only Jesus’ coming as the light of the world, but also the hostile response of the world. From the beginning, John stated that “the world did not know him” and Jesus’ “own people did not receive him” (Jn. 1:10-11). Jesus’ coming brings conflict, and though the darkness opposes him it is not able to put out his light (Jn. 1:5).

Light serves a double function. The purpose of the sun is to convey life and growth. But whenever you move a large stone and expose the ground to the sun’s light, bugs and creepy crawlers are driven by the light into the dark places they love. In the same way, the purpose of John’s Gospel is not merely to preach good news about Jesus, but also to warn us that his gospel brings conflict and judgment.

The theme of conflict between faith and salvation versus unbelief and judgment comes into sharp focus in John 9. C. H. Dodd calls this “one of the most brilliant passages in the gospel, rich in the tragic irony of which the evangelist is master.”¹ There is irony, as those who claimed to see revealed their utter blindness. And there is tragedy, as those appointed to enlighten the people exposed themselves as servants of darkness. Both the irony and the tragedy are relevant to us, because the preaching of the gospel shines that

¹ C.H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1963), 357.

same light onto us and reveals the hidden truth about our hearts, a truth that will determine our judgment. John thus tells us that how we respond to Jesus is the most important question in all of life.

SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS

For all their religious credentials, the Pharisees revealed themselves as creatures of darkness by their hatred for Jesus.

This is displayed with stunning clarity in their interview of the man whose sight was restored. In John 8, the Pharisees showed their inability to contend with Jesus, but now they fail even to overcome the testimony of a beggar who until recently had been blind all his life.

How can such religious people be so obstinate in unbelief? This passage provides us a number of clues. First, notice that the Pharisees kept saying, “We know... we know” (Jn. 9:24, 29). This showed their false intellectual confidence. During the long years in which they exercised leadership in Jerusalem, they came to regard themselves as the arbiters of truth. As such they were always saying “we know” about things they little understood. When the Pharisee Nicodemus met with Jesus in chapter 3, he began, “We know.” Jesus responded by pointing out his spiritual ignorance and blindness: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:3).

The fact is that the Pharisees did not know about Jesus, as their questioning reveals. Coming a second time to the man whose sight was restored, they demanded: “Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner” (Jn. 9:24). “Give glory to God” is what Joshua said when he demanded that Achan admit his sin in the Old Testament. So the Pharisees were insinuating that the man had lied and demanded that he speak the truth before God. The man replied that the only thing he knew was that Jesus had opened his eyes. In all of this, the Pharisees revealed how little they knew, as they hunted for evidence to bolster their objections to Jesus.

This makes an important point for us. We need to admit that we do not know about God and his way of salvation unless he tells us. What does God expect? How does God feel about us? What does God

have planned? Anyone can have a theory, but only God truly knows and unless he tells us we will stay in the dark. The good news is that God has spoken in the Bible, which is his revealed Word. But the way to remain blind even when the Bible is read or preached is to approach God's Word claiming, "I know, I know," refusing to be taught by God through his Word.

Armed with this attitude, the Pharisees pressed the poor man about Jesus: "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" (Jn. 9:26). He replied, "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?" (Jn. 9:27). In their reply, the Pharisees show a second reason for spiritual blindness: their blind devotion to tradition. John records, "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'" (Jn. 9:28-29).

There is nothing wrong with godly traditions, until they become an end in themselves, as they tend to do. The Pharisees trusted Moses, but doubted Jesus' teaching. How this would have dismayed Moses, since he pointed to Christ! As Jesus earlier said, Moses himself would judge them for their unbelief: "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me" (Jn. 5:46). Moreover, there is particular irony in the Pharisees' opposition to Jesus' miracle of giving sight, since the prophets had specified this as a sign of the Messiah. "In that day..." Isaiah wrote, "out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see" (Isa. 29:18).

People refuse Jesus for traditions today. Though Judaism existed to lead people to the Messiah, Jews refuse the gospel thinking they would betray Judaism. Roman Catholicism emerged out of the early gospel-preaching church, yet later it officially condemned the gospel to make the church supreme over salvation. One of the hardest things for Roman Catholic converts is to break with tradition. The same thing can happen in our religious traditions. Let us be grateful for a godly legacy if we have one, but let our traditions ever be the servant of Jesus and his gospel and never the would-be master.

The Pharisees were not doing well against the man whose sight Jesus restored, but they might have done better if they had really listened.

When they insisted they Jesus' teaching could not be accepted because they could not account for his origins, the man answered:

Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper 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. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing (Jn. 9:30-33).

The Pharisees had lost the man's respect and his attitude showed it. But his argument was serious and compelling. Jesus' miracle commended his claims. The Pharisees rejected this for a third reason: by abuse of their authority: "They answered him, 'You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?' And they cast him out" (Jn. 9:34). With these words, the man whom Jesus had blessed was excommunicated from the Jewish synagogue. This was a grievous matter, isolating him not only from religious society but also from the political, economic, and social life of his people.

There are times when church leaders are required to remove members as an act of discipline, which we refer to as excommunication. The purposes of excommunication are to preserve the sanctity of Christ's church and call flagrant sinners to repentance. It is a sober action that should only happen with much prayer and after repeated attempts to minister repentance have failed.

But how far was this action from the biblical practice. Notice the Pharisees' contempt: "You were born in utter sin," they spat, blaming the man for his former plight. "Would you teach us?" they reviled. But the man's offense was not a moral sin or a valid charge of heresy, as their failure to refute him showed. He was kicked out simply for challenging their unbelief. Gordon Keddie writes, "When churches and clerics depart from the truth of God's Word, church discipline merely serves their interest in retaining their institutional power."²

What the Pharisees were saying was "We don't have to believe because we are the ones in charge." Almost anyone can remain blind to the gospel by doing the same. Fathers may refuse the witness of wives and children by saying, "I'm the head of this house." Liberal

² Gordon J. Keddie, *A Study Commentary on John*, 2 vols. (location: Evangelical Press,), I:380.

scholars contort the Bible on the authority of their degrees. Post-modern individuals appeal to the authority of their own autonomy, saying “I don’t have to believe anything unless I want to.”

At the bottom of all these sources of unbelief was simple hostility to Jesus himself. In the end, there are none so blind as those who will not see. This is why Jesus spoke of judgment on so-called enlightened unbelievers like the Pharisees: “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind” (Jn. 9:39). Jesus did not primarily come to judge but to save sinners. But those who reject him necessarily come into judgment, and part of this judgment is a hardening effect caused by their unbelief. The Pharisees objected to Jesus, “Are we also blind?” Jesus answered, “If you were blind you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains” (Jn. 9:40-41). This refers both to their proud claims to knowledge and to the fact that they rejected Jesus even though they knew that his healing was a true miracle. Because they sinned boldly in the face of knowledge, their judgment was increased and their blindness redoubled.

This warns each of us who hears the gospel but does not believe. Well might we all pray to God with the words of Thomas Chalmers:

O deliver me not up to the judicial blindness which comes upon those who stifle the light that is in them; make me thoroughly aware of the ignorance of nature..., and be so awakened to the danger and deficiency of nature, that Christ shall give light.³

EYES TO SEE

In contrast to the blindness of these “seeing” Pharisees, John presents the growing sight of the man who once was blind. As we consider him, we notice a direct contrast between his manner and that of his accusers. Whereas they bragged, “We know, we know,” the man Jesus healed admitted what he did *not* know. “Whether he is a sinner,” he began, “I do not know” (Jn. 9:25).

It is always healthy for a Christian – especially a new convert, but also a seasoned veteran – to admit the things that he or she doesn’t

³ Thomas Chalmers, *Sabbath Scripture Readings* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 2006), 127.

know. Neither our faith in Christ nor our witness requires us to be experts on everything. “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” Jesus said, and it is those who are humble about their need for knowledge who receive his help.

But there were things that this man *did* know – and he knew very well that he knew them: “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see” (Jn. 9:25). There are, of course, things that one must know simply to be a Christian – namely, that Jesus is the Son of God who became our Savior by dying on the cross for our sins. If you know this but are unsure of other important questions, then admit your ignorance but also stand firmly on these core truths. The man born blind could not be shaken from his knowledge that while once blind he now could see, and no believer should be shaken from the knowledge that Jesus died for his sins, that the Bible is God’s inerrant Word, and that salvation comes through faith in Christ.

Shortly after Martin Luther had launched the Protestant Reformation by preaching justification through faith alone, he was challenged to some high profile debates with leading Roman Catholic scholars. The record shows that Luther did not always do well in these debates and often admitted that he was wrong about certain things. But he knew that he was right about salvation through faith in Christ alone by God’s grace alone. There he stood and he not only emerged victorious but his faith and understanding grew.

How was Luther able to stand? Because he not only knew what he did *not* know and also what he *did* know, but he also knew *how* he knew it. The same was true for man born blind. How did he know? He answered, because “he opened my eyes” (Jn. 9:30).

How do we know what we know about Jesus and salvation? We know for the same reason, that God opened our eyes through the light of his Word. True faith always arises from the Scriptures. Make sure that you know what you believe, and make sure that you know you believe it because the Bible teaches it. Then you will stand firm before the world despite ignorance of many things, and by continuing to learn from the Bible your faith and knowledge will grow.

THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION

This dialogue reveals great differences between the Pharisees and the man born blind, differences that determined their faith or unbelief. While the Pharisees were focused mainly on their own agenda and position, the man who could now see was focused wholly on Jesus. This, too, is the way to stand firm and grow, not by asking what the world thinks of your faith but by focusing on the glorious person and saving work of Jesus himself.

The man's trust in Jesus was well rewarded when the Lord returned to minister to him after his excommunication. There are some churches from which it is a privilege to be kicked out, especially when they toss us into the arms of Jesus. The apostle John and his readers learned this when they were banned by Judaism, and Martin Luther learned it when he was banned by the pope because of the gospel. This former blind man was blessed to be cast upon the grace of the Lord. John writes, "Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?'" (Jn. 9:35).

This question that Jesus asked was and is the most important of all questions: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" I say this because it deals with the greatest subject in life and in death – the state of our relationship with God. Jesus had blessed this man physically, but unless his faith was settled on Jesus himself, then his ultimate destiny was in doubt. With what grace did Jesus come with this question, seeking to settle this once blind man in the only truth that could save his soul! It is with the same grace that Jesus asks this all-important question to us. James Boice writes:

There are many things in your mind that you think are important and that the world judges to be important, but none of them are as important as the great matter of salvation... Do you believe on Jesus? The Bible stresses the importance of this matter when it asks properly, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Mk. 8:36).⁺

Furthermore, this question is most important because it deals with the most important person who ever lived. This is one of the ways that

⁺ James Montgomery Boice, *John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 3:724.

Christianity differs from other religions. One may be a Buddhist while knowing practically nothing of Buddha himself. Buddha once stated that it matters nothing what anyone thinks of him, only of the principles he taught. A similar thing might be said of Islam and its founder. Certainly, Muslims hold Mohammed in very high regard, but their personal beliefs about Mohammed are more or less immaterial to the Islamic way of salvation through good works.

Jesus taught the very opposite when it came to himself. “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” he asked as the key question regarding salvation. “Son of Man” denotes the divine Savior who came from heaven to earth and returns to heaven with authority to judge the whole world. The “Son of Man,” Jesus taught, is the Savior who was lifted onto the cross to die for our sins (Jn. 3:14-15). Jesus summed up his gospel by saying, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (Jn. 3:36).

The man born blind was still groping with his new sight. So he asked Jesus about the Son of Man, “And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?” (Jn. 9:36). Notice that Jesus’ answer consisted of directing the man’s faith to himself: “You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you” (Jn. 8:37). Now knowing all that he really needed, the man believed and worshiped Jesus as the Son of God and Savior: “He said, ‘Lord, I believe,’ and he worshiped him” (Jn. 9:38).

I have already mentioned Jesus’ concluding words with the Pharisees, as they objected to what Jesus said when he returned to this man. Jesus replied, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind” (Jn. 9:39).

This shows us that Jesus’ question not only deals with the most important subject and the most important person, but it is also the most urgent matter for each of us: “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” People think that by not answering, they are merely putting the question off. But they are not! If you hear Christ’s gospel and turn away, you are spurning the truth of God, rejecting the only Savior he has sent, and risking the judgment of deeper darkness so that you may never again have the chance to believe.

How beautifully Jesus stands out in this dreadful chapter, with its stunning depiction of the darkness of life. The Pharisees looked on the man without pity and tried to turn his greatest blessing into their most woeful curse. They neighbors handed him over for questioning and even his parents refused to stand up for him. What a world it is in which we live, and how greatly people we have trusted let us down! Against this dark backdrop, Jesus stands out for his purity, his mercy, his wisdom, and his grace. In all these great affairs, his chief concern is for this needy man. Psalm 27:10 is fulfilled in him: “Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me.” Will you not admit your need of Jesus and desire him as your own Savior? Let us therefore respond to the gospel the way this man did. Let us answer Jesus’ question by saying, “I believe, Lord,” and then let us worship him.

THE GREAT DIVIDE

There is a point along the Continental Divide high in the Colorado mountains where the waters of two small streams separate to begin two long journeys in different directions. One half leads to the Pacific Ocean on America’s west coast and the other leads to the Atlantic Ocean in the east. The dividing point is a single rock that sits within that little stream. As the waters strike the rock, some turn west to flow through the White River of Utah to the Grand River and then the Colorado River until entering the Pacific in the Gulf of California. But other waters turn east from that rock and flow into the North Platte River and then through the Missouri River and the Mississippi River into the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean. Two drops of water, side-by-side, find two different destinies when they strike that one rock on the Continental Divide.⁵

The same is true of Jesus Christ, who asks us, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” That one question will determine the eternal destiny of everyone who answers it. Some, like the man whose eyes Jesus had opened, respond by believing and enter through faith into eternal life. Others, like the Pharisees, relying on their supposed knowledge, or

⁵ Cited from Boice, *John*, 3:731.

their traditions, or on their stubborn will, reject Jesus and end up separated from God and from heaven forever.

Therefore, let me urge you not to take the question lightly. “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” Jesus asks. If you, like this man, are not quite sure, then turn to God’s Word and ask him sincerely. God will lead the honest inquirer into salvation through the Bible’s teaching. But let me warn you if you, like the Pharisees, simply refuse to see. The chance to be saved may never be given to you again, either because of Christ’s return to judge the world, your own death, which may come at any time, or the hardening of your heart that results from unbelief. The way to eternal life is simple, as the apostle Paul once put it, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). Lastly, if you have answered by believing on Jesus, then count this faith your most precious possession. Fix your eyes on your wonderful Savior, devote your life to worshiping him, and never turn back to the darkness now that your eyes have been opened to see.