

The Eye-Opener
That You May Believe
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Let's go to the Lord in a time of preparation.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we give you praise. We thank you for this Lord's day, a day when we remember Jesus Christ risen from the dead, a day to gather together from around the city to lift our voices with grace in our hearts in adoration and worship of our great God and Savior. For you are good and you are to be feared, loved, praised, called upon and served with all of our heart, our soul, our mind and our strength. And we gather this evening to sit under your word to listen to the word of God proclaimed, to grow in our knowledge of you and of your law, being instructed, built up, encouraged and fed and that by the power of the Spirit your word would dwell in us richly as we received with faith, yielding obedience unto you in a childlike love and a willing mind.

Heavenly Father, as we come, some of us weighed down by the cares of this world, troubled by work or relational difficulties, poor health or other, help us this evening to hear the word of God for all Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness. Would you be with our senior minister as he comes to preach your word to us this evening and calls us, O God, to delight in Jesus? More than anything else, to flee sin in reverential fear of you and to be conformed into the image of your Son. We ask these things in Christ's name. Amen.

Our Scripture reading this evening is from John 9. We'll be reading from verse 1 through 12 and you can find this on page 895 in the Pew Bibles. This is God's word,

1 As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. 4 We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. 5 As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." 6 Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud 7 and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and

washed and came back seeing. 8 The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" 9 Some said, "It is he." Others said, "No, but he is like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." 10 So they said to him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" 11 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 washed and received my sight." 12 They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

Now, we discover over and over again in our experience, you take 2 children brought up in the same home, a Christian home, exposed to the same parental influences, had the same Bible stories read to them as they were growing up, been prayed over, prayed for, prayed with, brought up in a church that believes the Bible, teaches the Bible, sings the Bible, prays the Bible and as they develop into manhood or womanhood, it becomes apparent that they are going in 2 entirely different directions. For one, it all makes sense, it all falls into place. They come to believe in the Lord Jesus and cast themselves upon him. For the other, there may be a kind of nodding acquaintance with the things of God but actually even though they never go off the rails, even though they never deny the faith, even though they never give up going to church at least perhaps in the early days, as time passes, as circumstances in their lives develop, as temptations come their way, as questions arise in their minds, it becomes apparent that although they are not really rejecting even the faith of their parents, it becomes apparent that actually they don't get it. They don't get the faith. They don't understand it. They really don't see it. They don't disagree with it, they don't reject it but they really don't get it and it is at moments of crisis, moments when the circumstances of life are testing them that you begin to see that actually there is no saving faith there. Why is that? Why is it that people can sit under the word of God, read the word of God and some people get it and some don't?

As we've been following the conversations, the debating and the interactions that Jesus Christ has been having with people in his day that is recorded in John's Gospel, we're confronted with that very reality. We're confronted with some people, only a few, who get the message, who see it, who go for the gusto and grab at the truth and make it their own. But there are others there, yes, others there with Jesus there, listening to the best preaching you could get ever in human history, listening to the Lord Jesus himself there among them, doing miracles, doing all the things that demonstrate that he is the Lord, seeing all of those things firsthand and in spite of that, they don't get it. In fact, the opposite, they reject it. All of that is the background, those are the ingredients in the mix as we come to look at this chapter this evening. It is not just the story of something that happens out of the blue. This miracle about which we are reading and we're going to look at it in a two-part phase, part 1 being the miracle itself this evening and then look more closely at the purpose of the miracle as it's unpacked for us later in the chapter. But this miracle takes place in that context in which there is this division amongst people. Some believe but they don't really believe. Some don't get it at all and they don't believe. And a few believe and are set free by the truth that they find in Jesus. That's the context as we come to the sermon. It would be helpful if I had the sermon, in fact, with me here instead of back there.

Now, the key phrase in this section is in verse 5. Not that I ever look at these notes as it becomes apparent as time goes on, but anyway, they're there anyway as a kind of cushion in case I need to fall down. Verse 5, "As long as I am in the world," Jesus says, "I am the light of the world." That's what connects it to the discussions, the debate that I just mentioned in the previous chapter because it's in chapter 8:12 that Jesus makes the claim, "I am the light of the world." "Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'" And the very phrase "the light of the world" has its Hebrew background in Isaiah 49:6. In John's Gospel if you're stuck on almost any theme or picture or idea that just seems to come out of the blue, you can more or less guarantee that he got it from Isaiah. The Hebrew in Isaiah 49:6 goes like this, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob," this is the servant of the Lord, the one who's going to be despised, rejected and killed for our sins in chapter 53. Here he is being spoken to by the Lord, "To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth." Here is God speaking to his servant, the one who will be wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquity. The one who has the Holy Spirit on him with a full anointing. This is the one to whom the Lord is speaking in Isaiah 49. This idea of Jesus then as light, the light for the nations, the light of the world that brings salvation to the ends of the earth, this idea is the idea that drives the narrative of this passage. It shows us what happens when the light of truth shines, that some are made blinder by it and others are made to see by it because through this miracle of the healing of this blind man, Jesus is going to demonstrate at a physical level what his presence and his word and his truth can do at a spiritual level in the hearts and lives of men and women.

Now, you can see immediately that the a miracle is set against the background of a human tragedy. We read about a man who is born blind. We're not told how people knew that. Some suggest that perhaps the man was born without eyes at all, that all there were were sockets where eyes should be and therefore it was obvious that this was a man who was born blind. We don't know the background. We know that he was a familiar figure, that people knew of his presence, knew that he was born blind whatever the reason for that and this man's tragic condition serves the bigger picture because of the theme of spiritual blindness that has already been introduced by the expression "the light of the world." And it's against that background that we see this man who is born blind.

I want you to notice in verse 1 something very important. I don't want to miss this even though it's not apposite to our sermon this evening but I want you to notice what it is that precipitates the whole story here. What precipitates it in verse 1 is this: that he, that is Jesus, saw a man blind from birth. As Jesus passed by, he saw this man and it was the disciples who saw what Jesus saw. They followed his eyes. You know, a very weird thing goes on on Sunday mornings mostly as I'm looking around the congregation, there are some people in the congregation that look to see what I'm looking at. I'm actually not looking at anything, I'm just looking. I'm kind of giving a wandering eye to see who's there and who's not there and take notes so that I can keep a record of your infractions. That's all I'm doing. But some people follow my eyes and apparently the disciples were

following Jesus' eyes and they saw him look at this man who was born blind. That's crucial actually to this story.

But what I want to just pause on here before we actually launch into it is that this whole thing starts with Jesus seeing this man. These disciples are engaged in asking the question about this man because they see Jesus looking at this man. That's important, I think, because many of us are inured to disability that we find all around us. We don't see the wounded soldier or the Down syndrome child. We would rather ignore them because they make us uncomfortable. I came across these words of John Piper this week that I think I want to pass on to you. He says in an exhortation, "See people with disabilities like Jesus did, not like the priest and the Levite on the Jericho Road who passed by on the other side. That's our natural reaction: to see and avoid. But if we are Christians, we are not natural people anymore, we are followers of Jesus. We have the Spirit of Jesus in our hearts. We have been seen and touched in all our brokenness by the attentive, merciful Savior." Piper ends, "If you want to be one of the most remarkable kinds of human beings on our planet, the Jesus kind, then see people with disabilities. See them. Move toward them and God will show you what to say."

Jesus saw this man. They followed his eyes. They saw what he saw and that's what provokes their question. What is their question? "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Now, what's interesting about that question is, of course, that it's been addressed already in the Bible. In fact, there's a whole book of the Bible called the book of Job and the book of Job, one of its purposes in the Bible is to address this whole philosophy, this whole idea that there is a direct causal relationship between a particular sin and a particular sickness. And in spite of that book being one of the oldest books in our Bible and having been there from the beginning, still this idea of a direct causal relationship between a particular sin and a particular sickness was still alive and well and kicking in Jesus' day.

Now, we should stand back a moment and say that it's absolutely right that the whole of the Bible, the Hebrew Bible and the Greek Bible, the Old and the New Testament, are all united in saying this: that the entrance of sin into the world in the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden led to all sickness and death that there is in the world. "The wages of sin is death," with all that that entails. If you read the early chapters of Romans, there you see the effects of sin as they break into the world and as men and women are caught up in sin. Sin leads to death. Sin leads beyond death to judgment. There is a reign of sin and a reign of death and sin reigned and death reigned from Adam. That's a reality that the Bible speaks of. But it is one thing to say that all sickness and death are in the world as a result of the sin of Adam being accredited to all human beings after Adam. In other words, we share in Adam's sin because we vote for Adam every time we sin. That's one thing. It is another thing to try and draw a straight line between one specific sin and a particular ailment or illness. The reality is that there is a propensity in us, I think, that wants to tie events together. We want to have a solution. We want to have an explanation for things. You may know somebody in your family who always has to have an explanation for everything that goes on; a little story that they tell to explain somebody's behavior. You know they're making the story up but it makes sense of the behavior of

somebody else for them. Well, we have this propensity within us to try and find an explanation when anything goes wrong in somebody else's life, not ours, of course, but in somebody else's life.

So what you find as you find with these men here that they had this idea of this direct causal connection between sin and sickness and even though there was no basis for it, people did not stop speculating. In fact, there were people who even thought they had biblical warrant for doing what they were doing from Exodus 20:5, "I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me." They thought that was a verse that at least gave them some biblical support for their view. Some Rabbis, by Jesus' day, were saying that a parent's sin left its mark on the baby. For example, if a mother worshiped at a pagan shrine during her pregnancy, her unborn child was regarded as having participated in that pagan rite with all the implications. Some Rabbis speculated that it was possible for a baby itself to sin while it was still in its mother's womb. They are ridiculous but they speculated all kinds of things.

Now, that kind of speculation plus the human penchant for trying to find and explain the inexplicable leads the disciples to ask this question, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?" They were arguing from his problem to a sinful origin. Not only was that biblically unsound, the book of Job tells us that, but it wasn't the most sensitive thing for them to do within the earshot of this man. It's amazing how people regularly put their foot in it when they're talking to, for example, the parents of children with disabilities or when talking directly to people with disabilities. You talk as if they can't hear or understand or know what you're saying. This is not the most sensitive kind of question you should ask, "Did this child sin? Did this man sin? Or was it his parents?" I have a bit of sensitive counseling advice to you if you do that: stop it. You shouldn't do that.

Now, what is this biblical background? I said as far as the Bible is concerned that there is a causal relationship between sin, sickness and death but that we have no basis, we have no grounds because we have no way of knowing if there is a direct causal relationship between one specific sin and a particular illness. That's why Jesus answers the way he does. He's quite clear, isn't he? "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him." He's saying a couple of things there. Not only is he discounting the philosophy behind their question, he's discounting that, but what he's saying is that this man's condition is within the orbit of the sovereignty of God. It's within the orbit of the sovereignty of God. This has not just happened, as it were, this man's congenital condition was not outside the scope of God's overall ruling and directing of our lives because what Jesus is teaching here and what the Bible teaches everywhere, is that sin itself is not outside the sphere of God's sovereignty. He permitted it. He ordained that out of human sin would come our redemption. The physical horrors of suffering are merely there to reveal to us, to demonstrate to us, the moral horrors of sin. Why do we have all these hospitals? Why do we have sick people? What do we have dead people? Why do we have graveyards and crematoria? Well, we have them as a reminder to humanity that actually there is something worse than being sick. There is something worse than physical death. It is merely, sickness and death are merely the

sacraments of spiritual sickness and spiritual death. They are the outward visible sign of the reality of spiritual sin itself.

Jesus places this man's suffering within the sphere of the sovereignty of God. Any attempt to deny God's sovereign, wise, purposeful control over conception and birth has a head-on collision with passages like Exodus 4 or Psalm 139. Let me read a couple of verses. Exodus 4:11, "The LORD said to Moses, 'Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?'" Or Psalm 139, "For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb." Now, I don't mean to cause added pain to those who suffer from congenital problems but to say that even those things are not out with the sovereignty of God; he has not lost control here. But I want you to notice even more closely that in this particular case, Jesus subsumes this issue into the purposes of God. So he places it in the sphere of God's sovereignty but he also points us to God's purpose and here are his words, his purpose is this: that the works of God might be displayed in him. What he's saying to these people is, "You want to know the cause of this. You want an explanation. You want to know if there's a reason why this happened to this man. I don't want to talk to you about the cause. That's above your pay grade. I want to talk to you about the purpose." The purpose. "I want to woo you away from this fixation on causality as a decisive explanation of suffering. I also want to turn you away from surrender to a sense of futility or absurdity, of chaos or meaninglessness and I want you to ponder the purposes and plans of God. There is no child, there is no man or woman, there is no suffering outside of the purposes of God."

So Jesus answered, do you notice this, emphasizes not what caused the man's blindness but on what God was about to do. The works of God are going to be made manifest in this man's life. For Jesus, blindness from birth is sufficiently explained by saying that God intends to display some of his glory through this blindness. In this case, it will be healing; the glory of God's power to heal. But there is nothing in the Bible that says it has to be by healing. Healing is not the only way in which the glory of God can be displayed. Do you remember Paul had a terrible illness or sickness or issue. It was a physical problem that he struggled with and he prayed 3 times that the Lord would take it away, "Lord, take it away. I'd be more effective as a minister if I didn't have this. Please Lord, take it away. It would be a great glorifying thing to you if Paul is healed because I can go around giving my testimony at healing meetings if you will come and there are crowds to hear me tell my story of how you healed me. Oh Lord, please take this away from me. I'm fed up with it now. Enough." And 3 times the Lord refuses to take it away, you remember. And do you remember the Lord's words to him? "My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in your weakness." God's saying to Paul, "I'll put my power on display not by healing you but by sustaining you, by enabling you to overcome, by enabling you to keep going, by enabling you to be effective in spite of and alongside the suffering that you are enduring."

Jesus' prevailing thought here is that even evil can contribute to the greater glory of God. Now, that is high theology. That is above what my emotions can sometimes take a hold of. That is above sometimes what my mind can wrap itself around. But this is what it

means to know God. He is outside of our comfort zone very often. Do you remember Jesus himself knew this way in which God could be glorified in the midst of suffering. In his own rejection, for example, I think of John 12, the great passage in which Jesus prays, "Father, glorify your name." And a voice comes from heaven saying, "I have glorified it and I will glorify it again." And immediately you think, "That's great. You know, God's going to glorify Jesus. He's been glorifying his Father and the Father is now glorifying him. How is he going to glorify his Son?" And immediately the text tells you, "Though he had done many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 'Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?' Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them. Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him." What is it saying? Israel's unbelief was a way in which the Father glorified the Son, the evil of Jesus' rejection and subsequent crucifixion leads to the glory of God in the salvation of his people.

I think of that other passage, John 17, "When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.'" He's thinking of the cross and the evil that God would use. It was evil. Evil men did the evil things to the Son of God and yet out of that came the salvation of the world.

Now, you see, this is a hard thing to take, isn't it? It's because we are so earthbound we only see life in terms of the few years we have here, that the very notion, the very notion that sickness and suffering can be within the sphere of the sovereignty of God and can be within the sphere of the purposes of God shocks us. It unsettles us. It raises questions in our minds. We find it hard to deal with. We find it hard to deal with because actually we think this life is all we have. That these few years are all we have when, in fact, we were made for billions and billions of years. And what we do in these few years is get ready for life in that infinite capacity of life for which we were ultimately made.

So Jesus continues. Listen to what he says, "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work." Notice those 2 words: we, me. The "we" is emphatic. It includes the disciples, I'm sure, but I want you to notice that he is careful to distinguish himself as the one whom the Father has sent. "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day." He is the one who was sent. He is the sent one of God. This is important, by the way, in a moment. He is the sent one of God. Just register that word "sent," just for a second in your brain. Put it on the side, click save because we're going to go back there in a moment. He is unique. He is the sent one of God. And there is a divine imperative working on him and on his people. This must, we must do the works of God. We must do them now in spite of opposition. Now in spite of the strength of the enemy. Now in spite of competing priorities even though this was a Sabbath day as we will learn in a moment when Jesus does this miracle. In spite of competing priorities, there is an urgency to doing the work of God because this is the day

of opportunity. The night is coming and in John's Gospel, the night spells darkness, that is, spiritual darkness apart from Jesus. This is the day of opportunity.

This is one of the aspects of the mystery surrounding the fulfillment of the Messiah's work in the world. People expected the kingdom to come in its fullness when Messiah came. They weren't prepared for a hiatus between its inauguration and its consummation. They expected him to bring final judgment then, for example, but he holds final judgment back to allow men and women to repent, to allow the contradiction of the kingdom, that it would grow slowly, imperceptibly, that it would grow amidst persecution, that it would grow amidst widespread error as his elect are gathered in from all parts of the earth until that final moment when that final day will come. We must work the works of God while it is day.

When the miracle happens, let's look at the miracle, it does so at Jesus' initiative. Look at the context again with me, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." That's crucial. Now, notice "I am the light of the world. Having said these things." So what is happening now is going to be a demonstration of what it means for Jesus to be the light of the world. This is a physical demonstration at a physical level of the spiritual realities that Jesus is speaking of when he says, "I am the light of the world." Do you see that?

"Having said these things, he spit 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," what? "Sent. So he went and washed and came back seeing." I want to build on that for a moment. This is important. There is a clear flow from Jesus' reiteration of the claim he had made earlier, verse 12, chapter 8, "I am the light of the world." It is clear that he's using that expression metaphorically for spiritual light and truth and life that he brings and now he's going to demonstrate at a physical level the benefits of his coming for the least, the lowest, the neediest of his creatures. He performs the miracle, it's a miracle not of restoration. He's not restoring a man's sight, this is a creative act. He is giving a man sight who never had it. He's the light of the world. So he spits on the ground, he makes mud and he cakes the mud on the man's eyes.

Now, there is a sense in which we've cheated this evening. We haven't read the whole of the chapter so let me just give you a heads up of what's coming after. What's coming after are the Pharisees, these religious leaders who don't see and they don't want to see. Later on in chapter 12, I quoted this, we're going to have a quotation from Isaiah of the judgment that God was going to send on Israel. What is the judgment God was going to send on Israel? Do you remember? He has blinded their eyes. He has hardened their heart lest they see with their eyes and understand with their heart and turn and I would heal them, back in Isaiah 6:10, that was his great commission. What a job description: make the heart of this people dull and their ears heavy and blind their eyes lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts. Or Isaiah 29:9, "Astonish yourselves and be astonished; blind yourselves and be blind!"

What is Jesus doing to this blind man by caking on this mud on his eyes? Everybody gets hung up on the saliva and the dirt but it's what he does, he anoints the man's blind eyes. What is he doing? He is double blinding the man. This is a prophetic action. If you've read Ezekiel you'll find Ezekiel does this kind of thing all the time. It's a kind of visual prophetic action. What is he doing? He is prophetically demonstrating what happens, especially to the Pharisees and people like the Pharisees who reject the truth. What does God do if they don't want the true? What does God do? He blinds them. He prevents them from seeing what they don't want to see. He is symbolizing the judgment that has come upon Israel.

But he does another thing: he demonstrates the only place where a human being blinded spiritually so that they cannot see the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, may find healing. What does he tell the man to do? He says to the man, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent)." Let me tell you a bit about this pool. Located southwest of the city of David. Its waters were sent via Hezekiah's tunnel underground from the Gihon spring in the Kidron Valley. The name of the pool, in Hebrew we call it Siloam, in Hebrew the name of the pool is called Shiloah. Its origin in the Bible is in Genesis 49:10 which talks about the coming of the Messiah. "The scepter," this is what it says in Hebrew, "the scepter will not depart from Judah until Shiloah comes." Both Jews and Christians believe that to be a reference to the Messiah. In Isaiah 8:6, the rebellious people of Judah are accused of rejecting Shiloah. This people have refused the waters of Shiloah just as the people of Jesus' day were rejecting the sent one of God. Shiloah means sent, the sent one of God. In other words, what Jesus is doing in this twofold action is on the one hand demonstrating that people who reject him will be double blinded. They will not see that the affect of his presence is to blind people who do not want to see. And on the other hand, to demonstrate by sending this man to Shiloah which flags up a messianic prophecy in the minds of these religious leaders that he is interacting with that reminds these religious leaders of an accusation by the prophet Isaiah at a time in the past that they were rejecting the waters of Shiloah, the cleansing waters of Shiloah by sending this man to be washed in the pool of Shiloah. It's the pool of the Messiah. It's the waters of the Messiah. That reminisces here of Elijah sending Naaman to wash in the Jordan, you remember, a pagan soldier.

This man is washed and having gone and washed, he came back seeing. There's the miracle. This man had never seen anything before in his life. He had never seen light or people or towns or trees, his own hands or his own feet. He had never seen anything in his life before. Everything is new. "Something lives in every hue, Christless eyes have never seen."

And his coming creates this mild sensation. We'll pick this up next time. "The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying to one another," it's pantomime really, "Could this be him? It can't be him. It is him. It's like him but it's not him." Meanwhile, the poor guy is continually saying, "It's me! It's me! It's me! It really is me!" It's a pantomime. What can they believe? This man had been begging all his life. He had been a blind beggar, the truly poor and now he's going about seeing. And what does he say? He gives his testimony, "The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes

and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' So I went and washed and received my sight.'" He just said what he knew. It wasn't a big involved testimony but he said what he knew and he bore witness to Jesus' authority to give sight to the blind, the spiritually blind, to open our eyes to see the truth as it is in Jesus.

Father, we pray that tonight you would open our eyes to see and our wills to embrace the truth as it is in Jesus. As we take these emblems, these very physical things of bread and wine just now, we pray that you would feed us spiritually, nurture us, Lord, in our faith. Make us stronger in our faith we pray in Jesus' strong name. Amen.