

F. After the Feast of Tabernacles – Jesus and the Blind Man (9:1-10:21)

Jesus quickly departed the treasury when the Jews began to pick up stones to stone Him. Apparently Jesus' disciples were with Him, for when He passed by a man who had been blind from birth they questioned Him concerning the man's condition. His blindness had forced him into a life of begging and John's account indicates that many in Jerusalem were familiar with him and his circumstance. The fact that John recorded the man's miraculous healing shows that he regarded it as important to his account. The significance he attached to it and his reason for including it become clear from the subsequent interactions the healing provoked (9:8-10:21).

1. John didn't identify the location of Jesus' encounter with the blind man, but his account suggests that it occurred in Jerusalem shortly after Jesus and His disciples left the temple area. Being a beggar, the man would have situated himself in a place where lots of people passed by, making it likely that he was sitting on the ground near one of the city gates – perhaps the eastern gate which was closest to the temple mount and led out of the city into the Kidron Valley and Mount of Olives to the east.

a. Wherever Jesus and His disciples came upon this man, they obviously took note of him, for the disciples' questioned Jesus about him and how they ought to understand his blindness. Their question is notable in that it reflects a common theological viewpoint in Israel at that time, namely the idea that calamity and suffering are God's direct recompense for sin (9:1-2; cf. Luke 13:1-5). The Jews regarded a person's personal circumstances as a critical barometer of his standing with God (a view supported by a certain reading of the Scripture), and the day was coming soon when they would apply this criterion to Jesus Himself (cf. Matthew 27:38-43 with Isaiah 53:1-4). The Israelite people embraced this way of thinking, but it wasn't a Jewish innovation; *rather, it is a human idea which reflects man's natural way of thinking about the divine-human relationship.*

- The notion of personal circumstances as divine judicial recompense is present in some form in all human religious systems and their practical expression. It is seen, for example, in the Hindu concept of karma, the Buddhist doctrine of enlightenment and Islam's understanding of divine justice. It even exists in certain strands of Christianity. (The fact that Jewish scholarship, which was grounded in zealous devotion to Torah, embraced this concept of retribution shows that the Scripture can be read in this way.) So it is fundamental to the superstitious constructs of primitive pagan spirituality in which avoiding calamity and securing "blessing" (fertility, health, crop abundance, etc.) is accomplished through complying with the behavioral and sacrificial demands of spirit powers.

No form of human religion or spirituality is exempt from this construct, and the reason is that it characterizes man's thinking in his natural state. Even apart from religious formulations or convictions, people instinctively believe that their good conduct (however they define it) somehow earns favor with divine principles or powers (however they conceive them).

Conversely, people's first reaction in the face of difficulty, hardship or suffering is to try to identify the wrongdoing or transgression(s) which provoked their regrettable circumstance. *Quid pro quo* ("something for something") is inherent to human relationships as men know them, and the same interrelational dynamic is instinctively presupposed between men and deity. Some form of reciprocity in the divine-human relationship is common to all religious systems; each religion defines the relational standards and proper conduct for both parties and assumes reward and punishment based on those definitions and conformity to them.

- The notion of direct divine punishment for sin – with its reciprocal of earthly blessing for obedience – is so graven onto the natural mind that Satan tested Jesus at precisely this point. This is significant because Jesus was being tempted as the seed of Eve and son of Abraham: *the promised new man who embodied faithful Israel*. (His testing amounted to a recapitulation of both Adam's testing at Satan's hand and Israel's testing in the wilderness.) Passing the test, therefore, involved Jesus proving faithful as true man, and this meant, among other things, not succumbing to natural human convictions respecting divine punishment and blessing which reflect a natural understanding of the divine-human relationship (ref. Luke 4:3, 9-10).

The issue is not whether God punishes men for their sin or blesses them in their obedience; if this were not the case in any sense, Jesus' life and atoning death as the Last Adam would be empty and meaningless. Truth, justice and love all demand appropriate recompense and God continually set this principle before the children of Israel. Indeed, Yahweh's retribution for sin was the premise behind Israel's exile and captivity and His pledge to return and put all things right through judgment, atonement and purgation. But the principle of divine recompense does not imply, or in any legitimate way support, the conclusion that personal circumstances are God's direct recompense for personal behavior. This is an invention of the natural human mind.

It seemed to Jesus' disciples (and their sensibilities were reinforced by rabbinical teaching) that this man's tragic plight was to be explained in one of two ways: His blindness was God's recompense either for his own sin or that of his parents. The reason for including the second possibility was the fact that he'd been *born* blind. The circumstance of his disability made it difficult to ascribe it to his own sin; was it possible that, in some manner, he'd sinned against God while still in his mother's womb? Almost certainly they reasoned that God had visited this affliction upon him because of something his parents had done. But this raised the question of justice in punishing one person for the sin of another – something God insisted He does not do (ref. Ezekiel 18:1-20). (This should not be confused with God dealing with Israel corporately as His "son," such that in certain instances of covenant violation He imposed corporate punishment for the sins of particular individuals (cf. Joshua 7; Ezekiel 24:15-23; Lamentations 2:10-20; Hosea 13).

- b. Jesus answered His disciples in an unexpected way: Neither of their options was correct; the man's blindness wasn't due either to his own sin or that of his parents. They *were* correct in reasoning that God was implicated in the man's condition, but it wasn't as they imagined. They asked about causation; Jesus answered in terms of divine purpose: *God's involvement was a matter of revelation, not retribution*. He hadn't punished this man with blindness, but appointed him in his condition to play a part in His revelation to Israel of His designs in His Messiah (9:3). The man's blindness was a symbol of Israel's condition (as also mankind's condition), so that Jesus' healing interaction with him constituted a sign pointing to the purpose of His coming and what Yahweh would accomplish in Him.

Failing to take into account the true nature and scope of the messianic mission, many find in Jesus' statement only a reference to the healing He was about to perform. That is, the "work of God" to be displayed in the man refers to God's supernatural power exerted in restoring sight to eyes that had never functioned. Jesus would indeed manifest God's power in this way, but this physical healing wasn't the "works" Jesus was speaking of. Rather, God was about to display in this blind man a work which would point to and illuminate the *messianic works* by which He'd fulfill His promises to Israel and inaugurate His kingdom.

The metaphorical significance of this episode is further highlighted by Jesus' reference to day and night (9:4). In context, He was employing those terms as metaphors for the realms of light and darkness, but not in the physical sense, but in connection with Himself as the "light of the world" (9:5). Thus *day* signifies the occasion and opportunity afforded by Jesus' presence as Yahweh's light come into the world to "illumine every man" and dispel the darkness (cf. 1:4-9, 3:19-21, 8:12); conversely, night signifies the circumstance which results when His presence is removed from the world. Jesus' meaning is summarized as follows: Just as men must give themselves to their work while the daylight remains (at that time in history most work had to cease when darkness fell), so it was with His work commissioned by His Father: There was a window of occasion and opportunity for it so long as He was in the world as the world's light. But soon night and darkness were coming and then His work would cease.

Two things stand out in this statement, the first being that Jesus included His disciples in His work: "*We must work the works of Him who sent Me.*" Secondly, He qualified their participation in His work in the same way He qualified His own: They, too, could only work while the day remained; *the night was coming when no one would be able to work*. These observations indicate that Jesus was talking about the two distinct dimensions of His messianic work as it serves the cause of Yahweh's eschatological kingdom:

- 1) His Father had sent Him into the world as the light which illumines all men. That is, Jesus came to Israel, but for the sake of the world. The incarnation of the Logos and the messianic mission were the tangible revelation of the God who is faithful to His purposes for the world.

In His person as much as His works, Jesus showed Israel who their God really is and what He intended by the things He promised in the Law and prophets (Matthew 5:17). He was Yahweh's light come into the world to do the works of light – works (in word as well as deed) which expose, confront and dispel the darkness (cf. 8:12, 12:20-46). As long as He remained in the world, He was the light of the world (9:5).

- 2) And when He'd finished His work on the earth, Jesus was going to entrust the continuation of His mission to His disciples. He would secure and inaugurate His Father's kingdom; they, in the power of His outpoured Spirit, would proclaim and manifest it and labor toward its fruition. Jesus, the enthroned King-Priest, was charged with building Yahweh's house, but He was going to do that work of building through men He gathered to Himself (Zechariah 6:9-15) – first, His immediate disciples (cf. 15:26-27; Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:1-8) and then those who would come to faith through them (cf. Acts 8:1-4, 15:1-41, 16:1-5, 18:1-28; etc.).

Both of these dimensions of Jesus' work – the work His Father had given Him – were subject to the constraints of day and night. Jesus' earthly work in Israel was going to reach its climax and come to an end with the nightfall of Calvary (cf. 13:21-32 with Luke 22:39-53, 23:44-46), and that darkness would also preclude any work on the part of His disciples (cf. 16:12-32, 20:19-21:14 with Matthew 26:20-32, 47-56). It wouldn't be until the dawning of the new day in Jesus' resurrection and the coming of His Spirit that the disciples' work – or rather, the continuation of His work in them – would commence (15:26-16:15; Acts 1:1-8).

2. Apparently Jesus answered His disciples after they had walked over to the blind man, for as soon as He finished speaking He reached down and made clay with His spittle and dirt and applied it to the man's eyes, then instructing him to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam (9:6-7). John provided no other details, so it's unclear why Jesus chose this method of healing. Obviously this ritual wasn't necessary (cf. Matthew 9:27-30, 12:22, 15:30-31, 20:30-34; Mark 8:22-23), so Jesus must have had another reason for it. For the blind man, it was certainly a test and some believe that was the extent of its purpose. John is silent regarding what this man knew about Jesus or whether the two men conversed before the Lord applied the mud and directed him to the Pool. What is clear is that he had some confidence that healing awaited him if he followed Jesus' instruction.

But John's comment on Siloam (9:7) suggests that going to this pool and washing in it was important to the meaning of the healing. In that case, Jesus likely applied mud to the man's eyes simply to facilitate that washing. John noted that Siloam signifies *having been sent*, a descriptor Jesus repeatedly applied to Himself (cf. 9:4 with 4:34, 5:22-38, 6:28-58, 7:14-33, 8:12-42). So also He'd declared that He was the *light of the world*, sent by His Father to deliver men from darkness (8:12), and He'd made the same claim just moments earlier (9:5). It seems, then, that by dispatching this man to Siloam to have his eyes opened, Jesus was punctuating the truth of His claims with a compelling physical sign. What He'd declared about Himself, He now demonstrated in undeniable fashion (9:8-12).