

Water for the Way: Part Four

John 9:1-41

1. The question.

- *John 9:1-2; Ezekiel 18:1-4*

2. The answer.

- *John 9:3-7; Colossians 1:16*

3. The inquiry.

- *John 9:8-34*

4. The conclusion(s).

- *John 9:35-41*

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Water for the Way

Week Four

(John 9:1-41)¹

The letter was addressed to me, and came to me in 1995 when I was the student pastor at College Church on the campus of Northwest Nazarene University. The letter referred to the situation that was happening with our youngest son, Brenden. At that time, he was one year old. From the time he was one until almost four, he suffered from an unknown illness that caused his body to be unable to process fats. He was diagnosed as “failure to thrive,” which for Brenden meant that no food was being digested by his body; it either came up or went out in pretty much the same condition it went in. By the time he was three years old he only weighed 22 pounds. His body was slowly dying. During those years, Shelly had to spend months at a time with Brenden, at Children’s Hospital in Denver, taking the other two boys with her. Miraculously, she was able to get an immediate appointment by a simple phone call to the world’s leading failure-to-thrive specialist. We were told there was a two-year waiting list, so none of his front office knew how we got in so quickly. That doctor was trying to diagnose Brenden’s disease. He continued to be our doctor throughout that journey. Getting in to see him was just one of many sustaining and healing miracles the Lord performed along the way.

They first thought it was Cystic Fibrosis, but eventually ruled that out. Then they thought it might be Celiac, but ruled that out too. The doctor was certain it was something called Shwachman-Diamond Syndrome, which was a disease that our doctor had done major research in helping identify. The problem was that they couldn’t conclusively determine whether it was that or something else because his little body was too weak to continue the exhausting, invasive testing. The grace of God, prayer, our doctor, and the loving care of his mother kept him alive. After nearly three years of that ordeal, it all just disappeared. The Lord healed him.

But that letter.... the letter that came to me was written by a parent of one of the teens that had been in my youth group while I was the youth pastor in Corvallis, Oregon. We went to College Church from there. I had spent 8 years in Corvallis, trying to help her kids find faith. The writer of the letter wrote this to me: “God has revealed to me that the reason your son is suffering and dying is because there is sin in your life.” So when I read the letter, I felt angry, betrayed, and saddened that she

¹ Primary resources are William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, Rev. and updated, vol. 1, The New Daily Study Bible (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2001), Joseph Dongell, *John: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, ID: Welseyean Publishing House, 1997), and *Faithlife Study Bible*, Lexham Press, Joseph Mayfield and Ralphe Earle, *John/Acts: Beacon Bible Commentary*, (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press, 1965).

would accuse me of such a thing. Even though it was upsetting, I knew not to take this woman too seriously because years before that, this same woman once made a scene in the middle of a funeral service because she was convinced that the deceased person was going to rise up out of the coffin. She's still waiting for that to happen. Oh – one more thing – at the end of her letter, she wrote that God also told her that Brenden would be healed if I purchased aerosol spray vitamins from her. She also said that I could buy my future supplies from her at a discount. How gracious.

Now, I will say that as my anger subsided, I prayed this prayer: “God, this woman is a nutcase and I reject her curse. *But...*are you trying to tell me something, through her craziness?” So I waited and listened to the Spirit in case he was trying to call anything to my attention. He can do that, you know – he speaks to us even through the biggest knuckleheads.

But I was angry for another reason, and that was because this woman accused *God* of such a thing. It would be one thing if I *did* have known sin in my life, but even then, the God of the Bible would *never* punish my infant child for *my* sin.

Her accusation against my son, my God, and me is nothing new. People have always tried to create a simple cause and effect reason for suffering, but life just is not like that. That kind of thinking has been around for a long time; it's what starts the story in John 9 from our Lenten devotional reading for today. I hope you've read it already this morning and come prepared. Why don't you turn there in your Bibles – John 9:1 – because we are going to walk through it, and allow the Holy Spirit to speak to us.

Would you stand as I read it to us?

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. “Go,” he told him, “Wash in the Pool of Siloam” (this word means “Sent”). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, “Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?” Some claimed that he was.

Others said, “No, he only looks like him.”

But he himself insisted, “I am the man.”

“How then were your eyes opened?” they asked.

He replied, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see."

"Where is this man?" they asked him.

"I don't know," he said.

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "He put mud on my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed, and now I see."

Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath."

But others asked, "How can a sinner perform such signs?" So they were divided.

Then they turned again to the blind man, "What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened."

The man replied, "He is a prophet."

They still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man's parents. "Is this your son?" they asked. "Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?"

"We know he is our son," the parents answered, "and we know he was born blind. But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. That was why his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God by telling the truth," they said. "We know this man is a sinner."

He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?"

Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from."

The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. Nobody has ever

heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”

To this they replied, “You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!” And they threw him out.

Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

“Who is he, sir?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.”

Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.”

Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him.

Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.”

Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, “What? Are we blind too?”

Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains. (John 9:1-41, niv)

Thank you for standing!

Once again, John allows us as readers to enter into the story and be drawn along with it, just like last week’s Scriptures. The entire passage begins, as I said earlier, with...

1. The *question*. (9:1-2)

The disciples see the man who was born blind from birth, and they ask Jesus if the man’s blindness is a result of his parents’ sin or his own sin. The very question indicates a narrow understanding of the relationship between sin and any physical illness. Their question shows that they believed there were only one of two possible answers: his blindness is either his parents’ fault because *they* sinned, or it’s the man’s own fault because *he* sinned. Of course, he was blind from birth, so that meant he would have somehow sinned while in the womb.

The disciples’ question reflects one of the common Jewish thoughts of the day: that the sins of the parents are visited on their children. (There are some Old Testament passages that talk about this [Exodus 20:5; 34:7; Numbers 14:18; Deuteronomy 5:9]). The question also reflects a line of thinking of their day that a person could actually sin while still in his mother’s womb. These ideas fit well within the Jewish religionists’ legalistic mindset, because they thought there was a direct cause and effect: if you have some kind of disease, then obviously you have sinned. It’s the same attitude that we see in the book of Job with the example of the really bad advisors. It was *this* kind of thinking about God the Father that Jesus came to destroy. And it’s not like they didn’t know better – already by this time, the prophet Ezekiel had made a strong case for individual responsibility; that sinners would be

punished for their *own* sins, and the innocent would *not* be punished for the sins of others:

“The word of the Lord came to me: ‘What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: “The parents eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge”? ‘As surely as I live,’ declares the Sovereign Lord, ‘you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to me. The one who sins is the one who will die.’” (Ezekiel 18:1-4, niv)

To the disciples’ question, then, Jesus clearly answered, “no.” Now, you *can* find examples in the Bible of people being inflicted with sickness, and even death, as punishment for his or her sin (Acts 5:1-11; 1 Corinthians 10:6-10; 11-30). We see it more frequently in the Old Testament than we do in the New Testament, though, because that was the age of law, but we live in the age of Grace. Now I think we could all agree that there are a lot of sinful behaviors that *result* in destructive *consequences* to those who practice them, and even to those they inflict that sinful behavior on. We can even see a physical toll on someone who is consumed with hatred, anger, bitterness, griping and complaining, jealousy, and other destructive attitudes. So in other words, physical illness *may* result from sin committed by the sufferer (*may* – but not always!), but even then, it is more *consequential* than *judgmental*. (Repeat)

Here's the thing: sickness and death *have* been unleashed throughout the whole world as a result of Adam and Eve’s original decision to sin, so sin *is* the *original* source of the web of sickness and death that we are *all* entangled in, regardless of how good or bad we may be. Christians *do* suffer, even those whose faith is strong and whose hearts are pure.

So in our story, instead of directly answering that question, Jesus shifted the disciples’ attention away from the *cause* of the man’s blindness, and instead helped them focus on the *result* of the man’s blindness: “That the work of God might be displayed in his life.” (vs. 3) The man’s personal tragedy would soon be transformed into an opportunity for God’s glory, grace, and love to shine. So next in the story we see...

2. The ***answer***. (9:3-7)

Jesus makes it clear that God intends to work *through* this man’s blindness-since-birth. It wasn’t God’s fault that he was blind, but God could work in the situation, if the blind guy would trust him. In fact, God is the *only* one who can do such a thing. So here’s an important answer to this entire question: God should not be charged for our misfortunes, but *only* God provides the power in them, through them, and out of them. Every time that we are faced with difficult consequences and circumstances, disease, and even death, it’s not God’s fault, *but* we *do* have an opportunity to see God’s glory, mercy, and grace. EVERY time! That’s what Jesus’ death and resurrection provides for us forever. That is why in this passage Jesus

referred to his impending death. And so that is how we should face our own misfortunes, by seeing them as opportunities for God to shine, whether in our suffering or our healing. *Everything does not happen for a reason, but everything that happens does create an opportunity for God to work (repeat).*

So Jesus heals the man, but he does it in an unusual way that might be hard to understand without explanation. First, Jesus took dirt and spit and made clay that he put on the man's eyes. That seems weird and unsanitary to us today. But in those days, people believed that spit had medicinal property. And they believed the greater the person, the more powerful the spit! So Jesus is telling them that since his spit heals, he is great! But there's an even bigger thing going on here: remember the man was *born* blind. Blindness in the Bible is a symbol for stumbling around in spiritual darkness. That is why Jesus made the statement at the end of the passage, about people being able to see and people being blind. Ultimately, we need a cure for sinfulness and spiritual blindness, not just health issues. So Jesus takes us back to the beginning of creation when he smears mud on the guy's face. Here's the amazing thing that Jesus is doing: when God created humans, he took clay and formed mankind, right? God created humans out of clay. Well, since the man in our passage was *born* blind, he never actually had useful eyes. Instead of just *healing* the man's eyes, Jesus in effect *created* eyes for him. In doing this, Jesus is showing that he not only can heal blind eyes, which the prophet Isaiah said would be a signature trait of the Messiah (Isaiah 35:5), but Jesus is showing that he *is God* because he is creating just like he did in the Garden. The Bible says this about Jesus:

“For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.” (Colossians 1:16, niv)

So after making clay and putting it on the man's eyes, Jesus sent the man to the pool of Siloam to wash. Whenever God wants to do a work in our lives, there will always be a required level of action on our part; we have to put feet to our faith. So the man went and washed, and suddenly he had eyes; he could see!

John points out that the meaning of the name “Siloam” is “sent,” which highlights that Jesus is the “Sent One” from God, and that God the sender of Jesus is the ultimate source of healing power. Then, in our healing, we are sent out to tell others.

Again, Jesus proves that the answer to all of our hardships is that they can become an opportunity for God to shine in and through our lives – whether we are healed or not.

And the point is proven because the people take notice – they all knew this man and passed him everyday for decades and they couldn't believe that he was the same guy. Right away, the man begins to tell his neighbors what God has done for him. Once they realize that he is indeed the same guy who was blind, they want to know how he was healed and who did it. Then it isn't long before the religious leaders hear about it and call the man in for...

3. The *inquiry*. (9:8-34)

The religionists are the ones who want to have control of what people and God can and cannot do. Clearly, whoever healed this guy didn't get their permission; Jesus didn't clear it with them first. Then, worse yet, they find out that Jesus healed the blind man on the Sabbath! They had strict religious rules for the Sabbath: no going to work, no going out to dinner, no mowing the lawn (some of you who grew up in the church remember those rules) ... actually their laws were even worse than that: they had specific rules about *everything* on the Sabbath. If someone was dying, you weren't even allowed to help heal the person. All you were allowed to do to help a sick person was to do just enough to stop them from getting worse, so that on the *next* day, if they were still alive, you could try to heal them. So the religionists are adamant that they want to know who this person is that blatantly broke the religious rules! Listen – here's a key: it was *not* God who made their rules – the religionists did that. True religion was supposed to serve people and bring God closer to them. Instead, they turned it around so that the people had to serve the religion, saying religion would get them closer to God.

So rather than give up their power and control and their pride in thinking they had all the answers, they wouldn't accept what God was doing; instead they tried to make God fit into their religion. They actually believed that God would rather let a man stay blind than love the man and heal him on the Sabbath. And the Sabbath was a day that was supposed to be God's anyway! How dare they say what God can and can't do on his own day! Listen: whenever the rules of your religion intersect with compassionate love for a fellow human being, you should always choose compassionate love. You should always choose the person over the legalism. Because that is what Jesus chose! It doesn't even matter if the reason the person who needs compassion needs it because of his own sin. Jesus chooses loving compassion; so should we! Legalism does not originate with God; it originates with us. What originates with God is love and compassion. Legalism originates with us as soon as we begin deciding who is good enough to be loved, and when the right time to love someone is.

So they refused to believe the man's story, and refused to accept that Jesus is from God, so the religionists call in the blind man's parents. The religionists flex their muscles of influence and power and make the parents testify against their son. See, they could throw the parents out of the synagogue, which would essentially mean being thrown out of their community with no means of support. So to avoid excommunication, the parents throw their own son under the bus – in verse 21 they answered, "he's an adult – let him speak for himself. We're not going to defend him." So the religionists go back to the ex-blind man. This time, the ex-blind man turns the tables on *them*. They are trying to cross-examine him, but he cross-examines them! He argues, "All I know is, I was blind and now I see. How do *you* think it happened? If the man who healed me was not from God, how could he create seeing eyes where there were none before? Could a sinner do this? Of course not!"

The religious leaders don't have an answer for his argument, so they do what every schoolyard bully does when he is trapped in a corner: they start calling the ex-blind

man names. They basically say, “Oh yeah?! Well you are *stupid!* You are a sinner! That’s what you are!”

As the argument is taking place, both the ex-blind man and the religionists are beginning to realize more and more who Jesus is. But what’s interesting is the difference between their two opinions.

We need to see...

4. The **conclusion**. (9:35-41)

Throughout the course of the interrogation and the rest of the story, we see both the religionists and the ex-blind man come to conclusions about who Jesus is. I want you to see the difference between them. Let’s start with who...

Jesus was to:

- **the religionists**: They start out their interrogation by asking the ex-blind man who the...

- **man** (vs. 16) is that healed him. They don’t believe his story, so they ask him practically seven different ways to Sabbath who this guy was. But they don’t like where the conversation is headed. If Jesus really is from God, then it means God is not behaving in ways that *they* think God should. God is behaving in ways that mean they don’t have all the answers and all the power. So as the discussion escalates, they shift from calling Jesus a man to calling him a...

- **sinner** (vs 24). Completely ignoring the obvious – that Jesus has the power to bring sight to a man that is born blind from birth – they focus instead on the rules of their religion. Ignoring that Jesus showed compassion on a fellow human being, they are angry that Jesus would give sight to someone that they’ve judged a sinner. That’s how blind we can be when we want to justify ourselves and condemn others that we think are sinful. We get on a track of self-righteousness that we can’t get off of. Finally, the religionists decide in the next chapter that not only is Jesus a sinner, he must be the...

- **devil** (10:20), because Jesus dared to defy their rules and instead loves and heals people.

But even as their accusations against Jesus grow worse, the ex-blind man’s conclusions about Jesus get better. Let’s see who...

Jesus is to:

- **the blind man**. He starts off in the inquisition at the same place that the religionists do; he refers to Jesus as a...

- **man** (vs 11). But as the religionists get worse, the blind man gets better – he elevates Jesus from just any ordinary man to being a...

– **prophet** (vs 17). He concludes that Jesus must at least be sent from God if he can do these kinds of miracles. A sinner couldn't do this, and for sure a fake magician couldn't do this. In the process of this, this man becomes like the Samaritan woman did – this man becomes a witness for Jesus. He knows what Jesus did for him, even if he doesn't understand completely everything about Jesus. He even invites the religionists to become Jesus' disciples! The one who doesn't have all the answers is witnessing about Jesus, and the ones who *think* they have all the answers are getting it all wrong.

That's a good lesson for us: we don't have to have all the answers; but we do need to willingly tell others what Jesus has done for us. We don't have to have all the right theology, but we *do* have to witness, and invite other people to be Jesus' disciples, too.

So the man goes out to try and find Jesus in the crowds (which will be tough because he never actually saw Jesus' face). But fortunately Jesus is looking for him! They meet up, and Jesus gets right to the heart of things, as usual. He asks the man if he believes in the Messiah – the Son of God. The man says, "Tell me who he is, and I will!" And like with the woman at the well, Jesus reveals to the man that *he* is the Christ, Son of God. The man says, "Lord, I believe! You are...

– **Christ** (vs. 38)!" It was then that Jesus pointed out that the people who realize they are spiritually blind and in need of Jesus are the ones who will see clearly, but the ones who think they have all the answers and think they see clearly are really the ones who are spiritually blind.

So what does all this mean for you and me?

Whenever I prepare a sermon, I always ask God, "What is it that you want us to take away from this? What decision must we make? What action must we take?" And it comes down to a few things, really. The first is this: if you are going through a difficult circumstance, no matter what it is, just know that it is an opportunity for God to reveal his Love and his glory in and through your life.

Secondly, this begs the question: where are you today on the spectrum? When you walked in here, what was your opinion of Jesus? Did you walk in here saying he was just an ordinary man? Or maybe you were thinking that he is a prophet, or a great teacher. If so, I want to let you know that he's more than that. And because of what you've heard today, you can't keep believing Jesus is just a man or a prophet. Jesus won't let you stay there; you have to decide whether or not you believe he is the Christ. You must know that He can create things in your life that have never been there before. He can give you spiritual eyes to see everything in your life in an entirely new and exciting and expanded way. But *you've* got to decide. For the blind man, it began when he was willing to walk to the pool and wash his eyes. For you, it can begin when you are willing to simply pray a prayer to accept Jesus. Take these moments and consider what you are going to do. While you ponder and pray, now I want to talk to the rest of us – those who would say they've already accepted Jesus as Christ.

I want to warn us that we are just as prone to turn our relationship with Jesus into a set of rules as the religionists were. It is very easy for us to begin to take pride in our having the answers. And it's very easy for us to decide who it is that God loves and who he doesn't; to decide how and when God should work, and with whom. If you know someone who has a sinful lifestyle and think can't be accepted by God *right now*, AND loved and healed by Him, you are a religionist. If you would rather be *right* than welcome someone into our church who is in a sinful lifestyle, you are a religionist. If you'd rather argue with someone about theology then show them love and compassion, you are a religionist. Friend, family member, with as much grace as I can muster, *you* need to get right with God, because *you* are the one that is blind. I say this to you because I love you.

And I'll be honest: when I think about this story and the people in it, and who *I* most relate to, I'm very uncomfortable to realize that I connect more with the religionists than the blind man. I've been a Christian for a long time. I've been in the church a long time. I am more prone to be a religionist than a healed blind man. I am more prone to take pride in my religion than I am to desperately need my savior so I can see. I want to repent and be an ex-blind man. You might think about doing the same.

Prayer

Whether you just accepted Christ, or got yourself right with him, you are now the sent one – like the blind man, you must go out and tell others what Jesus has done for you. Because there's one thing you do know: you were blind, and now you see.

Benediction:

This benediction is inspired from Paul's experience with Jesus, when Jesus opened Paul's spiritual eyes. Receive these words from Jesus:

I have saved you for this purpose: to (be) my servant and witness of what you have seen and what I will show you ... I am sending you to open (the eyes of others). Then they can turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, and receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are made holy by faith in me.' (Acts 26:15-18, ceb)