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*“Jesus graciously tries to help people see.”*

**CONTEXT**

Chapter eight began with Jesus claiming to be the light of the world and ended with Jesus’ enemies wanting to kill Him. How could the people be so blind? Chapter nine examines that question and exposes the blindness of people who reject Jesus.

**THE QUESTION AND ANSWER – JOHN 9:1-5**

The story begins when Jesus and His disciples see a man blind since birth. The disciples ask a very human question. Whose fault is this blindness? It is not unusual that the disciples want to know why the man was born blind. Historians, congressional committees and we ourselves try to determine cause and to fix blame.

Furthermore the options posed in the disciples’ question are also reasonable. Obviously, sometimes our sins hurt us. Satan tempted Adam, Eve, and even Jesus (Matthew 4:1-11) to do things to hurt themselves and we are tempted likewise. Equally obvious, the sin of parents can hurt children. For example, children learn prejudice from parents, and statistics indicate that children of abusive parents frequently abuse their children, children of alcoholic parents are more likely to become alcoholics, and children who are unloved frequently suffer more psychological problems.

The disciples’ question rests on theological blindness as well as natural curiosity. They assume that physical blindness is a punishment of sin by God. They don’t question that assumption; they merely question whose sin God is punishing. The assumption of the disciples distorts their reading of the Old Testament. They overlook the loving creative goodness of God and blindly assume that God wants to hurt people. They remember passages like Exodus 20:5, Psalm 109:9-14, 137:7-9 and Isaiah 65:6-7 teaching that it is God’s will that children suffer for the sins of their parents. On the other hand, they remember passages like Deuteronomy 24:16, Ezekiel 18:1-4 and Jeremiah

31:29-30 which seem to teach the opposite. The blindness comes with the focus on sin rather than salvation.

We suffer from the same distorted theological vision. We know that God punishes sin and, like Job's friends (Job 4:2-8), we force moral judgments. We jest that "God's going to get you" or threaten our children by telling them that Jesus is watching and does not like naughty children. Our jest or threat creates problems for ourselves and others.

Jesus' reply ignores the disciples' question. He knows that the disciples' question creates more problems than it solves. Answering their question would deal with human sin but ignore divine glory. Nevertheless, we often let the disciples' question guide our own conduct. For example, we may not give people a fair chance because of judgments about a handicap, their background, or the character of their parents. We excuse and tolerate our own bad attitudes or bad actions because "that's the way I was taught!" Jesus will not answer a question which enables us to blame others and avoid personal responsibility. On the other hand, using only the options of the disciples' question, we may unreasonably blame ourselves for our own problem or even the problems of a loved one. For example, we may wonder if bad health or a business failure is retribution for a sin committed long ago. When a child is born with a handicap, dies tragically, does poorly in school, or even commits a crime, parents feel great guilt and/or wonder why God is punishing them. Jesus must teach His disciples that blaming self or others does not solve the question of sin or explain a physical handicap.

Jesus' reply leads the disciples away from an examination of sin into a deeper understanding of God's glory. His answer has four parts. First, He rejects the idea that blindness is caused by the man's or his parent's sin. Second, Jesus teaches that the blindness is an opportunity for God's work. Third, there is an urgency to do God's work and, finally, He teaches the disciples to understand such work as the shared responsibility given by the One Who sent Jesus.

Reflect upon the four aspects of Jesus' reply. First, reject the idea that a physical handicap is an opportunity to fix blame or wallow in guilt. Second, see how handicaps or problems provide opportunity to display the work of

God. Third, think urgently. What can be done now? Meet present opportunities. Finally, understand helping people as a God-given mission. In our society, human "problems" are often put "out of sight and out of mind." Jesus calls us to see such "problems" as opportunities. Loving parents, helpful children, and caring friends are all missionaries revealing the glory of Christian love.

In conclusion to this section, a Christian pastor to the blind once pointed out to me that the Bible never tells us that Jesus "healed" a blind person. Jesus "gives sight" but He does not "heal." I think the semantics are important and I now try to avoid using the word "healing" with regard to blindness and other handicaps. "Healing" implies disease and gives a negative image to handicapped people. It smacks of punishment. "Giving sight" expresses love and sharing a blessing.

*"Trusting God influences our action and may mean more than simply sitting and waiting."*

#### THE GIFT OF SIGHT – JOHN 9:6-7

Although Jesus helped other blind people with simply a word or a touch (Matthew 9:27-31, 20:29-34, Mark 10:46-52 and Luke 18:35-43), He now spits on the ground, makes mud with the saliva, puts the paste on the blind man's eyes and tells him to go wash in the Pool of Siloam (9:6).

As an aside, one should not feel squeamish or consider Jesus' action crude and unsanitary. People at Jesus' time thought spit had healing value. Ancient Greco-Roman writers as famous as Tacitus and Suetonius wrote of the therapeutic usage of spit. The scientific Pliny the Elder wrote an entire book on how to use beneficially human and animal spit. Perhaps Jesus also uses that positive attitude about spit in the parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). When the dogs lick the poor man's sores (Luke 16:20), Jesus may be teaching that the dogs do more for the man's health than the rich man.

Returning to the story, I think that Jesus' action is important for two reasons. First, He uses the things of this world to help and, second, His action demands faith. Like a sacrament using water or bread and wine, something of the world combines with Jesus' Word to offer miraculous

*John reminds the Christians that loving Christ  
tests the closest human relationship.*

help. Second, Jesus does not impose His blessing. The man must trust Him enough to go to the pool to wash off the mud. Jesus forced the man to make a decision. In unbelief, he could have rejected Jesus' directive and gone home. Instead, he trusted Jesus enough to do as He said. In a sense, the man faithfully participates in Jesus' action. Apply the two reasons to life today. Today the healing power of God may place worldly things on our handicaps, such as exercise, rest, good food, medicine, surgery, physical therapy or other "spit-like" things of this world. Second, actively trust that God wants to help. That means acting according to God's will and following His Word. Trusting God influences our action and may mean more than simply sitting and waiting.

#### **THE BATTLE OF BLINDNESS – JOHN 9:8-17**

The man recovers his sight! Is the battle with blindness over? Matthew, Mark and Luke simply tell stories of blind men receiving sight. They record little of the reaction to the miracle. Perhaps they know that their readers will understand that the miracle is part of the Messianic activity of "giving sight to the blind (Isaiah 29:18, 35:5, and 42:7)." John's story is radically different. He tells us that the struggle with spiritual blindness begins after the blind man sees. The blindness manifests itself in a number of ways. First, people are not certain what happened (9:8-9). Then they want to know how it happened (9:10). Like them, we too, debate whether miracles really happen. Like them, we have more curiosity for how things work than awe for the work itself. We view a model ship in a tiny bottle and we ask, "How did you do that?" We view a friend's blessing and we want to know what happened so that we, too, can be blessed.

Next John tells us that religious legalists question the way Jesus acted since He opened the man's eyes on the Sabbath. Like many religious people, they criticize Jesus not for what He did but for the way He did it. Their criticism is rooted in religious traditions that carefully interpreted

God's teaching about work on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15). People debated how to keep the Sabbath holy and developed thirty-nine rules about cooking food, traveling and other work which preserved or profaned the sanctity of the day. According to such traditions, Jesus probably broke four rules. He kneaded clay, used Sabbath spittle, anointed eyes, and healed on the Sabbath in a non-life threatening situation.

The dilemma of the Pharisees is clear. Jesus broke the Sabbath but with super-human results. The end is good but does it justify the means? Their blindness is clear. Rather than debate the validity of their Biblical interpretation, they debate Jesus and His work. Assuming the validity of their own traditions, either they must reject the miracle or the miracle worker.

Today we easily discern the folly of such ancient blindness. Nevertheless, in a similar way, Christians today may overlook a good thing improperly done. We grumble, "I respect what they did but they should have checked with the proper committee first!" We are tempted to overlook truth if it is spoken by someone of an opposing political party or of a different denomination.

#### **DOUBTING THE SIGN – JOHN 9:18-23**

Jesus' enemies blindly debate the reality of the miracle. First, they interrogate the parents of the former blind man. Their blind predetermined sentence (9:22) forces the parents to choose personal safety or, in a sense, to disown their son (9:23). Describing their action, John reminds the Christians that loving Christ tests the closest human relationship. People who think primarily about their own welfare misunderstand and even disown those who follow God's will. The parental decision reminds us of Jesus' words in Matthew 10:36-38 and Luke 12:53. Peer pressure and the search for social acceptability abort precious opportunities to confess faith today also.

*Jesus graciously tries to help people see. He finds the former blind man and gives him something even more precious than physical sight. Jesus enables him to believe and to worship.*

#### **REJECTING THE SIGN – JOHN 9:24-34**

After successfully pressuring the parents not to acknowledge Jesus, His enemies again interrogate the former blind man (9:24-34). Once more, their blindness reveals itself. The former blind man is pressured to deny his faith, ridiculed on the basis of his faith, and finally rejected. The irony is vivid. Since the man was born blind, they condemn him as a sinner (9:34 and 9:2). But the man is no longer blind. According to their theological logic, the question of sin is no longer relevant. They do not see the sign of God's glory. Even in the Christian church similar blindness still appears. There is a reluctance to accept testimony, a temptation to ridicule experience, a quickness to condemn, and a slowness to forgive. New disciples are judged by traditional standards. New expressions of faith in non-traditional songs are "thrown out." Mission work in a different language receives no support or is rejected.

#### **JESUS SEARCHES – JOHN 9:35-41**

The chapter ends where it began. Jesus graciously tries to help people see. He finds the former blind man and gives him something even more precious than physical sight. Jesus enables him to believe and to worship (9:38). Jesus' remarks after the excommunication call His enemies to recognize their blindness (9:39). Jesus' final words stand as Law and Gospel (9:41). People who remain blind to the illogic of their theology and the injustice of their actions must reject Jesus' ways. However, if they see their sin, Jesus stands ready to help.

Jesus' final words can be applied in a number of ways. Experts claim that alcoholics must "see" the problem before they can be helped. Marriage partners, blind to growing lovelessness, blindly create more lovelessness. They drift apart until, by God's grace, they see the problem and search for new ways to see the old love. The thrill of having things blinds people to the pressure of materialism. Only when they see how the "rat race" creates frustration rather than happiness are they ready to look beyond the blindness of materialism to the love-giving sight of Jesus.

**PERSONAL APPLICATION – JOHN 10:1-42**

*Lord God, with Your great love, protect us from evil and lead us to  
trust and love You more and more. In Jesus' name. Amen*

John 10:1-6

1. In your own words, what does the illustration, “figure of speech” (10:6), or parable in verses 1-5 mean?
2. Why would the people have failed to understand the “figure of speech?” (Refer to: 9:41)
3. Read Psalm 23, Jeremiah 23:1-4 and Ezekiel 34 for the Biblical background with which Jesus’ listeners would have tried to understand it. Describe the blessings of Psalm 23 from the following verses:

Verse One:

Verse Two:

Verse Three:

Verse Four:

Verse Five:

Verse Six:

According to Jeremiah 23:1-4, whom will God punish and how will He bless His people?

Who are the shepherds in Ezekiel 34:1-10?

How have they taken care of the flock (Ezekiel 34:1-4)?

What happened to the sheep (Ezekiel 34:5-9a)?

How will God help His sheep (Ezekiel 34:10-31)?

4. With whom or what could you equate the following today? John 10:1-6

Sheep pen

Climber/thief and robber

Shepherd

Watchman

Gate

Sheep

“Calls by name”

“Leads them out”

“Goes ahead of them”

“Follow/know his voice”

“Not follow/run away”

John 10:7-21

5. What will the good shepherd do?

6. The Latin word for “shepherd” is “pastor.” How is a congregation’s pastor (clergy) a “shepherd?”

How can the “Good Shepherd” be a model for a good pastor?

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How can a “hired hand” (as clergy) affect a congregation?

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7. Many of us live in an urban culture and seldom, if ever, see shepherds taking care of sheep. Therefore, Jesus’ figure of speech is not as vivid to us as it was to the original listeners. List some “figures of speech” that mean about the same as “shepherd” but might have more impact on urban people today.

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John 10:22-33

8. Use a dictionary to determine the meaning of the Feast of Dedication or Hanukkah.

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If possible, ask a Jewish person how Hanukkah is celebrated today.

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9. Read again 10:25-30. Summarize what these passages mean to you and how you can apply them to your life.

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10. What great claim does Jesus make and how do the unbelievers react to that claim?

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John 10:34-42

11. State two reasons Jesus gave for believing that He is the Son of God.

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12. What religious significance or tradition is connected with the Jordan River? (Joshua 4:1-7)

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13. Why is it significant that Jesus is rejected in Jerusalem but trusted near the Jordan?

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14. How can retreating to the original truths of our faith help our spiritual life?
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