

The Light of the World

John 8:12; 9

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I once saw a play entitled *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*. It's the story of an Oklahoma family in the 1920s. In their house, at the top of a staircase was a landing that had no light. The youngest child, a little boy, was afraid to go up the stairs. The dark at the top of the stairs represented the darkness, the aloneness, that the people in the family felt because of their alienation from each other. Toward the end of the play there's some resolution. The little boy starts up the stairs, then he turns to take his mother's hand and says, "I'm not afraid if someone goes with me." Jesus is God going with us so we don't have to be afraid.

At night during the Feast of Tabernacles four huge golden candlesticks were lit in the Temple's Court of Women. Each candlestick had four golden bowls on top with wicks floating in oil. It was said that the whole city of Jerusalem reflected the light that burned in the Temple.

As with the water ceremonies during Tabernacles, the use of light in this festival had its background in several Old Testament passages. At creation, God said, "Let there be light" and there was light (Genesis 1:3). Exodus describes a pillar of fire that represented God's presence and that guided the Israelites through the wilderness. The shining glory of God filled the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle and later in the Jerusalem Temple. The prophet Zechariah spoke of the Day of the LORD when there would be light in the evening and living waters would flow from Jerusalem.

People often spoke about God as being light. "The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?" (Psalm 27:1). "The LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory" (Isaiah 60:19). "Though I sit in darkness, the LORD will be my light" (Micah 7:8). The Servant of the Lord is to be a light to the Gentiles (nations) to bring God's salvation to the whole earth (Isa 49:6). The word (or law) of the Lord is a light to guide our steps (Ps 119:105).

With torches blazing and the references to light on everyone's mind, Jesus announces, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Again, Jesus is the reality that the rituals symbolized. He's the fulfillment of all that the Temple and the Law meant. He's the realization of the prophet's promises.

Remember the first chapter of John's Gospel introduces the theme of light. "In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (4-5). John the Baptist came as a witness to the light and "the true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world" (9).

Just a little bit after John 3:16, we hear these words:

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. (3:19-21)

The fiery pillar represented God's presence guiding the people. Jesus is God with us, leading us. In the law God's revelation was shining to a degree. In Jesus, God is fully revealed. The Day of the Lord began to dawn when Jesus came. He is the light of the world. Following him means deliverance from darkness and life in the light.

Jesus' claim to be the light was too much for the Pharisees. They challenged Jesus because of what he claimed about himself. The rest of chapter 8 is an argument between Jesus and various Pharisee and other Judeans.

The debate swirls around who Jesus is. Following his claim to be the light of the world, Jesus uses the phrase *I Am* three more times. He's echoing God's revelation to Moses and through the prophets, especially Isaiah (in chapters 40-55).

“Unless you believe that I Am, you will indeed die in your sins” (8:24).

“When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I Am” (8:28).

“Before Abraham was, I Am” (8:58).

Finally, the people understood what Jesus was claiming and they thought he was blaspheming, so they tried to stone him. But he slipped away.

We pick up the theme of light again in chapter 9. The healing of a man who had been blind since birth displays the fact that Jesus is the light and demonstrates the new birth when a person comes out of darkness into light.

Jesus and his disciples are walking along and see a man who’s been blind since he was born. The disciples express a view that was common at the time when they ask, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” The common idea was that each occasion of sickness or suffering was caused by some sin.

When bad things happen, we tend to look for someone to blame. Sometimes it’s ourselves; more often it’s someone else. We might even try to blame God. One pastor tells about a man in his church whose business was wiped out in a flood. The man was convinced that God was punishing him for some hidden, unknown sin he’d committed in the past. The pastor couldn’t convince him otherwise (Roger Fredrickson, *The Communicator’s Commentary: John 168*).

Jesus rejects the notion that every sickness is always caused by a certain sin when he says, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned” (as the cause of this sickness), “but let God be glorified!” Jesus ignores the question about the cause of the blindness and speaks of the result of the blindness: so that God’s works would be displayed.

In John’s Gospel, sin describes how people respond to God’s revelation in Jesus. So the man’s blindness doesn’t call for reflecting on sin and what causes sickness. The man’s blindness is an opportunity for God’s glory to be revealed. “The ‘need’ that evokes the miracle, then, is not the man’s blindness, but the need for God’s works to be made manifest” (Gail O’Day, *John: The New Interpreter’s Bible*).

After saying, "Let God be glorified," Jesus tells his disciples, "As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me." Jesus still invites his disciples—you and me—to work with him, to do God's work in the world. And Jesus repeats, "While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

Jesus' method in this healing is unique. He spits on the ground and makes some mud. Then he puts the mud on the man's eyes and tells him to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam. John mentions that Siloam means "sent." Jesus was sent from the Father. Siloam was the pool where water came from for the ceremonies in the Festival of Tabernacles. This is another indicator that Jesus fulfills what the old ceremonies pointed to. Now Jesus who was sent sends the blind man to wash in the pool. So the blind man goes and washes, and comes home seeing.

This sparks a controversy almost immediately. The man's neighbors wonder if he really was the blind beggar they knew. He tells them that he is. He says, "I am he," which is the same phrase that Jesus often uses. Without knowing it, the healed man is beginning to bear his Healer's name: I Am (Fredrickson 170).

The neighbors ask the man how his eyes were opened and he tells them his story. As the man keeps repeating his story, his faith increases. Notice how his knowledge of Jesus progresses. At first he says, "*The man they call Jesus....*" He doesn't yet know Jesus personally or know for sure who Jesus is. He hasn't even seen Jesus yet. A major theme in this story is the increasing sight of the blind man and the increasing blindness of the Pharisees.

Since it was a Sabbath when Jesus healed the man, the people bring the man to the Pharisees. And they begin questioning him about how he was healed, how Jesus did this. So the man tells his story again.

According to the Pharisees' Sabbath rules, Jesus had done forbidden work by kneading the clay to put on the man's eyes. In their view, Jesus had broken the Sabbath law to heal the blind man. Some of them conclude that Jesus can't be from God because he broke the Sabbath. But others wonder how a sinner could do such miraculous things. And they're divided on the issue of who Jesus is.

So they ask the formerly blind man what his opinion is about Jesus. The man says, *"He is a prophet."* He takes another step in seeing who Jesus is, in maturing faith.

Now the "Jews," that is, some Pharisees, begin to doubt that this man really was born blind. They're having trouble dealing with the reality of this miracle. So they call in the man's parents and question them. The parents acknowledge that he's their son and that he was born blind. But they want to avoid trouble—specifically, being kicked out of the synagogue—so they say they don't know how their son was healed. They point out that he's of age and can answer for himself.

So the Pharisees bring in the former blind man again and solemnly charge him to tell the truth: "Give glory to God! We know this Jesus is a sinner."

The man still doesn't know much about Jesus, but he knows what Jesus did for him. In a classic response he says, *"I don't know whether or not he's a sinner. One thing I do know: I once was blind, but now I see!"*

So they ask him again, "How did Jesus do this?"

"I've already told you and you didn't listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?" Is the man saying that he's a disciple of Jesus? Does he recognize Jesus as a valid teacher and leader?

His remark angers the Pharisees. They insult the man and say, "You are this fellow's disciple! We're disciples of Moses! We don't even know where this fellow comes from!"

The man who had been blind shows amazing insight. "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. You yourselves teach that God doesn't listen to sinners, but to the godly person who does God's will. Nobody ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If Jesus were not from God, he could do nothing." Here's another step in the man's increasing vision and faith: *Jesus is from God.*

But that's not what the Pharisees want to hear. So they insult the man again and throw him out.

John wrote his Gospel for a particular group of Christians in the decade of the 90s A.D. During that time, these Christians were being

excluded from worship in Jewish synagogues. So the community reading John's Gospel would see their own experience reflected in this account. The story in John 9 portrays a conflict with the religious authorities in Jesus' own day. But it's told in terms that also speak on the level of the community's own experience of conflict and persecution (O'Day).

John, and whoever finally put John's accounts together in the form of the Gospel, uses a real incident from the life of Jesus to portray or symbolize several aspects of the experience of Christians from the time of Jesus' resurrection to the time the Gospel was written and shared with the church. We can still find the gospel speaking to us in our time and our situation. One point that's made is that God's true children will find their way from the old community to the new one even though the transition may be difficult (J. Ramsey Michaels, *John: A Good News Commentary*).

So the Pharisees throw the man out of this interrogation and out of fellowship. But while they *throw* him out, Jesus *seeks* him out. When Jesus finds him he asks, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

"Who is he? Tell me so I may believe in him."

"You have now seen him. In fact, he is the one speaking to you."

At this the man says, "*Lord, I believe*" and he worships Jesus. He truly gives glory to God as the Pharisees told him to. He's gone from speaking only of "the man they call Jesus" to "Lord, I believe." Jesus not only gave the man physical sight, but he also gave him eyes of faith to see who Jesus really is and to know him. The Pharisees accused the man of being steeped in sin at birth. That recalls the question about sin that opened the story. Regardless of the disputes about sin, the man's healing was such a total transformation that we can see it as a rebirth (Michaels).

Then Jesus says that he came to make the blind see and to expose the blindness of those who see. Some Pharisees ask, "What? Are we blind too?"

Jesus replies, "If you were blind (and admitted it) you wouldn't be guilty. But since you claim you can see (and don't recognize your spiritual blindness) your guilt remains."

Whatever our darkness, in whatever way we're blind, Jesus wants to go with us and give us light. He wants to increase our vision.

Where are you in the process of seeing and knowing Jesus? Is he just someone you've heard of—"the man they call Jesus"? Or is he a prophet or teacher or someone you're interested in or someone who's done something good for you? Or are you ready to say with the formerly blind man, "Lord, I believe" and worship Jesus with all your life?

Jesus really lives in us when we are open to him. Even a small opening of faith lets his light and presence into us. Then our hearts expand, we become more open, and we're filled with more of his presence. The light of the world shines in us and we perceive it more and more. The light of the world shines through us, so Jesus can say to his disciples, "You are the light of the world. ...Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:14, 16).