

BELIEVING IS SEEING

by Ray C. Stedman

Our Lord's encounter with a man who was born blind, and the question put to him by the disciples concerning the man's blindness, is a wonderfully helpful passage. It helps us face the question that all of us have asked at one time or another, either about ourselves or someone else: Why does God permit such suffering to occur? On television the other day I saw a handsome little boy who had been born without arms or legs, and it was hard not to ask that question. Why would a God of love permit handicaps to helpless children, or permit horrible accidents to those who are already well-developed, perhaps beautiful young people? That is what we are confronted with here in this account in the ninth chapter of John.

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him." {John 9:1-3 RSV}

The disciples had evidently been taught, through their upbringing in Judaism, that sin and hurt, injury, and handicap are linked together; that human hurt is the result of human sin. Notice that Jesus does not deny that. It is helpful to note right from the beginning that he recognizes there is such a link. However, it is not the one that many people think, as he will make clear. But the fact that he does not deny the link will answer many questions.

What that indicates, of course, is that we are not living in a world where we can always expect perfection; that God does not try to operate the world in such a way that everything works out beautifully. We are living in a fallen world. From Genesis to Revelation, the Scriptures declare that we are living in a broken world, a fragmented world, a world which is not what it once was and is not what it shall be. For the present we are afflicted with hurts and damage and injuries and difficulties and hardships. That is part of life today, and it is all a result of the introduction of the principle of human evil, of sin, into human life.

The Scriptures confirm that everybody is affected by this principle of human evil. Many of us think we have escaped it because we were not born with evident handicaps. But in fact we all have handicaps. Someone has well said, "When you look at a beautiful athlete" (such as we will be seeing in the Olympic Games very shortly -- these fine, handsome, well-coordinated young men and women), "what you are looking at is the ruin of an Adam." Everywhere humanity reflects the weakness of the fall. This is why our minds cannot operate as they should. I tried to quote a poem in the early service and I could not think of the first line. It just fled from me. That shows how sin has attacked me. And you are no better off!

But Jesus makes clear that suffering is not always directly traceable to personal sin. Sometimes it is! There are texts in Scripture that clearly indicate that people are hurting and suffering and physically deprived and deprived because of their own evil ways. But in the case of this man that is not true. Many people think it is rather strange that the disciples would even think that, since the man was "born blind," as the text declares. How could his blindness be caused by his sin when he was born in this condition, before he ever had an opportunity to sin?

There are some today who suggest that proves the idea of reincarnation; that this man must have sinned in a previous life. But the idea of reincarnation is never anywhere present in the Scriptures. It is precluded by the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. Thus the doctrine of the resurrection and the idea of reincarnation cannot be held at the same time.

The disciples are probably thinking of the Jewish rabbinical teaching that it is possible for an embryo to sin. This may be what lies behind their question. But Jesus declares, "No, it is not that; nor is it the parents' sin." As we well know today, babies are born with herpes or with AIDS because of their parents' sins. But, in this

case, Jesus specifically says it is not for that reason that the man in question was born blind.

Why, then, was he born blind? "That the works of God might be made manifest in him," is Jesus' response. That gives a positive reason for this kind of affliction. It is an opportunity, not a disaster, but an opportunity for certain things to be manifested in such a person's life, and in the lives of people who come in contact with that person, that would otherwise never be brought out. You can surely think of examples of that. The handicapped -- oftentimes those who are handicapped from birth -- frequently develop inner qualities of peace and joy and strength that otherwise normal people do not have. The handicapped oftentimes show a tremendous strength of spirit that is able to take on challenges and endure difficulties that other people cannot. Fanny Crosby, that dear saint of the last century who wrote "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!" was blind from her earliest babyhood as a result of an accident. When she was only eight years old she wrote this little rhyme,

Oh, what a happy child I am,
Although I can not see.
I am resolved that in this world,
Contented I will be.
How many blessings I enjoy
That other people don't.
To weep and sigh
Because I'm blind,
I cannot and I won't!

She lived to be over 90, and that beautiful, rejoicing spirit characterized her all her days.

God sometimes permits handicaps in order to awaken compassion in the hearts of others. When I go visit the Green Pastures home and see those little children who are severely handicapped, and often mentally retarded as well, and I observe how those handicaps draw out loving touches, compassionate commitment and service on the part of others, it creates such a sense of beauty that I cannot visit that home without breaking into tears. All this is part of God's purposes in allowing handicaps to exist.

Jesus now goes on to say that God's hour to help has struck for this man who was born blind.

"We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." {John 9:4-5 RSV}

Those words indicate at least three things:

As our Lord's eyes fell on this blind man who had been there very likely many years (the disciples seemed to know him well), he received in his inner heart a signal from the Father that it was time to act on his behalf. Remember, in Chapter 5, Jesus said that this is how he knew what to do, and when to do it. He was given an inner vision of the Father at work: "My Father is working still, and I am working," {John 5:17 RSV}. When Jesus "saw" what the Father did, he would do the same thing. He immediately feels a sense of urgency. "When the Father chooses to work then it is time for me to work. And I must do it now. The night of the cross is coming, when I can no longer work." With a sense of urgency he moves to do what is needed. Further, he has a clear understanding of what that is: "I was sent into the world to be the light of the world. Thus to give light is my function, and here is a man in darkness."

There immediately follows the account of the physical miracle of the opening of this man's eyes.

As he said this, he spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and anointed the man's eyes with the clay, saying to him, "Go, wash In the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing. {John 9:6-7 RSV}

Notice that John wastes no words in describing this miracle. He puts it as briefly as possible: "He went and washed and came back seeing." Obviously he is not calling attention to this physical miracle; there is

something deeper here. When you notice that John points out the meaning of the name of this pool to which Jesus sent this man (he says it means "Sent"), he obviously is indicating that these strange actions of Jesus -- spitting on the ground, making clay, anointing the eyes with the clay, and then sending the man to the pool to wash (which he never does with any other person) -- is a symbolic action that is teaching something deeper than the mere opening of a man's eyes. We must understand it in that light if we want to get at the deeper meaning of this miracle. This is clearly a parable in action. Our Lord is not merely interested in restoring his physical sight. That is part of it, but that is something he can do easily. There is a deeper insight involved, and it is brought out by the symbols he employs.

What does clay symbolize in Scripture? In Genesis we are told that God formed man from the dust of the ground, from the clay of the earth. That symbolism is used many times in Scripture. God is the Potter, we read in Jeremiah {Jer 18:4-6}. We are the clay. He molds us and shapes us into what he wants us to be. Believers, the Apostle Paul declares, "have this treasure in earthen vessels" {2 Cor 4:7} -- clay pots. And the pots are not very strong. Clay is not a very powerful substance. It is malleable and weak. Thus, all through Scripture, clay is used as a symbol of the weakness and fragility of human nature. We are all made of clay. We are clay pots. Some of us are even a little cracked! There is a science being developed here in California called "psycho-ceramics" to deal with cracked pots! This is what clay symbolizes.

When our Lord smears clay over this man's eyes he is saying that there is something hindering the man's spiritual sight -- not only his physical, but his spiritual sight. It is the clay of his humanity, his own and that of those with whom he is surrounded. That fallen human nature is a hindrance to seeing spiritual truth and reality. When he sends this man on a stumbling journey to the pool of Siloam he is indicating that there is a difficult time ahead of him. The process of healing his spiritual sight will involve a prolonged and difficult journey that will be filled with obstacles. It is only when he gets to the pool that his inner sight will be granted him.

Last June my youngest daughter and I were in Jerusalem, and we walked one afternoon from the temple area down the deep declivity of the Kidron ravine to the pool of Siloam. It was a hot, dusty afternoon, and there were many obstacles along the way. For a blind man to traverse this would be very difficult. He would have to ask for directions and for help, and he might easily fall into some of the crevices alongside the road on the way down. It was a difficult journey the Lord sent him on, but when he found his way to the pool, whose meaning is "Sent," then his eyes would be opened and he would be washed and cleansed.

Clearly this is a description of what follows in this man's life. Our Lord has worked it out in this beautiful object lesson to indicate what it takes to open blinded spiritual eyes. Physical eyes can easily be opened by his power, but to open spiritual eyes takes a process of overcoming obstacles that lie in the way. Only as that process is completed, and men come to the place where at last they see who Jesus is, are spiritual eyes opened. This is the story of the remaining verses of this chapter. It is a story of the resistance that this man met, the obstacles to faith that he overcame, and the gradual insight that he gained as he learned more and more about Jesus until he found himself at last at Jesus' feet and his spiritual eyes were opened. It is all worked out in a most dramatic way.

The narrative is self-explanatory and requires little comment:

First, the man comes to his neighbors. He cannot find the Lord when he returns so he goes home, and his neighbors react.

The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar, said, "Is not this the man who used to sit and beg?" Some said, "It is he"; others said, "No, but he is like him." He said, "I am the man." {John 9:8-9 RSV}

There is some reluctance to believe that this has actually happened. Some say, "Hmmm, I'm not sure. It may be him, but he looks different." But the man said, "I am the man." (He seems quite definite about it.)

The account continues:

They said to him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called

Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash'; so I went and washed and received my sight." [This is his invariable testimony.] They said to him "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

[In their uncertainty they did not know how to investigate what had happened, thus] **They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. {John 9:10-13 RSV}**

The keys to that section is what the man thought of Jesus. Notice that all he knows is his name, "the man called Jesus." He has heard his name, but he knows nothing more about him. That is where he begins.

Then immediately a new difficulty arises.

Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. The Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And he said to them, "He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and I see." {John 9:14-15 RSV}

I love the simplicity and directness of this man. He never complicates anything.

Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?" There was a division among them. {John 9:16 RSV}

Here we see the resistance developing. At the leading of the Father, Jesus had once again deliberately run afoul of the petty regulations of the Jewish leaders concerning the Sabbath. In their eyes he had broken the Sabbath in three separate ways:

First, he spat on the ground and made mud. The rabbis held that it was all right to spit on a rock on the Sabbath day because that would not make mud, but spitting on the dirt violated the Sabbath because that made mud -- and making mud is work, and work is forbidden on the Sabbath day! That is how ridiculous their regulations became.

Second, the rabbis said it was forbidden to heal on the Sabbath day. They specifically said, "If you find somebody with a broken leg you can keep it from getting worse, but you cannot make it any better."

The third thing Jesus did was to use spit. There is a specific instruction in the rabbinical literature that spit could not be used because spit is medicine. The use of medicine was forbidden on the Sabbath day because that too is a form of work.

So with these infinitely narrow, petty regulations they had surrounded the Sabbath day with such difficulty that one could hardly breathe without breaking the law. This was their excuse to reject Jesus. Some said, "How can he be from God? He doesn't keep the rules." Others were a little more cautious. "Look at the signs," they said. "These are wonderful things he does. God seems to endorse what he is doing." Thus there was division and doubt.

Now we see the effect this had on the man, who was listening to them:

So they again said to the blind man, "What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?" He said, "He is a prophet." {John 9:17 RSV}

Now he has grown spiritually. He still regards Jesus as a man, but he sees him as God's man, a gifted man, a man with insight and understanding, a great man. All the resistance to accepting this remarkable miracle has deepened his insight and understanding.

Then the man's parents become involved.

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight, and asked them, "Is this your

son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age, he will speak for himself." {John 9:18-21 RSV}

That indicates that his parents were not ready to go very far in helping him. They admitted he was their son, they confirmed that he had been born blind, but they would not go any further.

The account goes on to tell us why.

His parents said this because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if any one should confess him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue [excommunicated]. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age, ask him." {John 9:22-23 RSV}

That indicates they did know who opened his eyes, but they lied and refused to say because they were afraid. So the clay of fallen, fearful, weak humanity continues to blind the eyes of these involved in this story.

The resistance grows even more intense.

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and said to him, "Give God the praise; [That is an official oath they are putting him under. That is like the oath taken in a court of law, "I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God."] "Give God the praise; we know that this man is a sinner." {John 9:24 RSV}

That was their preconceived conclusion. But the man refuses to become involved in a theological argument.

He answered, "Whether he is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see." {John 9:25 RSV}

That is one of the greatest models of how to bear a witness as a believer. Many people are afraid to say anything about the Lord because they think they will be dragged into a theological argument that will be over their heads. But witness is simply doing what this man did -- saying what Jesus did for you, that is all. "Once I was blind, now I can see" -- that is what a witness is. You are the world's greatest authority on what happened to you. As someone has well said, "A man with an experience is never at the mercy of a man with only an argument." When you stand on your experience no one can deny what the Lord has done in your life. You are a positive, powerful witness for Christ. This man teaches us great things in that regard.

They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you too want to become his disciples?" And they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know [we are the theological doctors here, the experts] that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." {John 9:26-29 RSV}

That admission was a fatal mistake. At last they had to admit there was something they did not know. The man seizes on it.

The man answered, "Why, this is a marvel! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if any one is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him." {John 9:30-31 RSV}

He has got them now. With this simple, logical argument he has pinned them to the wall. He continues:

Never since the world began has it been heard that any one opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." {John 9:32-33 RSV}

Observe how he has grown. Now Jesus is seen as "from God" -- he is the one sent from God. The man's

insight has grown tremendously.

So they become very angry:

They answered him, "You were born in utter sin," {John 9:34a RSV}

That is a reference to his blindness. That marked him in their eyes as being a sinner, already cursed of God.

"You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" And they cast him out. {John 9:34b RSV}

They voted him out, excommunicated him from the synagogue.

Note the man's powerful and beautiful argument: "How can you miss the point so terribly? You are facing the greatest miracle, perhaps, this country has ever seen: 'From the beginning of time nobody has ever heard of a man whose eyes were blind from birth being opened.' This has never happened in all the history of this nation, now it has happened and yet you argue about whether it is valid because Jesus did not sign the register properly; he did not do what you thought he ought to do on the Sabbath." That is like giving someone a magnificent diamond and having it rejected because the box it came in is made of plastic! Such is the blindness of these men.

The man's perception of Jesus is that he is the channel of God. He is not only a prophet, but he is the one whom God has sent -- the Messiah. Now he has come to the place where he is ready to see him, and recognize him, because he knows who he is. Spiritually, he has reached his Pool of Siloam. Immediately we read:

Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, "Do you believe in the Son of man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and it is he who speaks to you." He said, "Lord, I believe"; and he worshipped him. {John 9:35-38 RSV}

What a beautiful scene! Notice that he did not have to find Jesus. When, in the temporary darkness of his human clay he was at last brought to see who Jesus was, then immediately Jesus found him. God's hour had struck. Jesus opened his spiritual eyes with the simple words, "You are looking at him, he who speaks to you is he." Immediately the man responded by falling on his knees to worship this matchless Lord, this incomparable Christ, this Savior of mankind.

Then follows the Lord's closing comment:

Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." {John 9:39 RSV}

We ought often to read that verse because one of the characteristics of human clay is that it begins to fancy itself wise and powerful. We begin to think that we are strong and know much. One of the tragedies of any age is the arrogance of men of knowledge who claim to know but who cannot see their hand before their eyes. Jesus described them as "blind guides of the blind," {cf, Matt 23:16-24}. Their fate, he said, would be that both will fall into the ditch.

Last week I received in the mail a volume covering the book of Numbers, in a new biblical commentary series published by an evangelical publisher. When I opened the book, I discovered that it was filled with the specious speculations of scholars identifying the events of the Old Testament as legends, as mere old wives' tales. The book of Numbers records the story of the poisonous serpents which God sent among the camp of the Israelites. As a cure for the bites of the serpents, Moses lifted up a brazen serpent on a pole and said, "If you look at that, you will be healed," {cf, Num 21:9}. In the third chapter of this gospel Jesus himself refers to that very incident. He said to Nicodemus, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up," {John 3:14 KJV}. That is a direct parallelism; "Just as Moses did that, so must the Son of Man be lifted up [on a cross] that whoever believes in him might have eternal life." Thus our Lord underscores and confirms the historicity of that event. Yet here is a book, published by evangelicals and edited

by evangelical leaders, that is nothing but a compilation of the empty speculations of scholars, with no objective evidence whatsoever, that virtually tears the book of Numbers out of the Scriptures! That is the blindness of men who think they see.

This is the blindness our Lord refers to here. In Matthew 11 he prayed, "Father, I thank you that you have hidden these things from the wise and the prudent and revealed them unto babes," {cf, Matt 11:25}. When we are reading the Scriptures we ought to recognize how desperately we are in need of being taught of God. He is able to open our eyes if we admit we do not see. But if we think we know, and we are confident that we do not need any help, then we are stumbling on into blindness. We will find ourselves eventually falling into a pit, unable to be helped.

I have had in my New Testament a verse I found in the writings of Henry Van Dyke some years ago. It is a beautiful prayer, and it states what ought to be the attitude of every believer as he comes to the Scriptures.

Grant us the knowledge that we need
To solve the questions of the mind.

Light Thou our candles while we read,
To keep our hearts from going blind.

Enlarge our vision to behold
The wonders Thou hast wrought of old!

In this Book we have the revelation of the Lord himself. As we come to it we may have to come through difficulty, through hardship, through trial, through resistance, but that is all part of God's way to teach us what these words mean. As we read through the tears, oftentimes, that circumstances place upon us, our eyes are opened and we see the beauty and the glory and the majesty of our God.

I hope that too is your prayer.

Prayer:

Lord, we pray that you will indeed open our eyes. Help us to acknowledge that we are very inadequate people. We do not know how to solve our problems. There is no course we can take that will deliver us from ourselves. Help us, Lord, to come, like this man, and worship at your feet, to recognize that you have come into the world to give us light in our darkness, to lead us through the bewildering paths that we must trod, and bring us to the place of cleansing and of opened eyes. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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