

THE SEARCH FOR SIGHT

SERIES: ONE TO ONE

By Danny Hall

One of the things I've learned over the years is that sometimes we're absolutely sure we understand something, only to find out later that there was a whole realm of truth that we didn't have, and our ideas about it were way off.

I'm a big sports fan. In fact, Ginger says I will sit down and watch anything that's remotely related to sports. When we were living in Europe, believe it or not, I got interested in cricket. There were people I knew who loved cricket, and we had a satellite dish that picked up a lot of feeds from England, so I started watching cricket and trying to figure it out. It's a rather obscure game for us Americans. But the more I watched it, the more I was sure I had at least a basic understanding of it. Then a man in our church gave me a book called *Cricket for Americans* (which amounts to *Cricket for Dummies*). I began to read this book, just fascinated, and I realized that I hadn't understood any of it. When I watched the game again, my eyes were opened in a whole new way. I could understand some of the nuances of it, the texture of the game, the good and the bad of it, and it made the whole experience more enjoyable.

This occurs in a lot of areas of our life, and one area that is very dangerous for us is our faith journey. We form an idea of what it means to know God or follow God, perhaps from what we observe in others, what we've been taught as children, or the religious setting we're in, and often

we fall into patterns, thinking we've figured God out, when in reality we're blind to the truth and wonder of who God is.

We're in a series in the Gospel of John, looking at stories of one-on-one encounters Jesus has with various individuals. We now come to a story that deals with this issue. Let's enter into this story, and allow our eyes to be opened more fully to the wonder and beauty of who God is and what he has for us. John 9:1-41:

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 work of God might be displayed in his life. As long as it is day, we must do the work 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."

Having said 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 demanded.

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 do such miraculous signs?” So they were divided.

Finally 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.”

The Jews 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 Jews, for already the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ 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,” 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 man 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....”

This is the longest of these one-on-one encounters that are recorded by John, and it’s filled with all kinds of interesting twists and turns. It’s a drama, if you will, in three acts. It begins and ends with an encounter between Jesus and the man born blind, and in between is this long discussion in which the Pharisees are trying to figure out what has happened, to somehow explain it away.

As we look at each of these three acts in turn, I invite you to try to put yourself in the story. Are you like the man born blind? Perhaps you have been burdened by some problem in your life, and you need a touch from the healing hand of Jesus. Perhaps you're like the parents, fearful of what might happen to you if you enter into what God is doing. Or perhaps you're like the Pharisees, caught up in your own approach to God and religion, or whatever system you're operating in, and you don't dare even see what God might be doing. As these scenes unfold, perhaps God will help us to encounter him in the midst of this story.

The gift of sight

In Act 1, Jesus and his disciples are walking down the road, and they come upon this man who was born blind. A common question is posed to Jesus: Who sinned, this man or his parents? Most people believed that when someone had this severe an affliction, there had to be some sin behind it, either of the parents or of the person himself. We might find this odd. How could the reason for this man's blindness be sin on his part when he was born this way? But there was a strain in the theology of the day, although not widely held, that it was even possible for a baby to sin in the womb.

Jesus, however, turns the question all around. It's not why this happened, but what purpose there might be in it in the hands of God. ("Why?" is an important question, and we'll come back to it.) Jesus says, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned. That is, there is no direct cause that you can

lay at the feet of the parents or of the man himself. No, this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.”

This is an interesting statement. Does Jesus mean that God caused this man to be born blind just so that he could demonstrate his power later in his life? I don't think so. This man's blindness is a natural human experience. We live in a fallen world in which physical, spiritual, emotional, and relational infirmities and diseases are part of the human story. But it is in the arena of human need, frailty, and infirmity that God displays his work.

Notice also that Jesus does not call what is about to happen a miracle. He calls it the work of God. This is what God does. It's the normal activity of God to be involved in the arena of human frailty, acting to save and heal. Jesus also says this work of God is extended to him and to his people, and that it's urgent. “As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent Me.” Jesus calls his followers to understand that the moment of God's activity is the moment we're living in. He does not say how long it will last, simply that it's an hour in which we ought to appropriate the opportunity to be light in the darkness. Jesus identifies himself as One sent from God at precisely the right time, when the opportunity is there for God to act in saving someone.

“Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” This is one of seven places in the Gospel of John where Jesus dramatically declares himself “the light of the world.” He also uses the phrase “I am” to identify himself with the Old-Testament covenant name of God, “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:13-14). He says, “I am God's light in this world of darkness.”

By implication, those who faithfully follow Jesus carry that torch of light into the world. *We* must do the work of him who sent Jesus; we participate in it. There's a sense of mission in this. This foreshadows what he will say to the disciples at the end of this book: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (20:21). The idea of being sent is an important theme in the gospel of John.

The story unfolds. Jesus turns to the man, spits on the ground, forms some mud, and places it on the man's eyes. Then he sends him down to the pool of Siloam to wash it off.

It's very interesting to observe how Jesus heals in the gospel stories. It's never the same. Sometimes he merely speaks a word and someone is healed. Sometimes he touches them and they are healed. In this case, he makes a little mud, places it on the man's eyes, and sends him down to wash. We all wish that there were some simple formula that Jesus always used, so that we could somehow follow it and find healing or peace or whatever we're looking for. But I believe the method changes from one context to another and one person to another because Jesus is acting in a saving, rescuing way according to the need of the individual at a particular moment in a particular context, for God's purpose.

It's surprising that Jesus directs the man to go down to the pool of Siloam. This name, interestingly enough, is derived from a word meaning "sent"; here again is the theme of being sent. But think about this for a moment. This man has never had sight, and now he's being sent to go wash this mud off his eyes. And as it turns out, he has to traverse some rugged terrain down

into the Kidron Valley. That is where this pool most likely was. So he will have to take quite a step of faith. If it were me, I might ask, “Is there an easier way?” We don’t know if someone will be walking alongside him, or if he even has to go alone. But what does he do? He goes.

Now we don’t know yet what this man knows about Jesus. In fact, we’re going to see that at the beginning he knows very little, only his name. But perhaps he’s heard enough, or he’s lived in the darkness of his blindness for so long, that he says, “What could it hurt?” In faith he walks to the pool, washes the mud off, and lo and behold, he can see!

He heads home and runs into his neighbors, and they can’t believe it. “Is that the man who’s been blind from birth?”

“It can’t be him.”

“Sure it is!”

“No, it just looks like him.”

Meanwhile he’s saying, “Wait a minute, I am the man!”

So they do what everyone does when they can’t answer the question. They take him to their authorities, the teachers of the law. Surely they will have an explanation of this. That launches us into Act 2.

The challenge of Jesus

In Act 2 the Pharisees run up against Jesus, the parents are faced with the dilemma caused by Jesus, and the man himself is challenged to do something about Jesus. This first scene of Act 2 is about the Pharisees' problem. They hear the story, and they're divided among themselves. The problem is, they have two theological beliefs that are now diametrically contradicting one another in this event. First, they believe that anybody who breaks the Sabbath law cannot be a godly person, and Jesus has healed this man on the Sabbath, and in doing that he's also made this little mud ball, and he's sent this man to walk to wash his eyes, all of which fall into the category of things you cannot do on the Sabbath because they are defined as work. So Jesus cannot be a godly person.

But the other thing they believe is that only a godly person could perform as great a miracle as healing a man who was born blind. So Jesus must be a godly man.

Now you and I, looking from a distance, would conclude that certainly the stronger argument here is that he healed somebody, so he must be godly. But in the context of the Pharisees' discussion, that's not the case. The voices that seem to be winning out are the ones that say, "No, he broke the Sabbath, so he's challenging our authority and our whole religious system and our way of life. He cannot be a godly person."

But the Pharisees are still bewildered about what to do with Jesus, so the next step they take is to bring in the parents. They are sure that there must be some other explanation than a miraculous healing by Jesus. Maybe this isn't the right man, or maybe he wasn't really born blind. "Tell us about your son," they say.

In this scene we see the parents' fear. Now, think about these parents. At first, I get kind of angry at the parents, and then I step back and I really feel more sad than angry. They have a son whom they say is of age, which means that he is at least thirteen, but since he's well known in the community and he's been out begging on the streets, he's probably older than that. Let's assume that he's a young adult, perhaps early twenties. But he's been blind since birth. They have been ostracized, and he has been marginalized, and they and he have been accused of being sinful because of this malady. Now, miraculously, he is healed. But the parents respond, "Yes, he is our son, and he was born blind. But that's as far as we'll go. We don't know what happened. Ask him, he's of age." The fear of what might happen to them overwhelms their ability to enter into the joy of what God has done for their son.

Can you imagine that kind of fear? But how many times do you and I find ourselves confronted by the reality that to trust God will take us into the unknown? All their security and their identity as Jewish people is being part of that synagogue family. Now it's in jeopardy because Jesus' popularity has grown enough, and he's challenged the authorities enough, that there are beginning to be rumblings that if people follow him, they'll be kicked out of the synagogue. They're caught up in the fear of what might happen to them and what other people will think.

Isn't that sad? Well, I get sad—until I get convicted. How many times does fear inhibit us from obeying and following Jesus?

The second act has a third scene, which is one of the most dramatic, and even comic, scenes in the Gospel of John. The Pharisees have another problem: although the parents are fearful, this man who was born blind has a powerful witness. He is brought back to them once again, and they increase the pressure on him. "Give glory to God..." This is the equivalent of saying, "Tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God." They even tell him what he needs to say. "We know this man is a sinner."

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

"What did he do to you?" they ask. "How did he open your eyes?"

These next interchanges are really funny. The man says, "I told you already, and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?"

He's really pushing their buttons now, and they're angry. They're hurling insults at him, and then they pull out their one trump card, the Moses card. "You're just 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."

This man's boldness is growing. Can you imagine it? He has been totally marginalized by everybody, and he's standing in front of the leaders, who have incredible power in their society. His parents have already cowered before them. He looks them in the eye and says, "Now, that is remarkable! You are supposed to be the ones who know these things. You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. Well, of course he came from God! We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man 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."

In the face of that incredible logic, they say, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they boot him out of the temple.

The lowest of the low in the community for his whole life, blind from birth, this man has watched this play out, and he has been growing in his understanding of who Jesus is, of what has been happening to him, even to the point that he is willing to challenge the leaders, standing firm in his defense of Jesus, and even if it means getting booted out of the synagogue for it.

That brings us to the final act of the story.

The gift of insight

This man has had his sight restored. Now in Act 3 Jesus is going to take him beyond that. Jesus has heard that he was kicked out of the synagogue, and he goes to see him. He asks him, "Do

you believe in the Son of Man?” The title “Son of Man” was a title of kingship and of the coming Messiah, a title that would have resonated in this young Jewish mind.

His heart is now open and hungry, and he knows this man of God who healed him must have truth that his soul needs. He says, “Who is he, sir? Tell me so that I may believe in him.”

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

The man says, “Lord, I believe,” and he worships him.

We saw in the story of the man who was lying by the pool of Bethesda all those years (John 5:1-15; Discovery Paper 4994) that Jesus offered him deeper healing than just physical healing. Now he gives this man not only physical sight, but spiritual insight into the things that really matter, into who he is.

Now, it’s interesting to trace through this story how the man born blind refers to Jesus. When first asked about what happened to him, he refers to Jesus as “the man they call Jesus.” At that point, that’s all he knows. Then later, as the argument develops and he is asked about this again, he says, “He is a prophet.” At that point he is probably giving him the highest title that he himself knows. When he challenges the Pharisees, saying, “Do you want to become his disciples, too?” he implies that he has become a disciple of Jesus, that Jesus is someone he wants to learn from. Next he calls Jesus “a man from God.” Finally he recognizes him as “the Son of Man,” the one to be believed in and worshiped. What an incredible faith journey this man has gone through

in this short period of time! His heart as well as his eyes have been opened, and he sees Jesus for who he is, trusts in him, and worships him.

On the heels of this exchange, the story ends as Jesus proclaims, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.” Now this may sound like a contradiction of John 3:17, which says that Jesus did not come to condemn but to rescue and to save. But I don’t think that is the case. I think Jesus is reminding us that when he enters into the dark world as the light, those who love darkness rather than light, as John said in 3:19, are condemned already. Those who say they can see are really blind, and need the insight that is provided by the healing touch of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit to open their eyes to see the beauty of who he is.

Let me summarize three things that I want you to think about in relation to this incredible story of faith in this man. First of all, while all of us long to be healed of whatever it is that troubles us, there is a difference between wanting God to fix or explain our weaknesses, and wanting him to use our weaknesses. It’s the difference between asking the question, “Why me, Lord?” and asking, “Lord, help me see what you are doing.” That’s an important shift in perspective on the things that we struggle with. Of course it’s not wrong for our hearts to long to be healed and transformed. But what we really need is to see what God is doing. How might he use the frailty of our humanity and the need that we have, for his glory?

Second, fear is one of the biggest hindrances to seeing God work. Fear so hems us in many times that we are unwilling to take the step of faith. We all will come so far—attend church, do a few

Christian things, let people know that we're Christians or churchgoers—but for most of us at some point, almost weekly, we run up against what we believe is a call of God to obey him that will launch us into the unknown. “What will happen to me if I really, radically say I'm going to follow you wherever you lead, and whatever you want Lord, I'll do it? Will it cost me something at my job? Will it cost me something in the way I live? I don't know what price I will have to pay. Should I go for it? Do I trust you, Lord?” And so many times, just as the parents in this story were too afraid to become active, joyful participants in what God was doing in their son's life, we're too scared to go to the places that the way of faith will take us. But the way of faith will take us to where we see Jesus and all the intimacy, power, and wonder of the life of faith that he offers us.

In the end it comes down to what we're going to do with Jesus. The Pharisees needed to keep him down, explain him away, persecute and pressure him, try to drive him out, and eventually they drove him to the cross itself. He challenged their false authority and their false representation of God. They were responsible for blinding people to God's truth, so he was a threat to them. The parents cowered in fear because they wouldn't say, “Jesus is who did this, and he is from God.” But the man placed his faith in Jesus and worshiped him, and his life was transformed, inside and out.

If you go out today and start a conversation with some people in your neighborhood, if you talk about God or religion, it will probably go okay. But if you turn the conversation to Jesus, trouble will start. The debate will get sticky and hot and uncomfortable, maybe contentious. But ultimately, the question that every person has to face is, “What are you going to do with Jesus?”

Each of the characters in this story confronts Jesus in a different way, but the only way to freedom, insight, life, hope, and peace is to follow the example of this man, to believe and worship Jesus. I hope that God will use this story in your heart to open you up to the wonder of what Jesus offers us: to take who we are in our infirmity and weakness and set us free to be used in the hands of our Master, to follow and worship him and to live a life of faith adventure in him.

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John 9:1-41

Fifth Message

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