

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD



SERIES: PORTRAITS JOHN PAINTED

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John 9:1-7

6th Message

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Night fell at midday when Jesus suffered on the cross and it was into that awful darkness that he cried, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Of this day Isaac Watts wrote, “Well might the sun in darkness hide, and shut his glories in, when Christ, the mighty Maker, died for man the creature of sin.”

We encounter light and darkness in the first sentences of the Bible, and they are used throughout as a metaphor to contrast good and evil. Jesus’ death—the innocent savior, abandoned by his friends, and forsaken by his father—seemed to signal the triumph of the darkness. But only until Easter morning.

John’s gospel has given us our texts for this series—*Portraits John Painted*—and it is John who most often speaks of Jesus using the language of light and darkness. “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:4-5). The story/portrait in this message comes from the ninth chapter of John. Jesus, the light of the world, encounters both a man born blind and those who choose spiritual blindness.

John 9:1-2:

¹As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

These events occur in Jerusalem. While observing Jesus’ interest in a blind beggar the disciples are confronted with an intellectual dilemma. We read that Jesus “saw a man.” However, the disciples look past the man and wonder aloud about the nature of sin and suffering. They speak callously of his condition and its cause as if the living person before them was deaf. Why do they ask this question?

We should remember that the disciples had previously seen Jesus cure blindness. They were also present in the synagogue in Nazareth when Jesus took the scroll of Isaiah and read: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoner and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim

the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). The possibility that Jesus would heal blindness was not startling and would not have led to their inquiry. Something about this blind man is different.

I think the problem is that his blindness was from birth. There are, of course, a number of ways in which eyesight can be lost. Old age, disease, injury, and infection all may lead to blindness. Jesus’ miraculous cures of these difficulties are testimony to his mercy and power. But in such cases there is no need to question the goodness of God. Hard living and bad luck lead to dire circumstances.

But if a baby can be born blind then confidence in God is shaken and the power of darkness seems very great indeed. Perhaps I am not as safe as I thought.

A blinded newborn has had no impure thoughts; has raised no fist of pride in the face of God; it has injured no one; has done nothing to deserve the deprivation and hardship that has been assigned to it. Why would God allow this injustice?

Young children learn at an early age to rail against (perceived) injustice—“Its not fair,” they cry. We want to believe we live in a world where good is rewarded and wickedness punished and people get their just desserts. We know how the law of consequence works. What you sow, you reap. But not always. Jesus’ disciples found this man disturbing not because he was blind—they had seen that before—but because he was born blind.

Of course the Scriptures never teach us to adopt a simplistic perspective on suffering. Before we look at how Jesus answered the disciples’ question let me list four reasons we need to affirm how much we don’t know, acknowledge that human suffering is wrapped in mystery. If all hardship could be explained by the law of consequence:

1. We may end up with friends like Job had. These men spent a great deal of effort, exerted considerable pressure, to induce Job to confess sins he had not committed and to acknowledge a proud heart that did not exist. Unless we admit that suffering is often undeserved ‘good counselors’ may make a hard situation much worse.

2. We may resist being forgiven for the sins we commit. The law of consequence deals only in rewards and punishment. Grace is entirely absent. We are lost if we hope to counter sinful failure with ‘good works’ in order to avoid suffering. Religious charlatans prey on people caught in this pattern and Jesus’ love gets left out of the equation.

3. We may grow proud when our lives go well. If rewards for the righteous and punishment for the wicked can explain every human circumstance then wealth and happiness must mark me as one of God’s favorites. And it is easy to avoid (even reject) the broken and needy.

4. We may miss out on the maturity that comes from trusting God amidst suffering, from faith that grows strong in the wilderness. His love means more to us when the rewards of this life are few.

Before we turn to John 9:3 let me say a word to the reader who is in pain, perhaps verging on hopelessness—those for whom suffering is not just a theological question. The Bible has two important truths to recall. 1. We will never be abandoned (Jesus said, “I am with you always” Matt. 28:20). 2. This world is not our home—Jesus will return some day to right every wrong and make all things new. Faith lays hold of what can’t be seen (Jesus’ companionship) and what is true (the world to come) though not yet present.

John 9:3:

³“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

In effect, the Lord brushes away the premise behind the disciples’ question. Attempting to discover the cause of the beggar’s blindness is futile. The proper question is: What will happen next? We cannot know when our hard life assignment is preparation for a great work of God. As we shall see, God is going to honor his Son on the stage of this man’s life. The New Testament contains no clearer word of testimony than the one uttered in this chapter by the man born blind. It is wiser to ask the Lord for a proper response to life’s storms than for an explanation of their cause.

John 9:4-7:

⁴As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

⁶After saying this, he spit on the ground,

made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. ⁷“Go,” he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam” (this word means “Sent”). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

What is meant by Jesus’ statement, “night is coming”? First, he knows that his own life is nearly over, that the light of the world will be extinguished in his death on the cross. Opportunities for him to minister among his disciples in Judea and Galilee will come to an end.

Similarly, our lives are not predictable. Night is coming. As the incarnate Son, Jesus of Nazareth was light to the world of his generation; today he is present in his people. We must not postpone opportunities for service or witness on the assumption that they can be accomplished later. The body of Christ, the church, has the highest possible calling, yet it is easy to get caught up with buildings, programs, media presentations, and political pronouncements that are not central to our mission. We must do his works, led by his Spirit, while we have opportunity.

With such grand themes in mind verses 6-7 are surely a surprise. Jesus makes an extraordinary claim (I am the light of the world) and then spits on the ground. Even when we acknowledge that in his day saliva was considered a medicine, his actions seem mundane and trivial. But I think there is an important point here.

Doing ‘the works of him who sent me’ is going to mean getting our hands dirty. It is going to mean physical touch and not having long discussions about the nature of suffering. Beyond concern for ‘homelessness’ do we care about any real person with no place to live? Do we walk alongside an unwed mother or visit a prisoner, or talk honestly with a hurting young person? Jesus’ act of touching this beggar means that we can’t do God’s work and keep our distance.

I want to close by reading one more of John’s ‘light’ passages. We noted that John, among all of the writers of Scripture, is the most comfortable with using light and darkness as a way of talking about righteousness and rebellion. At the end of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, John describes a vision in which darkness does not prevail as it seemed to do on the cross. In fact, the final victory is with light—dispelling darkness, and putting an end to sickness, sorrow, sin, and suffering.

Revelation 21:22-25:

²²I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

²³The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. ²⁵On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there.”

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