

Echoes of Scripture

Lent 4a ~ John 9:1-41

Summary of John 9:1-41

A story of the dangers of thinking you know something with certainty when, really, you are blinded to the truth. Jesus heals a man that was born blind. The blind man is cast out of the synagogue. His parents are threatened. And the religious authorities fail to recognize Jesus' identity; the Messiah "sent" by God, the living water, the light of the world, the Good Shepherd who has come to seek and to save the lost.

Suggested Course of Study

- Read the prologue John 1:1-18.
- Read the Nicodemus story John 3:1-21
- Read The story of Jesus healing on the Sabbath John 5:1-47
- Read all of John 7:1—10:42 in order to understand the important context of this passage (make sure you notice what is said about Jesus in John 10:21).



The Blind Man Washes in the Pool of Siloam at the Brooklyn Museum by James Tissot (1836-1902)

Immediate Context

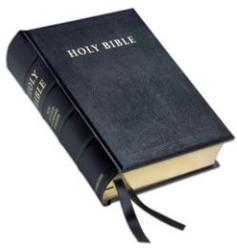
John 7:1-9 The Unbelief of Jesus' Brothers
 John 7:10-24 Jesus at the Festival of Booths
 John 7:25-31 Is This the Christ?
 John 7:32-36 Officers Are Sent to Arrest Jesus
 John 7:37-39 Rivers of Living Water
 John 7:40-44 Divisions among the People
 John 7:45-53 The Unbelief of Those in Authority
 John 8:1-11 The Woman Caught in Adultery
 John 8:12-20 Jesus the Light of the World
 John 8:21-30 Jesus Foretells His Death
 John 8:31-38 True Disciples
 John 8:39-59 Jesus and Abraham

John 9:1-41 A Man Born Blind Receives Sight
 John 10:1-21 Jesus the Good Shepherd
 John 10:22-42 Jesus is Rejected by the Jews
 John 11:1-16 The Death of Lazarus
 John 11:17-27 Jesus the Resurrection and the Life
 John 11:28-37 Jesus Weeps
 John 11:38-44 Jesus Raises Lazarus to Life
 John 11:45-57 The Plot to Kill Jesus
 John 12:1-8 Mary Anoints Jesus
 John 12:9-11 The Plot to Kill Lazarus
 John 12:12-19 The Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem
 John 12:20-26 Some Greeks wish to see Jesus

Key Words

AS HE WALKED ALONG – Where is Jesus? Jesus has just fled the temple because the Jews had picked up stones to throw at him (8:59). So Jesus is in Jerusalem, most likely near the temple. The reason he is in Jerusalem is to attend the Festival of Booths (7:10). Immediately when he arrives he gets into an argument with the religious leaders as he teaches in the temple. Part of the argument has to do with healing on the Sabbath where Jesus points out that the religious leaders are happy to carry out circumcision on the Sabbath (7:19-24) in accordance with the law, yet they complain that the law is being broken if a man is healed on the Sabbath.

WHO SINNED – The question of the disciples reflects the mindset of the people of the time. They believed that sin was the cause for this man's severe physical disablement—his blindness from birth; that blindness



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must be a form of divine punishment for sin. The question for the disciples isn't what caused it, but who caused it: Was it this man's fault (sin) or his parents? (See Exodus 20:5; 34:7; Numbers 14:18; Deuteronomy 5:9). Jesus doesn't eliminate the idea that sin causes suffering completely. He does in this case. But elsewhere in John, Jesus hints that sin can have bad consequences. (See John 5 where Jesus heals a man on a mat at the Pool of Beth-zatha (Bethesda or Bethesda); later Jesus finds him in the temple and says "See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you" (vs. 14).

HE WAS BORN BLIND – Jesus does not use these words in his answer to the disciples. They do not appear in the Greek in verse 3. The translators have included them because of the context in verse 2. But, a word for word translation of verses 3 and 4 is interesting: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned. But, in order that the works of God might be revealed in him, I (or we) must work the works of him who sent me (or us) while it is day; night is coming when no one can (δύναται; has the power or ability) work." Notice the important footnotes in verse 4; other ancient authorities have either *I* or *we* and *me* or *us*. This shows clearly that Jesus abruptly changes the subject. He doesn't speculate on the cause of the man's blindness. He simply says that neither sinned. Instead Jesus wants to focus on what they can do about it now. Paraphrasing: *This man is blind. Forget the cause. Let's talk about the solution. Let's talk about why we are here and what God wants us to do; what God has given us the power to do.*

Remember that in the Greek manuscripts, there is no punctuation or spacing. You just have the letters all bunched together (see image to the right). So for instance, you might have the letters "GODISNOWHERE". How do you read this phrase? Is it "God is now here"? Or is it "God is nowhere"? Separating words and even sentences can be a challenge. Decisions have to be made and we always hope that we make the right ones because the meaning can change significantly.



Verse 3 (Nestle Aland Greek New Testament; 27th Edition)

ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς· οὔτε οὗτος ἤμαρτεν οὔτε οἱ γονεῖς αὐτοῦ, ἀλλ' ἵνα φανερωθῇ τὰ ἔργα τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ.

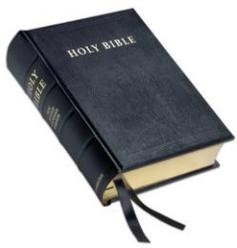
Literal translation:

Answered Jesus, neither this one sinned nor the parents of him, but in order that might be demonstrated the works of God in him.

I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD – See John's prologue; John 1:1-18. See also John 3:19. This is another of the famous I AM sayings. See also John 8:12.

It is interesting that Jesus chose to say this about himself at the time of the Festival of Booths (Sukkot; see Leviticus 23:34ff; Deuteronomy 16:13; Numbers 29:35); a time of remembering the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness as well as a harvest festival celebrating the "ingathering" of the harvest. Because it follows Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) it is a festival of joy representing the time of restored fellowship with God.

Two things are significant about the celebration of *Sukkot*. First, large candelabras were lit in the temple courts, high on the temple mount to symbolize "the revelation and truth of the Jewish faith". Also, at the festival, priests poured water from the Pool of Siloam onto the temple steps so that it would flow down and out through the Temple to the world outside, and so indicate the way that the God of the Jewish faith would



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satisfy the world. On the "last and greatest day of the Feast," in the midst of the water ceremony and prayers for God to send water, Jesus proclaimed, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink" (John 7:37-38).

In the water ceremony, the High Priest would lead a procession to the pool of Siloam where he would fill a golden pitcher with water and then return to the courtyard of the Temple. When the High Priest would pour out the water, the great crowd of people would wave their *lulavot* and sing out from the messianic Psalm "Save us, we pray, O Lord! O Lord, we pray, let us thrive! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! We bless you from the house of the Lord" (Psalm 118:25-26). See Numbers 20 and Jeremiah 2:13 for possible connections to this water ceremony.

After the water ceremony, during the evening, special festivities called *Simchat Bet HaShoevah* (happiness of the house of the water-drawing") occurred. During this time, the four towering menorahs were lit up (lighting up Jerusalem as if it were midday) and the priests would put on a "light show," performing "torch dances" while the Levites sang and played music. These shows would occur every night of Sukkot, all through the night. These festivities were apparently so spectacular that the Jewish sages have said, "He who has not seen the rejoicing at the *Simchat Bet HaShoevah*, has never seen rejoicing in his life" (*Talmud*). Click [here](#) and [here](#) for more information. See a connection between this celebration and Jesus saying "I AM the light of the world"?

MADE MUD – Jesus spits on the ground and makes mud with the saliva. Then he spreads the mud on the man's eyes. Perhaps we hear an echo of how God formed man from the dust of the ground in Genesis 2:7.

GO WASH – Jesus' instructions to the man to go and wash in the pool reminds us of the story of Naaman and Elisha (See 2 Kings 5:9-14). In both cases, the healer doesn't accompany the person who needs healing to the place where they are to wash; and the healing takes place only after the person obeys.

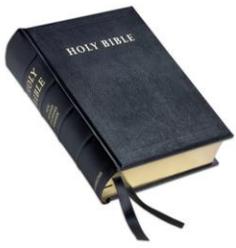
POOL OF SILOAM – (Σιλωάμ which means Sent; Ἀπεσταλμένος from ἀποστέλλω). We get our word "Apostle" from the same root. In this Gospel, Jesus is the one who is "sent" (see John 3:34; 7:28-29; 10:36; 12:45); along with John the Baptist (see John 1:6; 3:28).

The pool of Siloam is a rock-cut pool on the southern slope of the City of David, outside the walls of the Old City, to the southeast. It is mentioned several times in the Bible:

- Isaiah 8:6 (שִׁלּוֹחַ; Shiloah) mentions the pool's waters;
- Isaiah 22:9 ff. refers to the construction of Hezekiah's tunnel.
- Isaiah 8:6 it is the name of an aqueduct in Jerusalem.

As a fresh water reservoir, the Pool of Siloam was a major gathering place at the time of Christ for people making religious pilgrimages to Jerusalem, and the water from the pool was used for purification rituals in the Temple during the Feast of Tabernacles or Sukkot (see above). So this is a very public setting for a "sign," with many witnesses present.





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This healing reminds us of another healing that took place at another pool (in John 5:1-18; mentioned above). See 2 Chronicles 32:2-8, 30 where Hezekiah redirects the waters of Gihon; Isaiah 22:9-11; 2 Kings 20:20).

Incidentally, the name Siloam also appears in the gospel of Luke where, there too, Jesus challenges the “common wisdom” that sin causes all tragedy (See Luke 13:1-5). In discussing the execution of Galilean insurgents by Pilate, Jesus uses the tragic collapse of the Tower of Siloam to show that tragedy and death isn’t always a divine punishment for the “worst” sinners among us.

HOW WERE YOUR EYES OPENED? – No one can believe it. According to the man’s parents, he was born blind. But his neighbors don’t believe it is him. And many of the Pharisees and Jewish authorities can’t believe it either. He gets interrogated three times in this text and his parents once (vs. 8-10; 15-17; 18-23; 24-34); once by the neighbors and three times by the Pharisees, this man’s healing is questioned. The irony is that this healing is a sign in the gospel of John that is supposed to point to Jesus’ identity. The blind man sees the sign and understands. The Jewish authorities (or many of them) don’t. Because in their eyes, the healing violated God’s law (keep the Sabbath holy; a day of rest), it points not to Jesus’ identity as the messiah, but rather to Jesus’ identity as a sinner (or someone who has a demon). They see the sign, but misunderstand its message.

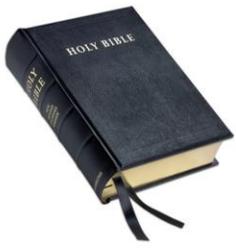
FOR HE DOES NOT OBSERVE THE SABBATH – The fact that Jesus heals on the Sabbath is reminiscent of the argument he has with the Pharisees (read John 7:10-36 and 5:1-18). It also reminds of other times Jesus or his disciples broke Sabbath traditions/regulations (see Matthew 12:1-14; Mark 1:21-28; 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-9; 13:10-16; 14:1-5). It also reminds us of the many arguments Jesus has regarding his identity in the gospel of John.

PUT OUT OF THE SYNAGOGUE – To be put out of the synagogue had farther reaching consequences than simply being able to skip worship on the Sabbath. They would be ostracized by the community and “separated from God”. When the exiles returned to Jerusalem, we read about what should happen to people who failed to assemble before the house of God; all their property should be forfeited and they themselves would be banned from the congregation (see Ezra 10:8).

WE KNOW THAT THIS MAN IS A SINNER – This passage is clearly about Jesus’ identity and mission. Who is Jesus? Is Jesus a sinner as the Pharisees claim (vs 24) or is he “from God” (vs 33) or “Son of Man/Son of God” (vs 35; see footnote); Jesus the shepherd (vs. 10:2), the gate (vs 10:7), or the Good Shepherd (vs. 10:11) or one who “has a demon” (vs. 10:20)?

Notice that the phrase “we know” is the same phrase used by Nicodemus in John 3:2 where he says “*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.*” This word “know” occurs eleven times in this passage. It is significant because this is a story about seeing and knowing. They think they know who Jesus is and where he comes from. But unfortunately, they don’t.

HERE IS AN ASTONISHING THING! YOU DO NOT KNOW WHERE HE COMES FROM, AND YET HE OPENED MY EYES – Do you hear more echoes of the Nicodemus story in John 3:7-8? Or the echoes of Jesus confrontation with the Pharisees in John 8:12-20? In John 3, Jesus mentions that Nicodemus is *astonished* and then goes on to talk about how “*the wind (Spirit) blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.*” In John 8, Jesus is teaching in the Temple treasury and calls himself the Light of the Word and the Pharisees say “Hey! Wait a minute! You can’t testify about yourself!” Jesus replies



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"I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. You judge by human standards..."

Notice how this formerly blind man beats the religious leaders in their debate and how they respond. He talks about what he knows (his experience). They talk about what they think they know.

Stories and talk of the blind being able to see again (2 Kings 6:8-23; Isaiah 29:18; 35:5; 42:7)

DO YOU BELIEVE IN THE SON OF MAN? – Notice the footnote in verse 35 (Other ancient authorities read *"the Son of God"*). The phrase "Son of Man" occurs at John 1:51; 3:13-14; 5:27; 6:27, 53, 62; 8:28; 9:35; 12:23, 34; 13:31. The phrase "Son of God" occurs at John 1:34, 49, 51, 3:18; 5:25; 6:27; 11:4, 27; 13:31; 19:7; 20:31.

AND HE WORSHIPED HIM – *"He said, 'Lord, I believe.' And he worshiped him"* (vs. 38). *προσεκύνησεν* from *προσκυνεω*—to prostrate oneself before someone as an act of reverence, fear, or supplication.

IRONIES IN THE TEXT:

- The blind man sees, but those who have eyes choose to close them to the truth.
- The authorities call the man to give glory to God by denouncing Jesus as a sinner, but the man gives glory to God by witnessing for Christ.
- The authorities continue questioning the man hoping to find a way to prove their preconceived notions. The man responds by asking if they want to become Jesus' disciples too. The authorities say that Moses' authority comes from God, but they do not know where Jesus comes from—implying that he must not come from God. The man responds by pointing out the obvious truth, "If this man were not from God, he could do nothing!"
- The authorities imply that one cannot be a follower of Moses and Jesus, but must choose one or the other. The message of John's gospel is that one can be faithful to Moses only through faithfulness to Jesus.
- The authorities repeatedly use the phrase "we know", but repeatedly reveal their ignorance (and their blindness).
- The authorities accuse the man of trying to teach them. The reader is aware that he is capable of doing just that, but they refuse to learn (or to see).