

JOHN 9

John 9:1–7. Jesus Heals a Blind Man

Although the phrasing of verse 1 raises the possibility that this episode picks up where the previous chapter left off, when Jesus “passed by” and escaped a stoning attempt at the temple, the content of this chapter indicates that although hostility towards Jesus is still present, it seems to have cooled off from the murderous pitch it has reached previously. The similar language is only incidental.

The disciples’ question presupposes two things, with the first being an assumption that sin and suffering are necessarily connected. The story of Job has obviously not left much of an impression on them since a major lesson of that book is that mortal suffering is a complex issue, not to be explained by something so simple as personal virtue. Second, their question assumes the possibility of sin in the premortal state—if not, the man could not have sinned with the result that “that he was born blind.” Jesus’s response illustrates another of the many causes of human suffering—God may allow suffering to endure for a time so that we may come to appreciate His goodness when it is graciously removed. The man himself will become a sign pointing to Jesus’s power and mission; to this end, Jesus heals the man even though no miracle is requested.

Only Mark and John record the use of saliva in Jesus’s miracles. Here, the saliva is not used as a healing agent as much as an ingredient in making clay. Some early Christian commentators see in this action an echo of Adam’s creation from the dirt of the ground (Genesis 2:7). The action reflects Jesus’s mission; the verb “anointed” (Greek *epichriō*) is related to the term Christ, which means “the anointed one.” Siloam, or *shiloah* in the Hebrew original, meaning “he who has been sent,” also has messianic connotations. The healing itself is relegated to a few, brief words, which suggests that (as is often the case in the Gospel of John) this episode is not about the healing at all but rather about the reaction and spiritual lesson associated with it.

John 9:8–12. The Neighbors’ Reaction to the Healing

These verses introduce the theme for the rest of the chapter: others’ reactions to the healing. So stunning is the miracle that the bystanders are slow to believe that this could be the blind man whom they were accustomed to seeing. The spiritual symbolism is powerful too: the man’s encounter with Jesus has left him so profoundly transformed that he seems to be an entirely new individual.

John 9:13–23. First Interview before the Pharisees

When the healed man is brought before the Pharisees, the reader is presented with a crucial detail, as yet omitted: it is the Sabbath. From a strict view of the Sabbath (as some strains of Pharisaic tradition held), several of Jesus’s actions (healing, making clay, anointing) could have been interpreted as a Sabbath violation. The division among the Pharisees centers around the significance of the miracle—for some, it seems like proof of Jesus’s divine commission, but others are hesitant to trust Jesus on the strength of miracles since the scriptures warn of miracle workers whose intent is to deceive (Deuteronomy 13:1–5).

The simplest way out of this dilemma is to deny that the miracle occurred, but upon interviewing the man’s parents, it becomes clear that he was indeed born blind. His parents approach the interview with caution, stating only the facts that they have been summoned to confirm. The Evangelist explains that association with Jesus could threaten one’s standing in the synagogue, hence the couple’s hesitancy to endorse the healing.

John 9:24–34. Second Interview before the Pharisees

The man who has been healed does not share his parents’ hesitancy to discuss his encounter with Jesus. Fueled by the passion of personal experience, he bears simple, pragmatic testimony in verse 25. The Pharisees seem to grow frustrated with their inability to elicit a denunciation from the man and insult both him and Jesus. The man’s response drips with sarcasm: “You don’t even know where he’s from and yet he’s doing these great miracles?” Like some among the Pharisees, this man recognizes the divine seal of approval in Jesus’s actions. His accusers revert to the suffering-caused-by-sin worldview espoused in verse 2 and expel him from the hearing. It’s unclear whether this expulsion is the same excommunication from the synagogue mentioned in verse 22.

John 9:35–41. Second Encounter with Jesus

The Evangelist’s remark that Jesus “found” the man indicates some effort and searching. Jesus has not healed this man and made him into an object lesson only to abandon him when tribulation arises. The man trusts Jesus wholly; his faith is ready and he only requires direction. Jesus’s answer emphasizes

sight and demonstrates that the true blessing of sight is the ability to recognize Jesus for who He is. The converse of this is also true; the Pharisees who overhear this, though they may see, are in fact blind because of their refusal to recognize Jesus.

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Source: *New Testament Insights: John*, by Jackson Abhau