

## Chapter 19: The Sight of Jesus

*John 9:1–41*

As a culture, we believe that education transforms people. Therefore, we often lean on two very powerful tools as we try to rally people to the causes we believe to be important: (1) providing an opportunity for people to see a problem *firsthand*, or (2) teaching people to give them *secondhand* knowledge when (1) isn't a possibility. As a culture, we take for granted the assumption that virtually every problem has ignorance at its root, with education (whether firsthand or secondhand) as the most powerful solution. So, we struggle to know what to do when we encounter people who *know* something, but yet refuse to *act* on that knowledge. While there are certainly times where the problem lies in the *head* so that more information is the solution, there are countless other times where the problem lies in the will and desires of the *heart*. In such cases, no amount of training, classes, books, lectures, discussions, coaching, or teaching will make a difference.

This divide between head knowledge and heart desires fundamentally characterizes the way that people interact with Jesus, too. For those who truly love Jesus, they find no shortage of opportunities to grow in their knowledge of him throughout their lifetimes. But for those who do not love Jesus, no amount of education is enough to push them to faith, even when they witness the power of his miracles firsthand. In the previous passage, Jesus taught that those who do not believe in him live as slaves to their sin, and in this passage we see a concrete example of that principle. Even in the face of the overwhelming proof of Jesus' healing of a man born blind, *neither sight nor knowledge can overcome spiritual blindness*.

### Seeing the Works of God (John 9:1–7)

This is the only place in the Gospel of John that we find the phrase, “As he passed by...” (John 9:1), which makes it difficult to know how much time passes between John 8 and John 9.<sup>1</sup> Some have suggested that Jesus happens upon this man as he leaves the temple after his dispute with the Jews who are seeking to stone him (John 8:59),<sup>2</sup> but it seems unlikely that Jesus could have such a leisurely conversation with his disciples and with the man born blind if there were people after him who are trying to kill him. More likely, this transition describes an undefined period of time, with a similar function to the phrase that John uses elsewhere, “After this...” (e.g., John 3:22; 5:1; 6:1). We simply do not know how much time has elapsed between the two chapters. On the other hand, the thematic connections between John 8 and John 9 are very clear. In John 9 again, Jesus speaks of himself as “light of the world” (John 9:5; cf. 8:12), and “light” was a special focus of the Feast of Tabernacles.<sup>3</sup> As such, the man born blind lacks light—and not only light, but *life*, for it is life that is the light of men (John 1:3).<sup>4</sup> Jesus will address this man's needs holistically, healing both his body and his soul.

## Who Sinned?

When the disciples see the man born blind, they ask Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2). According to the common viewpoint of their day, all human suffering arises directly from some specific sin. The disciples see a case like this in much the same way as the friends of Job, who insisted that Job’s suffering must have come from something he did, such as “cruelty to the widow and the fatherless (Job 4:7; 8:20; 11:6; 22:5–10).”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, they believe that if Job simply confesses his sin and repents, then he will no longer suffer. This same mindset persists today in the caste system of India, with the additional complication of the Hindu belief in reincarnation. So, the presumption of those born into the lowest caste (that is, the lowest level of society) is that they sinned in some previous life in such a way that karma has assigned the person a worse fate in this life as retribution for their former life. Since Jews do not believe in reincarnation,<sup>6</sup> the case of a man born blind becomes tricky, because his suffering might have arisen from the sin of his parents, or because of some sin that he committed while he was still in the womb.<sup>7</sup> So, the disciples take this difficult case to Jesus for clarification.

Jesus rejects the idea that some specific sin caused the blindness in this man: “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him” (John 9:3). While some sin *does* cause specific kinds of suffering (cf. John 5:14), and while all suffering comes as a general result of the curse on creation from the original fall of Adam (Gen. 3:14–19; Rom. 8:18–23), there is no explicit sin that explains the man’s blindness. The earlier story of Jesus’ healing of the man who was lame for thirty-eight years (John 5:1–18) teaches that sin can cause suffering, this story keeps us from superstitiously tying every bit of pain to some distinct sin. Instead, Jesus’ words here teach us to remember that we do not have the capacity to evaluate the judgments of God, as we read in the book of Isaiah: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8–9). Rather than attempting to pry into the hidden things of God, we should simply worship and adore him.<sup>8</sup>

Instead of explaining which sins will produce which experiences of suffering, Jesus “opens up an entirely new view in connection with the particular case before him.”<sup>9</sup> He directs the attention of the disciples away from any *past* sin standing as the *cause* of the man’s blindness, and he instead points them toward the *future* display of the powerful works of God as the *purpose* for the man’s blindness. The man was born blind because the works of God could not be displayed as powerfully and gloriously in him *unless* he suffered in that way. This does not mean that God intends to employ miracles to heal *all* suffering in this life, but Jesus does assure us here that God has a purpose for our suffering, even if we do not know what that purpose is. While we do not know why some things happen on *this* side of glory, we do know that God himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes on the *other* side (Rev. 21:4). Through suffering, God teaches us not to dwell on the causes of each occasion for suffering, but to trust him in hope-filled expectation for God’s eventual healing of the *whole* creation when Jesus returns.

## Working During the Day

Jesus further clarifies the purpose for this man’s blindness: “We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am

the light of the world” (John 9:4–5). In the days before electric lamps that could prolong productivity once the sun set, daylight limited people’s ability to work.<sup>10</sup> Everything that needed to be done must be done in the daylight, for when the sun set, the opportunity was lost. This proverb is very similar to our own: “Make hay while the sun shines.” By analogy, Jesus is saying that his own earthly ministry only has a short window of time for him to accomplish everything that the Father has given him to do. While he is in the world, he must cast his light, for the day is coming when he will be taken away without the ability to shine as directly in the same way through his bodily presence.<sup>11</sup> This man was born blind in order that the light of Jesus might shine by healing him.

After Jesus ascends to heaven (after the time when he is “in the world”) he remains as the light of the world, but his light now shines in a different way. In fact, Jesus does not actually describe himself here as “*the* light of the world” (that is, as the *only* light, as in John 8:12), but only as “*a* light of the world”—that is, as the *temporary* manifestation of his *eternal* light during the brief time of his earthly ministry.<sup>12</sup> After Jesus ascends in glory to the right hand of his Father, Jesus will continue to shine as *the* light of the world through the ministry of his word and sacraments by the power of his Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup> Jesus Christ is the same light yesterday, today, and forever, although his earthly ministry uniquely cast his light, for only during that time did he preach and work signs and wonders by his *bodily* presence. Today, Jesus does not continue to give us new signs or new teachings to consider, but we return again and again to the records of the witnesses of those who saw and listened to Jesus while he was still in the world bodily. The light of Jesus’ earthly ministry was temporary, and yet that light still shines to illuminate those of us who follow Jesus in the first disciples’ footsteps.

### Giving Sight to the Blind

Perhaps the most extraordinary miracle Jesus performs—aside from the miracle of raising the dead (e.g., John 11)—is to give sight to the blind. Neither any prophet throughout the Old Testament, nor any apostle of the New Testament ever restores sight to the blind at any point. (Paul’s recovery of sight after being blinded by Jesus in Acts 9:17–18 is not at all the same.) Even the healed man himself will remind the Pharisees that “Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind” (John 9:32). Leon Morris writes:

There are more miracles of the giving of sight to the blind recorded of Jesus than healings in any other category (see Matt. 9:27–31; 12:22–23; 15:30–31; 21:14; Mark 8:22–26; 10:46–52; Luke 7:21–22). In the Old Testament the giving of sight to the blind is associated with God himself (Exod. 4:11; Ps. 146:8). It is also a messianic activity (Isa. 29:18; 35:5; 42:7), and this may be its significance in the New Testament. It is a divine function, a function for God’s own Messiah, that Jesus fulfills when he gives sight to the blind. This chapter then has significance in John’s part for showing Jesus to be the Messiah.<sup>14</sup>

So, after Jesus finishes speaking to his disciples, “he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man’s eyes with the mud and said 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).

While Jesus gives sight to many blind people through the course of the Gospels, his manner for giving sight to the blind in this story is unique. Jesus uses his spit to give sight to another blind man on one other occasion (Mark 8:23), but only here does Jesus use his spit to make mud in order to

heal. Also, only here does Jesus instruct the blind man to wash in water to be healed. In part, by requiring this blind man to endure such an odd process tested his faith to evaluate whether he would willingly embrace “that type of submission which carries out a seemingly arbitrary command.”<sup>15</sup> Beyond that, it is possible that we see a reference in the mud to the creation story, where God made Adam out of the dirt of the ground so that the church father Irenaeus writes, what “the artificer—the Word—had omitted to form in the womb he supplied in public, that the works of God might be manifested in him.”<sup>16</sup> Also, it is possible that we see a reference to baptism, so that just as the man’s body is cleaned through washing with water in the pool of Siloam, so also our souls are healed through baptism.<sup>17</sup> But even if we do find an echo of creation or baptism here, those themes are not the primary connections that John wants to see. Instead, John’s main purpose is to draw our attention to the pool of Siloam itself by telling us that the name Siloam “means Sent” (John 9:7). Jesus, the Sent-One, makes use of the pool that means “Sent” in order to shine as the light of the world during the brief time of his earthly ministry. As John Calvin explains, “that fountain, which was near the temple, daily reminded the Jews of Christ who was to come, but whom they despised when he was exhibited before them. The Evangelist, therefore, magnifies the grace of Christ, because he alone enlightens our darkness, and restores sight to the blind.”

Critically, healing the blind man by sending him to wash in the pool of Siloam also joins together the two claims that Jesus makes during the Feast of Booths: he is the one who provides living water (John 7:37), and he himself is the light of the world (John 8:12). The spring of the pool of Siloam flows down from the temple hill, and it was out of the pool of Siloam that the priests would dip the golden pitcher for the daily water-pouring ceremony of the Feast of Booths.<sup>18</sup> Then, every night during the Feast of Booths, the Jews would dance in the light of the golden candelabras. By sending this man to wash in the pool of Siloam, Jesus connects the two symbols, giving the man *light* in the darkness of his blindness through the *living waters* of the pool of the Sent-One. In this way, Jesus proves that he is who he claims to be.

### **Humble Knowledge (John 9:8–34)**

When the man’s neighbors and those “who had seen him before as a beggar” discover that he has received sight, they begin a debate about his identity in a way that parallels the kinds of discussions that surround the identity of Jesus (John 9:8–9; cf. John 7:25–27, 40–44). Some hesitantly believe that this is the same man, so that the question, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” is phrased in such a way that expects an affirmative answer: “Yes, he is!”<sup>19</sup> Others affirm confidently, “It is he,” while others say, “No, but he is like him.” The man himself repeatedly testifies (“kept saying,” imperfect tense describing ongoing, repeated action) that he is indeed the man (John 9:9), so they ask him the obvious question: “Then how were your eyes opened” (John 9:10). At this point the man repeats the story, telling how Jesus made mud, anointed his eyes, and told him to go to Siloam and wash; after he did so, he received his sight (John 9:11). Then, the crowd asks the next obvious question: “Where is he?” to which the man replies, “I do not know” (John 9:12).

Notice carefully the first occurrence of the word “know” in this passage, that will come up several times in his disputes with the authority (John 9:12, 20–21, 24–25, 29–31).<sup>20</sup> Throughout this passage, the healed man freely acknowledges what he knows from his encounter with Jesus, but he never speculates about something that he does not know. The Pharisees, by contrast, delude

themselves that their prejudices about Jesus are truth that they “know.” They hold to their opinions so strongly that when the facts of this extraordinary miracle confront them, they do everything they can to cover it up!

### Inquisition of the Pharisees: Scene I

When the crowd brings the healed man to the Pharisees, it is unlikely that they have harmful motives.<sup>21</sup> Instead, they are doing the same thing that most Christians would do when they encounter something spiritual that they cannot quite understand: they take the matter to their spiritual leaders. Some may be hoping that the Pharisees will disprove the matter, but others probably expect the Pharisees to rejoice and give praise to God for the miracle that has taken place in their midst. The problematic circumstance, as in John 5:9b, is not in *what* has happened, but *when* the miracle happened: “Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes” (John 9:14). Once again, Jesus has performed a work of God for the restoration and healing of a human being made in God’s image on the Sabbath. By doing this, Jesus has run afoul of the “law.”

Of course, Jesus has in no way violated the written word of God in regard to the Sabbath, but only the oral law of traditions of humans built on *top* of God’s word, for the Pharisees considered the oral, human traditions to be of equal importance with God’s own word.<sup>22</sup> Jesus has already told us his motivations for performing this sign on the Sabbath: “that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (John 9:3–5). Jesus is doing the works of God on the Sabbath day, not the common works of man, so what he does glorifies God’s work of redemption in the world. Through this work, Jesus shines as the light of the world. Therefore, by doing this work on the Sabbath, Jesus is putting a test to the Jews: will they respond to a clear work of God by worshiping Jesus (John 9:38), or will they blaspheme the Holy Spirit by whom Jesus performs this sign by ascribing this work to a sinner (John 9:16, 24)?

When the Pharisees begin their inquisition into the miracle by asking the man what happened, he says, “He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and I see” (John 9:15). William Hendriksen observes, “Already the man appears to be wary. He weighs his words. Note how the report of the miracle is becoming more and more concise.”<sup>23</sup> Even from such a brief report, a “division” emerges within the ranks of the Pharisees (John 9:16c). Some believe that the only relevant detail in the case is the fact that the miracle took place on the Sabbath, which taints the miracle and the miracle-worker alike (John 9:16a). Others ask, “How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?” (John 9:16b). Note that while this second group *questions* whether such a miracle-worker could also be a sinner, they do not draw the natural conclusion that Jesus must *not* be a sinner, since they still hold to their expanded, legalistic view of the Sabbath. Neither group can account for all the details because they begin with false premises about the Sabbath, so they continue searching for some additional detail that will help them get to the bottom of the matter.<sup>24</sup>

Oddly, since they cannot settle the matter among themselves, they call for speculation on the part of the witness: “What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?” (John 9:17). John brings out the unbelief in this question by stating that the Pharisees ask him “again.” Their minds are so hardened against Jesus that rather than standing in awe of the miracle Jesus has taken place in their midst, they all agree that *something* must be wrong with what he has done.<sup>25</sup> It seems that the Pharisees were hoping that the man would voluntarily offer some kind of qualification: “Well, he did

heal me, but...” To their disappointment, the man responds, “He is a prophet” (John 9:17). The healed man draws his conclusions slowly in this passage, beginning here with a fairly general classification. Who else but a prophet could work such an extraordinary miracle? The man does not know much, but he does not reject the facts of his case as the Pharisees do.

### Inquisition of the Pharisees: Scene II

When the man instead states his belief that his healer must be a prophet, the Jews seek to discredit the miracle by discrediting the *man*. They call the man’s parents, since they do not believe the man’s story that he was born blind (John 9:18). They are desperate for any evidence to discredit this miracle, and so they hope that the man’s parents will testify that he was *not* born blind. This strategy will backfire, however, as the parents give unimpeachable testimony. Like their son, they stick to the facts of what they *know* and refuse to speculate about the facts, since the facts speak for themselves.

The Pharisees put two questions to the parents that work in opposite directions. First, they ask, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind?” (John 9:19). On this point, the Pharisees expect the parents to say that either (1) this man is not their son, but is someone who is pretending to be the man born blind (cf. John 9:8–9), or (2) this man is their son, but was not born blind. Second, they ask, “How then does he now see?” Perhaps these parents consulted a physician who gave their son some medicine. Perhaps the man’s sight has been recovering slowly for years. Perhaps something else—anything else!—can explain this phenomenon so that the Pharisees do not have to credit Jesus with an extraordinary miracle.

To the first question, the parents are able to say what they *know*: “We know that this is our son and that he was born blind” (John 9:20). This statement devastates the Pharisees’ case, since it establishes the identity of the healed man beyond all reasonable doubt.<sup>26</sup> To the second question, however, the parents refuse to speculate, for they do not *know* the facts of the case first-hand: “But how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes” (John 9:21a). Last, the parents defer back to their son’s testimony: “Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself” (John 9:21b). By this, they re-establish the credibility of their son and his testimony about the miracle as it happened—that is, that Jesus *did* indeed give him sight by anointing his eyes with mud and sending him to wash in the pool of Siloam.

In part, the parents want to avoid any appearance of confessing Jesus as the Christ, since the Jewish leaders have already begun to excommunicate any Jesus-confessors from the synagogue (John 9:22). From another perspective, however, the humble ignorance of the parents stands in stark contrast to the arrogant ignorance of the Pharisees. The parents know enough to undermine the case of the Pharisees by identifying the man as their son who was born blind, but they do not know what happened to heal him, and they are willing to admit it. The Pharisees *also* do not know what happened, but they refuse to admit their ignorance, since what has allegedly happened strikes at the heart of their religious understanding. They cannot even entertain the possibility that the man’s testimony is true, since that would mean that they are therefore wrong.

### Inquisition of the Pharisees: Scene III

Now that the man’s parents have independently verified their son’s story all the way up to the point of his healing, the Pharisees have only one card left to play: they must find a way to discredit

the miracle story itself. They start by appealing directly for the man to reveal Jesus as a sinner in some way: “Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner” (John 9:24). Again, note how the word “know” is used here. What the man and his parents *know*, they know with actual knowledge; what the Pharisees *know*, they only know by speculation, and they have no room for facts to change their minds. Essentially, they are bluffing, going all in on their prejudices despite the fact that they don’t hold a single card that can help them.

When the Pharisees say, “Give glory to God,” they are echoing the words spoken to Achan in Joshua 7:19 to get him to confess, after God exposed his hidden sin by the casting of lots—the phrase means something like, “Before God, own up and admit the truth.”<sup>27</sup> Now, the Israelites found Achan by casting lots tribe by tribe to identify the tribe of Judah, then clan by clan to identify the Zerahites, then household by household to identify the Zabdi’s, then man by man to identify Achan (Josh. 7:16–19). In the same way, the Pharisees have sought to ascertain the truth by interrogating witnesses, question by question. Rather than exposing the man as a liar, however, they expose themselves as unwilling to believe the truth. *They* are Achan in this passage, not Jesus! Instead of giving glory to God by glorifying Jesus through embracing the truth, though, they continue to cling to their lies (cf. John 8:54–55).

Once again, the man remains humble in his testimony about what he *knows*: “Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see” (John 9:25). The man is able to call the bluff of the Pharisees because he holds the trump card of the truth. Once this man was blind, but now he sees. Perhaps there is some explanation for this fact that still ends up with classifying Jesus as a sinner (he admits, he does not know about this), but the facts themselves cannot be changed. Jesus has given him sight. Neither the Pharisees nor anyone else can contradict this truth.

Because the Pharisees are committed to a lie, the truth does not satisfy them. So they ask again, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes” (John 9:26). By this point, the man has told his story twice with perfect consistency (John 9:11, 15), and the man points this out to them: “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” (John 9:27). The first question is rhetorical, exposing the fact that there is no need to hear the story again. The second question is phrased to expect a negative answer: “You don’t also want to become his disciples, do you?”<sup>28</sup> It is obvious that the Pharisees have no intention of becoming his disciples, but their obsessive rehearsing of the story as they seek to find a flaw is becoming absurd. Only a disciple of Jesus would want to hear this story repeatedly—as indeed *we* do who continue to study it today. In this second question, don’t miss the little word “also” in the man’s response—the longer this circus trial goes on, the more *he* wants to become Jesus’ disciple!<sup>29</sup>

### False Humility

Thoroughly disproven and discredited, the Pharisees have only one thing left in their total bankruptcy: reviling.<sup>30</sup> “And they reviled him, saying, ‘You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from’” (John 9:28–29). Finally the Pharisees express humility by acknowledging that they do not *know* something. Sadly, their humility is a foolish, false humility. When they did not have the facts, they *knew* that Jesus was a sinner (John 9:24), but now that all the facts are in to prove decisively that Jesus does the works of God—and therefore *cannot* be a sinner—then they retreat to

feigned humility in order to avoid believing the inescapable conclusions about Jesus. They strike a pose of humility, but they do so out of arrogance, for it is the thing that they *believe* they know that keeps them from believing what they *should* know, in light of the overwhelming evidence. They have heard second-hand testimony from his own parents that he was indeed born blind, and they have seen first-hand that this man now sees. Neither sight nor knowledge can help them, because ignorance isn't their real problem.

At this point, the tables turn. No longer do the Pharisees bring an inquisition against the man, but the man brings an inquisition against the Pharisees:

The man answered, “Why, this is an amazing thing! 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 anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” (John 9:30–33)

The “amazing thing” is not that someone should believe in Jesus. No, the amazing thing is that the Pharisees are so willfully, stubbornly, and unbelievably ignorant about Jesus in light of everything that has happened. As George Beasley-Murray puts it, “The ‘amazing thing’ is not faith, but unbelief!”<sup>31</sup>

In spite of the Pharisees’ intension, their inquisition has only served to clarify the thinking of the man toward faith.<sup>32</sup> Earlier he did not “know” whether Jesus could be a sinner (John 9:25), but now he knows that Jesus must be from God.<sup>33</sup> While the Pharisees have bungled their investigation at every turn, the man returns to commonly accepted first principles of theology—principles that he *knows* to be true, that God does not listen to sinners, but only to those who worship him. Therefore, if Jesus has performed a miracle that is unheard of since the beginning of the world, then he must be from God, since if he were not from God, he could do nothing. The Pharisees have sought every possible means to discredit the man and his story, but in the end, the man discredits *them* by the truth.

### Excommunication of the Pharisees

In response to this humiliation, the Pharisees excommunicate the formerly blind man: “They answered him, ‘You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?’ And they cast him out” (John 9:34). Even in this last statement, the Pharisees continue to expose the foolishness of their position. By attacking him as someone “born in utter sin,” they are returning back to the idea behind the question of the disciples that began this passage, that *someone* sinned in order for this man to be born blind. Whether because the parents sinned or the man sinned, when the Pharisees rage that he was *born* in utter sin, they are acknowledging that he was indeed born blind, a position they earlier did not believe (John 9:18). If he was born blind, then Jesus did indeed heal him, performing an extraordinary miracle.<sup>34</sup> The case is closed, in spite of the inability of the Pharisees to accept the logical conclusions.

But one important question remains: if the Pharisees excommunicate this man, how does that affect his status before God? How far does their authority over the synagogue reach, especially when they refuse to believe the truth about Jesus? On the one hand, Jesus himself teaches that sinners



should be excommunicated from the church and treated as a Gentile (that is, outside the family of God) if they refuse to repent from their sin (Matt. 18:17; cf. 1 Cor. 5:4–5), and that the church possesses the keys to the kingdom binding in heaven what they bind on earth, and loosing in heaven what they loose on earth (Matt. 16:19). On the other hand, this story illustrates that true excommunication is not subject to the whims of wicked men who misuse and abuse the authority that Christ has entrusted to them. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (the only infallible source of God’s word) are the keys to the kingdom, and the only lawful church authority in the church comes through the faithful proclamation and application of God’s word: “All church power, whether exercised by the body in general, or by representation, is only ministerial and declarative since the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice.”<sup>35</sup> Therefore, when Pharisees in *any* age excommunicate someone who faithfully obeys God’s word, their excommunication is invalid. As John Calvin writes: “In short, nothing can be more certain than that those who, we see, are not subject to Christ are deprived of the lawful power of excommunicating.”<sup>36</sup> In fact, by rejecting the truth about Jesus, these Pharisees do not excommunicate the formerly blind man from the household of God, but only *themselves*.

### **Guilt that Remains (John 9:35–41)**

After the religious leaders cast the man out of the synagogue, Jesus himself goes to the man, asking, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” (John 9:35). The man has already confessed his faith that Jesus is a prophet (John 9:17) and a man from God (John 9:31–33), so Jesus asks the man whether he also believes that he is the Son of Man whose kingdom will never end (Dan. 7:13–14). Humbly, the man asks Jesus to tell him who the Son of Man is, *in order to* believe in him (John 9:36). Jesus says, “You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you” (John 9:37). By first telling the man that he has already “seen” the Son of Man, Jesus reminds the man of the miracle he performed: he *sees* the Son of Man because the Son of Man gave him *sight*.

Taking this one step further, Jesus clarifies that the Son of Man is the same person who is speaking to him at that very moment. Without a lifetime of experience in differentiating between faces that we with sight take for granted, it is possible that the man needs clarification to confirm that the first face he saw belongs to the same man speaking to him (cf. Mark 8:24). Regardless, once Jesus clearly identifies himself as the Son of Man, the man needs to hear nothing further. He is already convinced in mind and heart, and, crying out, “Lord, I believe!” he falls down and worships Jesus (John 9:38). In contrast to the Pharisees, he does not continue to grasp at straws to disprove that Jesus is who he says he is; he simply needs to make sure that he is talking to the right person, and then he eagerly worships Jesus without any further questions.<sup>37</sup>

### **Judgment**

Jesus then offers a summary to help us understand this passage: “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind” (John 9:39). By “judgment,” Jesus is not speaking of the final work he will do as the Judge of all (cf. John 5:22), but judgment in the sense of how people respond to him, the light of the world. Either they move from a state of blindness to a life of seeing him, loving him, and worshipping him, or they harden themselves in blindness to him, the true light, even when they have opportunities to see him for who

he is.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, Jesus' words here do not actually contradict what he said in John 3:17 ("For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn [judge] the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him"), since Jesus did come to save some who are blind.<sup>39</sup> Others, however, persist in blindness, refusing to see him. By their spiritual blindness, they judge and condemn themselves.

### Guilt that Remains

When some Pharisees nearby hear Jesus say these things, they ask, "Are we also blind?" (John 9:40). Jesus replies, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains" (John 9:41). This answer works in two ways. First, Jesus suggests that real ignorance—not willful ignorance, but actual lack of knowledge—could provide them some excuse for their blindness: "If you were *actually* blind, you would have no guilt."<sup>40</sup> Since they do have knowledge, then they have no excuse. Second, Jesus provides them the solution to their blindness: they must acknowledge that they *cannot* see, asking Jesus to help them.<sup>41</sup> As long as they continue to claim that they see, refusing to let Jesus open their spiritual eyes in the same way that he opened the physical eyes of the blind man, then their guilt remains. The Law forbade mistreatment of the blind because they were vulnerable (Lev. 19:14; Deut. 27:18), but Jesus is not mistreating people who are helplessly blind. He is instead holding his hand out to help them, and they are refusing his help, insisting that they see just fine. Because they do not *remain/abide* in Jesus' word through faith (John 8:31), their guilt *remains/abides* in them.<sup>42</sup> Tragically, no amount of firsthand or secondhand knowledge of Jesus, his works, and his person are able to penetrate their unbelieving, spiritually blind hearts.

### Discussion Questions

1. Brainstorm of a list of all of the problems in your life that you have attempted to tackle by arming yourself with more education, whether firsthand or secondhand. How many ways have you sought to *learn* more about work? Personal habits? Relationship dynamics (as a child, as a sibling, as a spouse, as a parent, as a friend)? Faith? Home repairs? Foreign languages? Financial matters? What does all of this say about your view of education as a solution to life's problems?
2. What does this story of the man born blind teach us about suffering? Jesus refuses to explain the *cause* of this man's birth, so how can we trust the goodness of God without having clear principles to explain why certain things happen in our lives or the lives of others?
3. What does healthy humility look like in what we claim to *know*? What does false humility look like, when we decline to believe the things that we *can* know? Do you need to increase or decrease the strength of any of your own convictions?
4. To what degree do our hearts and our wills play a role in what we believe, in comparison to the role of our minds? Do you need to repent of willfully refusing to believe something that you know to be true about Jesus?

## Notes

1. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 674.
2. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 71–72. Still, Hendriksen cannot be certain: “We simply do not know whether the events recorded in chapters 8 and 9:1–34 happened on the same day. But if the blind man was not cured on the day when Jesus escaped being stoned to death, the miracle must have taken place very soon afterward (perhaps, the next day).”
3. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 359.
4. Köstenberger, *John*, 281.
5. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 73.
6. Some, however, have speculated that reincarnation, or the “transmigration of the soul,” is behind the disciples’ faulty thinking, including *John Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 365–66. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xv.i.html>>
7. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 72.
8. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 366. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xv.i.html>>
9. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 676.
10. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 368. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xv.i.html>>
11. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 362.
12. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 679.
13. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 369. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xv.i.html>>
14. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 422.
15. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 75.
16. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book V, 15.2. Available online: <<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.vii.xvi.html>> Cited in Beasley-Murray, *John*, 155.
17. For an evaluation of the ancient and modern arguments for baptism, see Beasley-Murray, *John*, 162. Ultimately, Beasley-Murray does not find the arguments persuasive: “Whereas, however, the story could plausibly be used as illustrative of conversion that finds completion in baptism, it is doubtful that the Evangelist had any such thought in mind, not even when narrating about the man washing his eyes in the water of Siloam.”
18. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 76.
19. Lenski also notes that the question demonstrates “great surprise. ‘Why this is the same man— incredible!’” Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 683.
20. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. , 784.
21. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 156.
22. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 373.
23. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 81.
24. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 688.
25. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 373. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xv.iii.html>>
26. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 341.
27. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 373.

28. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 345.
29. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 437.
30. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 695.
31. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 158.
32. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 697.
33. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 91.
34. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 91–92.
35. “Preface to the Book of Church Order,” *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America*, 2.7.
36. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 381. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xv.iv.html>>
37. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 348–49.
38. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 389–90. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xv.vi.html>>
39. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 377.
40. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 442.
41. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 393. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xv.vi.html>>
42. “And so *your guilt remains*. Although the verb ‘to remain’ (*menō*) normally has positive overtones in the Fourth Gospel (e.g. 15:5), both here and in 3:36 the picture is negative, and frightening.” (Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 378.)