

July 27, 2025

The Gospel of John
XXX. One Thing I Do Know
John 9:1-41

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

“As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth.” Right away we hit the first grace note in our text – *“As he passed by, he saw . . .”* Jesus saw a man whom others routinely passed by, stepped over, avoided, overlooked – Jesus saw him. Meaning more than a glance – meaning that Jesus noticed him, focused His attention upon him, felt compassion for him in His heart. It is a pattern in Jesus’ life that we see again and again. The one who is suffering and whom everyone else take pains to avoid, Jesus sees and stops and engages. The one who is outcast and excluded, Jesus sees and greets and includes.

Think of the Samaritan woman at the well back in chapter four – no one in her home village will speak to her. The other women shun her completely, which is why she goes to the well alone in the heat of the day. But Jesus sees her, goes up to her and speaks to her – all despite the additional cultural and religious barriers between a Jewish man and a Samaritan woman in that day. Jesus, looking upon her, loves her and offers her the water welling up into eternal life.¹

Or how about the healing of the lame man at the Pool of Bethesda in chapter five. For thirty-eight years this man had been lying there by the water, hoping for a miracle. How many people in all those years had walked past him unnoticed, uncaring, not wanting to get involved? But *“Jesus saw him”* – that’s what the text says, *“Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time.”* Jesus then approached him and spoke to him, saying, *“Do you want to be healed?”*²

Over and over again we see this happening in the Gospels – Jesus seeing someone who is hurting, Jesus seeing someone who is excluded, Jesus seeing someone whom everyone else is refusing to see. The woman in the crowd with the twelve year flow of blood – an ailment of body but also of exclusion from the religious life of the people – Jesus sees her in the crowd, stops in His tracks and speaks to her, heals her.³ Zacchaeus, greedy little man hiding up in a tree so that the crowd won’t see him, as well as so that he can see over the crowd to Jesus – greedy little man with a bruised heart and wounded spirit – and Jesus sees him. Stops in His tracks and speaks to him.⁴ The elderly woman in the Temple, offering up her two little coins, while all around the wealthy pour in their loud and proud stacks of coins to much fanfare. Jesus sees her, sees her great faithfulness and sacrifice, turns to His disciples saying, *“She is the one to watch.”*⁵ Over and over again in the Gospels, this simple act of grace: Jesus sees the hurting ones, Jesus sees the outcast and excluded ones, Jesus sees the ones with bruised hearts and wounded spirits.

Which means that Jesus sees each one of us also. When we are facing some illness or trouble or fear – whenever we are feeling broken or abandoned or helpless or alone – Jesus sees us. He sees us and sees what we are going through. He takes note of our pain. Jesus stops in His tracks and looks upon us in compassion and love. Which means there is nothing we go through in this life that we must go through alone, because Jesus sees us. Because Jesus comes to us. He is there when we need Him most:

*Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you...
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.⁶*

Jesus sees the man born blind. Jesus sees us also. *“When other helpers fail and comforts flee, help of the helpless, O abide with me.”⁷*

For Jesus doesn't just see us – indeed, He helps us. One theologian put it this way – this lovely, powerful way: *“Nothing irredeemable has happened to us or can happen to us on our way to our destiny in God's full world.”⁸* Nothing we go through is irredeemable. There is nothing we go through that Jesus cannot, will not, redeem for us and with us. *“Nothing irredeemable has happened to us or can happen to us”* because our Lord Jesus not only sees us, but helps us, even heals us. In our passage, Jesus not only sees the man blind from birth, Jesus heals him.

But not before a theological discussion breaks out among the disciples. Jesus sees a man who is hurting and in need of help – the disciples see an interesting theological conundrum: *“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”* Someone must have sinned if this man was born blind, right Jesus? Why else would this have happened to him? There must be a reason why, right Jesus?

It is the default human response to bad things happening, this question “why?” Almost the first thing out of our mouth when unexpected troubles break upon us: why did this unintended, unplanned, unchosen, unwanted bad thing happen? And why did it happen to me, or why did it happen to this person whom I love? It's a gut reaction, a knee jerk of the soul, to ask “why?” I think in part because such suffering tends to strip us of our sense of control over our lives – or, more accurately, our illusion of control. And instinctively we seem to believe that knowing the reason why this happened will enable us to regain our control over the situation. Or perhaps, more deeply, we ask that question “why” because we are terrified by the thought that our suffering, or the suffering of someone we love, might in fact be purely accidental, without any obvious purpose or meaning to it. We ask “why” so that some reason, some explanation, some rationale will assure us that our suffering is not in vain.

But the question “why” never really works, never really helps – and again I say that out of a very long experience as a pastor. It never really works because we rarely cut a clear-cut answer. It never really works because cause and effect are rarely as clear-cut as we imagine. The disciples assume that sin must be the cause of the effect of this man's blindness – in their world, sin was the

go-to answer to the question why. So either he or his parents sinned before he was born for him to have been born blind.

But how could they possibly know, one, if either of these possibilities is true; and two, that the sin on whoever's part was the direct cause of his being born blind? They don't know, they can't possibly know – and neither can we always know the reason why. My grandmother was a teetotaler all her life, and yet she died of liver disease – who can explain the cause and effect why behind that? One chain smoker who dies of lung cancer – and so claim to know the reason why; but what about the other chain smoker who lives to be a hundred – how do we account for that? We human beings just do not see clearly enough, know enough, to confidently assert a reason “why” in response to every bad thing which befalls us. As St. Paul puts it, at best we see “*but dimly in a mirror.*”⁹

But the truth is, even if we could confidently know the reason why, knowing why just doesn't help. It never really helps. Because knowing the reason why doesn't change anything about what we are going through. It doesn't cure the suffering, it doesn't change the pain, it doesn't remove or redeem what we are going through.

And maybe that is why Jesus so quickly rejects the disciples' question regarding “why.” He says to them, “*It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the work of God might be displayed in him.*” Now, at first hearing, it sounds as if Jesus is merely coming up with a different reason why – that it wasn't anyone's sin that is the reason why, that actually it was all God's fault. Blaming God is another very popular strategy when it comes to the question “why.” But that is not at all what Jesus is saying. He is not at all offering a divine explanation to the question why – what He is doing is rejecting the question “why” altogether!

You see, this is one of those places in Scripture where the English translation struggles to convey the meaning of the original Greek. What Jesus is saying to them is not that God is the reason why this man was born blind, but rather that God is the One who can and will enter into this man's suffering and redeem it. That God is not the One who rains down bad things on His beloved children, any more than we would do so to our own children. But rather that God is the One, the only One, who can and will bring good from out of our suffering. That is what Jesus means when He says, “*that the work of God might be displayed in him.*” He is not saying that God specifically gave this man his blindness at birth so that one day, down the road, Jesus could show up and cure him in front of everybody. Jesus is saying that asking “why” is not the answer, as well as that God is not the One to blame. Rather, what He is saying is that the mercy and power and redeeming love of God is always the answer when we suffer. Jesus is not saying that God did it – but rather that God is going to do something about it. That work of God is about to be displayed in this man's life!

Think of it in this way: in asking “why,” the disciples are looking backward in regard to this man's suffering – looking backward to a cause that, even if known, would not now, in this present moment, change the fact of his suffering. Jesus, instead, is inviting them to look ahead – to what God can do in and from this man's suffering. Look ahead to what God can do to redeem and bring meaning out of what seems in the present moment to be hopeless, meaningless, and irredeemable. “*But that the works of God might be displayed in him*” says nothing at all about the

why of what has happened to him, nothing at all about the why of whatever bad things happen to us.

Instead, Jesus is inviting us to trust that the One who sees us will indeed enter into our suffering in such a way as to redeem what we are going through – even heal us. Jesus is inviting us not to dwell on the past, nor to shrug our shoulders in despair in this present moment. Jesus is inviting us to behold, to wait and see, how He can and will work in our suffering, to bring us through. How we will help us along to a better day, to the redemption of what we are going through now. How He who loves us, whose love will never allow our suffering to fall through the cracks, how He will work in us the works of God – the application of His love and mercy and redeeming power to our situation. Until what we have experienced as bad becomes something that has been brought round to some unexpected but welcome form of good. Until what seems meaningless in the moment has been changed into a moment in which our God moved mountains before us to clear the way into a future full of hope.

So, having said that, having said, *“that the works of God may be displayed in him,”* Jesus then spits on the ground and makes mud, applies the mud to the man’s eyes and tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. Which the man does – and He is healed. He sees for the first time in his life – thanks be to God! But now, this also needs to be said, this also needs to be understood: that the way God works in us to help and to heal and to redeem and to give meaning to our pain may not always be the obvious cure we are praying for – as in the blind man receiving his sight. Just as we cannot know the reason why from out of the past, so we cannot know in advance what God will work in us to heal us, to redeem what we are going through, to turn things round to good in the end.¹⁰ The Bible does not promise us that we will always get the healing we choose. Sometimes we get the cure we want, but not always. Maybe not even often. But we will, without question, receive the healing which God knows we need.

I think of Tony Campolo’s story of the woman who came up to him after a worship service asking if he would pray for the healing of her husband who had cancer – which Campolo then did. Less than a week later, she called Campolo to thank him. She reminded him, *“Tony, on Sunday you prayed for my husband. He had cancer.”* Campolo seized on that word “had” – *“He had cancer”* – as meaning that maybe there had been a miraculous healing because of his prayer. She cut off that hope right away. In response to Campolo’s question regarding her use of the word “had,” she said, *“Well, he’s dead now.”* Campolo started to say how sorry he was, but she cut him off:

“You don’t understand. When my husband and I walked into that church on Sunday, he was angry with God. He had cancer and he knew he was going to be dead soon, and he hated God for letting it happen . . . At night he would lie in bed and curse God. It was horrible. And the angrier he got toward God, the meaner he was to everyone around him. It was unbearable to be in the same room with him. His nastiness just kept getting worse and worse and worse. But then you laid hands on him on Sunday morning and you prayed for him. When he walked out of church I knew there was something different. I could feel it. He was a different person. The

last four days of our lives have been the best four days we've ever had together. We talked and laughed. We even sang hymns with each other. It was a good, good time."

She paused, then added something really profound. She said, "Tony, he wasn't cured, but he was healed."¹¹

It may not be the cure we want, but it will always be the healing we need. That is what Jesus is promising us when He says, *"that the works of God might be displayed in him."* That the Jesus who sees us in our pain and suffering, will enter into our pain and suffering in order to bring us through it in the way He knows is best. Bring us through it in a way that will enable us to look back and say with Jacob, *"The Lord was in this place and I did not know it."¹²* Bring us through it in such a way that we can look back and say, *"This was the work of God."* Bring us through it in a way that will open to us a future, if perhaps different from the one we were hoping for, but a future nonetheless in which we are ever more closely, ever more assuredly, comforted and joyful and strong in the Lord. And even if, our worst case scenario, death occurs – He will raise us up from both grief and the grave and we will be together with our God forever. That the works of God may be displayed in us!

"One thing I do know," says the formerly blind man to the Pharisees once they get involved in the aftermath of his healing, *"One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."* One thing I know, one thing I do know – and you know it too – is that in Jesus Christ all things shall, in the end, be brought round to good. It can be hard to imagine this when we are suffering or hurting – but all such bad things really shall be redeemed and given meaning and purpose through His presence and power. Even if we can't in the present moment see how it could ever possibly be so, even if it doesn't happen in precisely the way we most want it to happen – one thing we do know, that Jesus Christ will see us, that Jesus Christ will come to us, that Jesus Christ will bring all that we are going through round to good, round to redemption – both now and forever.

¹ John 4:1-15.

² John 5:1-9.

³ Mark 5:24b-34.

⁴ Luke 19:1-10.

⁵ Mark 12:41-44.

⁶ Isaiah 43:1-3.

⁷ From the hymn, "Abide With Me," by Henry Francis Lyte. Hymn number 836 in our hymnal.

⁸ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 337.

⁹ I Corinthians 13:12.

¹⁰ Romans 8:28.

¹¹ Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You A Story* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), pp. 35-36.

¹² Genesis 28:16.