

JESUS HEALS THE BLIND MAN

John 9 (ESV)
Jesus Heals a Man Born Blind

DISCUSSION:

1. Based on the question the disciples ask Jesus (9:2), what do they believe was the cause of this man's blindness?

They clearly believed this blindness to be a curse for sin, either his personal sin or that of his parents. They're a lot like Job's three friends, assuming that these things don't just happen.

Follow-up questions:

Q: What diseases can you think of that *are* related to sinful choices?

Q: Do we sometimes make the same sorts of assumptions today ("*they must have sinned*")?

2. How does Jesus' response to the disciples question give suffering people hope?

Sometimes suffering just happens, and often it exists so that in some way God is glorified. If we lived in a world without hardship could we really bring God honor?

3. What similarity is there between this story and the story of Naaman the leper? Do you see any parallels between this story and baptism?

Both are asked to do something and have to act out of faith. I see a big parallel with baptism, experience of God's healing comes when one acts in obedience.

4. John stops and explains the meaning of Siloam. Why? Why might the Pool of Siloam be significant in this story?

There is symbolism in "sent." The blind experiences a miracle performed by the one sent by the Father. The blind man himself is sent to experience this miracle in front of a crowd and ultimately to testify about it to the Pharisees. The pool was a symbol of hope (physically by providing water during sieges of Jerusalem and figuratively by being the source of the water for the ritual during the recent feast of the tabernacles. This whole thing reinforces that Jesus is the "living water."

5. Jesus called himself the "Light of the World." What did he mean by that?

The source of true spiritual insight, the way we can see God.

6. In Matthew 9 Jesus heals two blind men by simply touching their eyes. Why do you think Jesus goes through the process of making mud and instructing the man to go wash, instead of healing him instantly?

Can't be too dogmatic here, but probably he does thing differently so that the emphasis is on the healer, not the mechanism of healing. Also, the blind man then gets to act out on faith and ultimately receives the gift not only of physical sight but spiritual sight as well.

7. Describe what it must have been like for the blind man to see vivid colors and people's expressions for the first time.

Astounding! If you know anything about neuro-development you realize that Jesus didn't just miraculously fix his eyes, he regenerated his optic nerves, optic brain pathways, occipital cortex and numerous brain processing centers that are required to perceive sight in the brain. (Biblical miracles are not Benny Hin miracles!).

8. Why do some of the Pharisees object to the miracle?

They don't understand it. They can't get over their understanding of "sinful actions on the Sabbath." They probably don't want to, since Sabbath controls are their way of controlling the people. Nor do they want to recognize Jesus' authority and be subject to him.

9. How is the blind man's "journey of faith" similar to the Capernaum official with the sick son (John 4)?

It's incremental. Increases over time. Points out that we can reasonably expect new believers to come at faith gradually and our own faith to sometimes grow slowly.

10. What kept the spiritual leaders from seeing the truth?

See #8. Spiritual blindness. According to Jesus' response, it's *willful* blindness. They choose not to seek the light. They are comfortable where they are, *thank you very much*.

11. Read 2 Corinthians 4:4-6. What is this passage describing? Who, according to these passages, is truly blind?

2 Corinthians 4:4-6 (ESV)

⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

God has exposed truth by sending Christ into the world. Just like in Gen 1, the knowledge of Jesus creates light in dark places. Those without knowledge of Christ are wandering in the dark, blind.

THEODICY AND THE HEALING OF THE
BLIND MAN (9:1–12)

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?”

³“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. ⁴As long as it is day, we must do the work 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.”

⁶Having said 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.

⁸His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, “Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹Some claimed that he was.

Others said, “No, he only looks like him.”

But he himself insisted, “I am the man.”

¹⁰“How then were your eyes opened?” they demanded.

¹¹He replied, “The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see.”

¹²“Where is this man?” they asked him. “I don’t know,” he said.

9:1 The evangelist introduces the setting of this fascinating narrative briefly with a note concerning Jesus walking. While Brown thinks the story begins rather abruptly,²¹¹ the words can be read as a vague continuation from the previous chapter. The primary connection is a literary one, and the way John has handled his connections normally should not be interpreted as necessarily implying immediacy of action. Some interpreters have tried to locate the setting at either the temple entrance or the entrance to the city near the pool, but such speculation is merely an argument from silence. Moreover, Jesus’ instruction to the blind one to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam (9:7) does not make the setting for the chapter more precise.²¹²

9:2–3 The disciples who have not been on stage since 7:3 are back in the picture. They serve as a theological foil for Jesus to

²¹¹ Brown, *John*, 1.371.

²¹² Cf. Haenchen, *John*, 2.37.

turn the tables on the human question of theodicy. Human beings generally seek for answers or a rationale that can help them deal with the hard questions of pain, suffering, and evil.²¹³ Like most confused human beings, the disciples assumed that the problem would be more tolerable if they could probe the questions of why. Accordingly, they sought to assign blame for the man's unhappy state in life.

In so doing, the disciples joined the long cadre of miserable friends who like those in another biblical story sought to comfort the unfortunate Job. Actually, those colleagues added to Job's terrible plight (e.g., [Job 13:1–12](#)). In assigning blame, the friends there in fact stood over against the suffering of Job and perched themselves on the pinnacle of self-righteousness.

Similarly, when the disciples asked Jesus, "Who sinned?" ([John 9:2](#)), they frankly eschewed the role of a caring servant and chose instead to adopt the role of judge. 🗡️ By contrast, however, Jesus rejected their question as nonproductive speculation and chose instead the

²¹³ See G. Gerstenberger and W. Schrage, *Suffering*, trans. J. Stealy (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 229–31.

role of a caregiver who recognized that the works of God would be manifested through his Son's work ([9:3–4](#)).

The disciples' full question at [9:2](#) involved giving Jesus an unsatisfactory alternative concerning the blame for the man's blindness. Like the disciples, the rabbis normally would have argued from their texts the basic thesis that an individual's burden of sin (cf. [Ezek 18:4, 20](#); [Jer 31:29–30](#)) was the cause for illness. Such a view would relate personal distress to a person's own acts of transgression, particularly if the person was an adult. In the case of children the issue was not totally clear, but the Palestinian Targum (on [Deut 21:20](#)) would seem to argue that it was the duty of parents to confess their transgressions for deviations of children. But that perspective was not fully determinative among the Jews.²¹⁴

In the present case it might be argued that since the blindness was from birth, the blame would seemingly fall on the parents, but failing that solution, the blame would fall on the person's prenatal state. Based on the text of the struggle between Esau and Jacob in Rebekah's womb ([Gen 25:22–23](#)), the rabbis argued that Esau sinned in the womb (cf. [Ps 58:3](#); contrast Paul's argument in [Rom 9:11](#) and

²¹⁴ See [Str-B 2.527–29](#).

the perspective of God's role concerning a child in [Jer 1:5](#)).²¹⁵ Jesus, however, refused to accept the disciples' alternative of blame and in fact shifted the base system of the discussion from blame to the grace of God in the face of human need. The story line thus signals that in this pericope Jesus was going to use the man's tragedy to reveal the works (*erga*) of God ([9:3](#)).

9:4–5 The mention of the works of God leads to a further statement on work both in terms of reaffirming the personal mission of Jesus (“Him Who Sent Me”) and the role of Jesus with his followers (“We Must Do the Work,” [9:4](#)).²¹⁶ The emphasis in this verse clearly falls on the earthly work of Jesus (“as long as it is day,” [9:5](#)).

The symbols of light and darkness, as noted at [1:4–5](#) and at [8:12](#), were ancient universal religious symbols used to represent themes of good and evil. The sym-

bolic contrast between night and day would have been read by the early Christians in the postresurrection era as a reminder that after the “night” of the Lamb of God's death (note especially [13:30](#)), the daylight had reappeared with the resurrection of the Lord (note especially the contrast in [21:3–4](#)). The night, however, was to be an extremely difficult time when the disciples and Jesus were separated in the trauma of the cross, and at that time all seemed to be lost—“when no one can work” ([9:4](#)).

But that time had not yet come. Indeed, Jesus was still in the world, and he was “the light of the world” ([9:5](#)). While the statement is not a complete “I am” (*egō eimi*) saying (only *eimi* is used here), the connection with the earlier Tabernacles statement in [8:12](#) can hardly be missed. The signal had thus been given for the implications of the discourse chapters of Tabernacles to be illustrated in a sign.

The preceding temporal clause translated “While I am in the world” when linked to the “I am” saying of [9:5](#) functions both as a messianic statement and as an announcement to Jesus' disciples that his earthly role was definitely to be limited in time. Such a limitation was contrary to some popular theories that

²¹⁵ For a rabbinic perspective on a child's responsibility see *Gen. Rab.* 63.6.

²¹⁶ Textual scribes (e.g., the first hand of Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus) and scholars (e.g., Bultmann, *John*, 331, n. 7) have sought to smooth out the difference between “me” and “we” at [8:4](#), but the text seems to be alluding to the difference between Jesus and his followers.

the earthly Messiah and messianic age would last forever (cf. [12:34](#)). The concept of time, of course, is another example of double-level Johannine thinking. In this Gospel Jesus is presented as trying to be clear to his disciples, but as should become evident in other texts (cf. [11:11–16](#); [12:16](#); [14:5–9](#)), the disciples frequently do not show much more perception than the crowd, a theme also reflected in the Synoptics (cf. [Mark 8:17, 21](#); [Matt 15:17; 16:9, 11](#); [Luke 18:34](#); cf. also the prophetic statements in [Isa 6:9](#); [Hos 4:10–14](#)).

9:6–7 The first five verses of chap. 9 thus serve as a window or introduction to the meaning of the sign (powerful act) in the remaining verses. What Jesus did next was rather shocking. The story as stated simply bristles with symbolic allusions, which are subject to varied scholarly opinions with respect to their meanings. It may suffice here to suggest a few possible allusions.

Two spittle miracles are recorded in Mark (the healing of the deaf man who also had a speech problem in [7:32–35](#) and the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida in [8:22–25](#)), but there are no spittle miracles in Matthew or Luke. In both cases from Mark, as in this case from John, spittle seems to be a kind of vehicle Jesus used

to perform the miracle. Like his touch (cf. [Mark 5:31; 5:41](#)), Jesus' spittle seems to be an aspect of his person that carried his power. In the present case the mixing of Jesus' spittle (*ptysma*) with dirt is somewhat reminiscent of God's breath mixing with dirt of the earth in the miracle of human creation ([Gen 2:7](#)).²¹⁷

In the Hellenistic world mud (*pēlos*) frequently was used in magical incantations and particularly in some healing practices of the followers of Asclepius.²¹⁷ Among the rabbis there were varied opinions. Some considered that the spittle of the firstborn of the father had healing powers, but not the firstborn of the mother.²¹⁸ Others regarded such spittle practices either as condemnable magic or as unclean based on an implied negative connotation of the Torah (cf. [Lev 15:8](#)).²¹⁹

That Jesus sent the blind man to the Pool of Siloam and that healing was either effected or revealed at that point calls to mind the healing of Naaman in the Jordan (cf. [2 Kgs 5:10, 13–14](#)). The implication in both stories seems to be that the healer demanded the man in

²¹⁷ Cf. K. Rengstorf, “πηλός,” *TDNT* 6.118–19.

²¹⁸ See *b. Bat.* 126b.

²¹⁹ Cf. especially *t. Sanh.* 12:10. See also *Str-B* 2.15.

need to obey the healer's instructions. As such the reader should not miss the close connection between obedience or effectual believing and experiencing the powerful work of God. Moreover, the name of the ancient pool was regarded as significant in this connection because the evangelist made a point of informing the reader of its meaning. According to John, the word "Siloam" meant "sent" (John 9:7).²²⁰ As such the pool's name is indicative both of Jesus' mission and his command to those who would receive his blessings and become identified as his followers.

The intersection of the Pool of Siloam with the Festival of Tabernacles should also not be overlooked here because the water drawn for the water ceremony in the temple was carried in procession from this very same pool. The Pool of Siloam was a strategic place of well-being

²²⁰ The Greek Σιλῳάμ is an approximate transliteration/rendering of the Hebrew שִׁלּוֹחַ, which is the verb "to send." Etymologically the words are slightly different, but there may have been a merging of two traditions in the understanding of people: one from Gen 49:10, lit., "until Shiloh comes" (NASB; which was interpreted messianically) with the warning text of Isa 8:6 concerning "the waters of Shiloah."

for the inhabitants of Jerusalem because after Hezekiah dug the water tunnel from the Spring of Gihon to the Pool of Siloam, the Jerusalemites had a continual source of life-sustaining water within the walls of the city during times of siege.²²¹

The man obediently followed Jesus' instructions, and he was healed; he came to sight (9:7). Some scholars like Brown and Schnackenburg have seen in this story symbolic baptismal overtones and

²²¹ R. Mackowski clearly indicates how the Pool of Siloam was at the inside terminus of Hezekiah's Tunnel and is to be distinguished from both the Upper Pool, which was outside the walls and dates back to the tenth or ninth centuries B.C., and the Birket el-Hamra, the pool usually designated as the Pool of Solomon (*Jerusalem, City of Jesus* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 56–58, 72, 74). The old fountain gate originally was the way to the Spring of Gihon, but with the digging of the tunnel and the construction of the Pool of Siloam, the inhabitants of Jerusalem had continual access to water in times of siege. Visitors to Jerusalem still today can trek through the ancient water tunnel and see where the tunnelers from both sides met underground. For a theological discussion of Siloam in this context see K. Mueller, "Joh 9, 7 und das jüdische Verständnis des Siloh-Spruches," *BZ* 13 (1969): 251–56.

have pointed to catacomb art as well as early liturgical resources²²² for support in such interpretations.²²³ In evaluating such a thesis, which presses for a connection between such a healing story and a church practice, it is imperative on the one hand to recognize that church preaching and worship practices often employ stories from biblical texts to illustrate Christian experience. Such uses of a text are not inappropriate. On the other hand, such uses of a text do not govern an authorial meaning for the text. In this case it would be hard to argue that the story actually carried a baptismal message beyond the obvious healing meaning.²²⁴

9:8–12 As the story continues, it becomes evident that the miracle was so significant that human understanding

²²² See E. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, ed. F. Davey (London: Faber & Faber, 1947), 363–65.

²²³ See Brown, *John*, 1.380–82, and Schnackenburg, *St. John*, 2.257–58.

²²⁴ Note that a similar case in preaching and practice can be made for using the story as an illustration for a salvation message. In this case the connection is closer because one finds in the story references to both believing and worship, but these elements follow the healing itself; in a derivative sense the story points to such a concluding implication.

was baffled. The neighbors were the first to observe the transformation in the man, and they began the typical questioning when something is difficult to accept. The man had been a beggar (probably his only means of support, cf. [Mark 10:46](#)), and the question the neighbors raised was whether he was the same person that they knew ([John 9:8](#)). The resulting division of opinion represented both possible answers to such a questioning process. The man, however, confirmed his self-identity with the expression “I am” (*egō eimi*; [9:9](#)). Beyond the issue of identity here, the expression probably should not be pressed theologically.

When the initial question of identification was answered, it was followed by a second probing question that sought for the reason behind the change ([9:10](#)). The man’s answer was a simple rehearsal of the facts concerning his healing ([9:11](#)). That answer was then followed by still another question related to Jesus’ whereabouts. The poor man’s only response to this additional question was “I do not know” (*ouk oida*; [9:12](#)). In this exchange the neighbors functioned almost like the nondecisive “crowd” (the *ochlos*) of [7:25](#), who actually wanted to have simple, cut-and-dried, categorical answers to their questions. Crowds, like the neighbors in

this story, are notoriously emotional and reactionary. They generally are looking for noncomplicated leadership guidance and quick answers to important questions. Such was the case in this instance as they sought for an authoritative evaluation of the man (9:13).

Excursus 2

“The Jews” in John’s Gospel

In recent years, the label “anti-Semitic” has frequently been attached to John’s gospel. What basis in fact does such an astonishing charge have?

Significantly, John usually does not distinguish between the different parties within Judaism current in Jesus’s day but lumps them all together under the epithet “the Jews.” Thus the Sadducees, prominent in the Synoptics, are not mentioned in John’s gospel at all. And although John occasionally refers to the Jews positively or neutrally, usually he uses the term “the Jews” negatively. Was the author of John’s gospel therefore anti-Semitic?

To begin with, the charge of anti-Semitism clearly involves anachronism. Of course, at the end of a century that has witnessed the murderous holocaust of the Jewish people at the hands of Hitler’s Nazi Germany, it is not surprising that people are particularly sensitive to the appearance of anti-Semitic sentiments, even in Scripture. What adds fuel to the fire is that the Bible has in fact been used in the course of history to justify anti-Semitism, and even some powerful Chris-

tian men, such as the Reformer Martin Luther, have not been free from anti-Semitic tendencies. Hence the concern to expose any latent anti-Semitism wherever it can be found is certainly legitimate.

Yet any such charge against a document whose writer (the apostle John) is a Jew and whose major “hero” (Jesus) is a Jew (cf. 4:9) seems implausible. “If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand,” said Jesus (Mark 3:24–25), so what about John, the Jew, writing an anti-Semitic gospel about the Jew Jesus? Also, every member of Jesus’s inner circle, the Twelve, was Jewish, and as the Johannine Jesus makes clear when talking to the Samaritan woman, “salvation is from the Jews” (4:22). This hardly sounds anti-Semitic. Apart from this, John often refers to “the Jews” in a neutral context, such as in the phrase “a Feast of the Jews” (e.g., 2:13; 5:1; 6:4; 7:2; 11:55) or in connection with a Jewish custom (e.g., 2:6; 19:40). Thus John simply intends to educate his readers (who are not necessarily familiar with Palestinian Jewish customs).

But what about the negative instances of the phrase “the Jews” in John’s gospel (e.g., 5:16, 18; 7:1; 8:48; 10:31, 33; 11:8; 19:12)? (Note that the Greek word *Ioudaioi* is often translated “Jewish leaders” in the

NIV.) The general answer is that, theologically, John places ultimate responsibility for Jesus's crucifixion squarely on the shoulders of the Jewish people as represented by their religious leadership, the Jewish ruling council (called the Sanhedrin). In this context, the thrust of John's use of the term "the Jews" is not ethnic; it is salvation-historical. John seeks to forestall Jews' presuming upon their religious heritage. For in John's analysis, the Jews, by claiming Abraham and Moses as their ancestors and the Scriptures (including their own traditions) as their own possession, fell into the sins of religious pride and prejudice that blinded their eyes toward their very own Messiah, that is, Jesus.

In this sense, Israel had become part of the "world" in that it rejected the God-sent Messiah (note the parallelism between 1:10, "*the world* did not recognize him," and 1:11, "his own [that is, *the Jewish people*] did not receive him"). This does not mean that the Jews rejected Jesus *without exception*: we have already seen that all of Jesus's initial close followers were in fact Jews. Yet by pinning guilt for Jesus's crucifixion on the Jews, John makes clear that God's plan now had shifted: no longer did he focus his saving purposes on *the nation of Israel*; rather,

whoever believed that the Messiah was Jesus, whether Jew or not, belonged to God's new covenant community.

The rapid influx of gentiles into the church had brought about a paradoxical reversal—most Jews had become part of "the world," while many non-Jews (that is, gentiles) had become part of God's people. But is this not exactly what was already promised by the Old Testament prophets? Yes, it is. Thus Paul and Peter concur in quoting Hosea's statement, "I will say to those called 'Not my people,' 'You are my people'" (Hos. 2:23; cited in Rom. 9:25 and 1 Pet. 2:10), with reference to the New Testament church made up of believing Jews and gentiles alike. Now it is hard to see how Paul and Peter, too, would have been anti-Semitic.

There may be one more reason why John did not further differentiate among "the Jews": his location post—AD 70, when, with the temple destroyed, the Sadducees had ceased to exist as a party, so that it was no longer meaningful to speak in such terms. By not distinguishing between Pharisees and Sadducees, John makes the important theological point that the Jewish nation at large, represented by its religious leadership, had rejected the God-sent Messiah. Thus John did not intend to humiliate unbelieving

Jews or to slam the door of forgiveness in their faces. Rather, to lead them to faith, he had to confront them with their guilt.

Peter did this, when, at Pentecost, he looked directly at his Jewish audience and said, “*You*, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross” ([Acts 2:23](#)). Paradoxically, therefore, John’s gospel, with its apparent harsh language regarding the Jews, is actually (at least in part) trying to evangelize the Jews. For in the period after AD 70 Jews groped for answers to the national catastrophe. Now John believed he had the answer: Jesus the Messiah, the new center of worship in place of the old sanctuary, the true meaning symbolized by the various Jewish festivals. For John, despite the Jews’ rejection of their Messiah, Jesus was still holding out his hand, waiting to forgive them if they returned to him in repentance and faith.

Is John’s gospel anti-Semitic? No. Rather, the Jews in Jesus’s day were anti-Jesus the Messiah and thus had become part of the unbelieving world. In order to remedy this tragedy, and in order to present Jesus as the Messiah the Jews had waited for so long, John wrote his gospel.