

100 Key Texts Study-#10

Week of March 13-19: John 9:1-41

General Background on John: Today we enter the gospel of John for the first time in our study. John's gospel differs sharply from the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), which seem to be based on the same sources and often overlap. Much of John's material is unique to John or told so differently that you wonder if he was using different sources! There is disagreement among scholars as to whether John was written later than the other gospels or at a similar time. The language Jesus uses in John is often metaphorical and the use of certain words is highly symbolic, with layers of meaning.

A great deal could be said about John's gospel, but for this introduction, please note these basics.

- The purpose of the book is to engender "belief" and in Jesus' name, which leads to "life" in him, all of which is stated clearly in 20:30-31.
- The word belief does not have to do with doctrinal assent to certain truths, but to being in relationship with Jesus. The word life refers to a quality of being that is beyond mere existence. See John 3:16—"everlasting" or "eternal" life.
- The book of John presents Jesus as both earthly and fleshly and as the very presence of God on earth. Jesus is the Word made flesh, the only begotten Son of God. Jesus refers to himself many times as "I AM," as in "I am the good shepherd, I am the light of the world, the gate for the sheep, the door, the bread of life, the living water, the way, the resurrection and the life." (I AM is literally the name God gives himself in Exodus.)
- Events in the gospel often become the occasion for extended monologues by Jesus—the actual event is eclipsed by the words of Jesus himself.
- The "Jews" are portrayed in the worst possible light and therefore the book of John has sometimes been used for anti-Semitic purposes. However, by "the Jews" John is not referring to Jewish people as a whole, but to the religious establishment and leadership. Most scholars believe that the

extremely sharp tone of Jesus' words reflected the situation in which John wrote, after the Temple had been destroyed, as Judaism responded to Christianity by condemning it as a heretical sect that must be eliminated.

- Jesus is portrayed as having divine foreknowledge. He is in complete control of everything that happens to him, both in life and in death.
- His death on the cross is not a tragedy, but a moment of great exaltation and victory.
- Jesus' miracles are called "signs" in John and are intended to help people recognize that in him the kingdom of God is **already** present.

Read the text, John 9:1-41.

What jumps out at you in this text? What questions arise? What words seem to be very important to the story, and are repeated often?

This text can be divided into segments or movements. As the story unfolds, one party comes to "see" more and more and another party becomes more and more "blind." Who comes to see; who becomes blind?

Is there any verse in this text that you reminds you of a hymn? Of an old country song?

The text is very complex: meaning is communicated on several different levels. Many of John's typical themes appear in this reading.

Consider the text in six movements: 9:1-7; 8-12; 13-17; 18-23; 24-34; 35-41.

Read the opening, John 9:1-7.

Note that the man was blind **from birth**. Therefore, his affliction was not amenable to correction. He had never been able to see. The disciples assume that his blindness is due to sin (the connection was often made in the ancient world that physical illness or disability resulted from Divine punishment), but since he was blind **from birth**, they wonder if his parents were at fault. Jesus rejects the disciples' connection between sin and blindness; rather, he says, the man's blindness provides an opportunity for God to act! He then casts the man's blindness as symptomatic of the "darkness" in the world. Night is coming and he

and disciples are to “work” while it is yet “day,” so that all people might walk in the light. “I am the light of the world.” Note the use of the “egoh aymee” (Greek words for I AM) saying here. Refer to 8:12.

Jesus makes a mud paste and uses it to open the man’s eyes. He washes in the pool of Siloam (where the waters were associated with God’s healing power) and came back “seeing.”

- Have you known someone who is physically blind? What was life like for them? Can you imagine what it would be like to be blind?
- Do you feel sometimes as if the world is a dark place? Why or why not?

Read V. 8-12

This movement is an exchange between neighbors/bystanders and the man born blind. The dialogue is very simple and focuses on literal detail. Note that the people find it hard to believe that the man could be the same one who heretofore had been unable to see. They **keep** asking him questions. Yet there appears to be no malice behind their questions—just amazement, bewilderment.

- Tell of a time when you were “blind,” but then you began to “see.” What role did Jesus’ love and power play in your coming to see?

Read v. 13-17

It was customary to bring someone who had been healed of disease to the priests, who could certify healing. So the neighbors of the man bring him to the Pharisees, one of the leading groups within the religious establishment (the most “progressive” group). A tension between the religious establishment and Jesus begins to appear. The healing was on the Sabbath day—and the Pharisees cannot accept work of any kind done on the Sabbath. Some conclude that Jesus cannot be from God, because he does not observe the Sabbath. Yet, others speak of “**signs**” which could not be performed by “sinners.” The word “signs” in John refers to acts that point to God’s in-breaking in the world. Here, some in the religious community do think that God is at work, while others are so tied to legal observance that they cannot believe Jesus was from God.

Note again the importance (and double meaning) of the word “see.”

Read V. 18-23

Note the phrase, “the Jews.” When John uses this term, it is often in a pejorative way, and refers not to Jewish people as a whole but to the religious leaders who consistently opposed Jesus and consistently opposed the early church. Note the increasing hostility on the part of the religious leaders and the fear that motivates the blind man’s parents. Instead of being joyful because of a miraculous act of healing, both the religious leaders and parents are afraid—though of different things. The religious leaders are afraid of Jesus, who threatens their belief system and power/control. The parents are afraid of being excommunicated—by the religious authorities.

- Have you ever been reluctant to embrace good news, because it conflicted with a strong belief (like Sabbath observance)?
- Have you ever been so afraid that you will be punished or treated unfairly that you avoided being completely honest? Do religious or political authorities exercise power to intimidate and control people today?

Read V. 24-34.

In this movement, the Pharisees’ rhetoric becomes increasingly hostile and judgmental. The words “sin” and “sinner” are applied to Jesus, because he disobeys the Sabbath law by healing a blind man on the Sabbath. The blind man, however “sees” the truth: that healings are signs of God’s grace at work in Jesus. Sinners cannot perform such signs, for God will not listen to them. He implies that the religious elite do not know what sin is. Stung by this statement, they attack the blind man as “born entirely in sins.” They accept the connection between physical impairment and sin which Jesus rejected in verse 3.

When it says that the Pharisees “drove him out,” it means not only that they sent him away from their presence, but that they removed him from the synagogue, they excommunicated him. He was no longer welcome in the presence of God.

Read v. 35-41.

The narrative reaches its climax when the blind man and Jesus speak in the presence of some Pharisees. The blind man now “sees” Jesus: that is, he comes to “believe” in Jesus. Belief is more than an assertion of truth: it is a relationship with Jesus. The blind man worships Jesus as “Son of Man.” The Pharisees meanwhile, are blind, because they do not “see” Jesus as Son of Man. If they knew they were blind like the man who was born blind, they could be freed from sin; they could be forgiven. But they are too confident in themselves to believe they **need** Jesus’ forgiveness and healing. Therefore, they are stuck in their sin. They **think** they can see, when in reality, they are blind as bats.

Reflection Questions

- Have you ever become aware, when you thought you understood someone or a certain situation, that you actually were very wrong about it? That you were missing something all along?
- Do you understand yourself as a “sinner”? In what way?
- How does this text proclaim good news to you?

For your prayers:

Open my eyes, Lord. So often my spiritual vision is clouded. Keep me from judging others. Help me own my sin and find in you the healing grace of Jesus.t. Walk with me this week, so I might not lose sight of you. Amen.

In coming weeks:

March 20-26 - Mark 5:1-20

March 27-April 2 - John 11:1-57

April 3-9 - Luke 22:1-46