

God Came Down

(The Fourth Gospel)

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The Man Born Blind: the Question of Human Suffering (9:1-41)

I once heard a very moving and insightful sermon on this text, preached by Landon Saunders at the Highland Church of Christ in Memphis, TN. He viewed the text from the way the different players on stage were viewed by the other players of the story. My recollection of that presentation has influence the way I currently see this story. In the following the essential concept of this approach to this story is present, embellished by my own exegetical work with this text.

*As 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" (John 9:1-5).*

In John 8:2, we see the disciples of Jesus viewing this man as a religious question or a "theological curiosity." "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" they asked. Underlying this question is the presupposition that human suffering is the consequence of some evil done by the one suffering. This was the view of many people of this time. This was the assumption of the associates of Job in the Hebrew Scriptures, it was the view of many of the rabbis, and, curiously, is the core belief of many of the Eastern Religions, especially that of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

The critical teaching here is that suffering is the result of the evil that one does in this life or has done in a former life. The good that he does must outweigh the evil or the consequences of the evil will dominate the next life. This viewpoint is rooted in the principal that what goes around, comes around. This principal is reflected in the concept of *yin-yang*, the balance of positive and negative forces at work in the universe as reflected in the Tai-Chi symbol of the Chinese philosophy of I-Ching. The good that one does is imputed to him as good *karma*; the evil that one does is imputed to him as bad *karma*. At the end of his life, the good is weighed against the bad; the weightiest *karma* determines that person's destiny in the next experience of life called *samsara*- reincarnation.

The Judaism of the time of Jesus had no belief in *yin-yang*, *karma*, or *samsara*, but they did believe that God's vengeance and the consequences of our evil actions were realized in this life, in that belief in an afterlife was only a developing concept within the Judaism of this period. This was the concept underlying this question of Jesus' disciples. Since God was sovereign over the universe, all things must be the result of his will. This included the good we experience in life as well as the bad.

Within rabbinic theology, all human suffering came from God, either directly or indirectly. Pain and suffering were the results of our own doing or what others do to us, which were understood as God's indirect punishment of our sins, or pain and suffering sent upon us directly by God in the form of natural calamity and disease. This way of interpreting the problem of evil sees God as the cause of all the evil in our world. Jesus' answer to their question is that this man's sins were neither the result of his sins nor the sins of his parents. He does not elaborate beyond this concerning the problem of evil. Some scholars, however, see Jesus' answer extending beyond these words to his comments concerning his intention to heal the man. In their interpretation Jesus says that the man was born blind so that he could heal him and thus manifest the glory of God. The problem with this interpretation is that it portrays God as a being that arbitrarily inflicts suffering upon human beings so that he can demonstrate his power in heal them when the time is right.

There is a problem concerning the translation of the Greek here. There are no punctuation marks in the manuscripts of the Greek texts of the New Testament. Determining where to put a period, comma, or semi-colon is an editorial decision of the translator. In this text, I would argue strongly

for a period at the end of Jesus' words, "Neither this man sinned nor the parents of him," (9:3a). A new sentence begins with the words, "But in order that we may make manifest the works of God in him, let us work the works of the one having sent me while it is yet day; for the night comes when no one is able to work," (9:3b-4). Given the fact that Jesus immediately set about the task of healing the blind man, this seems a very legitimate interpretation and punctuation of the text.

Scene Eleven (9:6-12): Jesus Heals the Man Born Blind

Having 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.

In verse 8, we see the people of this man's community viewing him as "a blind beggar," essentially, a label. Once he was labeled he could be placed in the appropriate category and, for all practical purposes, dismissed. This was especially so if he was in his situation because of sin, as they assumed, whether his or his parents. If he was being punished by God, no one should presume to interfere with what God was doing. To try and help him would be to withstand God, so a hands-off approach was clearly the best course of action.

There is in verses 6-7, a very simple message of how faith works. Jesus stooped to the earth and made clay. He then anointed the man's eyes with the clay and told him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. When the man did as Jesus instructed him, he was healed. This is a similar story to that of Naaman and Elisha in 2 Kings 5. Both men were told to do something which did not appear to have anything to do with the healing of their affliction. Naaman questioned the prophet's instructions to go wash in the river Jordan, but he did as he was instructed and was healed. This blind man

didn't question Jesus' instructions; he simply went to the pool and washed his eyes. In both of these healings there is a question of the role of belief and obedience to the words of the healer. In both cases, the healing came only when the instructions of the healer were obeyed. In 2 Kings 5:8, Elisha said that the healing would show that there was a prophet in Israel. When Naaman dipped seven times in the Jordan River, he came up clean of his leprosy. When the man born blind washed in the pool of Siloam, he received his sight.

In both cases, the healing was effect when the words of the healer were obeyed. Naaman, however, had to be persuaded that he had nothing to lose by doing what the prophet had instructed. It does not appear that he believed that washing in the Jordan would accomplish what he desired, but he did it. With the man born blind, there is no indication that he was doing anything more than obeying what Jesus had told him to do. It does not appear that he even knew who Jesus was. When asked how he received his sight he 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," (v11). When the Jewish leaders ask the man about his belief in Jesus, he replied, "'Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know, I was blind but now I see!'" They then accused him of being a disciple of Jesus. His reply seems to indicate that he had come to some degree of faith, but it was not his belief in Jesus that healed him. In the case of Naaman and this man, it was their obedience to the words of the prophet that effected the healing. After that, belief seems to develop, as Elisha said to King of Israel, "Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel," (2 Kings 5:8). The healing was proof that the presence of God was within the healer. After the healings, in each case, there was evidence of belief in the God of the healer.

Scene Twelve (9:13-34): Reaction of the Pharisees

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. ¹⁴Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. ¹⁵Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "He put mud on my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed, and now I see." ¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others asked, "How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?" So they were divided. ¹⁷Finally they turned again to the blind man,

"What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened." The man replied, "He is a prophet." ¹⁸The Jews still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man's parents. ¹⁹"Is this your son?" they asked. "Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?" ²⁰"We know he is our son," the parents answered, "and we know he was born blind. ²¹But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself." ²²His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for already the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue. ²³That was why his parents said, "He is of age; ask him" (9:13-23).

The Sabbath, Again!

The Pharisees bring the man healed in for interrogation, first, to confirm the healing, then, to find some way of undermining what had happened; hopefully, discrediting Jesus in the process. Perhaps, this man was not who everyone thought he was, so they called in his parents to identify him. The parents identified him as their son, but, according to their answer, he was to them "a biological fact." He had been born to them, and he had been born blind, beyond that, they had nothing more to say. Rather than rejoice that their son had received his sight, their only concern seemed to be their fear of being excommunicated from the synagogue as a result of their identification with him.

A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God," they said. "We know this man is a sinner." ²⁵He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" ²⁶Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" ²⁷He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?" ²⁸Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! ²⁹We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from." ³⁰The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. ³²Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind.

³³*If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.* ³⁴*To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out (9:24-34).*

Try as they might, these Jewish theologians could not deny that a man known to have been blind from birth had received his sight, so to them this may was “a theological problem.” Since they could not deny that a man born blind had received his sight, they had to somehow disassociate Jesus from the miracle. “Give glory to God,” they instructed the man. But the man knew what had happened and they could not convince him otherwise. They must, then, find a way of discrediting Jesus, and this was critical for them. If Jesus of Nazareth had given this man sight, the people would conclude that Jesus’ claims to have come from God were true. Their approach was that of *reductio ad homo* (reduce the argument to the man). If Jesus violated the Sabbath, then he was in violation of the *Torah*; whoever transgresses the *Torah* is a sinner. “We know this man is a sinner,” they insisted, implying that he could not have been the channel through which God had worked a wonder such as this.

On two points they could have discredit Jesus. First, if this man’s blindness from birth were the result of sin on the part of his parents, Jesus’ reversal of the judgment of God would have leagued him with Satan. Secondly, if Jesus had violated the Sabbath, then he had violated the fourth commandment (*Torah*). On either count, he could not claim to have been sent from God, either as a prophet or as the Messiah. The man’s response is a classic case of refutation by means of the obvious. "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know, I was blind but now I see!" (9:25)

Their response indicates their inability to intelligently reply to what the man had said. “Let’s go back over this again,” they replied, “How did he open your eyes?” "I have told you already and you did not listen,” the man said, “why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?" On all points the Pharisee as a challenge to their theology and their authority credibility viewed this man healed of his blindness as Biblical scholars. With this man’s reply, the Pharisees were infuriated, and also defeated in their attempts to discredit the miracle or the one who performed it.

As is the case when one’s arguments fall apart, this man’s

interrogators began to declare their credentials, “We are *Talmudim Moshe* (Disciples of Moses).” “We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from.” What follows shows how obviously inadequate these interrogators were in cross-examining this man. “The man answered, now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes,” (verse 30). “We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will.” What an implication as to the identity of Jesus is seen in this response. This last comment of the man seems to take the wind from his antagonists. “If this man were not from God, he could do nothing,” is the blind man’s conclusion. Their response was the only one they had left. “You were steeped in sin at birth; how could you possibly know anything, who are you to instruct us?” Their final resolution to the problem - distance themselves, which is what the concluding words of this scene implies, “and they threw him out.”

***Scene Thirteen (9:35-41): Jesus Reveals
His Identity to the One Healed***

Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" ³⁶"Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him." ³⁷Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you." ³⁸Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him. ³⁹Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." ⁴⁰Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, "What? Are we blind too?" ⁴¹Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.

Jesus viewed this man as “a human being” who was in need of human kindness as well the healing and deliverance of God. Verse 35 says that Jesus found the man, so, he must have gone looking for him. Why? Giving him sight wasn’t the greatest gift Jesus had to offer this man, and wasn’t what he needed most. As was the case with Naaman, this man wasn’t healed by his faith in the healer; rather, he was healed by his obedience to the words of the healer. The power was in the healer, not the one healed. There are stories of healing in which the faith of the believer was what effected the healing, but this isn’t one of them. He comments to the Pharisees, “would you become his disciples also,” does not mean that

this man was a disciple. He had only met Jesus and knew nothing of him or his teachings. Like Naaman, however, following the healing, he was convinced that the one who had done this for him was indeed a prophet of God, as was Naaman in 2 Kings 5. Jesus was indeed a prophet of God, but he was more, he was always more.

Jesus introduced himself to the man he had healed with the words, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" "Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him," (9:35-37). Why did Jesus call himself the Son of Man? What would such an expression have meant to this poor Jewish beggar? In John's Gospel one finds Jesus' self-designation, "the Son of Man," in 12 occurrences. It is used in a number of ways: (1) a way of speaking of an offspring of Adam (*ben adam* – son of Adam), a way of speaking of a human being, and (2) it is used of an otherworldly figure who is from heaven and comes to earth in the form of a man (Daniel 7, 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra). Because this Christological title is so important to Jesus' understanding of his identity, an excursus on this title is presented on Gospel of John menu page.

As to the development of this story as it plays out on the stage of this drama, Jesus said to the man, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you." In his conversation with the woman at the well in Samaria Jesus had identified himself to the woman as the Messiah for whom she and the Samaritans longed (cf., John 4:25-26). Here again Jesus identifies himself as a messianic figure, this time the mysterious Son of Man figure of the first century apocalyptic tradition found in Daniel 7, 1 Enoch 37-71, and 4 Ezra 13. Having heard Jesus identify himself as the Son of Man, the man responds in belief and in worship as well. "Then the man said, 'Lord, I believe,' and he worshiped him," (9:38). The Greek word used here for worship is the same as that found in Jesus discussion of worship with the woman in Samaria. It is *proskuneo*, which means, "to proceed toward with kisses [expressions of affection]." This is not the word used for Temple worship; i.e., *latreia* and *leiturgeo*, which are usually translated as ritual service or temple worship. The word *proskuneo* is the word used to express worship as an expressed emotion, and so is it used here.

Confessions, Claims, and Christological Titles

In John's Gospel one finds Jesus' self-designation, "the Son of Man," in 12 occurrences. It is used in a number of ways: (1) a poetic metaphor for

an offspring of Adam (*ben adam* – son of Adam), a way of speaking of a human being; (2) it is used of an otherworldly figure who is from heaven but looks like a man (Daniel 7, 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra); (3) he is a servant figure who suffers for the redemption of mankind (Isaiah 53).

Jesus is called "Lord" in the Gospel of John some 38 times. In a similar fashion, he is addressed as "Teacher" and "Rabbi" some 14 times, and is called "a Prophet" in 6 occurrences. The title "Christ" or "Messiah" is given to Jesus in 17 occurrences, with a number of other titles associated with the Jewish Messianic expectation. He is called "the one who is to come," "the one sent," "the one of whom Moses and the Prophets wrote," "the son of David," in some 16 occurrences; and the title "king of Israel" is used of him 12 times. John wishes to clearly establish that many of the people of Galilee and Judea believe Jesus to be the expected Messiah spoken of in the Hebrew Scriptures and in much of the Jewish apocalyptic literature of the time (e.g., the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Jewish Pseudepigraphal writings, and the Jewish oral tradition which later became the Rabbinic Traditions).

That Jesus was believed to be, and was, an historical figure known to the people of first century Palestine as Jesus of Nazareth is very evident in this Gospel. The personal and historical name "Jesus," and "Jesus of Nazareth" are found in 247 occurrences in the Gospel of John. There can be little doubt but that John wanted to establish the fact that the Jesus of his faith was a real historical figure truly evidenced as a human being in the fullest sense of the word. Jesus of Nazareth was, in John's belief, "one of us."

The most significant array of titles given to Jesus in this Gospel, however, has to do with portraying him as one who has come from God. The titles "the Son" or "Son of God" are found 22 times, the title "Only Begotten Son" is found 4 times. He is called "the one who comes from above" 7 times, and the "Holy One of God" once. In the prologue of this Gospel, Jesus is identified as "the Word," "the Word who was with God," who was "the Word of God," who was "in the beginning with God," and "the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us." John concludes his prologue section with the words, "No one has ever seen God, the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him know," (John 1:18). The Greek word John uses for "bosom" is *kolpos*, which means, "the breast or chest area" (i.e., the place of the heart), Jesus came from the very heart of God.