

I WAS BLIND, BUT NOW I CAN SEE!

John 9:1-41 & Psalm 41:1-3

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Quite a story...particularly for that fellow by the road! Put yourself in his place.

It was very difficult for you to get to sleep last night, wasn't it? There was no way that you wanted to close your eyes. After all, those eyes had been sightless since you were born. Again and again you looked at everything in that little Judean home...the mud walls that had become an ever lighter beige over the years, the brown chairs and table, the red color of your father's cloak, the wrinkled hands of your mother as she served you your food. All the colors of the rainbow...blues, greens, purples...colors you had heard about, but could never have known before. No wonder you could not sleep.

As night fell, you stared out the window, looking up to the heavens and seeing those millions of twinkling stars you had heard about...that glorious moon shining down so brightly in the desert sky. You looked out across the city and saw the candlelight flickering in hundreds of courtyards as darkness began to descend. Over and over, you looked at things that everyone else takes for granted...but to you, each view was special.

As you scanned the scene, you thought about the events of the day. You had gone out from your parents' home just as you had done for over twenty years, ever since you had been old enough to care for yourself. You had been going to the same spot along the same side of the same road everyday to beg for alms. There were others along the route who did the same thing, but after so many years, no one ever tried to get too near to you, to "cut into your territory." You were able to get enough to subsist, but not much more.

But yesterday was "Shabbat," the Sabbath Day, generally one of the more successful days of the week for you. Perhaps people felt more generous on their way to and from worship in the temple...or perhaps more guilty.

Then again, your Sabbath success might have had something to do with your exhortation to the travelers. You were clever enough to quote Scripture as you begged. "Attend, all you who pass by, the words of the Psalmist: 'Happy are those who consider the poor; the LORD delivers them in the day of trouble.' Help me, poor and miserable, blind from my birth." Or you might quote the Proverbs: "'He who has mercy on the poor, happy is he.' Help this poor, miserable blind sinner." Yes, Shabbat had always been one of your better days.

You got to know some of those who passed by over the years...the temple leaders who made such a production of giving you next to nothing while exhorting you to a more faithful life;

the sweet old widow who would always have a few mites for you as a memorial to her little boy who had died so long ago. There were some who gave who never made themselves known - they silently came up, put a few coins in your bowl, and walked on without saying a word. You would always acknowledge their gift with a "Shalom Aleichim," but they would never respond. Of course, there were others who would also approach silently, but for other reasons...pranksters who would come up as if to give you something, but instead would grab whatever was in your bowl and run off laughing loudly and taunting you to come after them. You knew the tricks though: you had learned long ago never to leave more than a few mites in your bowl at any one time - most of the money would be removed as soon as it was given and put in a pouch on the inside of your cloak.

But on this particular Sabbath, it was not the temple leaders or the widow or the pranksters who approached you. It was a group of students with their rabbi.

You made your usual appeal for mercy: "Help me, poor and miserable, blind from my birth." But instead of hearing coins drop in your bowl, you heard one of the men ask, "Master, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?" WHAT? What kind of thing is that to ask? You thought, "Don't ask questions...give a few shekel's here."

It WAS a fair question, though...one that you had wondered about, although not in recent years. You had heard your parents discuss it. Some actually believed that a person could sin while still in the mother's womb. Others said that the sin was held over, along with the punishment, from a previous existence of the soul, an idea that came from Plato and the Greeks. Certain Jews believed that souls were ALREADY either good or bad and punishment for whatever sinfulness there was would be inflicted after birth. Or perhaps your blindness came because of some sin of your parents or grandparents. Who cares? Theology, Schmeology. You are blind. Too bad.

But what did this rabbi say? He said that neither you NOR your parents had sinned. He said that your blindness existed that the works of God might be shown through you. What? Then the teacher said some more things that were totally lost on you...things about working while it is day and the night coming when no one can work, and "while I am in the world, I am the light of the world." You had no idea what that meant.

You did not have much time to do any wondering, for suddenly, you felt something cool and soothing being put on your eyes. The rabbi had spat upon the ground and made a muddy paste and applied it to your darkened sockets. What sort of magic was this? Many believed that there was some special power in the spittle of a famous man

-the scientists of the day all said it had curative qualities.

It was said to be protection from the poison of serpents, a guard against epilepsy, leprous spots could be cured, and it could even take care of a crick in the neck. But could it restore sight to one who had never known sight? Again, no time to wonder.

The rabbi told you to hurry on and wash it off in the pool of Siloam.

No trouble getting there. After all, the pool was one of the most famous landmarks in all of Jerusalem. You washed...and as you finished...it was unbelievable. It was as if you had just been awakened from a long night by someone pulling back the shades - the light floods into those sleep-darkened eyes. At first, you squinted against the brightness, then forms became more well-defined, and finally, all was clear in the morning light...people, water, rocks, trees...all these things you had only imagined before were now in clear, sharp focus. The shout formed deep in your heart and burst forth from your lips...PRAISE GOD! I CAN SEE!"

And you kept shouting all the way home which, in itself, was a strange trip. All those years, that journey had been guided by friends or by counting the number of steps to a particular turning place in the road. But now you had no landmarks for reference - you had never seen any. How do you get home? Do you count the steps again as you had done for so many years, or do you know to turn left on the Jericho road, then left again on King David Street, go two blocks to Jehoshaphat Court and it's the second house on the right. However it happened, you made it, shouting all the way, "I WAS BLIND, BUT NOW I CAN SEE!"

Needless to say, the neighbors had no idea what to make of it. Some said, "Well, look here! He is the one who sat by the road and begged." Others said, "Well, he LOOKS like him, but it might be someone else." But you said, "NO, NO, NO, it is NOT someone else. It is I. I am the one.

I was blind but now I can see." But HOW, they wanted to know.

So you told them the story: "The man called Jesus anointed my eyes with clay, told me to go and wash in the pool of Siloam, and now I can see." Over and over again, you joyously told that same story.

But the most special telling was to your mother and father. All these years they had worried and wondered over you... concerned what would happen to their child when they would no longer be around. Now, with eyes and mouths wide open, they listened to your incredible tale... dumbstruck at the magnitude of the miracle that had taken place.

Well, this was too big an event to be held among just family and friends. Your parents took you to the temple to meet with the leaders there.

They wanted the priests to verify that the miracle was real. So the Pharisees asked you to tell them what happened, and once again,

you repeated it, just as you had done for everyone else.

But there was a difference this time - instead of being happy for what had happened to you, those Pharisees began to look at one another with a glance that said, "You realize that the one he is talking about is that fellow we have been having so much trouble with...this Jesus of Nazareth."

So by the time you had finished your story, the temple leaders were ready to pounce.

After all, these were leaders, and one of the functions of leadership is to distinguish false prophets from true. They were SURE that this Jesus was a false prophet, NOW they had the proof. They did not care that someone who had been blind since birth could now see again - that made no difference. This Jesus had violated the Sabbath...and THREE WAYS at that. He had done "work" by making clay, and even something as simple as that was forbidden; he had HEALED on the Sabbath and that was illegal (medical attention might be given if a life were in danger and then only to keep the patient from getting worse, NOT to make him better...blindness was not life threatening); and finally, it was absolutely forbidden to put spittle upon even so much as the eyelids. This Jesus was definitely a law-breaker...a false prophet...a sinner.

But even though the violations seemed to show that Jesus was not from God, some of the Pharisees objected. They asked, "How can a man who can do these things, perform such miracles, NOT be from God?" After all, you had been blind from the time you were born. Had you only been healed of a backache, that might be one thing, but you had been given sight that you had never had before. It was too big a thing to be passed over as the work of a sorcerer or a false prophet. The argument among the Pharisees reached no satisfactory conclusion, so they decided to ask you what YOU thought. "He opened your eyes; what do YOU say about Him?"

To you it was obvious: "He is a prophet," you answered. You had never been particularly religious...after all, you were not even allowed to attend the temple services because of your disability. But you knew some scripture. Moses had guaranteed to the Pharaoh that he was genuinely God's messenger by the signs and wonders he had performed. Elijah proved he was the prophet of the real God by doing things the prophets of Baal could not do. To you, there was no question...Jesus HAD to be a prophet of Yahweh.

By now, the skeptical Pharisees were beginning to see another possibility...you had never really been blind at all. You were just a disciple of Jesus who SAID you were blind and now were healed to get the faithful ensnared by this false prophet. AHA! So they sent you into another chamber and called your parents back in to see what they had to say.

Your poor parents! They had heard that the leaders of the temple were out to get Jesus and had threatened anyone who claimed to be his disciple with excommunication. They would be excluded from the congregation; their property might be forfeit; they would be social lepers; they would be cut off from God - excommunication was a powerful weapon. But what could they say? "We are sorry, but, yes, this is our son...and yes, he has been blind since birth...no, we do not know how his sight was restored. Ask HIM! He is old enough to answer your questions."

Your parents were afraid...and who could blame them?

So again, the Pharisees called YOU in, thoroughly bewildered by this time. They wanted the story again. They said, "Swear it as in a court of law...tell what happened." And so, one more time, you told them as plainly as you could, "I do not know anything about whether this man is a sinner or not; all I know is that I was blind and now I can see." But the Pharisees persisted at you: "Well, how did he do it?" An exasperated smile came across your face - "I have told you once; now you want to hear it again? Why? You do not want to become his disciples TOO, do you?" And then you chuckled a little which made your interrogators REALLY mad.

You should not have done THAT - not very tactful. That is partly why they began yelling at you, calling you names and saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God spoke to Moses, but we do not know about this man." The words came in torrents.

Finally, with a sigh, you said, "You people amaze me. You say you do not know where he comes from, but yet he gave me the sight I never had. God does not listen to sinners, but God DOES listen to those who fear him and do his will. Since the beginning of time, no one born blind has ever had his sight restored until now. If this man had not been from God, he could never have done it."

That was the last straw. Had there been any doubt as to whether or not you were a disciple of Jesus before, it was now removed. They said, "How DARE you try to teach US. After all, YOU were born entirely in sin...blind. Get out...OUT!" You were excommunicated. It was quite a blow. You used to be a blind beggar by the road; now you were a social leper and no good Jew would be allowed to associate with you. What should have been the happiest day of your life was turning to dust and ashes in your mouth.

You went out, wandered down the road apiece and then sat down under a tree to think about all that had happened... discouraged, down-cast. Suddenly, there was Jesus again. He came over to you and asked, "Do you believe in the Son of God?" And you responded, "Who is he, Master, that I might believe?" Then Jesus answered, "Not only have you seen him, but it is he who is talking to you now." What else could you answer as, all of a sudden, the truth of what you had been saying to the Pharisees became so obvious..."Lord, I believe." And you worshiped him.

This morning you awakened from a night of only fitful sleep. You could look to the east and see the glory of a sunrise that you had never seen before. You could look around the room and see the bed from which you had just arisen. You could see the color of your clothes. But, in your mind, there was something more...you could see Jesus - truly the Son of God.

Yes, yesterday you were blind. Then you met Jesus. And with millions of others through the years, your eyes were opened. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound That saved a wretch like me; I once was lost but now am found, Was blind but now I see. Amen. Let us PRAY!