

John 9 – “The Jesus Experience: Not Just Sight, But Insight”

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Special credit for the sermon goes to Peter Leithart, whose excellent book *Deep Exegesis* uses this chapter as a running test case. If you really want to know how to read this chapter, and the rest of the Bible, this is a great book to read. Neither my sermon, nor these supplemental notes can begin to capture the richness Leithart draws out of the narrative of John 9.

While John 9 has multiple structures, here is the pattern I used in the sermon:

John 9 consists in 8 scenes, each with a two-party dialogue:

Scene 1: Jesus and disciples (9:1-5)

Scene 2: Jesus and man (9:6-7)

Scene 3: Man and neighbors (9:8-12)

Scene 4: Man and Pharisees (9:13-17)

Scene 5: Pharisees and parents (9:18-23)

Scene 6: Man and Pharisees (9:24-34)

Scene 7: Jesus and man (9:35-38)

Scene 8: Jesus and Pharisees (9:39-41)

New creation themes dominate the passage. The narrative makes references to light (Jn. 9:5; cf. Gen. 1:3), water (Jn. 9:6, 7; cf. Gen. 1:2), day / night (Jn. 9:4; cf. Gen. 1), birth (Jn. 9:1, 19, etc.), the creation of the world (Jn. 9:32), etc. Just as God gets his hands dirty in making man in the beginning when he breathes life into man by his Spirit, so Jesus uses dirt and water (spit) to make the man a new creation / new Adam (cf. Gen. 2). As such, the man becomes a prototype for a new kind of human, a disciple of Jesus.

The language used throughout the narrative is cosmic. Jesus' "work" is to make a new cosmos (Jn. 9:4), even as his Father made the first cosmos ("like Father, like Son;" if Jesus brings in a new creation, he must be divine in some way). All of this, of course, harkens back to John 1, where the gospel begins with deep allusions to Genesis's creation account ("in the beginning was the Word...all things were

made...light....darkness...."). This is another "new cosmos" passage in John's gospel.

In 9:24, ironically, the Pharisees call on the man to give glory to God; in truth, this is exactly what he's doing by confessing Jesus as the one who opened his eyes. To confess Jesus = to give glory to God. The Pharisees are the ones who need to learn what it means to give glory to God. The uniqueness of the miracle proves Jesus is more than a man, more than a prophet, more than a new Moses – he must be from God, he must be God in the flesh (Jn. 9:32).

As the man's eyes are opened, the Pharisees become progressively blinder and blinder. As the man comes to know more and more, the Pharisees are exposed as knowing less and less (culminating with their claim in 9:34, which completely contradicts 9:3). The whole chapter plays on the themes of knowing and not knowing. In the end, it's the Pharisees who are found to be blind guides of the blind, refusing to see what's happened right in front of them, refusing to see the plain identity of Jesus, refusing to see the light. They are blinded by their desire to be right, to be "in the know," to be in power. The man born blind, meanwhile, has become a new creation, full of light, full of sight, full of insight. In his old birth in the old Adam, he was blind; in his new birth through the new Adam, he is able to see – and not see only with the eyes of his body but with the eyes of his heart. The Pharisees can see, but cannot really see things the way they are; the blind man has his eyes opened, so he can see not only appearances, but realities. They remain in the dark, while he has entered the light. They are stuck in the old, while he has entered the new. They are blind while he sees.

The connection with Moses drawn in 9:28 suggests Jesus is a new Moses, which would make this a new exodus story. The man has his Red Sea crossing the pool, then his period of wandering in the wilderness (in which he resists temptation), before finally entering the promised land when Jesus returns to him.

The whole episode is also a mini-parable of Christian discipleship for the apostolic generation. They knew Jesus in the flesh; then he went

away from them, for a period of testing and persecution, during which time their knowledge of Jesus increases, even though he is not visible; finally, he will return at the end to vindicate his people and fully reveal himself to them. While there is no allusion to the work of the Spirit as Jesus' stand-in during the period of his absence in John 9, John 14-16 show us that the Spirit keeps Jesus present with us even when he is absent. Indeed, that is one of the great lessons of this chapter: *the presence of the absent Christ*. Even when we cannot see Jesus, even when he seems hidden from, even when he seems to have left us to suffer all alone – he is there with us, bringing us into deeper knowledge of himself, so long as we seek to remain faithful. Behind all of this, of course, is the work of the Spirit.

What does this passage teach us about what it means to know God/Jesus? We tend to think those who know God best have read the most books; they are the theologians and academics, with lots of letters after their names. But John 9 gives a different picture. *Sometimes the best theologian is not the one who has read the most about Jesus, but the one who has suffered the most for Jesus.*

It is suffering that exposes the difference between merely knowing about God and knowing God himself. True knowledge of God cannot be confined to propositional, discursive knowing. It is deeply personal, experiential, even mystical. C. S. Lewis compares knowing about God versus knowing God to having a map of the beach versus actually taking a walk on the beach. It is the difference between knowing about the scientific making of wine and actually taking a sip from a glass. If we stay true to Jesus when we are called to suffer for him, our knowledge of him will grow in depth and personal profundity. Jesus may seem absent in times of suffering, and yet (paradoxically), he is most present with us in those times. This is the same point the gospels make again and again: suffering is actually the pathway to glory, the cross is the gateway to resurrection, and losing your life is the only way to find real life. In losing Jesus during those hard times, we find him a deeper, more experiential way.

Thus, John 9 challenges the way a lot of American Christians have come to see the Christian life. Prosperity in and of itself is neither a sign that God is for us or against us. Likewise, we should not automatically suffering is a punishment for some particular sin (cf.

9:3). Instead, God may call us to suffer so he can reveal his glory in us and through us in new ways.

Likewise, John 9 challenges those who would think of knowing God solely as an academic or intellectual exercise. In the West, there has been a tendency to make theology the study of God, rather than (or more than) the experience of God. The location of theology in the West progressively moved from the church, to the monastery, to the cathedral school, to the university. Emphasis shifted from prayerful reading and spiritual reflection to academic credentials and scientific methods.

To be sure, God is to be known through careful (and prayerful) study of his Word. But God is not an object for investigation; he is a person (really, three persons in shared communion and life) known in relationship. The true theologian is not just an academic (though academics certainly can be theologians!), but one who pursues God, often at great personal cost. The biblical meaning of “knowing” is not what we modern Westerners tend to think; it does not mean, strictly speaking, rationalistic or scientific knowing. To know God is to love him, to experience him, to befriend him. The human metaphor for this kind of knowledge is marital oneness; to have communion with Christ is to be “one flesh” with him.

James Jordan once made the point that whereas ancient man worshipped his gods, modern man wants to study his gods. Again, ordinarily, we must study if we are to have a mature knowledge of God; God’s self-disclosure in Scripture cannot be neglected. Hence, Paul repeatedly calls Timothy to study so he can preach and teach the Word in all its fullness. We are called to meditate on Scripture; to love God with our minds; to search the Scriptures like the Bereans; etc. If we are of age and ability, we need to use our rationality in the pursuit of God. But we must not replace knowing God experientially with knowing God academically. The man in John 9 is a good reminder of this. He did not know very many propositions about Jesus; he could not have written a textbook on Christology. But by the end of the story he knows Jesus personally and experientially; his knowledge of the Man From God has grown as he has been faithful to him in the crucible of suffering. He has entered into true discipleship, true sight, true knowledge.

[Note: This is not to castigate the Western tradition as

"rationalist." I don't think the label "rationalist" describes Augustine, whose conversion was largely a mystical experience, who wrote theology in the form of prayer, and who lived by the motto, "I believe in order to understand." Nor does the label "rationalist" describe Anselm, who wrote his greatest apologetic work (*Proslogion*) in the form of a prayer to the very God whose existence he was defending! John Frame describes Anselm as a "presuppositionalist of the heart," which is apt. Anselm did theology on his knees as much as anyone. Anselm, of course, held to an Augustinian epistemology of "I believe in order to understand," using reason within the circle of faith rather than autonomously. Further, he strongly believed that truth had to be sought in the context of community and friendship, not just in the private study of the scholar (R. W. Southern notes that for Anselm, "his circle of friends was essential for the development of his theology"; his *Cur Deus Homo* was written in the communal form of a dialogue, with a master and student seeking truth together). Then there's Calvin, who was hardly a scholastic in any meaningful sense. His *Institutes* were not written as a systematic theology, but followed the narrative outline of the ancient creeds. He wrote to provide a sort handbook to accompany his REAL life's work, which was Bible commentary. The *Institutes* were provided simply so that various discussions of the biblical text could proceed more quickly, with fewer digressions. On top of that, Calvin had a strong mystical streak of his own, e.g., when he discusses the Lord's Supper, he is quick to rule out certain erroneous views, but when it comes time to give his own view, he simply admits "I must rather experience than explain it." Indeed. Calvin also believed that ascetic practices, rightly embraced, could be a means by which we moved into a deeper, more experiential knowledge of God. You cannot get any more Western than Luther, but he talked about reason as the devil's whore and threw ink pots at the devil. Hardly a rationalist! For Luther, faith is identical to the knowledge of God, but since he believed infants could have faith, this cannot be limited to those with abstract reasoning capabilities. Following Calvin, many Puritans

took a deeply experiential approach to the Christian faith, sometimes even going too far in an introspective, mystical direction. While some strains within Puritanism were indeed overly rationalistic and therefore overly systematic and academic in how they approached knowledge of things divine, the Puritan tradition on a whole greatly emphasized a warm personal, prayerful relationship with God. Jumping back to the medieval period, even Aquinas has, in my opinion gotten a bad rap as a rationalist. In reality, Aquinas is also a presuppositionalist of sorts, since he says "knowledge of God is implicit in our knowledge of everything." Aquinas has been historically classified as a dualist, but I think he made a real attempt at integrating nature and grace, faith and reason, into a happy marriage. Aquinas used the categories of Aristotle, though not as thoroughly as some would have us believe -- and besides, he did so mainly in an attempt to contextualize biblical truth for his university audience, not to produce a syncretistic amalgam of Christian and Greek thought. At the end of his life, Aquinas had a mystical experience of God that led him to declare all his previous writings as "straw" -- which is a fitting conclusion to the end of any theologian's life in my opinion!

All this to say: While there is definitely a "textbook" tradition of doing theology in West, it does not tell the whole story. It will not due to paint the entire Western in rationalistic colors; the situation is more variegated than that, and there is a long and deep tradition in the West of emphasizing a richly personal and experiential knowledge of God. Western Christians at their best do not just desire to know about God in propositional form; they desire to know God himself in the most intimate and personal way.]

Peter J. Leithart:

"The blind man in John 9 passes through the waters and gets

attached to Jesus, Joshua. His parents are afraid of being kicked out of the old world, the world on the other side of the water of exodus. As several students have pointed out to me, the parents are like the generation that came out of Egypt but fell in the wilderness. They want to stay with the old Moses, rather than clinging to the new; they want to return to Egypt, the synagogue of Satan.”

The story is not only about a new creation, but also a new synagogue, a new community. The Pharisees and the man’s parents cling to the old Moses, and thus remain in the darkness of the old world. The word “parents” is used 6 times in the chapter, a symbolic/numerological reminder that they are refusing to enter the Sabbath rest of Jesus’ new creation. As Leithart says, the generational divide becomes a covenantal divide. His parents will perish in the wilderness, while the man born blind will enter the promised land.

The man born blind has his eyes opened by and to the true light. He is willing to stand with Jesus, even if it means being all alone. He is willing to suffer for Jesus, even if means being all alone. He is willing to cling to Jesus even if it means losing his status with his family, his synagogue, and his nation. He is willing to be a bold witness for Jesus, even though Jesus “feels” absent from him. He is willing to point to Jesus, even though Jesus is nowhere to be seen. In all of this, he is a model of the kind of discipleship Jesus calls us to (cf. Jn. 14-16; see *Deep Exegesis*, 175ff).

David Smolin has made the point that since Satan cannot attack God directly, he attacks those God loves. That’s exactly what we see in this chapter. The Pharisees, in good satanic fashion, accuse the man and attack him. He becomes a scapegoat for Jesus, the one who bears the brunt of their attack on Jesus. But because the man is sharing in the sufferings of Jesus, his sufferings become a window to a greater knowledge of Jesus and in the end, he is vindicated by Jesus. The story closes with Jesus coming to his defense as an advocate and silencing the man’s accusers.

Peter Leithart:

John 9 tells an exodus story: The man born blind crosses through water, from darkness to light. Perhaps this is also a Jordan crossing, because as soon as he passes through the water he is involved in warfare with the Jews.

But there's another liminal moment in the story: Having crossed through the water and fought with the Jews, he is pushed over the threshold of the synagogue outside the camp. Through this double-crossing he finds Jesus and confesses faith. Baptism in Siloam places him on Jesus' side of the battle for Judaism; confession of faith leads to worship. Baptism and confession make the blind man a new man, passed not only from darkness to light but from death to life.

Malcolm Muggeridge once made the point that everything worth knowing, he learned through suffering. John 9 makes a similar point: As the man suffered, his true knowledge of himself, of God, and of Jesus increased.

This is not to say automatically makes us better. If suffering is not mixed with persevering faith, it can just made us hardened and bitter. But when we suffer patiently and faithfully, we grow towards maturity (cf. Rom. 5:1ff; James 1:1ff).

When John 9 shows up the in the lectionary, it is typically paired with Ephesians 5:8-13. The whole passage is a paradigm of what it means to live as a child of the light. The passage can also be connected with all those texts that speak of God's light coming, e.g., Isa. 60:1ff. The man moves out of the darkness of the old world and into the light of new through encountering Jesus.