

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN  
9:1-12

1. And as *Jesus* passed by, he saw a man who was blind from birth. 2. And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? 3. Jesus answered, Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be made manifest in him. 4. I must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; the night is coming when no man can work. 5. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world. 6. When he had thus spoken he spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay. 7. And he said to him, Go wash in the pool of Siloam (which is translated, Sent). He went his way therefore and washed, and came seeing. 8. The neighbors therefore and those who previously had seen that he was blind said, Is not this he who sat and begged? 9. Some said, This is he. Others *said*, He is like him. *But* he said, I am *he*. 10. Therefore they said to him, How were your eyes opened? 11. He answered and said, A man who is called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, Go to the pool of Siloam and wash. And I went and washed, and I received sight. 12. Then they said to him, Where is He? He said, I do not know.

1.--[*And as Jesus passed by.*] The Greek word rendered "passed by" is the same as the word so rendered in the preceding verse, at the end of the last chapter. Some think from this repetition that the miracle recorded here took place immediately after the events of the last chapter without the least break or interruption, and that it was as our Lord was retiring from the temple after the attempt of the Jews to stone Him that He saw the blind man. Others, however, think that an interval of time must have elapsed, partly because it seems improbable that our Lord and His disciples would all be able to withdraw themselves quietly from an angry mob and calmly stand still near the scene of attempted violence to attend to a blind man, and partly because it is the manner of St. John's Gospel to pass from one event to another, sometimes without intimating that there is any change of time or place. Thus, John v.19, vi.25,43,59, vii.28-33. The point, however, is not one of any practical importance.

Chemnitius holds strongly that an interval of two months comes in here, and that our Lord spent that time in a visitation of the towns and villages of Judea, as related in Luke xiii.22. He thinks that He thus occupied the two months after the feast of tabernacles and that He returned to Jerusalem shortly before the feast of dedication, in winter. The main objection to this theory seems to be that it is not the natural conclusion we should draw from the text.

Gualter, Ferus, Ecolampadius, and Musculus maintain, on the other hand, that there is a close and intentional connection between this chapter and the preceding one. They think that our Lord desired to show by deed as well as work that He was "the Light of the world." (John viii.14.) Bucer

says, "This chapter is a sermon in act and deed on the words 'I am the Light of the world.'"

In the miracle which occupies the whole of this chapter, the following special circumstances deserve notice: (1) It is only related by St. John. (2) Like each of the few miracles in St. John, it is described with great minuteness and particularity. (3) It is one of the four miracles wrought in Judea, or near Jerusalem, mentioned in St. John. He records eight great miracles altogether: four in Galilee--turning the water into wine, healing the nobleman's son, feeding the multitude, and walking on the water (chap. ii, iv, and vi.), and four in Judea--purifying the temple, healing the impotent man, restoring sight to the blind, and raising Lazarus (chap. ii, v, vi, and ix). (4) It is one of those miracles which the Jews were especially taught to expect in Messiah's time: "In that day shall the eyes of the blind see out of obscurity." (Isa. xxix.18.) (5) It is one of those signs of Messiah having come, to which Jesus particularly directed John the Baptist's attention: "The blind receive their sight." (Matt. xi.5.) (6) It was a miracle worked in so public a place, and on a man so well known, that it was impossible for the Jerusalem Jews to deny it.

It is hardly necessary, perhaps, to bid any well-instructed Christian to observe the singularly instructive and typical character of each of the eight miracles which John was inspired to record. Each was a vivid picture of spiritual things.

Hengstenberg observes that three of the four great miracles wrought by Christ in Judea exactly represent the three classes of works referred to in Matt. xi.5: "The lame walk, the blind see, the dead are raised up." (John v, ix, and xi.)

[*He saw a man who was blind from birth.*] The man was probably sitting near the temple gateway to attract the notice of worshipers going to and fro, like the man described in Acts. (Acts iii.2.) Being blind, he would naturally be dependent on charity. The Jewish law specifies the blind as peculiarly deserving of attention (Lev. xix.14, Deut. xxvii.18.) To give sight to one who had not lost the use of his eyes by disease or accident, but had never seen at all, was, of course, a mighty miracle.

Let it be noted that our Lord "saw" the blind man and healed him of His own free will, unasked and unexpectedly. As in the case of the impotent man (John v.6), He did not wait to be entreated but was Himself the first to move. Let it however be noted at the same time, that if the man had not been by the wayside, our Lord would not have seen him.

Chrysostom observes that when the Jews "would not receive our Lord's sayings and tried to kill Him, He went out of the temple and healed the blind, mitigating their rage by His absence, and by working a miracle both softening their hardness and proving His affections. And it is clear that He proceeded intentionally to this work on leaving the temple, for it was He who saw the blind man and not the blind man who came to Him."

Gualter observes that this passage shows how the eyes of the Lord are in every place and how He sees His own people even when they think not of Him.

Alford thinks it possible that the blind man was constantly proclaiming that he had been born blind, to excite pity.

Burgon observes: "More of our Savior's miracles are recorded as having been wrought on blindness than on any other form of human infirmity. One deaf and dumb man is related to have had speech and hearing restored to him; one case of palsy and one of dropsy find special record; twice was leprosy and twice was fever expelled by the Savior's word; three times were dead persons raised to life; but the records of His cures wrought on blindness are four in number at least, if not five." (See Matt. xii.22.) Isaiah seems to foretell the recovery of sight by the blind as "an act of mercy specially symbolical of Messiah's day." (Isa. xxix.18, xxxii.3, xxxv.5, xlii.7.)

2.--[*And his disciples asked Him.*] This expression seems to show that our Lord was surrounded and accompanied by His usual followers, and favors the idea that there was some break or interval between the beginning of this chapter and the end of the last. Though He by Divine power could hide Himself and go through the midst of His enemies, it is hardly reasonable to suppose that within a few minutes He would be surrounded again by His disciples. Yet it is, of course, possible.

[*Master, who sinned...born blind?*] This curious question has given rise to much unprofitable discussion. It is repeatedly asked, "Why did the disciples ask this? What put it into their minds to start the inquiry?"

(a) Some think that the Jews had imbibed the common oriental notion of the pre-existence and transmigration of souls from one body to another, and that the disciples supposed that in some previous state of existence this blind man must have committed some great sin for which he was now punished.

(b) Some think that the question refers to a strange notion current among some Jews that infants might sin before they were born. In support of this view, they quote Gen. xxv.22 and Gen. xxxviii.28,29.

(c) The most probable view is that the question arose from a misapplication of such passages of Scripture as the second Commandment where God speaks of "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children" (Exod. xx.5), and from a forgetfulness of Ezek. xviii.20, etc. There are few notions that men seem to cling to so naturally as the notion that bodily sufferings and all afflictions are the direct consequences of sin, and that a diseased or afflicted person must necessarily be a very wicked man. This was precisely the short-sighted view that Job's three friends took up when they came to visit him, and against which Job contended. This was the idea of the people at Melita when Paul was bitten by a viper after the shipwreck: "This man is a murderer." (Acts xxviii.4.) This appears to have been at the bottom of the question of the disciples: "There is suffering; then there must have been sin. Whose sin was it?"

Chrysostom thinks that the disciples remembered our Lord's words to the paralytic whom He healed (chap. v.14), "You are made whole; sin no more," and asked now to what sin this man's blindness might be traced. This, however, seems very improbable considering the length of time between the

two miracles.

Hengstenberg observes that the fallacy of supposing that special afflictions are the result of some special sins, "commends itself to low and common spirits by its simplicity and palpableness. It has the advantage of rendering it needless to weep with them that weep. It saves a man from the obligation, when he sees heavy affliction, of smiting on his breast and saying 'God be merciful to me a sinner.' It gives the natural man the comfortable feeling that he is so much the better than the sufferer, as he is more fortunate."

Those who wish to go more deeply into the subject will find it fully discussed by the great Dutch divine, Gomarus.

It is worth notice that the word here rendered "Master" is the same that is rendered "Rabbi" in five other places in St. John. (i.38,49, iii.2,26, and vi.25.) Why our translators did not observe uniformity in their translation of the word throughout this Gospel is not very clear.

3.--[*Jesus answered, Neither...sinned.*] This first part of our Lord's answer is elliptical. The sense, of course, must be supplied from the context. Our Lord did not mean that neither this blind man nor his parents had committed any sin at all, but that it was not any special sin of his or theirs which had caused his blindness. Nor yet did our Lord mean that the sins of parents could never entail disease on children, but that the case before Him, at any rate, was not such a case. Of course, He did not mean us to forget that sin is the great primeval cause of all the evils that are in the world.

[*But that the works of God...manifest in him.*] The meaning of this must be that the man's blindness was permitted and overruled by God in order that His works of mercy in healing him might be shown to men. This blindness was allowed and ordained by God, not because the man was specially wicked, but in order to furnish a platform for the exhibition of a work of Divine mercy and power.

A deep and instructive principle lies in these words. They surely throw some light on that great question of the origin of evil. God has thought fit to allow evil to exist in order that He may have a platform for showing His mercy, grace, and compassion. If man had never fallen, there would have been no opportunity of showing Divine mercy. But by permitting evil, mysterious as it seems, God's works of grace, mercy, and wisdom in saving sinners have been wonderfully manifested to all His creatures. The redeeming of the Church of elect sinners is the means of "showing to principalities and powers the manifold wisdom of God." (Eph. iii.10.) Without the fall, we should have known nothing of the cross and the Gospel.

Melancthon, on this verse, suggests no less than ten reasons why God permits evil to come on the Church, which contain much food for thought. Brentius and Chemnitius also say many excellent things on the same theme.

Bucer remarks that this verse should teach us to bear ills patiently and cheerfully, since all that happens to us tends, in some way, to the glory

of God.

Gualter remarks that even wicked men like Pharaoh subserve the glory of God (Rom. ix.17); much more may men's afflictions and diseases.

Ecolampadius remarks that God allows nothing whatever to happen without some good reason and cause.

Henry observes: "The intention of Providence often does not appear till a great while after the event, perhaps many years after. The sentences in the book of Providence are sometimes long, and you must read a great way before you understand the meaning."

Jones of Nayland, on this text, remarks: "The best way to answer the great question of the origin of evil is to consider the end of it--'What good comes out of it?' This makes the subject plain and useful. Why was this man born blind? That the works of God might appear and Christ might cure him. Why did man fall? That God might save him. Why is evil permitted in the world? That God may be glorified in removing it. Why does the body of man die? That God may raise it up again. When we philosophize in this manner, we find light, certainty, and comfort. We have a memorable example of it in the case before us."

Barnes remarks that "Those who are afflicted with blindness, deafness, or any deformity, should be submissive to God. It is His appointment, and is right and best. God does no wrong; and when all His works are seen, the universe will see and know that He is just."

4.--[*I must work the works, etc.*] The connection between this verse and the preceding one seems to be in the word "works." It is as though our Lord said: "Healing the blind man is one of the great 'works' which God has appointed for Me to do, and I must do it during the 'day' or short period of my ministry. This blindness was ordained by my Father to be a means of showing forth my divine power."

The expressions "while it is day", and "the night comes," must probably be interpreted with special reference to our Lord's ministry upon earth. While He was with His disciples speaking, teaching, and working miracles, it was comparatively "day." His little Church basked in the full sunlight of His Divine presence, and saw and learned countless wonderful things. When He ascended up on high it became comparatively "night." Just as in night "no man can work," so when Christ left the world the visible proof of His Divine mission which the disciples had so long enjoyed and seen could no longer be given. The proverbial saying "No man can work in the night" would be verified.

These limits to the application of the figure must be carefully remembered. Of course our Lord did not mean that the Church, after His ascension, would not enjoy far more spiritual light than it did before He came; nor yet that the disciples, after the day of Pentecost, would not see many truths far more clearly even than when Christ was with them. But the words "day and night" here have a special reference to our Lord's bodily presence with His Church. As long as He was visibly with them, it was "day." When He left

them, it was "night." It is well to remark that St. Paul uses the same figures when comparing time present with time to come, at the second advent. He says, "The night is far spent, and the day is at hand." (Rom. xiii.12.) There the night is Christ's bodily absence and the day Christ's bodily presence.

Melancthon points out what an example Christ supplies to Christians in this place. The hatred, opposition, and persecution of the world, and the failures and infirmities of professing Christians, must not make us give way to despondency. Like our Master, we must work on.

Calvin observes: "From these words we may deduce the universal rule, that to every man the course of his life may be called his day."

Beza and others think that there is a primary prophecy here of the withdrawal of light and privilege from the Jews, which was in the mind of our Lord, as well as the general principle that to all men day is the time for work and not night.

5.--[*As long as I am in the world, etc.*] This verse seems to be a general broad assertion of our Lord's purpose in coming into the world and His position while in it. "I came into the world to be its Sun and spiritual Guide, and to deliver men from the natural darkness in which they are. And so long as I am in the world, I wish to be its Light in the fullest sense, the Deliverer of men's souls and the Healer of men's bodies."

Cocceius suggests that in these words our Lord had respect to the fact that He was going to work a work on the Sabbath and that it would be disapproved by the Jews as a breach of the Sabbath. Foreseeing this, He defends what He is about to do by reminding His disciples that during the short time of His earthly ministry, He must seize every opportunity of doing good.

Alford observes that just as Jesus said before He raised Lazarus, "I am the Resurrection and the Life," so here, before giving sight to the blind, He said "I am the Light."

6.--[*When...spoken...made clay...anointed the eyes, etc.*] The action here used by our Lord is the same that we find used on two other occasions--once when He healed one deaf and dumb (Mark vii.33), and once when He healed a blind man (Mark viii.23). The making of the "clay," however, is quite peculiar to this miracle. The reason why our Lord used the action we cannot tell. There is, of course, no special virtue either in spittle or in clay made from spittle which could cure a man born blind. Why then did Jesus use this means? Why did He not heal the man with a word or a touch?

The only answer to such inquiries is that our Lord would teach us, by His peculiar mode of proceeding here, that He is not tied to any one means of doing good, and that we may expect to find variety in His methods of dealing with souls as well as with bodies. May He not also wish to teach us that He can, when He thinks fit, invest material things with an efficacy which is not inherent in them? We are not to despise Baptism and the Lord's Supper because water, bread, and wine are mere material elements. To many who use them, no doubt they are nothing more than mere material

things and never do them the slightest good. But to those who use the sacraments rightly, worthily, and with faith, Christ can make water, bread, and wine instruments of doing real good. He who was pleased to use clay in healing a blind man may surely use material things, if He thinks fit, in His own ordinances. The water in Baptism and the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, while they are not to be treated as idols, ought not to be treated with irreverence and contempt. It was, of course, not the clay that healed the blind man, but Christ's word and power. Nevertheless the clay was used. So the brazen serpent in itself had no medicinal power to cure the bitten Israelites. But without it they were not cured.

The selection of clay for anointing the blind man's eyes is thought by some to be significant and to contain a possible reference to the original formation of man out of the dust. He who formed man with all his bodily faculties out of the dust could easily restore one of those lost faculties, even sight, when He thought fit. He who healed these blind eyes with clay was the same Being who originally formed man out of the clay.

Ecolampadius thinks that the spittle was an emblem of Christ's Divinity, and the clay of His humanity, and that the union of the two represented the union of the two natures in Christ's person whereby healing came to a sin-sick world. To say the least, this seems fanciful.

Barradius suggests that our Lord actually formed new eyes for the man, as He at first formed man's body out of the dust. This, however, seems needlessly improbable.

Poole thinks that our Lord used spittle to make clay simply because there was no water nigh at hand to make it with.

Wordsworth observes that Christ's manner of working the miracle was "tenderness to the Jews. They would see the clay on the man's eyes and see him going to Siloam."

He also observes: "God loves to effect His greatest works by means tending under ordinary circumstances to produce the very opposite of what is to be done. God walls the sea with sand. God clears the air with storms. God warms the earth with snow. So in the world of grace, He brings water in the desert, not from the soft earth, but the flinty rock. He heals the sting of the serpent of fire by the serpent of brass. He overthrows the wall of Jericho by ram's horns. He slays a thousand men with the jawbone of an ass. He cures saltwater with salt. He fells the giant with a sling and stone. And thus does the Son of God work in the Gospel. He cures the blind man by that which seemed likely to increase his blindness--by anointing his eyes with clay. He exalts us to heaven by the stumbling block of the cross."

7.--[*And said...Go, etc.*] The direction here given to the blind man would remind any pious Jew of Elisha's directions to Naaman, "Go wash in Jordan." (2 Kings v.10.) The water of this pool had no inherent healing efficacy any more than other water. But the command was a test of faith, and in obeying, the blind man found what he wanted. It is the great principle which runs through Scripture: "Believe and obey, and all will be right."

The pool of Siloam was a well-known reservoir, or artificial pond, in a valley close to Jerusalem, remarkable for a supply of water from an intermittent spring. It is pointed out in the present day, and there seems no reason to doubt that it is the same pool that was so called eighteen hundred years ago. It is first mentioned in Nehemiah iii.15 and afterwards in Isaiah viii.6.

Lightfoot asserts that the pool of Bethesda and the pool of Siloam were both supplied from one spring.

[*Which is translated, Sent.*] There is undeniable difficulty about this sentence. It is naturally asked, Why is this parenthetical explanation inserted by St. John? Why are we specially told that the word Siloam means Sent, or He that was sent? The most probable answer seems to be that the name of the fountain was meant to refer the blind man's mind to the Messiah, whom God had "sent." All pious Jews would understand the expression which so frequently occurs in John's Gospel, "He whom God has sent," to point to Messiah. When therefore Jesus said, "Go wash in Siloam," the naming of that particular fountain would be a silent hint that He who gave the command was the Sent One of God, the great Healer of all diseases. St. John's parenthesis would then mean, when expounded, "This was a most suitable and proper pool for Jesus to name. It was fitting that He who was 'Sent of God' should work a miracle in the pool called 'Sent.'" This is the view of Chrysostom and Augustine.

It is impossible to help feeling that the clause looks very much like the insertion of some ignorant early copyist who wished to show his own knowledge of etymology, and perhaps found it in an old copy as a marginal gloss. The Syriac and Persian versions do not contain the clause. Yet it certainly is found in most manuscripts and versions.

Hutcheson thinks that John inserted this clause for no other end than to remind readers that this fountain was a special gift "sent" by God, among the hills near Jerusalem, for the benefit of the Jews.

Hengstenberg says, "As Jesus represents Himself and His Church as the real Pool of Bethesda, in chap. v., so here He declares Himself the real Sent One, or Siloam, the Fountain of blessings."

[*He went...washed...came seeing.*] The blind man, as is often the case with people born blind, was probably able to find his way about Jerusalem without trouble, and the road from the temple gate to the pool of Siloam was likely to be much frequented. His implicit faith and obedience contrast favorably with the conduct of Naaman when told to go and wash in Jordan. (2 Kings v.14.) The word "came" must either mean "to his own home" or simply "came back to the temple gate." The miracle of healing seems to have taken place in the act of washing in Siloam.

Let us remember that the blind man's conduct is meant to be a pattern to us. He did not stumble at Christ's command, but simply obeyed, and in obeying he was healed. We must do likewise.

Melancthon thinks it likely that a crowd of curious and jeering spectators

accompanied the man to Siloam to see the result of our Lord's prescription.

Scott remarks that the immediate power of using the eyes was no small part of the miracle. When people recover sight now after surgical operations, it requires a considerable time to learn the use of the newly-acquired sense.

8.--[*The neighbors.*] This would seem to show that he "came" to his own house as soon as he was healed of his blindness. The word before us naturally means the people who lived near to him.

[*Those who...had seen...blind.*] This expression includes all persons in Jerusalem who knew the blind man by sight, though they did not live near him but had often seen him near the temple and become familiar with his appearance. There are generally blind beggars in the chief thoroughfares of large cities and near large public buildings whom all residents know well by sight. The slow, uncertain, feeble gait of a blind man always makes him conspicuous.

[*Is not this he who sat and begged?*] This question seems to settle that the blind man was one of the poorest and humblest class of Jews. None are so likely to come to poverty and be dependent on charity as the blind, who of course cannot work for their own support.

9.--[*Some said, This is he.*] This probably was the saying of the blind man's neighbors, who naturally knew him best.

[*Others said, He is like him.*] This was probably the saying of people living in Jerusalem, who knew the blind man by sight but did not live near him and were not, therefore, so familiar with his appearance. The difference between the look and demeanor of the man before and after his miraculous cure would necessarily be very great. One can quite understand that some would hardly know him again. Augustine remarks, "The opened eyes had altered his looks." Musculus observes how much the expression of a face depends on the eyes.

[*He said, I am he.*] This was the saying of the man when he heard people doubting his identity and looking at him with hesitation. "I assure you," he says, "that I am he who used to sit at the temple gate and beg."

10.--[*Therefore they said, etc.*] Those who asked this question appear to have been the people who came together round the blind man when he returned from the pool of Siloam with his sight restored. Some were his neighbors and others were inhabitants of Jerusalem, drawn together by the miracle. The inquiry was the natural one that such a wonderful cure would first call forth.

11.--[*He answered and said, etc.*] This verse is a simple unvarnished account of the facts of the cure. How the blind man knew that our Lord's name was "Jesus" does not appear. It is not unlikely that some of the bystanders, when our Lord first told him to go to the pool of Siloam, told him that Jesus of Nazareth, the person whose preaching was making such stir in Jerusalem, was the speaker. We cannot doubt that our Lord was well

known by this time to all dwellers in Jerusalem. Yet there is no proof that the beggar recognized Him as anything more than "a man called Jesus." The accuracy with which he recites all the facts of his cure is well worthy of notice. "He first put clay on my eyes; then He bid me go and wash in Siloam. I went; I was cured."

12.--[*Then they said...Where...do not know.*] The desire to see the worker of this wonderful miracle was natural, but the question "Where is He?" was probably asked with a mischievous intention. Those who asked it wished to lay hands on our Lord and bring Him before the rulers. The man's answer certainly seems to show that he did not return to the place where he had sat and begged, but to his house. Had he gone back to the temple gate, he might have replied that Jesus was here only a short time before and was probably not far off. The questioners seem to suppose that the worker of such a miracle and the subject of it could not be far apart. They did not understand that our Lord always avoided, rather than courted, public notice.