

The Man Born Blind

Chapter 9 of John

By David L. Miner

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The Man Born Blind

This is a discussion of what seems to be the process that every unbeliever goes through before he or she finally meets Jesus. I cannot say that each and every unbeliever goes through the exact same series of steps, but I can say that in my experience pretty much everyone does.

It is a wonderful and miraculous process to see, and even more so when God gives you the privilege of *participating* in at least part of that process. There is great joy for the believer in seeing this process, and unbounding excitement in personally working with an unbeliever to its conclusion.

And there is even greater wonder if we watch Jesus himself create and then participate in this process. We will look at one such instance, and experience such wonder, where the Creator of the Universe allows an unbeliever to travel through this process and see Jesus for the first time. And we really mean "*see Jesus for the first time*" because we are going to look at the story of Jesus healing a man blind from birth, as described in the ninth Chapter of the Gospel of John.

But first, let's see what has been happening immediately previous to this miracle.

It was still early in the public ministry of Jesus. He had a pattern of just walking around and coming across all sorts of opportunities to teach and heal. Most of his ministry was in the northern half of Israel, especially along the north edge of the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus grew up. But he headed south to Judea to minister several times in the 30 or so years that Jesus was here on this earth.

Some time before Jesus meets the man born blind, probably some weeks, he traveled south to Jerusalem, teaching in the Temple area, both inside and outside the temple gates. This was usually a location reserved for established teachers of the law and spiritual leaders recognized by the Pharisees. In reality, you had to have some spiritual clout just to teach in the temple, or else you had to expect some interrogations and investigations by the Pharisees if they didn't know you. And this was probably one of the reasons why Jesus selected this location for himself.

And this is probably a good place for a note about the Pharisees.

When Moses led the Hebrew people out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, and into the Arabian peninsula, he was faced with the serious logistical problem of leading and administering what was probably three million men, women, and children, along with wagons, livestock, and everything else involved in relocating that three million people.

This was HUGE! His father-in-law, Jethro, suggested that Moses select some people to assist him with the problems, as explained in the eighteenth chapter of Exodus. Over the months and years, this group of leaders became viewed as Elders, and over the centuries the Elders evolved into the men who held responsibility to assure that the Jewish people observed the Law as given to Moses.

The Torah contained the Law and comprised the first five books of the Christian Old Testament. The Law was pretty clear. But to help clarify the INTENT of God, the Hebrew leaders developed certain beliefs which became traditions, and the Elders helped the Jews keep these traditions. This group, with roots all the way back to Moses, evolved into the Pharisees of the time of Jesus.

"To illustrate the importance of the role of the Pharisees, we can review the concept of work on the Sabbath. Thirty-nine categories of work are prohibited on the Sabbath. These are called the thirty-nine *melachot*. The cessation of all work was intended on the Sabbath, but the word work does not mean physical labor." (Exploring Jewish Tradition, Twitty and Twitty, Doubleday, 2001).

So we can list 39 *melachot*, or main categories of work, that are prohibited on the Sabbath. But within each main category is one or more derivations, or *toldah*, that are equally forbidden. And under these derivations is a further clarification, called rabbinic legislation, or *gerzerah*. This "legislation" was for the purpose of protecting against the unintentional violation of the *toldah* or the *melachot*.

In other words, the Jews believed they could not work on the Sabbath. And work was broken down into 39 categories. And each category had a group of forbidden tasks. And each forbidden task had one or more rabbinical legislation or traditions to protect against even accidental violations. And the overview and enforcement of all this was the job of the Pharisees.

Specifically, one of the main categories of work is REAPING, which is described as "*any activity that separates a growing plant from its place of growth.*" The subcategory forbids the obvious, plus cutting flowers or picking berries, fruit, etc. And the rabbinic legislation further prohibits climbing a tree, because it might

break a branch off the limb, and horseback riding, because that could break off a plant from its roots.

THIS was the job of the Pharisees: making sure that people understood all that was required and restricted by the Law and the traditions, and to make note of those in violation of that Law and those traditions. And the Pharisees wandered all over Israel making sure the Jews didn't break them. They were very much a *religious police force*.

My purpose in making such detailed descriptions of the Pharisees and their role is not to make them out to be bad guys in any way. Many of the Pharisees saw their role as *SAFEGUARDING* the Jewish people from violating the Law, because the Law required serious punishment, all the way up to death, for any violations. And some violations affected entire villages, and a few even affected the entire Nation of Israel.

Jesus, however, seemed committed to show the inflexibility and hardness of the Pharisees. And he did this frequently and aggressively.

Teaching in the Temple, Jesus got into several discussions with the Jewish leaders, each one getting more tense than the last one. Finally, the leaders decided that Jesus had gone too far into heresy, and in chapter five the writer tells us that they had decided to kill Jesus. [See John 5:18] Naturally, Jesus didn't make it easy on them, just slipping out of the crowd. Whether it was because some of his followers encouraged Jesus to head north, or if it was because Jesus had some intended appointments up there, Jesus headed back home. I guess he figured he could always come back. After all, it was only about 100 miles by foot...

Back in Galilee, as described in John 6:1 and over the next couple of chapters, Jesus did some more wandering and teaching and healing. This time his walking around included feeding 5,000 men, along with women and children, with only five small barley loaves and two fish. Naturally, the more people who gathered around him, the more the Jewish leaders watched him. And again we had some really tense discussions between Jesus and the religious leaders.

Finally, we read in the seventh chapter of John that the time for the *Feast of the Tabernacles* was approaching. The brothers of Jesus suggested that he join the family and head south to Jerusalem for the celebration, as was their tradition. Some have suggested that these brothers knew the Pharisees in Jerusalem would kill Jesus on sight and were trying to take Jesus to his death. Others have suggested that these brothers were merely trying to get Jesus to become more public so he would be accepted by more people, and thereby become a political

and religious figure by public acclamation. The only thing we know from Scripture is that the brothers did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God. We see this here in John 7:5, as well as in Matthew 12:46-50, Mark 3:31-35, and Luke 8:4-10. (Of course, we all would have no problem believing a brother of ours should he claim to be God, right?)

But Jesus told them to go ahead without him, and he would catch up shortly. Then he headed south in secret, and showed up in Jerusalem by himself, but apparently with at least some of his disciples. And Jesus still, as usual, went to the temple to teach. And he still, as usual, stirred up quite a controversy.

This time the controversy was truly confrontational, and is described in detail in chapter 8, beginning with verse 12. In one of the conversations, Jesus told the Jewish leaders that they were from their father Satan, and that they were practicing the sinful actions of the father of lies. This did not win friends among the religious leaders. But Jesus didn't stop there. He compared himself to Abraham and the prophets, even to the point of saying, *Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.* [John 8:58, KJV]

Now, Jesus was probably playing on words, identifying himself with what God said to Moses from the burning bush, which the Jews had turned into a holy phrase. See Exodus 3:14. Or he may have been making the claim that he pre-existed Abraham, the Father of the Jews. Either way, the Pharisees took this to be blasphemy and a violation of Jewish Law. They picked up stones to kill Jesus because blasphemy was punishable by stoning to death in Leviticus.

And Jesus just seemed to slip away without being seen, again. You can see all the excitement culminating at the end of the chapter, in verse 59.

And as he was leaving the scene, in the very next verse, Jesus and his disciples walked past a man who had been born blind.

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?"
[John 9:1, NIV]

The disciples addressed him as "rabbi" because that meant "teacher" and the question addressed an important theological belief, established hundreds of years ago during the time of Moses.

Apparently, some of his disciples must have decided this would be a classic opportunity to discover the views held by Jesus that equated sin with disease and misfortune - traditional Jewish teaching said that if you obey God you will be

blessed, and if you disobey God you will be punished with disease and misfortune. But I imagine that at least a couple of his followers thought that running away from an assassination attempt was not the best time for an examination of a theological point that was at least a thousand years old.

Obviously, Jesus decided that theology was more important than safety, and he chose to answer the question.

Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him. [John 9:3, NIV]

The writer of the gospel did not record one of the disciples saying, "Well, at least he HAS a life, which is more than we will have if the Pharisees catch up with us!" I am certain it was stated by at least one of the disciples, and I am certain these disciples were ready to move on as soon as Jesus answered the question. I can just see a disciple subtly, or maybe not so subtly, tugging on Christ's sleeve...

But Jesus took a few more moments and squatted down, spit on the ground, and made some clay or mud. He then applied the mud to the man's eyes. Some people here have suggested that Jesus actually created new eyes for the man, because of the parallels between the mud in the Creation account in Genesis and the mud here. Regardless, the man was about to see for the first time in his life. No matter what Jesus did here, the many aspects of vision which were dysfunctional in this man indicates that nothing could have been accomplished without the miraculous power of the Creator of the Universe.

And a physical miracle was not the only issue before Jesus. This man was considered a sinner, condemned to a horrible life by God. He was considered spiritually unclean, and untouchable by anyone in Jewish society. As he walked, and possibly stumbled, from his home to his normal place to beg, the blind man had to be careful to touch no one or they too would be considered unclean. It would take at least a day of ceremonial washing for that casual contact to wash away from a devout Jew. His family couldn't touch him, or even enter his room at home, for the same reason. It was possible that he had his own entrance into the house that only he used, in order to protect his family.

Please note that Jesus touched the blind man.

Given the fact that he had been born blind, and the fact that his blindness was presumed to be a result of grievous sin, Jewish belief at that time dictated that the man could not be cleansed from his sin by any religious ceremonial washing or sacrifice on his part. He was considered unclean and could not be touched, and he was considered unforgiven and destined to eternal separation from God.

And Jesus touched him.

This was an outrageous action by itself. Most people averted their eyes and tried to act like he wasn't even there, like he didn't even exist. Everyone gave him a wide berth so they would not become unclean just by brushing against him.

And Jesus touched him.

This man spent his entire life being ignored, even shunned, by all his family and friends. No parties, no poker nights, no racquetball games, NO LIFE!

And Jesus touched him.

Had he wanted, Jesus could have waved his hand as he walked by and the man would have been healed. Instead, Jesus reached out and touched him, healed him, and changed his life forever.

In fact, his life was so changed that his friends and neighbors couldn't even recognize him for certain.

His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?" Some claimed he was. Others said, "No, he only looks like him." [John 9:8-9, NIV]

If you stop and think about it, there is a HUGE difference between a man sitting on a street corner begging and a man walking, possibly jumping, around all excited. It had probably been years since any of these people even looked at him. And none of them had ever seen him just walking around; only walking carefully between his home and his regular corner. So it was not surprising at all that they couldn't decide if the man they were talking with was the man they had ignored for so long.

Naturally, the man kept claiming he was the one born blind. And, naturally, they demanded,

"How then were your eyes opened?" [John 9:10, NIV]

The man's response was very important: please read it again.

He answered, "The man who is called Jesus made clay, and anointed my

eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash'; so I went away and washed, and I received sight."

[John 9:11, NASB]

When asked what happened, he who was born blind said, "The man they call Jesus..."

Of course, it wasn't enough that Jesus was being pursued by the Pharisees because they wanted to stone him to death for blasphemy. And it wasn't enough for Jesus to pause in his escape from the Pharisees long enough for him to talk to and heal the man born blind. Jesus had to do all this on the Sabbath, giving to angry religious cops all the more reason to hunt him down and kill him.

That meant the word was out, and the word was not good!

So the people decided they didn't want to run the risk of getting blamed for any violation of the Sabbath, and they took the man born blind to the Pharisees. This is sort of like a neighbor calling the cops when they think you might have a marijuana plant in your back bedroom.

They brought to the Pharisees the man who was formerly blind. Now it was a Sabbath on the day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also were asking him again how he received his sight. And he said to them, "He applied clay to my eyes, and I washed, and I see."

[John 9:13-15, NASB]

The man kept it short and simple, like so many of us would when dealing with the authorities. And naturally, the Pharisees wanted to know more. So they questioned the man further.

Some 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. Finally, 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."

[John 9:16-17, NIV]

This time when asked what happened, he who was born blind said, "He is a prophet," a spiritual man from some god or some religion, but definitely a knowledgeable religious leader.

This was going nowhere for the Pharisees. Not only could they not discover anything the man did that violated the Sabbath, but they had uncovered another Jew who believed Jesus at least a little. But like the FBI agent said to Benjamin

Gates in *National Treasure*, "Someone's gotta go to jail, Ben." So the Pharisees decided to interview the parents of the man born blind.

The Pharisees still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, so they sent for the man's parents. "Is this your son?" they asked. "Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?"

"We know he is our son," the parents answered, "and we know he was born blind. But 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." His 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. That is why his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." [John 9:18-23, NIV]

The parents didn't want to risk getting into trouble with the Pharisees, so they did what people have done throughout history - they pointed the finger at someone else. They admitted the obvious, and then the parents punted the ball to their son. They said, yes, he was their son and, yes, he was born blind, but if you want anything more, you need to ask him. I can well imagine the fear in their eyes as they said this!

So the Pharisees were left with only one eye-witness: the man born blind. They called for him and they started demanding a confession of sorts.

A second time they summoned the man who had been born blind. "Give glory to God," they said. "We know this man is a sinner." 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." [John 9:24-25, NIV]

The command "Give glory to God" was the spiritual equivalent to putting the man under oath. That told everyone present that someone was in serious trouble. As a result, the man born blind was careful and stuck with the simplest version of the truth he could declare. His response held nothing that incriminated anyone, and therefore it was not acceptable to the Pharisees. They asked for more.

Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He 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?" [John 9:26-27, NIV]

How many times have we seen a smart aleck answer get us in trouble? Either the man had never dealt with angry Pharisees before, or else he didn't care. Either way, we could easily predict what happened next. Bad things, man!

Then they reviled him, and said, Thou art his disciple; but we are Moses' disciples. We know that God spake unto Moses: as for this fellow, we know not from whence he is. [John 9:28-29, KJV]

Where Jesus came from was quite important to the Pharisees, and they believed they needed to know his origins. Why? Because the Pharisees knew every prophet and spiritual leader in what Christians call the *Old Testament*. They could identify anyone important by using his origin and tracing the Scriptures from there. Remember, Jesus was becoming very popular and the people were following his teachings. The Pharisees had to discredit him, and quickly. So where he came from was important. Especially since Jesus did something that no one had ever done before - he healed a man born blind!

So the man born blind decided to jump from the frying pan into the fire. Sarcasm is such a productive means of dealing with angry Pharisees, right?

The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. Nobody has ever heard opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out. [John 9:30-34, NIV]

What a day this man was having! That morning he walked carefully, probably with help, from his home to his favorite street corner, where he planned to beg for food and money, hoping to bring home enough to make the humiliation worth doing it another day. And then, unexpectedly, a man walks by and puts mud in his eyes. The blind man washes off the mud and he can see for the first time in his life. And just for being able to see, he finds that he is in serious trouble with an angry group of Pharisees.

But this time when the man born blind was faced with who Jesus was, he stated that Jesus was a man sent by God; his God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

And because of his acknowledging Jesus as coming from the God of Abraham, he has been excommunicated, kicked out of the synagogue, destined for a life of

separation from good Jews and ultimately from God. I can just hear him saying, "This is a really bad day!"

But wait a minute! Isn't that exactly how his day started? Wasn't he already considered unclean and destined to an eternity separated from God?

So what has really changed in his life? What was different about his afternoon from his morning?

Only two things were different, as far as Scripture tells us. First, he has met Jesus. And second, he can see.

I am totally convinced that the man born blind took a few moments to think about his day so far. And then, I believe he put a huge grin on his face and began walking around like a first-time tourist! He might even have done a little skipping, and maybe even a little jumping.

But I don't think he felt bad about his day in the least!

Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" "Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him." Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you." Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him. [John 9:35-38, NIV]

This last time when asked, the man born blind said, "Lord!"

And that is how almost everyone for more than 2,000 years has found a personal relationship with Jesus. They started out thinking he was a man, but worth listening to. Then, after hearing him and watching him work, they conclude that he is a prophet or some significant spiritual leader with wise words. And finally, after walking around and looking at life through new eyes, they decide he is who he says he is, and they worship him as Lord.

...a man
...a prophet of some god
...a man from HIS God
...LORD!

That is someone worth meeting, isn't it? A man, a prophet of some god, a man sent by the One True God, and now his Lord? What a progression! What a process! What a day!

It sure worked for me.

So what kind of day do you think you are about to have?

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