

55 - Choosing Hope

John 9:35-10:4

Not only will sheep recognize the voice of the true Shepherd, but the true Shepherd knows which sheep belong to Him. He knows them "by name." In John's description of Jesus' encounter with a man born blind, we observe this truth in action. On His way out of the temple Jesus saw a particular beggar and stopped. Now there would have been many beggars lining the entrance to the temple because people tended to give to the poor on their way in to worship. But there was something about this man, this blind beggar, that caused Jesus to stop. Thankfully He told us what it was. He said he knew that the Father had been at work in that man's heart (Jn 9:3-4). He stopped "so that the works of God in him might be revealed" (literal). That means God prepared that man to believe in Jesus. He was spiritually receptive. Though blind to natural light, he had become ready to see spiritual light. In other words, the Shepherd stopped when He recognized one of His sheep. Even before the man believed in Him, Jesus "knew his name." The question we want to answer today is, how did that happen? What work did God do in that man to prepare him to believe in Jesus? We ask because we want to know how He prepares us.

Those who do not see (Jn 9:39)

When Jesus told this man who He was, the man immediately believed and worshipped Him. Then while he may still have been kneeling at His feet, Jesus said this to the Pharisees who were watching nearby:

"For judgment I came into this world, so that the ones who do not see may see, and the ones who see may become blind" (literal) (Jn 9:39).

To understand this statement we need to identify the group of people Jesus called those "who do not see" and the group He called those "who see." Obviously those "who do not see" are not people who are physically blind. In this case it was someone who had been physically blind who had spiritual sight, while many with physical eyesight were spiritually blind. Jesus' presence had exposed which was which.

The idea of "eyes that see" and "ears that hear" is a theme that goes all the way back in Israel's history to Moses (Dt 29:4) and was later used by the prophets (Isa 6:9-10; Jer 5:21; Eze 12:2). Spiritual blindness or deafness occurs when someone refuses to see or hear something God is trying to reveal. Both images point to the humility within a person which allows God to bring correction or teach a new truth. With this man whose eyesight had been restored in front of him, Jesus explained to those Pharisees the attitude which had made it possible for him to respond in faith. And that attitude was simply this: The man knew he was "blind," beyond the blindness of his physical disability. That means He was humble enough to recognize that he didn't have a genuine relationship with God and honest enough to admit it.

Another term Jesus used to describe this same quality was "poor in spirit" (Mt 5:3). To be "poor in spirit" means a person understands their own spiritual poverty; they know they don't have a right relationship with God. On another occasion Jesus said it was "those who are sick" who need a physician (Mt 9:12). He was saying it is those who know they are spiritually sick who are willing to receive God's remedy. On another occasion He said it was to "infants" that God had revealed hidden truth, not to the "wise and intelligent" (Mt 11:25). To enter God's kingdom people must "become like children" (Mt 18:3). All of these images point to the same attitude: humility. To know what we don't know and be honest about what we don't have is the first step to gaining it. It allows us to look for help and be willing to receive it when God sends it. The person who feels no such need, who believes they already know all they need to know and has all that's necessary, is not open to more, is not willing to accept correction and is likely to reject anything different from what they already have. Someone like that tends to say, "The old is good enough" (Lk 5:39).

So Jesus' statement about "those who do not see" and "those who see" was meant to expose the difference between those who felt they already knew all they needed to know and those who were painfully aware of how little they knew. To a man who knew he was spiritually blind, Jesus revealed the truth about Himself. To those who proudly assumed they saw all they needed to see, encountering Jesus left them under greater judgment. When they rejected Him they damaged themselves spiritually. They became less able to "see" than before.

The gift of suffering

As much as we try to avoid suffering, it is a strange fact that suffering seems to deepen people. It's in the difficult times that most of us finally ask the hard questions about the reality of God or the purpose of life. Suffering either causes us to grow bitter toward God or presses us to become serious about knowing Him. It won't let us stay neutral. It drives us to make hard choices; it forces us to go one direction or the other; it demands that we find real help, either from God or some other source.

As painful as it may be, suffering, particularly prolonged suffering, carries within itself a gift: It tends to loosen our grip on this world. For some that means they despair and long to die, but in others it opens their eyes to "see" the next world. They begin to cling to God's promises of a future world in which there is no suffering.



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A man born blind

The frustration of being born blind must have been miserable at times. But apparently in that man, his suffering deepened his longing for eternal life, to the point that he didn't care what others thought of him anymore. We see that by the way he responded to those who attacked Jesus (Jn 9: 24-34). He was willing to lose everything to be loyal to Jesus. No one stood with him through the ordeal. He was rejected by his parents, his neighbors, the Pharisees and the highest religious court in Israel. There was nothing anyone could do to make him renounce Jesus.

That would never have happened if during the years of disability he had grown bitter toward God. Who could have blamed if the apparent unfairness of his lot in life had soured him. So many of the rewards of life had been denied him, and he must have asked many times, "O God, why me?" But at some point he chose to stop because a bitter man would never have reacted the way he did. A bitter man would never have asked, "Who is he, Lord, that I may believe in Him?" (v36). That's the cry of a humble heart, of someone longing for more of God, of someone who didn't care if his family, neighbors or spiritual leaders rejected him. That's the cry of someone who had stopped blaming God, if he ever started, and had turned to Him as his hope.

Hope (Ro 8:18-25)

The word "hope," when used in the Bible, often has a very special meaning. It looks into the future and sees the blessings God has in store for us when we finally meet Him face to face. You might say that "hope" is faith, which it is, focused on that glorious future. So hope arises when we believe God's promises about eternal life. It waits eagerly for the resurrection and the life that follows in which there will be no sickness, sorrow or sin. It knows that never again will there be violence, cruelty, injustice, disease or disabilities of any kind. And because hope really believes that, hope takes the bitterness out of suffering and allows it to prepare our heart for our Shepherd.

I believe hope is a choice. Here's how the apostle Paul saw that choice: Romans 8:18-25. Notice: Paul doesn't say some believers must suffer and "groan" while others have it easy. He says we all groan waiting in hope for the day when our bodies will be resurrected, and we can enter into the full glory of God.

Responding to suffering

Put yourself in that man's shoes. If you or I had been born with that disability, how would we respond? Would we let it loosen our grip on this world and turn us toward the promises of God, or would we accuse Him of injustice, of failing to keep His promises and of ignoring our pleas of help? The more you think about it the more amazing his response appears. What would we do if we weren't healed? What if a loved one continued to struggle indefinitely? What if the goals we worked for all our life never materialized, at least to the degree for which we prayed and dreamed? If we're honest with ourselves these sorts of disappointments touch all of us in one way or another. The question is: When suffering comes which way do we go? Toward God or away from Him. Do we fall back or cling tighter? Do we stop believing or turn in hope toward the day when we'll see Him face to face?

The answer each of us gives to this question is really quite personal and can be hidden from the eyes of others. We can cover our negative feelings toward God and pretend to serve Him. But we can't hide our heart from Him. Listen to what David said in this Psalm: "O Lord, You have searched me and known [me]. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, and are intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, Behold, O Lord, You know it all" (Ps 139:1-4).

David learned that God knew all about him while he was still a young boy. Out of eight brothers, God selected him to become Israel's next king, because as Samuel the prophet said, "God [sees] not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1Sa 16:7).

And because God knows the human heart, He pointed David out to Samuel and a blind beggar to Jesus. Whenever He finds a humble heart He prepares it for more of Him. The integrity and depth of resolve that we see in this man born blind seldom develops in someone who lives an easy life. When everything is successful and pleasant, who among us looks for something else? But when life is difficult, some people will turn and hope in God, and He knows the name of every one of them.

Another way

In order to bring us to Himself, God must first convince us we need Him. He must loosen our grip on this world and create in us a longing to be with Him forever. Is it possible for that to happen in someone without having to suffer first? Yes, it is. The Word of God tells us all we need to know for salvation. If we choose to humble ourselves and believe His Word, it will perform the deep surgery our hearts require. It will convict us of sin, show us the foolishness of living for the pleasures of this world, reveal the promises of eternal life and invite us to believe in Jesus' death and resurrection. We don't have to suffer in order to learn those things; all that God requires is the willingness to humble ourselves and believe. He'll do the rest.



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Questions

- 1) Have you had to suffer through some sort of hardship for a long time? How did that struggle affect your relationship with God? Did you draw closer or pull away? Where are you now?
- 2) Do you ever think about heaven? Does it seem real to you? Has it loosened your “grip” on this world? If it has, tell us how.