

THE MAN BORN BLIND

John 9

In this lesson not only the miracle itself but the argument to which it led give us important instruction. The teacher should read all the notes and try to give his pupils as much as possible and to impress the chapter as a whole upon their minds.

Doctrinal Points

Afflictions are not punishments for sins. They can, however, be opportunities for the development of character.

To be born blind, spiritually, means to have been deprived by outer circumstance of the opportunity to learn and understand divine truth.

There are no defective souls.

Notes for Parents

You know that there are some Christian churches whose doctrines teach that because Adam sinned, all his descendants are born sinners and will go to hell unless their sin is removed by baptism, and some churches also teach that all sickness and misfortune is inflicted upon man by the Lord as a punishment for sin. But this is not at all what Christ Himself taught.

Our chapter for today answers our natural questions about why apparently good people should have afflictions to bear. The Lord here tells us that it is in order that “the works of God should be made manifest” in them, and in John 6:29 He tells us what the works of God are: “This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.” Read the story of the blind man in our chapter for today and you will see how this came true for him.

There is a much more serious kind of blindness than physical blindness. Even though a good person may have to go through this earthly life without seeing the beauties of nature or the faces of

loved ones, we can be sure that as soon as such a person puts off the physical body, he will be able to see, because his soul has always been able to see. Our souls see when we understand and accept the truth. We say to a naughty child, “Can’t you see how much happier you would be if you would only try to be good?” And the only reason the child does not see it is because he does not want to. This is the lesson which the conduct of the Pharisees in our chapter teaches us. They refused to see the truth because it was contrary to their selfish pride and ambition.

But the blind man was humble and anxious to know what was right so that he could do it. When we read that the Lord saw him, we know that He saw his heart and his thoughts. So the Lord could give him sight. He did give him physical sight, but He gave him the more important sight also. See how the man’s understanding of the Lord grew as he was led to think about his experience. First he knew Him only as “a man that is called Jesus”; then as he had to answer the questions of the Pharisees, he came to see that He must be a prophet, and then that such power could come only from God; and finally he was ready to see that Jesus was actually the Son of God, the promised Messiah who was God Himself in the flesh, and worshiped Him. The Lord must rise in this way in our minds if the works of God are to be made manifest in us. Outward affliction may be the means of bringing us in touch with the Lord, because it can make us humble and eager for the help which He always stands ready to give to those who will trust in Him. Affliction is not a punishment for sin, and neither does the Lord hold anyone responsible for ignorance for which he is not to blame.

Primary

Even little children can form an idea of what blindness represents and can understand the meaning of the story if it is carefully explained. Discuss the meaning of the Lord’s words in verse 41.

Do you remember the story about the man at the pool of Bethesda, who had been sick for thirty-eight years and did not think he

could help himself to become well? The Lord told him to try, and then healed him when he obeyed.

Today we have a story about a man who really could not help himself.

What was this man's trouble?

How long had he been blind?

What did the disciples ask the Lord?

What did He tell them?

How did He heal the man?

The Pharisees again objected to the healing.

At first they refused to believe that the man had been healed.

Then they tried to tell him that Jesus was a sinner.

But the man felt sure that only God could have such power.

So the Pharisees put him out of the synagogue.

Then Jesus came to him again and told him who He was.

The man believed Him and worshiped Him.

See if you can think what verse 41 means.

This miracle, like many of the Lord's miracles, was performed on the sabbath day, and so the Pharisees found fault. They were always looking for faults in the Lord because they did not want people to follow Him.

When your mother asks you to do something, you often say, "Why?" Then when she explains why, sometimes you say, "I see," and do what she asks. But sometimes, if it is something you don't want to do, you pretend you don't see why, even if you really do. That is what the Lord is showing us in this story. Our minds, as well as our eyes, see. The Lord makes it possible for our minds to see what we ought to do, and so when we don't do it, we are to blame.

Junior

This is a good lesson through which to teach the Juniors the importance of being honest with themselves and recognizing the folly of the "know-it-all" attitude into which children of this age so often begin to slip. The open mind and the humble heart and the sincere effort to learn more and more all the time about what is right should be presented as essential virtues.

In our lesson for today the Lord had come to Jerusalem again, this time for the feast of tabernacles, the harvest feast. He had been teaching in the temple and arguing with His enemies and, as usual, the argument ended by their trying to destroy Him, this time by casting stones at Him. But, as on several other occasions, they had no power to injure Him because His work in the world was not finished. The last verse of chapter 8 says: “Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.”

As He passed by, whom did He see?

What did His disciples ask?

What did He answer?

There is a very important lesson for us here. Some people think that all sicknesses and misfortunes are the direct result of sin. Here the Lord teaches us that this is not necessarily true. Sometimes they are. For example, when we overeat, we may be sick as a direct result. But many good people have sicknesses for which neither they nor their parents are to blame. The Lord tells us the reason: “that the works of God should be made manifest.” No sickness or misfortune is ever permitted by the Lord to come to a person unless the Lord sees that it can be the means of leading to good for him and for others. Many people have become great through their efforts to rise above physical handicaps, people who might otherwise have settled down into very ordinary lives. An invalid who is patient and cheerful and interested in other people’s problems often becomes the friend and counselor of many well people.

In the case of the man in our chapter, the Lord used his affliction to teach the world deep lessons, which we all need. He healed this man, as He healed many others, and when you are older you will study the spiritual meaning of the details of this particular miracle. But some of the lessons which resulted from the healing you can understand now.

On what day of the week did this healing take place?

What did the Pharisees decide from this?

Whom did they ask to confirm the miracle?

Why were the man's parents afraid to speak up for the Lord?
Why was the man himself not afraid?
What argument did he use?
What did they do to him?
What did the Lord tell him about Himself?
What did the man do then?

The last three verses of our chapter help us to understand what was behind this argument between the man and the Pharisees, and also what is meant by blindness. This is one of the places in the Bible where the internal or spiritual sense comes out into the letter. In fact we should know from our common speech that blindness pictures ignorance of the truth, for we often say a person is blind when we are not talking about physical sight at all, and we all say "I see," when we mean "I understand."

The scribes and Pharisees, were proud of their possession of the Scriptures. They claimed to understand them and to be the only ones who could tell others what the Scriptures taught. But when the Lord faced them with things in the Scriptures which they did not want to obey, they refused to look at the truth. The Lord always spoke the truth of the Scriptures because, as we have seen, He was the Word made flesh. So all His life and teaching came as a judgment, "that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind." Those whose sight He opened to see the truth were people like the blind man in our story, who were willing to accept and obey the truth when it was shown them. And those who were made blind by His coming were those who pretended to understand more than others but who closed their minds against any truth which condemned their selfish ways.

We should remember this lesson whenever we are listening to advice or correction. We, too, often try to close our eyes to unwelcome truth about ourselves.

Intermediate

Center the lesson on the correspondences in the miracle itself, and be sure the meaning of the miracle is clear before you go on to the other lessons of the

chapter. Point out that the crucial difference between the blind man and the Pharisees was in the matter of willingness to accept the Lord.

The Gospel of John contains the account of only eight miracles of the Lord as against more than twice as many in each of the other Gospels. But only two of the eight—the feeding of the five thousand and the Lord’s walking on the sea—are found in any of the other Gospels. And, as we should expect, the six which are unique with John are of deep importance. We are studying four of them.

The one we have for today gives us many things to think about. Even people who know nothing of the heavenly doctrines know that blindness pictures ignorance, because the word is so used in our common speech. When something happens unexpectedly which we immediately realize we ought to have foreseen, we say: “How blind I have been!” The man in our chapter had been blind from his birth; that is, his condition pictures ignorance which comes from the circumstances in which we are born and brought up. We can easily see that people brought up, for instance, in the interior of Australia might never even have heard of the Lord or the Word. But we do not have to go so far from home as that. There are people all around us who are ignorant of the Word because no one has ever tried to teach them, and there are many more who are blind to its real meaning because they have been brought up in false ideas of it. This was true of the people of the Lord’s time.

When we read that the Lord “saw” anyone, we know that it means not just that He saw the person sitting there before Him, but that He saw all that was in his heart. The heart of this blind beggar was humble and good, and his mind contained some knowledge of the letter of the Word although, because he had been taught false ideas about it, he was blind to its real meaning. The ground upon which he sat pictures the church in man’s heart, the goodness in a person founded on belief in the letter of the Scriptures as coming from God, whatever its meaning might be. The saliva which proceeded from the Lord’s own mouth represents genuine

truth from the letter of the Word, and the clay which was formed out of soil by means of it represents goodness in the man's heart reshaped by this bit of genuine truth. When this was applied to the man's eyes, he was told to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. A pool represents truth gathered in the memory. When he washed, he came seeing.

What does this mean in actual life? Let us think of a person brought up with a knowledge of the Bible but with false ideas of its meaning. He is a good person and tries to live as well as he knows how, in spite of his ignorance. Then one day something comes to him which he immediately feels to be new and really true. It may be something said to him by a friend (each of us can be this kind of missionary) or it may be a new thought growing out of something that has happened. He goes to his Bible to see if this new thought will help him to understand things there which have been dark to him, and he finds that he suddenly sees what they mean.

This is the meaning of the miracle itself. But there are many other lessons connected with it in our chapter. The question asked by the disciples in verse 2 is a very common question in people's minds. Are sickness, handicaps of various sorts, and misfortunes punishments for sin in the person who suffers or in others close to him? We know, of course, that some sicknesses and reverses are directly due to our own misdeeds; we can almost always recognize the source of these. But the Lord says this is by no means true of all our trials. In the case of the person who is doing wrong, the Lord often has to permit his wrongdoing to result in unpleasant consequences in order to stop him short and make him think about the nature of what he is doing. And in the case of a good person, trials of various sorts are permitted to come when the Lord sees that meeting them will strengthen and deepen his character. Few of us can stand uninterrupted good fortune without becoming lazy and self-satisfied. In either case it is true that affliction is sometimes permitted to come to a person "that the works of God should be made manifest in him."

The way in which the man's neighbors received the miracle shows us the difference in people. Some believed it and some did not. No one is ever convinced by a miracle against his will. And the rest of the chapter tells us—through the dealings of the Pharisees with the man—to what lengths a person who is selfish and satisfied with himself will go to discredit facts which do not agree with his own opinions and way of life. Keep this chapter in mind, for as you grow older you will find it illustrated again and again in the arguments and conduct of those who do not want to believe in the Lord. They completely brush aside the experience of the thousands whom the Lord has enabled to see, finally calling them fools and refusing to associate with them.

But fortunately those who have once recognized the Lord and come to see Him as the Word made flesh have reached a security and a firm standing ground which cannot be shaken. And truth is the final judge. Those who acknowledge their own ignorance and look to the Lord for light receive more and more from Him, but those who reject the Lord and consider themselves wise really become blind, and their blindness is their own doing. This is what is meant by the last three verses of our chapter. The Pharisees condemned themselves. Read John 3:18-21.

Basic Correspondences

blindness = ignorance
the Lord's saliva = truth from the letter of the Word

Senior

This can be made a very important lesson for the Seniors if it helps them to recognize and reject the tendency to “brush off” truth which they do not want to obey. It will also help them to understand some of the trends in the world they are about to enter.

One of the things Swedenborg tells us about the Word is that it is like a man clothed, but with his face and hands bare [SS 55]. This means that although for the most part the letter of the Word conceals rather than reveals the internal meaning, there are enough

places in it where the internal clearly appears so that anyone approaching it with a genuine desire for the Lord's instruction will see its quality and find in it strength and help. Our chapter for today is one of the "bare" passages. This does not mean that there are not depths of meaning in it which cannot be seen on the surface, but it does mean that no one who reads it with an open mind can fail to see some of its spiritual application.

The key to this spiritual meaning is found in the last three verses of the chapter, which show us clearly that the blindness with which the Lord is really concerned is not physical but spiritual blindness, blindness to divine truth. If we study the chapter with this in mind, we shall find several deep and important lessons in it.

The man in the story had been blind from birth. He represents those who for one reason or another have never had an opportunity to learn and understand divine truth. The question of the disciples and the Lord's answer in verses 2 to 5 help our thinking about all the trials and handicaps which come to good people. The Christian Church over the centuries developed some terrible doctrines which are here plainly shown to be false: the doctrine of "original sin," for example, which declares that the sin of Adam is imputed to all his descendants and can be removed only by the sacrament of baptism, so that all infants who die without being baptized as well as all people in the world of other than the Christian faith are condemned to hell after death. The Lord said that no blame attached to the man because of his blindness.

The Lord's method of giving the man his sight is explained in the passage from the writings at the end of this lesson. You will understand it if you think of the attitude of the man after his healing in comparison with the attitude of his neighbors, his parents, other people, and finally the Pharisees. The man himself knew what had happened to him and was honest enough to face the facts squarely and brave enough to stand by his new knowledge whatever the consequences to himself might be. It is only such people who can be shown divine truth—who can really see it. Follow the man through the chapter and see how his understanding

grew and deepened. First he said, “I am he.” He realized that this thing had really happened to him, that he was the same person who had so short a time before been blind and hopeless. Then he said, “a man named Jesus” had healed him. He knew only the Lord’s name and thought of Him as merely a stranger passing by. Then, as the questioning set him thinking of the nature of what had happened to him, he realized that this was no ordinary man, and he said, “He is a prophet.” Goaded further, he became confirmed in the belief that the power could have come only from God, and he dared to use the very teachings of the Scriptures to contradict the judgment of the Pharisees (verses 30-33). So they put him out of the synagogue—excommunicated him—and then, freed from the last vestige of control by the falsities in which he had been brought up, he found himself again in the presence of the Lord, the Lord told him who He really was, and the man said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. Here, you see, was a Jew to whom the Lord was able to make the same clear declaration of His deity which He had made to the Gentile Samaritan woman. But the man had to break with the synagogue first. Read here Matthew 9:16-17.

With this history in mind go back to the Lord’s answer to the disciples in verse 3: “Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him”; then note something which the Lord had previously said to the people when they asked Him: “What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?” His answer was, “This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.” All the trials and afflictions which come to good people are permitted by the Lord because He sees that meeting them will bring these particular individuals into states of humility and trust which not only will enable Him to help them but will also enable them to believe in Him more deeply and intelligently.

Now consider the states of the others in this story. Even some of the man’s neighbors who had seen him daily preferred to imagine that this man who could see must be someone else. His own parents,

who could not deny his identity or the facts in the case, were afraid to face these facts and reshape their lives according to them. And the others, when they found that they could not deny the facts, chose to attribute the Lord's power to the devil, just as they had once before (Matthew 12:24).

So the lesson of the chapter is summed up at the end. The judgment which the coming of the Lord brought to the world was not a judgment imposed on men by Him. It was a new revelation of divine truth on the most external level, so that anyone who really wanted the truth could see it. Those who did not want any truth which they found inconvenient to accept were free to reject it, but in rejecting it they rejected the Lord and condemned themselves. Read John 3:19. As you face your life in the adult world, this is the choice which is offered you. The Lord has given us the truth and has shown us plainly the consequences of both choices. Each of us has to decide for himself whether to believe the Lord or to believe only what suits one's own selfish convenience.

Adult

The teacher will probably have to choose which of the topics covered in this chapter will be most helpful to his particular class for discussion. They are all vital questions: the spiritual meaning of blindness, the cause of afflictions, the necessity of belief in the Lord, and our responsibility for our choice.

The fact that this miracle and its consequences are described in so much detail suggests that the lessons it teaches are complex and far-reaching. We realize the truth of this even in reading the first three verses of the chapter. Here was a man born blind. Why? People are always asking why afflictions are permitted, especially to those apparently innocent. Many, contemplating the evils and the sorrows of the world, are tempted to deny the existence of a loving God. Others, like the disciples in the story, believing in God, can find no other explanation for afflictions than that they are the direct or indirect punishment for sin; they are merely in doubt as to whether the blame belongs to the individual or to his

environment. But the Lord tells us: “Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.” In the letter this points to the fact that the history of this man, as of all the people of that day, had been so guided by divine providence that the account of his healing might serve as a lesson to all future generations. But there is a deeper and more universal meaning than this. No one is held responsible for the evil tendencies which he inherits or for the falsities in which he is brought up. The conditions in which he is born, the circumstances by which he is surrounded are but the setting of his life work. Afflictions, like any other circumstances, are opportunities for the development of character—“that the works of God should be made manifest.” We are individually responsible for what we do with the opportunities given us, for acknowledging and struggling against the evil tendencies in our hearts and for accepting the truth and following it as fast as we see it.

The character of the man of our story appears clearly to us as we read the chapter, but the Lord knew it before He performed the miracle. The very first verse reads, “And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth.” Whenever we read that the Lord “saw,” we know that it means that He saw the heart and mind as well as the outward condition. He saw in the blind man the humility and goodness and the desire for truth which would make it possible for him to see. His affliction had made him humble and gentle instead of proud and stiff-necked like the Pharisees. In John 6:29 we read: “This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.” The heart of the blind man was in a state open to belief; so the “works of God” could be made manifest in him. This is the object of everything which the Lord permits to come into our lives. Divine providence watches over us at every turn, seeking to check us when we are going in the wrong way, to show us our evils and our weakness, and to open our hearts and minds to Christ’s way as the only way of happiness.

Blindness represents ignorance. We use the word in this way today—it is one of the simplest correspondences to illustrate. For

example, we say “I see,” when we mean, “I understand.” We say “How blind I have been!” when we have been ignorant of the course of events leading up to a given circumstance. We call a person “short-sighted” when he is ignorant of the consequences which are likely to follow a particular course of action. The man of our story had been blind from birth. This makes him a picture of one ignorant of spiritual truth, not from any unwillingness or laziness of his own, but because he has never had an opportunity to learn. In performing this miracle the Lord made use of three things: clay representing good—the “good ground” of the parable of the sower—which the Lord saw in the man’s heart; saliva, water from the Lord’s own mouth, representing a divine truth expressed in a form adapted to the external states of men, “truths from the sense of the letter of the Word” (AE 239¹⁹); and the pool of Siloam in which the man washed off the clay representing the removal of false ideas by means of truth from the letter of the Word. This pool, like the pool of Bethesda, pictures the knowledge of the letter of the Word which we have stored up in our minds. It was at that time pure, fresh spring water and part of the water supply of Jerusalem, a symbol of the knowledge of the letter of the Word cleansing and satisfying the Holy City of the soul. Such knowledge, as we have seen before, is stored up by the Lord in each one of us, but one who has not had true spiritual instruction may not recognize its use and value; he may think of it as mere man-made morality and not connect it with the Lord and heaven. Until we make a living contact with the Lord and begin to set our lives in order according to the Word because He commands it, we remain spiritually blind. But once we begin to see, our experience leads to certainty.

The rest of the story shows in a wonderful way this development of belief. In the first place nothing that the Pharisees could say could outweigh the man’s experience. They sought first to deny the fact of the miracle. Then they tried to discredit the means by which it was performed. And finally they called the man an ignorant sinner, and cast him out. The modern Pharisee is equally im-

pervious to truth. When he comes in contact with one who has had a deep spiritual experience, he first tries to disprove it, then to “explain” it by natural or by unworthy causes, and finally he dismisses it altogether by calling the person a fool. He refuses to see the truth simply because he does not want to see it. But the man in our story was not to be shaken. He had his experience. He knew what he had been and what he was now: “One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see.” When one’s eyes have been opened by experience to see spiritual truth, one knows its reality, and this knowledge gives him the power to penetrate the shallowness of the arguments which would reduce his experience to a mere natural occurrence.

Moreover, opposition served to clarify the man’s own understanding of his experience and finally led him to recognize its true source. We find that he first spoke of the Lord as “a man that is called Jesus.” But the questions of the Pharisees made him consider seriously who this man was, and presently he said of Him, “He is a prophet.” Then as the Pharisees tried to discredit the Lord, the man saw more and more clearly that He was from heaven, and finally, when He again appeared, the man needed only His own assurance that He was the Son of God, “And he said, Lord, I believe. And he worshipped him.”

The same can be true with us, once we have had a real experience of the illuminating power of the Word. Opposition—whether from other people or from worldly reasonings in our own minds, which are also “Pharisees”—merely serves to stimulate and to clarify our thought about our experiences, and ultimately we accept the Lord as God with us. People today often start with the idea that Jesus was a man like other men, but if they continue to study His teachings with a desire to learn how to live, they are inevitably led to recognize Him first as a prophet, then as in some way divine, and finally as God Himself. Men today who, like the Pharisees, are unwilling at heart to recognize any authority higher than themselves treat the record of the Lord’s life and teachings just as the Pharisees themselves treated the Lord and His work, although

many of them claim to be followers of truth, just as the Pharisees claimed to be disciples of Moses. Of all such professed followers of the truth who reject the Lord from pride and self-will He says: “If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth.”

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Apocalypse Explained, n. 239¹⁹: “Why the Lord did this no one understands unless he knows the internal or spiritual sense of the Word; in that sense, by ‘a man blind from birth’ those are meant who are born outside of the church and who therefore could not know anything about the Lord, or be taught out of the Word. ‘The clay that the Lord made from spittle on the ground’ signifies reformation by means of truths from the sense of the letter of the Word; ‘the ground’ is the church where the Word is; ‘clay’ is the ultimate Divine forming; ‘anointing the eyes of the blind with it’ is to give thereby the understanding of truth; ‘the pool of Siloam’ also signifies the Word in the letter; ‘to be washed there’ is to be purified from falsities and evils.”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. Where was the pool of Bethesda? *Jerusalem*
- P. How many porches did it have? *five*
- P. Who lay in the porches? *sick people*
- P. Why did they lie there? *hoping to be healed*
- J. How long had one man been sick? *thirty-eight years*
- P. What did the Lord ask him? *do you want to be well?*
- J. What did he answer? *no one helps me*
- P. What did the Lord tell him to do? *rise, take bed, walk*
- P. What happened when he obeyed? *healed*
- J. What did the Lord tell the man later? *sin no more*
- P. In our story today how long had the man been blind? *since birth*
- J. What did the disciples ask the Lord about him? *who sinned?*
- J. What did the Lord tell them? *no one*
- P. How was the man’s sight restored? *clay, washing in pool*
- P. What was the first objection to the miracle? *done on the sabbath*
- J. What did their questions first lead the man to decide about the one who had healed him? *a prophet*
- J. Why were the man’s parents afraid to praise the Lord openly? *fear of being cast out*

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- J. When they could not deny the facts, what did his enemies say about the Lord? *he is a sinner*
- J. What did the man answer? *“Never since the world began . . .”*
- P. How was he punished? *cast out*
- J. What did the Lord then tell him? *He was Son of God*
- P. How did the man respond? *worshiped Him*
- J. Why did the Lord say He came into the world? *for judgment*
- J. What did the Pharisees ask? *are we blind?*
- J. What did He tell them? *if you were . . . no guilt*
- I. What does blindness represent? *ignorance*
- S. What vital choice in life must each one of us make? *whether to believe the Lord or not*