

Exposition of the Gospel of John CHAPTER 31

CHRIST AND THE BLIND BEGGAR

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Transcript

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John 9:1-7

Below will be found an Analysis of the passage which is to be before us:— 1. Jesus beholds the man born blind: verse 1. 2. The disciples' question: verse 2. 3. Christ's answer: verses 3-5. 4. Christ anoints the blind man: verse 6. 5. Christ sends the man to the Pool: verse 7. 6. The man's prompt obedience: verse 7. 7. The miracle completed: verse 7. That there is an intimate connection between John 8 and John 9 is manifest from the first word of the latter, and when the Holy Spirit has thus linked two things together it behooves us to pay close attention to the law of comparison and contrast. The little conjunction at the opening of John 9 is very appropriate, for in the previous verse we read of Jesus hiding Himself from those who took up stones to cast at Him; while in John 9:1 we behold a man blind from his birth, unable to see the passing Savior. That these two chapters are closely related is further seen by a comparison of John 8:12 and John 9:5: in both Christ is revealed, specifically, as "the light of the world." As we read carefully the opening verses of the chapter now before us and compare them with the contents of John 8 it will be found that they present to us a series of contrasts. For example, in John 8 we behold Christ as "the light" exposing the darkness, but in John 9 He communicates sight. In John 8 the Light is despised and rejected, in John 9 He is received and worshipped. In John 8 the Jews are seen stooping down—to pick up stones; in John 9 Christ is seen stooping down—to make anointing clay. In John 8 Christ hides Himself from the Jews; in John 9 He reveals Himself to the blind beggar. In John 8 we have a company in whom the Word has no place (verse 37); in John 9 is one who responds promptly to the Word (verse 7). In John 8 Christ, inside the Temple, is called a demoniac (verse 48); in John 9, outside the Temple, He is owned as Lord (verse 36). The central truth of John 8 is the Light testing human responsibility; in John 9 the central truth is God acting in sovereign grace after human responsibility has failed. This last and most important contrast we must ponder at length. In John 8 a saddening and humbling scene was before us. There Christ was manifested as "the light" and woeful were the objects that it shone upon. It reminds us very much of that which is presented right at the beginning of God's Word. Genesis 1:2 introduces us to a ruined earth, with darkness enveloping it. The very first thing God said there was, "Let there be light," and

we are told, "There was light." And upon what did the light shine? what did its beams reveal? It shone upon an earth that had become "without form and void"; its beams revealed a scene of desolation and death. There was no sun shining by day nor moon by night. There was no vegetation, no moving creature, no life. A pall of death hung over the earth. The light only made manifest the awful ruin which sin (here, the sin of Satan) had wrought, and the need for the sovereign goodness and almighty power of God to intervene and produce life and fertility. So it was in John 8. Christ as the Light of the world discovers not only the state of Israel, but too, the common atheism of man. He affirmed His power to make free the bondslaves of sin (John 8:32): but His auditors denied that they were in bondage. He spoke the words of the Father (John 8:38): but they neither understood nor believed Him. He told them that their characters were formed under the influence of the Devil and that they desired it to be so (John 8:44): in reply they blasphemously charged Him with having a demon. He declared that He was the Object who had rejoiced the heart of Abraham (John 8:56): and they scoffed at Him. He told them He was the great and eternal "I am" (John 8:58): and they picked up stones to cast at Him. All of this furnishes us with a graphic but accurate picture of the character of the natural man the world over. The mind of the sinner is enmity against God, and he hates the Christ of God. He may be very religious, and left to himself, he may appear to be quite pious. But let the light of God be turned upon him, let the bubble of his self-righteousness be punctured, let his awful depravity be exposed, let the claims of Christ be pressed upon him, and he is not only skeptical, but furious. What, then, was Christ's response? Did He turn His back on the whole human race? Did He return at once to heaven, thoroughly disgusted at His reception in this world? What wonder if the Father had there and then called His Son back to the glory which He had left. Ah! but God is the God of all grace, and grace needed the dark background of sin so that its bright lustre might shine the more resplendently. Yet grace would be misunderstood and unappreciated were it shown to all alike, for in that case men would deem it a right to which they were entitled, a meet compensation for God allowing the race to fall into sin. O the folly of human reasoning! Grace would be no more grace if fallen men had any claims upon it. God is under no obligations to men: every title to His favor was forfeited forever when they, in the person of their representative, rebelled against Him. Therefore does He say, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy" (Rom. 9:15). It is this side of the truth which receives such striking illustration in the passage which is to be before us. In John 8 we are shown the utter ruin of the natural man-despising God's goodness, hating His Christ. Here in John 9 we behold the Lord dealing in grace, acting according to His sovereign benignity. This, this is the central contrast pointed by these two chapters. In the former it is the Light testing human responsibility; in the latter, the Light acting in sovereign mercy after the failure of human responsibility had been demonstrated. In the one we see the sin of man exposed, in the other we behold the grace of God displayed. "And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth" (John 9:1). That which is dominant in this passage is intimated in the opening verse. The sovereignty of Divine grace is exemplified at once in the actions of our Lord and in the character of the one upon whom His favors were bestowed. The Savior saw a certain man; the man did not see Him, for he had no capacity to do so, being blind. Nor did the blind man call upon Christ to have mercy upon him. The Lord was the one to take the initiative. It is ever thus when sovereign grace acts. But let us admire separately each detail in the picture here. "And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man." How blessed. The Savior was not occupied with His own sorrows to the exclusion of those of others. The absence of appreciation and the presence of hatred in almost all around Him, did not check that blessed One in His unwearied service to others, still less did He abandon it. Love "suffereth long," and "beareth all things" (1 Cor. 13). And Christ was Love incarnate, therefore did the stream of Divine goodness flow on unhindered by all man's wickedness. How this perfection of Christ rebukes our imperfections, our selfishness! "He saw a man which was blind from his birth." What a pitiable object! To lose an arm or a leg is a serious handicap, but

the loss of sight is far more so. And this man had never seen. From how many enjoyments was he cut off! Into what a narrow world did his affliction confine him! And blindness, like all other bodily afflictions, is one of the effects of sin. Not always so directly, but always so remotely. Had Adam never disobeyed his Maker the human family had been free from disease and suffering. Let us learn then to hate sin with godly hatred as the cause of all our sorrows; and let the sight of suffering ones serve to remind us of what a horrible thing sin is. But let us also remind ourselves that there is something infinitely more awful than physical blindness and temporal suffering, namely, sickness of soul and a blinded heart. "He saw a man which was blind from his birth." Accurately did he portray the terrible condition of the natural man. The sinner is blind spiritually. His understanding is darkened and his heart is blinded (Eph. 4:18). Because of this he cannot see the awfulness of his condition: he cannot see his imminent danger: he cannot see his need of a Savior—"Except a man be born again he cannot see" (John 3:3). Such an one needs more than light; he needs the capacity given him to see the light. It is not a matter of mending his glasses (reformation), or of correcting his vision (education and culture), or of eye ointment (religion). None of these reach, or can reach, the root of the trouble. The natural man is born blind spiritually, and a faculty missing at birth cannot be supplied by extra cultivation of the others. A "transgressor from the womb" (Isa. 48:8). shapen in iniquity and conceived in sin (Ps. 51:5), man needs a Savior from the time he draws his very first breath. Such is the condition of God's elect in their unregenerate state—"by nature the children of wrath, even as others" (Eph. 2:3). "He saw a man which was blind from his birth." The late Bishop Ryle called attention to the significant fact that the Gospels record more cases of blindness healed than that of any other one affliction. There was one deaf and dumb healed, one sick of the palsy, one sick of a fever, two instances of lepers being healed, three dead raised, but five of the blind! How this emphasizes the fact that man is in the dark spiritually. Moreover, the man in our lesson was a beggar (verse 8)—another line in the picture which so accurately portrays our state by nature. A beggar the poor sinner is: possessing nothing of his own, dependent on charity. A blind beggar—what an object of need and helplessness! Blind from his birth—altogether beyond the reach of man! "And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). How little pity these disciples seem to have had for this blind beggar, and how indifferent to the outflow of the Lord's grace. Instead of humbly and trustfully waiting to see what Christ would do, they were philosophizing. The point over which they were reasoning concerned the problem of suffering and the inequalities in the lot of human existence—points which have engaged the minds of men in every clime and age, and which apart from the light of God's Word are still unsolved. There are many who drift along unexercised by much of what goes on around them. That some should be born into this world to enter an environment of comfort and luxury, while others first see the light amid squalor and poverty; that some should start the race of mortality with a healthy body and a goodly reserve of vitality, while others should be severely handicapped with an organism that is feeble or diseased, and still others should be crippled from the womb, are phenomena which affect different people in very different ways. Many are largely unconcerned. If all is well with them, they give very little thought to the troubles of their fellows. But there are others who cannot remain indifferent, and whose minds seek an explanation to these mysteries. Why is it that some are born blind?—a mere accident it cannot be. As a punishment for sin, is the most obvious explanation. But if this be the true answer, a punishment for whose sins? "Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" Three theories were current among the philosophers and theologians of that day. The first obtained in some measure among the Babylonians, and more extensively amongst the Persians and Greeks, and that was the doctrine of reincarnation. This was the view of the Essenes and Gnostics. They held that the soul of man returned to this earth again and again, and that the law of retribution regulated its varied temporal circumstances. If in his previous earthly life a man had been guilty of grievous sins, special punishment was meted out to him

in his next earthly sojourn. In this way philosophers sought to explain the glaring inequalities among men. Those who now lived in conditions of comfort and prosperity were reaping the reward of former merit; those who were born to a life of suffering and poverty were being punished for previous sins. That this theory of re-incarnation obtained in measure even among the Jews is clear from Matthew 16:13, 14. When Christ asked His disciples, "Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?" they said, "Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elijah; and others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets" which shows that some of them thought the soul of one of the prophets was now re-incarnated in the body of Jesus of Nazareth. Further evidence that this view obtained to some extent among the Jews is supplied by the Apocrypha. In "The Wisdom of Solomon"—8:19, 20—are found these words, "Now I was a goodly child, and a goodly soul fell to my lot. Nay rather, being good, I came into a body undefiled"! But among the rabbins this theory held no place. It was so completely without scriptural support, yea, it so obviously clashed with the teaching of the Old Testament, they rejected it in toto. How then could they explain the problem of human suffering? The majority of them did so by the law of heredity. They considered that Exodus 20:5 supplied the key to the whole problem: all suffering was to be attributed to the sins of the parents. But the Old Testament ought to have warned them against such a sweeping application of Exodus 20:5. The case of Job should have at least modified their views. With some it did, and among the Pharisees a third theory, still more untenable, was formulated. Some held that a child could sin even in the womb, and Genesis 25:22 was quoted in support. It was in view of these prevailing and conflicting theories and philosophies which then obtained that the disciples put their question to the Lord: "Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" Evidently they desired to hear what He would say upon the matter. But what is the present-day application of this verse to us? Surely the reasoning of these disciples in the presence of the blind beggar points a solemn warning. Surely it tells of the danger there is of us theorizing and philosophizing while we remain indifferent to human needs. Let us beware of becoming so occupied with the problems of theology that we fail to preach the Gospel to lost souls! "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). The Lord returned a double answer to the disciples' inquiry: negatively, this man was not born blind because of sin. "Neither did this man sin nor his parents" must not be understood absolutely, but like many another sentence of Scripture has to be modified by its setting. Our Lord did not mean that this man's parents had never sinned, but that their sin was not the reason why their son had been born blind. All suffering is remotely due to sin, for if sin had not entered the world there would have been no suffering among humankind. But there is much suffering which is not due immediately to sin. Indirectly the Lord here rebukes a spirit which all of us are prone to indulge. It is so easy to assume the role of judge and pass sentence upon another. This was the sin of Job's friends, recorded for our learning and warning. The same spirit is displayed among some of the "Faith-healing" sects of our day. With them the view largely obtains that sickness is due to some sin in the life, and that where healing is withheld it is because that sin is unconfessed. But this is a very harsh and censorious judgment, and must frequently be erroneous. Moreover, it tends strongly to foster pride. If I am enjoying better health than many of my fellows, the inference would be, it is because I am not so great a sinner as they! The Lord deliver us from such reprehensible Phariseeism. "But that the works of God should be made manifest in him." Here is the positive side of our Lord's answer, and it throws some light upon the problem of suffering. God has His own wise reasons for permitting sickness and disease; oftentimes it is that He may be glorified thereby. It was so in the case of Lazarus (John 11:4). It was so in connection with the death of Peter (John 21:19). It was so in the affliction of the apostle Paul (2 Cor. 12:9). It was so with this blind beggar: he was born blind that the power of God might be evidenced in the removal of it, and that Christ might be glorified thereby. "But that the works of God should be made manifest in him." Let us not miss the present application of this

to suffering saints today. Surely this word of the Savior's contains a message of consolation to afflicted ones among His people now. Not that they may expect to be relieved by a miracle, but that they may comfort themselves with the assurance that God has a wise (if hidden) purpose to be served by their affliction, and that is, that in some way He will be glorified thereby. That way may not be manifested at once; perhaps not for long years. At least thirty years (see verse 23) passed before God made it evident why this man had been born blind. As to what God's purpose is in our affliction, as to how His purpose will be attained, and as to when it will be accomplished, these things are none of our affair. Our business is to meekly submit to His sovereign pleasure (1 Sam. 3:18), and to be duly "exercised thereby" (Heb. 12:11). Of this we may be sure, that whatever is for God's glory in us, will ultimately bring blessing to us. Then do not question God's love, but seek grace to rest in sincere faith on Romans 11:36 and 8:28. "I must work the works of him that sent me" (John 9:4). And what were these works? To reveal the perfections of God and to minister to the needs of His creatures. Such "works" the Son must do because He was one both in will and in nature with the Father. But no doubt there is another meaning in these words. The "works of him" that sent Christ were not only works that were pleasing to God, but they were works which had been predestinated by God. These works must be done because God had eternally decreed them—cf. the "must" in John 4:4 and 10:16. "The night cometh, when no man can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (John 9:4, 5). More specifically this statement had reference to what Christ was about to do—give sight to the blind beggar. This is clear from the opening words of verse 6: "When he had thus spoken." The miracle Christ was about to perform gave a striking illustration of the yet greater miracle of the Divine bestowment of spiritual vision upon an elect sinner. Such an one must be illumined for the eternal counsels of Deity so determined—compare the "must" in Acts 4:12. The saving of a sinner is not only entirely the "work" of God, but it is, pre-eminently, that in which He delights. This is what these words of Christ here plainly intimate. How blessed to know, then, that the most glorious of all God's works is displayed in the saving of lost and hell-deserving sinners, and that the Persons of the Trinity cooperate in the outflow of grace. "The night cometh, when no man can work." Christ here teaches us both by word and example the importance of making the most of our present opportunities. His earthly ministry was completed in less than four years, and these were now rapidly drawing to a close. He must then be about His Father's business. A Divine constraint was upon Him. May a like sense of urgency impel us to redeem the time, knowing the days are evil (Eph. 5:16). What a solemn word is this for the sinner: "the night cometh, when no man can work"! This is life's day for him; in front lies the blackness of darkness forever (Jude 1:13). Unsaved reader, your "night" hastens on. "Today if ye will hear his voice harden not your hearts." "Behold now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2). "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." Christ seems to be referring to the attempt which had just been made upon His life (John 8:59). Soon the appointed time would come for Him to leave the world, but until that time had arrived man could not get rid of Him. The light would shine despite all man's efforts to put it out. The stones of these Jews could not intimidate or hinder this One from finishing the work which has been given Him to do. "Light of the world" He had just demonstrated Himself to be by exposing their wicked hearts. "Light of the world" He would now exhibit Himself by communicating sight and salvation to this poor blind beggar. "When he had thus spoken, he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay" (John 9:6). This was a parable in action and deserves our closest attention. Christ's mode of procedure here though extraordinarily peculiar was, nevertheless, profoundly significant. Peculiar it certainly was, for the surest way to blot out vision would be to plaster the eye with wet clay: and yet this was the only thing Christ did to this blind beggar. Equally sure is it that His mysterious action possessed some deep symbolic significance. What that was we shall now inquire. "When he had thus spoken, he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed

the eyes of the blind man with the clay." The first thing we must do is to study this care* fully in the light of the context. What is before us in the context? This: the "light of the world" (John 8:12), the "sent one" (John 8:18), the "Son" (John 8:36) was despised and rejected of the Jews. And why was that? Because He appeared before them in such lowly guise. They judged Him "after the flesh" (John 8:15); they sought to kill Him because He was "a man that had told them the truth" (John 8:40). They had no eyes to discern His Divine glory and were stumbled by the fact that He stood before them in "the likeness of men." Now what do we have here in John 9? This: once more Christ affirms that He was "the light of the world" (John 9:5); then, immediately following, we read, "When he had thus spoken, he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay." Surely the meaning of this is now apparent. "As a figure, it pointed to the humanity of Christ in earthly humiliation and lowliness, presented to the eyes of men, but with Divine efficacy of life in Him" (J.N.D.). Christ had presented Himself before the Jews, but devoid of spiritual perception they recognized Him not. And did the blind beggar, who accurately represented the Jews, did he see when Christ applied the clay to his eyes? No; he did not. He was still as blind as ever, and even though he had not been blind he could not have seen now. What, then, must he do? He must obey Christ. And what did Christ tell him to do? Mark carefully what follows. "And said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam, (which is by interpretation, Sent)" (John 9:7). This, too, was a sermon in action. What the blind beggar needed was water. And of what did that speak? Clearly of the written Word (see our notes on John 3:5, and cf. Ephesians 5:26). It was just because the Jews failed to use the water of the Word that the eyes of their hearts remained closed. Turn to John 5, and what do we find there? We see the Jews seeking to kill Christ because He made Himself equal with God (verse 18). And what did He bid them do? This: "Search the Scriptures" (John 5:39). We have the same thing again in John 10: the Jews took up stones again to stone Him (verse 31). And the Lord asked them why they acted thus. Their answer was, "Because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God" (verse 33). What reply did Christ make, "Jesus answered them, Is it not written?" It was then, this very thing which (symbolically) the Lord commanded the blind beggar to do. He obeyed implicitly, and the result was that he obtained his sight. The difference between the Jews and the beggar was this: they thought they could see already, and so refused the testimony of the written Word; whereas the beggar knew that he was blind and therefore used the water to which Christ referred him. This supplies the key to the 39th verse of this chapter which sums up all that has gone before. "And Jesus said, For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind." We turn now to consider the doctrinal significance of what has just been before us. The blind beggar is to be viewed as a representative character, i.e., as standing for each of God's elect. Blind from birth, and therefore beyond the help of man; a beggar and therefore having nothing, he fitly portrays our condition by nature. Sought out by Christ and ministered to without a single cry or appeal from him, we have a beautiful illustration of the activities of sovereign grace reaching out to us in our unregenerate state. Our Lord's method of dealing with him, was also, in principle, the way in which He dealt with us, when Divine mercy came to our rescue. "He spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay." This seems to have a double meaning. Dispensationally it symbolized Christ presenting Himself in the flesh before the eyes of Israel. Doctrinally it prefigured the Lord pressing upon the sinner his lost condition and need of a Savior. The placing of clay on his eyes emphasizes our blindness. "And said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam." This intimates our need of turning to the Word and applying it to ourselves, for it is the entrance of God's words which, alone, give light (Ps. 119:130). The name of the Pool in which the blind beggar was commanded to wash is not without its significance, as is seen by the fact that the Holy Spirit was careful to interpret it to us. God incarnate is the Object presented to the needy sinner's view: the One who was "anointed" by the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:38). How is He presented to us? Not

as pure spirit, nor in the form of an angel; but as "made flesh." Where is He to be thus found? In the written Word. As we turn to that Word we shall learn that the man Christ Jesus is none other than the "sent one" of the Father. It is through the Word alone (as taught by the Holy Spirit) that we can come to know the Christ of God. "He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing" (John 9:7). The simple obedience of the blind beggar is very beautiful. He did not stop to reason and ask questions, but promptly did what was told him. As the old Puritan, John Trapp (1647), quaintly puts it, "He obeyed Christ blindly. He looked not upon Siloam with Syrian eyes as Naaman did upon Jordan; but, passing by the unlikelihood of a cure by such means, he believeth and doeth as he was bidden, without hesitation." Let the interested student go over the whole chapter carefully and prayerfully, seeking the personal application of this passage. Let the following questions be studied:— 1. How do verses 8 and 9 apply to the history of a newly saved soul? 2. What do verses 10 and 11 teach us concerning the young convert? 3. How do verse 12 fit in with the application of this passage to a babe in Christ? 4. Study verses 13-16 from a similar viewpoint. 5. What do the beggar's words in verse 17 intimate? Cf. our remarks on John 4:19. 6. What does verse 18 teach the young believer to expect? 7. What do verses 20-23 teach the babe in Christ he must do?

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