

Shekinah Enlightenment: How Faithfulness Reveals the Divine Light

John 9:1-41; Jerry Truex; April 3, 2011

Introduction

The text we are looking at today—John 9:1-41—is a story showing how Jesus is the *light of the world*, which was his claim in John 8:12. As the story shows, belief or faithfulness to Jesus leads to experiencing enlightenment, a revelation of the Divine Light.

1. Read metaphorically

At the literal level, this passage is about a miraculous healing of a man born blind. It's a miracle story. However, I believe that we must read the story metaphorically. That is, the story is not primarily about a physical healing, but about enlightenment.

We read the story at one level (the literal healing), but with an eye for its metaphorical significance—as John intended. When we look for the metaphorical meaning, we see the story is about you and I here-and-now.

There are two existential questions we are to ask of ourselves:

- a. How does one receive spiritual sight or enlightened? (9:10, 15)
- b. How does one lose spiritual sight and enter darkness? (9:40-41)

2. A series of trials

The story focuses on a man who is born blind who is healed by Jesus. The story is composed of seven scenes or seven trials:

One: Jesus and the man (9:1-7)

Two: The man and his neighbors (9:8-12)

Three: The man and the Pharisees (9:13-17)

Four: The Pharisees and the man's parents
(9:18-23)

Five: The man and the Pharisees (9:24-34)

Six: The man and Jesus (9:35-38)

Seven: Jesus and the Pharisees (9:39-41)

Scene One: Jesus and the blind man (9:1-7)

¹ As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³ Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.

⁴ We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." ⁶ When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, ⁷ saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. (NRSV)

In the first scene, the disciples get the ball rolling by asking Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" Jesus' response reveals his convictions about two things.

1. Human suffering (blindness) reveals Divine Glory (*Shekinah*)

First, the disciples assume that blindness was caused by sin. That was a common assumption at that time. A person suffered as punishment for sin. That is what Job's accusers said to Job.

Notice that Jesus rejects that idea. Sin does not cause blindness. Rather, Jesus believes that suffering can be for the glory of God. What kind of glory is Jesus talking about? He is referring to the *shekinah* (shi-kee-na) of God. *Shekinah* is the visible majesty of the Divine Presence, especially dwelling in the Temple. Human suffering—in this case blindness—can reveal the powerful presence of Divine Glory.

2. Riddle: Belief is possible when the Divine Light is present

Second, Jesus makes a strange statement about "when it is day, we work for God, but when night comes, no one works." The literal meaning of the statement is trivial—before the invention of the electric light bulb, everyone had to work during the daylight.

However, if we take the saying as a riddle, the statement suggests that under certain conditions—spiritual darkness—it is impossible to do God's work, which refers to belief or faith. But, under other conditions—when the Divine Light is present—people can do God's work, they can believe.

3. Jesus heals the man

When Jesus sees the blind man, he spits on the ground, makes mud with his saliva, and puts it on the man's eyes. After the mud pack, Jesus tells the man to go to the Pool of Siloam and wash. The man does exactly what he hears Jesus tell him—he washes and he sees for the first time.

Scene Two: The blind man and his neighbors (9:8-12)

⁸ The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" ⁹ Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." ¹⁰ But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" ¹¹ He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." ¹² They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know." (NRSV)

1. Jesus leaves ... or does he?

In the second scene, Jesus has exited the stage ... or has he? As we read further, we sense that Jesus the Light is still present enlightening some people.

2. Some believe ... others do not

New characters are introduced—the man's neighbors—and a trial of sorts begins. The neighbors question the man. Some think he is the same man who they use to know. Others think he is a different person. The point is, the neighbors are divided. Some accept the miracle, others reject it.

3. Jesus is called "the man"

The former blind man can see, but he's not very enlightened. He doesn't seem to know who Jesus is at this point. He simply identifies Jesus simply as *the man* (*ho anthrōpos*). The man sees, but he doesn't.

Scene Three: The blind man and Pharisees (9:13-17)

¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴ Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵ Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." ¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such

signs?" And they were divided. ¹⁷ So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet." (NRSV)

1. Enter the Pharisees

In the third scene, the neighbors bring the former blind man to the Pharisees. With the introduction of the Pharisees, the author whispers something important into the ear of the readers: "Now it was on a Sabbath day that Jesus made clay and opened his eyes" (9:14).

The Pharisees were Jews whose main concern was fulfilling all of God's commands, and they were *especially* concerned about keeping the purity laws.

2. Was the man impure?

In the Jewish culture at that time, people with physical deformities or disabilities, like blindness, were considered impure. He could not associate with other Jews, who kept the purity codes. He couldn't eat or go to the temple with them. He was a social outcast.

Jesus put mud on this man's eyes and he told him to go wash in the Pool of Siloam. Any Jew ... every Jew ... would have understood this to be an act of ritual cleansing. In other words, the man who was born blind was no longer impure; after his healing and washing, he could enter mainstream Jewish society for the first time.

That's why the neighbors took the man to the Pharisees. If anyone knew whether the man was ritually pure and could now be included in society, the Pharisees would.

3. The Pharisees had divided opinions

When the man is questioned by the Pharisees, they are concerned with *how* the healing took place. In their purity system, certain types of work were prohibited on the Sabbath. And they want to know if Jesus broke Sabbath laws?

Some Pharisees said Jesus could not be from God. He violated the Sabbath—making clay, anointing, healing chronic illnesses were all considered work that could not be done on the Sabbath. Jesus was a sinner (*harmartōlos*).

Other Pharisees concluded that Jesus was not a sinner. Only someone from God could do a miracle. Like the neighbors, the Pharisees were divided.

4. Jesus is called "a prophet"

In scene three, we see the former blind man takes a step of faith (belief) and declares that Jesus is a *prophet*.

Scene Four: The blind man's parents and Pharisees (9:18-23)

¹⁸ The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹ and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" ²⁰ His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹ but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." ²² His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. ²³ Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." (NRSV)

The fourth scene is the center of the story. The attempt to get Jesus on the charge of violating the Sabbath has failed. So the parents are summoned to appear before the Jewish authorities. The authorities now try to discredit the miracle.

However, the parents confirm the miracle. The man was, in fact, born blind and now he sees. But, the parents are not very supportive. In fact, they are afraid. They were afraid of being *kicked out of the synagogue (aposynogōgos)*.

The religious authorities had decided that anyone who confessed Jesus as the Messiah would be expelled from the synagogue. We are not told why. But it is likely that the non-believing Jews thought that the Jewish Christians blasphemed God, they gave honor and praise to Jesus that should only have been given to God.

Scene Five: The blind man and Pharisees (9:24-34)

²⁴ So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." ²⁵ He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." ²⁶ They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" ²⁷ He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?"

²⁸ Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." ³⁰ The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³² Never since the world began has it been

heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." ³⁴ They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out. (NRSV)

In scene five, the former blind man is once again brought back on stage for more interrogation by the religious authorities.

1. The religious authorities plunge into darkness

The authorities have refused to accept the miracle. They refuse "so see". So they plunge deeper into *darkness*. Ironically, the authorities tell the man to give glory to God, when the reader knows the religious authorities are the one's failing to see God's glory.

This irony is compounded when the authorities confidently declare that they *know* that Jesus is a sinner which, for the reader, proves their ignorance and lack of enlightenment.

The religious authorities also want to know how Jesus healed the man. In this way, they actually admit that Jesus heal the man's vision.

2. The man claims to be Jesus' disciple

In this scene, the man sarcastically asks if the authorities want to become Jesus' disciples also (9:27), which infuriates the authorities.

The authorities lose their cool. They shout at the man: "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" They throw him out (*ekballō*) of the synagogue (v. 34).

3. The spiritual enlightenment of the man

In this scene, the man takes another step of faith into the light. At first, he identified Jesus merely as *the man* (9:7); then a little latter, he saw Jesus as *a prophet* (9:17); now he sees Jesus as *from God* (9:32) and even acknowledges that he has become one of Jesus' disciples (9:27-28).

In contrast, the authorities turn face-first into darkness. Ironically, they *know* that Jesus is a sinner and they *know* that he is not from God. Their darkness is emphasized by the fact that they don't have a clue about Jesus.

Scene Six: The blind man and Jesus (9:35-38)

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" ³⁶ He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." ³⁷ Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." ³⁸ He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. (NRSV)

Scene six is the end of the man’s trial and the climax to his enlightenment.

1. "Do you believe?" (v. 35)

Jesus comes to the man and asks him: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" (9:35).

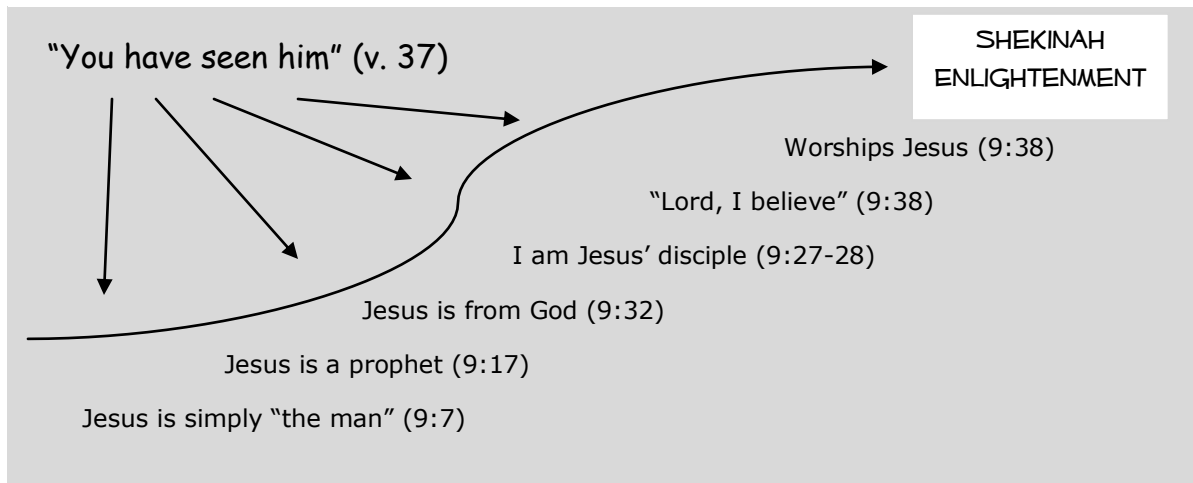
2. "You have seen him" (v. 37)

And when the man asks, "who is the Son of Man?" Jesus says, "You have seen him."

The original Greek for "you have seen" is *heōrakas*. It is in the perfect tense. The perfect tense refers to *past action that continues in the present*. The implication is that before Jesus meets the man in 9:35, the man has already seen Jesus!

When did he see Jesus prior to verse 35? During his trial—during the process of being abandoned and rejected, interrogated and insulted, and finally excluded from the community—the Divine Light, the *Shekinah* was with the man.

The Divine Light enlightened the man. He "saw" God’s glory—the *Shekinah*—manifesting in and through his life. He discovered this through his encounter with Jesus. It was not an immediate enlightenment, but developed as he proved faithful and loyal to Jesus. Finally, he received a fully epiphany of Jesus himself.



3. "Lord, I believe" (v. 38)

The man born blind has remained faithful to Jesus throughout his ordeal.

Now he offers a verbal pledge of allegiance. He identifies Jesus as the Lord and says, "I believe" (*pisteuō*; πιστεύω). The Greek verb, *pisteuō*, is a cognate of *pistis*, which means faith, faithful, or loyalty. The man essentially says, "I am faithful." It is a present tense verb stressing continuous action. He bows to Jesus and offers obeisance (*proskuneō*; προσκυνέω).

Scene Seven: Jesus and the Pharisees (9:39-41)

³⁹ Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." ⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" ⁴¹ Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains. (NRSV)

1. Judgment as division (*krima*)

The story closes with an enigmatic statement by Jesus:

John 9:39. For judgment (*krima*) I came into the world so that those who do not see [spiritually] may see and those who [claim to] see will become [spiritually] blind.

The word *krima* in Greek can be translated either *judgment* or *division*. Jesus judges the world. But how does he do it? This narrative show us how. Throughout the narrative we have seen the *division* or *judgment* of the world.

Remember, the neighbors were divided; some accepted the miracle, others did not. The Pharisees were divided; some believed Jesus was from God, others did not.

The revelation of Jesus brings division; some chose to believe, others do not. The judgment/division is a matter choice. Those who believe—the ones, who through steadfast faithfulness to Jesus, no matter the suffering and humiliation, experience progressive enlightenment and the *Shekinah* of God.

2. Ironic reversal

There is a complete reversal at the end of the story. The man (and Jesus) were put on trial by the Pharisees.

But in the end of the story, we can see that the Pharisees were on trial too. In fact, they put themselves on trial when they asked, "Surely, we are not blind, are we?" Their question is itself the answer. They are blind. They cannot see the Light that comes into the world. They are blind about the cause of sin.

The ironic reversal of John 9:1-41:

It is not that sin causes (physical) blindness (the assumption the Disciples & the Pharisees). Rather, sin is caused by (spiritual) blindness, which is the refusal to see the Divine Light.

Reflection

The narrative encourages us to remain faithful to Christ throughout all our ordeals. We must practice seeing the presence of the Divine Light in our affairs. The man born blind is a model of every believer who embraces the Lordship of Jesus and suffers persecution as a result.

Like the man born blind, Christ may seem to be absent in our struggles, but the purpose of the narrative is to show we are never alone—the Light of Christ accompanies us—and if we remain loyal, we move gradually and invariably toward enlightenment, or experiencing the Glory of God.

There is plenty of darkness in the world—with its wars, poverty, and injustice. It will try to *blind* us. And there are plenty of personal trials associated with work, family, and health. They will try to *destroy* us. But cultivate faithfulness and loyalty to Christ assures us of entering into the presence and power of the *Shekinah*. .