

The Gospel of John

Text: John 9

Reading: *Daring Faith*, pp. 99–110

Summary of John 7–8¹

John 7–8 take place in Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths). The chapters can be outlined loosely as follows:

7:1-13	Jesus Goes to Jerusalem
7:14-36	Words of Conflict: Jesus' Teaching and Response
7:37-52	Words of Conflict: Jesus' Teaching and Response
[7:53-8:11	A Narrative of Conflict]
8:12-30	Words of Conflict: Jesus' Teaching and Response
8:31-59	Debate Between Jesus and His Jewish Opponents

In 7:1-52, the conflict between Jesus and his opponents is played out in a sequence of short scenes in which Jesus presses his case with the crowds at center stage (e.g., 7:25-31), while the Jewish leadership plots against him in the wings (7:32, 45-52). In chapter 8, the mini-dramas eventually converge into one drama, as Jesus and his opponents engage in direct accusations and recriminations (8:31-59). In these scenes John demonstrates the critical importance of right judgment, of seeing that God was decisively and newly available in the one whom God sent, Jesus.

The action in these chapters revolves around four central themes:

- (1) **Jesus' identity as the one sent from God** (7:16, 28-29, 33; 8:16, 18, 29, 42).
- (2) **Faithful interpretation of Jewish tradition** (7:22-23, 47-52; 8:39-41, 52-58).
- (3) **The faith decision Jesus' presence in the world demands and the division it causes** (7:31, 40-44, 8:30-33, 42-43, 47).
- (4) **The increasing threat to Jesus' life** (7:1, 13, 19, 25, 30, 32, 44; 8:37, 40, 59).

The relationship of 7:53-8:11 to John 7 and 8 warrants special mention. This passage does not appear in the earliest Greek manuscripts of John, suggesting that the story did not belong originally to this Gospel. The origins of the Jesus tradition preserved in this passage are unclear, as is how it ended up in the Gospel of John. Given the uncertainty about the history of John 7:53–8:11, numerous translations (including the NIV) print this text in brackets and inform the reader of its complicated textual history.

To some extent, these verses disrupt the movement of John 7–8; the pattern of Jesus' teaching intermingled with the crowd's response recurs in 8:12 after the interruption of 7:53–8:11. Yet one can also identify a logic to this particular placement of the tradition. John 7:53–8:11 contains a story that illustrates the confrontation and conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities that is at the heart of John 7–8, and this thematic connection may have led a later scribe to add the story after John 7:52.

¹ Gail O'Day, *The Gospel of John* (NIB 9; Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 614-15.

The Healing of the Blind Man (John 9)

Background: The story continues the themes from the previous two chapters: belief and unbelief; light; sin; the irony that the ones who should “see” do not; the question of where Jesus comes from; and right judgment versus judgment by appearances. The action here follows directly upon Jesus’ teaching at the Festival of Booths. It builds on the imagery of the festival, especially on Jesus as the light of life (8:12). As the dialogue is passed quickly among the characters, the reader gets a glimpse of different responses to Jesus and, in comparing them, is able to judge rightly who “sees” and who does not.

A. The Healing (9:1-12)

1. Stories of Jesus giving sight to a blind man are found in all four Gospels (Matt. 9:27-31; Mark 10:46-52; Luke 18:35-42). In the pattern of many miracle stories, verses 1-5 describe the situation of need that evokes the miracle. This “miracle” is the sixth of the seven “signs” in John’s Gospel.

★ What does the disciples’ question in verse 2 reveal about their beliefs about people born with disabilities? How does Jesus correct their understanding and simultaneously reveal more about his work in the world (vv. 3-5)?

★ How does this affect the way you think about people in your life who are disabled or handicapped in some way? Does Jesus’ answer match up with Christian explanations today?

2. The connection the disciples make between sinful actions and illness (v. 2) is rejected by Jesus (vv. 3-4). The man’s blindness is an occasion that will reveal God’s presence in Jesus (v. 3).
3. As was the case with the paralytic (John 5), this healing is all Jesus’ initiative. The blind man responds immediately to Jesus’ commands. As a result, he “came back able to see.”

B. The “Blind” Man and the Pharisees (9:13-17)

1. Verse 14 introduces the controversy over violation of Sabbath law. Aside from the healing itself, Jesus’ activity in making the clay was a category of work that was prohibited on the Sabbath.
2. Jesus’ violation of the Sabbath leads some of the Pharisees to conclude that he is not from God. Others, however, offer an important question: “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?”
3. In their division, the Pharisees turn to the blind man, who now bears witness to Jesus. There is a progression to his testimony: in verse 11 he simply refers to Jesus by name, but in verse 17 he identifies him as a prophet. He “sees” the works of God in Jesus.

C. The “Jews” and the Man’s Parents (9:18-23)

1. The man’s parents come on the scene as the Jewish authorities continue to investigate whether this man is the same one who was born blind. The parents confirm the identity of their son but do not make any claims about his sight.
2. Their silence is attributed to their being “afraid of the Jews” because the Jews “had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.” (v. 22).
3. The synagogue was the focus of the entire community. If you were put out of the synagogue, you’d probably be better off leaving the area altogether. The man’s parents are afraid and anxious for their social standing, their livelihood, and perhaps their lives.

- ★ How does the way the blind man's parents respond to the Judeans reflect this fear?
- ★ Describe fears you've had about speaking plainly regarding your beliefs or testimony about Jesus because of the social consequences.

D. The Man and the Pharisees, Part 2 (9:24-34)

1. Upon the return of the healed man, the authorities insist on their traditional definitions of sin (v. 24, see also v. 16), but the man points to the newness that came from his encounter with Jesus (v. 25).
2. The Jews respond with another request for the man to report how his healing happened, but the man refuses, turning their repeated questions about his healing back on them (vv. 26-27). The mock sincerity of the man's response in v. 27 is a textbook example of ironic understatement in John's Gospel, as he cleverly turns the authorities' questioning against them.
3. The authorities mock the man. Their response to his invitation to be Jesus' disciples shows that they see a sharp distinction between Jesus and Moses. They stress their faithfulness to the law of Moses.

- ★ What argument does the blind man use to defend that Jesus is from God (vv. 30-33)?
- ★ Why do the Judeans respond by throwing him out of the synagogue (v. 34)?

4. The man's opening words in v. 30 show that he is not governed by the fear that shaped his parents' response to the authorities. His healing is unprecedented and is only possible if God is its source.
5. The authorities' response to his argument is not one of logic but of arrogance. They insist on an understanding of "sin" that recalls the disciples' opening question in verse 2, and this perspective makes it difficult for them to "judge rightly" (7:24) in this instance. Ironically, the man has functioned more like a teacher than the religious authorities have.

E. Jesus and the Man (9:35-38)

1. Jesus again takes the initiative in seeking out the healed man. Their encounter represents the first time that the man "sees" Jesus, since he has not been in Jesus' presence since Jesus put the clay on his eyes (v. 6). Jesus' self-identification in v. 37 leads to the man's confession of faith.

- ★ What progression of belief do you see in the man through this chapter?
- ★ How is God's work seen in the man? Only in the miracle, in his faith, or something else?

2. The man has moved from acknowledging Jesus simply as the man who had healed him (v. 11), to identifying him as a prophet (v. 17), then as a miracle worker from God (vv. 30-33), and finally as "Lord" (v. 38). His gift of sight has deepened from physical sight to include spiritual sight.
3. "Worship" is used in John to speak of the worship of God (4:20-24; 12:20). When the man worships Jesus, then, he is acknowledging the presence of God in Jesus and thus ironically fulfills the authorities' demand that he give glory to God (v. 24).

F. Jesus and the Pharisees (9:39-41)

1. In the final dialogue scene, the focus shifts from the healing miracle itself to the purpose of Jesus' ministry as revealed in that miracle. The chapter closes with the contrasting responses of the Pharisees. Some of them, overhearing Jesus, question the implication that they are blind (v. 40).
2. As in John 3:18-21 and 8:14-16, Jesus' coming into the world as the light creates the moment of decision and judgment. Sight and blindness are not defined by one's physical sight but by one's openness to the revelation of God in Jesus.

★ How is verse 41 a complete reversal of where the chapter began?

3. "Sin" in both v. 41 and throughout John's Gospel is defined by neither the presence of an illness (9:2) nor the violation of the law (9:16, 24), but almost exclusively by one's relationship to Jesus, and more specifically, by whether one believes that God is present in Jesus.
4. Throughout the preceding dialogue, the Jewish authorities, who have their physical sight, repeatedly insisted on their knowledge about who Jesus could and could not be, and by so doing showed themselves to be closed to Jesus as the light of the world and hence blind.
5. By contrast, the man who had been born blind received his physical sight, but his true sight came as he recognized Jesus as the Son of Man, as the light of the world. In their immovable arrogance, shown again in v. 40, the Pharisees demonstrate their own blindness and hence judge themselves.

★ How do we avoid the spiritual blindness that plagues the parents and the Pharisees?

★ What about Jesus do you struggle to see?

Points for Home

1. Miracles are only *signs* to people who are ready to see them. Those who see the sign clearly see it as a sign that Jesus is the Messiah. Namely, the blind man sees, and he confesses that Jesus is the Messiah. The story thus becomes a sign to us, a sign of the Messiah, a call for us to see him.
2. The story reveals a central idea of John's Gospel, that judgment is based not on what people do, as the disciples and the Pharisees assumed, but on people's embrace of God in Jesus. The only way to be excluded from Jesus' offer of salvation is to turn one's back on that offer.
3. Here and throughout John's Gospel, readers are thus called to make a decision about Jesus. Through the story of the man who was born blind, John invites us to recognize the transformative power of the light and love of God made manifest in the incarnation and to shape our lives accordingly.
4. The blind man's movement from darkness to light and his confession of faith in Jesus provides a vehicle through which the church can celebrate the power of new life that begins in baptism. The blind man's words testify to the transforming power of God's grace: "I was blind, but now I see."

Sources:

Gail O'Day, *The Gospel of John*

Gail O'Day and Susan Hylen, *John*

N.T. Wright, *The Gospel of John*