

The Gospel of John Seven Signs, Seven Statements

Lesson #6

Sign # 5 – Healing of the blind man

From the opening chapters of his Gospel, St. John depicts Jesus as the “new Moses” promised in Deuteronomy. The Jews of the first century AD, suffering under Roman rule, were looking for “the Prophet.” They believed the expected Messiah would be another Moses who would repeat the Exodus liberation but on a grander scale. This is the reason the priests and the Levites came from Jerusalem to ask John the Baptist, *Are you the Prophet?* —to which John responds that he is not. Some have misinterpreted John’s reply to suggest that he did not understand his role as the precursor to the Messiah, but John clearly understood his mission; he knew he was to herald the coming of the Messiah but he also knew that he was not “the prophet greater than Moses”. It was the Messiah who would come as the Davidic heir, the rightful King of Israel, and as the Prophet greater than Moses.

Through the events of this next encounter with Christ in John chapter 9 Jesus seems to be performing what is called in the Hebrew terminology of Old Testament Prophets an *ot*. In the Old Testament an *ot* is an action performed by God’s holy prophet that indicates something much more significant and profound than the individual act itself. An example would be the “sign” or *ot* of the healing of the paralytic man at the pool of Bethesda. This *ot* pointed to Jesus’ greater promise of healing—the healing of the covenant people of Israel of their paralysis through their bondage to sin and transforming them into the New Covenant people, who—through the power of the Holy Spirit—will have the ability to complete their mission as God’s emissaries to the nations of the earth. It is in this tradition of the healing prophet that Jesus heals the man born blind in John chapter 9. Look carefully beyond the simple story for the deeper meaning behind these events.

Please read John 9:1-7: The Man Born Blind

1 As he went along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should have been born blind?’ 3 ‘Neither he nor his parents sinned,’ Jesus answered, ‘he was born blind so that the works of God might be revealed in him. 4 As long as day lasts we must carry out the work of the one who sent me; the night will soon be here when no one can work. 5 As long as I am in the world I am the light of the world.’ 6 Having said this, he spat on the ground, made a paste with the spittle, put this over the eyes of the blind man, 7 and said to him, ‘Go and wash in the Pool of Siloam (the name means ‘one who has been sent’). So he went off and washed and came back able to see.

The literal beginning of this phrase: *And [Kai in the Greek] passing on he saw*, indicates that as He left the Temple precincts Jesus and his disciples saw the blind man [Interlineal Bible Greek New Testament, John 9:1].

This is the first direct mention of the disciples since chapter 6 when many of His disciples walked away after Jesus’ teaching that His flesh was the real bread “come down from heaven” and when only

the 12 Apostles remained. St. Luke tells us there were at least 70 or 72 disciples, from whom the 12 Apostles were selected (see Luke 6:13; 10:1) and of those who walked away after the “Bread of Life” discourse, some must have returned.

The disciples ask Jesus if the man’s affliction was due to his sins or his parents’ sins. **The implication is that the righteous are somehow protected from these afflictions and that sinners suffer from the penalty of their sins or their parent’s sins.** Despite the story of Job and his faithfulness to God during undeserved great suffering, Old Covenant believers were taught that there was a direct relationship between sin, sickness, and affliction. The Old Covenant Law was temporal and the blessings that came from the Law were temporal. The Old Covenant believers saw health and prosperity as signs of God’s favor. The Old Covenant tradition taught that the sins of the parents could affect an infant, and **some Rabbis even taught that a baby could sin in a mother’s womb.**

Jesus’ response to their question concerning who had sinned is that neither the man nor his parents had sinned. Jesus answers his disciples’ question in terms of the purpose of the man’s blindness and not its cause. The purpose of the man’s blindness is to give an example of God’s power over history and His desire that His Name be glorified through this man.

Jesus has already given His teaching on sin in John 5:14 when He told the formerly paralytic man: *Now you are well again, do not sin any more or something worse may happen to you.* **What could be worse than being paralyzed for 38 years?** Un-repentant mortal sin can result in spiritual death and eternal separation from God—a condition which is far worse than being paralyzed for most of one’s adult life. Under the Old Covenant, there was no sacrifice for forgiveness from mortal, intentional sin (Numbers 15:27-31).

What is the symbolic significance of Jesus’ references to “day”, “night”, and “work”? Why is there a sense of urgency in His explanation to the disciples? How do these images of “day,” “night,” and “work,” fit into the theme of Jesus’ approaching “hour”?

This is another example of “light” verses “dark” imagery. In this passage “day” refers to Jesus’ life/work on earth as fully man and fully God. He then compares death with “night”. The urgency of His “work” is that He must fulfill the Father’s will and testify to Israel that He is the fulfillment of the promised Messiah before the time of His glorification. His “day” will last until His “hour” comes—His “hour” being the time God has deemed as the time of His sacrificial death. That time is fast approaching because this is the early fall of 29AD.

The references such as: “As long as the day lasts”, “the work” and “night,” were also understood by the Fathers of the Church as referring to the Day of the Lord at the end of time. So that means that there is also urgency for the Church in carrying out her mission. She must urgently carry out Christ’s work in the redemption of mankind through the centuries by evangelization before the Day of Judgment comes and there is no more “time” to come to salvation. And of course, in the “day” of each of our faith journeys “time” will eventually end for all of us.

Pope Paul VI in his Homily at the Feast of the Mother of God in 1976 warned the Church: *Time is precious, time passes, time is a phase of experiment with regard to our decisive and definitive fate. Our future and eternal destiny depends on the proof we give of faithfulness to our duties. Time is*

a gift from God; it is a question posed by God's love to our free and, and it can be said, fateful answer. We must be sparing of time, in order to use it well, in the intense activity of our life of work, love and suffering. Idleness or boredom have no place in the life of a Christian! Rest, yes, when necessary, but always with a view to vigilance, which only on the last day will open to a light on which the sun will never set.

What does Jesus mean when He declares: 'As long as I am in the world I am the light of the world'...?

Jesus is the true light because without Him all creation is in darkness: creation and mankind cannot understand itself, know itself, or know where it is going without His "Light". In the Vatican II document *Gaudium et spes*, 22, the Church warns the faithful: *Only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light..[...]. Through Christ and in Christ, the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful; apart from His Gospel they overwhelm us.* Jesus is warning His disciples, and us, of the urgent need to let ourselves be enlightened by His infusing and purifying "Light" while there is still time. St. John told us in 1:9: *The Word was the real light that gives light to everyone; he was coming into the world. He was in the world that had come into being through him....* Jesus will repeat this warning in John 12:35-36.

John 9:6-7: *Having said this, he spat on the ground, made a paste with the spittle, put this over the eyes of the blind man, and said to him, 'Go and wash in the Pool of Siloam (the name means 'one who has been sent'). So he went off and washed and came back able to see.*

Archaeological update: In the fall of 2004 workers repairing a sewage pipe in the old city of Jerusalem discovered a series of ancient steps leading to large area covered in water-proof plaster. The Israeli Antiquities Authority officials believe this is the Biblical "Pool of Siloam", a site lost since the destruction of Jerusalem when it was leveled by the Roman Army after the Second Jewish Revolt of 132-35AD, also called the Bar Kokhba Revolt. The excavations of the site have revealed a much more elaborate pool and water system than previously believed. Located where St. John identified the site in his Gospel account, the excavation substantiates that the site of the Siloam Pool of Jesus' time was a large freshwater reservoir that served as a gathering place and a focus of religious pilgrimages for the faithful, just as St John describes in his Gospel. The pool is estimated to be 225 feet long with three sets of stairs leading down into the reservoir. Enthusiastic Bible scholars are claiming that this will be the archaeological discovery of the decade for Biblical studies. For more information on this discovery, visit the website www.bibleplaces.com/poolofsilam.htm

Historical background

The pool of Siloam was very important during the Feast of Tabernacles. It was from this reservoir that the High Priest collected water in a golden pitcher to be poured out as a libation on God's holy altar of sacrifice in the courtyard of the Temple. The water reminded the people to look back in time to the "water" miracles of the Exodus experience and to look forward to the day when the Messiah would "pour out" his blessings on Israel [Numbers 11:25-29; Isaiah 32:15; Ezekiel 36:24-30; Joel 3:1-2].

John say the meaning of the name of this pool is "one who has been sent", significant to John in that this name clearly points to the Christ, the Messiah sent by God.

King Hezekiah, descendant of the great King David, built this pool in the 7th century BC. He built this reservoir to supply Jerusalem with water in the event the city was besieged by a foreign army, which was exactly what happened [see 2 Kings 20:20, 2 Chronicles 32:30]. The pool is a parallelogram which was believed to be only about 53 feet long, but recent excavations have revealed the pool to be a much larger, 225 feet long, perhaps eighteen feet wide and in its state in the time Jesus lived, it must have been about 20 feet deep. It was one of several Jerusalem pools but the water that fed it flowed through a subterranean conduit from the Gihon stream; a spring which bore the same name as one of the 4 rivers that flowed out from the Garden of Eden [Genesis 2:13]. In the 4th century AD when Pilgrims began to pour into Jerusalem from all over the Christian world, the Gihon spring became known as “the Fountain of the Virgin.” The connection being that the Siloam pool represented Christ as the Living Water, and the source Jesus came from, when He came into the world in His human form, was from Mary, the new Eve, symbolized as the Gihon spring.

But there is so much more involved in the Old Testament connection to this word “Siloam”. The etymology of the word Siloam is interesting. Siloam is the Greek corruption for a Hebrew word. The word in Hebrew is *Shiloah* or *Siloh/Shiloh*. Clearly John intends us to see that this “One who has been sent” is Jesus Himself. But there is another interesting connection to this very ancient Hebrew word.

Turn to **Genesis 49:8-12** and the very odd prophesy Jacob, who Yahweh renamed Israel makes on his deathbed concerning his fourth son Judah:

*“Judah, your brothers will praise you: you grip your enemies by the neck, your father’s sons will do you homage. Judah is a lion’s whelp; you stand over your prey my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, a mighty lion: who dare rouse him? The scepter shall not pass from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until **tribute be brought him** and the peoples render him obedience. He tethers his donkey to the vine, to its stock the foal of his she-donkey. He washes his clothes in wine, his robes in the blood of the grape. His eyes are darkened with wine and his teeth are white with milk.”*

Genesis 49:10 is a much disputed passage and because the literal translation does not seem to make sense various substitute phrases have been used. The literal translation of the clause uses the Hebrew consonants which are used for the Hebrew word “shiloh” What if the reference is John’s translation of the word siloam/Shiloh, which is “until shiloh come” meaning “until *He who is sent/ has been sent* comes”? And what if the masculine article isn’t bad grammar but good theology just as St. John uses the masculine article wherever he uses the Greek word for “spirit” instead of the correct Greek neuter article—bad Greek but good theology because God’s Spirit should take a masculine article. In this case, the masculine article can refer to “He who is/ has been sent” as the Messiah. In that case the literal translation of **Genesis 49:10** using the Hebrew word “shiloh” should read: *The scepter shall not pass from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, **until shiloh comes** to him and the peoples render his obedience.*

Jesus is a descendant of Judah through King David, the first king of Israel from the tribe of Judah. Only kings from David’s line will rule Judah. The Jews always saw this passage in Genesis 49 as a prophecy of David with whom God will make an unconditional covenant that his throne will last forever (2 Samuel 7:11-17). Christians see this prophecy imperfectly fulfilled in David but perfectly

fulfilled in Jesus son of David Son of God who is the fulfillment of both Jacob's prophecy and the Davidic covenant.

Now remembering John's etymology for this word as "*one who has been sent*", read Jacob's prophecy again from **Genesis 49:10** but this time replace the Hebrew word "Shiloh" with the meaning St. John applied to this word: *The scepter shall not pass from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until **the one who has been sent** come(s) to him (Judah/Israel) and the peoples render his (Jesus) obedience.* It is to Judah, known in the 1st century by the Roman name Judea (Judaea) that Jesus comes first and Judah should be rendering Him obedience but Judah/Judea is **blind**, like the man born blind waiting to be healed at the pool of Siloam.

So the symbolic significance of the blind man (who has been blind from birth) being healed in the pool of Siloam-Shiloh is that he suffered, just like Israel suffered for her "blindness" in being unable or unwilling to "see" God's plan for her as a holy nation. This "blindness" resulted in the sin of the golden calf [Exodus 32], which was as great a fall from grace as Adam's fall in Eden, and her reluctance to accept God's plan to go forth to dominate the Promised Land in the book of Numbers and to be a "light" to the Gentile nations. Israel is now, if she is willing, to be healed by the Messiah, the One who is sent from God, so she can complete her mission to the nations of the earth and carry forth Abraham's promised worldwide blessing from **Genesis 22:19**: *All nations on earth will bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed my command.*

Returning to the healing of the man born blind; can you think of an Old Testament episode that reminds you of this 2-stage healing, by word and by action? Hint: see **2 Kings 5:1-14**.

It is similar to the Prophet Elisha's healing of Naaman, the general of the king of Damascus, who is cured of his leprosy when Elisha tells him to bathe in the Jordan River seven times

Like the healing of the Gentile Naaman in 2 Kings, and Jesus' the healing of the deaf and dumb man in **Mark 7:31-35**, and another blind man in **Mark 8:22-26**, Jesus' healing is also done in two steps

Couldn't Jesus simply touch the man and heal him? Why did He use spit and earth in this "sign"? What does this "sign" point toward?

In all three miracles Jesus uses natural, created matter in His healing:

1. In Mark 7:31-35 Jesus puts His fingers into the man's ears and touched his tongue with spittle.
2. In Mark 8:22-26 Jesus put spit on the blind man's eyes.
3. In John 9:6 Jesus mixes dirt with His spit to make a paste which He places on the man's eyes to heal the man blind from birth.

These healings make use of the natural world. These healings prefigure the gift of the Sacraments—all of which make use of matter.

My favorite simple definition of a Sacrament is from the old Baltimore Catechism: "a visible sign instituted by Christ to confer grace." Our current Catechism beautifully explains the depth and mystery of these gifts given by Jesus in many different passages including **CCC# 1115**:

...The mysteries of Christ's life are the foundations of what he would henceforth dispense in the sacraments, through the ministers of his Church, for 'what was visible in our Savior has passed over into his mysteries.'"

And in CCC# 1116: *"Sacraments are 'powers that comes froth' from the Body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving. They are actions of the Holy Spirit at work in his Body, the Church. They are 'the masterworks of God' in the new and everlasting covenant.*

In essence a Sacrament is the continuation of the manifestation of the Incarnation of Christ when an invisible God made Himself materially visible to man. It is in the Sacraments in which Jesus works, through the use of matter, to produce effects that far exceed anything matter can naturally do. In the Sacraments He gives us His very life. Have you ever seen someone you love suffer from ill health and wished you could give your own good health to that love one to ease their suffering or even heal them? This is what Christ does for us in the Sacraments. We are physical beings; it is for our sake that He became a physical being and through the Sacraments He continually makes a physical connection with us through visible matter giving us grace through His divine life to heal, nourish, and sustain us on our journey of faith.

What sacrament would this healing of the blind man in the pool of Siloam have prefigured? The Fathers and Doctors of the Church have seen this miracle as symbolizing the sacrament of Baptism in which the soul is cleansed through the natural medium of water, and receives the light of faith. In his commentary on St. John's Gospel, St. Thomas Aquinas writes: *He sent the man to the pool called the pool of Siloam, to be cleansed and to be enlightened, that is, to be baptized and receive in baptism full enlightenment.*

The Fathers and Doctors of the Church also saw a symbolic connection in the use of the dirt of the earth in this healing that will render this man a "new creation" in Christ. This connection can be found in Genesis 2:7. The first man, Adam, was made from the dirt of the earth. As a matter of fact, Adam's very name means "ground," in Hebrew *adamah*. The symbolic parallel is that God the Father made the first man from the dirt of the earth and entered into covenant with him, and now God the Son uses the earth to heal and restore this man of Israel as a new creation of the New Covenant.

The Scribes are incensed at Jesus' audacity to heal this man on the Sabbath. They had become so enmeshed in the minute details of the Law that they had forgotten the "big picture". Jesus reminds them of two passages in Sacred Scripture. The Deuteronomy passage, is part of the Old Covenant profession of faith called the *Shema*; the Old Covenant people repeated this verse daily. Their self imposed rules have distorted the Law to the point that these rules have taken precedence over their obligations to justice and charity and have resulted in a rule of fanaticism that blinds them from recognizing the work of God in action. It is the Scribes and Pharisees who are blind—and Jesus will accuse them of blindness to the spirit of the Law in this episode and during His last week in Jerusalem in **Matthew 23:19**.

The parents are afraid to answer the Pharisees' question about the miraculous healing of their son. Can you blame them? They feared that they would be excommunicated from the synagogue. The earliest Biblical reference to excommunication is found in **Ezra 10:8**. The Temple in Jerusalem was

the only place where the sacrifices prescribed by the Law of the Covenant could be offered but every village had a synagogue where the word of God in Sacred Scripture was studied.

The institution of the synagogue seems to have been formed during the 70 years of the Babylonian exile when the people were completely cut off from the Temple [6th century BC]. After the return from exile the synagogue, as a community of believers, was established in every village. The 1st century AD Jewish historian Flavius Josephus reported that Jerusalem had 130 synagogues, many of which were formed around trade communities like the Baker's Synagogue, the Mason's Synagogue, etc. Membership in one of the faith communities not only provided spiritual nourishment in the study of sacred Scripture but provided a community support group—an extended family that made life easier in difficult times. A permanent expulsion from the synagogue resulted in a curse on the offender that left him or her completely isolated from the community. The excommunicated member could not participate in the religious services in the synagogue and was to be shunned when passed on the street. Since it was both a spiritual and economic boycott the person who was excommunicated was essentially “dead” to the community—a very fearful condition. Scholars do not agree if this excommunication included Temple worship but there are Old Testament passages that clearly point to excommunication from Temple/Tabernacle worship for violating the Law; for example the Law forbidding the restriction of drinking blood in **Leviticus 17:14**.

Jesus intends for His followers to have this happen to them. Christ wants His disciples to be excommunicated by their Old Covenant faith communities. In Luke 6:22-23, Jesus' sermon on the mount, He tells His disciples:

‘Blessed are you when people hate you, drive you out, abuse you, denounce your name as criminal, on account of the Son of man. Rejoice when that day comes and dance for joy, look!—your reward will be great in heaven. This was the way their ancestors treated the prophets.’

There is real irony in this man's confrontation with the Scribes and Pharisees. Here is Jesus being identified as the prophet greater than Moses. The proper response is to listen to Him. Yet in their exasperation they invoke Moses. “Moses; *we are disciples of Moses...*” the words almost scream across the page! The Scribes and Pharisees held Moses in great esteem as the Law giver and claim to be his disciples but the Israelites of the Exodus experience rebuked Moses, disobeyed him and at times the people even threatened to kill Moses. They never truly loved him and that was his great burden. Now the people of this generation treat “the Prophet greater than Moses” even worse!

The healed man's arguments concerning the validity of the healing being “of God” are reasonable and sound. It is ironic that the blind man now sees physically and spiritually while the Old Covenant leadership is still spiritually blind. They cannot accept Jesus' divinity, which is the only possible correct interpretation of this miracle.

Jesus' judgment of the Pharisees is that they can see physically, and they are capable of being open to seeing spiritually if they would acknowledge their sins, but they do not have the desire to see the truth, therefore, they are unworthy of the kind of sight He can offer. In many ways this is the trap of the “self-sufficient” man. The self-sufficient man or woman is so comfortable and sure of being able to take care of himself materially that he is blind to his need for God. It is the reason Jesus said: *Yes, I tell you again, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to*

enter the kingdom of Heaven [Matthew 19:24; also see Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25]. It isn't impossible—nothing is impossible for God, but it is the rich man's self-sufficiency which becomes his biggest obstacle—swelling him so much with pride that he feels he doesn't really need God.

The Pharisees and Temple authorities are informally [without a legal trial] judging Jesus, but He is also judging them and His judgment on the Old Covenant leadership is reminiscent of the Old Testament prophet's "covenant lawsuits" called through them by Yahweh on an apostate Israel/Judah. Called in Hebrew a *riv*, the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Hosea all condemned the Old Covenant Church for violations against the Covenant. In each case the *riv* resulted in the judgment of God and the destruction of Israel in 722BC and Judah and the Temple in 587/6BC. It is in this same tradition of a *riv* that St. John will prophesy against the false prophet Old Covenant Church for rejecting the Messiah in the *Revelation of Jesus Christ to His Servant John* in what is commonly called the *Book of Revelation* or the *Apocalypse*. John's vision will result in the destruction of Judea, Jerusalem, and the Temple in 70AD.

This encounter with Christ in chapter 9 is an "acting out" of the triumph of "light" over "darkness". Just as the Old Covenant prophets of Yahweh accompanied their spoken word by symbolic actions which dramatized their message, so Jesus' acts out the truth of His declaration: "*I AM the Light of the world.*" In addition to the contrast between the "light" and the "darkness" and "sight" and "blindness" there is a second purpose to these events and that is the issue of whether or not Jesus has supernatural powers and if He does, who is He? That question is answered definitively for us by the man who was once blind both physically and spiritually but who now, through Christ Jesus, has perfect sight: *Lord, I believe!*

As Jesus' death draws nearer you will notice that His 'life giving' activity increases. It is an expression of the urgency He feels. The healing of the blind man and its baptismal significance in the pool of Siloam has its background in the approaching death of the Savior.