

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
9:13-25

13. They brought to the Pharisees him who was formerly blind. 14. And it was the sabbath day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. 15. Then the Pharisees also asked him again how he had received his sight. He said to them, He put clay on my eyes, and I washed and do see. 16. Therefore some of the Pharisees said, This man is not from God, because he does not keep the sabbath day. Others said, How can a man who is a sinner do such miracles? And there was a division among them. 17. They said to the blind man again, What do you say about Him who has opened your eyes? He said, He is a prophet. 18. But the Jews did not believe concerning him, that he had been blind and received his sight, until they called the parents of him who had received his sight. 19. And they asked them saying, Is this your son, whom ye say was born blind? How then does he now see? 20. His parents answered them and said, We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21. but by what means he now sees, we do not know, or who has opened his eyes we do not know. He is of age; ask him. He shall speak for himself. 22. These words spoke his parents, because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if any man confessed that he was Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue. 23. Therefore his parents said, He is of age; ask him. 24. Then again they called the man who was blind and said to him, Give God the praise! We know that this man is a sinner. 25. He answered and said, Whether he is a sinner *or not*, I do not know. One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see.

13.--[*They brought...formerly blind.*] The prime movers in this matter seem to have been the neighbors of the blind man. They thought that so marvelous an event as this sudden cure demanded investigation.

The "Pharisees" in this passage, if we may judge by the context, must have been the great council, or Sandehrim, of the Jewish nation--the same body before whom our Lord made His defense in the fifth chapter of this Gospel. At any rate, we can hardly imagine any other body at Jerusalem "excommunicating" a man. (See verse 34.)

Whitby observes how wonderfully the providence of God ordered things that the Pharisees should be put to silence and open shame by a poor blind man!

14.--[*And it was the Sabbath day, etc.*] This seems specially mentioned by the Evangelist parenthetically for two reasons.

(a) It proved our Lord's unvarying readiness to do works of mercy on the Sabbath day.

(b) It explains the bitter enmity of the Jews against our Lord in this chapter. They regarded Him as a breaker of the Sabbath.

Assuming that there was no interval of time between the end of the last chapter and the beginning of this, it is remarkable how much our Lord did and said on this Sabbath day. From the beginning of the eighth chapter down to the thirty-fifth verse of the ninth, the narrative at first sight seems to run on without a break. It certainly makes it rather doubtful whether there should not be a break or pause assumed at the end of the eighth chapter.

Burkitt remarks that one object of our Lord in working so many miracles on the Sabbath was "to instruct the Jews in the true doctrines and proper duties of the Sabbath, and to let them know that works of necessity and mercy are very consistent with the due sanctification of the Sabbath. It is hard to find any time wherein charity is unseasonable; for as it is the best of graces, so its works are fittest for the best of days.

Whitby thinks that our Lord frequently did miracles on the Sabbath to impress on believing Jews the folly of the superstitious observance of it, and to prevent the misery they would run into if they persisted in an extravagant scrupulosity about the Sabbath when days of vengeance came on Jerusalem.

15.--[*Then the Pharisees...sight.*] The question asked of the healed man by the council of Pharisees was precisely the same that had been asked by his neighbors: "Your eyes have been opened suddenly, though you were born blind. Tell us how it was done."

It is worthy of remark that the Greek word which we render here and all through the chapter as "received sight" means literally no more than "looked up, or saw again." This, of course, could not be precisely true and correct in the case of this man, as he had never seen or used his eyes at all and could not therefore see a second time. But it is useful to notice how here and elsewhere in Scripture the Holy Ghost uses the language which is most familiar and easily understood, even when it is not precisely and scientifically correct. And it is what we all do every day. We talk of the sun "rising" though we know well that, strictly speaking, he does not rise, and that what we see is the effect of the earth moving round the sun.

Barnes observes: "The proper question to have been asked was whether he had in fact been cured, and not in what way. The question about a sinner's conversion is, whether in fact it has been done, and not about the mode or manner in which it has been effected. Yet no small part of disputes among men are about the *mode* in which the Spirit renews the heart and not about the *fact* that it is done."

[*He said to them, etc.*] The answer of the healed man is an honest, bold, plain repetition of the same story he had told already. The only difference is that he does not name "Jesus" here but says "He" put clay, as if he knew his examiners would understand whom he meant. Or it may be that his mind was so full of his Benefactor that he omits to name Him and takes for granted that all would know who He was.

The simple straightforward boldness of this man, standing before the most

formidable court of the Jews and telling out his story, is very noteworthy. It is, moreover, a complete statement of facts and consequences. "He put clay; I washed; I see."

16.--[*Therefore some of the Pharisees said, etc.*] This verse brings forward prominently the existence of two classes among the Pharisees. The one was the great majority, consisting of hundreds of bigoted enemies of our Lord ready to catch at any pretext for injuring His reputation and damaging His character. They said, "This Man is not from God. He is a wicked man because He does not keep the Sabbath day. A Prophet sent from God would not have done any work on the Sabbath." This assertion, of course, was based on the false and groundless principle that works of mercy to the sick were a violation of the Fourth Commandment. According to Lightfoot, the Rabbins expressly forbid saliva to be applied to the eyelids on the Sabbath day.

The other class, consisting of a small minority, raised the grave question, "How could a man not sent by God, a wicked man, work such an astonishing miracle as this? If He were not commissioned and enabled by God, He could not possibly give sight to the blind. Surely He must be from God." These must have been Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Gamaliel, and others. Their line of argument is precisely that of Nicodemus in the famous visit to our Lord by night, when he said "No man can do these miracles except God be with him." (John iii.2.)

Three times in John's Gospel we find that expression, "There was a division among them." (Here, vii.43, and x.19.)

The hesitating manner in which the better class of the council raise the question here, "How can a man," etc., is strongly indicative of a timid minority, who felt that the stream of feeling was all against them. It strikingly resembles the question of Nicodemus (John vii.51), "Does our law judge any man," etc. One might almost think it was Nicodemus speaking here.

In large assemblies of men convened to consider ecclesiastical and religious questions, we may confidently assume that there are always some present whose hearts are right and who are willing to support the truth, even though they sit in bad company, and are for the present silenced and overawed. Gamaliel's conduct, in Acts v.34, is an illustration of this. There is no warrant for staying away from assemblies and councils merely because we happen to be in a minority.

Chrysostom remarks how "none of the assembly dared say what he wished openly, or in the way of assertion, but only in the way of doubt. One party wanted to kill our Lord and the other to save Him. Neither spoke out."

Bullinger observes that "all divisions are not necessarily evil, nor all concord and unity necessarily good."

17.--[*They said to the blind man again.*] This division among the members of the council had at least this good affect: that they found it necessary

to go into the whole case more fully and ask further questions. These very questions brought the reality of the miracle into fuller light than before.

[*What do you say...opened your eyes?*] This question must evidently mean, "What do you think about this Person who, you say, has opened your eyes? Whom do you believe Him to be seeing that He has wrought this cure?" The question is an inquiry not about the reality of the miracle, but about the Person who is said to have performed it. It looks, according to some, like an intention to entrap the poor man into saying something about Jesus for which they could condemn Him. On the other hand, Chrysostom, Ferus, and Toletus argue that those who made the inquiry of this text must have been the party which favored our Lord.

[*He said, He is a prophet.*] This expression was the beginning of faith in the healed man. It was a declaration of his own belief that the Person who had wrought such a great cure must be a Person specially raised by God to do great works, like Elijah or Elisha. We must not forget that in the present day we are apt to confine the word "prophet" to a man who foretells things to come. But the Bible use of the word is much wider. The "prophets" raised up in the Old Testament were by no means all foretellers of things to come. Preaching, warning, and miracle-working were the whole business of not a few. In this sense the man seems to have called our Lord "a Prophet." It was for what He had *done* rather than for what He had *said*.

We should carefully note that the first idea about our Lord which the Jewish mind seemed ready to embrace was that He was a "Prophet." Thus the multitude which escorted Him into Jerusalem said, "This is Jesus the Prophet of Nazareth" (Matt. xxi.11); and again, "The multitude took Him for a Prophet" (Matt. xxi.46); and again, "Others said it is a Prophet" (Mark vi.15); and again, "A great Prophet is risen up among us" (Luke vii.16). Even the two disciples going to Emmaus were only positive on one point: that Jesus had been "a Prophet mighty in word and deed" (Luke xxiv.19). But it was a higher step of faith to say that Jesus was "the Prophet" promised by Moses--the Messiah. This the healed man did not yet say. As yet he only got so far as "a Prophet," not "the Prophet."

Chemnitius remarks on this poor man's clear view of our Lord's greatness, that "you will often find more solid theological piety among tailors and shoemakers than among cardinals, bishops, and abbots."

Adam Clarke says it was "a Jewish maxim that a prophet might dispense with the observance of the Sabbath." If the healed man referred to this, his answer was a silencing one, and put the Pharisees in a dilemma.

Lampe also remarks that many things were allowed to prophets sent by God on an extraordinary mission, even about the observance of the ceremonial law, as we see in the history of David and Elijah. This gives great weight to the man's reply, "He is a Prophet."

18.--[*But the Jews did not believe, etc.*] Here, as elsewhere, we should mark the extraordinary unbelief of the Jewish people and their obstinate determination to shut their eyes against light. It teaches the folly of supposing that mere evidence alone will ever make men Christians. It is

the lack of will to believe and not the lack of reasons for believing that makes men infidels.

"The Jews" here, as in other places in John's Gospel, mean the teachers of the Jewish nation at Jerusalem, and especially the Pharisees.

The expression "until they called" deserves special notice. We should remark that it does not mean that "after they called the man's parents, they believed; that they were unbelieving up to the time that they called them and then began to believe." On the contrary, the context shows that even after they had called them, they continued unbelieving. Parkhurst observes that it is a form of speaking "signifying an interval, but not necessarily excluding the time following." The expression throws light on Matt. i.25. That well-known text must not be pressed too far. It is no certain proof that Mary had other children after Jesus was born. Compare 1 Sam. xv.35, 2 Sam. vi.23, Job xxvii.5, Isa. xxii.14, Matt. v.26 and xviii.34.

The word "called" probably implies the public call or summons of the man's parents to appear before the council, just as witnesses are called aloud by name to appear in our courts of justice.

Gualter observes how close the resemblance was between the conduct of the Pharisees in this case and that of the Romish Inquisition. The pertinacious determined effort to condemn the innocent, and to deprive Christ of His glory, is painfully the same.

Besser quotes a saying of the infidel Voltaire: "If in the market of Paris, before the eyes of a thousand men and before my own eyes, a miracle should be performed, I would much rather disbelieve the two thousand eyes and my own two than believe it!"

19.--[*They asked them, etc.*] The enemies of our Lord overreached themselves by their summoning the parents of the healed man. They brought publicly forward the two best possible witnesses as to the fact of the man's identity, as to the fact that he was born blind, and as to the fact that he now had his sight. So true is the saying, "He takes the wise in their own craftiness." (1 Cor. iii.19.)

Chrysostom thinks that the expression "whom ye say," insinuated that they supposed the parents to be impostors, and that "they were acting deceitfully and plotting on behalf of Christ" by spreading a report that their son was born blind.

The language of the verse seems to show that the healed man and his parents were at first confronted, and that the Pharisees pointed to him and asked, "Is this your son?"

20.--[*His parents answered, etc.*] The father and mother of the blind man made a plain statement of facts that could not be contradicted. They placed it beyond a doubt that the man now standing before the Sanhedrim was one who, from the best possible evidence, they knew had been born blind. The fact of having a blind child is one about which no parent could be

mistaken.

21.--[*But by what means...or who...we do not know.*] These words of the healed man's parents were probably the simple truth. The time was so short since the cure was wrought that they might well be ignorant of the manner of it. Hastily summoned before the Sanhedrim, they might well have had no opportunity of conversing with their son, and as yet may have known nothing of the miracle.

[*He is of age, etc.*] These words show the determination of the parents to have nothing more to do with their son's case than they could possibly help. They evidently regarded the council with the same undefined dread with which men at one time regarded the Inquisition in Spain.

The word "age" is the same Greek word that in Matt. vi.27 is translated "stature." It is highly probable that in that text it would have been better rendered "age," as here.

The words "he," "him," and "himself" in this clause are all emphatic, and all might be rendered "himself."

A man was reckoned "of age" by the Jews when he was thirty.

22.--[*These words spoke...feared the Jews.*] This sentence must refer to the latter part of the preceding verse. Fear of the leading Jews in the council of Pharisees made the parents refer their inquirers to their son. Four times in John's Gospel we have special mention made of the "fear of the Jews." Here, and vii.13, xii.42, and xix.38.

[*The Jews had already agreed, etc.*] This is a striking example of the extreme littleness of unbelief and the lengths to which hatred of Christ will go. To resolve on such a decision as this shows a settled determination not to be convinced.

The punishment of being "put out of the synagogue" was a heavy one to the Jew. It was equivalent to being cut off from all communion with other Jews and tantamount to excommunication.

Those only who do anything for evangelizing the Jews now can form any adequate idea of the trials which conversion to Christianity entails on them, and the dread in which they stand of being cut off from Israel.

Trench says: "We must not understand that the Sanhedrim had formally declared Jesus to be an impostor and a false Christ, but only that so long as the truth or falsehood of His claim to be the Messiah was not clear, and they, the great tribunal had not given a decision, none were to anticipate that decision, and the penalty of premature confession was to be excommunicated."

23.--[*Therefore his parents said, etc.*] It was the fear of running the slightest risk of excommunication, or being even suspected of favoring the Healer of their son, that made the parents refer all inquiries to him and refuse to offer any opinion about the means of his cure, whatever they may

have felt.

24.--[*Then again...blind.*] This was a second summons into court. Very possibly the healed man had been carefully removed out of court while his parents were being examined. But when nothing could be got out of them, there was no alternative but to submit him to a second process of cross-examination and intimidation.

[*And said...Give God the praise, etc.*] This sentence admits of two interpretations.

(a) Some, as Calvin, Chemnitius, Gualter, Ecolampadius, Beza, Piscator, Diodati, Aretius, Ferus, Maldonatus, Jansenius, Rollock, Alford, and Trench, regard it as a solemn form of adjuration and think it parallel to Joshua's words to Achan (Josh. vii.19): "You stand in God's presence. Give glory to Him by speaking the truth." This, however, makes the clause that follows rather unmeaning and renders it necessary to supply a good deal to fill up the sense.

(b) Others, as Chrysostom, Brentius, Musculus, Pellican, Vatablus, and Barradius, regard it as specially referring to the cure which had been performed. "Give God the honor and glory of your healing. He must have wrought the cure and not this man who anointed your eyes with clay. He could not have wrought this cure because he is a Sabbath-breaker, and therefore a sinner. A sinner like him could not have healed you." I rather prefer this view.

Gualter and Musculus point out the odious affectation of zeal for God's glory which characterizes the conduct of many wicked persons in every age. Even the Spanish Inquisition professed a zeal for God's glory.

This "we" here is emphatic in the Greek: "We, who are learned men, and ought to know best."

25.--[*He answered...sinner or not, etc.*] The healed man's answer is a very simple and yet very striking one. He tells his inquirers that the question whether Jesus is a sinner is one he knows nothing about. But he does know the fact that he himself was blind up to that very day, and that now he can see. He carefully avoids at present saying a word about the character of his Healer. The one point he sticks to is the reality of the miracle. He must believe his own senses. His senses told him that he was cured.

The expression in every age has been regarded as a happy illustration of a true Christian's experience of the work of grace in his heart. There may be much about it that is mysterious and inexplicable to him and of which he knows nothing. But the result of the Holy Ghost's work he does know and feel. There is a change somewhere. He sees what he did not see before. He feels what he did not feel before. Of that he is quite certain. There is a common and true saying among true Christians of the lower orders: "You may silence me and beat me out of what I know; but you cannot beat me out of what I feel."

The English translation of the last clause rather misses the brevity and

force of the Greek. It would be more literally rendered, "Being blind, now I see."