

IMAGINATIONS OF THE HEART

Born Blind (*John 9*)

1

It was a Sabbath. I remember it so well. I sat by the roadside and heard the people shuffling off to synagogue. The air was warm and played on my skin as I sat there, the sun gently touching me. Sabbath smells different, you know. The odours of work are diminished, the scent of freshly washed clothes replacing them. It sounds different too, quieter, more reverent. Except for the children of course, though even their exuberance has a hushed, controlled tone to it. Also, people are much more likely to drop a coin into my bowl on the Sabbath.

Yes, I remember it well, not because it was different but because it was the same. Just like any other Sabbath day; the snatches of conversation as people walk past me gradually diminishing as they arrive at the synagogue, until the service starts and I am left in silence with only the faint echoes of the chanting and praying wafting over to tantalise my ears. That's why I remember that day: because it was just like any other day. And also, of course, because it was different from every other day.

One thing you get used to, if you're blind, is the curious fact that people also think you're deaf. They stand and talk about you rather than to you. I used to get really angry but after so many years I just got resigned to it. It happened again on that day. I heard the voices and footsteps approaching. Quite a few of them; noisy, too. A bit raucous I thought, not as reverent as they should be on the LORD's day of rest. Strangers, too. I didn't recognise the voices but I could tell they were from up North by their accents. They come to a halt just by me. I can tell that they're looking at the little card which Elizabeth wrote for me—all it says is, 'Blind From Birth'—and they're deciding whether to put a coin into my bowl. Then one of them speaks. "Teacher, who sinned? This man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

'Here we go again' I think, 'this thing about sin again.' They love it because it's such a good puzzle. It can't have been me who sinned because I was blind when I came into the world and you can't sin before you are born can you? So it must have been my parents. But Jeremiah tells us that God has promised that the sins of the fathers will no longer be visited upon their sons. So it can't be them either! As I say, it's a good puzzle—it certainly keeps the Pharisees busy for hours!

But I don't want to be a puzzle; I want to be a person. I want to be whole, to be clean, to be able to join the crowds on the journey to the synagogue on the Sabbath. I want to belong. So what if I can't see? I can hear, smell, touch, walk, talk, do everything else that a human being should do. I just can't 'see'—whatever that is. I can't recognise people or things from

a distance if I'm not able to hear or smell them. I can't distinguish between 'colours' as I can between different sounds. I can't know the shape of something without having touched it first. Yes, it sounds very wonderful this 'seeing' but just because I can't do it doesn't make me any less of a man does it?

They say it's because God is displeased with me. Is that true? LORD, are you displeased with me? You know that I love you. If I love you even more will you give me sight? I know that I am a sinner—though no more than anyone else I think. If I repent even harder will you heal me? The same old unanswered questions go swirling round my head every day, especially on the Sabbath and now these strangers bring them to the surface again.



11

“Teacher, who sinned—this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” So I wait for the answer. Which side of the fence will he be on, this teacher from Galilee? Or will he just sit on it? “Neither” said a voice—the teacher I assume—“but this was done so that God’s glory be made clear...”

What is this? God made me blind so that He would seem more glorious? I don’t understand; is he saying that this is just some cruel trick that God has played on me? Not that I haven’t thought that myself, of course, but I’ve always tried to push it away. It seems blasphemous—and dangerous. I know that David got away with saying hard things to God in the psalms but I’m not so brave! It doesn’t seem to worry this teacher though. He carries on speaking—something about the night coming but that he is the light of the world! I don’t understand any of this. I want to ask him, challenge him, but there is a gentle authority in his voice and a strength and certainty too. If he says he is the light of the world then it must be true—whatever it means!

He’s not like any Rabbi I’ve ever come across before. ‘Jesus’ I think they called him as they were approaching. Then it all goes very quiet. I hear the sound of someone scrabbling about in the dust, then spitting—on the ground, I think. I begin to get a bit uneasy. What is going on? Then suddenly, without any warning or request, hands are grasping my head. It is him! I just know it is him. What is he playing at? How dare he grab me like this? His thumbs move around to my eyes. They press something cold and wet onto my eyes. I try to screw up my eyelids but it is too late. The mud—for that is surely what it is, made from his spit and the dust of the earth—stings as it touches my eyeballs and then the thumbs are gone, though the hands remain, still holding me firmly but oh so tenderly. I feel... ‘protected’ is the word that comes to me. Yes, I feel protected, safe in this gentle grip of iron.

It is strangely good to be held by him and I am bereft when he lets go of me. But as he does so, he speaks: “Go to the pool of Siloam and wash there.” Nothing more, just this command, and I hear his footsteps receding in the distance and then his companions hurrying to catch up with him. “Don’t go”, I long to shout but for some reason I cannot. And so I sit there in the growing silence, confused and shocked, not understanding what has just happened to me.

Hope, doubt, dread, joy—how can so many conflicting feelings chase themselves around in my poor person? What shall I do? Go to the pool of Siloam, as he told me or just go home, wash my face and forget the whole thing. Going home seems safer. Yes, I hate the fact that I’m different, that I’m an outsider, that I’m despised—but at least its familiar. I manage to get by and things could be worse. Going home suddenly feels very safe.

On the other hand, taking the road to Siloam seems fraught with danger. It isn’t far; I can find my way there easily enough but the clear implications of his words and actions is that

if I wash the mud off in that pool I will be able to see! And I don't know if I can cope with that. Supposing I get there and nothing happens. That would be so cruel. People think I'm tough but I know how easily bruised I can be. 'No risk, no pain', I tell myself. 'Better the devil you know...'

And another thing, suppose it works and I can see just like everyone else, what will I do then? Begging isn't a great way to survive but I get by. If I could see that would mean the end of that—no-one would give me anything, why should they? But what would I do? I have no skills, no trade, nothing that would give me a living. I've already taken far too much from Mum and Dad. I don't want to be completely dependent on them. So many reasons to just go home.

Well, I have to do something. The mud on my eyes has now baked hard. I try to open my eyelids but they are stuck down tight by the dried mud. It is uncomfortable and beginning to hurt. Home or Siloam? I need to wash it off somewhere. Safety or risk? Dull certainty or fragile hope? This is one of those 'now or never again' moments. My mind goes back to the touch of his hands on my face, the sound of his voice. I realise that I was in the presence of someone very special. This Jesus, or whoever he is, is not a man to be taken lightly. If I do not follow what he said I will be regretful—forever blind. And so I rise and turn towards Siloam.

As the sun gets higher and hotter I grope through the empty streets. Soon the synagogues will empty and all will be noise and bustle. But for now it is quiet, my own halting footsteps all I can hear. No! I can just hear the ripple of water and the stream flowing from the tunnel into the pool. It is so cool here and I know I am close. Careful now! There are steps down to the pool, thirty four of them, I think. Is there a handrail? I can't remember.

So slowly, very slowly, I edge my way towards the pool, feeling with my feet for the first step. And even so I almost stumble as my right leg steps onto nothingness. But my hand reaches out to the right and I steady myself on the rock face. One, two, three, ... thirty-three, thirty-four. This should be the last. Yes it is. The ground is flat now, gently sloping down. Still be careful, don't want to fall in the pool and drown. That would be ironic, wouldn't it! The healing would work and I would see myself die! I don't know where these dark thoughts come from and I push them away. The pool is close. I can sense the water, smell its cool balm. I drop to my knees and crawl the last few yards, my hand reaching out before me as I seek the water's edge. And there—my hand is wet. I have arrived. This is the moment.

The world seems to have stood still as I reach both hands into the water and cup them together. I have to remind myself to breathe. Slowly I bring the water my eyes. But slowly doesn't work, the water trickles through my fingers. The mud is dampened but not washed away. So I begin to splash water over my face faster and faster. Suddenly I am in a frenzy. My whole head, my whole tunic is soaked and all the mud has gone. If I want to, I can open my eyes.



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I don't know how long it was I just knelt there. I could open my eyes but I didn't. Because I feared that I would still be blind? Because I was afraid that nothing would be different? No. Because I was convinced everything would be different. Because I was sure that I would see—and I was afraid.

Already I am becoming aware of sensations behind my eyelids. I can sense changes, patterns flickering dimly. At least, I think that's right. I know all the words to do with sight and seeing but I don't know how or when to use them. But do know that if—when—I open my eyes I will 'see'. So slowly, very slowly I open my eyelids a tiny crack. Sensation floods in, almost overwhelming me. This is light! It's a bit like the feeling of sun on my face but much more focused and intense. If this is what a tiny bit of seeing is like how can anyone cope with the whole thing?

I dare not open my eyes any more. I am afraid that they will burn out and I will be as blind as before, but painfully so. Gradually, though, the sharpness fades. Perhaps I am getting used to this, perhaps I can risk opening my eyes a little more. And so, little by little, oh so slowly I bring my eyes fully open. I realise, I see, that the light is not all the same, that there is an infinite gradation within it. I see—are those colours? Are those shapes? That must be the water of the pool—always changing; there incredibly bright, there not bright, always in motion. It is so beautiful. I could stay here for ever looking at its liquid changes.

As I move my head, move my eyes, I look down. This must be my body! Those must be my hands! I wiggle my fingers and, yes, the image before my eyes changes as I do. I stare in rapt wonder. I know my hands so well, the shape of them, the feel of the skin, the lumps and bumps of the joints. I know how it feels when I move them. And now I know what they look like! It is both a surprise and no surprise. What I had sensed, felt before is now very similar to what I now see. But what I now see is so much more. They seem so real, so solid, somehow. So much light and dark and different colours (I think that's colour) and there is a sense of a kind of touching even though there is no contact. I move them gently side to side, palm to back. I bring them closer to my eyes, move them away again. My hands! How beautiful they are. How wonderfully and fearfully made!

The hands are half outstretched before me, the palms facing me, facing upwards. It is the position for prayer. "Oh Lord, my God how wonderful you are. Nothing is too great for you. You made me from nothing and everything I have is yours and now you have given me this gift of sight also. I am so blessed by you and awestruck that the king of the universe should come into my life and touch me, transform me, this way. I know that I have done nothing to deserve this and yet you give your power to me freely and without reservation. Lord you have changed my life. Help me to live a changed life now and always. Amen.!

Then the words are done and I just sit in wordless praise and thanks. I have been touched by the presence of God and I want this moment to last for ever.

At last, though, I am gradually restored to this present reality. I hear sounds again, feel the hardness of the rock beneath my body, see the pool and the water's edge (see! I can see!) and know that it is time to go back to my home and my everyday world. And so I rise and start my journey.



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It takes some getting used to, this seeing. I stand up and suddenly feel unsteady on my feet. The sensations; sights? images? visions?—I am not sure of the right words—crowd in on me and I am confused. I close my eyes and the world seems familiar and safe again. I turn my back on the pool and move slowly towards the steps, opening my eyes a little and then quickly closing them again. Its hard but I am gradually getting the hang of it.

I come to the foot of the steps, open my eyes and look up. It is so high! So steep! the world may be a richer place when you can see but it is scarier too. Still, I have to admit that sight does help as I climb step by step and when I get to the top, I can see the path stretching out before me. That's so good. No longer will I have to feel from wall to wall. I can walk in the middle of the path and just walk around any obstacles I see. This is amazing. I walk faster and faster my fear turning into exhilaration as I do. Soon I am running and jumping and shouting with joy. There is a freedom here I have never known before. I can see! I can see—and the world is bigger, better, richer than I ever imagined it could be. What a gift he gave me, that Jesus, what a blessing. Whatever happens to me now I will always thank and praise him for what he has done for me.

I am almost home now. I turn the corner and I see lots of shapes, moving shapes. They are people. I hear their voices and see them for the first time. The service in the synagogue is over and they are walking home, happy and contented. I recognise David's voice and call out to him. "David! David! Over here. It's me, James." One of the shapes turns and comes towards me. "James? Is that you? Are you looking at me?" "Yes it is me; I can see.!"

Some of the others come up now. They start arguing about me. "That can't be the blind beggar," they say, "It is someone else who looks like him." "No, it is him, I'm sure" says David. "Of course it's me" I say, "I'm still the same person but now my life has been turned upside down and the world has become wonderful."

"How did this happen?" asks someone. "A passing teacher, he healed me. He made mud with his spit, put it on my eyes and told me to wash them in Siloam. And when I did I could see. It is the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to me." "If it's true, it's certainly a wonder." said one of the men. "I think we should tell the Pharisees about this." said another and everyone seemed to agree. So suddenly I found myself being hustled into the synagogue and into the presence of the assembled Pharisees.





There is a gabble of voices as everyone tries to explain at once. Then one of the Pharisees—I don't recognise him, of course, though his voice sounds familiar—raises his hand for silence. "Bring him to me." And I am pushed, jostled to the front. "Tell me your story," he demands. "Well sir, I am a man who was born blind and has been so these past twenty years. Then a man came and he put mud on my eyes and told me to wash in the Pool of Siloam and when I did, I could see!"

At this the gabble and babble breaks out again. And this time the Pharisees are doing it too. I can't hear so well with my eyes open so I close them and listen closely. Fragments reach me: "It's a miracle!" "Who could do such a thing?" "God is with us." "Is this of God or the evil one?" "Has the law been broken?" "We must find out more." The hubbub dies away and I open my eyes to find the same man—is he the leader of the Pharisees?—with his hand raised.

"We have some questions. Firstly, who put this mud on your eyes?" "It was a man named Jesus, sir." There is a hiss and mutter from the Pharisees. "I see. And where did he get this mud?" "Well I think he took some earth from the ground, spat on it, and made the mud that way." "His own saliva? On your eyes?" "I think so. That's what it sounded like." The Pharisee snorted with disgust. "And when did this happen? Why have we only just heard about it?" "Well it happened just this hour. I've only just come back from the pool." "It happened today?" "Yes, I've just said that!" I was getting fed up with all these questions, and a little anxious too. I didn't like the way this seemed to be going.

The Pharisees were now talking and arguing amongst themselves. "A healing like this must be from God." "How can it be when the Sabbath has been profaned?"

The Sabbath! Of course—this Jesus had healed me on the Sabbath. I must admit that because I was excluded from everything, that the Sabbath never really meant much to me—but it certainly will now! The day of rest has become the day of healing for me. But was this wrong? Was it against the law? Was healing me 'work'? And if so, surely it was God's own work so it must be Ok—mustn't it?

The Pharisees are talking about Jesus now. Some say he is a sinner because he broke the Sabbath rules. Others say that a sinner could not perform such a miracle. Suddenly the leader turns to me: "You! What have you got to say about this man Jesus?"

For a moment I don't know what to say. I know nothing of him except that he healed me. No, that isn't true. I have heard his voice, full of quiet authority. I have felt his touch, gentle and firm. I have known a deep peace when he put the mud on my eyes. I do know this man and I know that he is more than a man. "He is a prophet, sir. Sent from God." This is obviously not the answer they want to hear. "This man is a babbler," says the Pharisee. "We'll get no sense out of him. Are his parents here?"

And two people step forward. My father and my mother! For the first time in my life I can see them. My father, so tall compared to others, walking awkwardly. It's strange. I've heard that limp all my life—he broke his leg as a child—and now I can see it! And my mother, my own sweet soft warm mother, how good she looks to me, how beautiful. This miracle just goes on and on, getting more marvellous with every moment. Tears fill my eyes and I cannot see properly any more.

When I am able to see again I realise that they are frightened. The Pharisees are asking about me, asking why I can see again. Of course they do not know. "Ask him," they say, "he is of age." 'Yes, ask me.' I think. 'Leave my parents alone.' And that is exactly what they do.



11

Dismissing my mother and father, the Pharisees call me over again. “Give glory to God!” they say. “We demand that you tell us the truth. We know that this Jesus is a sinner.” “I know nothing of him,” I reply defensively. “I’ve never met him before today. Never heard of him either. I don’t know if he is a sinner or not.” And then my courage starts to return. “But one thing I do know,” I say defiantly, “I was blind but now I can see! I can see you and you and you... and I never could until this very day.”

“Tell us again, what did he do to you? How did he make you see again?” I’m getting fed up with this. God has come to me and has blessed me. This should be the happiest day of my life. But instead of rejoicing and praising Him I am stuck here undergoing the third degree. What do they think happened? That he cast a magic spell on me? That he conjured a demon to restore my sight? I’ve had enough of this: “I’ve already told you everything that happened. I have nothing else to add. Why are you so keen to know? Do you want to become his disciples?” Whoops! That’s not a very smart thing to say. But they’ve got me so mad it just slipped out—and I don’t care.

“How dare you!” “We follow Moses and no-one else.” “We know that Moses was a prophet but we know nothing about this man.” Oh yes, they were angry all right. But so was I. “You know nothing about him?” I ask. “Here is a man who can heal someone who was born blind. Have you ever known that to be done before? No, I thought not. And do you really think that any man could do this unless God was with him? A sinner could not possibly do such a thing. Only a man who is filled with the spirit of God could have healed me, and you know it. If he wasn’t from God he could have done nothing.”

Suddenly I realise that I am standing in the Synagogue lecturing the Pharisees about religion. This crazy day has just got crazier! So I am not surprised at their response but the vehemence of it shocks me. The leader screams at me, flecks of his spit spattering my face: “How dare you speak to us like that! You who were born in sin are now so steeped in sin that you can only speak evil and lies. You are unclean filth and you are defiling this house of prayer with your very presence. Get him out of here right now!”

This last was addressed to a grey-haired man—the leader of the synagogue I guessed—who nodded to a couple of the others. They walked up to me, lay hands on me and marched, dragged, me out of the synagogue and threw me down into the dust of the street.



11

For an age I lay there, stunned, shocked, bruised but mainly just ‘looking’ (oh, how easily that word slips into my mind, how joyously). The roadway is so beautiful. Tiny, tiny particles of dust and larger grains of sand. Sand—it feels so rough to the finger, it stings the face in a sand storm, it is sharp beneath freshly washed feet, but oh how lovely it looks. As I move my head slowly the light reflects (?) from the individual grains. It glistens (?) in the sun. It shimmers (?) in the sunlight. So many words I’ve heard but never thought I’d ever get to use. And so many different colours (?) and shades(?). Sand is ‘brown’; I’ve heard plenty of people say that, though others say ‘yellow’ or even ‘white’, which has always confused me. But now I see that they are all right! Sand is brown and yellow and white and countless other colours too. Too many colours, not enough names...

Gradually the ecstasy of this reverie is invaded by noise. Footsteps, voices, coming nearer. I raise my eyes just a little. Two feet are approaching. They stop in front of me and I look a little higher. A hand comes into view, reaching for my hand. I grasp it and am helped up. The hand belongs to a man with smiling eyes. “Hello again,” he says, and immediately I know that this is Jesus. Not just because I recognise his voice but because I suddenly know, with a deep conviction, that it is him. “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” he asks. “Sir, who is that?” I reply though I think I already know the answer. “You are looking at him. You are talking to him.” says Jesus.

I am *looking* at him. Suddenly it all catches up with me: the mud, the pool, the light, the Pharisees, the sand, everything. And I think of all the joy I’ve had; I think of what I said to the Pharisees: ‘How could this man do such a thing unless he was from God?’ and the utter deep truth of my own words hits me. This is the man who did these things. This is the man sent from God, the man who brought God to me! And I fall to my knees and worship. “Lord,” I say, “Lord, I believe.”

I grasp his coat in my hands, squeezing it so tight (but even in my ecstasy noticing the weave of the fabric and how intricate it is). And I cling on to his garment as he puts his hand on my head and I lean it against his legs. It is as if I am being held in my mother’s arms again. It is as if I have come home for the first time in my life. It is as if a dam has burst and I am being drowned in love.

And now—now!—now I see. Though my eyes are blinded with tears, I see. From the depths of my heart, I see. There is no end to the greatness and goodness of God and this Jesus is the one who brings him close to us. ‘Do you believe in the Son of man?’ oh yes, with all my heart—because now I can see the truth.

