

“He Had Been Blind”

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

1 Samuel 16:1-13, Psalm 23, Ephesians 5:8-14, and John 9:1-41 all make the same point. Obedience is responding faithfully even in doubt.

At the age of 45, Michael May regained his sight. May was blinded at age three, and lived 42 years of his life without sight. In 1999, he was given the possibility to see again through what was at that time a revolutionary transplant surgery. When the doctors removed the surgical bandages from his eyes, May couldn't perceive space or see height, distance, depth, or three-dimensional shapes. Michael May didn't get discouraged by the long learning curve. He knew that learning to see again would involve not just the operation, but a lifelong quest to learn, grow, take risks, and change. As he left the hospital, May peppered his wife with questions: “What's this? What's that? Is that a step? Is that a flower? He rode elevators over and over again for the sheer pleasure of finding the hotel lobby after the ride. May played catch with his son, horribly missing many balls before he finally got the hang of it. He continued to struggle with his transition to the reality of sight. The transformation was slow. As a result, every day and even every failure seemed like a new opportunity for Michael May to learn, grow, and change.¹

I do not know if Michael May was a Christian or not. It doesn't matter. Michael May demonstrated obedience is responding faithfully even in doubt when he pursued the eye transplant surgery. And he demonstrated obedience is responding faithfully even in doubt when he couldn't see shapes or have depth perception or see three dimensional figures right away following the surgery. Michael May persevered in learning the names of things he had never seen, and how to play catch with his son. Michael May had been blind.

¹Adapted from an article written by Robert Kurson, “Into the Light,” in *Esquire* (June 2005).

John 9:1-41 focus on “blindness” and “sight.” Both blindness and sight demonstrate obedience is responding faithfully even in doubt. Jesus heals the blind man by restoring his literal sight but also giving sight to his spiritual blindness.

- Jesus sees a man “blind from birth” while walking and addresses him.
- Jesus put a small patch of mud made with his saliva on the blind man’s eyes.
- Jesus tells the blind man to wash in the pool of Siloam.
- The blind man washed and returned to Jesus able to see.
- The blind man is a disciple of Jesus.
- The blind man demonstrated obedience is responding faithfully even in doubt.
- The Pharisees are disciples of Moses.
- The Pharisees assert the blind man cannot be healed from his blindness because his whole existence is rooted in sin.
- The Pharisees do not believe Jesus is sinless because he healed on the Sabbath.
- The Pharisees doubt that Jesus is God, sinless, and has the power to heal.
- Jesus states that the man who had been blind, believing that he is God brought sight to his spiritual blindness.
- Jesus views the Pharisees as stuck in the legalism of the law. Although they can literally see, they cannot bring light into darkness because they’re stuck in the darkness of self-righteousness.

The focal point of John 9:1-41 is God’s work made manifest in Christ. But it also has much to say about the blind man seeing God in Christ and saying so.²

²In the three paragraphs above of textual analysis, I have benefited from the thinking of Rebecca Abts Wright, Jane Anne Ferguson, John W. Wurster, Jerome F. D. Creach, Sally B. Purvis, Andrew Nagy-Benson, and Michael L. Lindvall in *Connections, Year A, Volume 2* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 77-79, 79-81, 82-83, 84-86, 86-87, 88-90, and 90-92.

Some argue that “Amazing Grace” is the most popular hymn in the English-speaking world. You might agree. I do. In the first verse the line “I once was blind, but now I see,” occurs. It appears to echo verse 25 in John 9. The hymn’s author is John Newton. Once a slave trader, he became a Christian and a leading voice in the abolitionist movement. The words “blindness” and “sight” for Newton were both metaphorical and autobiographical. Metaphorically, what things make us blind today? Might the political “echo chambers” be on the list? Or perhaps internet websites that link us to like-minded blogs join the list. And lastly, but not insignificant, choosing friends where our perspectives won’t be challenged.

I’ve prayed often, over my lifetime, for people to regain their eyesight. Within the past five years, I have intently begun to pray for my “blindness” caused by some of the things mentioned above to be lifted. I continue to pray. I invite you to join the journey that John Newton experienced, “I once was blind, but now I see.” In so many areas of my life I have said, and continue to say, “I had been blind.” Amen.

*This sermon was preached (for the In-Person and Livestream congregations)
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