



Pastor Michael O'Neill  
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**Ashes to Fire, Week 4**  
**With Jesus Along the Road**  
*John 9:1-41*

**1. The Question (9:1-2)**

- Exodus 20:5, 34:7; Numbers 14:18; Deuteronomy 5:9;  
Ezekiel 18:1-4; Acts 5:1-11; 1 Corinthians 10:6-10, 11-30

**2. The Answer (9:3-7)**

- Isaiah 35:5

**3. The Inquiry (9:8-34)**

**4. The Conclusion (9:35-41)**

- The Religionists:

- Man (vs 16)

- Sinner (vs 24)

- Devil (10:20)

- The Blind Man:

- Man (vs 11)

- Prophet (vs 17)

- Christ (vs 38)

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West Valley Church  
Michael O'Neill

**A2F: With Jesus Along the Road**  
*Ashes to Fire, Year A*  
**(John 9:1-41)<sup>1</sup>**

The letter was written to me. The writer of the letter said in part, “God has revealed to me that the reason your son is suffering and dying is because there is sin in your life.” The situation that the letter referred to took place over twenty years ago; some of you know that part of our story with our youngest son, Brenden. From the time he was one until almost four, he suffered from an unknown malady that caused his body to be unable to process fats. He was diagnosed as “failure to thrive,” so that no food would be digested by his body; it either came up or went out in pretty much the same condition it went in. By the time he was three years old he weighed about 22 pounds. His body was slowly dying. At the time I was working as the youth pastor at College Church of the Nazarene on the campus of Northwest Nazarene University. Shelly spent months at a time with Brenden, taking the other two boys with her, at Children’s hospital in Denver. Miraculously, she was able to get in within a week to see the world’s leading failure-to-thrive specialist, who was trying to diagnose Brenden’s disease. He continued to be our doctor throughout that journey. Getting in to see him was just one of many sustaining and healing miracles the Lord performed along the way.

They thought it was Cystic Fibrosis but ruled that out. They thought it might be Celiac, but ruled that out too. Then something called Swachman’s Syndrome, which our doctor helped discover, but they couldn’t conclusively determine whether it was that or something else. His body was too weak to continue the exhausting, invasive testing. The grace of God, prayer, the loving care of his mother, and Pediasure kept him alive. After nearly three years of that ordeal, it all just disappeared. The Lord healed him.

But that letter.... the letter that came to me was written by a parent of one of the teens that had been in my youth group when I was the youth pastor in Corvallis, Oregon. We went to Nampa from there. I had spent the better of my life during those 8 years in Corvallis, trying to help her kids find faith. I felt angry, betrayed, and saddened that she would accuse me of such a thing. I was able to put her letter into context, though. I knew this woman had once made a scene in the middle of a funeral service because she was convinced that the deceased person was going to rise up out of the coffin. Oh, and also, at the end of her letter, she wrote that God

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<sup>1</sup> Primary resources are William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, Rev. and updated, vol. 1, The New Daily Study Bible (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2001), Joseph Dongell, *John: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, ID: Welseyean Publishing House, 1997), and *Faithlife Study Bible*, Lexham Press, Joseph Mayfield and Ralphe Earle, *John/Acts: Beacon Bible Commentary*, (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press, 1965).

also told her that Brenden would be healed if I used the sample of aerosol spray vitamins that she included, and that I could buy my future supplies from her. How gracious.

Now, I will say that as my anger subsided, I prayed this prayer: “God, this woman is a nutcase and I reject her curse. *But...*are you, through her craziness, trying to tell me something?” So I waited and listened to the Spirit in case he was trying to call anything to my attention. He can do that, you know – he speak to us through even the nuttiest people.

But I was angered for another reason, which was that this woman would accuse God of such a thing. It would be one thing if I *did* have known sin in my life, but the God I know would *never* punish my infant child for *my* sin.

Her accusation against my son, my God, and me is nothing new. That kind of thing has been around for a long time; it’s what starts the story in our Ashes to Fire reading for today from John 9. I hope you’ve read it already this morning and come prepared. If not, please take a few moments to read it as I continue, because we’re not going to read through it here – it’s a long passage and we won’t take all the time to read through it. Either way, why don’t you turn there in your Bibles – John 9:1 – because we are going to walk through it, and allow the Holy Spirit to speak to us.

Once again, John writes this in a way that he wrote the previous passages that we’ve looked at; he allows us as readers to enter into the story and be drawn along with it. The entire passage begins, as I said earlier, with...

### 1. The *Question* (9:1-2)

The disciples see the man who was born blind from birth, and they ask Jesus if the man’s blindness is a result of his parents’ sin or his own sin. The very question indicates a narrow understanding of the relationship between sin and any physical illness. Their question shows that they believed there was only one of two possible answers: his blindness is either his parents’ fault because *they* sinned, or it’s the man’s own fault because *he* sinned. Of course, he was blind from birth, so that meant he would have sinned while in the womb.

This brings up the question of the problem of sin, evil, and disease in the world – a topic that I would enjoy talking a long time with you about, but I don’t have that luxury in a sermon of limited length (unless you *want* me to give you a lecture on the philosophical, physiological, moral, and theological ramifications of disease, sickness, death, and sin – in other words, the problem of reconciling evil with an omnibenevolent God, and developing a theodicy from those conclusions.) As exciting as that might be, I’m assuming you’d rather not do that, so for your sake and mine, today let’s just stick to the context of this passage.

The disciples’ question reflects one of the common Jewish thoughts of the day: that the sins of the parents are visited on their children. (There are some Old Testament passages that talk about this [Exodus 20:5; 34:7; Numbers 14:18; Deuteronomy 5:9]). The question also reflects a line of thinking of their day that a person could actually

sin while still in his mother's womb. These ideas fit well within the Jewish religionists' legalistic mindset; because they thought that *everything* had a direct cause and effect: if you have some kind of disease, then obviously you have sinned. It's the same attitude that we see in the book of Job with the example of the really bad advisors. It was *this* kind of thinking about God the Father that Jesus came to destroy. And it's not like they didn't know better – already by this time, the prophet Ezekiel had made a strong case for individual responsibility; that sinners would be punished for their *own* sins, and the innocent would *not* be punished for the sins of others:

“The word of the Lord came to me: ‘What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: “The parents eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge”? ‘As surely as I live,’ declares the Sovereign Lord, ‘you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to me. The one who sins is the one who will die.’” (Ezekiel 18:1-4, niv)

To the disciples' question, then, Jesus clearly answered, “no.” But Jesus did *not* directly answer the bigger question of what causes human suffering. So, again, without launching into an entire college semester of theodicy, let me just make a few comments.

First, you *can* find examples in the Bible of people being inflicted with sickness, and even death, as punishment for his or her sin (Acts 5:1-11; 1 Corinthians 10:6-10; 11-30). We see it more frequently in the Old Testament than we do in the New Testament, though, because we now live in the age of Grace, not the Law. But I think we could all agree that there are a lot of sinful behaviors that result in destructive consequences to those who practice them, and even to those they inflict that sinful behavior on. We can even see a physical toll on someone who is consumed with hatred, anger, bitterness, griping and complaining, jealousy, and other destructive attitudes. So in other words, physical illness *may* result from sin committed by the sufferer (*may* – but not always!), and even then it is more *consequential* than *judgmental*.

But on the other hand, sickness and death *have* been unleashed throughout the whole world as a result of Adam and Eve's original decision to sin, so sin is the original source of the web of sickness and death that we are *all* entangled in, regardless of how good or bad we may be. Christians *do* suffer, even those whose faith is strong and whose hearts are pure. So if you are going through some horrible situation or health issue, and someone tells you that you have to have more faith so you won't be sick anymore, or that you have to just name your “victory” and everything will get better, you can tell them that they have bad theology and theodicy. In fact it's worse than bad, it's outright wrong and ignorant and harmful.

Instead of directly answering that question, Jesus shifted the disciples' attention away from the *cause* of the man's blindness, and instead helped them focus on the *result* of the man's blindness: “That the work of God might be displayed in his life.”

(vs 3) The man's personal tragedy would soon be transformed into an opportunity for God's glory, grace, and love to shine. So next in the story we see...

## 2. The *Answer* (9:3-7)

Jesus makes it clear that God intends to work through this man's blindness-since-birth. It wasn't God's fault that he was blind, but God could work in the situation, if the blind guy would trust him. In fact, God is the *only* one who can do such a thing. So here's an important answer to this entire question: God should not be charged for our misfortunes, but *only* God provides the power in them, through them, and out of them. Every time that we are faced with difficult circumstances, disease, and even death, we have an opportunity to see God's glory, mercy, and grace. EVERY time! That's what Jesus' death and resurrection provides for us forever. That is why in this passage Jesus referred to his impending death. And so that is how we should face our own misfortunes, by seeing them as opportunities for God to shine, whether in our suffering or our healing. Everything does *not* happen for a reason, but everything that happens does create an opportunity for God to work. If you think everything happens for a reason, your theodicy is bad. I can easily speak for Pastor Roger and tell you that is exactly their family's prayer in the midst of this diagnosis: "God, use this as an opportunity for your love and power to shine."

So Jesus heals the man, but he does it in an unusual way that might be hard to understand without explanation. First, Jesus took dirt and spit and made clay that he put on the man's eyes. That seems weird and unsanitary to us today. But in those days, people believed that spit had medicinal property; that's why to this day, when you cut your finger, you instinctively put it in your mouth. And they believed the greater the person, the more powerful the spit! So Jesus is telling them that since his spit heals, he is great! But there's an even bigger thing going on here: remember the man was born blind. Blindness in the Bible is a symbol for sinfulness – stumbling around in spiritual darkness. That is why Jesus made the statement at the end of the passage, about people being able to see and people being blind. Ultimately, we need a cure for sinfulness, not just health issues. So Jesus takes us back to the beginning of creation when he smears mud on the guy's face. Here's what Jesus is doing: when God created humans, he took clay and formed mankind, right? God created man out of clay. Well, since the man in our passage was *born* blind, so he never actually had useful eyes. Instead of healing the man's eyes, Jesus in effect *created* eyes for him. In doing this, Jesus is showing that he not only can heal blind eyes, which the prophet Isaiah said would be a signature trait of the Messiah (Isaiah 35:5), but Jesus is showing that he is actually *one with God* because he is creating just as God did. The Bible says this about Jesus:

"For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him." (Col. 1:16, niv) (Bonus verse!)

So after making clay and putting it on the man's eyes, Jesus sent the man to the pool of Siloam to wash. Whenever God wants to do a work in our lives, there will always

be a required level of action on our part; we have to put feet to our faith. So the man went and washed, and suddenly he had sight! He could see.

The pool of Siloam had significant history for Jews, which we don't have time to go into. But John points out that the meaning of the name "Siloam" is "sent," which highlights that Jesus is the "Sent One" from God, and that God the sender of Jesus is the ultimate source of healing power.

Again, Jesus proves that the answer to all of our hardships is that they can become an opportunity for God to shine in and through our lives – whether we are healed or not.

And the point is proven because the people take notice – they all knew this man and passed him everyday for decades and they couldn't believe that he was the same guy. Right away, the man begins to tell his neighbors what God has done for him. Once they realize that he is indeed the same guy who was blind, they want to know how he was healed and who did it. Then it isn't long before the religious leaders hear about it and call the man in for...

### 3. The *Inquiry* (9:8-34)

The religionists are the ones who want to have the control of what is allowed in their religion, and what is not. Clearly, whoever healed this guy didn't get their okay; Jesus didn't clear it with them first. Then, worse yet, they find out that Jesus healed the blind man on the Sabbath! Last week I shared with you how strict their religious rules were for the Sabbath: no going to work, no going out to dinner, no mowing the lawn (some of you who grew up in the church remember those rules)...actually their laws were even worse than that: they had specific rules about *everything* on the Sabbath (which was Saturday, by the way – not Sunday). If someone was dying, you weren't even allowed to help heal the person. All you were allowed to do to help a sick person was to do just enough to stop them from getting worse, so that on the *next* day, if they were still alive, you could try to heal them. So the religionists are adamant that they want to know who this person is that blatantly broke the religious rules! (Won't they be surprised when they find out the one who did it is God himself – the very one they claim to worship!) See, God didn't make their rules – the religionists did. The religion was supposed to serve people and bring God closer to them. Instead, they turned it around so that the people had to serve the religion, as if that would get them closer to God.

Rather than give up their power and control and their pride in thinking they've got all the answers, they wouldn't accept what God was doing; instead they tried to make God fit into their religion. They actually believed that God would rather let a man go blind than love the man and heal him on the Sabbath. And the Sabbath was a day that was supposed to be God's anyway! How dare they say what God can and can't do on his own day. Listen: whenever the rules of your religion intersect with compassionate love for a fellow human being, you should always choose compassionate love. You should always choose the person over the legalism.

Because that's what God does! It doesn't matter if the reason the person who needs compassion needs it because of his own sin. God chooses loving compassion; so should we! Every time, because our legalism does not originate with God, it originates with us. What originates with God is love and compassion. Legalism originates with us as soon as we begin deciding who is good enough to be loved, and when the right time to love someone is.

Refusing to believe the man's story, and refusing to accept that Jesus is from God, the religionists call in the blind man's parents. The religionists flex their muscles of influence and power and make the parents testify against their son. See, they could throw the parents out of the synagogue, which would essentially mean being thrown out of their community with no means of support. So to avoid excommunication, the parents throw their own son under the bus – in verse 21 they answered, "He's an adult – let him speak for himself. We're not going to defend him." So they asked the ex-blind man again. This time, the ex-blind man turns the tables on *them*. They are trying to cross-examine him, but he cross-examines them! He argues, "If the man who healed me was not from God, how could he create seeing eyes where there were none before? Could a sinner do this? Of course not!"

The religious leaders don't have an answer for his argument, so they do what every schoolyard bully does when he is trapped in a corner: they start calling the ex-blind man names. They basically say, "Oh yeah?! Well you are *stupid!* You are a sinner! That's what you are!"

As the argument is taking place, both the ex-blind man and the religionists are beginning to realize more and more who Jesus is. But what's interesting is the difference between their two opinions.

We need to see...

#### 4. The ***conclusion*** (9:35-41)

Throughout the course of the interrogation and the rest of the story, we see both the religionists and the ex-blind man come to a conclusion about who Jesus is. Let's start with...

##### - The ***Religionists:***

They start out their interrogation by asking the ex-blind man who the...

##### - ***Man*** (vs 16)

...is that healed him. They don't believe his story, so they ask him practically seven different ways to Sabbath who this guy was. But they don't like where the conversation is headed. If Jesus really is from God, then it means God is not behaving in ways that *they* think God should. God is behaving in ways that mean

they don't have all the answers and all the power. So as the discussion escalates, they shift from calling Jesus a man to calling him ...

- ***Sinner*** (vs 24)

Completely ignoring the obvious – that Jesus has the power to bring sight to a man that is born blind from birth – they focus instead on the rules of their religion. Ignoring that Jesus showed compassion on a fellow human being, they are angry that Jesus would give sight to someone that they've determined is a sinner and is getting what he deserved. That's how blind we can be when we want to justify ourselves and condemn others that we think are sinful. We get on a track of self-righteousness that we can't get off of. Finally, the religionists decide in the next chapter that not only is Jesus a sinner, he must be the...

- ***Devil*** (10:20)

...because Jesus dares to defy their rules and instead loves and heals people.

But even as their accusations against Jesus grow worse, the ex-blind man's conclusions about Jesus gets better. Let's see what...

- **The *Blind Man***: sees (Get it – let's *see* what the blind man *sees*?).

He starts off in the inquisition at the same place that the religionists do; he refers to Jesus as a...

- ***Man*** (vs 11)

But as the religionists get worse, the blind man gets better – he elevates Jesus from just any ordinary man to being a...

- ***Prophet*** (vs 17)

He concludes that Jesus must at least be sent from God if he can do these kinds of miracles. A sinner couldn't do this, and for sure a fake magician couldn't do this. In the process of this, this man becomes like the Samaritan woman did – this man becomes a witness for Jesus. He knows what Jesus did for him, even if he doesn't understand completely everything about Jesus. He even invites the religionists to become Jesus' disciples! The one who doesn't have all the answers is witnessing about Jesus, and the ones who *think* they have all the answers are getting it all wrong. And even after the ex-blind man's parents throw him under the bus, he sticks to the truth and throws himself under the bus, and then gets thrown out of the synagogue. His parents stay comfortably inside because they chose fear instead of



love for their son and faith in Jesus – even while their son courageously defends Jesus and doesn't back down, getting thrown out of the community himself.

That's a good lesson for us: we don't have to have all the answers; but we do need to willingly tell others what Jesus has done for us. We don't have to have all the right theology, but we *do* have to witness, and invite other people to be Jesus' disciples, too.

So the man goes out to try and find Jesus. That's not going to be easy, since he has yet to look in Jesus' face! He doesn't even know what Jesus looks like. But He's fortunate, because Jesus is looking for him! They meet up, and Jesus gets right to the heart of things, as usual. He asks the man if he believes in the Messiah – the Son of God. The man says, "Tell me who he is and I will!" And like with the woman at the well, Jesus reveals to the man that *he* is the Christ, Son of God. The man says, "Lord, I believe! You are..."

– ***Christ*** (vs 38)!"

It was then that Jesus pointed out that the people who realize they are spiritually blind and in need of Jesus are the ones who will see clearly, but the ones who think they have all the answers and think they see clearly are really the ones who are spiritually blind. So what does all this mean?

Whenever I prepare a sermon, I always ask God, "What is it that you want us to take away from this? What decision must we make? What action must we take?" And it comes down to two things, really. The first is this: Where are you today on the spectrum? When you walked in here, what was your opinion of Jesus? Did you walk in here saying he was just an ordinary man? Or maybe you were thinking that he is a prophet, or a great teacher. If so, I want to let you know that he's more than that. And because of what you've heard today, you can't just keep believing Jesus is a prophet. Jesus won't let you stay there; you have to decide whether or not you believe he is the Christ. You must know that He can create things in your life that have never been there before. He can give you spiritual eyes to see everything in your life in an entirely new and exciting and expanded way. But *you've* got to decide. For the blind man, it began when he was willing to walk to the pool and wash his eyes. For you, it can begin when you are willing to walk to that table back there in just a moment and have a conversation with another one of Jesus' disciples. We have folks who will meet you there and talk with you. They will be very glad to answer any questions, and tell you what Jesus has done for them. Hold that thought and consider what you are going to do. Because now I want to talk to the rest of us – those who would say they've already accepted Jesus as Christ.

I want to warn us that we are just as prone to turn our relationship with Jesus into a set of rules as the religionists were. It is very easy for us to begin to take pride in our having the answers. And it's very easy for us to decide who it is that God loves and who he doesn't; to decide how and when God should work, and with whom. To borrow a line from a famous comedian (although this isn't funny at all): if you are

certain in your knowledge of how God should work, you just might be a religionist. If you honestly can't believe that someone who has a sinful lifestyle can't be loved and healed by God, you just might be a religionist. If you would rather be *right* than welcome someone into our church who is in a sinful lifestyle, you just might be a religionist. If you'd rather argue with someone about theology than show them love and compassion, you just might be a religionist.

If you think you are always right about God, you are a religionist and *you* need to get right with God.

Because when I think about this story, and who I most relate to, I'm uncomfortable that I connect more with the religionists than the blind man. I've been a Christian for a long time. I've been in the church a long time. I am more prone to be a religionist than a healed blind man. I want to repent and be an ex-blind man. You might think about doing the same.

*Pray*