

John

Lesson #9

A Light in the Darkness

(8: 1 – 9: 41)

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Review

Autumn brought increasing conflict and tension within Jesus' family, with the crowds and with the religious authorities in Jerusalem. As the feast of Tabernacles drew near, Jesus' "brothers" urged him to go to Jerusalem, but in a tone of mocking sarcasm:

“Leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. No one works in secret if he wants to be known publically. If you do these things, manifest yourself to the world.’ For his brothers did not believe in him” (7: 3).

At first Jesus refused to go *“because the Jews were trying to kill him” (7: 1)*, but he soon relented, making his way secretly to Jerusalem, arriving halfway through the feast. And, indeed, he walked into a hornet's nest. During a series of heated exchanges with the crowds, the religious leaders dispatched temple guards to arrest him, but they failed to do so.

Preview

Lesson #9 opens with the story of the woman caught in the very act of adultery and Jesus' surprise response to it. The story then turns to the second of seven "I am" statements:

1. "I am the bread of life" (6: 35)
2. "I am the light of the world" (8: 12)
3. "I am the gate for the sheep" (10: 7)
4. "I am the good shepherd" (10: 11)
5. "I am the resurrection and the life (11: 25)
6. "I am the way and the truth and the life" (14:6)
7. "I am the true vine" (15:1)

The statement stands in sharp contrast to the darkness of the world and to the utter blindness of the religious leaders who refuse to accept Jesus, who find his statements preposterous, and who think him to be stark-raving mad.

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Review, cont.

Indeed, as we noted in Lesson #6, the great Oxford literary scholar and Christian apologist, C.S. Lewis, remarked:

“A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse.”

(Mere Christianity, p. 54)

Only those who stand in the light can see; the religious leaders cannot. The story of the man born blind illustrates this perfectly.



We turn now to the story of the woman caught in adultery, a graphic but very subtle narrative that invites us to step into the scene, to watch carefully Jesus' physical movements and to question the motives and actions of those who accuse the woman.

As the feast of Tabernacles included 7 controversies, so this section includes 3 movements:

1. **The woman caught in adultery**
2. An escalating, heated argument with the "Jews"
3. The man born blind

Read the story of the woman caught in adultery very carefully!

“Then each went to his own house, while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. But early in the morning he arrived again in the temple area, and all the people started coming to him, and **he sat down** and taught them. Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and **made her stand** in the middle. They said to him, ‘Teacher, this woman was **caught in the very act** of committing adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women [**Leviticus 20: 10; Deuteronomy 22: 23-24**]. So what do you say?’ They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him. **Jesus bent down** and **began to write on the ground with his finger**. But when they continued asking him, **he straightened up** and said to them, ‘Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her . . .

“Again he bent down and wrote on the ground. And in response they went away one by one, beginning with the elders. So he was left alone with the woman before him. Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She replied, ‘No one, sir.’ Then Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go, [and] from now on do not sin any more.’”

(8: 1-11)



Rembrandt. *The Woman Taken in Adultery*, (oil on oak), 1644.
National Gallery, London.



Rembrandt. *The Woman Taken in Adultery*, detail (oil on oak), 1644.
National Gallery, London.



Humm. I recall reading that this story is not in many of the early Greek manuscripts, and that perhaps John did not even write it.



Oh, oh!

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That's true. Although 1,476 Greek manuscripts include the story, 267 don't—and those that don't include the earlier 2nd and 3rd century manuscripts and the ones that textual critics consider the most authoritative.

Yet, the story has taken a beloved place in Christian thought and life, and *“let him who is without sin, cast the first stone”* and *“go, and sin no more”* have become emblematic expressions of mercy and forgiveness.

Whether an authentic Johannine text or not, the story sits exactly where it should in John's narrative, introducing the light of mercy and forgiveness into a dark world in the person of Jesus Christ, a dark world that dominates the scenes in the narrative that follows.

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Now we move to the 2nd movement in this section:

1. The woman caught in adultery
2. **An escalating, heated argument with the “Jews”**
3. The man born blind

“Jesus spoke to them again, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’ So the Pharisees said to him, ‘You testify on your own behalf, so your testimony cannot be verified.’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Even if I do testify on my own behalf, my testimony can be verified, because I know where I came from and where I am going. But you do not know where I come from or where I am going. You judge by appearances [literally, κατὰ τὴν σάρκα “according to the flesh”], but I do not judge anyone. And even if I should judge, my judgment is valid, because I am not alone, but it is I and the Father who sent me. Even in your law it is written that the testimony of two men can be verified. I testify on my behalf and so does the Father who sent me’ . . .

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“So they said to him, ‘Where is your father?’ Jesus answered, ‘You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.’ He spoke these words while teaching in the treasury in the temple area. But no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.”

(8: 12-20)

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John introduces the 2nd of Jesus' seven "I am" statements here: "***I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life***" (8: 12).

The Pharisees immediately challenge Jesus for "testifying" on his own behalf; that is, for boasting about himself. He responds by asserting that his testimony is true, for he knows where he is from and to where he is going—an assertion that he makes throughout John's gospel.

But then Jesus claims that the Father supports his testimony, to which the Pharisees ask, "***Where is your father***" (8: 19).



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With that statement the conflict and darkness so prominent in John take a sharp turn into the black arena of an *ad hominem* attack, a vicious personal attack on Jesus' character.

We have spoken about the nature of a patriarchal society and the importance of one's position as a son—especially a 1st born son—in a family. Jesus repeatedly emphasizes his relationship to the “Father”; indeed, the father/son relationship between God and Jesus is foundational in John. But it opens the door to an inevitable personal attack, discrediting everything Jesus says by shining a spotlight into the dark corner that everyone knows is there: Joseph and Mary were betrothed, but *Mary became pregnant by someone else!*

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In a small rural village like Nazareth, that would be common knowledge, so when Jesus' goes public the gossip would open the door for his opponents to discredit him.



That never even occurred to me!

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Watch how it plays out, and how it escalates from a heated argument to a blistering personal attack on Jesus.

“**He said** to them again, ‘I am going away and you will look for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going you cannot come.’ **So the Jews said**, ‘He is not going to kill himself, is he, because he said, ‘Where I am going you cannot come?’ **He said** to them, ‘You belong to what is below, I belong to what is above. You belong to this world, but I do not belong to this world. That is why I told you that you will die in your sins. For if you do not believe that [**Ἐγώ εἰμι**] I AM, you will die in your sins.’ **So they said** to him, ‘Who are you?’ **Jesus said** to them, ‘What I told you from the beginning. I have much to say about you in condemnation. But the one who sent me is true, and what I heard from him I tell the world’ . . . **So Jesus said** [to them], ‘When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I AM . . .’

“Jesus then said to those Jews who believed in him, ‘If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free’ . . . They answered and said to him, ‘Our father is Abraham.’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works of Abraham. But now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God: Abraham did not do this. You are doing the works of your father [Satan]. [So] they said to him, ‘We are not illegitimate. We have one Father, God.’”

(8: 21-41)

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Notice how Jesus and the “Jews” exchange blows, like two boxers duking it out, fists flying, with the “Jews” striking a low blow:

“We are not illegitimate. We have one Father, God.”

(8: 42)

The Greek reads literally:

Ἡμεῖς ἐκ πορνείας οὐ γεγεννήμεθα
We of fornication have not been born.

But Jesus recovers from the low blow, counterpunching:

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“Jesus said to them, ‘If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and am here; I did not come on my own, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I’m saying? Because you cannot bear to hear my word. You belong to your father the devil and you willingly carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in truth, because there is not truth in him. When he tells a lie, he speaks in character, because he is a liar and the father of lies . . . If I am telling the truth, why do you not believe me? Whoever belongs to God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not listen, because you do not belong to God. The Jews answered and said to him, ‘Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and are possessed?’ . . .”

(8: 42-48)

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So, the argument
devolves into name
calling!



My goodness,
how will all of this
end?

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“[So Jesus said], ‘Abraham your father rejoiced to see my day; he saw it and was glad. So the Jews said to him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old and you have seen Abraham?’ Jesus said to them ‘Amen, Amen, I say to you, before Abraham came to be, [Ἐγὼ εἰμι] I AM.’ So they picked up stones to throw at him; but Jesus hid and went out of the temple area.”

(8: 56-59)



Now we move to the 3rd and final movement in this section:

1. The woman caught in adultery
2. An escalating, heated argument with the “Jews”
3. **The man born blind**



Leaving the temple complex, Jesus encounters a man born blind, and in what follows, John crafts a brilliant story of increasing illumination and understanding, of a man who emerges from total darkness into the light.

In this story John introduces the 5th of Jesus' 7 signs, and the 2nd of Jesus' 7 "I am" statements:

"I am the light of the world."



**El Greco. *Healing the Man Born Blind* (oil on panel), c. 1567.
Old Masters' Gallery, Dresden.**

“As he passed by he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him. We have to do the works of the one who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, **I am the light of the world**. When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva, and smeared the clay on his eyes, and said, to him. ‘Go wash in the Pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). So he went and washed, and came back able to see.”

(9: 1-7)

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This is an incredibly rich story, with deep echoes from previous events.

- **As we know from Deuteronomy 24: 16, *“Parents shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their parents; only for one’s own crime shall a person be put to death.”***

Consequently, when Jesus’ disciples ask *“who sinned, this man of his parents,”* Jesus says in effect, “Neither, s* happens, but given that it has, we will use it to glorify God.”**

- **Jesus then contrasts the polar opposites of day/night and light/dark.**

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- Sending the man born blind to the pool of Siloam recalls the final day of the feast of Tabernacles, during which the priest descends from the Temple to the pool of Siloam, bringing water in a golden pitcher and pouring it into a silver basin at the altar, remembering and celebrating the water that gushed from the rock at Meribah during the Exodus, bringing life to the parched Israelites.

- In that scene, Jesus said, *“Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture says: ‘Rivers of living water will flow from within him’”* (7: 37-38).

- Spitting on the ground and making clay with his saliva, recalls “springs of living water” and the water from the pool of Siloam in which Jesus has the man wash to receive his sight.

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That is really clever on John's part, having Jesus spit on the ground, put the clay on the man's eyes and wash in the pool of Siloam, ever so subtly linking the healing to the life-giving waters of Meribah and to Tabernacles.



I always wondered why Jesus spit!

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So the man born blind receives his sight, but watch how gradually he is enlightened on Jesus' identity, an enlightenment that completely eludes the "Jews," who remain stumbling about in the dark.

“His neighbors and those who had seen him earlier as a beggar said, ‘Isn’t this the one who used to sit and beg?’ Some said, ‘It is,’ but others said, ‘No, he just looks like him.’ He said, “I am.” So they said to him, ‘[So] how were your eyes opened?’ He replied, ‘**The man called Jesus** made clay and anointed my eyes and told me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ So I went there and washed and was able to see.’ And they said to him, ‘Where is he?’ He said, ‘I don’t know.’”

(9: 8-12)

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Notice that the man born blind stands at the 1st level of understanding concerning Jesus' identity:

1. **“The man called Jesus”** (9: 11)

“They brought the one who was once blind to the Pharisees. Now Jesus had made clay and opened his eyes on a sabbath [here we go again!]. So then the Pharisees also asked him how he was able to see. He said to them, ‘He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and now I can see.’ So some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, because he does not keep the sabbath.’ [But] others said, ‘How can a sinful man do such signs?’ And there was a division among them. So they said to the blind man again, ‘What do you have to say about him, since he opened your eyes?’ He said, ‘He is a prophet.’”

(9: 8-12)

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The man born blind now moves to the 2nd level of understanding:

1. "The man called Jesus" (9: 11)
2. **"He is a prophet" (9: 17)**

“Now the Jews did not believe that he had been blind and gained his sight until they summoned the parents of the one who had gained his sight. They asked them, ‘Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How does he now see?’ His parents answered and said, ‘We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. We do not know how he sees now, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him, he is of age; he can speak for himself.’ His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone acknowledged him as the Messiah, he would be expelled from the synagogue. For this reason his parents said, ‘He is of age; question him.’ So a second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him . . .

'Give God the praise! We know that this man is a sinner.' He replied, 'If he is a sinner, I do not know. One thing I do know is that I was blind and now I see.' So they said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' He answered them, 'I told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?' They ridiculed him and said, 'You are that man's disciple; we are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but we do not know where this one is from.' The man answered and said to them, 'This is what is so amazing, that you do not know where he is from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if one is devout and does his will he listens to him. It is unheard of that anyone ever opened the eyes of a person born blind . . .

'If this man were not from God, he would not be able to do anything.' They answered and said to him, 'You were born totally in sin, and are you trying to teach us?' Then they threw him out."

(9: 18-34)

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The man born blind moves to the 3rd level of understanding:

1. "The man called Jesus" (9: 11)
2. "He is a prophet" (9: 17)
3. "If this man were not from God" (9: 33)

‘When Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, he found him and said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ He answered and said, ‘Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him and the one speaking with you is he. He said, ‘I do believe, Lord,’ and **he worshiped him.**”

(9: 35-38)

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The man born blind at last reaches the 4th and final level of understanding who Jesus is, and he responds accordingly:

1. “The man called Jesus” (9: 11)
2. “He is a prophet” (9: 17)
3. “If this man were not from God” (9: 33)
4. **“He worshiped him” (9: 38)**

“Then Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see might see, and those who do see might become blind.’ Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not also blind, are we?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you are saying, ‘We see, so your sin remains.’”

(9: 33-41)

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So, we've followed a series of three movements in this narrative sequence:

1. **The woman caught in adultery;**
2. **an escalating, heated argument with the "Jews"; and**
3. **the man born blind.**

In all three, light shines in a dark world, the light of Christ. Some see it and recognize it; most don't.

John paints his world in stark contrasting colors: light/dark, believers/unbelievers, saved/lost.

And these bold colors dominate John's palette as he crafts his divine portrait of Christ.

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Questions for discussion and thought

1. How did the “Jews” know that the woman was committing adultery?
2. What happened to the man with whom she was committing it?
3. How does Jesus body movement add to our understanding of the story?
4. In the argument with the “Jews,” why does Jesus continue to escalate, rather than simply walk away?
5. How might we apply the story of the man born blind to our own lives?

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