

John 9:1-41 – Preached on March 2, 2008

9As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

⁸The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” ¹⁰But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” ¹²They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.”

**Sing: Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found
Was blind, but now I see.**

John Newton wrote these words. Do you know his story? He was born in London in 1725. When John was eleven, he went to sea with his father and made six voyages with him before his father retired. John then went into the service and was aboard a man-of-war. Finding conditions intolerable, he fled the ship. He was soon recaptured and publicly flogged and demoted.

Finally, at his own request, he was exchanged into service on a slave ship, which took him to the coast of Sierra Leone. He became the servant of a slave trader and was brutally abused. In 1748 he was rescued by a sea captain who had known John’s father, and John eventually went on to become captain of his own ship.

John Newton has some early religious instruction from his mother, who had died when he was a child. After that, he gave up on any religious convictions. But one time, on a homeward voyage,

while he was attempting to steer the ship through a violent storm, he experienced what he was to refer to later as his “great deliverance.” He recorded in his journal that when all seemed lost and the ship would surely sink, he exclaimed, “Lord, have mercy on us.” Later in his cabin, he reflected on what he had said and began to believe that God had addressed him through the storm and that grace had begun to work for him.

Because of this, he then continued in the slave trade business but he saw to it that the slaves under his care were treated humanely. Eventually John Newton decided to become a minister and was ordained. He remained in the ministry until his death in 1807.

What a remarkable story about an everyday person who struggled with his faith. Those words, “I was blind, but now I see” are powerful. If each one of us thinks for a moment, I am sure we all think of a story in our own lives of when we struggled with our faith. Of a time when we just couldn’t see the full picture of what was happening. That’s what John Newton wrote about, and that’s what the man in our gospel story was experiencing.

The man in our story was a beggar, shut out by his own community. People didn’t know his name. They only knew him as the one who was blind and who was always asking for food and money. This man did not believe in Jesus...had never heard of him.

And then Jesus approaches him. He takes some mud in his hands, spits in it, and puts it on the man’s eyes. And the man is healed of his blindness in more ways than one – he can physically see and also sees that the man who healed him is more than a man. He is the Christ.

John Newton and the blind man have a lot in common with those words, “I once was blind, but now I see.” What about you? Is there a time in your life when you were spiritually blind, but then saw? When you experienced God’s grace in your life?

**Sing: ‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed!**

Do you remember a time when you didn’t believe in God? When you questioned your faith? The blind man in our story sure can. Before his encounter with Jesus, faith wasn’t even a thought. And for John Newton, before the encounter with the storm, faith wasn’t much thought to him, either. One of my dear friends talks about the first time she experienced grace in her own life.

She was a very firm believer in confession – and was taught that if she didn’t confess every sin, she would end up in hell when she died. So she was obsessed with confession. She would confess her sins constantly. When she was in college, she would go to a Catholic church and go to confession three or four times a week. Eventually, the campus priest told her to stop coming to confession for three months!

But then my friend heard a man preach about grace. About how grace wasn’t earned, it was a gift. My friend had never thought about that before...that grace was a gift. And she says that when she

realized that forgiveness had already happened – through the death and resurrection of Jesus – her entire body leapt with joy.

John Newton, the blind man, and my friend know the meaning to the words, “How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed.” Grace. Wonderful grace. A gift. A gift from God.

**Sing: Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.**

John Newton experienced extreme violence in his life. He experienced great fear and anxiety...and the words from this verse can only come from a person who understands what it is like to suffer. The blind man could have written those words. Having to walk the streets with no one to help him. Begging for a living.

And maybe for each one of us, we too know what it is like to suffer. To not know what we're going to be walking into. To fear what life will bring us next. To hurt so badly that it seems that nothing will ever be right again. To question God and to wonder why we have to endure such pain and suffering.

We have been in danger – car accidents, health problems, burglaries, verbal or physical abuse. Floods and droughts. Bankruptcy and job loss.

We know and understand those words, “Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come.” But we also can believe the words that come next: “Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.”

Grace has brought each one of us this far. It is God that is with each one of us...it is God's presence that we believe in...it is God's faithfulness to each one of us that will lead us home. And we don't know how it will all end. We don't know what we are going to run into next. But we know that no matter what we face in life, the grace of Jesus Christ, through his own death and resurrection, will lead us home.

**Sing: The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.**

The Lord has promised good to us. We hear it through John Newton's life, as he changes his mind about the slave trade. We hear it in the words of the blind man who is so amazed at the power of Jesus that he says, “I once was blind but now I see.”

I once was blind to the presence of God, but now I know God is here.
I once was blind to what having faith would mean for me, but now I know.
I once was blind to the needs of other people, but now I see that there is suffering.

I once was blind to my own sin, but now I see that things need to change.
I once was blind to how much I am loved, but now I see the cross.
Amazing grace. Go now and see this grace for yourselves. Amen.

**Sing: Amazing grace, how sweet the sound.
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.**