

JOURNEY WITH JESUS.

B. THE AMBASSADOR.

17. The Light of the World.

John 8:12-58. The Feast of Tabernacles was not only about water. On the evening of the first day of the festival 4 large menorahs were lit, the light from their candles flooding over the outside walls of the temple and illuminating the city of Jerusalem. Pious Jews celebrated joyously, dancing with torches and shouting words of praise. Levites played music, standing on the steps that led from the Court of the Israelites to the Court of Women. Dancing and singing went on until dawn. The celebration ended with 2 priests with trumpets slowly descending the steps, affirming people's loyalty to Yahweh.

It was against this background that Jesus once more reached out to the people. "I am the Light of the world," he cried. "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." In other words, "You are glad of the temple illuminations lighting up the darkness. Well, I am the Light of the world and whoever follows me will have light, not just for one exciting night, but for all the pathway of his life. This light in the temple will flicker and die, but my light will last for ever and ever."

This called forth an immediate challenge from the Pharisees. The word "light" was specially associated in Jewish thought and language with God. **Psalm 27:1** – "The Lord is my light and my salvation" – obviously referred to God, and the rabbis declared that the name of the Messiah was Light. To them Jesus' claim was nothing short of blasphemy: just who did he think he was? Blinded by prejudice, they failed to understand his explanation: he had come from God, who was his Father and collateral witness to the truth he was trying to tell them.

John mentions in **verse 20** that Jesus was speaking in the temple area "near the place where the offerings were put." The treasury stood in the Court of Women – venue for the festivities – and had 13 trumpet-shaped receptacles to hold the respective offerings to be made. Their labels read "gold for the mercy seat," "frankincense," "bird offerings," "wood," "freewill offerings" etc. There were "trumpets" for any special trespass-offering or thank-offering a person may make, and one for any offerings for the poor, if the person had any money left after all the contributions! There would be a steady flow of worshippers coming and going: Jesus had chosen his spot well for the maximum audience. (Such detailed touches abound throughout the gospels, reminding us that these were eye-witness accounts.)

Jesus did not only claim to be the same as God: he flung out the challenge that people should actually follow him. The Greek word for "follow" is "akolouthein", and that has 5 different but closely connected meanings. It can be used of a soldier following his captain into battle, or of a slave attending his master. It was often used of someone accepting a wise counsellor's opinion or judgement, and often of giving obedience to the laws of a city or state. And it could be used for following a teacher's line of argument in agreement. So we see that to follow Jesus meant to give oneself body, soul and spirit in obedience to him; only so would one be able to walk in the light and have the life which, as in the natural realm, is possible only with light.

The religious leaders, respected for their knowledge of the Scriptures and their consequent authority over the masses, found this a hard pill to swallow. They were determined not to understand what Jesus was telling them. The aim of their questions was not to understand more, but to trick Jesus into contradicting himself so that they could prove him to be false. "Who are you?" they asked but would not listen to his answer. Twice, in **verses 24 and 28**, Jesus made the astounding claim, "I am" – the very title God had given of Himself to Moses at the burning bush, in **Exodus 3:14**, "I AM WHO I AM." It was too much for them to take.

Happily, however, even as Jesus spoke there were those who with open minds could understand enough to put their faith in him. There were others who could appreciate his words but not to the point of committing themselves to actually following him. As an encouragement Jesus told them, (**verse 31**) that if they kept faithfully to his teaching, they would be his disciples in truth, and knowing the truth

would set them free. There is a reference here to some lovely imagery in **Psalm 119:32**, “I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.” But that touched a raw nerve: indignantly they answered that as Abraham’s descendants they had never been slaves! It is true that **Leviticus 25:39-43** states God’s law that Israelites must never be enslaved by fellow-Israelites, but one wonders how much freedom they had in Jesus’ time under their Roman overlords! Jesus of course was talking about spiritual freedom –the freedom from the slavery of sin, the freedom to walk tall through whatever life dealt them, the freedom from fear of the future.

Judaism had taught these people that what made them free was the study of the Law. So now they countered with pride, “Abraham is our father,” to which Jesus pointed out that they did not show any of Abraham’s spirit in the way they were responding to him, which in fact proved they were not really Abraham’s children, but children of the devil. In **verse 46** Jesus went on to present a challenge that no-one could answer – “Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?” Nobody could. Jesus remained the spotless, sinless Lamb of God even as he took upon himself the sins of the world at Calvary. Nobody can ever in honesty speak one word against him. Jesus summed up the reason for the blindness of the Jews in **verse 47** - “The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.”

That was too much for the proud descendants of “God’s chosen people” who resorted to heaping insults upon him – he was illegitimate, (the stigma Mary too had to bear all her life) he was a Samaritan, he was demon-possessed. Without losing his temper Jesus calmly replied that he was honouring his Father and whoever followed his word would not see death. Of course he was speaking in the spiritual sense but his accusers did not want to understand and insisted that he was mad. Then Jesus, the Eternal One, made the outstanding claim, “Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day” and when they scoffed that he was not even 50 years old and how could he have known Abraham, Jesus uttered the mind-boggling words, “Before Abraham was born, I am!”

Once again Jesus had used the same title that God had applied to himself back in Exodus. This “blasphemy” was too much for the Jews: they took up stones to stone him, but Jesus, the Light of the World, managed calmly to walk away from them, leaving them to their darkness. Earlier, (**John 3:19**), John had written, “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.”

Have you ever tried to “argue the case” for Jesus with someone who does not want to believe? It is impossible, isn’t it? Don’t be discouraged: if the Jews wouldn’t listen to Jesus, how will anyone listen to us? It is the work of the Holy Spirit to convict men of sin, and it is our part to simply recount without arguing what Jesus has done for us and the difference he has made in our lives.

*“Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness,
Opened my eyes, let me see
Beauty that made this heart adore you,
Hope of a life spent with you.”¹*

Blind Eyes Opened, Open Eyes Shut.

John 9:1-41. And now as we turn to this chapter it is as if Jesus were putting into practice the lessons he had been teaching. Can you imagine how drained he must have felt after that hostile interrogation from the Jews, followed up with a very real threat on his life? Yet Jesus slipped away and walked calmly along the road, the Light of the world undimmed. And as he walked, he came to a man who was blind from birth, sitting as a beggar by the wayside.

Jesus’ disciples, steeped in the rabbinic tradition that suffering was a judgement from God for some wrongdoing, asked him the theological question – for whose sin was this man suffering? His own, or his parents? (Notice that they did *not* ask, “Master, can we spare some money for this poor destitute man?”) We wonder how anyone can imagine that someone can sin before they are born, but in fact some of the Jewish theologians held a belief in pre-natal sin!

Jesus was swift to correct them. The man's blindness was not the result of anyone's sin, but it did have a purpose – that the work of God might be displayed in his life. This was autumn, and with the coming of spring Jesus' ministry on earth would come to an end. Therefore, he urged them, we must do the work of God while we can, before the darkness comes. "While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

This man had never seen and we can only imagine his plight. We go through some earth-shattering experience and wonder if God cares. He not only cares, He goes through the suffering with us. As the hymn-writer said, "There is no place where earth's sorrows are more felt than up in heaven." ² Yet suffering has a balm if we can see it has a purpose. Is it our honest desire to glorify God in our lives? As Barclay says, "Any kind of suffering is a God-given opportunity to demonstrate the glory of God in our own lives." ³

And Jesus did care. The Light of the world would bring light to blind eyes. Stooping down Jesus spat on the ground, made some mud with the spittle and put it on the man's eyes. We might turn up our nose at this as being unhygienic, but it is a fact that spittle was believed to possess certain curative qualities. Pliny, the famous Roman collector of contemporary scientific information, named spittle as a preservative against the poison of serpents, a protection against epilepsy, that lichens and leprous spots could be cured by the application of fasting spittle, that ophthalmia could be cured by anointing the eyes every morning with fasting spittle, and that carcinomata and crick in the neck could be cured by spittle! Today, if we burn our finger we instinctively put it in our mouth, and I personally know a woman whose warts were cured by nothing else than fasting spittle!

Did Jesus need this aid to accomplish the healing? Of course not! But it seems this man did not know anything about Jesus, and so had had no opportunity to exercise any faith in him. Jesus in his graciousness helped the patient's faith by using means in which the man already had some confidence. But the final operative in the cure was the faith of the man. Jesus told him to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam, and it was that step of obedience, prompted by faith, that brought the man his cure.

Siloam, a miracle of 6th century B.C. engineering, was a landmark of Jerusalem. The water supply of Jerusalem, from the Spring of Gihon, had always been precarious in the event of a siege; it was completely exposed and could easily be cut off. When King Hezekiah realised that Sennacherib was about to invade Palestine he decided to cut a conduit through solid rock from the spring into the city. Because the workmen followed a fissure in the rock, they had to dig in zig-zag fashion for 533 metres, one team starting from each end and amazingly both meeting in the middle. In 1880 a tablet was discovered commemorating the excitement when the diggers heard each other pick-for-pick through the metre-and-a-half of solid rock remaining to be dug! The conduit, on average 2 metres high, finished in an open air basin 6 metres by 9 metres. This was Siloam, its name, "Sent", indicating the fact that water had been sent from the spring into the city.

As the man obediently washed his face the miracle happened - he received full sight and raced home with the amazing news. This was the first time anyone had ever been known to cure a man who had been born blind. A secondary miracle was that the man could walk home unaided. Someone who has never seen and then been given sight, has great difficulty in adjusting to that unaccustomed function, learning to relate sight to his familiar experience of things through sound and touch. There have been cases where such a cured person stated he would prefer to go back to his blindness! Jesus' cure was perfect and complete! I must add, however, that it would have been good if the man had first gone back to Jesus to say "thank you!"

How often we accept God's goodness with never a response!

We have all been born blind because of our state of original sin. We grope through life making as good a job of it as we can – and then Jesus gives us sight! It is not always easy to adjust to this

superabundant life! Everything takes on a new perspective that sometimes takes our breath away. But we are not left to walk this new exciting life alone: Jesus our healer is there with us: we can dare anything with him!

But that miracle immediately opened a can of worms, as we see in **verses 8-34**. The man's neighbours were so wonderstruck that they could hardly believe he was the same man, and wanted to know just how this amazing thing could have happened. The man was happy to relate the details, even though all he knew about his benefactor was that he was "the man they call Jesus." But they couldn't leave things there: full of wonder they brought him to the Pharisees. Woe betide! Those religious sticklers quickly jumped on the fact that whoever had healed the man had broken 3 of the 1521 Jewish oral laws for keeping the Sabbath: by making clay he had worked, he had healed, and he had put spittle on the man's eyelids – a specific no-no on the Sabbath day! It was by laws such as these that the Scribes and Pharisees sought to honour God, but in fact Jesus had put his finger on their problem when he quoted **Isaiah 29:13** in **Matthew 15:8**, "These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Confronted by the man, they became divided, some making the point that someone who could do such miracles could not be a sinner, while others, with the stronger voice, declared that no-one who broke *their* interpretation of the Law could possibly come from God.

They interrogated the hapless man again, but he was not to be intimidated. He had had some time to think rationally and his faith had already grown from not knowing who Jesus was, to declaring that he was a prophet. The Jews were still unwilling to believe that a miracle had happened, and sought confirmation from his parents, who, out of fear, did nothing at all to back him up. The Jewish synagogue authorities had a powerful weapon, and that was excommunication from the congregation of God's people. A man could be banished from the synagogue for life, publicly cursed, and cut off from his fellow-men. This would not only extinguish his social and business life, but would bring him the terror of regarding himself as cut off from God as well. We can't be too hard on the parents!

Once again the Pharisees questioned the man, adjuring him to tell the truth, (**verse 24**), which he promptly did in a simple and beautiful testimony. "One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" But *how* did he do it? They wanted to know. Exasperated, the man accused them of insincerity, whereupon, unable to deny the fact of the miracle, they resorted to insult. Undeterred, courageous, the man set out his logical response that, seeing God does not listen to sinners, and that his healer had obviously been heard by God, it follows that he must have come from God. The Pharisees couldn't stand this affront to their idea that they alone understood the Law and its outworkings in everyday life: they hurled terrible abuse at him, (**verse 34**) and in a final rejection, threw him out. In this action they violated their own laws, which stated that witnesses were to be examined fairly and without prejudice.

There is a lovely prophecy in **Ezekiel 34:1**. "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.'" And that is just what Jesus did, in **verse 35**. He could have been indignant at the lack of gratitude and left him to his own devices: he could have avoided trouble for himself by making himself prudently scarce. But Jesus had a shepherd's heart, and when he heard that the man had been cast out of the synagogue he searched for him until he found him. He did not just soothe him with comfort and understanding: rather, he gave the man another challenge to his faith. "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" And here the faith of the man reached its peak. "Lord, I believe," and he worshipped him. Blind for all of his life, he could now see – not only physically, but spiritually, as he came to understand more of who Jesus really was.

Looking beyond the man, Jesus stood as the great dividing point between right and wrong, as he declared, "I have come as a judge into this world: the blind will see, while those who see will become blind." Affronted, the Pharisees gave back, "What? Are we blind too?" Jesus just looked at them. "You claim that you can see," he returned, "That shows just how blind you are!"

The Light of the world can bring joy or judgement. Only in the light of Christ do we see our own imperfections and realise our need of forgiveness. Only in the light of Christ do we see the wonder and majesty and beauty of God: our eyes are opened to the things of eternity. Those who refuse to look at him are still lost in their blindness. We need to feel the touch of Jesus, to see him in all his beauty, to feel his love and forgiveness, to experience his power in our lives and to be totally free.

¹"Light of the World", Worship Again album, 2002, Michael W, Smith

²Souls of men! Why will ye scatter, No, 206, Baptist Church Hymnal (Revised), 1933, Psalms and Hymns Trust, London

³William Barclay, The Gospel of John Vol.2, The Daily Study Bible, page 46, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh