

So, this scripture was one long, epic story.

Two major themes were sight, or lack thereof, and sinfulness.

In fact, blindness and sight are explicitly mentioned in 24 of these 41 verses!

And sin is discussed 9 times in this passage.

The disciples think that the blind man or his parents sinned, but Jesus corrects them and says that nobody sinned.

The Pharisees and others accuse Jesus of sinning because he performed a miracle on the Sabbath.

They then call the formerly-blind man a sinner and he responds by saying he doesn't know whether he's a sinner.

Then he says that God doesn't listen to sinners, and the Pharisees respond by saying that he was born entirely of sins and he has nothing to teach them.

Then, in the last verse, some of the Pharisees ask Jesus,

*“Surely we are not blind, are we?”*

Jesus responds, *‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see,” your sin remains.’* (John 9:40-41)

So the big debate between Jesus, the blind man and the Pharisees is whether having a disability, in this case, blindness, is equated with being sinful.

This was the prevailing belief at the time, that people with physical ailments were being punished either because they did something wrong, or because their parents or even ancestors did.

If someone had a child that was born with birth defects, the family would often be shunned from the community, or the family would abandon the child, because they believed that God was punishing them because someone in the family went against God's will.

Now, obviously we don't subscribe to this belief anymore but you will sometimes hear people ask the rhetorical question, "What did I, or we, do to deserve this?"

As if having a loved one with a disability is a punishment of some kind.

I know that we equate these healing stories with being miraculous, but I want us to think for a minute about what that implicitly says about someone who is blind, deaf, or paralyzed.

It places a value judgment on being different.

When we say it's a miracle that someone was able to see or hear or walk, what we're also saying is that they were somehow imperfect, or less than, when they couldn't see or hear or walk.

There's a whole field of scholarship called the Liberation Theology of Disabilities in which theologians with disabilities interpret the scriptures from their perspective.

They critique how traditional interpretations of these healing stories continue to marginalize people with disabilities.

One such trailblazer was a woman named Nancy Eiland.

She wrote the preeminent book on this topic, entitled *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*.

One text that she focuses on is in Luke, chapter 24, in which Jesus, after his resurrection, invites his disciples to touch his wounds.

She writes that, *“In presenting his impaired body to his startled friends, the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God.”*

She argued that God becomes a God that the disabled can identify with.

Jesus isn't made perfect, his blemishes and imperfections aren't erased.

*“His injury is part of him, neither a divine punishment nor an opportunity for healing.”* (“Nancy Eiland is dead at 44; Wrote of a Disabled God,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/22/us/22eiesland.html>).

Another theologian, Rodger Kamenetz has also done work on the theology of disabilities, and after giving a talk one day, a woman in a wheelchair rolled up to him and said *with great seriousness and very slowly, “I would like you to consider that a disability means...absolutely nothing.”* (“Lectionary Commentary: “Ray Charles and John 9 — Seeing for the First Time” [www.patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com)).

That's the thing that so many of us able-bodied people do. We layer meaning and value judgments onto the experiences of those people who have different abilities from us.

Maybe it isn't that they sinned or that they're somehow imperfect or that God wanted them that way or that there's some profound reason for their disability, maybe it's just chance.

Maybe, as that woman said, her disability meant nothing.

It's also dangerous to assume that people with disabilities want to be healed, as is implied in all the biblical healing stories.

Marie Harman is an author who writes about being disabled and she said, *"In our society, disabilities are often seen as things that need to be "fixed," and, therefore, the person who has the disability is also viewed as broken.*

*In reality, those of us who have the disability often celebrate their disability.*

*We identify with our disability, and we see it as a part of ourselves.*

*Without our disability, we would not be our complete selves, and in a sense we would then be broken.*

*As a society, we need to stop looking at a disability as something that needs to be fixed.*

*We need to stop asking the question, "What is wrong with you?" because in that person's eyes he or she may just be perfect. ("Please Stop Trying to Fix My Disability." [www.themighty.com](http://www.themighty.com)).*

Now, do we all need to be healed? Yes.

Do we all need to be transformed? Yes.

But that doesn't necessarily mean giving sight to those who are blind or making the lame walk or the deaf hear.

It's not necessarily our physical differences that need to be changed and transformed, but our mental and emotional ones.

We need to be cured of our intolerance, our bigotry, our egoism, our self-centeredness, our greed, and all the other things that separate us from the love of God.

John Newton wrote arguably the most famous hymn in the world, "Amazing Grace."

The lyric "I was blind but now I see," was drawn directly from this scripture, as these are words that the formerly blind man said to the Pharisees.

Newton wrote the hymn because he experienced a spiritual conversion.

He was a slave ship captain, and in 1748, his ship got caught in the midst of a huge storm off the coast of Ireland and it almost sank.

He awoke in the middle of the night, as the ship was filling with water, and called out to God.

The story goes that the cargo shifted and plugged up the hole that was letting water in, and they drifted to safety.

You could say that this was a coincidence, but Newton believed it was a miracle and it marked the beginning of his conversion to Evangelical Christianity.

The good news is that he gave up profanity, gambling and drinking.

The bad news is that he didn't give up trading slaves, although, as if it's any consolation, he gained sympathy for the slaves while he was in Africa.

Thirty-four years after he retired from the industry, he did write a very public confession, apologizing for participating in the horrific transatlantic slave trade.

His transformative experience changed his head and his heart, and those are the kinds of healing experiences that we need.

That's also the kind of healing that Jesus talks about in this scripture.

That's why he tells the Pharisees that they are blind, because they are spiritually blind.

They can't see the truth, that God's love is made manifest through Jesus, that they are to live with grace and humility.

They think they know everything already, but their arrogance caused their spiritual blindness.

They couldn't see the vulnerable people that their laws and teachings ignored.

They couldn't see that the law isn't the only way to abundant life.

They couldn't see that Jesus was a genuine prophet or healer because he didn't abide by their Sabbath laws.

They couldn't see that the man's blindness had nothing to do with his sin.

They couldn't see in so many ways, and yet they were convinced that they were on the moral high ground because they could physically see.

Well physical ability has nothing to do with spiritual maturity, and yet we all know people like this, who allow their arrogance to prevent them from connecting with God.

They don't need to rely on a higher power because they know everything.

These people, too, are spiritually blind.

*As one scholar said, "A person can be physically blind and have 20/20 spiritual vision. And a person can have perfect 20/20 physical vision and be spiritually unable to discern a thing."*

Whenever we read these healing stories, let's be careful not to rush to judgment or assumptions.

Let's not assume that the disabled person wanted to be changed or that their life was better after they were changed. Let's not assume that becoming able-bodied is superior to having a disability.

It isn't, necessarily.

Instead let's focus on the transformations, the healings that we need to experience, in order to be more connected with God and each other.

We all have those flaws which separate us from the love of God, and those are the miraculous transformations that we need to experience, when we go from being greedy to generous, from arrogant to humble, from living for ourselves to living for others.

After all, a blind woman was asked how she sings Amazing Grace, especially that verse that says, "I was blind, but now I see," and she responded,

*“When we get to that verse, I straighten my shoulders, and sing with gusto,*

*'Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.*

*I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, and I still can't see!*

*But . . . praise God from whom all blessings flow!”* (Jesus, the Blind Man, and Spiritual Vision: Reflections on John 9: 1-41,” [www.patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com)).

Amen.

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