Background Notes

Key Scripture Texts: John 9:1-41; 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23:1-6; Ephesians 5:8-14

Introduction

In 2007, Cormac McCarthy won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for his novel The Road. Left desolate by some unidentified calamity, America becomes the landscape for a father and his son in search of a better home. Cold, dark and filled with ash, the land lacks vegetation. Rain, snow, and storms are frequent. Cannibalistic tribes and nomads, among the survivors, crawl through city and country in search of human flesh. It is a dangerous road for a father and his son. The man and the boy have only each other — "the good guys," who are "carrying the fire." By the time they run out of road at the sea, the truth dawns clearly: things aren’t much better there. Worse, the father dies. The boy grieves his father’s death for three days, with no idea what to do next. Then he encounters a man who says he has been tracking the father and son. With a woman and two children of his own, the man invites the boy to join his family, acknowledging he is indeed one of the "good guys." The book ends reflectively about nature and infinity in this much diminished world. It is a story told along the road.

Watching the motion picture version of the story leaves the viewer with a sense of continuing and painful despair. It seems the movie will never end, and the grey world around the two principal characters casts shadows on the audience. No one is left untouched. The road is a shared experience, and we become fellow travelers.

The Gospel reading for this week concentrates on the story of the “man blind from birth” in John 9. Jesus meets him, John tells us, “As he went along.” The man was someone Jesus encountered, “Along the Road.” But the encounter was more than accidental, and the road became a place of hope and not despair because Jesus was there. Intertwining themes dominate the story: blindness and sight; darkness and light. Something dramatic happens to the blind man which escapes ordinary explanation. Jesus’ critics refuse to accept what happened as the work of Jesus. The blind man who is healed must engage his critics alone. In the end, what looked like a chance meeting along the road became a powerful testimony to the mercy of Jesus. Many stereotypes are challenged, including the notion that sin is the primary reason for sickness. Supporting these dominant themes are the texts about the anointing of David as king, the celebration of God as Shepherd, and the good news that the risen Christ gives light and life to those who once lived in darkness.

Along the road, we discover the prevailing hand of God who restores to wholeness what has been broken. In each case, a new journey begins which will one day lead to the appearance of “the house of the LORD forever” and to the light which outshines the sun. Blind persons receive unexpected sight and unlikely persons become God’s anointed ones. Lent itself is a journey — a road — and in equally unexpected ways, Jesus joins us as we walk to God’s appointed destination.

Once I Was Blind But Now I See (John 9:1-41)

This week's reading appears following a highly-charged controversy in John 8. Assuming that the account of the woman taken in adultery (7:53-8:11) is not original to John's work, we may view the Greek verb, paragō,
meaning "pass on, disappear" as a fitting transition: "As he passed by..." (9:1). The verb form is a present active participle, which suggests action coinciding with what preceded, "he secretly departed" the Temple, and what followed, "he saw a man blind from birth". In other words, no sooner does Jesus secretly leave the Temple, by "disappearing" from the heated and dangerous confrontation with the leadership, than he takes notice of a blind man, one who has lived in darkness since his birth. Jesus, the one who during the Menorah lighting called himself "the light of the world," is drawn to a human being who stands in need of this light. Rarely did Jesus teach some profound truth without performing some great work in fulfillment of his teaching. He was not, after all, merely a sage, scattering bits of wisdom, although he communicated that subversive wisdom which overturned the prevailing values of the world. For Jesus, his word was power--power to transform the world around him, especially the brokenness of people's lives which stood in need of his redemptive love.

Our text has a special structure known as a chiasmus ("to invert"), that is, an "X-like (or cross)" symmetry, in which the first point corresponds to the last point, and the inner points to each other. In the center of the John 9 chiasmus is a form known as synchysis ("to mingle, confuse"), where the sections parallel each other in the same, rather than the reverse order. The following simple outline accurately represents the passage. The AA' and BB' sections form the main chiasmus, while the C1D1/C2D2 sections comprise the synchysis:

- **A)** Jesus and his disciples: Sin and Blindness (1-5)
  - **B)** Jesus and the Blind Person: Restoring physical sight (6-7)
    - **C1)** Neighbors and Healed Blind Person: Personal Identity and Process of Healing (8-12)
      - **D1)** Healed Blind Person and the Pharisees: Origin of Jesus: from God? from Sin? (13-17)
    - **C2)** Parents and Jewish authorities: Personal Identity and Process of Healing (vv. 18-23)
      - **D2)** Healed Blind Person and Jewish Authorities: Origin of Jesus: from God? from Sin? (24-34)
  - **B')** Jesus and the Healed Blind Person: Restoring spiritual sight (35-38)
  - **A')** Jesus and the Pharisees: Sin and Blindness (39-41)

Such interesting literary forms provided a handy method for remembering stories, poems or other sayings by offering a simple means for keeping things in proper sequence. They also served as a means to compare, contrast, and re-arrange material around a single theme. In this case, the theme of "blindness" and its connection with "sin" creates the envelope (outer sections) for the narrative (AA'). As we move "inside" the envelope, we see Jesus encountering the blind man, first to heal his physical blindness (B) and then to restore his spiritual vision (B'). Of course, these are the "controlling" elements of the narrative. Once we move to the synchysis pairs (C1D1/C2D2), we are in the middle of heated discussion and controversy involving neighbors, the healed blind person, the Pharisees and other Jewish authorities. That is, John "mixes it up" in this center node of his story! Of special interest is the sharp contrast between the healed blind man and the Pharisees/authorities. The man's faith continues to grow while the resistance of the authorities continues to harden. Scholars like Raymond Brown have noted the literary beauty of John 9, both in its arrangement of material and intensity of discourse. Its eloquence is only exceeded by the mercy of Jesus for a man in deep need.

**A) Jesus and his disciples: Sin and Blindness (1-5)**

1 As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. 4 We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. 5 As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

Blindness was a common physical malady in the ancient world, caused by accident, punishment, disease, birth, and the intervention of the gods (or God). Cases of blindness appear in the Old Testament:

And they blinded the men that were at the door of the house, both small and great: so that they wearied themselves to find the door (Genesis 19:11).

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2 In our view, the passage from John 8:1-11 is actually a genuine composition, but which has more in common with the Gospel of Luke than with its present location in John's Gospel. Based on some manuscript evidence and consistency of style, we think it belongs after Luke 21:38 rather than after John 7:52.
Blindness is the most frequently mentioned physical handicap in ancient Greek texts. Galen, a physician, catalogued over 100 eye pathologies. Blindness was construed, in some cases, as divine punishment. 1) looking on a god or idol or entering sacred space; 2) competing with the gods could bring the curse of blindness. The ancient Greek and Romans wrote about blindness as having a compensatory offset. A person might lose their sight but then be given prophetic powers, for example.

"Blindness from birth" (Greek: tuphlon ek genetēs) carried additional burdens, culturally speaking, and generated all sorts of explanations in an attempt to make sense out of this congenital condition. In the present case, the disciples of Jesus reveal this tendency by posing two of the more popular causes, namely, 1) the man sinned, or 2) his parents sinned. The second of these reasons is not hard to find in the Old Testament. Consider the following passage from the Ten Commandments:

You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me (Exodus 20:5; also, see 34:7; Numbers 14:18; Deuteronomy 5:9).

A certain reading of these texts has led some to accept the idea of a "generational curse," a sort of divine judgment visited on unwitting or unknowing persons because of their parents' misdeeds. The disciples seem to be reflecting some form of this belief in their day. However, the Old Testament prophets point us in a different direction, especially as seen in Ezekiel 18:

1 The word of the LORD came to me: 2 "What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'? 3 As I live, declares the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. 4 Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die (Ezekiel 18:1-4). The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself (Ezekiel 18:20).

The reader is encouraged to read the full 18th chapter of Ezekiel, but these selections capture the heart of the argument.

Nor should we ignore the message of the book of Job, where his friends were firmly convinced that his calamitous life was due to some hidden sin. Their thankless counsel to him, as he sat in the ash-heap covered with sores, was a single harangue pressuring him to repent. The offshoot of Job's story was the message that God has mysterious purposes for suffering which escape the prejudices of Job's friends and the pride of Job's heart. Suffering cannot, God finally tells Job, be reduced to a simple set of explanations, but must do its deeper work of bringing the heart into line with the purposes of God.

Somehow, the popular view in the days of Jesus did not give full weight to the wise words of the prophet. In an effort to explain the painful reality of a child born with a congenital difficulty, the sins of his parents were alleged—even secret sins not apparent to all. But should that argument fail to convince, the fall-back argument might well be that the person "sinned in the womb." That seems farfetched to us, but within the theology of Second Temple Judaism it found acceptance. No doubt the disciples, like their contemporaries, carried around such questions, waiting for a wise rabbi or sage to offer a helpful "out," both for their discomfort with the condition and their doubts about God's justice. Jesus takes a wholly different approach.

Jesus seems to be saying, "Look, we can argue until we are blue in the face about the causes of the man's condition, but none of that will change one simple fact: the man is still blind." He then proceeds to offer, not causes, but purposes: "That the works of God might be displayed in him." The Greeks, like Aristotle, spoke of different kinds of "causes" for things, each with a different emphasis: 1) material cause ("from what"); 2) formal
cause ("to what"); 3) efficient cause ("of what"); 4) final cause ("for what"). In this instance, Jesus lays aside the material cause, accepts the reality of the formal cause, and proceeds to address the question of the final cause, the purpose. We might even infer that he has clearly in mind an efficient cause for "changing" the situation of the blind mind. Put simply, Jesus tells his disciples, "We have work to do here; it is the work of God." The point of the man's blindness is not to explain it, but to change it, knowing that God stands ready to do so and has sent Jesus into the world for just such a purpose.

When Jesus tells his disciples that the "works of God will be displayed" in the blind man, John uses the Greek word *phaneraō* meaning "make known, reveal, show, make evident or plain" in the aorist past form, suggesting a definitive and unmistakable revelation that God is indeed working in the blind man's life. The verb belongs to a result clause: Jesus is predicting that what is about to happen will reveal God, and, in fact, if the disciples are looking for a "cause", they should be seeking a "final cause," the purpose for what is about to happen. God fully intends to "make something" wonderful out of the man's long-term condition. Here is God in His role as Creator: the One before whom "formlessness and void" becomes order and fullness. Again, Genesis 1 lies behind what Jesus says in response to his disciples' question.

The Greek mood of the verb *phaneraō* could be construed as an imperative, in which case, Jesus is issuing an invitation: "Let the works of God be displayed!" In other words, Jesus seizes the life-long condition of the man's blindness as a fresh opportunity to actively reveal "the works of God."³

Then Jesus makes a sharp distinction between "day" (*hēmera*) and "night" (*nux*), conditions created by light or its absence and which form the boundaries of work. Jesus bases his statements on the premise that God "sent" him to do "the works" (*ta erga*, from *ergon*, "work, deed, action, task, occupation, undertaking, practical expression, handiwork, workmanship, effect, result"). Ironically, these assertions about "work" are spoken within the context of "the Sabbath day" (9:14). Controversies about Sabbath-keeping accompany Jesus' "work", and, in this case, Jesus shifts the ground for deciding when to do God's works and when not to do so. Whereas the Pharisees and rabbinic Judaism want to use Sabbath as the boundary marker, Jesus insists that the works of God should be done during the "day" when "light" is present.

With the arrival of Jesus into Israel's world, a period of darkness has been replaced by "light", and when God says "let there be light", the Creation begins afresh. To drive home that point, Jesus adds, "While I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (9:5). The great Menorah celebration during Sukkot (see above) became the setting for Jesus' earlier words: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (8:12). In the Prologue of John's Gospel, similar language is ascribed to Jesus who is called "the Word" (*logos*):

3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him (John 1:3-10).

The phrase in our text, "While I am in the world" (9:5a) and the language of the Prologue, "He was in the world" (1:10) are parallel statements, and they are both set in the context of Jesus as "light of the world."

However, a somber note is struck in 9:4b through the words, "Night is coming, when no one can work." A few chapters later, we hear Jesus saying: "But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him" (11:10). John will also use the word "night" (*nux*) at the Last Supper, when Judas receives the bread from Jesus and leaves the Twelve on his mission of betrayal. The words are poignant: "he immediately went out, and it was night" (13:30). Even after Jesus' resurrection, when the disciples attempt to catch fish "that night", they

catch nothing until "the dawn breaks" (21:4) and the risen Jesus appears to them on the shore (21:1-6). It's hard to miss the connection. The earthly ministry of Jesus will one day end, even as "the day-light" ends. The days between "now and then" are momentous for Jesus and his disciples. In them the work of the New Creation gets an early start. The man born blind is about to leave behind his darkness and become a part of that fresh new beginning.

"Darkness" challenges light in John's Gospel. As we observed in the Prologue above, darkness attempts to overcome light. Later we read: "19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed" (John 3:19-20). Also, "35 So Jesus said to them, The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. 36 While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.' When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them: (John 12:35-3). Later, "I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness" (John 12:46).

When we bear witness to Jesus through the Gospel, we enter the realm of darkness armed with light. Darkness resists the light and casts it shadows around both the witness and the person who hears its message. In some ways, the darkness had already done its deadly work by its condemnation of the man born blind. In the grip of a perpetual night, he lived in the kingdom of darkness. Proclaiming the Good News to persons such as this man means turning on the light who is Jesus. Through our words, God says "let there be light," and the New Creation begins its restorative and transforming work. Like John the baptizer, we "bear witness to the light…the true light…enlightening everyone…coming into the world" (1:9).

B) Jesus and the Blind Person: Restoring physical sight (6-7)

Having said these things, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud 7 and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.

What does the reader of John's account expect will happen next? Perhaps we will hear a few magic words, like, "Hocus pocus..." or "Be healed!" spoken with authority. The healing ministry of Jesus followed no predictable scripts. The work of Creation is entirely within the prerogative of God. God speaks and the world leaps into existence. No one counseled God on the manner of his work or the order of His creative work. In this case, Jesus behaves in ways that smack of primitive folk medicine. He spits on the ground, kneading mud from saliva and dust. Among the ancients, saliva had magical powers. However, John makes little of the means. If anything, the similarity between Jesus' actions and God's original creation of humankind is more striking. God's forming of the human from dust and the breath of life may well be the Old Testament setting for this story. He who created the world once more takes dust in order to restore sight to the blind. The word translated "anoint" is epichriō, meaning to "smear or spread out."

Concurrent with this symbolic action, Jesus issues an instruction for the man to make his way to the pool known as Siloam, where a portion of the Festival's water ceremony took place. John makes a point of stressing the meaning of the pool, based on one form of its Hebrew root: shalah, meaning "to send." There may be in this notation a connection to Jesus' earlier words about doing the work of the one who "sent me." The Father sends Jesus to perform works of healing, and Jesus sends those in need to the place of healing. Three actions are recorded: 1) he went , 2) he washed, and 3) he came. Each verb form is in the aorist tense, and represent distinctly completed actions, all in response to Jesus instructions. That is, the man born blind did what Jesus told him to do without argument. Some in the audience might have recalled the story of Naaman the Syrian

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who had leprosy and was instructed by the prophet Elisha to wash seven times in the muddy Jordan River (2 Kings 5:1-14). Naaman resisted, preferring the clearer waters of Damascus. But, persuaded by his servants, he relented and was healed. In our text, the man born blind offered no objection to anything that Jesus did or asked.

What Jesus requires of us in the Gospel may not conform to our expectations. Perhaps we object to confessing our sins or accepting the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross or allowing our sins to be washed in his blood. Faith may be an obstacle to the person requiring all facts. Whatever the resistance, Jesus still applies his chosen remedy to the blind of heart and sends them to the place of cleansing. In response, we must go, wash, and return. He will do the rest. And the man born blind made that wonderful discovery. "...Came back seeing..." (9:7). The Greek for "seeing" is the present participle of 

\[belpō\], suggesting that though his going, washing and coming were completed actions, his healing was continuing—an achievement of Jesus that would remain a part of his new life. A certain matter-of-factness accompanies John's use of language when he tells us that the man "came seeing."

C1) Neighbors and Healed Blind Person: Personal Identity and Process of Healing (8-12)

6 The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" 7 Some said, "It is he." Others said, "No, but he is like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." 10 So they said to him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" 11 He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' So I went and washed and received my sight." 12 They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

In this (9:8-12) and subsequent sections, the miracle of healing the man born blind will become a topic of debate and controversy for the people around Jesus and the man himself. It appears that he returned to his house and there encountered his neighbors and others who knew him "before when he was a beggar." His blindness had given him a place of visibility because he was constrained to beg for alms in his blind condition. Charity in the ancient world was dispensed in this fashion, the blind person being unable to work. A certain reward accompanied giving alms, and through this practice he made a sparse living. More importantly, people around him knew him, and were able to make a comparison of his medical condition before and after the healing. Little did he know that his daily appearances, seeking charity, would have such an important role to play in establishing his identity on the fateful day he met Jesus. For us, we often fail to realize how the most inconvenient and painful experiences become baselines for what God will one day do in our lives.

The leading question from his neighbors was simply: "Is this the man who used to sit and beg?" Establishing this identity was essential to the historical claim of his healing. "Same man? Can it be?" Face it: persons born blind simply don't suddenly start seeing again. It would be understandable for his neighbors to suspect a case of mistaken identity. For early Christians, the same challenge would rise in the face of the claim that Jesus rose from the dead. "What? The same man who crucified, placed in the tomb and sealed there, now is alive? Impossible! Are you sure it's the same man?" Knowing the location of the tomb was critical in that case; knowing that the once public blind beggar was the man now standing before them, able to see, was essential to proving his healing.

A collection of responses to this question reveal the degrees of credibility among the man's neighbors:

1. "It is he." Full identity.
2. "No, but it is like him." Mistaken identity.

John makes clear that each detracting response was accompanied by the man's insistence: "I am the man," from the Greek \[egō eimi\], simply, "I am." "He kept saying," John tells us, using the imperfect form of the verb to underscore the continuing nature of his affirmation. When God transforms a person, the changes may seem too good to be true. Snatched from a painful past, attended by addictions or worse, a person may have a hard time convincing his close acquaintances that he is a different person. The statement "I am", within John's Gospel, has special meaning, for it ordinarily identifies Jesus: "I am the way," or simply, "I am", as in the closing verses of chapter 8. This "I am" which the man affirms of himself is more than the "I was" just a few moments before.
The same Jesus who said, "I am the light of the world," had become the source of new life, of new being, of a new "I am" for the man born blind. The man would never be same "I am" ever again.

To his neighbors, the sticking point was the little word "how?" (Greek: pós). Nor was this the first time a person posed such a question about the works of Jesus. Recall how Nicodemus asked Jesus, "How can a man be born when he is old?" (3:4), followed by "How can these things be?" (3:9). "How?" questions are common in John's Gospel, and in most cases raise the issue "possibility" of something happening. The question of modus is raised in John 9 in these places: 9:10, 15-16, 19, 21, 26. Under ordinary circumstances, the inquirer would expect a wholly different result than he sees when looking at the works or hearing the words of Jesus. This further illustrates the vast difference between "light" and "darkness". The healing accomplished by Jesus for the man born blind requires faith in a much greater resource than his neighbors know. They are right to ask the question, but will they recognize the answer?

The man's response begins with the words, "The man called Jesus..." For the Christian readers of John's Gospel, the statement has a certain inspirational value. The "how" resolves itself as simply "the man called Jesus." We are struck by the lack of theological sophistication. Here is a Christology without abstraction! "While I am in the world..." Jesus had told his disciples which, by all accounts, means "while I am a human being in the world...the Word become flesh (1:14)." The humanity of Jesus, intended by the Greek anthrōpos ("the man"), brought him into intimate connection with needy people around him. But in his humanity he was "Jesus", Yeshua, "Savior," the light coming into the world to drive out the darkness, and, in this case, the blindness. Paul would later write: "One God...one mediator between God and humanity: the human Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5; Romans 5:15). The availability of sight for the blind depends on the availability of God for humanity, and the intersection of these two occurs in "the man called Jesus."

In recounting the word of Jesus, the man born blind repeats verbatim what Jesus asked of him and what happened. He does not embellish or try to explain the process. His faithfulness to Jesus' instructions had resulted in "receiving my sight," he affirms. The Greek uses the expression anablepō in its aorist form. This is a compound verb which means "to see again." It can also mean "look up," as in "looked up at Jesus." Since the man was "born blind," he had never actually seen before, and so the sense of "again" may be better grasped by "restored." "Having washed" precedes this testimony of sight and translates the aorist middle participle of niptō, implying that he "washed for himself," stressing both the definitive nature of his action and also his own personal involvement. Jesus asked the man to do something in order to receive his sight, and that action was a testimony to the man's faith. Faith revealed itself in what the man did, and he makes that clear through these words. We are reminded of an earlier "sign" performed by Jesus in chapter 2 where he responds to Mary's request for wine at the wedding feast. Her words to the servants on that occasion are relevant here: "Whatever he tells you, do it!” (2:5). This is, after all, the way of salvation: we are to be obedient to what God asks of us. Through the Gospel he speaks to us, "This is my Son: hear him!” (Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7).

All of this peaks the interest of the man's neighbors who now want to know "Where is he?" This could be read several ways: 1) "Where is this Jesus? We don't see him anywhere. Are you sure it was he?"; 2) "We'd like to see Jesus. Where is he?"; 3) "Where is Jesus now?" Whatever their expectations, the man might well disappoint them with his rather plain response: "I don't know." For a miracle so astounding, performed by "the man Jesus," there is very little fanfare--and very little information from the man who benefited. His ignorance of Jesus' whereabouts would eventually be matched by the experience of the early Christ followers. Standing at the empty tomb, they would hear words like, "He is not here. He is risen!" While the skeptic and the doubter might want to produce the "how" of this remarkable event, the man born blind, but now able to see, shows little interest in providing such information. Why would he? He has been the recipient of a mighty work of God, and his vision no doubt remains the most fascinating development in his life. The "change" seems to overshadow everything else, including, "Where is Jesus?"

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5 In particular, these passages: John 1:48; 3:4, 9; 4:9; 6:42, 52; 7:15; 8:33; 9:10, 15-16, 19, 21, 26; 12:34; 14:5; 14:22; 18:22.

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. So the Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And he said to them, "He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?" And there was a division among them. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?" He said, "He is a prophet."

Showing respect for the local religious leaders, the man's neighbors bring him to the Pharisees for further clarification. These learned men largely oversaw the synagogue movement within Second Temple Judaism, and the neighbors no doubt felt an obligation to "vet" their friend with the rabbis. The synagogue was more than just a religious center; it was the heart and soul of community life in individual towns and villages. The Pharisees had long maintained that Jewish life in the community ought to be every bit as holy as life in the Jerusalem Temple. For that reason, they reproduced in the synagogue many of the practices found in the Temple, bringing holiness to an even more demanding "local" level. Perhaps the neighbors were doing what ordinarily would have been done for someone cured of leprosy---validating the cure with a priest (Compare Matthew 8:3-4 and parallels; also, Leviticus 13 and the role of priests in this regard). No doubt, the neighbors grasped the momentous nature of the man's situation, and were following the spirit of Torah in getting the approval of the local leadership--in this case the Pharisees.

But John also reminds the reader of another potential issue: this took place on "a Sabbath day," and we already know from previous incidents in John's Gospel, that Sabbath-keeping (or breaking!) had gotten Jesus into difficulty before (see John 5 and 7 in this connection). How would the Pharisees square the healing "on the Sabbath"? The emphasis of the text is on Jesus "making mud and opening his eyes," two "works" performed on the Sabbath which would come under scrutiny. Only certain actions were permitted on the Sabbath, and the Pharisees had written about them in some detail, carefully laying out the methods for keeping Sabbath and any exceptions. "Mud making" and "eye opening" apparently failed the test. Once the man informs the Pharisees, in response to their "how" question, that Jesus "put mud on my eyes, I washed and I see," the leadership immediately slams the door on any legitimacy of Jesus' action. Their reasoning is hard-and-fast: "Sabbath breaking is ungodly. Jesus broke the Sabbath. Jesus is ungodly." Or, to use their language, "Not from God." While they do not yet dispute the miracle, they hope to disallow it by undermining the righteousness of the one who did it. Keepers of the "holiness of Israel," some of the Pharisees (the Shammaites, the right-wing party, no doubt), used Sabbath as a "boundary marker" for deciding who is true Israel and who is not.

Although the miracle is "wonderful," this cannot, in their view justify the breaking of Sabbath. Counter to this are the words of "other" Pharisees (the Hillel party, more moderate) who pay more attention to the "sign" than to the apparent legal infraction. The common Greek word for "sign," used by John, is σήμειον, in the plural form. This word appears throughout the Gospel of John and dominates chapters 2-12 which is usually classified as "The Book of Signs." The Gospel concludes with this comment about the "signs":

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:30-31).

Seven such signs appear throughout the Gospel, offered as evidences "that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God."

The idea of a "sign" is that which points beyond itself to another reality, but in some way already contains that reality in itself. Signs, by their nature, have "meaning" or semantics. The works of Jesus point to God, yet they also display something about Jesus who embodies God for human observation. Recall Jesus' words to his disciples: "the works of God displayed in him," referring to the miracle Jesus was about to perform. Signs are about the "significance" of something. W. Nichol in his monograph, The Sēmeia in the Fourth Gospel: Tradition and Redaction (1972), observes a line from Prophet-to-Messiah-to-Jesus in John's use of "sign" as an authenticating event. Prophets like Moses and Elijah exhibited sēmeia in their ministries. What they did
revealed something about the nature of God. In Jesus' case, he is, by all intents, the embodiment ("Word-become-flesh") of the meanings present in the signs. It's hard to imagine the signs without Jesus being in a unique relationship with God. This is, of course, what the audience in John 9 is grappling with.

Confronted with the bare question from the Pharisees, "What do you say about him, since he opened your eyes?", the man replies merely, "He is a prophet." This squares with the Moses-Elijah trajectory coming out of the Old Testament, placing Jesus, minimally, on the same line of thought. It's tempting to criticize the man for what seems to be a very limited Christology (view of Jesus), but considering his context and the remarkable nature of his healing, it's a very significant confession. At the very least, Jesus saw himself as a prophet, bearing the word of God, announcing the coming reign of God. He was, of course, much more than that, but certainly not less. We might even surmise that the man saw Jesus on a par with Moses and Elijah, and that is no small confession! Those were quintessential prophets, par excellent.

There is one additional caution which the rabbis no doubt had in the back of their minds. It comes from reading Deuteronomy 13:1-5, a warning that anyone claiming to be a prophet should not be judged a true prophet on the basis of his "signs" alone, but those signs must be tested by whatever he teaches. Should his teaching not agree with Torah, then the prophet must be disallowed. For Jesus' critics to make this passage apply, they would need to show that both the signs and the teachings were inconsistent with the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament. In Jesus' case, his signs were rooted in what Israel knew about the character of the One true God, Yahweh: that we was creator and giver of life. All of Jesus signs bear the marks of Israel's God being present in them. They cannot be classed as "lying wonders" for they have no marks of deception and all the marks of divinity.

C2) Parents and Jewish authorities: Personal Identity and Process of Healing (vv. 18-23)

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight 19 and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" 20 His parents answered, "We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. 21 But how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." 22 (His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue.) 23 Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

Having reached a dead-end, for the time being, with the man himself, the Jewish leadership 6 now approaches his parents. The validity of Jesus' healing miracle, in part, rested with the accuracy of the claim that the man had, in fact, "been blind," as 9:18 points out. John keeps pressing the factual nature of his present condition, namely, that he could see. Whatever they might disprove about his past, his present "sighted condition" was without dispute, since it was the most evident fact before them. Several key points mark the investigation:

1. Is this your son?
2. Was he born blind?
3. How do you explain his ability to see now?

Once more, the opposition is looking for easy ways to discredit the miracle by undercutting basic facts of the case. They cannot be faulted for turning over every stone in their efforts. If anything, John can lean back after filling this report and say, "See, even the opponents of Jesus thoroughly checked out the facts! They have the most to gain by disproving, and the most to lose by proving the facts!"

We sense a tentativeness from the parents, as they systematically tick off #1 and #2 above. However, they were not in a position to offer a reason for his cure, though he no doubt told them. Therefore, they refuse to answer #3, but defer to the man himself, pleading ignorance:

1. How he sees? We do not know.
2. Who opened his eyes? Ask him.

6 When John's Gospel uses the simple word "Jews", it is not referring to all Jewish people, but rather to those who held leadership positions within Second Temple Judaism, persons like the Pharisees, Sadducees, and High Priests. The word means that in this case.
The aside in the text, assuming it is John's comment and not a later "gloss" (comment) by a scribe, seems reasonable in light of the pressures to disavow Jesus. More is a stake here than a single interrogation. The Pharisees run the synagogue and that means the primary life of the community. The public dislike of Jesus by the right-wing of the party was, apparently, well-known, and persons who made outright confessions that "Jesus is Messiah" were subject to expulsion. Now there is considerable scholarly debate about what this "put out of the synagogue" actually meant. The underlying Greek expression, *aposunagōgos*, occurs only here and at 12:42 and 16:2 in the New Testament. We are not sure what it implies in detail. There were different forms of expulsion from the synagogue described in later Jewish writings, and they varied in different degrees from a brief thirty day suspension (Hebrew: *niddāy*) to a permanent ban (Hebrew: *herem*). The *Mishnah* had such regulations, but, again, were they actually in force prior to that writing? The most we can say, from John's aside, is that *pro tempore* a ban was in place, a sort of "for the moment" policy created by the leadership to contain the Jesus movement. We do know that Jesus warned his followers that the day would come, sometime in the future, when they would be "put out of the synagogue" (John 16:2), flogged in the synagogues (Matthew 10:17; 23:34), and beaten in the synagogues (Mark 13:9). Was this but a foreshadowing of the future?

Bearing witness to the person of Jesus comes with a price. Following Jesus is costly. Those who seek to win others to the Gospel will experience rejection and persecution, and must be prepared for those outcomes. Were the parents of Jesus acting cowardly or wisely? They certainly allowed their son to take full responsibility for his confession about Jesus, and that was as it should be. Parents cannot become Christians for their children. Their children must come to the age of reason and one day decide for themselves. Parents can bear witness to that for which they have knowledge and direct experience, but the matter of choice is left to their children. They may bring their children for dedication or baptism "before they are able to walk," carrying them to the altar and placing them into the hands of the minister. But one day, those same children will need to make profession of faith, like the man born blind: "He is of age; ask him!" And, indeed, this has been the practice of the church generally in making distinctions between baptism of infants, but confirmation of those who are "of age" to decide for themselves. Such confirmation must be freely chosen and not forced, even as the parents in this case took the risky step and invited their son to speak for himself before the authorities. Or, as someone has wisely said, "God has no grandchildren."

D2) Healed Blind Person and Jewish Authorities: Origin of Jesus: from God? from Sin? (24-34)

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, "Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?"

And they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

They answered him, "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" And they cast him out.

The leadership is running out of options in undermining the facts of the man's case. Too much solid evidence confronts them. The man was born blind, his parents attest he is their son, and he obviously stands before them able to see. What now? They return to questioning the man himself. Their lead off move is to force the man to accept his healing from God alone: "Give glory to God" is a command from a religious authority to one of their constituency. They command the man born blind to direct his testimony of healing to God whose glory is revealed thereby. They want to "cut out Jesus" from the equation of the man's healing, completely disallowing any role he might have had in bringing it about. Their best effort comes with the reassertion that Jesus is a "sinner" (Greek: *hamartōlos*), no doubt based on the fact that he performed this cure (and its attendant remedies--spittle and mud) on the Sabbath day. Sabbath-breakers are "sinners," and that should preclude the man from giving glory to God because of Jesus. In effect, "God, yes! Jesus, no!"
This is worth contemplating. Many would seek salvation from "God" in a generic sense, calling Him "the Almighty" or the "Supreme Being," the cosmic "man upstairs." But none of these designations wears the personal face of God. The Gospel of John bears consistent witness to Jesus as the revelation of God, the one who shines in otherwise darkness, bringing to light what God is truly like. "See me and you see the Father," Jesus would eventually tell his disciples (14:9). The one who lives close to the Father, i.e. Jesus, reveals him (1:18). A personal relationship with God requires a personal encounter with Jesus by faith.

We have further linguistic evidence that the expression, "Give glory to God," was actually a Hebrew idiom which meant "Confess your sin" (Strack-Billerbeck, *Commentary on the New Testament*, 2:535). Like the hapless comforters of Job, the man's inquisitors press him to admit his sin (the cause of his blindness) and his lying about the cause of his present sight.

The man born blind grows increasingly impatient with his inquisitors, even as his courage and faith also develops. Nothing strengthens the testimony of a Christian more than direct challenges to his faith and what he believes. Such adversities drive him to the Word and to a process of honest thinking. Listen to the man's response: "I don't know if the man is a sinner or not. Frankly, I don't care, for it is irrelevant to my case. My case is quite simple, really, and we have been over the facts several times. In case you missed the crux of the matter, here it is: Once I was blind, but now I see." He is undeterred by their insistence to explain once more "how" the cure came about, and seems quite willing to question their listening skills! We might paraphrase him, "What part of 'he spit on dirt, made mud, told me to wash' don't you understand? How many times do I have to say it? I am beginning to suspect you might be more interested in this Jesus than you are letting on! 'Me thinks ye doth protest too much!'"

The deepening of the man's faith is matched by the hardening of the Pharisees hearts. They fall back on their unwavering claim to be "disciples of Moses," and that they don't consider Jesus even close to being a new Moses. Their inquisition turns ugly, as John tells us, "they reviled him", from the Greek loidoreō which literally means "to curse, insult" and also occurs in Acts 23:4; 1 Corinthians 4:12 and 1 Peter 2:23. They immediately declare the man to be a disciple of Jesus, no doubt by virtue of his healing and his persistent defense of what happened, holding fast to the facts. They might me implying that the man is somehow under Jesus' spell, manipulated by him. By contrast, they are disciples of Moses, they insist. "God spoke to Moses," they maintain. Their next statement, it would seem, should be, "God didn't speak to Jesus." But, oddly, that's not the move they make in their argument with the man. Instead, they take a lighter stance: "As for this man, we don't know here he comes from." Perhaps they prove all too easily the aphorism, "Ignorance is bliss." The agnostic could be an atheist if he had more courage! Of course, the Pharisees could remedy their ignorance by open-minded investigation, but that would require a prior commitment to "follow the truth wherever it leads," and that is plainly not their desire.

The man picks up on their oblique response and their careful "tip-toeing" around the issues he raises. Emboldened yet more and showing signs of growing faith, he once more indulges his sarcasm with: "That's just too wild! You are the religious experts and yet you don't know where this man came from. Isn't that your business: to know such things? You should especially know where someone comes from who opened my blinded eyes! That miracle has to be the news of the century! It's living proof that God listens to Jesus. How can God listen to a sinner? Isn't God's granting of this marvelous sign the strongest possible evidence that he comes from God?" His argument is born from both personal experience (his healing) and a fresh look at the facts. Whereas the Pharisees wanted to make the Sabbath-day violation bear the weight of their rejection of Jesus, the man looks at the evidence from the standpoint of the miracle itself and works the argument from the strength of the healing to the authentication of Jesus. The man refuses to shut out this "other possibility."

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7 The expression in 1:18 which translates as "he has made him known" comes from a Greek verb which means "to exegete." That word is ordinarily associated with the explanation of a sacred text, a task done by an exegete. What John is, in effect, saying is simply, Jesus is the true exegete of God.
Coming to faith in Jesus often requires that we take a fresh look at the facts of the case. It means that we make room for a different reading of the story than what a secular mind might find there. In sharing our faith, we often encounter people who have only seen the story from a single viewpoint. Our job is to show them what Jesus looks like from the viewpoint of a person (ourselves) who has been changed by the Gospel.

Edging toward losing the ground of their argument, the Pharisees resort to a nasty debate tactic: attacking the person (ad hominem), calling the man the equivalent of an S.O.B. in our vernacular (excuse the vulgarity, but it grasps the sense of "You were born in utter sin…" quite accurately (9:34)). They then proceed to ostracize him from the community, subjecting him to the shame of exclusion: "They cast him out", consistent with the aside in 9:22 noted above.

B' Jesus and the Healed Blind Person: Restoring spiritual sight (35-38)

35 Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" 36 He answered, "And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" 37 Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you." 38 He said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him.

What's remarkable about the telling of this story, thus far, is the absence of Jesus from the various conversations. By healing the man, he has, in effect, armed him with the "truth of the sign," a most powerful weapon in the man's witnessing arsenal. Left alone, both by Jesus and his parents, up until now, he has entered the fray, doing battle with the darkness, equipped with the "armor of light" (see Romans 13:12). The man had truth on his side, or, better, he was on the side of truth: truth about his blindness, the words of Jesus to him, how he responded to those words, and the results which followed. The man also behaved honorably toward the truth, weighing carefully the accusations made against Jesus and himself in light of the undeniable nature of his restored sight. "Once I was blind, but now I see." Those are hard words to overturn when your life is living proof of them. The greatest witness is the power of a changed life, and the man born blind bore it with distinction. This was, after all, new ground for him, the man who spent his life until now "in darkness."

But now Jesus returns to the conversation, although we have every reason to believe he was never far away. What draws him back to the man is the man's new social plight: "they had cast him out." What did the man need? He needed the restoration of community, albeit in a different form. Jesus goes looking for the man, as evidenced by the statement, "having found him", from the Greek root heuriskō in the aorist participial form, suggesting Jesus was looking and at last found him. Jesus will never abandon those who suffer for his sake, no matter the seriousness of their plight. "He who comes to me, Jesus had told his followers, I will not cast out" (John 6:37). The man needed the community of Jesus, having been excluded from the failed community of Second Temple Judaism.

What follows is a wholly different kind of question than the man has been used to answering. He stands before, not his inquisitors, but the man called Jesus, the one who healed him. The question Jesus puts to him comes not from a heart determined to contradict him (and reject him), but from a heart committed to the man's ultimate transformation. Jesus asks, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" (9:35). The title Jesus uses here, "Son of Man," has roots in the Old Testament books of Ezekiel and Daniel. Of special note, is Daniel 7 where a mysteriously divine figure appears among the clouds of heaven and makes his approach to God Himself. When he arrives at the throne of God, he is given the kingdom, along with the right of judgment. The nations of the world must give an account to him. "Son of Man" language is also Messiah language. Jewish people who believed in the Messianic promises of their Scriptures looked forward to the appearance of this One to remedy their situation and put the world to rights. We assume by Jesus' question that the man had some familiarity with these teachings. What the man born blind, but now healed, needed was a righteous judge to take up his cause and make right the injustice (expulsion from the community) he had just sustained.
Therefore, the man is eager in his reply: "And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" That is, he was willing to cast his lot with this "Son of Man", placing his trust in him, and letting him rule justly on his behalf. Though he presently knows that Jesus is his "healer," he has not made the connection between Jesus and "The Son of Man." This illustrates the process of both witness and conversion. First, Jesus meets the man's immediate need without asking anything in return, except obedience to the instructions for receiving his sight. Then, he allows the man opportunity to bear testimony to what happened to him. At this juncture, the man hears about "The Son of Man" who is able to take up his cause before these, his accusers.

Without further delay, Jesus reveals himself as this "Son of Man," prompting the man to say "Lord, I believe." The Greek uses the present tense of the verb for "believe," *pisteuō*: "I am believing..." Faith is, in the biblical sense, more than mere intellectual assent to a body of truth. As the book of James reminds us, "Even the demons 'believe' and tremble" (James 2:19). Rooted in the Old Testament idea of "leaning for support" (Hebrew: *emunah*), the word comes closest to our idea of "trust" or "confidence." We believe "on", perhaps, more than "in." Faith stakes its life on Another. Faith demonstrates its commitment by credible actions. One entire chapter in the New Testament (Hebrews 11) devotes itself to a "hall of faith," identifying Old Testament characters who acted "by faith." Each person of "faith" places trust in "things hoped for" and the "evidence of things not seen."

The man born blind trusted the Jesus who took the initiative in his life by healing his blindness. Here is "the grace which goes before," the preparatory steps in a process which brought the man to finally affirm, "Lord, I believe." In many ways, this man follows the pattern which John presented in the Prologue of his Gospel:

1. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:9-13).

Healed of his blindness, the man benefited from the "light...coming into the world" who "did receive" Jesus, "believed in his name," and underwent the birth "of the will...of God." The act of "receiving" Jesus parallels "believing in his name." The Greek word "to receive" is *lambanō*, meaning to "take, take hold of, get, obtain, take advantage of." Jesus offered himself to the man by healing him and revealing his identity as "Son of Man." The man gladly "took hold of" Jesus through his faith.

But he did more than that. John tells us, "he worshipped him." The Greek verb is *prokuneō*, "to fall down, kneel, bow low, kneel at another's feet," and by implication "to worship." This word is used in Matthew 4:10 where Jesus tells Satan, his tempter, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and only serve him." The word occurs several times in John 4:20-24 in Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman about the nature of the true worship of God. Let there be no doubt: the man born blind worships Jesus as God who is revealed in the Messianic "Son of Man" of Daniel's vision (see above). The Son of Man is a divine being who is given authority by God Himself and who shares the throne of God. By connecting himself to this imagery, Jesus is inviting the man to worship him, and the he gladly accepts the invitation.

**A') Jesus and the Pharisees: Sin and Blindness (39-41)**

39 Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind." 40 Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, "Are we also blind?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains.

Once more Jesus turns his attention to his critics, continuing to develop the theme that he is the Son of Man by saying to them, "For judgment I came into this world." John uses the phrase *eis krima*, "with a view to judgment". The word *krima* means "judgment, decision, verdict." Following close on the heels of his pronouncement that he is "the Son of Man," this choice of terminology reminds us of Daniel 7's statements about this being:

13 I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. 14 And to him was given dominion and glory and a
kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-14).

Jesus had already "come to the Ancient of days" and now had come into the world to exercise his authority as "Son of Man" to sift the hearts of human beings. His arrival means that the tables of justice will be turned in favor of those "who are blind," while those who claim the privilege of "sight" will be judged as blind. It is evident that Jesus is using the healing of the blind man as a metaphor for a much more serious "blindness". The critics of Jesus claim the right to "sit in Moses' seat" (see Matthew 23:2) and pass judgment on the man born blind whose healing they reject and whose fellowship with the community they sever. Their actions are those of "judges", but Jesus, by speaking the words "those who see may become blind", sets aside their legal decision and rules in favor of the man instead.

When the Shammaite Pharisees respond, they are in effect saying, "Are you talking about us?" To which, Jesus responds with his ruling against them. Their claim "to see" makes them liable to serious malfeasance and injustice. If they were basing their rulings on "the light" of God's true Torah, they would not have condemned the man born blind for placing his faith in the Jesus who gave him sight. Through their actions, they have ruled contrary to the judgment of the Son of Man, "the light coming into the world." His verdict about them? "Guilty!" His verdict about the man? Transformed!

**Spiritual Blindness**

The story of John 9 progresses from the healing of a man born blind to the opening of his spiritual eyes to the truth of Jesus. His healing from physical blindness was but the introduction to his spiritual journey, one which brought him through the rough currents of controversy and rejection and back to the feet of Jesus. We learn from John's account that human infirmity does not admit of simplistic explanations ("Who sinned?!"), nor is the formalistic keeping of rules the mark of a true prophet ("This man is a sinner!"). Yet Jesus' critics fell prey to such stereotypes, and it blinded them to seeing Jesus doing "the works of God." The metaphor of blindness is found throughout Scripture. It commonly refers to a willful shutting of people's eyes against the light of God. The Old Testament made this connection:

- Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed" (Isaiah 6:10).
- Astonish yourselves and be astonished; blind yourselves and be blind! Be drunk, but not with wine; stagger, but not with strong drink! (Isaiah 29:9).
- Bring out the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears! (Isaiah 43:8).
- His watchmen are blind; they are all without knowledge; they are all silent dogs; they cannot bark, dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber (Isaiah 56:10).
- We grope for the wall like the blind; we grope like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among those in full vigor we are like dead men (Isaiah 59:10).

Jesus shared the sentiment of Isaiah's words when he told the dominate leadership within Second Temple Judaism:

- Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit" (Matthew 15:14; also, Luke 6:39).

Later in Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus raises a prophetic "woe" against the same leadership, he repeats the adjective "blind" (Greek: *tuphloi*) several times to make his point:

1. "blind guides" (23:16, 24)
2. "blind fools" (23:17)
3. "blind men" (23:19)
4. "blind Pharisee" (23:26)

In each case, Jesus gives examples of how they failed to consistently interpret and apply Torah to people's lives. They behaved like people who were unable to see clearly what they were doing, and so they did it badly. The problem with spiritual blindness lies in the refusal to acknowledge it, and forging ahead anyway.
Blindness can also be a form of judgment. Those who know what is true, but choose to deliberately ignore it, are denied further "light." That is their judgment. Jesus was the "light of the world," yet the leadership refused to "come to his light," preferring their own wisdom instead. Of them, Jesus said:

"He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them" (John 12:40).

This was the intent of Isaiah's words in 6:10 (above). Paul applies a similar logic in his letter to the Roman Christians: "...You are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness..." (Romans 2:19). But, he continues (paraphrased), "you fail to consistently follow in your own life what you tell others to do in theirs." Light judges darkness, not by its destruction but by its dispersion. As Augustine reminds us, "Darkness is not something, but the absence of light."

The cause of this blindness? "In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:4). So accustomed to the darkness in which they live, their eyes become blind (1 John 2:11). Worse, they do not realize that they are blind (Revelation 3:17)!

But, as the story of John 9 tell us, God's light is greater than the world's darkness. The man born blind became the living proof of the transforming power of Jesus Christ, he who came so that the blind might receive their sight (see Isaiah 29:18; 35:5; 42:7, 16, 18; Matthew 11:5; Luke 4:18). The message of the Gospel shines God's light into the darkness:

1. We are able to cast off the "works of darkness" and "put on the armor of light" (Romans 13:12).
2. The Lord will "bring to light" what was once "hidden in darkness" (1 Corinthians 4:5).
3. The God of Creation who said "let there be light" now shines His light into our hearts, clearly showing us Himself in the person of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6).
4. "For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord" (Ephesians 5:8).
5. The "whole armor of God" fortifies us against "this present darkness" (Ephesians 6:12).
6. God has "delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Colossians 1:13).
7. Christ followers "are not in darkness..." but " are all children of light, children of the day ... not of the night or of the darkness" (1 Thessalonians 5:4).
8. We have been invited "...to proclaim the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).
9. Because of God's truth in Jesus, "...the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining" (1 John 2:8).
10. Those who "hate their brother" are "walking in the darkness", but those who forgive him prove themselves to be the children of God (1 John 2:9, 11).

One helpful New Testament text which makes the connection between light, darkness, and forgiveness is 1 John 1:5-9:

5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. 6 If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 8 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Light and darkness, in this passage, become synonyms for truth and falsehood, honesty and dishonesty, fellowship with God and hypocrisy, forgiveness and sin. Its fundamental teaching is that "God is light and in him is no darkness at all" (1:5). This corresponds to Jesus' affirmation, "I am the light of the world." God's light confronts the fact of our sin, much in the same manner as the light of Jesus challenged the blindness of the man born blind. Marks of darkness, and, in turn, spiritual blindness, include: 1) walking in darkness; 2) lying; 3) saying we have no sin; 4) self-deception. Without the light, we are virtually blind. Without God's light, we are spiritually blind.
A certain responsibility rests with those who at last "see the light," and then fail to accept what that light reveals. When light shines into the world, it divides the world (see Genesis 1). When light shines, we are confronted with a series of questions: 1) What do we say? 2) Where do we walk? 3) What do we confess? Light invites honesty and confession. Light exposes sin. When light shines, we are invited by a series of commands: 1) Walk in the light; 2) Confess our sins; 3) Experience fellowship with God. Our first parents knew the pain of hiding from God and the folly of sewing fig-leaves to cover their nakedness. In their hiddenness "they walked in darkness", and in their futile efforts at "covering up", they "deceived themselves." This same sort of self-deception led Jesus' critics to hide behind Sabbath observance in their efforts to avoid Jesus, the light of the world. They rejected his role as "Son of Man." By contrast, the man born blind obeyed the instructions of Jesus, thus "walking in the light," and, in the process, received his sight. He discovered that God was "faithful and just" to forgive and receive him into the fellowship of Jesus — the Jesus who met him along the road.

He is Tending the Sheep (1 Samuel 16:1-13)
The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king." 2 But Samuel said, "How can I go? Saul will hear about it and kill me." The LORD said, "Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' 3 Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what to do. You are to anoint for me the one I indicate." 4 Samuel did what the LORD said. When he arrived at Bethlehem, the elders of the town trembled when they met him. They asked, "Do you come in peace?" 5 Samuel replied, "Yes, in peace; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves and come to the sacrifice with me." Then he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. 6 When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed stands here before the LORD." 7 But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." 8 Then Jesse called Abinadab and had him pass in front of Samuel. But Samuel said, "The LORD has not chosen this one either." 9 Jesse then had Shammah pass by, but Samuel said, "Nor has the LORD chosen this one." 10 Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, "The LORD has not chosen these." 11 So he asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?" "There is still the youngest," Jesse answered, "but he is tending the sheep." Samuel said, "Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives." 12 So he sent and had him brought in. He was ruddy, with a fine appearance and handsome features. Then the LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; he is the one." 13 So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came upon David in power. Samuel then went to Ramah.

"How long will you mourn for Saul?" That question haunts the thoughts of the prophet Samuel. His work, prior to the events of this text, began when he was a small boy, working for the High Priest Eli. Even then, dark clouds hung over the world he was about to enter. The spiritual life of Israel was at an all-time low, and the roads connecting the sanctuary-tent at Shiloh to the rest of Israel were perilous. Danger from the Philistines (to the west) was constant. Of all Israel's enemies during the period of the "Judges" (Shophetîm), this war-like and belligerent sea-coast people were the fiercest. Only in the hills and mountains, could Israelites find safety from the well-heeled army of the five cities of Philistia (Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gath). Known popularly for their champion warrior Goliath, the Philistines were masters of iron weaponry and skilled in the use of chariots for war (see Judges 1:9; 1 Samuel 13:5). Endless war existed between the two nations.

The prelude to this week's text in 1 Samuel finds Israel without a king. As prophet, Samuel faithfully led the people from the brink of disaster, in the aftermath of Eli's death, to a security under the protection of Yahweh. Who is the king? Yahweh is the king! This was Samuel's opinion, and he couldn't understand why Israel suddenly demanded that he find a king for them — "like all the other nations." Insecure in their sense of uniqueness as Yahweh's people, they wanted to trade in their "imaginary" king for a real one (see 1 Samuel 8:6), and thus feel safer. Despite Samuel's warnings about the dangers of a monarchy, the people insisted and Samuel gave in — at Yahweh's insistence. He anointed Saul as their first king. A reluctant ruler by all accounts, Saul suffered from manic depression that often broke forth in violent acts. In the end, he and his heir died an ignominious death at the hands of the Philistines. The road to kingship was marred by his reign. In spite of this failure, God remained faithful, and well ahead of Saul's demise, he commanded Samuel to find another king — one better suited to lead the people of God in victory over their enemies and in obedience to Torah.
Our text tells the very compressed story of how that came about. Yahweh seems impatient with Samuel who slowly recognizes that Saul’s throne cannot be saved. “Rejected” is the operative word from the Lord’s mouth. Time to “be on your way,” he tells his road-weary prophet; time to take your anointing horn and find a son of Jesse to be a better king. Fearful, Samuel asks, “How can I go?” Saul had his agents in the field, and, even though Samuel was a prophet, he was not fireproof. Under the rouse of a sacred gathering at Jesse’s house, Samuel arrives at the “little” town of Bethlehem. The residents are more fearful than Samuel — they fear him and why he has come. Assuring them with the Hebrew greeting of shalom, Samuel proceeds with the sacrifice. Then the moment of truth arrives. Very subtly, the prophet moves down the line before each of Jesse’s seven sons who were present for the service of worship.

Pausing and waiting for guidance from Yahweh, Samuel remembers the word from God: “Do not consider his appearance…Yahweh does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but Yahweh looks at the heart” (16:7). One by one, the seven sons fail the test, until at last, puzzled by the outcome, the prophet queries their father, “Are these all the sons you have (16:11a)?” In classic story-teller fashion, the “best is left till last.” Jesse replies in almost diminutive form by saying, “There is still the youngest. But he’s with the sheep” (16:11b). From the standpoint of inheritance and the family dynasty, youngest sons normally didn’t figure substantially. They were the “runts” of the litter! How important is sheep-tending, after all? Of course the history of Israel tells a different story. As we shall see shortly in the case of Psalm 23, Yahweh is the shepherd of Israel, and it is this youngest son of Jesse who will tell us so!

Knowing the mysterious ways of God, Samuel demands the appearance of this youngest child: “We will not sit down until he arrives.” No sooner does he arrive than Yahweh informs Samuel, “Arise, anoint him; he is the one” (16:12). While all his brothers watch, the youngest son of Jesse’s family receives the anointing oil from Samuel’s horn. The scribes who composed this narrative then explain: “From that day on the Spirit of Yahweh came upon David in power” (16:13). His name is withheld until the end of the scene. Who is the mystery son? Almost matter-of-factly, the text tells us “He was ruddy, with a fine appearance and handsome features” (16:12). Had not Yahweh told Samuel not to consider … his appearance? Yet, here stands a man who has such an appearance! This apparent contradiction is a simple paradox: Samuel was not to use appearance as a standard, but rather he was to allow Yahweh to direct the choice he made. As it turned out, the one God chose had a fine appearance. More importantly, David was a person of the Spirit whose real power rested in God and not in these inherent personal qualities.

“Be on your way,” God commanded Samuel, and along this road, he discovered the greater purposes of God for Israel in the person of David — the one who would be the shepherd-king of Israel.

He Leads Me (Psalm 23:1-6)
The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, 3 he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Several key phrases highlight the themes of this much-beloved and most well-known Psalm. They are: “he leads,” “he guides,” and “I walk.” Sheep without a shepherd are blind. By comparing himself to one of his flock, the psalmist affirms that he, too, is blind without Yahweh as his shepherd. Otherwise, he is a needy person who runs the risk of not having enough and not finding his way. It is natural for sheep to follow each other, and when the whole flock has a faithful shepherd to lead them, that arrangement works just fine. However, sheep rarely produce true leaders who know where they are going or where good pasture is found or where accessible water flows. For those life-essential provisions, sheep require a shepherd who “makes,” “leads,” “restores,” “guides,” “comforts,” “prepares,” and “anoints.” These strong verbs of loving care reveal the commitment of the shepherd to his sheep as they travel together along the road.
The poet addresses God as *my* Shepherd or, in the Hebrew, *rōʾî*, a word spoken in endearment as well as with security. God does not *belong* to the sheep, but surely *they* certainly belong to Him. Yet, the relationship between shepherd and sheep is deeply personal and faithful. Confidence — deep confidence — rises from this special bond, as the poet declares that “goodness” and “love” will *follow* him all the days of his life. What the shepherd brings to the relationship which makes it so precious to the sheep is his “goodness” and his “love.”

1. The Hebrew word for “goodness” is simply *tôb*, and it has to do with a person’s state of “well-being” or happiness. It includes elements of beauty, pleasantness and desirability. Inherent in this word is also the notion of great value or “expensiveness” and also points to what is beneficial or helpful. It also has moral overtones: goodness is the opposite of evil and refers to the righteous and desirable purposes of God for one’s life.

2. The second word, translated as “love” in the NIV, is the word *hesed*, a rather familiar term to Old Testament readers since it has to do with God’s covenant faithfulness to His people. God makes and keeps His promises. He follows through. He remains committed, often when His people become unfaithful. He puts into effect the terms of His covenant, implementing them in concrete ways in the best interests of His kingdom. Thus, because God has *hesed*, his people can *count on* Him.

Fortunately for the sheep, life is spent in pastures and in pens, not just along roads. The shepherd’s job is to bring the sheep from pen to pasture and from pasture to pen. The road connects the two. The people of God live under similar conditions. We also are future-oriented, rooted in hope that we will “live in the house of Yahweh forever.” Because Jesus meets us *along the road*, he gives direction to our travels and a *destination* to them as well. He is our eyes and our vision which bring us to the future, where His will is perfectly done in all of His creation by the consent of His creatures.

Along this road there is no ultimate want and there is no paralyzing fear; there is no final fatigue or unremitted thirst. Lostness is replaced by direction; death is overcome by life forever. Loneliness finds companionship in the One who is *with us*. Danger finds assurance in the abiding comfort of the one who provides — even in the presence of our enemies. Along this road we live by God’s appointment — His anointing. Along this road scarcity is replaced by the cup which overflows.

“The house of the LORD” is a wonderful phrase in 23:6. It speaks of something permanent and reliable, promising shelter and sustenance to otherwise disoriented persons. For the psalmist, this house was still a future expectation. David longed to build a temple for Yahweh, but was told that task was being deferred for his son Solomon (1 Chronicles 17:4ff). God told David that God had a better house for David in the form of his descendents who would become the *royal house* of kings to rule Israel. Little did David know that one day the “house of the LORD” would include representatives of the whole human race who would comprise the congregation of God, both Jew and Gentile. Yet, David knew that the road he now traveled was taking him somewhere, and that Yahweh, the faithful shepherd, would lead the way to an everlasting home — a place that would last.

**Once Darkness, Now Light (Ephesians 5:8-14)**

> For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light \(^9\) (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) \(^10\) and find out what pleases the Lord. \(^11\) Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. \(^12\) For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. \(^13\) But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, \(^14\) for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: “Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

Earlier in this week’s study, we commented on the wider meaning of “light and darkness” within the biblical text. The man born blind could not safely travel without companionship — without someone to be *his eyes*. For him, the road was a potentially treacherous place to be, and perils lurked in the shadows of his blindness. Paul develops this theme is this passage from *Ephesians*. He tells his audience that they were not just *in* darkness, they *were* darkness. What they really *were* was saturated with darkness. We might say that they were
“children of the dark.” Traveling the rugged roads of the Mediterranean in the days of Paul was risky business. Certain roads were especially perilous, likely watched by robbers and brigands looking for booty and gunning for Roman soldiers. Such persons had become the darkness they craved, since it gave cover to their mischievous deeds. Children of darkness act “in secret” and prefer to remain “invisible.” As we were reminded by Tolkien’s ring, to be invisible is to be invincible — or to imagine that it is so. Humanity was, writes Paul, living under the cover of darkness as persons of darkness. The only road they preferred was one under their surveillance after dark. Shameful, disobedient, fruitless, and courting with death, children of darkness had no long-term future. In short, they did not please the Lord, nor did they have any desire to do so.

The good news is that Sun (=“Son”) has risen and transformed the children of darkness into children of light. Road-weary of this dark and deadly life-style, they benefit from the fact that Christ now shines on them! As a result, they become fruit-bearing trees whose branches are richly weighed down by “goodness, righteousness, and truth.” They are no longer robbers and brigands for whom the road is a place of evil. Instead, they are producers and givers who live transparent lives. They have chosen to wake from the sleep of death; they have chosen to allow the light to expose their “deeds of darkness.” Like the man born blind, they have obeyed the instructions of their gracious Lord, and they confess with joy, “Once I was blind, but now I can see.”

Conclusion
Lyricist Dan Fogelberg has written:

Along The Road

| Joy at the start | Darkness obscures the trail. | But through it all a heart held humble |
| Fear in the journey | Cursing the quest | Levels and lights your way. |
| Joy in the coming home | Courting disaster | Joy at the start |
| A part of the heart | Measureless nights forebode | Fear in the journey |
| Gets lost in the learning | Moments of rest | Joy in the coming home |
| Somewhere along the road. | Glimpses of laughter | A part of the heart |
| Along the road | Are treasured along the road. | Gets lost in the learning |
| Your path may wander | Your steps may tumble | Somewhere along the road |
| A pilgrim’s faith may fail | Along the road | Somewhere along the road |
| Absence makes the heart grow stronger | Your thoughts may start to stray | Somewhere along the road. |

Occasionally someone will ask me during a Faith Questions class, “Why did Jesus engage some people and not others in life-changing conversations?” It’s a good question. We have a sense of fairness which demands that our Lord treat others with evenhandedness. Understood. Still, a certain mystery surrounds the specific encounters selected by the biblical writers. There were no doubt others that did not make press time. The Gospel of John suggests that there aren’t enough books in the world to contain all the stories (John 21:25). I suspect that the ones we have in our Bibles are best suited to an audience which has now spanned nearly 2,000 years. They have certainly stood the test of time. But we must not rule out the manner in which Jesus conducted his work. He was an itinerant prophet-teacher, and this approach for getting the kingdom message out there attracted the seemingly random encounter. It also probably generated great diversity. All kinds of people were swept into the ministry “net” of Jesus.

By traveling along the road, visiting towns and villages throughout Israel, Jesus met persons in many life situations and with varied needs. He seemed to want it that way. From other biblical material, we also know that such an approach allows the Holy Spirit to lead and permits the unexpected to happen. It represents a unique form of availability. Jesus was constantly putting himself at the disposal of God’s leading. On one occasion he prayed “for those you have given me, for they are yours” (John 17:9). While this likely refers to the Twelve apostles, it’s also possible that he intended the whole range of people he met along the road. Those supposed chance encounters were really God-appointments, and Jesus was never late to any of them — even
when he waited a day for Lazarus to die (see John 11). Underlying his ministry along the road was Jesus’ conviction that good soil for Gospel planting existed throughout the world: “The field is the world,” he once said (Matthew 13:38). If that is true, then the road is the connector to many such fields where seeds fall on good soil and harvests are plentiful.

Walking along the road of our lives, Jesus meets us. No place is too dark or dusty or despairing. He is not put off by our gender or race or disability. He listens to our sadness, brightens to our joys, and forgives our sins. With him we feel safe and nurtured and at home. Sometimes he chooses to find us through the shared experiences of fellow travelers. Sometimes he sits in our churches, and when he does, he looks for tables which need overturning, traditions requiring refreshing, and trouble needing reconciling. Along the road with Jesus, every day ignites our imagination to the ever-active love of God who opens the eyes of the blind, anoints shepherd boys as his kings, leads wayward sheep to pasture, and re-makes his people as children of light. Along the road he is the way, the truth, and the life.

Glory to God. Amen.
To gain a deeper understanding of *Ashes to Fire: Jesus Along the Road* carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website [http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org](http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org), or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the Information desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. This week’s Gospel reading from John 9:1-41 begins with the words “as we went along.” Jesus traveled the roads of Galilee and Judea with his disciples, and in so doing he came into contact with a variety of people. Whom does he meet in John 9, and what is the man’s need?
2. What questions do the disciples raise about the man, and how does Jesus respond to them? Was this a chance encounter or something more? Explain.
3. After Jesus heals him of his blindness, what immediate questions come from those who know him? How does the man answer them? Make a simple list, including the questions and the answers.
4. What is the significance of the exchange in 9:12? Why did Jesus leave the man alone to deal with his critics?
5. When the Pharisees (learned religious leaders) enter the story, what is their assessment of the man’s healing? Discuss the various questions they put to him, and then evaluate his answers. Who is Jesus, according to the man (9:17)? Are you surprised by his response?
6. How do you account for the Pharisees persistence in denying Jesus’ role in the man’s healing? Give some examples of this persistence, and evaluate each exchange they have with the man?
7. In what ways does the man show growing courage as he talks with the Pharisees? What decisive testimony does he offer to them in 9:25?
8. After the Pharisees throw the man out of the synagogue (9:34), he reconnects with Jesus (9:35-41). What do they discuss, and what further steps does the man take toward of saving faith?
9. What teaching opportunity does Jesus exploit when certain Pharisees question him in 9:39-41? How does the concept of “blindness” function in this last section?
10. The Old Testament reading is from 1 Samuel 16:1-13. Briefly summarizes the story-line of this passage, indentifying the key persons and the special role of Samuel. What problem is Samuel seeking to solve? Under what circumstances does he solve it?
11. Why do you suppose God allowed Samuel to examine all of Jesse’s sons, rather than just sending him directly to David? What does this tell us about how God sometimes leads us? What special instructions did God give Samuel for making his choice of a new king for Israel (16:7)?
12. Briefly list the main things we learn about David from this passage. How are these qualities signs of David’s future?
13. From Psalm 23 we learn that the Lord is our shepherd. What does that mean? Why is it appropriate that God used David to write this psalm? According to Psalm 23, what does it mean to be led by the Lord? What is our ultimate destination? What are our constant companions? (23:6).
14. In his letter to the Ephesians (5:8-14), Paul deals with themes of light and darkness. Why is this passage an appropriate companion piece to the Gospel reading this week? What role does light have in this passage? What does Paul mean when he writes, “Christ will shine on you” (5:14)?
15. What responsibilities do “children of light” have? Explain the meaning of the words “goodness, righteousness, and truth” found in 5:9. In what sense are they “fruit” (compare Galatians 5:22-23), and what makes them grow?
16. Besides having this fruit, what other qualities do “children of light” exhibit in this passage (see 5:11-13). What does it mean “to expose” “the fruitless deeds of darkness” (5:11)?