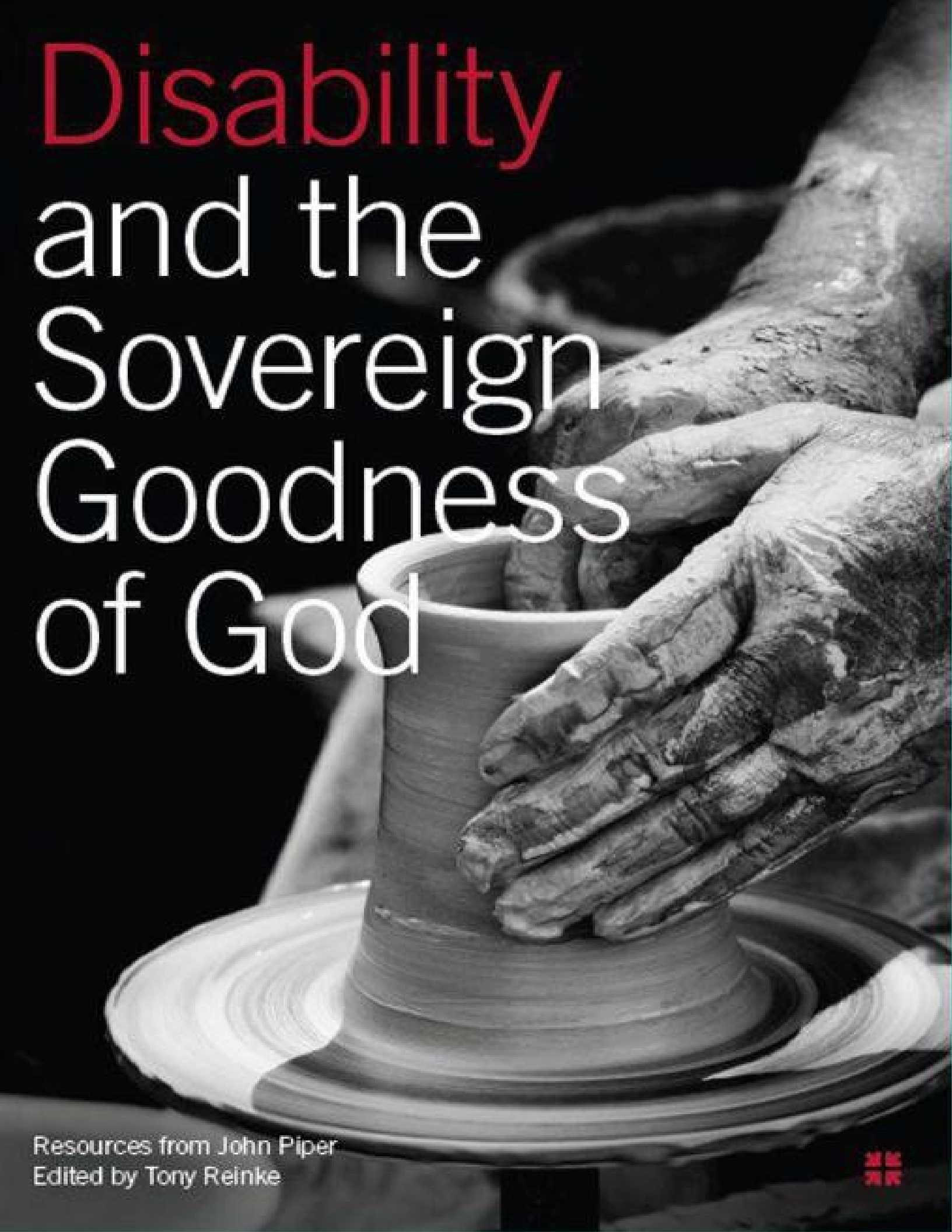
Disability and the Sovereign Goodness of God



Resources from John Piper

Edited by Tony Reinke

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Editor's Preface

Disabilities break into life in various forms: as the product of genetic misalignments in the womb, as the result of tragic and regrettable accidents, as the byproducts of infectious disease, and from the degenerative effects of old age. They affect joints, bones, nervous systems, lungs, hearts, and brains. And even in the United States—a country that leads the world in medical innovation and technology—roughly 20% of its citizens live with a disability.

No church is immune, so every church leader must be prepared. Disability raises some of the most fundamental questions about the goodness and sovereignty of God a pastor will ever face. And often these questions are raised by people experiencing significant suffering.

Does God have a good design in my disability?

To this hard question God is not silent. But for us to hear from him requires that we submit our hearts to his word to learn from him. And that is the aim of this collection of sermons and interviews from the ministry of John Piper.

This short ebook opens with the story of Jesus healing the blind man in John 9. It is a story relevant for those who have been healed. And it is equally valuable for those who will not be healed of their disability in this lifetime. John 9 is foundational for the rest of the ebook.

The two chapters that follow are unedited sermon manuscripts from the preaching ministry of John Piper. In the first, "Why Was This Child Born Blind?," Pastor John makes the important distinction between the *cause* and *purpose* of disability. Like the disciples, we are too easily absorbed with questions of what *causes* disability and less focused on the *purposes* of God in the disability, and this fundamental flaw distracts us from God's ultimate, sovereign, and good design. Ultimately all disabilities exist to point us to Christ, who willingly suffered so that one day all the suffering related to disability will be erased from the joints and cells and brains of God's children.

In the second sermon, "The Works of God and the Worship of Jesus," Pastor John explains how God is at the bottom of everything—including every disability. God has a good purpose behind the suffering, and his good purpose is intended to influence more than the one who is disabled.

So how does this biblical truth land on those who are directly affected by disability? It was during the preaching of the following two sermons in 2011 that

Piper interviewed John Knight. Knight is the father of Paul, a teenage son who was born blind and remains blind to this day (which is just one of his many other physical and cognitive struggles). Knight candidly walks through his story, the devastation he and his wife experienced, their anger towards God, the time they left their church, the patient care of that local church, and ultimately how they discovered God's good design in the life of their son. The interview is a precious glimpse into the poignancy of God's promises in the Knight family. The interview has been transcribed and edited for readability, and is published here as chapter 4.

The ebook concludes with two more sermons. The first, "Born Blind for the Glory of God," is a sermon Piper preached in 2010 on John 9. He revisits the fact that the sovereign God of the universe is sovereign over every disability, and has a good design for every one of his children. Thus, he concludes, abortion for any supposed genetic defect is simply wrong and contrary to Scripture and to God's design.

Finally, the ebook closes with a sermon from 2009 on John 5:1–18. This is the story of an invalid whose physical health was restored. He was one man, chosen from a large gathering of disabled men and women who were blind, lame, and paralyzed. In this sermon Piper notes the compassion of Jesus, but also notes that Jesus chose to heal only *one* man. We do not yet live in the age of physical healing, he argues from the text, and most of those living with disabilities in the church will live unhealed. And God has a good design in that, too.

This ebook is designed for pastors who will be called on to minister God's Word to God's people at decisive points in their lives. The question is not *if* disabilities will surface in our church, the question is how you will respond *when* they do? At that decisive moment, what will you say?

—Tony Reinke

1: John 9:1–38

[1]As he [Jesus] 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.” [6] Having said these things, he spit 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.

[8] 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?” [9] 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.”

[13] They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. [14] Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. [15] 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.” [16] 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. [17] 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.”

[18] 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.”

[24] 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.” [25] He answered, “Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” [26] They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” [27] 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?” [28] And they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. [29] We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” [30] The man answered, “Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. [31] 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. [32] Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. [33] If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” [34] They answered him, “You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?” And they cast him out.

[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.

2: Why Was This Child Born Blind? (John 9:1–23) [1]

One of the reasons I believe the Bible and love the Bible is because it deals with the hardest issues in life. It doesn't sweep painful things under the rug—or complex things or confusing things or provoking things or shocking things or controversial things. In fact, Jesus sometimes went out of his way to *create* controversy with the Pharisees so that more truth about himself and about unbelief would come out, so that we could be warned by examples of hardness and wooed by images of his glory.

One of the hardest things in life is the suffering of children, and the suffering of those who love them—especially when that early suffering turns into a lifetime of living with profound loss. Few things in my ministry have given me a deeper sense of satisfaction than seeing God raise up at Bethlehem a heart and mind and vision and a ministry for people with disabilities, especially children. I thank God for the coordinator of our Disability Ministry, Brenda Fischer. And I thank God for the parents who have put their minds and hearts together to trumpet a vision for such a ministry.

The Supremacy of God in Disability

You can go to our website (www.hopeingod.org) and read the vision statement that Bob Horning and John Knight put together—dads who know what they are talking about close up. Here is the core of what they have to say:

> Our vision is that Bethlehem would display the supremacy of God in disability and suffering. We want our lives to reflect an unshakable joy in the Lord that allows us to embrace a life of suffering in disability for His purpose and glory. We want to shout that life with a disability and with Jesus is infinitely better than a healthy body without Him. We say, with Paul, that "this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Corinthians 4:17). We want this to be true as individuals and in the church as a body.

> Is disability hard? As fathers of children with rare disabling conditions, we can attest to the struggles men in particular face when their child has a disability. Disability is expensive—financially, emotionally, and relationally. It seems neither light nor momentary. The male myth of self-determination, control, and independence is exploded in the face of needing to turn to medical professionals, social workers and educators on issues we never dreamed of facing. To this we say, thank you, God, for not allowing us to live the lie that there is anything good or worthwhile apart from you. Thank you for showing us how much we need you! The struggles our wives endure is perhaps even deeper.

The Bible: Not Silent on Disability

The issue may be autism or Down syndrome or FASD or spina bifida or blindness or any number of rare and unpronounceable conditions—each has its own peculiar sorrows, its own peculiar way of turning decades into what you never dreamed or planned they would be. Married life isn't what you thought it would be. Everything is irrevocably changed, and life will never be the same again. And you were not asked.

What would I do as a pastor if I had to face these things—these children, these parents—with a Bible that said nothing about it? What if all I could do is think up ideas on my own about suffering and disability? What if all I had was human opinions? I thank God that this is not our condition. The Bible is permeated with suffering and sorrow. This is one of the things that make it so believable. It is filled with things that God has said and done to shed light on these sufferings and sorrows.

Light Shining in Darkness

We will see that it is not incidental to the story when Jesus says, precisely in this context (verse 5), "I am the light of the world." We are not left in the dark about the meaning of darkness. God's light has come into the world, and it is shining on disabilities and on everything else. God has not left us to alone to despair of any meaning, or to create our own meaning.

So ask God to open your eyes, and let's walk with Jesus, in the light, through this text of God's word in John 9:1–4.

The Hard-Knock Life of Disability

Verse 1: “As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth.” He is a man now. But he was born blind. And it did not go easily for him. We will meet his parents later in verse 18. But they were not able to care for him any longer. So he was a beggar. We know that because of verse 8: “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?’” So he was blind and he was desperately poor. Life had been very hard.

Verse 1 says Jesus *saw him* as he passed by. And the disciples *saw that he saw him*. Verse 2 says, “And his disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’” That question is crucial. But notice, the story did not begin with the disciples’ question, or with the disciples seeing the blind man. The story begins with Jesus seeing the man: “As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth.” The disciples are engaged because Jesus is engaged.

Attentive, Merciful, Moving *Toward* Disability

And I would just plead in passing—children, young people, and adults—see people with disabilities. And I don’t mean see them like the priest and the Levite on the Jericho Road, passing by on the other side. This is our natural reflex—see and avoid. But we are not natural people. We are followers of Jesus. We have the Spirit of Jesus in our hearts. We have been seen and touched in all our brokenness by an attentive, merciful Savior.

If you want to be one of the most remarkable kinds of human beings on the planet—a Jesus kind—see people with disabilities. See them. And move toward them. God will show you what to say.

Redeeming Awkward Moments

When the disciples saw Jesus’ attention to the blind man, they asked for an explanation of his blindness. Verse 2: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” That was probably not the most compassionate thing to say at the moment. And you will blow it too someday. Yes, you will. But Jesus is merciful (just like our parents of children with disabilities have been merciful when we have said ill-informed and insensitive things), and he redeems awkward moments and callous words.

In this case, what does Jesus do? He answers their question but not in the categories that they are using. They want an explanation for this man's blindness. And he gives it to them. But they ask for the explanation in the categories of *cause*. What is it in the past that caused the blindness? But Jesus says that won't work, and he gives them an explanation in the category of *purpose*. Not what's the *cause* of the blindness, but what's the *purpose* of the blindness? Let me try to unpack this.

Not Cause, But Purpose

They say in verse 2, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" In other words, what is the *cause* of this blindness? The man's sin? Or the parents' sin? Is this blindness a punishment for the parents' sin or a punishment for his own sin—some kind of inherited sinfulness already in the womb?

Jesus says, in effect, specific sins in the past don't always correlate with specific suffering in the present. The decisive explanation for this blindness is not found by looking for its *cause* but by looking for its *purpose*. Verse 3: Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."

Suffering Not Owing to Specific Sin

Ponder a moment the words, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents." That is very significant. The point Jesus is making is not that suffering didn't come into the world because of sin. It did. That's plain from Genesis 3 and Romans 8:18–25. If there never had been sin, there never would have been suffering. All suffering is owing to sin. And part of the meaning of the physical horrors of suffering is to reveal the moral horrors of sin.

But that is not what Jesus is saying here. Nor is he not denying it. What he is saying here is: Specific suffering is often—I would say most of the time—not owing to specific sin. The disciples didn't understand this distinction, it seems—that the existence of sin in the world is the cause of suffering in the world, but specific sins in the world are usually *not* the cause of specific sufferings in the world.

Explanation in the Purposes of God

But that is what Jesus is saying here in verse 3: “It was *not* that this man sinned, or his parents.” In other words, this blindness—this specific suffering—is not owing to the specific sins of the parents or the man. Don’t look there for the explanation.

Then he tells them where to look. Look for an explanation of this blindness in the purposes of God. Verse 3: “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but *that the works of God might be displayed in him*.” The explanation of the blindness lies not in the past causes but the future purposes.

Countering an Objection

Let me address an objection at this point. There are some pastors and teachers who dislike intensely the idea that God might will that a child be born blind so that some purpose of God might be achieved. One of the ways they try to escape the teaching of this text is to say that Jesus is pointing to the *result* of the blindness, not the *purpose* of the blindness. When Jesus says in verse 3, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but *that the works of God might be displayed in him*,” he means, the result of the blindness is that God was able to use the blindness to show his work, not that he planned the blindness in order to show his work.

But there are at least three reasons why that won’t work.

1. One is that the disciples are asking for an explanation of the blindness, and Jesus’ answer is given as an explanation of the blindness. But if you say God had no purpose, no plan, no design in the blindness but simply finds the blindness later and uses it, that is not an explanation of the blindness. It doesn’t answer the disciples’ question. They want to know: Why is he blind? And Jesus really does give an answer. *This* is why he’s blind—there is purpose in it. There is a divine design. There’s a plan. God means for his work to be displayed in him.
2. Here’s another reason why that suggestion doesn’t work. God knows all things. He knows exactly what is happening in the moment of conception. When there is a defective chromosome or some genetic irregularity in the sperm that is about to fertilize an egg, God can simply say no. He commands the winds. He commands the waves. He commands the sperm

and the genetic makeup of the egg. If God foresees and permits a conception that he knows will produce blindness, he has reasons for this permission. And those reasons are his purposes. His designs. His plans. God never has met a child from whom he had no plan. There are no accidents in God's mind or hands.

3. And third, any attempt to deny God's sovereign, wise, purposeful control over conception and birth has a head-on collision with Exodus 4:11 and Psalm 139:13. "The Lord said to Moses, 'Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?'" "You formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb."

Purpose: Displaying the Works of God

The meaning of Jesus in John 9:3 is not obscure. He is saying to the disciples: Turn away from your fixation on causality as the decisive explanation of suffering. And turn away from any surrender to futility, or absurdity, or chaos, or meaninglessness. And turn to the purposes and plans of God. There is no child and no suffering outside God's purposes.

"It was not that this man sinned, or his parents." This blindness came about "*in order that that the works of God might be displayed in this man*."

This is not the whole explanation of suffering in the Bible. There are dozens of other relevant passages and important points to make. But this passage and this point are massively important. Let me draw out one or two things, and then we will pick it up the next time to see what happens and to ask: Why did he use spit, and why mud, and why the washing in the pool called "Sent," and why the reference to working while it is day, and why 41 verses of controversy? All that's coming. But for today let's not miss how Jesus talks about our suffering.

Ultimate Meaning Only in God

There is one main truth in the words of verse 3: The blindness is "that the works of God might be displayed in him."

That truth is that suffering can only have ultimate meaning in relation to God.

Jesus says that the purpose of the blindness is to put the work of God on display. This means that for our suffering to have ultimate meaning, God must be supremely valuable to us. More valuable than health and life. Many things in the

Bible make no sense until God becomes your supreme value.

For God's Glory—Both in Healing and Non-Healing

For Jesus, blindness from birth is sufficiently explained by saying: God intends to display some of his glory through this blindness. In this case, it happens to be healing—the glory of God's power to heal. But there is nothing that says it has to be healing. When Paul cried out three times for his thorn in the flesh to be healed, Jesus said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). I will put my power on display, not by healing you, but by sustaining you.

In other words, healing displays the works of God in John 9, and sustaining grace displays the works of God in 2 Corinthians 12. What is common in the two cases is the supreme value of the glory of God. The blindness is for the glory of God. The thorn in the flesh is for the glory of God. The healing is for his glory, and the non-healing is for his glory.

Suffering can only have ultimate meaning in relation to God.

From Healing to the Ministry of Dying

One last observation. Verse 4: "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work." This means two things: One is that the works of God referred to in verse 3—"that the works of God might be displayed"—these works of God will be done through the hands of Jesus. Jesus is going to heal this man's blindness. The works of God are the works of Jesus.

And second, he must do this quickly, because night is coming, and his work will be over. Jesus will turn from a ministry of healing to a ministry of dying. He will turn from the day-work of relieving suffering, and do the night-work of suffering himself. He will finally submit totally to the plan of his Father that the Son be swallowed up by the sin and suffering of the world.

Eyes to See

And if you join the disciples in asking: Why? Who sinned that this man must suffer like this? The answer would certainly be: Not him. We did. That is the

cause of his suffering. But it's not the decisive explanation. The decisive explanation is: He is suffering that the works of God might be displayed in him. The works of wrath-bearing, and curse-removing, and guilt-lifting, and righteousness-providing, and death-defeating, and life-giving, and in the end suffering-removing—totally removing.

"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4). And over every sorrow and every disability and every loss embraced in faith for the glory of God will be written in blood: "This light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:17–18).

May God give you eyes to see that the display of his works in his Son's suffering and your suffering and your child's suffering are all expressions of his love.

3: The Work's of God and the Worship of Jesus (John 9:1–38) [2]

Last time, we focused on verses 1–5. Jesus sees a man who had been blind from birth. His disciples ask about the cause of the blindness. Jesus turns the question around and says, in effect, human causes are not decisive in explaining things. Divine purposes are decisive. Verse 3: “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents [human *causes*], but that the works of God might be displayed in him [God’s *purpose*].”

The reason *causes* are not the ultimate explanation for things is that God is not ultimately a responder but ultimately a planner. In other words, when God ordains that something happen, God is not, at the bottom, responding to human causes. He is, at bottom, planning a purpose.

All Things for Good—Even Mess and Pain

The implication of this for your life is profound. No matter what mess you’re in or what pain you’re in, the causes of that mess and that pain are not decisive in explaining it. What is decisive in explaining it is God’s purpose. Yes, there are causes. Some of them your fault, perhaps, and some of them not. But those causes are not decisive in determining the meaning of your mess or your pain. What is absolutely decisive is God’s purpose. “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him” (verse 3).

And if you will confess your sins, and hold fast to Jesus as your Rock and your Redeemer and your Riches, God’s purpose for your mess and your pain will be a good purpose. It will be worth everything you must endure. We know this is true because God says so. Romans 8:28: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

God Himself: The Greatest Treasure

Of course, none of this will make sense, or be helpful, if God himself, and the glory of his incomparable works, is not your greatest treasure. When Jesus says, the purpose of this blindness is "that *the works of God* might be displayed in him," he assumes the manifestation of the works of God, has a value that outweighs years and years of blindness. Both for the man and his parents.

In order to embrace that, we have to value the manifestation of the works of God more than we value seeing. Indeed more than we value life itself. Psalm 63:3 says, "Your steadfast love is better than life." And Jesus said to the prisoners in Smyrna, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10). Being loved by God, and being with God forever, is better than having eyes and better than being alive in this world. If we don't believe that, then saying that God has wise and good purposes in all our losses, will not be much comfort. But if we do believe it, not only will God's purposes comfort us and strengthen us, but they will make us able to patiently, and gently help others through their times of darkness.

Jesus: Doing the Works of God

Now here we are at verses 6–7 and the actual healing of the man born blind: "Having said these things, [Jesus] spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud and said to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing."

Here's an observation that sets the stage for everything else in this chapter. Jesus said in verse 3 that the man was blind so that the works of God would be manifest. But then he said in verse 4, "*We* must work the works of him who sent me." And in verse 6 Jesus himself made the mud and healed him. So the stage is set for the question: Who is this Jesus? How are we to respond to this Jesus? Who says God's work is going to be shown here, and then does the work himself?

Controversy Divinely Designed

And I'll tell you ahead of time what's going to happen so you can watch it unfold. The controversy that follows is all designed by God to show how the person and work of Jesus leads some to blasphemy and some to worship. The blasphemy is in verse 24: "So for the second time they [the Pharisees] called the

man who had been blind and said to him, ‘Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner.’” In other words, God gets glory when you call Jesus a sinner. That is blasphemy. “You are glorifying God when you are demonizing Jesus” is blasphemy.

But that was not the only response to the healing of this blind man. There is also worship. This is in verse 38. It’s the climax of the story. The last thing the man does in this text before he disappears from the story is worship Jesus: “‘Lord, I believe,’ and he worshiped him.” In the other six places in this gospel where the word “worship” (Greek *proskuneo*) is used, it means really “worship,” not just “fall down.”

Toward Blasphemy and Worship

So that’s where the story is going. Jesus has himself done the works of God. And those who have eyes to see say with John 1:14, “We have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” That’s what the blind man saw. That’s what the Pharisees did not see, which is why this chapter ends with blindness just like it began, only of a worse kind.

So let’s see how things unfold toward blasphemy and worship.

Why Mud?

Why did Jesus use mud to heal the blind man? I suggest two reasons. One is explicit in the text, and the other seems implied.

First, Jesus did it because it was against the law to do it on the Sabbath—against the Pharisee’s understanding of the law—and he meant to unleash the controversy that would bring out both the blasphemy and the worship (compare 1 Corinthians 11:19). You can see this in verses 13–14: “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 mud-making is explicitly connected with the Sabbath and the Pharisees. They had developed many applications of the prohibition of work on the Sabbath, and one of them was the kneading of dough. And the word for mud or clay here is the same as the word of dough. Jesus had broken the law against kneading dough, or clay, or mud.

Why the Sabbath?

Why would he do this? To show that he was “Lord of the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:8). He defines the Sabbath. The point of Sabbath rest is healing. That’s why you rest. Healing! The point of Sabbath rest is that we are helpless and God creates, God sustains, God heals, we don’t. What day could be better for God incarnate to find a broken man and heal him—to give him and his parents rest from all the struggles of blindness? That’s what the Sabbath is for—God-exalting blessing to broken and weary humans.

And he did it on the Sabbath to trigger this controversy that goes on for 41 verses. Hearts are exposed in this controversy. And not just exposed. Hearts are shaped. Faith doesn’t just get revealed; faith gets strengthened. This blind man becomes clearer and clearer about who Jesus is. And he becomes stronger and stronger in his courage in defending Jesus against very dangerous adversaries. This is what Jesus was after: Clear sight of who he was, courageous confession of faith, and worship. And the expression of tragically blasphemous hearts.

That’s the first reason for the mud. It was on the Sabbath and would unleash a firestorm for the sake of truth and faith and worship.

God Usually Uses Means

The second reason for the mud is to show that God usually uses means in doing his wonderful works in this world. Jesus could have simply spoken and the man’s eyes would have been opened. Most of the wonders of God in the Old Testament were brought about by the use of human means. “The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord” (Proverbs 21:31). God is decisive in the victory, but he uses means. He doesn’t need the horse, but he uses the horse.

Ponder this in the bigger picture of life for a moment. What this means is that God does not despise the physical world he has made. He uses the means of food to sustain life. He uses the means of sex to beget children. And he uses a thousand remedies to bring about healing—from sleep to penicillin. From Riboflavin to radiation. From sunshine on the skin to cough syrup for the throat.

Not Despising the Physical World

And lest you think this removes the mystery of God’s wonderful work, consider boring down through layer after layer after layer of physical causes for why antibiotics work against strep. Forty or fifty layers down into the molecular,

subatomic activities of the smallest particles, or non-particles, there comes a point where there is no explanation inside this closed material system. The final explanation is always God. And if our hearts are alive and humble and worshipful, we will not stop until we see God at the bottom of everything.

It is no small thing, to believe that God uses means to accomplish his purposes. And his purposes are that the glory of his work would be displayed. And therefore, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork" (Psalms 19:1). And so does all the rest of creation, if we have eyes to see. Jesus used mud. We may use mud—or medicine. The difference is how close to the surface the miracle is. Let your life be full of wonder at the works of God—and full of worship.

The Pool Called Sent

Now Jesus sends him away to wash in the pool of Siloam. Verse 7: "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing." The name of the pool meant "sent" and John bothered to point that out. Why?

Perhaps because the reason the pool was called Sent is that the water in the pool was sent there by stream from a distant spring. In pointing this out, Jesus may have been making a comparison between the pool called "Sent" and himself as the one "sent" from the Father as the living water (John 4:10–11). Verse 4: "We must work the works of him who sent me."

If that's right, then the water signifies not just cleansing, and not just healing, but life. In John 4, Jesus gives the woman at the well "living water"—the water of life. When you meet Jesus and receive him for who he is, you live, and you see, and you begin to be healed, and will be healed completely before he is done with you at the resurrection. All our seeing and all our healing is owing to new spiritual life that comes from Jesus—the Sent One.

Five Conversations Follow

Now come five conversations, and step-by-step the blind man's sight of who Jesus is becomes clearer, and his courage to defend him becomes stronger, until we reach the climax in verse 38 with worship.

1) The Beggar and His Neighbors (Verses 8–12)

The first conversation in verses 8–12 is between the man and his neighbors. They were arguing about whether he was the blind beggar. He insisted he is the one who as blind. So they ask in verse 10 how his eyes were opened. And he answers in verse 11, “The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes.” So at this point, he simply calls him “the man.” He knows his name, Jesus, but he simply calls him “the man.”

2) The Beggar and the Pharisees (Verses 13–17)

The second conversation in verses 13–17 is between the man and the Pharisees. They too ask him (verse 15) how he could be seeing if he were blind. He tells them. They are divided by his answer. He can’t be from God; he broke the Sabbath. How can he do this sign if he is a sinner? So they ask the beggar in verse 17, “What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?”

Something has happened in this interchange. Something is happening in the man’s heart. He answers in verse 17, “He is a prophet.” Not just an ordinary man, but one sent by God.

3) The Pharisees and the Parents (Verses 18–23)

The third conversation in verses 18–23 is between the Pharisees and the man’s parents. They ask in verse 19: Is he your son? Was he born blind? How does he see? They answer (verses 20–21): He is our son, and he was born blind, but we don’t know how he was healed. And John says in verse 22 that the reason they said this was because they feared the Jews. (See also 7:13; 19:38; 20:19).

I think the point here is not to be hard on the parents, but to make the son’s courage all the more amazing. The parents are like Nicodemus who in John 3:2 came to Jesus at night to avoid being seen, but in John 19:39 was openly assisting in his burial. They are on their way. But their son is moving much faster.

4) The Beggar and the Pharisees (Verses 24–34)

So in the fourth conversation in verses 24–34, we see the full-blown courage of the beggar—a mere beggar standing up to the most religious and educated

people of the land! And we see the full-blown blasphemy of the Pharisees.

Verse 24: “Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner.” Join us in our blasphemy. Or we will excommunicate you from the synagogue. Glorify God by calling Jesus a sinner. Amazingly he responds to this threat with his most famous statement of all: “Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” The power of a personal testimony over a bad argument is very great.

The truth about Jesus was going deeper all the time. He is seeing more and more. And his courage becomes scorn. Verse 27: Why do you want to hear my story again, “Do you also want to become his disciples?”

And now they become hostile. Verses 28–29: “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 controversy exposes another deceit. No, they are not disciples of Moses. Because Jesus said in John 5:46, “If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me.” Now we start to see who is really blind in this story.

His courage for Jesus continues to grow. Verses 30–33: “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.”

This is simply astonishing what has happened in this man’s soul. They can’t handle it. So they cast him out with contempt. Verse 34: “‘You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?’ And they cast him out.” Yes, he had become their teacher. The blind man was seeing more and more clearly. And their blindness was hardening.

5) Jesus and the Beggar (Verses 35–38)

Which leads to the last conversation in verses 35–38 between Jesus and the beggar. And one thing that makes it so significant is that Jesus initiates it. The man has been threatened and cast out of his lifelong religious community. But Jesus seeks him and finds him (it’s no accident that the next chapter is about Jesus as the Shepherd who gathers his sheep). Verses 35–38:

> Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having *found* him he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered, “And who is he, sir, that I

> may believe in him?" Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you." He said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him."

And that's the last thing we see or hear of him. That is the point of the story. Jesus does the works of God. Jesus is the glory of God. Jesus is to be worshipped. The man was blind. And then he called Jesus "the man." And then he called him a prophet. And then he defended him at huge risk. And then fell down and worshipped. This is why Jesus came into the world. He is seeking worshipers.

4 Questions

So I close with four questions for you, and three statements.

- Do you worship Jesus?
- Do you find your worship of Jesus deepening or weakening in the midst of threat and danger?
- Does your worship falter or flourish when your family is fearful or unbelieving?
- Do you confess him openly and defend him with your simple testimony, *I was blind, but now I see?*

3 Statements

To encourage you in each of those four ways, here are three statements:

- God has a wise, good, and Christ-exalting purpose for everything that happens to you.
- Jesus is the only path to the full, final, joyful experience of that purpose.
- Jesus sought out this rejected blind man—this nobody, this beggar—and he is seeking you out right now. To make you a courageous worshiper of Jesus.

4: One Father's Journey to Understand God's Good Design for His Disabled Son: John Piper Interviews John Knight

PART 1 (video)

John Piper: John Knight is the Director of Development at Desiring God, and he's here with me. Sixteen years ago, John and Dianne, his wife, were very happily and joyfully anticipating the birth of their first child. He would be named Paul. I think Paul Knight is a powerful name. And when he was born, it was manifest to the medical folks and to John and Dianne that he was blind, because he had no eyes. This was a blow like not all parents receive.

And last Sunday (May 22, 2011), I preached from John 9:1–3, where Jesus sees a man born blind, and the disciples jump on the issue of *cause* and ask: "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" And Jesus responds: "It was neither this man, nor his parents, that he was born blind," and that starts to feel like relief, but then he says, "but that the *works of God* might be manifest in him," which I argued in the sermon means God ordained this blindness and this man for the works of God to be plain in him.

And, John, I knew you were there and listening, and I knew you would have a deep, painful, loving appreciation of that truth, because you named your blog after this passage. Give me the web address of your blog.

John Knight: The Works of God dot com (theworksofgod.com)—taken from John 9:3.

Piper: So you presently are celebrating God's sovereignty in the life of your son and yourself, but it was not always so. So we want to take a few minutes to talk about what it was like at the beginning, what people did to help, and what happened.

When I was done with this sermon, I prayed for an hour or so with people, most of whom either themselves or knew somebody who are not where you are right now. The bitterness is still there, the confusion, the anger is still here, and

they were asking me, “What can I do, or where do I go?” So you and I would like to help those folks. We don’t want to get on their case and make life harder for them.

Knight: That’s right.

Piper: We want to do something. So my first question, John, is talk to us about those early days, because there are probably hundreds of parents who are going to watch this and say, “We’re where John was 16 years ago, not where he is today.”

What was it like?

Knight: It was thrilling for about fifteen seconds. My boy came, it was just before noon the 4th of July 1995, a very much anticipated birth. And the nurse was cleaning him up and said, “I think we have a problem here.” The quality of her voice confirmed that this was a big problem; this was not a little problem. And because he was born without eyes, they could tell us right away that he had no sight at all, and they were then concerned about other issues. So a whole series of specialists came trooping through, some of whom were just curious to see a boy without eyes. I didn’t realize that at the time. I realize it today. They were simply curious. So we didn’t have the typical sort of celebration of new birth and the time with our boy. He was taken here and there.

And I was devastated. And Dianne was devastated. And very early on important things happened. I called my dad, and the first thing I said, “Paul is here, Paul Harland—” my dad is Harland Paul. I could hear much rejoicing in the background. “And he’s blind.” And my dad said, “It’s going to be okay.” And I knew what that meant. My dad lost his dad when he was 17. My dad is a godly man who taught me to love the Word. I knew he wasn’t going to give up on me. I wasn’t sure about me with this boy at that moment, frankly, but I knew my dad wasn’t going to give up on me.

We were the good family at church. Dianne and I volunteered for things, came to church every Sunday, went to Sunday school. We were the nice young couple—and just as proud and self-righteous as could be sitting in your pews. I came to Bethlehem because it was a smart church. I thought I was a Christian. But it was about two months later, when Paul was hooked up to more tubes and sensors, surrounded by medical professionals over at Children’s in Minneapolis, I came to the conclusion: “God, you are strong, that’s true, and you are wicked. You are mean. You’re capricious. Do it to me. Do it to me—not to this boy. What did he ever do to you?” That was September 29, 1995.

And we separated ourselves from church. We quit our small group and quit the Sunday school, we quit coming to church. And the church wasn't as big as it is today, but it was plenty big.

Piper: Was Dianne having similar feelings?

Knight: Very much so. We walked out together. And here are a couple of things that happened that were really important.

There was one couple—not in our small group, not really well connected to them at all—and for some reason, God placed us on their hearts, and they said, "We will not let you go." And they did it in a really curious way. Lots of people were praying for us, lots of people were sending us notes. I still have the note that you sent the day after he was born. It's like gold to me today. It wasn't for a season, but today it is. They would invite us over for dinner. And Gerrilyn would just drive by and drop off bread that she had made, and say, "I was thinking about you," and leave. Not a big deal. There wasn't heavy prayer or, "I'm going to lead you into the Word." It was just, "I notice you. I see you. I know you're hurting. I love you. I know you like bread."

And I remember the day clearly—Dianne doesn't remember it all. Gerrilyn came, one of her drive-bys—that's what we started calling them. "Wonder when the next drive-by is going to be?" And this one was full of soap and shampoo. Nice soap. And I'm thinking, what in the world? But on reflection years later, she was recognizing my wife as a woman who might like to have smelly soap. These affections were deep.

And I—to my shame, I would sit at their table having dinner with them and their four children (at the time ages 9–16)—so there's a 9-year-old boy sitting at that table, and here are the words I'm saying: "Believe what you want, Karl. I don't care. I don't care. I have evidence that God is cruel." And I would point to my son.

But he was a mature man. He didn't even engage. He said, "I love you, John. I have regard for you. I love your boy." And then his children would do the confounding thing of just treating my son like a little boy. Paul looks different. He doesn't have eyes. That's evident. The autism at that time we didn't know about.

Piper: Don't pass that too quick. Describe the present situation and then go back.

Knight: Yes, Paul is a complicated young man. He lives with autism and he is

significantly cognitively impaired—which is hard to measure, because the blindness and the autism confound each other when they try to measure it. He lives with growth hormone deficiency, so he's very small. He's 15, almost 16, and he's about 50 pounds. For the past year and a half, we have been dealing with an undiagnosed seizure-like disorder. They don't want to call it a seizure. It's hard on him. It's hard on all of us to watch him. He doesn't eat well. He doesn't sleep well. He is very complicated.

Piper: So it's not like blind and everything else is okay. It is multiple issues.

Knight: Yes.

Piper: So they were treating him normal.

Knight: Yes, they were treating him like a little boy. They'd throw him up in the air and make him laugh and do funny bird sounds and—and that was confounding, because most people, most adults couldn't do that. And so I would have this extraordinary expression of love and affection at the dinner table here, and I would turn to my left—and there would be at least one of these children playing with my boy *like he was a real boy*. I wasn't even sure he was a real boy at times.

I had lived my entire life as the good boy. I didn't give my parents too much trouble. I went to Bethel College. I married a fine woman. We didn't accrue a lot of debt. I was working in non-profits, going to a good church. But I was lost, I was absolutely lost *until* God let me see how lost I was.

He showed me how lost I was in a hospital in Indianapolis. Paul was receiving surgery on his eye sockets from one of two doctors in the United States qualified for, and experienced in, what Paul needed. The clinic was in a suburb of Indianapolis but the surgery was scheduled in a hospital. Over the course of the morning of his surgery we received less-than-the-best medical care for Paul, and during one walk down a hallway I saw Paul begin to wake up *before* he was in the surgical room! I was angry. I concluded that the anesthesiologist needed to die, and that I would kill him. In that moment, God let me see how depraved I was. It is really hard to appeal to one's natural goodness when preparing to kill another human being. I needed a Savior. In that hospital corridor in Indianapolis God showed me how depraved I was, I think for the very first time. I count that walk down that hallway as foundational to my faith. At the end of that hallway I knew I needed Jesus in a way I had never known before.

And so we came back to the church with our tail between our legs, because we

didn’t leave very nicely, we poked people in the eye when we were leaving, but we came back. Karl and Gerrilyn were right there with us, making sure Paul would be taken care of in the nursery with his special stuff going on. They persisted. That was a big deal that they persisted with us.

There was another Paul. He’s a wonderful man. He wasn’t married at the time. He was afraid of children—and I knew that. We were friends. And he came to me, and he said, “I’ll watch your boy in the nursery.” I said, “Oh, you don’t need to do that. I know how it is.” And he said, “No, it’s more important for me that you go to church.” We never actually, I think, needed him, maybe once to do it, but I remember just the offer, it was raw courage. He was saying, “I will enter into your pain, and I will give you the opportunity to go to church, even though I am scared to death of little children.”

What do you do with that? God was clearly working. I couldn’t deny that God was working. But I still didn’t like John 9. I didn’t like that at all. And it was hard for me to have people come and raise that. Here I have a little boy born blind, and here’s John 9, a man born blind. Well, let’s make the connection. Let’s go talk to John Knight about John 9. Neither this man, nor his parents sinned. People wanted us to live free of our own worries about how our actions could have caused Paul’s blindness. But I knew how sinful I really was, and so their assertions didn’t really provide any comfort. It seemed perfectly reasonable that I was being punished by God through Paul’s disabilities. And because Paul doesn’t have eyes, and because there was no opportunity for his ‘healing,’ I grew bitter towards the man in John 9. He eventually was given the ability to see. But that would never happen for my son.

Well, you may remember the email I sent to you on that very subject, asking why couldn’t people just leave us alone? Why couldn’t Jesus have said, “You’re blind and you’re fine”? And you helpfully took me to Paul, and Paul’s thorn in the flesh, and the Holy Spirit used all of those people. I am convinced to this day it was the Holy Spirit coming to those individuals saying, “Go talk to John Knight about John 9,” all to make me that angry to come to you and say, “I want an explanation, Pastor John.” And rather than disciplining me—I don’t think my language was too bad, it could have been but I can’t remember now—but rather than disciplining me, you took me to Paul, another Paul, and his thorn in the flesh, and the Holy Spirit just said, “See. See.” And I did. I did. And then I went back to John 9. I read it. I see it! I see it! “So that the works of God might be displayed in him.” He did it for Paul, he did it for this man, and he did it for my Paul. It was God. I had nothing to do with that. It was God who did that.

God has wiped my memory of who I did this to, but there was more than one person who came and brought John 9 to me, and I attacked them with my

tongue, and I took out every weapon I had, and I left them bleeding. Those are shameful memories for me. But they caused an email to you.

Piper: When was that "I see" moment? How old was Paul?

Knight: He would have been over a year old at that point. He was almost two, actually. For us it was a relatively short season.

Piper: Yes, I mention in the sermon people I had met who said it took them eight years to be okay with their totally disabled son. You have devoted a lot of energy and time to thinking about these things. We want to keep this short so people can enjoy it and—or *not*, depending on how it's hitting them. So we'll save some of that for later. But just describe your present attitude towards your son. Your wife has had cancer. John 9 is still in the Bible. Bethlehem still exists. You're here at DG. Where are you now?

Knight: Well, it's hard to be brief on that because God has done so much. From 1995 until 2003, when our youngest son was born prematurely, I had an entirely different heart when my son was born and we were in the ICU. And I knew God was for me. I *knew* it. I had no doubts that God had given me a premature son for a good purpose. And then when my wife was diagnosed with Stage IV cancer in October 11, 2004, both of us knew God was for us. No doubts. Zero doubts. No explanation for that except He gave me a new heart over those intervening years.

And part of that was the persistent teaching I received. I love Bethlehem, all of Bethlehem. I love when you're there; I love when you're *not* there. I have seen the value of daily Bible reading and drinking deeply of it. Actually, it was Noel some years ago who was writing about just have a theme, think about a theme and look for where God is in that theme. So I chose disability, and I haven't let go of disability since then. And hundreds of references to disability and disease, suffering, even more when you include just straight-up suffering. And I have read hundreds of journal articles. Most of whom don't understand God like this, most of whom have a man-centric view, like we can explain this away, or God needs us to help Him explain this. Foolishness. It's evil. I've seen seminary courses based on false presumptions.

I write because I want people to love God this much. I want people to see that Exodus 4:11—"Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" Yes, it is God. I want people to remember and train up the next generation. The works of God is also found in Psalm 78:7. The context there is, "Fathers train up so that we remember the works of God."

I need to fight discouragement. My wife has lost some of her vitality because cancer has taken some of it away from her. There is no evidence of disease today, so we're very happily letting mom run the household.

Piper: And there are other children.

Knight: Three boys and one girl total, yes. And so we're a busy, active household.

Piper: I think it's probably obvious to listeners that the lessons are plain. But let's name one or two of them. A lesson for those who are clobbered by some kind of suffering in their lives for which they are baffled or even angry, and then a lesson for those who are walking through that.

Knight: Well, for those who are watching it and want to do something, trust Jesus. Just simply trust Jesus. Several years after God gripped me, Gerrilyn just said, "We didn't know what would happen with you. We didn't have a clue. There was no evidences of faith or our having any impact at all in your life. All the prayers that we had—there was no evidence." You have to trust Jesus in those moments.

And I've had times when people have said the wrong thing, they've used the wrong words, and God, in His glory, has interpreted those words differently in my head.

Piper: You mean to make them helpful.

Knight: Helpful, yes.

Piper: So when you say "trust Jesus," you mean go ahead and move into the situation not knowing how it will go.

Knight: That's right. I *hurt* people with my words. You may walk away thinking, I didn't do that very well; in fact, I made it worse. Well, God was doing something in me nobody could see, and it was manifest many months later. So we have to trust Jesus. Even when it goes badly, we have to trust Jesus that he knows what he's doing. And the Spirit will help.

And for those of us in the circumstance, well, live authentically. If you're hurting, let people know you're hurting. And trust Jesus. We don't need to be afraid of our emotions. God gave them to us. I live a pretty happy life today. I'm glad for that. It was not always so, and it was because people kept saying, "The

hurt is not going to change how we feel about you. The pain, the words that you're using, is not going to change." And now I can trust Jesus in that when I have painful moments, and I have good men in my life, and they help me.

Piper: Thank you, John, for doing this with us. Let me pray for those folks that are watching. *Lord, just briefly but with all our heart we say thank you to Jesus for the grace, the works of God manifest in John Knight and Dianne Knight and in Paul Knight. You are at work, and grace is being displayed, and your glory is being manifested, and we tremblingly accept what you've given. And pray for those who are watching that the "see"—that command that John heard to "see"—would be sweetly granted, see your goodness, your wisdom, your holiness, your grace in the sorrows of life. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

PART 2 (video)

Piper: This is our second interview with John Knight, the Director of Development here at Desiring God. I don't assume that all of you have seen the first one, so we'll do a little bit of review. Here's what prompted these short interviews.

A couple of weeks ago, I preached from John 9 on Jesus' encounter with a man born blind, and the disciples raised the question: "Who sinned, that this man was born blind?" And Jesus said it wasn't that this man sinned, or his parents, that he was born blind; it was that the *works of God* might be manifest. And I knew there were people in the audience, like John, whose son, 15 years ago, was born blind. It was a catastrophic moment and disability. And so I knew John was out there. Lots of other parents are out there. We have a significant disability ministry at the church that gives me deep pleasure of the compassion that's shown, and we want it to grow.

I know that there are parents out there who don't have that kind of support, and we want to help, we want to be an encouragement, and I just thought this conversation would be helpful after a sermon where I made the case that, yes, this child was designed by God for blindness in order that the works of God would be manifest in him. And in his case, of course, it was he was going to be healed and Jesus would be seen as a great healer. But that is not always the case. Can you use a text like this to encourage yourself when, in fact, the works of God are not the works of healing?

So I thought it would be good to talk to John about those kinds of things, and we got a little bit of a background last time. Maybe rehearse your history and

give viewers a two- or three-minute version of your life from that moment through the discovery of greater disabilities, your wife's situation.

Knight: Well, we were thrilled to have our first child. We had a little difficulty having a child, so this was a great thrill for the entire family. And so the discovery on the day of his birth of his blindness, it was horrible, and it did not seem to get any better over those intervening weeks. In fact, I explained last time we left the church because I couldn't reconcile how a good God could do something like this to an innocent little boy.

We would be loved profoundly by a particular couple that did not know what the outcome would be. They persisted in loving us. My parents, my in-laws, they all persisted in loving us. And God did a miraculous thing in letting me see Him as glorious and beautiful and powerful all at the same time. We would discover later that Paul also lives with autism, significant cognitive disabilities.

Piper: Just give us manifestations of what that means practically. Those are names, but what is it like? Can he talk to you?

Knight: He has very little language. It's all function language. If he's thirsty, he can tell us in a way that we understand that he needs a drink. If he needs to use the toilet, that kind of thing. But there's no affectional language. He's never going to say, "I love you, dad, or, "I'd really like to do this with you, dad." He doesn't have a framework for that. And he's very small. He doesn't eat well. He doesn't sleep well. He also has growth hormone deficiency, so he's always going to be small.

He's a complicated boy, and about a year and a half ago developed a seizure-like disorder that is as yet undiagnosed. So the very usually happy, bubbly, singy little boy that we normally have goes away after he has these episodes, and he has them almost every day. So in past months he's been more lethargic than active, losing some skills that he's had. And so it has not stopped. This journey that we have with him has not stopped.

My wife six years ago was diagnosed with Stage IV metastatic breast cancer and went through an incredible year of massive treatment—chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation. And the difference between 1994–1995 and 2004–2005 are very clearly evident in our house, because the two of us cannot remember doubting God's goodness in 2004. And 1995–1996 were all doubting God's goodness.

Piper: I said a minute ago that if you knew your boy was going to be healed at,

say, age 20 or 30, you just might say 30 years of blindness would be worth seeing God do that. You're probably not looking forward to that happening in five years. So how does John 9:3 work for you? How does the contextual reality or the wider biblical context sustain you, give you hope? You seem like a remarkably hope-filled person.

Knight: Well, it comes in the context of the entire Word of God, so that we can look at John 9:3 and see some of the characteristics of God that are hope giving. God looked through time and space and creation before anything was made and said about that man born blind, "He will be born blind so the works of God might be displayed in him." Foreknowledge is a big deal for me. Knowing that God knows these things is a big deal for me.

Piper: And that doesn't make him cruel for you.

Knight: Not at all. He also had foreknowledge of the reality of the cross and the price that would be paid by his own son. So you put those realities together of how sin-filled and cruel and depraved I am, and here is Jesus, who lived a perfect life and took my sin on his body, with perfect foreknowledge of that too. And then looking at the man born blind. This was an evidence of God knowing something to bring glory to Himself, which would make Jesus more beautiful to us today. And John would be called to write about it, then, and so give us the book of John to write about this Jesus that we would believe.

In Scripture we are given a remarkable accounting of Paul and his thorn in the flesh. We are given the remarkable accounting of Mephibosheth and the kindness that David extended to him (2 Samuel 19:24–30). He was lame in both of his feet, and David sought him out because he had made this covenant with Mephibosheth's father: "I will do this." And he did it as a foreshadowing of Christ in the Church. Mephibosheth is lied about. David has to make in his human assumption: "I don't know who's right here. I'll give half to the guy who's lying about you and half to you." And Mephibosheth says, "Let him have it all. I'm with my king." I look at that and say, that's what I want to be like. I want to be with my king, my king who has done everything for me. I don't need anything else. So we pile on all of these references and foreshadowing and say, okay, John 9:3 *is* good news.

Piper: So in your case, at least I would say, that there is now significant evidence that the works of God have been manifest in your son's life. Through the joy he has brought into your family, through the faith that has been awakened

in you, through the ministry he has in our church in various and indirect and direct ways. What would you say to parents who can't point to any of those yet? They lost a son. He's dead. Or he's in such a situation and their faith is in such a situation where they're looking around for some works of God to be manifest here, and they all look like *mean* works of God. How can you help them to move forward or not throw it away?

Knight: Well, I think you and I have very little actually to do with that. But when God calls some, like he called that family to stand in the gap for us, there was such affection flowing towards us when we were not reciprocating affection at all. We were reciprocating with bitterness and angry words and things like that. So I think it might be more of a call to those who are watching this happen, saying, "We're watching them wander, we're watching them hurt, we're watching them doubt. We're going to move into that. We're going to come close to that. We don't know what we're doing. We don't know how to do it. We don't know anything about disability or that kind of pain or anything else, but we're going to trust that God will help us in that moment."

I have met families who just seem to go on raw courage for a very, very long time. They don't have any evidence at all and are living with hurt and bitterness but are trying to parent well, trying to love their spouse well—marriages hurt in these situations significantly—but don't have any sort of foundation on the Word or on God. I do call out and say, "Come, let us reason together. Come, let us sit together. You and I have experienced something similar. Let's talk about that. Let's talk about what this path has looked like." In the depths of it, nobody thought there was any hope for us.

Piper: I wrote a blog yesterday about reading Christian biography, just because a text in Hebrews had hit me about not only looking at your leaders but also to walk as they walk and imitate them (Hebrews 13:7). This is why I want people to meet you. Here is something God did in a real flesh-and-blood human being who's not bitter and angry at God, who has a blind son and a wife with cancer. Seeing that just might be used of God.

Let's just do one more thing before we sign off today. You mentioned to me, I think it was off camera, going to a conference and some theologians or pastors or somebody were talking about Old Testament texts, like Leviticus 21. Recount that little story for me, and then I'm going to go there, and we'll close with your response to that text.

Knight: It was under the banner of "let us make sure that our churches and our

synagogues and the like are welcoming to people with disabilities," and it was very much oriented to program and accessibilities of ramps, elevators, attitudes, and things like that. In the afternoon session there was a panel discussion, and someone asked, "What do we do with the hard texts in the Bible?" And a Jewish rabbi very quickly grabbed that and said, "Oh, you mean like in Leviticus? Well, we just ignore those passages. We know better now." And I was thunderstruck by that. I didn't have a response, because I was struggling with Leviticus, but I knew that answer couldn't be right. And so that started me on the path of discovery.

Piper: Let me read it, and then you just tell me how you think about it. This is Leviticus 21:16–24.

> And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to Aaron, saying, None of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or a man who has an injured foot or an injured hand, or a hunchback or a dwarf or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. No man of the offspring of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the Lord's food offerings; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God. He may eat the bread of his God, both of the most holy and of the holy things, but he shall not go through the veil or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries, for I am the Lord who sanctifies them." So Moses spoke to Aaron and to his sons and to all the people of Israel.

So I can imagine somebody coming to this text and saying, well, God's attitude towards my son, or millions of other people, is that they are defective and, therefore, to be kept at a distance from him, which does not sound like good news. So now you read this and you think what?

Knight: Well, I read that, and there are 13 conditions. Okay, this is a hard word, and then it gets harder, and then it gets harder still, when he talks about defiling. How can there be anything good in here? Thankfully, you lead us in a way that says, "Don't go past. When it's hard, go after it. Ask the Holy Spirit to help." And so I did.

I read commentaries. Most commentaries aren't really very helpful on this passage. Matthew Henry's commentary written 400 years ago is actually

probably the most helpful on this. And consider it in light of who God is. God numbers every one of our days (Psalm 139:16). He already knows our days. They've already been accounted for. So that foreknowledge, "I know what I'm doing. I know what I'm doing. Hang onto that. I know what I'm doing."

And Exodus 4, where He speaks very specifically to Moses, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" (Exodus 4:11). So we already know God has done it. So God is not surprised by these 13 conditions. God has done it, ordained it. So rest on that.

Okay, so what's in Leviticus then? God's perfect foreknowledge, perfect power, and perfect holiness—there's that little phrase in there, "But he may eat" (Leviticus 21:22). It's embedded right in there as a little clause. There it is. There's your birthright. If I give you 80 years, there's a season that you might have to live with this, but your birthright is secure. Nobody can take your birthright away from you. You are mine.

And it was five or six years after hearing that rabbi speak, I was sitting in the Roseville library just meditating over this and tears are rolling down my face at that thought. The birthright is secure. Nobody can take that away. An uncle can't say, "Oh, you can't eat because of your disability or your short arm or anything else." No, I can eat. It's a promise. It's embedded in the very words that some want to take out. The protection is right there.

Okay, this is thrilling and helpful. Now most of the commentaries are useful in looking at Leviticus 21 and saying this is a foreshadow of a perfect, sinless Jesus. That is helpful. Jesus isn't going to have any moral blemish at all. These guys, you can't tell, so the outward evidences we'll talk about, with the importance being the inward quality of are you trusting in me over everything, including your standing, including how people think about you? That's thrilling. And in Leviticus 22 the animal has to be perfect—no blemish, perfect sacrifice. So the great high priest can have no moral blemish, and the perfect sacrifice can have no blemish. It's amazing and hope-filled.

And disability is hard in every conceivable juncture of life. I don't get to *not* live with it or not live with disease in my wife. I have to live with it. But knowing that there are these promises embedded in the very hardest of texts, oh, man, I want to live anticipating when I come to the text that the Spirit will help me see what is really there, rather than what my perception might want to rise up and say, "Oh, God, you're mean, you're cruel." Wait. Wait. See that in there.

And then to watch in Mark 2:1–12 where the man is lowered down through the roof, so he has people who care about him bringing him to Jesus, and Jesus notices their faith—*their faith*, and it says that in all three parallel accounts. It's multiple, not just *his* faith. And then he doesn't even heal him for his sake. Jesus

says to them, “So that you may know I have authority over sin.” And he turns from the hard word to, “Rise, pick up your bed, and go home.” There’s always more going on here, always more, and I want to know it.

Piper: Amen. Let’s pray. *Father, there is always more. You’re always doing a thousand things in us, in our children, in this pain-filled world. You’re always doing more than we can see. Help us and those who are watching to trust your Word, even when they cannot see how a text works, may they have patience. May they say, God have something here for me, something hopeful, something pointing to Jesus, like a pure priest and a pure animal that will one day be broken someday in Christ, so that those who have been broken can be finally eternally made whole. So, God, have mercy upon us and those who watch to teach us and give us strength of faith. We pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.*

PART 3 (video)

Piper: John Knight is the Director of Development here at Desiring God. This is interview number three about disabilities and God’s sovereignty and goodness. And the reason we started this is because I’ll be wrapping up a little series on John 9 this coming Sunday, where Jesus meets a blind man, he’s been blind from birth, and his disciples say that somebody must have sinned that he was born blind, and Jesus redirects their attention from the *cause* to the *purpose* and says, “No, it wasn’t that this man sinned or his parents, but that”—and we understand the grammatical issues here, and we believe contextually, grammatically, theologically this means, no, not *cause* but *purpose*. This is *in order that* the works of God would be manifest. In his case, that meant he got healed. He suffered a long time because of that decision on God’s part to set it up that way, but he got healed. But that’s not the only kind of works of God, and we’ve been talking about that.

So, John, what I thought we would go in two directions. You said to me in an email that you love the Bible, you want Bible to be prominent here, and the sovereignty of God is so crucial, and so let me just lob you a ball to say, okay, texts, doctrine of sovereignty. What has helped you, what Biblical texts and what doctrines? And we’re speaking this for the sake of parents and for churches, and we’ll close off with pastors in a few minutes. But go wherever you want to go. What helped?

Knight: Well, of course it begins with the work of the Holy Spirit who came and

let me see things that were impossible for me to see. You know my hostility to John 9 those years ago. I did not want to believe that a good God would visit that kind of suffering on a boy and by extension on a family. And the Holy Spirit came and said, “I want you to understand something about Jesus. Jesus suffered intentionally, cruelly, died and rose again victorious to cover every sin. Every sin. And if you claim *this* Jesus, *this* suffering, sovereign Lord, you’ll understand some things.”

And so the Holy Spirit opened my eyes to the reality that Jesus came with perfect foreknowledge about what he was going to experience, asked the Father for another plan, but did it, and he did it to bring glory to God and to serve as the righteous king who could look at a dad like me and say, “I know what suffering is. I know what it looks like, I know what it feels like, so trust me. Trust me on this.”

The Bible started to make sense. Romans 12:3, “The faith you have been given. You didn’t earn it. There’s nothing that you could have done to earn it. It was a free gift to you. It was not free to me. I give it to you freely.”

In John 9:1, Jesus *saw* the man. He saw the man who was born blind. He didn’t ignore him. He didn’t walk past him. He saw him. And I felt the depths of that. Jesus sees me, he sees my son, he sees my wife with her cancer. He sees us and he understands. And he sees in such a way that other people see too. They may not see with clarity, but they see as well.

Psalm 139:16, usually in the context of the affirmation of life: “Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them.” So frequently I get up in the morning, and I think—we don’t have an answer for Paul’s seizure-like disorder. And I get sad very easily. And then this text comes to mind. God knows. God knows every day of this boy’s life. He knows my day as well. He will help me. He will help Paul. And that reaching up to Jesus at the very beginnings of the day, saying, “I need you. I need you now to help me to get out of this bed and do this thing.”

Piper: So your experience of the Word in that regard, that these days are written, this painful day, this seizure day is written, was planned by God, strengthens you, helps you, carries you. Unpack that a little bit, because a lot of people hear the sovereignty of God there and they’re pushed away by it. You’ve been drawn into it. How does a purposeful God—when the purposes are so hard, painful, denying what other kids have—how does that work positively for you?

Knight: Oh, it is the future hope. It is Paul is talking about light, momentary

affliction when he did not experience light or momentary affliction (2 Corinthians 4:17). His was a significant burden. But in comparison to what he knew God was preparing for him and the freedom that he had in Jesus Christ, he was not a slave to his sin any longer, he was kept by the King of all creation, and someday I'll be able to see Jesus clearly—no more darkness between us. It is that future hope. The Bible is more real than my day today.

Piper: Yes, that passage, 2 Corinthians 4:16-17 says this light, momentary affliction *is working for us*. You may want to talk about that, about whether he can give evidences of faith. My own theology says if a little baby dies or a child has no physical ability to process biblical truth, God has mercy on that child, and that's working, then, for him, an eternal weight of glory.

Knight: Oh, amen. I was a very proud, self-righteous, self-indulgent man who knew how to use people and use systems. I was the good boy growing up, therefore I got a lot of what I wanted, which was peace and freedom and things like that in my parents' household. And then being married and working, people liked working with me. And I was just as proud as could be. I didn't need any Jesus. I didn't need any God. My sins were *little* sins, and I could easily self-justify myself in those little sins. And God, in His sovereign ability, said, "Okay, I'm going to give you some things." And my son is entirely a gift today. In those early days, I saw his disability as entirely curse. And I don't see any of it as curse today.

His seizures are hard, and we are advocating with doctors and we are advocating with others, "Help us understand this, help us to get rid of this kind of pain that is being inflicted on his body." We are not passive about that in the least. We are not passive about Dianne's cancer. We attacked the cancer; we attacked it with medicine and we attacked it with prayer. We believe God gives good gifts of medicine and nutrition and all kinds of things that help us in our bodies.

But what I really needed was help with my soul, and God used this particular means to rise up, "You're an angry man, John. You're a proud man, John. You're not a good man, John." And He revealed it to me through the means of my son.

Piper: So there is a way to have your whole worldview structure altered so that what almost everybody in the world sees as, not gift, but pain and sorrow and something that would cause anger and rebellion and depression, to actually see it as a gift in every way. I testify as a pastor that, because of the reverberations of his effects on you and others, Paul is a gift to our church. But you have to see the

world a certain way, don't you?

Knight: Yes. Well, I see the world contrary to how most of the world sees my son. He doesn't have gifts. We have to take care of him. He's never going to be productive. He's not going to be able to hold a job, you know, those kinds of things. They're around us all the time to encourage us, to encourage us that there's no worth to this little human life. And it is the Word that says what God has created has worth and inherent dignity.

Piper: You have watched parents who don't yet share this view of God, seeing pain this way so that it feels like God is good in this and God is purposeful. What are other possible explanations for parents? If you don't give your answer that God is wise, God is good, God is loving and God is sovereign and God has design and purpose, if we could discover it, we could grow with Him in these purposes—what do they believe? How do they stay Christian? What have you found in dealing with parents?

Knight: I have met men and women of such extraordinary raw courage. They don't believe in the sovereignty of God. They don't believe that there's necessarily anything good in this. They see frequently Jesus as beautiful, that there is forgiveness of sins, things like that. I met one dad, his child, with fairly significant disabilities, was in her 20s, and the question came up—it was a small group of dads with a pastor, a very good pastor, leading us—and he said, "What would you say to Jesus the first time you see him?" And I was just so overwhelmed I started to weep. I thought, I'll be with Jesus. It will all be done. I'll be with Jesus."

But this dad, who every external evidence was loved his wife, loved his children, was taking care of them, the first words out of his mouth was: "Why did do you this to me? Why did you do this to my daughter?" And I didn't look on him with anything but affection. "Brother, come across the bridge with me. You don't have to carry that anymore.

And I've met lots of people that are in between. They've gotten this spark of God is for me, but it's hard. It's hard to—

Piper: —to come across the bridge.

Knight: Yes.

Piper: The bridge of?

Knight: Of the disbelief, that embracing all that the world has said, that there's no value in this, there's nothing good about this, this is only pain, only suffering, and has no purpose. No, come with me. Come back to Jesus. Always there is purpose with Jesus. He's doing things.

Piper: You told me that you were recently talking with a friend who attended a conference of younger pastors, the cool variety, who were not as a group excited about ministering to the disabled. They're really into growth and urban impact and so on. So turn this to those pastors helpfully. How can we encourage pastors to move forward?

Knight: Yes, it was a younger dad who was in ministry. He was actually at a conference recently. Nobody is ever going to say in any church, "We're against folks with disabilities." You will not hear that in a Bible-believing church.

But in terms of emphasis, in terms of seeking out, publicly proclaiming, rarely will you ever hear anything like: let us pay attention to this issue, let us join with Jesus in seeing the man, seeing the woman, seeing the older saint who no longer can hear as well, or see as well, or walk as well, or the baby that was born with Down syndrome, or like my boy who was born blind, or the young person that has the car accident and traumatic brain injury, let's start seeing them too, not just the ones who are strong and smart. Go where the weak ones are. Go where the ones that people are ignoring are. And you're not going to have the same kind of interactions with those folks. It's going to be different.

Piper: Yes. And I would encourage pastors, mostly because of your influence, to say to them, you don't have to abandon the dream of extensive impact on the culture or the community to devote a sermon or some effort to lifting the awareness of the congregation. I mean, one sermon goes a long way to saying: "He cares." What we want to do is unleash the laypeople.

So let's close this to pastors. Do they need a program? I mean, you said something to me in an email about the happiest couple you met was in a 60-person church. So encourage the guys who have a brand new little church or a 2,000-person church, and both of them are feeling like, oh, we don't have the sophisticated program or we're too little to do it.

Knight: God places people in churches for a reason. He's brought them to you as gifts. You don't have to have all your ducks in a row. You don't even need to know what you're doing. I met this couple in January, and they're in a little tiny church with this beautiful little girl, happy couple. They had been embraced by

the entire congregation. The little Down syndrome girl has been embraced and loved their church, loved how they were being loved by their church. Not all those folks knew what they were doing. When we came back to Bethlehem in 1996, there was no program, there were individuals that said, "We see you. We have regard for you." There are big churches that don't have any disability ministry program, but they do have disabled members. They simply do. It might be the family member that doesn't come on a Sunday morning. Or it might be older members who aren't able to get around as well anymore. But they're there. Start seeing them.

And then in the seeing them, ask "God, help me. What should I do here?" Sometimes it's one thing. You're right, one sermon makes a big difference. I know of only one really good disability ministry program that didn't have the vocal support of its leadership, and so I take as normative usually the pastor needs to say things like, "I think we should do this," and then preach and lead the elders and things like that.

I've seen remarkable programs that were started by folks that said, "I just have a burden for this." Our disability ministry coordinator does not live with disability in her family, but she loves us, she loves the family, she loves the children, she loves the engagement. She cries with people who are going through extraordinary difficult pain. And God has given her the skin to go into situations where there's fire all the time, and she goes. And so for those pastors, just ask your folks to do the first thing. It might be one thing you're asked to do by God. Or it might be a persistent, fifteen-year relationship like we have with the couple I referenced in the first one.

Piper: So we end where we began, with the sovereignty of God, because the sovereignty of God is designed not simply to help you *cope* or *bear* the hard thing God may have given you, but it's also there to help you *risk* helping that person when you don't know how to help. That's where I am. I'm so prone not to risk saying something. Here's a person in a wheelchair that I don't think they're going to be able to respond to me, and I don't know what they might say if I walk up to them and greet them. I don't even know if they'll be able to shake my hand, and will that embarrass them, and all these what-ifs that hinder—that's unbelief. So you said this little trilogy of statements that was so encouraging to me. You said it's not a program. It's *love the child, serve the family, trust Jesus*. And that last one, trust Jesus, is where the good sovereign promises of God come in. I'll help you. I'll guide you. I'll strengthen you.

Thank you, John. This has been really good. Let me pray with you. *Father, I love John and Dianne and Paul and their family. They've ministered deeply to*

us. And I thank you for their partnership here. Take what we've spoken of and make it a blessing. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

5: Born Blind for the Glory of God: Eugenics by Abortion Is an Abomination to God (John 9:1–7) [3]

Last week we addressed the issue of racial harmony and diversity and justice by offering eight biblical ways parents can help their children love people who are different from them. This week we address parents and the rest of us about how *we* can love those who are different from us, namely, don't kill them.

Abortion and Disability

You may recall that I said last week that I would resist the urge to turn that sermon into a sermon about disabilities—even though racial differences and disability differences *both* tempt fallen human beings not to love, but to reject and exclude and belittle. This week I will not resist this urge. I am going to talk about abortion in relation to disability.

One of the great joys of my ministry has been to watch God raise up a "Disability Ministry" at Bethlehem, with Brenda Fischer as the Coordinator. I encourage you to go to the new hopeinGod.org website and read about it. So I am speaking into a situation at our church where children and young adults and older people are living—living!—with significant physical and mental handicaps.

The Daily Earthquake of Abortion

Let me set up the situation we are facing in America and how today's text relates to it. There are about 3,000 abortions a day in the United States and about 130,000 a day worldwide. Which means that the horrific, gut-wrenching reality of Haiti's earthquake on January 12 happens everyday in the abortion clinics of the world. And it is likely that if the dismemberment and bloodshed and helplessness of 130,000 dead babies a day received as much media coverage as

the earthquake victims have—rightly have!—there would be the same outcry and outpouring of effort to end the slaughter and relieve the suffering.

Americans have been giving 1.6 million dollars an hour for Haiti Relief for the last ten days—a beautiful thing. I hope you are part of it. It is so unbelievably easy to give with phones and computers. But the funding and resistance to the suffering of the silent, hidden destruction of the unborn is not so easy. So the 3,000 babies who are crushed to death every day in America by the earthquake of abortion go largely unnoticed.

No Moral or Spiritual Reason

Most of these babies are killed between 10 and 14 weeks of gestation, when the situation is, as they say, "optimal" for the complete dismemberment and evacuation. The babies usually look something like this.

We have no reason to think that there is any morally or spiritually significant difference between this baby and a one-month-old outside the womb. All the differences are morally and spiritually negligible. If it is wrong to kill a newborn, it is wrong to kill this baby in the womb.

"Eugenics by Abortion"

The recent gains in prenatal testing have introduced the possibility to abort children with traits you don't want in a child. So it is especially common in China to abort girls because of the coercive one-child rule. Most prochoice people in America think that's odious.

One writer said something very telling that takes me where I am going. He said, "You don't have to be a feminist to know that being a girl is not a birth defect." Hmmm? There are several tragic assumptions in that statement. One of them is that, if there is a birth defect, then abortion would be advisable. That is, in fact, where we have come as a society. George F. Will calls it "eugenics by abortion." Eugenics is infamous as "the science of improving a human population by controlled breeding to increase the occurrence of desirable heritable characteristics."

So, for example, according to Dr. Brian Skotko, pediatric geneticist at Children's Hospital in Boston, in a November 2009 article from ABC News, "An estimated 92 percent of all women who receive a prenatal diagnosis of Down syndrome choose to terminate their pregnancies." This is true, even

though, as Gary Bauer points out, there are many "waiting lists of couples ready to adopt children with Down syndrome."

Eugenics with a Vengeance

This Friday the *New York Times* reported that "70 percent of Americans said they believe that women should be able to obtain a legal abortion if there is a strong chance of a serious defect in the baby."

Wesley Smith wrote in the *Weekly Standard* in 2008,

> With the development of prenatal genetic diagnosis, the drive toward eugenics has returned with a vengeance. Americans may heartily cheer participants in the Special Olympics, but we abort some 90 percent of all gestating infants diagnosed with genetic disabilities such as Down Syndrome, dwarfism, and spina bifida.

The Gospel for the Guilty

As a pastor, whose calling is to shepherd the flock of Bethlehem, by proclaiming the whole counsel of God in the Scriptures, I don't feel a direct responsibility for what 70% of Americans think about the worth of children with disabilities. But I do feel a direct responsibility for what you believe about such children.

One estimate is that 70% of the women who get abortions in America are professing Christians. I know that many in this church have had abortions. And I don't want you to feel overwhelmed by this message. The center of all we preach and believe is that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). The gospel of Jesus Christ is the best news in the world to women who are tempted to hate themselves for aborting a child. "For [your] sake God made Christ to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him [you] might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

God-Knit in the Womb

So my aim in this message is modest and, I think, explosive, if the church really took hold of it and lived it. The message is that God knits all the children together in their mothers' wombs, and they are all—all of them of every degree

of ability—conceived for the purpose of displaying the glory of God.

You knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. (Psalm 139:13–15)

How I would love to put in your hands today Krista Horning's book about God's great power and good purposes in the disabilities of the children of Bethlehem. It's called *Just the Way I Am: God's Good Design in Disability*. You will love it. Or you will hate it. One way to view this sermon is as an effort to get you to love it.

After Jesus' Most Outlandish Claim

Let's turn to John 9:1. Jesus had just said perhaps the most outlandish thing he ever said. He said in John 8:58, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." This was doubly outrageous. "Before Abraham was, I was," would have been outrageous—a man claiming preexistence thousands of years ago. But what he said was, "Before Abraham was, *I am*." He used the sacred name of God in Exodus 3:14, "I am who I am." So he claimed to be God in the fullest sense.

They take up stones to stone him, but he goes out of the temple, and the next thing that happens is the encounter of a disabled man—a man who had been born disabled, blind. There is a connection between this man's blindness and the reality that Jesus is God Almighty and the purpose of God in this man's disability. Verses 1–3:

> As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."

A Wrong Deduction About Suffering

The disciples assume a direct correlation between a specific sin and the man's disability. Either he sinned in the womb of his mother, or his parents sinned. Those are the two explanations the disciples can think of. This kind of thinking is not unlike the way Job's three friends thought about suffering.

Jesus rejects both of them. He knows that suffering and sickness and disability

and death are in the world because of sin (Romans 5:12–14; 8:18–25), but he rejects the explanation that specific disabilities correspond to specific sins.

Another Explanation: The Glory of God

Instead, he gives another explanation. The disciples were asking about the cause of this blindness. Jesus answers their question, but the answer he gives is not about the human who the blindness *came from*, but what it is *leading to*. In other words, Jesus says the cause of this disability is not past sin, but future effects.

Verse 3: Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.” The cause of this man’s blindness is that God intended to display his work in the man.

Jesus, Always Doing More Than We Think

What is that work? Be careful with your answer. Jesus is always doing more than you think. In verses 4–5, Jesus continues,

> We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.

This signals that something more is going on here than merely healing the man’s physical eyes so that he can see natural light. Jesus calls attention to the fact that *he* is the light this man needs to see. “I am the light of the world.” Which many blind people see, and many seeing people are blind to. Verses 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 and said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.

Mere Physical Healing?

Yes, he came back seeing natural light. Is that enough? Is that what Jesus cares about most? Do you recall back in chapter 5 when Jesus healed the man who had

been crippled for 38 years? The man stood up and walked. Was that the point—mere physical healing? Yes, I say "mere" in view the infinitely more important spiritual change needed.

So John 5:14 says, "Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, 'See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.'" In other words, I healed you, yes. But I have tracked you down to make sure you know holiness is the main point. That's the real healing. Go, sin no more.

The Ultimate Healing: Seeing Jesus' Glory

Now here in chapter 9, Jesus does the same thing. Verses 35–38:

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

Now we see all the connections between, "Before Abraham was, I am," and blindness and healing and Jesus as the light of the world. Seeing the glory of Jesus as God and worshiping him was the main point. Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus is the "I am" who was here before Abraham. The most important thing is that the man see the glory of Jesus and worship him. That is what he did. This was the ultimate healing.

God Has a Design in Every Disability

So when Jesus said in verse 3, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him," this is the work of God—that the man see natural light and that the man see spiritual light. That the man be given natural eyes, and that he be given spiritual eyes. That he see the glory of this world, and the glory of its Maker, Jesus Christ. And worship him.

From this I conclude that in every disability, whether genetically from the womb, or circumstantially from an accident, or infectiously from a disease, God has a design, a purpose, for his own glory, and for the good of his people who love him and are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28). Therefore, it is wrong to think that such children in the womb are unimportant, or without a

unique, God-given worth in this world. And it is wrong to abort them—to kill them.

Answering Two Objections

Let me answer very briefly two objections. Someone might say, “But this blind man got his eyes and was able to benefit himself from the work of God. My child stayed blind.” Or someone may say, “My child never had the mental ability to process biblical truth about Jesus as the light of the world or wonder at ‘before Abraham was, I am.’”

That’s often true. And I don’t mean to say that the full scope of the work of God in the lives of the disabled always happens in this world. None of us is fully healed in this world. There will be a resurrection when Jesus “will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (Philippians 3:21).

And I don’t mean to say that in this world, the works of God will only benefit the one who has the disability. We can’t tell what is going in the mind and heart of many of the mentally disabled. Only God can. But the work of God through these disabilities in the lives of others—that is often the miracle. The works of faith and labors of love and steadfastness of hope are amazing works of God that put his all-satisfying glory on display in the lives of parents and brothers and sisters and friends and churches.

Design Even in Death

One other objection. Someone might say, “But these people all lived. Even Lazarus, though he died, lived again to bring glory to God (John 11:4, 40). So what about the disabled who die? Indeed what about any of us who die? Is dying the great triumph of the enemy?”

Or is death “swallowed up in victory?” Should we say, “Here the glory of God has ended?” Or should we say, “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:54–57)?

Is the death of the disabled meaningless? Or is this too appointed by God for the glory of his name?

Death for the Glory of God

The Gospel of John closes in chapter 21:18–19 with Jesus speaking to Simon Peter about this.

> “Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted [you were able bodied], but when you are old [and we could add, *disabled*], you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” (This he said to show *by what kind of death he was to glorify God*.)

God had appointed for Peter a disability in the end and a death for the glory of God. So I stand by the conclusion from John 9. In every disability, whether genetically from the womb, or circumstantially from an accident, or infectiously from a disease, God has a design, a purpose, for his own glory and for the good of his people who love him and are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28). Therefore, it is wrong to think that such children in the womb—or out of the womb, or in their doddering old age—are unimportant, or without a unique, God-given worth in this world.

The Advocate

Eugenics by abortion is an abomination to God. In the name of Christ, don’t do it. And if you have done it, there is an advocate, Jesus Christ the righteous one (1 John 2:1). “Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43).

6: Healed for the Sake of Holiness (John 5:1–18) [4]

[1] After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.
[2] Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. [3] In these lay a multitude of invalids —blind, lame, and paralyzed. [5] One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. [6] When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be healed?" [7] The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me." [8] Jesus said to him, "Get up, take up your bed, and walk." [9] And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked.
Now that day was the Sabbath. [10] So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed." [11] But he answered them, "The man who healed me, that man said to me, 'Take up your bed, and walk.'" [12] They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Take up your bed and walk'?" [13] Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place. [14] Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you." [15] The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him. [16] And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. [17] But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working." [18] This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

This passage from God's word—John 5:1–18—is amazing in what it shows us about Jesus; and how we should think about the fact that, in spite of Jesus' power

to heal, our world continues to be shot through with sin and disease and calamity and death. It is a very rich text, and I pray that God will open my mouth, and your mind and heart, and lead us into Christ-exalting truth.

First the setting. Verses 1–5,

> [1] After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. [2] Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. [3] In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. [5] One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years.

Jesus at the Pool

Three observations.

First, Jesus is in Jerusalem again, and he makes a point to go to a pool where people with diseases and disabilities wait for the troubling of the waters, because healings happen in this pool. Jesus walks in among this crowd of people.

What Happened to Verse 4?

Second, we notice that there is no verse 4 in the ESV (or the NIV, or the NASB). But it's there in the old Authorized King James version. Why is it missing? The answer is that it's not there in the oldest and best manuscripts. There are thousands of Greek manuscripts or fragments of Greek manuscripts and the way we arrive at our amazingly reliable Greek and Hebrew and English versions is that these texts are compared with each other in painstaking and complex ways so that when some manuscripts have different wording, we can tell almost all the time which is original. And in the few places where we can't, there is no significant historical or doctrinal issue at stake.

Here it seems that somewhere along the way, a copyist drew a marginal note of explanation into the actual text. Verse 7 begs for an explanation. It says, "The sick man answered him, 'Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me.'" It seems like only a few were healed (or maybe only one), when the water was "stirred up," and if you were too slow, you missed out.

So verse 4 in the King James explains (you can see it in your footnote): It says that the invalids were "waiting for the moving of the water; for an angel of the

Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred the water; whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was healed of whatever disease he had." That helps make sense out of verse 7 where the man says he can't get to the pool in time.

Of course, this explanation may be exactly right. But since it's missing from the earliest manuscripts and has other marks of being added later, the more recent versions omit it so that we have a version that is as close to the original as possible. How the pool worked is not essential to the story. The fact that Jesus worked is essential to the story.

A Multitude of People

The third observation in these first verses is that there was a *multitude* of people in these five colonnades. Verse 3: "In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed." That is going to be important when we get to verse 13 that says, "Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a *crowd* in the place." Jesus did not even stay around for the man to find out who it was who healed him. Why not? We will come to that in a few moments. It had something to do with the crowd.

The Focus Turns to Jesus

Now in verses 6–9 the focus is on the revelation of Jesus. What kind of person is he?

> 6 When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be healed?" 7 The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me." 8 Jesus said to him, "Get up, take up your bed, and walk." 9 And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked. Now that day was the Sabbath.

It seems to me that John is showing us something about Jesus' knowledge, his compassion, and his power.

Jesus' Knowledge

First, his knowledge. Verse 6: “When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time.” Jesus knew this man’s situation without having to be told. Thirty-eight years he had been paralyzed and unable to walk, and perhaps all of that time he had been brought here to the pool to wait—ever-hoping for some kind of miracle. Jesus knew his situation.

When you know Jesus, this is the kind of person you know. A person who knows you perfectly—knows everything about you, inside and out, and all you have ever felt or thought or done. “You discern my thoughts from afar. . . . Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether” (Psalm 139:2–4). The more you know about Jesus, the more precious this truth becomes.

Jesus’ Compassion

Second, the compassion of Jesus—this is one of the other things we know that makes his knowledge of us more precious. Jesus *chooses* to go to this pool. He did not have to. It didn’t sneak up on him. He didn’t stumble by. He knew what he was doing. He was going to this pool the same way he went to Samaria to find the woman at the well, and the same way he went to sign-seeking, prophet-dishonoring Galilee to find a kingly official who had a sick son. Jesus moves toward need, not comfort. Toward brokenhearted sinners, not the self-righteous.

Notice that when he asks the sick man in verse 6, “Do you want to be healed?” what the man said was not, “Yes.” Instead, he explains his tragic situation. Verse 7: “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me.” Jesus asks no more questions. In response to that description of his sorrows, Jesus acts. Verse 8: “Get up, take up your bed, and walk.”

So it looks like this healing is not a response to anything religious or faithful about the man. It looks like Jesus healed him simply because his situation was so miserable for so long. In other words, it looks like it came from Jesus’ compassion, not the man’s faith or righteousness.

I counted at least nine times in the Gospels where it says Jesus was moved with compassion or pity. So not only does Jesus know you perfectly, but he is easily moved by the misery you feel. His therapies are not always what we want. But that’s not owing to his heartlessness. He is not heartless. He is compassionate to us in our misery. He is a sympathetic High Priest for those who will trust him.

Jesus' Power

So his knowledge of us is complete, and his compassion toward us is great. And now his power is immediate and sovereign. Verse 8–9: "Jesus said to him, 'Get up, take up your bed, and walk.' And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked." The words "at once" signify the immediacy of Jesus' power. When he speaks, diseased muscles and bones obey. And they obey "at once." This is John exulting again in the sovereign power of Jesus the same way he did in John 4:52–53 where the official's son was healed at exactly the seventh hour 15 miles away when Jesus said the words.

So far then, John's aim is that we see the complete knowledge, the heartfelt compassion, and the sovereign power of Jesus. This is how you get to know Jesus. This is how you build a relationship with Jesus. You meet him here in his word. And you speak to him. You tell him what you think and feel about his knowledge and compassion and power. You ask him to shape your thinking and your feeling around this sight of his glory. Then you walk out of this room, or out of your morning encounter with him, into the day and live in the fellowship of this Jesus. Not an imaginary one. Not a self-made one. But the real living Jesus revealed with absolute authority in the words of his apostle.

"Now That Day Was the Sabbath"

Now at this point in verse 9, John says something that feels abrupt. He says, "Now that day was the Sabbath." We are all thinking about how magnificent Jesus is, and how happy the healed man must be. And then John says: "It happened on the Sabbath." And we pause and say, "Uh oh." Now what? The question this raises is: Is that what this story is really going to be about? Is this going to turn into a conflict over what you are allowed to do on the Sabbath? Is John going to shift from the glory of Jesus to the ground rules of the Sabbath?

The answer is no. The Sabbath issue is raised, but it's raised in a way that amazingly keeps the focus on the glory of Jesus. Watch what John does.

Forged in the Fires of Conflict

Jesus knows what he has done. He healed a man on the Sabbath and told him to carry his bed as a sign and celebration that he is whole. He knows this will create

conflict. Conflict in the ministry of Jesus is the furnace where the steel of his identity is forged. In the fires of conflict, his glory is made to shine. So here it comes. We will see part of it today and part of it next time we take up this text.

Is This a Random Miracle?

Verses 10–13:

> 10 So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath, and it
> is not lawful for you to take up your bed.” 11 But he answered them, “The
> man who healed me, that man said to me, ‘Take up your bed, and walk.’” 12
> They asked him, “Who is the man who said to you, ‘Take up your bed and
> walk’?” 13 Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for
> Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place.

Now notice what is most remarkable here. Jesus healed and disappeared before the man could find out who he was. He didn’t even know who healed him. Does this mean Jesus had no intention of dealing with this man’s soul? Was he content just to do a random miracle and leave the man in ignorance as to where it came from?

No. And we know this because in verse 14 it was Jesus who found the man, not the man who found Jesus: “Afterward *Jesus found him* in the temple and said to him, ‘See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.’” Jesus had no intention of walking away from this man and leaving him with nothing more than a healed body.

“I Have Healed You to Make You Holy”

Notice two things. At the end of verse 13, the reason Jesus walked away from the man was that there was a crowd there: “Jesus had withdrawn, *as there was a crowd in the place*.” The place was filled with sick people and, no doubt those who cared for them. Had he stayed there after healing one man there would have been a tumult of miracle-seeking. This is not the main thing Jesus is after.

So notice, secondly, how this is confirmed in verse 14. Jesus seeks out the man in the temple and tells him the real issue in his healing. “Afterward *Jesus found him* in the temple and said to him, ‘See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.’” What’s the issue? The issue is holiness

mainly, not health. “I have healed you to make you holy.”

“Turn from Sin to Me”

Do you see this? “Sin no more. Stop sinning. My aim in healing your body is the healing of your soul. I have given you a gift. It’s free. It came first, before my command. You didn’t earn it. You weren’t good enough for it. I chose you freely. And I healed you. Now, live in this power. Let the gift of healing, the gift of my free grace, be a means to your holiness.”

And yes, he warns him that, if he turns away, and mocks this gift, or makes an idol out of his health, and embraces sin as his way of life, he will perish. I take that—final judgment—to be the “worse thing” (in verse 14) that will happen because there aren’t many natural things worse than the 38 years this man endured, and because in verses 28–29, Jesus says, “An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.”

In other words: “I have healed you that you may be holy, that you may stop doing evil, and that you may not rise to the resurrection of judgment, but to the resurrection of life. I have pointed you to myself as a life-giver. I heal in more ways than one. Don’t turn from me to a life of sin.”

He Healed Only One

The implications of this are huge for the diseases and disabilities that we deal with today. Jesus walked into a huge “multitude of invalids” according to verse 3. And he heals one man. Just one. And disappears before even that man can know who he was. He leaves hundreds of invalids behind unhealed. Then he finds the man in a less conspicuous place and puts all the focus on holiness. “Sin no more.”

The point is this: In the first coming of the Son of God into the world, we receive foretastes of his healing power. The full healing of all his people and all their diseases and disabilities awaits the second coming of Christ. And the aim of these foretastes which we receive now is to call us to faith and holiness.

Healing Is the Exception, Not the Rule—For Now

Most people who suffer from disabilities in this life will have them to the day they die. And all of us, till Jesus comes again, will die of something. Here and there, some are healed. We believe in miracles. But even though Jesus had all the power to heal, he did not usher in the final day of perfect wholeness. His ministry points to that day. But while this age of groaning lasts (Romans 8:23), healing is the exception, not the rule. And that is not because we are weak in faith. To be sure, we might see more miracles if we expected more and believed more.

But Jesus left hundreds unhealed at the pool of Bethesda. And told the one man he did heal, who had not even believed on him—to wake up. I am pursuing your holiness. The main issue in this age till Jesus comes back is that we meet him—meet *him*—in our brokenness, and receive the power of his forgiveness to pursue holiness. In this calling to faith and holiness, the disabled often run faster and farther than many of us who have our legs and arms.

And in the mentally disabled, we simply don't know how far they are running. Perhaps farther than we think. Jesus knows. Jesus knows everything. And he is compassionate. And he is sovereign. May the Lord open your eyes to know Jesus personally, as one who knows you, and has compassion on you, and is sovereign over your body and your soul, and the one who has come with saving and healing power first for the sake of your holiness, and then finally for the sake of your everlasting health.

Footnotes

1 This sermon was originally preached on May 21, 2011. Listen to or download the audio online: http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/why-was-this-child-born-blind

2 This sermon was originally preached on June 4, 2011. Listen to or download the audio online: http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/the-works-of-god-and-the-worship-of-jesus

3 This sermon was originally preached on January 24, 2010 (Sanctity of Life Sunday). Listen to or download the audio online: http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/born-blind-for-the-glory-of-god

4 This sermon was originally preached on August 23, 2009. Listen to or download the audio online: http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/healed-for-the-sake-of-holiness