

# Once Blind, But Now I See

John 9.1-12, 35-41  
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As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. 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.’ When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, ‘Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?’ Some were saying, ‘It is he.’ Others were saying, ‘No, but it is someone like him.’ He kept saying, ‘I am the man.’ But they kept asking him, ‘Then how were your eyes opened?’ He answered, ‘The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, “Go to Siloam and wash.” Then I went and washed and received my sight.’ They said to him, ‘Where is he?’ He said, ‘I do not know’ ... Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ He answered, ‘And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.’ He said, ‘Lord, I believe.’ And he worshipped him. Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.’ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains.

Do you know what an “ear worm” is? An ear worm is one of those songs you hear that you can’t stop replaying in your mind. My latest ear worm is a song by the comedian Mel Brooks entitled “Hope for the Best, Expect the Worst.” It’s from the movie, “The Twelve Chairs.” Here, through the miracle of technology and our awesome sound man, let me play a little bit of it for you.

*Hope for the best, expect the worst  
Some drink champagne, some die of thirst.  
No way of knowing which way it’s going  
Hope for the best, expect the worst!*

*Hope for the best, expect the worst,  
The world’s a stage, we’re unrehearsed.  
Some reach the top, friends, while others drop, friends,*

*Hope for the best, expect the worst!*

*I knew a man who saved a fortune that was splendid  
Then he died the day he'd planned to go and spend it  
Shouting "Live while you're alive! No one will survive!"  
Life is sorrow—here today and gone tomorrow.*

*Live while you're alive, no one will survive—  
there's no guarantee!*

*Hope for the best; expect the worst.  
The rich are blessed; the poor are cursed.  
That is a fact, friends, the deck is stacked, friends  
Hope for the best, expect the worst!*

The reason I have thought about that song a lot recently (totally apart from my tragic, Calvinist perspective on history) is because I want to understand the central supporting character in today's scripture. He had been blind since birth. He had never known what it meant to see.

Blindness was widely known in the Biblical world. The most common eye disease was ophthalmia, a severe form of conjunctivitis that could be transmitted by flies and aggravated by the sun's glare and wind-borne dust. There were also the conditions we know today, glaucoma and cataracts. The most common form of blindness in infants was evidently a form of neonatal ophthalmia transmitted by a mother with a septic or gonorrheal infection, which may explain the disciples' question to Jesus: "Lord, who sinned, this man or his parents?" It was a reasonable thing to ask.

In the 4th chapter of Exodus, when Moses first encountered the Lord in a burning bush, he was commanded to return to Egypt and be God's instrument in liberating the Israelites. Moses objected:

"O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." And the Lord said to Moses, "Who gives speech to mortals? *Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind?* Is it not I the Lord?" [Exodus 4.10-11].

There must be a reason the Lord made someone mute, deaf or blind. A punishment for sin or other misconduct? Blindness as a consequence occurred fairly frequently in the Bible. The predators of Sodom who attacked Lot's house to rape his angelic guests were struck blind [Genesis 19.11]. The soldiers of the king of Aram who tried to capture the prophet Elisha were temporarily blinded [II Kings 6.15-23]. Saul, the great persecutor of Jesus' followers, was on his way to capture the Christians of Damascus when he was blinded by the Lord. That temporary blindness eventually led to his becoming that great evangelist whom we know as Paul the Apostle [Acts 9.1-9]. As Jesus said in our scripture, some people were blind so that God's works might be revealed through them.

God's law also forbade exploiting the handicapped:

"You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God, for I am the Lord" [Leviticus 19.14]

Nonetheless, exploitation still happened. The classic example occurred when Jacob manipulated his blind father Isaac by pretending to be his other son, Esau [Genesis 27].

When Jesus' ministry of healing began, one of his professed aims was "the recovery of sight to the blind" [Luke 4.18]. That blindness could be physical or spiritual. But "recovery" means regaining something you've lost. What if you never had sight to begin with? What kind of vocational training was available for you? Quite simply, you could be a beggar.

If you happened to have the dread disease of leprosy, you were required to live outside of city limits, wear ragged clothes, and call out "Unclean, unclean," if anyone strayed too close. If you were blind, you could stay there in the city, hunker down on some convenient street corner with your bowl, and beg for alms. Consider the plight of the blind man in light of our song. What would hoping for the best entail? Maybe "the best" would be getting a few extra coins here or there. Maybe some generous soul would give you enough to buy a second loaf of bread. Maybe the weather that day would be pleasant. What was the worst you could expect? To be tripped over; to be mocked; to be stolen from; to be abused by some cruel person who would think it funny to put a

stumbling block in front of you. The best you could hope for wasn't really much better than what you already had; the worst you could expect was not much worse.

*Hope for the best; expect the worst.  
Some drink champagne; some die of thirst.  
No way of knowing  
Which way it's going  
Hope for the best, expect the worst.*

He would have been used to overhearing things passersby said about him: “Mommy, Mommy, look at that man. What’s wrong with him?” “Hush, child, hush.” Or a few copper coins would ring in his bowl, and a voice would murmur, “God bless you” before the giver scurried away. Then, one day, he was the object of a theological discussion. “So who’s to blame, Lord? Him or his parents? Whose sin caused him to be this way?” Perhaps he’d heard talk like that before—the handicapped man as object lesson. Maybe he was made aware that the question had been addressed to the man named Jesus of Nazareth, who had been the subject of some stir there in Jerusalem: *a regular celebrity, that one*. Perhaps the blind man’s hopes soared: perhaps this man called Jesus, with an audience looking on, would be extra magnanimous, and put a silver denarius in his bowl—the equivalent of a day’s wages. That would be the best—a whole day’s worth of sustenance from a single contribution. But instead of hearing the ring of coins in his bowl, he heard the sound of someone spitting, and, then a moment later, something wet like mud slapped on his eyes. Was this supposed to be funny: “Hope for the best, expectorate the worst?” But then came the voice telling him to go and wash the mud away in the pool of Siloam. You can see the pool of Siloam on today’s bulletin cover. It’s a freshwater reservoir, just outside the southeast walls of the Old City, and fed by springs. It might have been used as a place for *mikvahs*—ritual baths. He went and washed and came back able to see for the first time ever.

It must have been astonishing for him. Was the first thing he saw his own image in the water? Did he have any idea that was him? It must have been like that all day—the

sightings of things that had once been familiar by their sound or feel or smell had to be discovered again in a whole new way. *So this is what a person looks like! So that vast expanse above me is what they call the sky! This thing I am standing on must be a road. What is that over there? Is that what they call a donkey? Could that small person be a child? Why do their clothes all look different? Is that because of what I've heard are colors?* When he returned from the pool of Siloam, the people could barely recognize him. It was like he had suddenly acquired a superpower—like young Clark Kent from Smallville discovering he could fly. Suddenly, the blind beggar could see. But now he had so many new things to learn, and learning can be hard.

It was hard for the people around him, too. Most knew him as the blind beggar. Most of the locals had borne him no malice. He was a familiar figure with his bowl on his corner. On those occasions when they actually took notice of him, they probably felt a twinge of pity. But this strange new being? What to make of him now? The Pharisees were particularly nonplussed. The Pharisees believed the Law was holy, the living word of God, and they protected that Law by, in their phrase, “putting it a fence around it.” His healing was a major event. Six days out of the week it would have incited reverence, even awe. But that it had been done on the Sabbath made it morally dubious. You weren't supposed to work on the Sabbath. The Fourth Commandment said so. The Pharisees put a fence around that Commandment with ever more minute regulations defining “work.” If you or a loved one were injured on the Sabbath, you could take measures to make sure the injury didn't get worse, but nothing to make it better, until the Sabbath passed. In modern terms, palliative care was allowed on the Sabbath, but not curative. If you cut yourself, you could staunch the bleeding and wrap the wound, but you had to wait until the Sabbath passed to stitch it, because sewing constituted work. Healing a blind man could only be done at the behest of God. Healing a blind man on the Sabbath was a major trespass against God's commandment (at least as regulated by the Pharisees). So which was Jesus—big-time sinner or man of God?

It was quite a conundrum for the Pharisees. In order to get the facts straight, they first went to the man's parents. Yes, they acknowledged, he had been blind since birth. But now he was a grownup. Why didn't they go talk to him directly? So they did. "Look," the man said, "I don't know if the one who healed me was a sinner or not. All I know is that I was blind but now I see." The cross-examination went on. Finally he said, "Look, if this man wasn't from God, he couldn't have healed me." That wasn't the answer they wanted, so they threw him out. What else could they do with such an ungrateful wretch, and after all they had done for him! Who had put the coins in his bowl? They had. Who had always been polite to him? They had. Who tried to keep malicious wise guys from putting stumbling blocks in front of him? They had. They liked him as a blind beggar. This newly sighted man who talked back—him, they didn't like so much.

*The rich are blessed; the poor are cursed.  
That is a fact, friend,  
The deck is stacked, friend,  
Hope for the best, expect the worst*

Everybody knew the deck was stacked. Or at least it was until Jesus came and shuffled the deck.

After he had been thrown out, Jesus went to him and revealed that he was the Son of Man for whom the world had been waiting. The newly sighted man believed—how could he not?—and worshiped him. Then Jesus said, in effect, that the real test of sight is not 20/20 vision, but whether one is prepared to follow the truth wherever it leads.

There is a fascinating note in the Jerusalem Talmud, one of the two great compendiums of Jewish law and tradition (the other is the Babylonian Talmud). In the Jerusalem Talmud, two individuals who lived in the 3rd Century A.D—one named Jacob, the other a grandson of Rabbi Jehoshua ben Levi—are reported to have been healed of blindness in the name of *Yeshua ben Pantera*, which is an insulting reference to Jesus and his alleged paternity. *Yeshua* is the original Aramaic name of Jesus and *ben* means "son

of.” The name *Yeshua ben Pantera* derives from a scurrilous falsehood that Jesus’ father was really a Roman soldier named Pantera (or Panthera) who served in Galilee at the time Jesus was conceived by Mary. The earliest known source of this fiction was an anti-Christian Greek writer named Celsus, who wrote some 150 years after Christ’s Resurrection. Celsus had claimed, according to the Christian writer Origen (in his work *Contra Celsum*, “Against Celsus”) that Jesus’ mother Mary had been “turned out by the carpenter who was betrothed to her, as she had been convicted of adultery and had a child by a certain soldier named Panthera.” Celsus either invented, or promulgated, the story because he was alarmed that Christians, though subject to recurring brutal persecutions, were rapidly gaining in numbers in the Roman Empire. His fabrication was adopted and repeated in the Jerusalem Talmud and in some medieval Jewish works. Jesus of Nazareth, it was asserted, was not only *not* the Messiah (and emphatically *not* the Son of God), he wasn’t even a real Jew. In the 19th Century, amidst a rising tide of anti-Semitism, related claims were made by various less-than-reputable historians and theologians who said that Jesus was not really Jewish, but was of Roman, or Greek, or Babylonian descent. Adolf Hitler was happy to add his assent to the proposition. In 1941, he asserted that Nazareth was a Roman colony and that Jesus was the child of a prostitute and a Roman soldier named Panthera. Furthermore, Hitler said, Jesus had been crucified because he spoke out against Jewish capitalism and that later Paul distorted his message.<sup>1</sup> It is a tragic irony of history that the Jerusalem Talmud was cited by Nazis and other anti-Semites as a reputable source to discount Jesus’ Jewish lineage, thereby fanning the devouring flames of the Holocaust. Like people, lies can have a long line of descendants.

Anyway, back to Jacob and the grandson of Jehoshua ben Levi, who were both cured of blindness “in the name of Jesus” 200 years after his resurrection. Of their being

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<sup>1</sup> The Jews and the World in the Fourth Gospel: Parallelism, Function, and Context, Lars Kierspel, pp. 66-67

healed, the Jerusalem Talmud states, “It is not permitted; it were better for them had they died.”<sup>2</sup>

*It is not permitted. It were better for them had they died.* Better to die than to be able to see? Look, there are going to be people in your life who prefer you just the way you are and who will be threatened if you suddenly become a better person. Indifferent friends who prefer you dependent and unmotivated; jealous friends who don’t want you advancing in life; bad friends who desperately want you to keep sharing the same horrible prejudices and bigotries that they do; worse friends who want you to remain mired in addiction.

Jesus Christ has much more in mind for you. He wants you to become, as much as possible, the very person God created you to be. He wants you to claim the full measure of the dignity in which you were created. He wants you to become the most brave, steadfast, committed, wise, hopeful, faithful, loving Christian you can possibly become—because your very best self is the very person God wants you to be.

Jesus Christ is still healing blindness. Your Lord and Savior wants you to see.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> John, by Gerard Sloyan, in the Interpretation series, p. 116].