

One area of the body most at risk for a leprosy sufferer is the eyes. The germ (*Mycobacterium leprae*) that gives people leprosy concentrates in specific parts of the body, including the eyes, and this can frequently lead to blindness. As an introduction to our theme of sight, let's take a closer look at how leprosy can take away our crucial sense of sight.

What happens to the eye in leprosy?

When leprosy affects facial nerves the blinking reflex and the eye's ability to moisturise itself can be lost. The cornea can also become numb so the person doesn't know when dirt is in their eye and it stays there causing damage by scratching the eyeball. In many cases these factors, if left untreated, will eventually lead to ulceration and blindness. In some cases the eye becomes infected with bacteria causing even more damage. (By the way, did you know that the moisture layer on our eyes is antibacterial and is actually three separate layers – basically oil, water, and mucous – each one produced by a different part of our eyes?)

Treatment of eyes damaged by leprosy involves giving multidrug therapy to kill the leprosy germ causing the damage. Surgery can restore the ability to blink, and daily eye drops help restore moisture. Simple precautions such as wearing sunglasses protect against glare and dust, and patients are encouraged to check their eyes daily and seek treatment if anything unusual occurs.

Spiritual Sight

The word 'sight' occurs on numerous occasions throughout both the Old and New Testaments, although sometimes translators use the word 'eyes' instead. It is a significant biblical word, especially when used metaphorically to speak of spiritual sight. It is significant, for example, that one of the early words used to describe one of God's prophets was 'seer' – one who sees into the deeper things of God (as in 1 Samuel 9:19 referring to Samuel).

In this study we'll be looking at two passages in the Gospels dealing with sight and vision in both their literal and spiritual connotations. The first is found in the Gospel of Mark.

Read Mark 10:46-52

Background

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem (see 11:1) to face death by crucifixion, which he knows is going to happen (9:33-34). He reaches Jericho, which was (and still is) about 15 miles north-west of Jerusalem, where he encounters and heals a blind man called Bartimaeus. It is quite possible that Mark names the man because he was later well known in the early church.

Discussion

- Why is sight such a good metaphor for receiving spiritual life (you might like to refer briefly to Paul's conversion in Acts chapter 9, especially verses 8 and 18). What does this tell us about the spiritual perception we are born with?
- If you were told you were about to lose your sight how would it make you feel? Try to think yourself into Bartimaeus' situation. Describe something of the way he probably lived.
- In verses 47-48 Bartimaeus hears that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by. From the way he reacted and the words he used, what do we learn about him and about what he thought of Jesus?

- What does the response of the 'many' to Bartimaeus tell us about their attitude to him (verse 48)? How does this contrast with Jesus' response? Is there a lesson here for us sometimes?
- In verses 49 and 50, are there principles worth copying in our relationship with the Lord?
- Jesus asked Bartimaeus in verse 51 what he wants. The answer seems obvious but Jesus never acts without a good purpose. What was it? How does this apply to us in our relationship with God?
- What does the outcome in verse 52 tell us about Jesus? How does the whole story of Bartimaeus in verses 46 to 52 sum up the essence of becoming a disciple of Jesus?

We turn now to our second Gospel passage dealing with sight, which is found in John chapter 9, the healing of the man born blind.

Background

There are seven miracles in John's Gospel referred to as 'signs', starting with water turned to wine in chapter 2 and ending with the raising of Lazarus in chapter 11. The miracle in John 9 is sign number six. It appears to be unique in that it's the only healing of a condition someone was born with.

The miracle can, of course be looked at on two levels: there is first the physical healing when Jesus restored the man's sight and he could see. Then at another level Jesus brings light into this blind man's mind and heart, giving him spiritual vision. Both ways of giving sight are miraculous, and are brought together here as complementary: the fact that Jesus is able and willing to give sight to a man born physically blind is a sign that points to the other truth, that Jesus can and does give spiritual sight to those born spiritually blind.

Read John 9:1-7 You can either read the passage straight from the Bible (perhaps dividing it up between the group as it's quite long), or role play the scene with members of the group taking different characters. There are seven characters, but if you don't have enough group members some could read two parts (for example, the disciples and the parents).

Narrator **Disciples** **Jesus** **Neighbours** **Blind man** **Pharisees** **Parents**

As he went 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, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.'

After saying this, he spat on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes and told him,

'Go, wash in the Pool of Siloam.'

(this word means "Sent"). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing. His neighbours and those who had formerly seen him begging asked,

'Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?'

Some claimed that he was, but others said,

'No, he only looks like him.'

But he himself insisted,

'I am the man.'

'How then were your eyes opened?'

'The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see.'

'Where is this man?'

'I don't know.'

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight.

'He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and now I see.'

Some of the Pharisees said,

'This man is not from God, because he doesn't keep the Sabbath.'

But others asked,

'How can a sinner perform such signs?'

So they were divided. Then they turned again to the blind man,

'What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened.'

The man replied, 'He is a prophet.'

They still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man's parents and asked them,

'Is this your son? Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?'

The parents answered,

'We know he's our son, and we know he was born blind. But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself.'

His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who had already decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. That was why his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.' A second time they summoned the man who had been blind and said,

'Give glory to God by telling the truth. We know this man is a sinner.'

He replied,

'Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!'

Then they asked him,

'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?'

He answered,

'I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?'

Then they hurled insults at him and said,

'You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from.'

'Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.'

To this they replied,

'You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!'

And they threw him out. Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said,

'Do you believe in the Son of Man?'

The man said, 'Who is he, sir? Tell me so that I may believe in him.'

Jesus said, 'You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.'

Then the man said, 'Lord, I believe,' and he worshiped him.

Discussion

- What is the disciples' assumption about the man's blindness in verse 2 (this is very similar to people's assumption about leprosy sufferers) What is Jesus' perspective (verse 3)? How might this help a person who was suffering?
- What was the big problem the Pharisees had that stopped them 'seeing' who Jesus was (verses 13-16)? Is there a similar danger that we might fall into?
- What can we learn from the healed man about how to give an effective witness in the face of opposition, and what it might cost?
- This is the sixth 'sign' in John's Gospel. What main truth about Jesus is this sign advertising?

To finish

Spend one minute in silence just looking around and thinking about all the different shapes and shades and colours you can see. Then close with a prayer of thanks for the gift of sight and for the many things that can be done to help those who are losing or have lost their sight, including of course, among those affected by leprosy. Pray that such work will continue and grow, and that there will be further breakthroughs in treatment.