

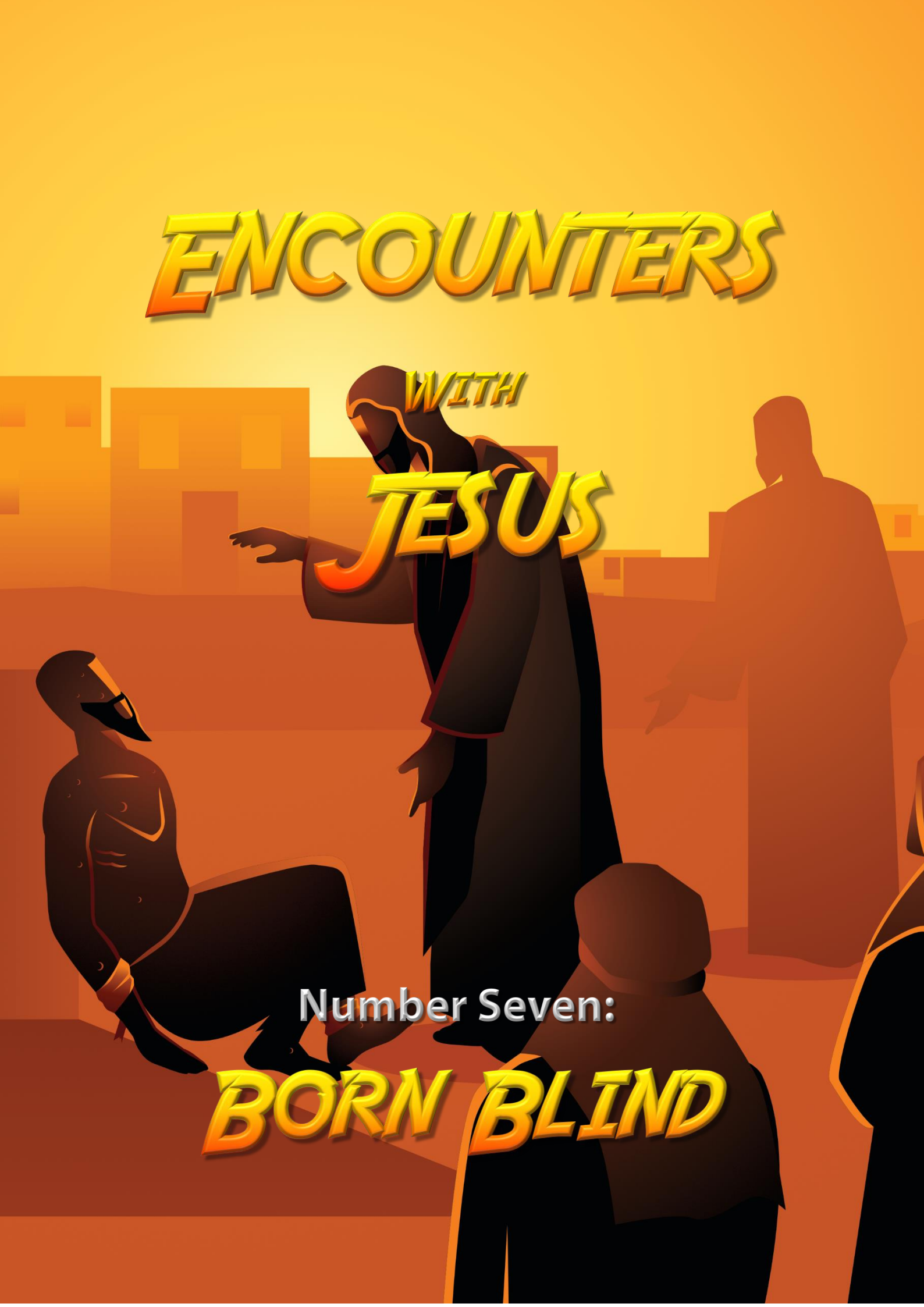
ENCOUNTERS

WITH

JESUS

Number Seven:

BORN BLIND



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In Jesus' time, disability was sometimes associated with sin—if you're disabled it must be a punishment for something you've done. Jesus had another opinion.

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It was a Sabbath. I remember it so well: I sat by the roadside and heard the people shuffling off to synagogue. The air was warm and played on my skin as I sat there, the sun gently touching me. Sabbath smells different, you know. The odours of work are diminished, the scent of freshly washed clothes replacing them. It sounds different too, quieter, more reverent. Except for the children of course, though even their exuberance has a hushed, controlled tone to it. Also, people are much more likely to drop a coin into my bowl on the Sabbath.

Yes, I remember it well, not because it was different but because it was the same. Just like any other Sabbath day; the snatches of conversation as people walk past me gradually diminishing as they arrive at the synagogue, until the service starts and I am left in silence with only the faint echoes of the chanting and praying wafting over to tantalise my ears. That's why I remember that day: because it was just like any other day; and also, of course, because it was so different from any other day.

One thing you get used to, if you're blind, is the curious fact that people also think you're deaf. They stand and talk about you rather than to you. I used to get really angry but after so many years I've just got resigned to it. It happened again on that day. I heard the voices and footsteps approaching. Quite a few of them; noisy, too. A bit raucous I think, not as reverent as they should be on the LORD's day of rest. Strangers, too. I don't recognise the voices but from their accents they're clearly from up North. They come to a halt just by me. I can tell that they're looking at the little card which Elizabeth wrote for me—all it says is, 'Blind From Birth'—and they're deciding whether to put a coin into my bowl. Then one of them speaks. "Teacher, who sinned? This man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

'Here we go again,' I think, 'this thing about sin.' They love it because it's such a good puzzle. It can't have been me who sinned because I was blind when I came into the world and you can't sin before you are born can you? So it must have been my parents. But Ezekiel tells us that God has promised that the sins of the fathers will no longer be visited upon their sons. So it can't be them either! As I say, it's a good puzzle—it certainly keeps the Pharisees busy for hours!

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But I don't want to be a puzzle. I want to be a person. I want to be whole, to be clean, to be able to join the crowds on the journey to the synagogue on the Sabbath. I want to belong. So what if I can't see? I can hear, smell, touch, walk, talk, do everything else that a human being should do. I just can't 'see'—whatever that is.

I can't recognise people or things from a distance if I'm not able to hear or smell them. I can't distinguish between 'colours' as I can between different sounds. I can't know the shape of something without having touched it first. Yes, it sounds very wonderful this 'seeing' but just because I can't do it doesn't make me any less of a man does it?

Some say it's because God is displeased with me. Is that the reason? LORD, are you displeased with me? You know that I love you. If I love you even more will you give me sight? I know that I am a sinner—though no more than anyone else, I think. If I repent even harder will you heal me? The same old unanswered questions go swirling round my head every day, especially on the Sabbath, and now these strangers bring them to the surface again.

So I wait for the teacher's answer. Which side of the fence will he be on, this teacher from Galilee? Or will he just sit on it? "Neither," says a voice—the teacher I assume—"but this was done so that God's glory may be made clear..."

What is this? God made me blind so that He would seem more glorious? I don't understand. Is he saying that this is just some cruel trick that God has played on me? Not that I haven't thought of that myself, of course, but I've always tried to push it away. It seems blasphemous—and dangerous. I know that David got away with saying hard things to God in the psalms but I'm not so brave! It doesn't seem to worry this teacher though. He carries on speaking—something about the night coming but that he is the light of the world! I don't understand any of it. I want to ask him, challenge him, but there is a gentle authority in his voice and a strength and certainty too. If he says he is the light of the world then perhaps he is—whatever it means!

He's not like any Rabbi I've ever come across before. 'Jesus', I think they called him as they were approaching. Then it all goes very quiet. I hear the sound of someone scrabbling about in the dust, then spitting—on the ground, I think. I begin to get a bit uneasy. What is going on?

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Then suddenly, without any warning or request, hands are grasping my head. It is him! I just know it. It is him! What is he playing at? How dare he grab me like this? His thumbs move around to my eyes. They press something cold and wet onto my eyes. I try to close my eyelids but it is too late. The mud—for that is surely what it is, made from his spit and the dust of the earth—stings as it touches my eyeballs; then the thumbs are gone, though the hands remain, still holding me firmly but tenderly, oh so tenderly. I feel... 'protected' is the word that comes to me. Yes, I feel protected, safe in this gentle grip of iron.

It is strangely good to be held by him and I feel regret when he lets go of me. But as he does so, he speaks: "Go to the pool of Siloam and wash there." Nothing more, just this command, and I hear his footsteps receding in the distance and then his companions hurrying to catch up with him. "Don't go", I long to shout but for some reason I cannot. So I sit there in the growing silence, confused and shocked, not understanding what has just happened to me.

Hope, doubt, dread, joy—how can so many conflicting feelings chase themselves around in my poor person? What shall I do? Go to the pool of Siloam, as he told me or just go home, wash my face and forget the whole thing. Going home seems safer. Yes, I hate the fact that I'm different, that I'm an outsider, that I'm despised—but at least it's familiar. I manage to get by and things could be worse. Going home suddenly feels very safe.

On the other hand, taking the road to Siloam seems risky, opening myself up to unknown possibilities. It isn't far; I can find my way there easily enough but the clear implication of his words and actions is that if I wash the mud off in that pool I will be able to see! I don't know if I can cope with that. Supposing I get there and nothing happens. That would be so cruel. People think I'm tough but I know how easily bruised I can be. 'No risk, no pain', I tell myself, 'better the devil you know...'

And another thing, suppose it does work and I can see just like everyone else, what will I do then? Begging isn't a great way to survive but I get by. If I could see, it would mean the end of that—no-one would give me anything—why should they? But what would I do? I have no skills, no trade, nothing that would give me a living. I've already taken far too much from Mum and Dad. I don't want to be completely dependent on them. So many reasons to go home...

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I have to do something. The mud on my eyes has now baked hard. I try to blink but my eyelids are stuck down tight by the dried mud. It is uncomfortable and beginning to hurt. Home or Siloam? I need to wash it off somewhere. Safety or risk? Dull certainty or fragile hope? This is one of those 'now or never again' moments. My mind goes back to the touch of his hands on my face, the sound of his voice. I realise that I was in the presence of someone very special. This Jesus, whoever he is, is not a man to be taken lightly. If I do not follow what he said I will be regretful—forever blind. So I rise and turn towards Siloam.

As the sun gets higher and hotter I grope through the empty streets. Soon the synagogues will empty and all will be noise and bustle. But for now it is quiet, my own halting footsteps all I can hear. No! I can just hear the ripple of water and the stream flowing from the tunnel into the pool. It is cooler here and I know I am close. Careful now! There are steps down to the pool, fifteen of them, I think, in three lots of five. Is there a handrail? I can't remember.

So slowly, very slowly, I edge my way towards the pool, feeling with my feet for the first step. Even so, I almost stumble as my right leg steps onto nothingness. But my hand reaches out to the right and I steady myself on the rock face. One, two, three, four, five, and now some level ground before the next lot. So, slowly, carefully, I make my way down. This should be the last. The ground is flat again, gently sloping down. Still, be careful, I don't want to fall in the pool and drown.

That would be ironic, wouldn't it! The healing would work and I would see myself die! I don't know where these dark thoughts come from and I push them away. The pool is close. I can sense the water, smell its cool balm. I drop to my knees and crawl the last few yards, my hand reaching out before me as I seek the water's edge. And there—my hand is wet. I have arrived. This is the moment.

The world seems to stand still as I reach both hands into the water and cup them together. I have to remind myself to breathe. Slowly I bring the water to my eyes. But slowly doesn't work, the water trickles through my fingers. The mud is dampened but not washed away. So I begin to splash water over my face faster and faster. Suddenly I am in a frenzy. My whole head, my whole tunic is soaked and all the mud has gone. If I want to, I can open my eyes.

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I don't know how for long I just kneel there. I could open my eyes but I don't. Because I fear that I will still be blind? Because I am afraid that nothing will be different? No. Because I am convinced *everything* will be different. Because I am sure that I will see—and I am afraid.

Already I am becoming aware of sensations behind my eyelids. I can sense changes, patterns flickering dimly. At least, I think that's right. I know all the words to do with sight and seeing but I don't know how or when to use them. But I do know that if—when—I open my eyes I will 'see'. So, slowly, very slowly, I open my eyelids a tiny crack. Sensation floods in, almost overwhelming me. This is light! It's a bit like the feeling of the heat of the sun on my face but much more focused and intense. If this is what a tiny bit of seeing is like how can anyone cope with the whole thing?

I dare not open my eyes any more. I am afraid that they will burn out and I will be as blind as before, but painfully so. Gradually, though, the sharpness fades. Perhaps I am getting used to this, perhaps I can risk opening my eyes a little more. And so, little by little, oh so slowly, I bring my eyes fully open. I realise, I see, that the light is not all the same, that there is an infinite gradation within it. I see—are those colours? Are those shapes? That must be the water of the pool—always changing; there incredibly bright, there not bright, always in motion. It is so beautiful. I could stay here for ever looking at its liquid dancing.

As I move my head, move my eyes, I look down. This must be my body! Those must be my hands! I wiggle my fingers and, yes, the image before my eyes changes as I do. I stare in rapt wonder. I know my hands so well, the shape of them, the feel of the skin, the lumps and bumps of the joints. I know how it feels when I move them. And now I know what they look like! It is both a surprise and no surprise. What I had sensed, felt before, is so very similar to what I now see. But what I now see is so much more. They seem so real, so solid, somehow. So much light and dark and different colours (I think that's colour) and there is a sense of a kind of touching even though there is no contact. I move them gently side to side, palm to back. I bring them closer to my eyes, move them away again. My hands! How beautiful they are. How fearfully and wonderfully made!

The hands are half outstretched before me, the palms facing me, facing upwards. It is the position for prayer. "Oh LORD, my God how

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wonderful you are. Nothing is too great for you. You made me from nothing and everything I have is yours and now you have given me this gift of sight also. I am so blessed by you and awestruck that the king of the universe should come into my life and touch me, transform me, this way. I know that I have done nothing to deserve this and yet you give your power to me freely and without reservation. LORD you have changed my life. Help me to live a changed life now and always. Amen!

Then the words are done and I just sit in wordless praise and thanks. I have been touched by the presence of God and I want this moment to last for ever.

Eventually, though, I am gradually restored to this present reality. I hear sounds again, feel the hardness of the rock beneath my body, see the pool and the water's edge (*see! I can see!*) and know that it is time to go back to my home and my everyday world. So I rise and start my journey back.

It takes some getting used to, this seeing. I stand up and suddenly feel unsteady on my feet. The sensations crowd in on me and I am confused. I don't know the right words to describe what is happening: sights, images, visions—it's too much. So I close my eyes and the world seems familiar and safe again. I turn my back on the pool and move slowly towards the steps, opening my eyes a little and then quickly closing them again. It is hard but I am gradually getting the hang of it.

I come to the foot of the steps, open my eyes and look up. It is so high! So steep! The world may be a richer place when you can see but it is scarier too. Still, I have to admit that sight does help as I climb step by step and when I get to the top, I can see the path stretching out before me. That's so good. No longer will I have to feel from wall to wall. I can walk in the middle of the path and just go around any obstacles I see. This is amazing. I walk faster and faster, my fear turning into exhilaration as I do. Soon I am running and jumping and shouting with joy. I feel free! A freedom I have never known before. I can see! I can see—and the world is bigger, better, richer than I ever imagined it could be. What a gift he gave me, that Jesus. What a blessing. Whatever happens to me now I will always thank and praise him for what he has done for me.

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I am almost home now. I turn the corner and I see lots of shapes, moving shapes. They are people. I hear their voices and see them for the first time. The service in the synagogue is over and they are walking home, happy and contented. I recognise David's voice and call out to him. "David! David! Over here. It's me, James." One of the shapes turns and comes towards me. "James? Is that you? Are you looking at me?" "Yes, it is me; I can see."

Some of the others come up now. They start arguing about me. "That can't be the blind beggar," they say, "it is someone who looks like him." "No, it is him, I'm sure," says David. "Of course it's me," I say, "I'm still the same person but my life has been turned upside down and the world has become wonderful."

"How did this happen?" someone asks. "A passing teacher, he healed me. He made mud with his spit, put it on my eyes and told me to wash them in Siloam. And when I did, I could see. It is the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to me." "If it's true, it's certainly a wonder," says one of the men. "I think we should tell the Pharisees about this," says another and everyone seems to agree. Suddenly I find myself being hustled into the synagogue and into the presence of the assembled Pharisees.

There is a gabble of voices as everyone tries to explain at once. Then one of the Pharisees raises his hand for silence. I don't recognise him, of course, though his voice sounds familiar. "Bring him to me." I am pushed, jostled to the front. "Tell me your story," he demands. "Well sir, I was born blind and have been so these past twenty years. Then a man came and he put mud on my eyes and told me to wash in the Pool of Siloam and when I did, I could see!"

The gabble and babble breaks out again. This time the Pharisees are doing it too. I can't hear so well with my eyes open so I close them and listen closely. Fragments reach me: "It's a miracle!" "Who could do such a thing?" "God is with us." "Is this of God or of the evil one?" "Has the law been broken?" "We must find out more." The hubbub dies away and I open my eyes to find the same man with his hand raised. Is he the leader of the Pharisees?

"We have some questions. Firstly, who put this mud on your eyes?" "It was a man named Jesus, sir." There is a hiss and mutter from the Pharisees. "I see. Where did he get this mud?" "I think he took some

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earth from the ground, spat on it, and made the mud that way." "His own saliva? On your eyes?" "I think so. That's what it sounded like." The Pharisee snorted with disgust. "When did this happen? Why have we only just heard about it?" "It happened just this hour. I've only just come back from the pool." "It happened today?" "Yes, I've just said that!" I'm getting fed up with all these questions, and a little anxious too. I don't like the way this seems to be going.

The Pharisees are now talking amongst themselves again. "A healing like this must be from God." "How can it be when the Sabbath has been profaned?"

The Sabbath! Of course—this Jesus has healed me on the Sabbath. I must admit that because I was never much involved, the Sabbath never really meant much to me—but it certainly will now! The day of rest has become the day of healing for me. But was this wrong? Was it against the law? Was healing me 'work'? If so, surely it was God's own work so it must be OK—mustn't it?

The Pharisees are arguing about Jesus now. Some say he is a sinner because he broke the Sabbath rules. Others say that a sinner could not perform such a miracle. Suddenly the leader turns to me: "You! What have you got to say about this man Jesus?"

For a moment I don't know what to say. I know nothing of him except that he healed me. No, that isn't true. I have heard his voice, full of quiet authority. I have felt his touch, gentle and firm. I have known a deep peace when he put the mud on my eyes. I do know this man and I know that he is more than a man. "He is a prophet, sir. Sent from God." This is obviously not the answer they want. "This man is a babbler," says the chief Pharisee. "We'll get no sense out of him. Are his parents here?"

Two people step forward. My father and my mother! For the first time in my life I see them. My father, so tall compared to others, walking awkwardly. It's strange. I've heard that limp all my life—he broke his leg as a child—and now I can see it! And my mother, my own sweet soft warm mother, how good she looks to me, how beautiful. This miracle just goes on and on, getting more marvellous with every moment. Tears fill my eyes and I cannot see properly any more.

When I am able to see again, I realise that they are frightened. The Pharisees are asking about me, asking why I can see again. Of course,

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they do not know. "Ask him," they say, "he is of age." 'Yes, ask me.' I think. 'Leave my parents alone.' Which is exactly what they do.

Dismissing my mother and father, the Pharisees call me over again. "Give glory to God!" they say. "We demand that you tell us the truth. We know that this Jesus is a sinner." "I know nothing of him," I reply defensively. "I've never met him before today. Never heard of him either. I don't know if he is a sinner or not." And then my courage starts to return. "But one thing I do know," I say defiantly, "I was blind but now I can see! I can see you and you and you... and I never could until this very day."

"Tell us again, what did he do to you? How did he make you see again?" I'm getting fed up with this. God has come to me and has blessed me. This should be the happiest day of my life. But instead of rejoicing and praising Him I am stuck here undergoing interrogation. What do they think happened? That he cast a magic spell on me? That he conjured a demon to restore my sight? I've had enough of this: "I've already told you everything that happened. I have nothing else to add. Why are you so keen to know? Do you want to become his disciples?" Whoops! That's not a very smart thing to say. But they've got me so mad it just slips out—and I don't care.

"How dare you!" "We follow Moses and no-one else." "We know that Moses was a prophet but we know nothing about this man." Oh yes, they are angry all right. But so am I. "You know nothing about him? "Here is a man who can heal someone who was born blind. Have you ever known that to be done before? No, I thought not. And do you really think that any man could do this unless God was with him? A sinner could not possibly do such a thing. Only a man who is filled with the spirit of God could have healed me, and you know it. If he wasn't from God he could have done nothing."

Suddenly I realise that I am standing in the Synagogue lecturing the Pharisees about religion. This crazy day has just got crazier! I am not surprised at their response but the vehemence of it shocks me. The leader screams at me, flecks of his spittle spattering my face: "How dare you speak to us like that! You who were born in sin are now so steeped in sin that you can only speak evil and lies. You are unclean filth and you are defiling this house of prayer with your very presence. Get him out of here right now!"

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This last is addressed to a grey-haired man—the leader of the synagogue I guessed—who nods to a couple of the others. They walk up to me, lay hands on me and march, drag, me out of the synagogue and throw me down into the dust of the street.

For an age I lie there, stunned, shocked, bruised but mainly just ‘looking’ (oh, how easily that word slips into my mind, how joyously). The roadway is so beautiful. Tiny, tiny particles of dust and larger grains of sand. Sand—it feels so rough to the finger, it stings the face in a sand storm, it is sharp beneath freshly washed feet, but oh how lovely it looks.

As I move my head slowly the light reflects (?) from the individual grains. It glistens (?) in the sun. It shimmers (?) in the sunlight. So many words I’ve heard but never thought I’d get to use. And so many different colours (?) and shades (?). Sand is ‘brown’; I’ve heard plenty of people say that, though others say ‘yellow’ or even ‘white’, which has always confused me. But now I see that they are all right! Sand is brown and yellow and white and countless other colours too. Too many colours, not enough words...

Gradually the ecstasy of this reverie is invaded by noise. Footsteps, voices, coming nearer. I raise my eyes just a little. Two feet are approaching. They stop in front of me and I look a little higher. A hand comes into view, reaching for my hand. I grasp it and am helped up. The hand belongs to a man with smiling eyes. “Hello again,” he says, and immediately I know that this is Jesus. Not just because I recognise his voice but because I suddenly know, with a deep conviction, that it is him. “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” he asks. “Sir, who is that?” I reply though I think I already know the answer. “You are looking at him. You are talking to him,” says Jesus.

I am looking at him. Suddenly it all catches up with me: the mud, the pool, the light, the Pharisees, the sand, everything. I think of all the joy I’ve had; I think of what I said to the Pharisees: ‘How could this man do such a thing unless he was from God?’ and the utter deep truth of my own words hits me. This is the man who did these things. This is the man sent from God, the man who brought God to me! I fall to my knees and worship. “Lord,” I say, “Lord, I believe.”

I grasp his coat in my hands, squeezing it so tight (but even in my ecstasy noticing the weave of the fabric and how intricate it is). I cling

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on to his garment as he puts his hand on my head and I lean it against his legs. It is as if I am being held in my mother's arms again. It is as if I have come home for the first time in my life. It is as if a dam has burst and I am being drowned in love.

And now—now!—now I see. Though my eyes are blinded with tears, I see. From the depths of my heart, I see. There is no end to the greatness and goodness of God and this Jesus is the one who brings him close to us.

'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' Oh yes, with all my heart—because now I see the truth.

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NOTES

The account of the healing of the man born blind is told only by John, taking up the whole of the ninth chapter of his gospel. We do not know the name of the blind man.

The account takes place in Jerusalem, the capital of Judea. The Pool of Siloam may have originally been built during in the reign of King Hezekiah (2Kings 20:20). It was reconstructed in the first century BC but it seems to have been abandoned some time in the first century AD. The pool was rediscovered during an excavation work for a sewer in the autumn of 2004. The excavations revealed that the pool was 225 feet wide, with three flights of five steps leading down to it and that the steps existed on at least three sides of the pool.

The phrase, 'fearfully and wonderfully made' comes from Psalm 139, verse 14.

I have supposed that the blind man did not normally go to the synagogue, the meeting place for Sabbath prayers. This is a bit of a stretch on my part with some rather flimsy evidence to back it up.

What we do know is that blindness disqualified priests from sacrificing or approaching the altar (Leviticus 21:17–23) and rendered sacrificial animals unacceptable (Leviticus 22:21–22; Deuteronomy 15:21; Malachi 1:8).

Some have apparently taken the rather enigmatic saying, "the blind and the lame shall not come into the house" (2Samuel 5:8) to indicate that at one time blind people were forbidden entrance to places of worship. (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*: Blindness)

In the Mishnah, a collection of the sayings and opinions of the Pharisees and other Rabbis which was pulled together at the end of the second century AD, Rabbi Judah expressed the opinion that a blind man was exempt from all religious obligations. He also stated that a person blind from birth cannot recite the Shema, the Jewish daily prayer, since the first of the two introductory blessings is for the daily renewal of light (*The Mishnah*: Megillah 4.6).

The question of healing on the seventh day, the Sabbath, seems to have been a subject of debate among the Pharisees in Jesus' day. Some were very strict and forbade all healing, others would turn a

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blind eye to healing when life was threatened and still others made somewhat ingenious interpretations: "If [on the sabbath day] someone's teeth pain him he may not suck vinegar through them but he may take vinegar after his usual fashion [at a meal], and if he is healed, he is healed." (*The Mishnah: Tractate Sabbath 14:3*)

Jesus was clearly at the permissive end of the scale and this was what incensed the more conservative of the Pharisees. After all, the man had been blind from birth. He could have been healed the following day without any offence to a strict interpretation of the law. To them, Jesus' actions may have seemed deliberately provocative.

The prophet Ezekiel wrote, "A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own." [Ezekiel 18:20]