

Francis (Fanny) Jane Crosby

Legacies of Light, Part 7

John 9:3

Travel back to Israel in the early centuries and you would discover one particular handicap was so feared that it was always associated with the wrath of God.

In a word – blindness.

It would become the ultimate degradation imposed by conquering Generals – to put out the eyes of their defeated foe – assigning them to live, without being able to see.

Aristotle mentioned that in the Mediterranean region, blindness was hereditary – in other words, it was the result of someone in their family tree being blind.ⁱ

So you can imagine how people would refuse to marry someone related to blind person – they were terrified that it would somehow be inherited or passed along.

Blindness was considered irreversible.

And by the time Jesus Christ came to walk through this region, blindness was considered by everyone to be incurable.ⁱⁱ

Unless – don't miss this – unless God did a miracle.

Blindness was incurable except by the hand of God.

With that context in mind, turn in your Bibles to the Gospel by *John, chapter 9* and you'll now understand why the disciples asked the question they did and you'll also know why Jesus did what He did.

Notice verse 1. As He passed by, He [Jesus] saw a man blind from birth.

Notice – this is a grown man who had never been able to see – in other words, this is the most

irreversible case you can have – this guy is without a doubt, incurable.

Notice verse 2. And His disciples asked Him, Rabbi – teacher – who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?

The disciples have simply bought the religious answer to disabilities – somebody sinned . . . somebody's at fault.

Now obviously, disabilities can result from the impact of any number of things – poor medical care; drugs or alcohol or disease introduced prenatally; some kind of accident.

But even all of those things happen to be, according to a correct understanding of scripture, secondary causes of God's sovereign purpose.

In other words, God doesn't say, "Well, just look what your mother did while she was pregnant – or look at what the doctor did or didn't do when you were born – or look at what that accident did to you . . . or that crime against you."

God never says to you or me, "That particular event was out of My control – I'm so sorry it happened and there was nothing I could do about it."

That was the prevalent view in the First Century and even to this 21st Century . . . "Isn't that too bad . . . somebody did something wrong and God had nothing to do with it and this guy now has to pay for it for the rest of his life.

Somebody sinned.

Notice verse 3. Jesus answered, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.

Now that's shocking news.

And to this day, what Jesus just said is both alarming or comforting . . . God was behind this disability.

Jesus is effectively saying that everything is ultimately secondary to God's purposes which are primary.

Can you imagine?

Jesus Christ stuns all of them here by declaring that this man's lifelong disability was actually planned by God to bring glory to Christ – at this moment in time – and credibility to the gospel.

And that's because of what Jesus is about to do – he's about to turn this disabled man into a passionate, fearless, evangelist.

Notice verse 6. When He had said this, He spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle and applied the clay to his eyes, 7. And said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam."

You can read all sorts of fanciful and allegorical interpretations of what Jesus did here – I mean, why didn't He just command this man to see – what's all this about spitting on the ground and making mud . . . that sounds rather gross, doesn't it?

So it must mean that Jesus is metaphorically going back to the garden – He's going to make this man a new man, like Adam, out of the dust of the ground – the act will come from His mouth, just as God breathed on Adam, so the spittle comes from the mouth of Christ, etc. etc.

That all sounds really interesting . . . it'll probably sell some study guides one day, but it misses the point.

Jesus Christ, who knows the future, knows that He will use this blind man to confound the religious leaders – the Scribes and Pharisees.

So the first thing Jesus does is violate their rules of Sabbath keeping.

Instead of simply speaking so that this man is healed – He does what they would consider physical labor. He makes some mud.

The rabbis of Jesus' had defined the Sabbath rest so ridiculously so that it meant that a man couldn't carry a handkerchief in his hand from an upstairs room to a downstairs room; he couldn't light a lamp or put out a lamp on the Sabbath. He couldn't cut his fingernails or pull a stray hair out of his beard.ⁱⁱⁱ

In fact, women weren't even allowed to look in a mirror on the Sabbath because they would be tempted to fix something and more than likely engage in some kind of repair work . . . that would be work.

Jesus is actually setting up this conflict.

Furthermore, by making mud, Jesus is applying a poultice to this man's eyelids – as crude as it was.

Again, the Jewish leaders didn't allow any medical work on the Sabbath unless it was necessary to save someone's life.

They weren't allowed to treat a toothache or to even pour cold water on a sprained ankle.^{iv}

Jesus is obviously curing this man by intentionally breaking the traditions of the religious leaders that meant absolutely nothing to God; so He's working with His hands and He's obviously giving this man medical treatment.

In fact, did you notice that Jesus even prescribes a further remedy by telling the man **to go and wash himself off in the pool of Siloam.**

In other words, Jesus is deliberately setting up this conflict so that the religious leaders will be boxed into a corner where they will have to either rethink their religion of traditions or deny the obvious hand of God.

Blindness can only be cured by the hand of God, they believed. Jesus must be God incarnate – or at last empowered by God.

And so this man is cured and he engages with fearless courage the religious leaders in two different conversations – the crux of his defense of Christ boils down to **verse 32 – look there** – this cured man says, **"Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, He could do nothing."**

In other words, "How obvious can it be that this man represents God?"

They have nothing to say!

The only thing they can do is call him a sinner (verse 34) and kick him out of the temple.

He becomes an irrefutable testimony to the power of God through Jesus Christ – the Son of Man.

Imagine – God has allowed this man to suffer for his entire life – so that at this moment, he can most effectively establish a witness to the authenticity of the divine power of Jesus Christ.

Imagine, this man's disability was planned – it was purposed by God.

Forget the fact that he was healed – every believer will be healed one day too – God planned that this man would live the majority of his life, blind.

Why? Not because he sinned, or because his parents sinned, but so that the word of God might be displayed in him.

And to this day, beloved, believers who live with disabilities – yet to be cured – and yet testify to the divine power and grace of Jesus Christ – they become incredible, convicting witnesses to the work of God displayed through them.

I am so proud of our hearing impaired mission’s team we’ve just commissioned to go and reach hearing impaired people on a mission trip to the Island of Jamaica; uniquely qualified to reach that world with the gospel of Christ.

We are cheering you on as you fearlessly proclaim the grace of God through Jesus Christ.

In light of commissioning this team tonight, I couldn’t help but explore another illustration of this text we just read in John chapter 9.

The most prolific musical testimony in the history of the Christian church was a blind woman who testified courageously of her salvation. And I shall see Him face to face (she would write). And tell the story, saved by grace.

And 8,000 more hymns, copied more than 100 million times in more languages than any other hymn writer. In fact, she wrote under 200 different pen names because hymnal publishers didn’t want people to know she had entirely dominated the music scene.

She would have as many as 40 hymns churning away before writing them down - actually, she never wrote any of them down, because she was blind.

Her name was Francis Jane Crosby . . . her friends called her Fannie Crosby.

She wasn’t actually born blind. When she was 6 weeks old she caught a cold. The family physician was away at the time and a country doctor was called to treat her. He prescribed hot mustard poultices to be applied to her eyelids which had become swollen and inflamed with some sort of rash. The infection did clear up, but the treatment scarred her eyes and it wasn’t long after that Fannie’s parent’s realized she’d lost her sight.

It was later discovered that this particular doctor was not even qualified to practice medicine, but he’d left town in a hurry and was never heard of again.

When she was five years old, friends and neighbors pooled their funds to send her and her mother to see the best eye specialist in the country – a Dr. Valentine Mott. She never forgot his diagnosis

as he eventually said to her, “Poor child – I am afraid you will never see again.”^v

But that wasn’t her attitude at all.

In fact, the first poem she would compose – when she was only 8 years old goes like this:

*Oh, what a happy child I am,
Although I cannot see!
I am resolved that in this world
Contented I will be.*

*How many blessings I enjoy
That other people don’t!
So weep or sigh because I’m blind,
I cannot, and I won’t.*^{vi}

Fannie would later write, “If I could meet that doctor now, I would say, “Thank you, for making me blind. It [was] intended by the blessed providence of God that I should be blind all my life and I thank God for the [way He arranged it].”^{vii}

In this response you find a balance for the believer – the secondary cause might be a doctor unqualified to practice medicine – but the primary cause is the intentional plan and providence of God . . . so that His work would be displayed in us.

One ability God clearly gave Fannie – and early on it was displayed – was a photographic memory.

A neighbor took Fannie under her wing and taught her the Bible. By the time she was 10 years old, she could quote Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, the Book of Proverbs, most of the Psalms, as well as Matthew, Mark, Luke, John.

It was obvious that Fannie was capable of a formal education and so, when she was 12, they enrolled her in New York City’s famous Institution for the Blind.

She loved every subject – except mathematics.

She even wrote a little poem to voice her frustration – it went like this:

*I loathe, abhor, it makes me sick,
To hear the word Arithmetic!*^{viii}

I like that poem.

When she graduated, she became one of the institutions most famous teachers – and she would teach there for 11 years.

And she soon became famous for writing poetry – and secular songs. She even wrote the first secular

cantata by an American composer, called The Flower Queen. She was published twice with books of poetry.

She was incredibly passionate about politics too; in fact she knew at least 5 presidents personally as she lobbied in Washington for the education of the blind; she was the first woman ever to address the Senate – urging them through poetic lines to acknowledge the plight of the blind.

During the civil war she often pinned a miniature Union Flag to her dress to show her support for Abraham Lincoln. On one occasion, in a restaurant, a woman from the south found this offensive and snapped at her to take that dirty rag off. Fanny jumped to her feet and said, “Repeat that remark at your own risk.” The restaurant manager arrived in time to prevent a fight.^{ix}

Although Fannie Crosby knew so much of the scripture by heart, she didn’t know the Savior until she was 30 years old. She was attending a revival service in New York City’s where she didn’t resolve her spiritual need during the sermon, but during the closing hymn, written by Isaac Watts, she gave her life to Christ.

The lyrics were, Alas and did my Savior bleed and did my Sovereign die, would He devote that sacred Head for such a worm as I.”

She would later say in an interview – when we began to sing that 5th stanza – and when we reached the third line – Here, Lord, I give myself away, tis all that I can do.” I did just that.^x

Now, up to this point Fannie had yet to write one sacred hymn. She had written music that was sung by minstrel’s on city stages, and published secular volumes of poetry – but not one hymn.

In fact, it would be 10 years later – when she met William Bradbury, the famous hymn writer and publisher, and he challenged her to write for the gospel sake – to use her talents for Christ.

On the spot, she agreed and within a matter of days, sent her first hymn text to him for publication. She was forty years of age.

She would go on to write more than 8,000 hymns over the course of the next 51 years.

She had a personal prayer request that her music would be instrumental in leading 1 million people to faith in Jesus Christ.

I have little doubt that was achieved.

A man by the name of Ira D. Sankey – who sang for D. L. Moody began singing her songs in their revival meetings. 100 years later, George Beverly

Shea and Cliff Barrows would sing her songs in Billy Graham crusades.

She came to faith in Christ at the singing of a hymn – and God in turn used her to display His glory as many, no doubt, have come to faith in Christ by the singing of hers.

Let me pull from her personal testimony three observations:

1. **First, usability in one area of life is often created when we accept our inability in other areas of life.**

What makes her testimony so compelling is her submission to an incredibly difficult life – as nothing less than joyful submission to the providence of God.

Frankly, she – and many others – remains a challenge for us today in so many areas where we might spend their lives pining away at doors the Lord has bolted shut, instead of looking for doors the Lord has already opened.

Instead of developing resentment or resignation, she maximized it so that ultimately the work of God, truly was displayed in and through her.

2. **Secondly, victory over one issue of suffering doesn’t guarantee victory over every issue**

Again, the study of someone’s life not only brings up their successes, but it reveals their failures.

Fannie married a former student who had also enrolled at the Institution for the Blind. They got to know each other over the course of several years and had fallen in love. He, although blind, had become an outstanding organist.

A year after their marriage, they had their only child – a daughter – whom they named Frances. Sadly, not long after her birth, she died from typhoid fever.

Fannie’s husband, Van grew more and more reclusive in grief. In fact, for the rest of her life, Fannie herself never spoke publically about being a mother until near the end of her life when she opened up about her years of sorrow.

Eventually, after years of living together intermittently, Fannie and Van separated. Most biographers and historians conclude that this was the result of Van’s reclusive resentment to the pain and sorrow of losing his little girl.

It was one thing to deal with the disability of blindness – it was too much to deal with the grief of death.

Fannie would respond by writing a hymn she entitled, *Safe in the Arms of God*.

Fannie would spend the remaining 20 years of her life, as a guest of wealthy patrons who appreciated and supported her as she composed hymn after hymn that longed for heaven.

One more observation:

3. Thirdly, disability – both its cause and its cure – is ultimately in the hand of our sovereign Lord.

In other words, it should be our testimony that the grace of God and the trustworthiness of Jesus are sufficient, even during the deepest trials.

- Why was this man born blind in John chapter 9?
- Why did God allow Fannie Crosby to be misdiagnosed?
- Why do you even now suffer from your disabilities?

Frankly, suffering is the universal language of the human race. All of you suffer, somewhere – somehow.

Why? So that as you demonstrate trust in the grace and purposes of God – *the works of God might be displayed through you*.

You happen to be a sheet of music upon which a perfect, loving, intentionally creative Lord is composing the harmony of His glory and His grace – and one day – one day, the tables will be turned – and those who suffered most will sing the loudest.

Don't ever think that seeing the Father's house will mean the same thing to you in the same way as it will be to someone who was blind.

Don't think for a moment that walking down golden streets beside the river of life and kneeling at the feet of Jesus will be the same for you as it will be for someone who couldn't walk or speak.

Frankly, I think God in His grace typically – not always – but typically takes all of our physical and mental abilities away over time to make us both long for heaven all the more and then enjoy it even more when we get there.

You just so happen to be – even now in your disabilities and sufferings and sorrows – you are – according to God's unique plan – a display of the glory and grace of God.

Fannie Crosby died at the age of 94 – having displayed the work of God through her life.

She would say near the end of her life: “How in the world could I have lived such a helpful life, as I have, were it not that I was blind . . . I have always believed that by this means the Lord consecrated me to the work that I [have been] permitted to do. When I remember how I have been so blessed, how can I complain?”^{xi}

Little wonder that on her memorial headstone are the words to perhaps her most famous hymn – lyrics that reflected her joy and her trust in Christ – her trust in that coming day she has since gone on to celebrate which caused her to live and write with such confidence and joy:

*Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine
Oh what a foretaste of glory divine
Heir of salvation, purchase of God
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.*

*This is my story, this is my song
Praising my Savior, all the day long;
This is my story, this is my song
Praising my Savior, all the day long.*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/27/2013 by Stephen Davey.

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i Kenneth O. Gangel, *Holman New Testament Commentary: John* (Holman, 2000), p. 189

ii Adapted from Gangel, p. 189

iii James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John* (Zondervan, 1985), p. 604

iv Ibid

v www.earnestlycontending.com/KT/bios/fannycrosby.html

vi Warren W. Wiersbe, 50 People Every Christian Should Know (Baker Books, 2009), p. 102

vii Adapted from Wiersbe, p. 101

viii Ibid, p. 103

ix www.christianitytoday.com/print/11630385

x www.wholesomewords.org/biography/bcrosby3.html

xi Adapted from <http://theworksofgod.com/2010/10/26/fanny-crosby-knew-suffering.html>