* **Apostles Creed**
* **Series Slide**
* Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (Soul-jah-neetz-sin) was born in Russia in 1918. His father was killed in a hunting accident while his mother was pregnant with him, so he was raised on a farm by his single mother. During the civil war that followed the Bolshevik revolution, that family farm was taken from them by the government in the name of Communism.
* He fought on the front lines of WWII with the Red Army, and that’s where his mind began to change about the Soviet Union.
* In that war, he saw Soviet soldiers and army officials commit stomach- turning evil… so brutal that I’ve decided not to mention them out loud in this public space. That led him to criticize Stalin and the Soviets in private letters to friends, for which he was arrested as a traitor. After an interrogation, he was torn from his wife, and sentenced without trial to 8 years in a labor camp. There, Solzhenitsyn witnessed and was the victim of more gross injustice and devaluing of human life. Often, people were worked to death or froze to death. In fact, from 1919-1959, the Stalin regime was responsible for more than 20 million deaths. Seeing and experiencing this suffering inspired to Solzhenitsyn to write literature. Sometimes, he had to write without benefit of pencil and paper. He would just memorize poems in his head and then write them down later when he had access to resources.
* After being released from the work camps for Soviet Dissenters, known as the Gulag, Soul-jah-nee-tzin found out he had cancer that went unnoticed in the Gulag. He was eventually cured, but his time in the hospital battling cancer gave him another front row seat to not only his own pain, but watching others suffer as well.
* Yet, it was in the darkness of the Soviet prison camp that his own spiritual awakening began- one that led him to embrace Christianity. He wrote later about that time, **“Bless you prison, bless you for being in my life. For there, lying upon the rotting prison straw, I came to realize that the object of life is not prosperity as we are made to believe, but the maturity of the human soul.”- Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn**
* Solzhenitsyn is most known for 2 literary works.One is his 1967 novel based on his time fighting his disease entitled “Cancer Ward”. The other is his extensive non-fiction description of the Soviet work camps entitled “The Gulag Archipelago”. In its entirety, its over 2000 pages. Its cited as being one of the key factors in exposing the evils of the Soviet Union and eventually bringing down the communist party in Russia.
* **Title Slide- “God in the Gulag: How Anger and Guilt Blind Us to God’s Work in Suffering”- John 9**
* Its strange how humans react to suffering in opposite ways. We typically think that the reality of pain and suffering is an argument against God’s love or even existence. Yet, in Solzhenitsyn’s case…and millions of others….it actually led him to trust not merely in the existence of God…but in a God who is loving and present.
* So what’s the difference? How do you become a person that when suffering comes- you see GOD in the Dark and hear him in the silence?
* That’s what we’re going to see from John chapter 9 today.
* **John 9:1-41**
* **As he was passing by, he saw a man blind from birth.**
* **2 His disciples asked him: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? ”**
* **3 “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” Jesus answered.“This came about so that God’s works might be displayed in him. 4 We must do 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 After he said these things he spit on the ground, made some mud from the saliva, and spread the mud on his eyes. 7 “Go,” he told him,“wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means “Sent”). So he left, washed, and came back seeing.**
* **8 His neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar said, “Isn’t this the one who used to sit begging? ” 9 Some said, “He’s the one.” Others were saying, “No, but he looks like him.”**
* **He kept saying, “I’m the one.”**
* **10 So they asked him, “Then how were your eyes opened? ”**
* **11 He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and told me,‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ So when I went and washed I received my sight.”**
* At this point, Jesus disappears and the man is taken to the religious leaders called the Pharisees- and what follows is a series of 5 conversations as the Pharisees interrogate the man and his parents with the aim of proving that because Jesus healed the man on the Sabbath, that he must be a demon-possessed sinner and therefore must be ostracized and killed.
* Now, lets pick back up on the end of the Pharisees final interrogation of the artist formerly known as the blind man.
* **26 Then they asked him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes? ”**
* **27 “I already told you,” he said, “and you didn’t listen. Why do you want to hear it again? You don’t want to become his disciples too, do you? ”**
* **28 They ridiculed him: “You’re that man’s disciple, but we’re Moses’s disciples. 29 We know that God has spoken to Moses. But this man ​— ​we don’t know where he’s from.”**
* **30 “This is an amazing thing! ” the man told them. “You don’t know where he is from, and yet he opened my eyes. 31 We know that God doesn’t listen to sinners, but if anyone is God-fearing and does his will, he listens to him. 32 Throughout history no one has ever heard of someone opening the eyes of a person born blind. 33 If this man were not from God, he wouldn’t be able to do anything.”**
* **34 “You were born entirely in sin,” they replied, “and are you trying to teach us? ” Then they threw him out.**
* **35 Jesus heard that they had thrown the man out, and when he found him, he asked,“Do you believe in the Son of Man? ”**
* **36 “Who is he, Sir, that I may believe in him? ” he asked.**
* **37 Jesus answered, “You have seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.”**
* **38 “I believe, Lord! ” he said, and he worshiped him.**
* **39 Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment, in order that those who do not see will see and those who do see will become blind.”**
* **40 Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard these things and asked him, “We aren’t blind too, are we? ”**
* **41 “If you were blind,” Jesus told them, “you wouldn’t have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.**

**Transition:** This healing is one of 7 signs that John writes about in his gospel to help us see who Jesus is and what he’s after.

* Remember, Jesus’ miracles are signs that point us to what the Kingdom of God is like. In this case, it points not only to the physical fact that there will be no handicaps like blindness when Jesus comes back and brings his Kingdom, but it also points to a spiritual reality…about how you enter God’s Kingdom in the first place. And that has a lot to do with how you approach pain and suffering in your life.
* **1) Suffering is your chance to get angry, feel guilty, or see God at work.**
  + The death of someone you love.
  + The pain of a spouse that continually hurts you.
  + or being single when you want to be married.
  + Or being childless when you want to have children.
  + Or larger societal injustices like slavery or the systemic racism that was left in its wake.
  + Suffering in all its forms prompts many of us to one of two responses- sometimes we experience both simultaneously.
  + We either blame someone outside of us in anger…or we blame ourselves in a continual feeling of guilt.
  + **V 2-3**
  + This is what the disciples assume about this blind man.
  + They assume either that the man has sinned and his blindness is God’s punishment for that…which means he’s guilty…
  + …or that his parents sinned and this is God’s way of punishing them…which means he can blame his parents in anger.
  + I find it interesting that Christianity is often accused of giving pat answers to difficult problems, like the nature of suffering. But when Jesus actually offers something different. He says, “Neither of your pat understandings of suffering is right.” He says, “this man was born blind so that the works of God could be displayed in him.”
  + In other words, Jesus moves the focus from “who’s to blame for this suffering?” to “Open your own eyes and watch God work in this suffering.”
  + The anger track goes like this:
  + If I am suffering, somebody out there is to blame.
  + I have to find somebody to pin this on.
  + So Republicans blame Democrats for joblessness, and Democrats blame Republicans for racism.
  + Parents blame their kids for making them angry all the tiem and kids blame their parents for their boredom.
  + We get angry in our suffering and blame God. This is often worse with Christians who think “I have made all these commitments to you, God, and my life just keeps getting worse!”
  + Then there’s the guilt side of things.
  + Instead of looking outward for blame, we look inward.
  + If I’m suffering it must be because I’ve done something wrong.
  + Sometimes we combine both of these responses.
  + A child whose parents divorce can simultaneously be angry at their parents for the choice they made at the same time they blame themselves.
  + As human beings, we are constantly trying to determine a cause and effect. If suffering is happening to me, somebody somewhere must have done something to cause it.
  + But Jesus here shifts the focus. He says to his disciples, “Don’t go down the guilt or the anger path. Suffering doesn’t always have a particular sin to trace back to. If you spend your time looking for that, you will be blinded to what God is doing…and if you miss that…you miss everything.
* **Transition:** So now, lets see what these works of God are.
* **2) God works in suffering to mature you in humility and fearlessness. Blindness to God’s work leaves you self-righteous** **and defensive.**
  + In this passage Jesus carries forward two ideas from what he revealed about himself at the Festival of Tabernacles in chapter 7 and chapter 8.
  + **V 4-5**
  + He makes the claim again that he is the Light of the World.
  + It's a statement about God’s presence with humanity in the darkness. Like God led Israel through he dark, cold desert with a pillar of fire- Jesus is saying, “I am that God”
  + Notice, that Jesus is saying there not only that he is the light of the world and has been sent to accomplish something, so he says everyone who experiences this light is also sent by God to do God’s works.
  + **V 7**
  + Jesus sends the blind man to wash the mud off of his eyes in the Pool of Siloam (which means Sent). At the festival Jesus invited everyone to come to him and drink and he would make a well of living water spring up and flow out of them. Additionally, all through Jesus’ time at the festival, he spoke over and over about being “Sent” from his Father on a mission from which he could not be deterred.
  + With both of these metaphors, Jesus is pointing something out that you must understand if you are going to look for the works of God in suffering.
* **Back to 2)**
  + Light is sent into darkness…to change darkness to light that can be sent again into darkness.
  + Water is sent into dryness…that creates a kind of flourishing spring that can bring flourishing to more dry places.
  + In other words, God’s plan is not for you to trust and obey Jesus…and then for all the light to separate from the Darkness. He sends us.
  + God’s plan is not to create a bunch of streams of living water that merely flow into themselves while the world outside is dying of thirst. He saves and sends.
  + God does his work in you…to also do his work in the world.
  + But, if he is going to make you into light that drives out darkness and water that sustains life in a desert, well, that takes a lot of maturing. Particularly in the area of humility and fearlessness.
  + Humility, because if you lose focus on God and others and turn your eyes onto yourself…and what you think you do or don’t deserve…you will miss God in the dark.
  + And fearlessness- because its never easy walking into pain, suffering- darkness and dryness.
  + So, lets take a look at this blind man, and also the Pharisees, because they are on 2 different tracks. The blind man is slowly seeing more and more light. Maturing…understanding who Jesus is and who he is.
  + The Pharisees, though, they completely miss it. They don’t change at all…except to get more angry and defensive.
  + First, watch the progression of this blind man.
  + **V11-**
  + His first take on Jesus is that he is a man.
  + He simply describes the events as they happened.
  + Then after listening to the Pharisees talk about Jesus as if he is evil, the healed man realizes that he is going to have to take sides.
  + **V 17**
  + SO when they asked him again, he takes a step further toward putting his lot in with Jesus. He says that Jesus is a prophet.
  + Now earlier in John chapter 5, there was another guy that Jesus healed by a pool on the Sabbath. But that guy, ended up ratting Jesus out to the Pharisees. That man took his healing and then turned on Jesus. There was no repentance, no belief. Only self-preservation.
  + But here, in John chapter 9, its almost like John is writing so that we see the proper response to Jesus. This guy is taking a different path than the man by the pool in Bethesda. This guy is going to stand up to the Pharisees…fearlessly.
  + The Pharisees then ask his parents about the healing.
  + V **20-21**
  + Notice what they say.
  + Sure, this is our son- but you need to ask him again who how this happened.
  + **V22**
  + This seems innocent enough, but John provides a little commentary here that exposes what is actually going on.
  + This man has told his parents what happened. They know the details. They are not ignorant to Jesus’ compassion and power. He healed their son.
  + But…they are afraid of the Pharisees.
  + Because the Pharisees have the power to ban them from Synagogue. That would mean being ostracized in their society. It would be bad for their business, bad for their social lives. It would push them into a very dark and dry place.
  + So they throw it back to their son in fear, rather than speaking up for Jesus and standing with their son.
  + **V24-25**
  + …and even though this man understands the danger…he won’t back down. The Pharisees sort of give him an ultimatum. They tell him, “We aren’t really looking for you to clear things up for us. There is only one position. If you are going to give glory to God, you have to say this man is a sinner.”
  + The Pharisees aren’t looking for the truth. They are looking to keep their position as top-dogs in the religious sector in Israel.
  + **V 26-27**
  + So they press him again, and this time we see the outright fearlessness that Jesus’ faithfulness has created in this man.
  + He fires back at them- “Gee, you guys sure are asking lots of questions about Jesus. It almost sounds like you’d like be one of his disciples. After all, only disciples ask this many questions about their Rabbi.
  + It's a little cheeky, isn’t it?
  + **V 28-29**
  + Now, the Pharisees fire back in defensiveness and self-righteousness in the 1st century equivalent of “I know you are but what am I?”
  + You’re one of his disciples! No YOU ARE!
  + And they use this opportunity to make their righteousness clear. “We are Moses’ disciples. God spoke through Moses- but this man- he’s a nobody.”
  + We’ve got our theology down…and anyone who’s not on our team doesn’t understand God.
  + What irony. They are missing God by claiming to know God.
  + Sadly, that still happens today…probably, its happening in this room right now.
  + **V 32-33**
  + The man says, “Look, no one has ever done this in history. It only follows that this man is from God.” So now he has progressed from calling Jesus a man…then to a prophet….now as “from God”.
  + He’s maturing. He’s growing in humility (not making this about himself) and in fearlessness (willing to confront the evil accusations of the Pharisees).
  + **V 34**
  + The Pharisees then respond with another defensive and self-righteous claim.
  + You…a dirty sinner (which we know you are because why else would God have made you blind)…you a dirty sinner are going to teach us…we’re the guys that know everything about God. You should shut up and listen to us. This is appaling.
  + Do you see their insecurity. They can’t stand that someone who they as beneath them would contradict them.
  + …Its almost as if they don’t even see that the blind man is healed. They only see him as the blind man. The Pharisees, miss the work of God in this man’s suffering…and in so doing…they miss God when they feel threatened.
  + **V 35**
  + So the Pharisees throw the man out. More suffering. Now he’s not blind, but he’s ostracized and cut off from his community.
  + And, just like Jesus came back to the man he healed at Bethesda, so he comes back to this man…never leaving him alone in his suffering.
  + He asks “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”
  + Jesus is referring to the Messianic prophecy of God descending from the clouds in victory from Daniel 7.
  + **V 36-37**
  + Jesus says, “The Son of Man is speaking with you right now”
  + …and finally, we have the end of this compacted version of a maturing disciple.
  + **V 38**
  + He has moved from calling Jesus a man, to a prophet, to being FROM GOD, and now…in this act of worship…declares Jesus God.
  + In the ultimate act of humility and fearlessness…He must increase, I must decrease…this man makes a statement with his life…and bows before Jesus…unafraid of the consequences.
  + Things end differently for the Pharisees
  + **V 40-41**
  + They come to Jesus and ask “Do you think we’re blind?”
  + This is not an honest question…as if they will change their minds if Jesus says “Yes”. They have already, in defensiveness and self-righteousness made their minds up about themselves…and about Jesus.
  + They know they see. They see better than anyone. And if you don’t see what the Pharisees see…they think…then you are blind.
  + Jesus says in reply, “Its too bad you aren’t blind. You need to experience that darkness to realize you need the light. But, since you think you see…since you have studied the TORAH…know all the law… and think that by it you are right and everyone else is wrong about you…well..your sin remains.
  + You will be defensive and self-righteous all the way to hell.
  + Its pity you weren’t born blind like this man.
  + Or as Aleksandr Solhenitsyn put it.
  + **“Bless you prison, bless you for being in my life. For there, lying upon the rotting prison straw, I came to realize that the object of life is not prosperity as we are made to believe, but the maturity of the human soul.”- Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn**
* **Back to 2)**
  + This weekend we celebrate the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
  + Dr. King was an example of this humility and fearlessness. In the face of people like Birmingham’s governor Bull Connor, who gave support to the racially motivated bombings in his city…because he was fearful and self-righteous and wanted to hold on to his racist way of life.
  + Yet, fearlessly and with humility, Dr. King went to Birmingham peacefully to protest segregation…and was arrested. There from that jail cell he wrote a now world famous letter in which he called on white pastors to be humbly fearless, and stand up with him --instead of being like the blind man’s parents who simply passed the buck and tried to stay safely in the middle.
  + We’ve seen this throughout history. When people follow Jesus closely…they mature into humble and fearless people…unafraid of jail, or death, or losing social or political clout.
  + And the ones that seek to hold onto to power, or money, or status…those that become defensive and self-protective…they end up losing everything.
  + There is no middle ground. You are either growing in Christ in humility and fearlessness… or falling deeper into self-righteous defensiveness.
  + Because you will always be trying to keep yourself out of suffering…out of positions that challenge you and call you to sacrifice…and in so doing…you will miss the very trial that God may be bringing to do his deepest work in you.
  + If you have the light, you don’t have to be afraid of the dark.
  + If you have a spring flowing out of you, you can walk into the desert fearlessly.
  + And the result will be life.
  + During his time in the Red Army, all around him Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn saw people who were afraid to speak up about the injustices of Communism.
  + He eventually did, and paid a high price for it.
  + He wrote in the Gulag Archipelago- **“Every man always has handy a dozen glib little reasons why he is right not to sacrifice himself.”- Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn**
  + So many of us have those glib little reasons handy for Jesus. About why his call to follow him into a life of cross-bearing doesn’t really mean a life that is difficult.
  + Or how we’re Americans and so we all deserve to make a certain amount of money, and we are all free to use our freedoms anyway we see fit.
  + Yet, it is in making the sacrifice…it is in taking the light into darkness, that the light will become stronger…the river will become more fierce…and more and more people will worship Jesus.
* **Transition:**
* You know what the Pharisees missed. They could have used another line from the Gulag Archipelago…probably Solzhenitsyn’s most memorable line in all his works.
* **“The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart.”- Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn**
* If the Pharisees would have been blind they could have seen. But because they thought they saw, they remained blind.
* If they would have seen not that they were better than this blind man, but that they, like him, had were guilty of sin, then they could have understood that Jesus himself came challenging them so that they could repent…and finally see God.
* **3) We suffer because we forgot God. Jesus suffers because God remembered us.** 
  + At the first of this passage, Jesus tells his disciples that this blind man isn’t suffering because of anyone’s particular sin.
  + In other words, just because we are suffering doesn’t mean that it directly connects to something we did to deserve it.
  + But the Scripture does teach us that we all are suffering because of sin in general.
  + Humanity rejected God as our King…and as our Father…and as our source of life. And so, we cut ourselves off from him…and began to die.
  + That’s the story on page 3 of the Bible that echoes throughout all the other pages.
  + So, in some ways, all of our suffering is connected to someone’s sin. Either ours, our neighbors, or Adam and Eve’s.
  + In a speech that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn gave late in his life…he gets at this idea.
  + **“Over a half century ago, while I was still a child, I recall hearing a number of old people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia: "Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened." Since then I have spent well-nigh 50 years working on the history of our revolution; in the process I have read hundreds of books, collected hundreds of personal testimonies, and have already contributed eight volumes of my own toward the effort of clearing away the rubble left by that upheaval. But if I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous revolution that swallowed up some 60 million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: "Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened.”- Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn**
  + In other words, in all of his experience and study of the evil that happened in Russia…he came back to the simple answer that was given him 50 years prior. “Men have forgotten God”.
  + When we forget about God in order to go our own way…we will do any evil and justify it as good.
  + But, when we turn back to practicing God’s presence…to remembering him…he makes us into the very instruments that challenge evil and bring about the good.
  + But there’s a problem.
  + If evil goes right through the heart of man…and God is doing away with evil to remake the world…then that means he’s going to do away with us.
  + Jesus gets at this in verse 39.
  + **V 39**
  + He says, I’m coming into the world to bring judgment. To separate the evil from the good.
  + But don’t miss the hope in this statement.
  + He says those who do note see, will see.
  + In Jesus God has made away for those of us who are blind to our own sin…those who have forgotten God …he has made a way to come back to him.
  + Just like Jesus comes to this man in his darkness, pursues and loves him… so he has come to all of us.
* **Back to 3)**
  + - Suffering, the brokenness of the world, is not the way God wants this world to be…and so he has determined not to leave it like that.
  + In his
    - General source of suffering is sin, though not always the particular
    - Solzhenitsyn quote.
* **Men have forgotten God.**
* **MATURITY OF THE HUMAN SOUL**- pay attention to the blind man maturing…and the stagnation (or degradation) of the Pharisees
  + The immaturity of the Pharisees when he suggests they want to follow Jesus…
  + …the Fearlessness of the formerly blind man in confronting the Pharisees.
* **Use his “right down the middle of the human heart quote to show the Pharisees inability to see their own sin..and Jesus’ righteousness. (He’s on the wrong team, therefore we must kill him)**
  + Those on the side of evil believe themselves to be unmistakably on the side of good
* The disciples question about suffering seems to assume that “Men have forgotten God”.
* “Men have forgotten God”- rather than God has forgotten man
* One day in the life of- exposed the camps
* Gulag Archipelago- 3 volumes- about 700 pgs apiece.
  + Deaths around 60 mil between 1919-1959
  + (not including WWII)
* Best way to combat evil- TRUTH
* We have to condemn publicly the very idea that some people have the right to repress others. In keeping silent about evil, in burying it so deep within us that no sign of it appears on the surface, we are implanting it, and it will rise up a thousandfold in the future.”
* The nature of suffering and the ability of people to find contentment in the gulag.
* **“They were people who had withdrawn so deeply into the life of the mind that no bodily suffering could upset their spiritual equilibrium.”**
* Stoic approach to life “Satiety depends not at all on how much we eat, but on how we eat. It's the same with happiness, the very same… happiness doesn’t depend on how many external blessings we have snatched from life. It depends only on our attitude toward them. There’s a saying about it in the Taoist ethic: ‘Whoever is capable of contentment will always be satisfied.’”
* contentment
* Trev-equipoise
* 1) The growth of the blind man, and the non-growth of the Pharisees
* 2) The fact that suffering is generally the result of sin, but not in particular
  + Prevents us from being Angry cynic
  + Prevents us from being guilt riddled
* 3) Productive suffering doesn’t spend all its time on WHY DID THIS HAPPEN? But on WHERE IS THIS LEADING?
  + Does not mean we don’t try to prevent suffering and learn from it.
  + I mean tearing apart philosophically
* Our mistakes when we think about suffering.
  + Mud seems to make things worse…
* Spiritually blindness
* Connection of Pool of SENT, Light of the world with living water and light of the world
* **Cards for Mike**
* 1) Understand the nature of darkness (Suffering)
* 2) Understand the nature of blindness (Inability to respond to the truth)
* 3) Understand what happens when you can see, even in the darkness (You don’t get angry from suffering anymore
  + growth, maturity that you see in the worshiping blind man that can see
  + The stagnate angry nature of the Pharisees that “can see”