

Interview with John Knight: Part 1

Conducted by John Piper

John Piper: John Knight is the Director of Development at Desiring God, and he's here with me. Sixteen years ago, John and Dianne, his wife, were, I presume, very happily and joyfully anticipating the birth of their first child. He would be named Paul. I think Paul Knight is a powerful name. And when he was born, it was manifest to the medical folks and to John and Dianne that he was blind, because he had no eyes. This was a blow like not all parents receive.

And last Sunday, I guess that would be May 22, 2011, I preached from John 9:1-3, where Jesus sees a man born blind, and the disciples jump on the issue of cause and say, Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? And Jesus responds, It was neither this man, nor his parents, that he was born blind — now, that starts to feel like relief, but then he says, but that the works of God might be manifest in him, which I argued in the sermon means God ordained this birth of this blindness and this man for the works of God to be plain in him.

And I knew you were there and listening, and I knew, because I know you, how you presently are hearing that kind of message. I knew you would have a deep, painful, loving appreciation of that truth, because you have a blog. Give me the name of it.

John Knight: The Works of God.

JP: Dot —

JK: Dot-com.

JP: Dot-com, taken from John 3, basically.

JK: John 9, yes.

JP: John 9:3, The Works of God. So you presently are celebrating God's sovereignty in the life of your son and yourself, but it was not always so, so what we want to take a few minutes to talk about is — is what it was like at the beginning, what people did to help, what happened in — and because when I was done with this sermon, I prayed for, if you took all three services together, I don't know, an hour or so with people, most of whom either themselves or knew somebody who are not where you are right now. The bitterness is still there, the confusion, the anger is still there, and they were asking me, "What can I do, or where do I go?" So you and I would like to help those folks.

JK: Yes.

JP: We don't want to get on their case and make life harder for them.

JK: That's right.

JP: We want to — to do something. So my first question, John, is talk to us about those — those early days, because there's probably hundreds of parents who are going to watch this and say, "We're where John was 16 years ago, not where he is today." What — what was it like?

JK: It was thrilling for about fifteen seconds. My boy came, it was just before noon the 4th of July 1995, a very much anticipated birth. And the nurse was cleaning him up and said, "I think we have a problem here." And there was a quality in her voice that I knew this — this was a big problem; this was not a little problem. And because he was without eyes, they could tell us right away that he had no sight at all, and they were without eyes, they could tell us right away that he had no sight at all, and they were concerned about other issues then. So a whole series of specialists came trooping through, some of whom were just curious to see a boy without eyes. That's unusual. I didn't realize that at the time. I realize it today. They were simply curious. And so we didn't have the — the typical sort of celebration of new birth and the time with — with our boy. He was taken here and there.

And I was devastated and Dianne was devastated. And very early on, important things happened. I called my dad, and the first thing I said, "Paul is here, Paul Harland —" my dad is Harland Paul "— is here." Oh, much rejoicing, I could hear it in the background. "And he's blind." And my dad said, "It's going to be okay." And I knew what that meant. I knew what that meant. My dad lost his dad when he was 17. My dad is a godly man who taught me to love the Word. I knew he wasn't going to give up on me. I wasn't sure about me with this boy at that moment, frankly, but I knew my dad wasn't going to give up on me.

We were the good family at church, John. We volunteered for things, came to church every Sunday, went to Sunday school. We were the nice young couple, and just as proud and self-righteous as could be sitting in your pews. I came to your church because it was a smart church. I thought I was a Christian. But it was about two months later, when Paul was hooked up to more tubes and sensors, surrounded by medical professionals over at Children's in Minneapolis, I just came to the conclusion, "God, you are strong, that's true, and you are wicked. You are mean. You're capricious. Do it to me. Do it to me, not to this boy. What did he ever do to you?" That was September 29, 1995.

And so we separated ourselves from church. We quit our small group and quit the Sunday school, quit coming to church. And the church wasn't as big as it is today, but it was plenty big.

JP: Dianne having similar feelings?

JK: Very much so. Very much so. I didn't — we walked out together. And here's — here's a couple of things that happened that were really, really important. There was one couple, one couple — not in our small group, not really well connected to them at all, I knew them a little bit — and for

some reason, God placed us on their hearts, and they said, “We will not let you go.” and they did it in a really curious way, because lots of people were praying for us, lots of people were sending us notes — I still have the note that you sent the day after he was born. It’s like gold to me today. It wasn’t for a season, but today it is.

They would invite us over for dinner. And Gerrilyn would just drive by and drop off bread that she had made, and, “I was thinking about you,” and leave. Not a big deal. There wasn’t heavy prayer or, “I’m going to lead you into the Word.” It was just, “I notice you. I see you. I know you’re hurting. I love you. I know you like bread.”

And I remember the day clearly — Dianne doesn’t remember it all. Gerrilyn came, one of her drive-bys — that’s what we started calling them. “Wonder when the next drive-by is going to be?” And it was full of soap and shampoo, nice soap. And I’m thinking, what in the world? But on reflection years later, she was recognizing my wife as a woman who might like to have smelly soap. It was — it was deep, these affections.

And I — to my shame, I would sit at their table having dinner with the prayers, and their four children, at the time ages nine to sixteen — so there’s a nine-year-old boy sitting at that table, and here’s the words I’m saying. “Believe what you want, Karl. I don’t care. I don’t care. I have evidence that God is cruel,” and I would point to my son.

Mature man. He didn’t even engage. It was like, where did it go? “I love you, John. I have regard for you. I love your boy.” And then his children would do the confounding thing of just treating my son like a little boy. Paulie looks different. He doesn’t have eyes. That’s evident. The autism at that time we didn’t know about, the significant —

JP: Don’t pass that too quick. Describe the present situation and then go back. Autism, you said?

JK: Yes, Paulie is a complicated young man. He lives with autism, he’s significantly cognitively impaired — hard to measure, because the blindness and the autism confound each other when they try and measure it. He lives with growth hormone deficiency, so he’s very small. He’s 15, almost 16, and he’s about 50 pounds. For the past year and a half, we’ve been dealing with an undiagnosed seizure-like disorder. They don’t want to call it a seizure. It’s hard on him. It’s hard on all of us to watch him. He doesn’t eat well. He doesn’t sleep well. He’s very complicated.

JP: Yeah. So it’s not like blind and everything else is okay. It’s just multiple issues.

JK: Yes.

JP: Yes. Sorry I interrupted.

JK: That’s all right. That is important.

JP: So they were treating him normal.

JK: Yes, they were treating him like a little boy. They’d throw him up in the air and make him laugh and do funny bird sounds and — and that was confounding, because most people, most adults couldn’t do that. And

so I would have this extraordinary expression of love and affection at the dinner table here, and I would turn to my left — I always sat at the same spot. I would turn to my left, and there would be at least one of these children playing with my boy like he was a boy. And I wasn't even sure he was a real boy at times.

I had lived my entire life as the good boy. I didn't give my parents too much trouble growing up. I went to Bethel College. I married a fine woman.

JP: Yes, you do.

JK: We didn't accrue a lot of debt. I was working in non-profits, going to a good church. I was lost. I was absolutely lost until God let me see how lost I was. He let me see that I was not good at all. And it was in a hospital corridor in Indianapolis, of all places, where I was thinking murderous thoughts of another human being, and God intervened and let me see how depraved I was, I think for the first time. Others have said, "Be careful about that." There were evidences of grace in my life before that, but I count that walk down that hallway as — as foundational to my faith. And at the end of that hallway I knew I needed Jesus in a way I had never known before.

And so came back to church, kind of tail between my legs, because we didn't leave very nicely, kind of poked people in the eye when we were leaving, but came back, and Karl and Gerrilyn were right there with us, making sure Paulie would be taken care of in the nursery with his special stuff going on. So they persisted. That was — that was a big deal that they persisted with us.

There was another Paul. He's a wonderful man. He wasn't married at the time. He was afraid of children — and I knew that. We were friends. And he came to me, and he said, "I'll watch your boy in the nursery." I said, "Oh, you don't need to do that. I know how it is." And he said, "No, it's more important for me that you go to church." I just remember — we never actually, I think, needed him, maybe once to do it, but I remember just the offer, it was just raw courage coming: "I will enter into your pain, and I will give you the opportunity to go to church, even though I am scared to death of little children."

What do you do with that? What do you do with that? I mean, God was clearly working. I couldn't deny that God was working. But I still didn't like John 9. I didn't like that at all. And it was — it was hard for me to have people come and raise that. Here I have a little boy born blind, and here's John 9, a man born blind. Well, let's make the connection. Let's go talk to John Knight about John 9. Neither this man, nor his parents sinned. And I'm thinking it could be. There's no reason why it couldn't be. That's — it wasn't helpful.

Well, you may remember the email I sent to you on that very subject saying why couldn't people just leave us alone? Why couldn't Jesus have said, "You're blind and you're fine"? And you helpfully took me to Paul, and Paul's thorn in the flesh, and the Holy Spirit used all of those people — I am convinced to this day it was the Holy Spirit coming to those individuals saying, "Go talk to John Knight about John 9," to — to make me that angry to come to you and say, "I want an explanation, Pastor."

And rather than disciplining me, which I — I don't think my language was too bad. It could have been. I can't remember now. But rather, you took me to Paul, another Paul, his thorn in the flesh, and the Holy Spirit just said, "See. See."

JP: Yes.

JK: And I did. I did. And I went back to John 9. I read it. I see it. I see it. So that the works of God might be displayed in him. He did it for Paul, he did it for this man, and he did it for my man. It was God. I am not — I had nothing to do with that. It was God who did that because there — and I am ashamed to this day. I don't know who — God has wiped my memory of who I did this to, but there was more than one person who came and brought John 9 to me, and I attacked them with my tongue, and I took out every weapon I had, and I left them bleeding. Those are — those are shameful memories for me. But they caused an email.

JP: You, since that time — when was that "I see" moment? How many years after Paul — how old was he?

JK: He would have been over a year old at that point.

JP: Okay.

JK: He was almost two, actually, so — for us it was a relatively short season.

JP: Yes, I mentioned people in the sermon who said, "It took us eight years to be okay with our totally disabled son," that I had met. You have devoted a lot of energy and time to thinking about these things, and I'm thinking in the future maybe we'll take more time. We want to keep this short so people can enjoy it and — or not, depending on how it's hitting them. So we'll save some of that for later. But — but just describe your present attitude towards your son. Your wife has had cancer. John 9 is still in the Bible. [Inaudible] still exists. You're here at DG. Just give us a brief — and then we'll wrap it up. Where are you now?

JK: Well, it's hard to be brief on that, because God has done so much. I mean, from 1995 until 2003, when our son was — our youngest son was born prematurely. I had an entirely different heart when my son was born and we were in the ICU. And I knew God was for me. I knew it. I had — I had no doubts that God had given me a premature son for a good purpose.

And then when my wife was diagnosed with Stage IV cancer in October of 2005 — or 2004, October 11th. I remember that day. Both of us knew God was for us. No doubts. Zero doubts. No explanation for that except He gave me a new heart over those intervening years.

And part of that was the — the persistent teaching I receive. I love Bethlehem, all of Bethlehem. I love when you're there; I love when you're not there.

JP: Good.

JK: I've seen the value of daily Bible reading and drinking deeply of it. Actually, it was Noel, I think, some years ago who was writing about just

have a theme, think about a theme and look for where God is in that theme. So I chose disability, and I haven't let go of disability since then. And hundreds of references to disability and disease, suffering, even more when you include just straight-up suffering. And I look at those — I look at Leviticus 21, which is probably the hardest series on disability in the Bible.

JP: Yes.

JK: A little phrase in there that we don't have time to go into here, but I remember sitting in the public library in Roseville and weeping at the goodness of God, to have just a little phrase in there.

JP: Do you want to say what it is? Maybe it's too much.

JK: Yes, it's too much. It's too much.

JP: All right, we'll go there next time.

JK: Yes.

JP: We'll do a Leviticus 21 session.

JK: And I have read hundreds of journal articles.

JP: Yes.

JK: Most of whom don't understand God like this, most of whom have a man-centric view, like we can explain away this or God needs us to help Him explain this. Foolishness. It's evil. I've seen seminary courses based on false presumptions. The reason I write is I want people to love God this much.

JP: Yes.

JK: I want people to see that Exodus 4:11, have I not — Is it not I, the Lord, who has done this thing? Yes, it is God. I want people to remember and train up the next generation. The works of God is also found in Psalm 78:7. The context there is, "Fathers train up so that we remember the works of God."

JP: Yes.

JK: I am — I need to fight discouragement. You know, my wife has — has lost some of her vitality because cancer has taken some of it away from her. No evidence of disease today, so we're very happily letting Mom run the household.

JP: And there are other children.

JK: Two other children, you know, so three boys and one girl, so —

JP: Three other children.

JK: I'm sorry, three other children, yes. I mentioned Johnny, my youngest.

JP: Yes.

JK: And so we're a busy, active household.

JP: Yes.

JK: I have — I have to fight discouragement at times with these episodes that Paul has. I do not want him to hurt. I never want him to hurt.

JP: So let's close by just — I think it's probably obvious to listeners that — the lessons are plain, but let's — let's name one or two of them. A lesson for those serving, those who are clobbered by some kind of suffering in their lives for which they are baffled or even angry, a lesson — and then a lesson for those who are walking through that.

JK: Yes. Well, for those who are watching it and want to do something, trust Jesus. Just simply trust Jesus. Several years after God gripped me, Gerrilyn just said, "We didn't know what would happen with you. We didn't have a clue. There was no evidences of faith or our having any impact at all in your life. All the prayers that we had, there was no evidence." You have to trust Jesus in those moments.

And I've had times when people have said the wrong thing, they've used the wrong words, and God, in His glory, has interpreted those words differently in my head.

JP: You mean to make them helpful.

JK: Helpful, yes. Yes.

JP: So when you say trust Jesus, you mean go ahead and move into the situation —

JK: Move in, yes.

JP: Not knowing how it will go.

JK: That's right. That's right. And you may even walk away as — I mean, I hurt people with my words. You may walk away thinking, I didn't do that very well; in fact, I made it worse. Well, God was doing something in me nobody could see, and it was manifest many months later. So we have to trust Jesus. Even when it goes badly, we have to trust Jesus that he knows what he's doing. And the Spirit will help.

And for those of us in the circumstance, well, live authentically. If you're hurting, let people know you're hurting. And trust Jesus. They — we don't need to be afraid of our emotions. God gave them to us. I live a pretty happy life today. I'm glad for that. It was not always so, and it was because people kept saying, "The hurt is not going to change how we feel about you. The pain, the words that you're using is not going to change."

And now I can trust Jesus in that when I have painful moments, and I have good men in my life, and they help me. So I think both — two sides, the same coin. It's still Jesus.

JP: Thank you, John, for doing this with us. We'll probably do some more. Let me pray for those folks that are watching.

Lord, just briefly but with all our heart we say thank you to Jesus for the grace, the works of God manifest in John Knight and Dianne Knight and in Paul Knight. You are at work, and grace is being displayed, and your glory is being manifested, and we tremblingly accept what you've given. And pray for those who are watching that "See" — that command that John heard, "See," would be sweetly granted. See your goodness, your wisdom, your holiness, your grace in the sorrows of life. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

JK: Amen.

JP: Thanks.

Topic: [The Sovereignty of God](#)

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