

Interview with John Knight: Part 2

Conducted by John Piper

John Piper: This is our second interview with John Knight, the Director of Development here at Desiring God. I don't assume that all of you have seen the first one, so we'll do a little bit of review. Here's what prompted these little, short interviews.

A couple of weeks ago, I preached from John 9 on Jesus' encounter with a man born blind, and the disciples raised the question, Who sinned, that this man was born blind? And Jesus said it wasn't that this man sinned, or his parents, that he was born blind; it was that the works of God might be manifest. And I knew there were people in the audience, like John, whose son, 15½ years ago or so, was born blind, no eyes, in fact. It was a catastrophic moment and disability.

And so I knew John was out there. Lots of other parents are out there. We have a significant disability ministry at the church that gives me deep pleasure of the compassion that's shown, and we want it to grow. But I know that there are parents out there who don't have that kind of support, and we — we want to help, we want to be an encouragement, and I just thought it would be helpful after a sermon where I made the case that, yes, this child was designed by God for blindness in order that the works of God would be manifest in him. And in his case, of course, it was he was going to be healed and Jesus would be seen as a great healer and — and that's not always the case. Can you use a text like this to encourage yourself when, in fact, the works of God are not the works of healing?

So I thought it would be good to talk to John about those kinds of things, and we got a little bit of a background last time and walked with you, John, through — I think you said the

birth of your son was thrilling for fifteen seconds, and — and then several years of collapse of faith. Maybe — maybe you rehearse — maybe give the people a two- or three-minute version of your life from that moment through the discovery of greater disabilities, your wife's situation. So let them know you and what we're dealing with here before I ask you any more questions.

John Knight: Well, we were thrilled to have our first child. We had a little difficulty having a child, so this was a great thrill for the entire family. And so the discovery on the day of his birth of his blindness, it was horrible, and it did not seem to get any better over those intervening weeks. In fact, I explained last time we left the church because we couldn't reconcile — I couldn't reconcile how a good God could do something like this to an innocent little boy.

We would be loved profoundly by a particular couple that did not know what the outcome would be. They just persisted in loving on us. My parents, my in-laws persisted in loving on us. And God did a miraculous thing in letting me see Him as glorious and beautiful and powerful all at the same time.

We would discover later that Paul also lives with autism, significant cognitive disabilities.

JP: Just manifestations of what that means practically. Those are names, but what is it like?

JK: Well, has —

JP: Can he — can he talk to you?

JK: He has very little language. It's all function language. If he's thirsty, he can tell us in a way that we understand that he needs a drink, if he needs to use the toilet, that kind of thing. But there's no affectional language. He's never going to say, "I love you, Dad, or, "I'd really like to do this with you, Dad." He doesn't have a framework for that. And he's very small and doesn't eat well, he doesn't sleep well. He also has growth hormone deficiency, so he's — he's always going to be small.

He's a complicated boy, and about a year and a half ago developed a seizure-like disorder that is as yet undiagnosed. So the very usually happy, bubbly, singy little boy that we normally have goes away after he has these episodes, and he has them almost every day. So past months he's been more lethargic than active, losing some skills that he's had. And so it has not stopped. This journey that we have with him has not stopped.

JP: Right. And your wife.

JK: My wife six years ago was diagnosed with Stage IV metastatic breast cancer, went through an incredible year of massive treatment — chemotherapy, surgery and radiation. And the difference between 1994-'95 and 2004-2005 are very clearly evident in our house, because the two of us cannot remember doubting God's goodness in 2004. We may have had moments, but we do not remember. And 1995-'96 were all doubting God's goodness.

JP: Yes. I said a minute ago that if you knew your boy was going to be healed at, say, age 20 or 30, you might — you just might say 30 years of blindness would be worth seeing God do that. You're probably not looking forward to that happening in five years. So how does John 9:3 work for you? How does the contextual reality or the wider Biblical context sustain you, give you hope? You seem like a remarkably hope-filled person.

JK: Well, it comes in the context of the entire Word of God, so that we can look at John 9:3 and see some of the characteristics of God there that are hope-giving. God looked through time and space and creation before anything was made and said about that man born blind, "He'll be born blind so the works of God might be displayed in him. Foreknowledge is a big deal for me. Knowing that God knows these things is a big deal for me.

JP: And that doesn't make him cruel for you.

JK: Not at all. Not at all. The reality of the cross, He also had foreknowledge of the reality of the cross and the price that would be paid by His own son. So you put those realities together of how sin-filled and cruel and depraved I am, and here is Jesus, who lived a perfect life and took my sin on his body, with perfect foreknowledge of that too.

JP: Yes.

JK: And then looking at the man born blind, okay, this is an evidence of God knowing something to bring glory to Himself, which would make Jesus more beautiful to us today. And John would be called to write about it, then, and so give us the Book of John to write about this Jesus that we would believe.

JP: Right.

JK: And we are given a remarkable accounting of Paul and his thorn in the flesh, we're given the remarkable accounting of Mephibosheth and the kindness that David extended to him. He was lame in both of his feet, and David sought him out because he had made this — this covenant with Mephibosheth's father, "I will do this." And he did it as a foreshadowing of Christ in the Church.

And the extraordinary — Mephibosheth is lied about. David has to make in his human assumption, in I think it's 2 Samuel 19. "I don't know who's right here. I'll give half to the guy who's lying about you and half to you." And Mephibosheth says, "Let him have it all."

JP: Yes.

JK: "Let him have it all. I'm with my king." I look at that and say, that's what I want to be like. I want to be with my king, my king who has done everything for me. I don't need anything else. So we pile on all of these references and foreshadowing and say, okay, John 9:3 is good news.

JP: So in your case, at least I would say that there is now significant evidence that the works of God have been manifest in your son's life.

JK: Yes.

JP: Through the joy he's brought into your family and through the faith that's been awakened in you and through the ministry he has in our church in various and indirect and direct ways. What would you say to parents who can't point to any of those yet? They lost a son. He's dead.

JK: Yes.

JP: Or he's in such a situation and their faith is in such a situation where they're looking around for some works of God to be manifest here, and they all look like mean works of God. What — what — how can you help them to move forward or not throw it away?

JK: Well, I think you and I have very little actually to do with that. But

when God calls some, like he called that family to stand in the gap for us, that there was such affection flowing towards us when we were not reciprocating affection at all. We were reciprocating with bitterness and angry words and things like that. So I think it might be more of a call to those who are watching this happen, saying, “We’re watching them wander, we’re watching them hurt, we’re watching them doubt. We’re going to move into that. We’re going to come close to that. We don’t know what we’re doing. We don’t know how to do it. We don’t know anything about disability or that kind of pain or anything else, but we’re going to trust that God will help us in that moment.”

And for those — you know, I have met families who just seem to go on raw courage for a very, very long time. They don’t have any evidence at all and are living with hurt and bitterness but are trying to parent well, trying to love their spouse well — marriages hurt in these situations significantly — but don’t have any sort of foundation on the Word or on God. I do call out and say, “Come, let us reason together. Come, let us sit together. You and I have experienced something similar. Let’s talk about that. Let’s talk about what this path has looked like.” In the depths of it, nobody thought there was any hope for us.

JP: I’ve been reading — I read a blog yesterday or day before about — reading Christian biography, just because a text in Philippians had hit me about not only the look at your leaders and walk as they walk and imitate them, but Paul saying to walk according to those who walk according to the example they have in us. Like this goes on and on, which is why I want people to know you, see you, because here’s just something God did in a real flesh-and-blood human being who’s not bitter and angry at God, who has a blind son and a wife with cancer. Just seeing that might — just might be used of God.

One more — let’s just do one more thing before we sign off today. We may — we may come back. You mentioned to me, I think it was off camera, going to a conference and some theologians or pastors or somebody were — were talking about Old Testament texts, like Leviticus 21.

JK: Yes.

JP: Recount that little story for me, and then I’m going to go there, and we’ll close by your — your response to that text.

JK: It was under the banner of let us make sure that our churches and our synagogues and the like are welcoming to people with disabilities, and it was very much oriented to program and accessibilities of ramps and elevators and attitude and things like that.

In the afternoon session, somebody stood up, there was a panel discussion, and just said to the panel, “What do we do with the hard texts in the Bible?” And a Jewish rabbi very quickly grabbed that and said, “Oh, you mean like in Leviticus? Well, we just ignore those passages. We know better now.”

And I — I was thunderstruck by that. I didn’t have a response, because I was struggling with Leviticus, but I knew that couldn’t be right. I knew that couldn’t be right. And so that started me on the path

of discovery.

JP: Let me — let me read it, and then you just tell me how you think about it.

JK: Yes.

JP: It goes like this. This is Leviticus 21:16. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, “Speak to Aaron,” so a priest, saying, “None of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God, for no one who has a blemish shall draw near; a man blind or lame or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long or a man who has an injured foot or an injured hand or a hunchback or a dwarf or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. No man of the offspring of Aaron, the priest, who has a blemish shall come near to offer the Lord’s food offerings, since he has a blemish. He shall not come near to offer the bread of his God. He may eat the bread of his God, both the most holy and the holy things, but he shall not go through the veil or approach the altar because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries, for I am the Lord who sanctifies them. So Moses spoke to Aaron and to his sons and to all the people of Israel.”

So I can imagine somebody coming to this text and saying, well, God’s attitude towards my son, or millions of other people, is that they are defective and, therefore, to be kept at a distance from him, which does not sound like good news.

JK: Yes.

JP: So now you read this and you think what?

JK: Well, I read that, and you begin — there are 13 conditions there, and you think, okay, this is a hard word, and then it gets harder, and then it gets harder still, when he talks about defiling. Like, well, how can that — how can there be anything good in here? That would be a good one to go past. Thankfully, you lead us in a way that says don’t go past. When it’s hard, go after it. Ask the Holy Spirit to help. And so I did. I did.

I read commentaries. Most commentaries aren’t really very helpful on this passage. Matthew Henry’s commentary written, what, 500 years ago is actually probably the most helpful on this. And consider it in light of who God is — so I can read that, first of all, in light of Psalm 139:16, where God first in Verse 13 of Psalm 139 talks about meeting together, then 16 talks about every one of our days being numbered. He already knows our days. They’ve already been accounted for. So that foreknowledge, “I know what I’m doing. I know what I’m doing. Hang onto that. I know what I’m doing.”

And Exodus 4, where He speaks very specifically to Moses, Have I not made some who are mute or deaf or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? So we already know God has done it. God is not surprised by these 13 things. God has done it, ordained it. So rest on that.

Okay, so what — what’s in here, then? God, perfect foreknowledge,

perfect power, perfect holiness — there's that little phrase in there, "But he may eat." It's embedded right in there as a little clause. And there it is. There's your birthright. For a season, if I give you 80 years, there's a season, that you might have to live with this, but your birthright is secure. Nobody can take your birthright away from you. You are mine.

And I was — five or six years after hearing that rabbi speak, I was sitting in the Roseville library just meditating over this, what in the world does this mean, and tears are rolling down my face at that thought. Birthright is secure. Nobody can take that away. An uncle can't say, "Oh, you can't eat because of your disability," or your short arm or anything else. No, I can eat. Right here, I can eat. It's a promise. It's embedded in the very words that some want to take out. The protection is right there.

Okay, this is thrilling and helpful. Now most of the commentaries are useful in looking at Leviticus 21 and saying this is a foreshadow of a perfect, sinless Jesus. That is helpful. Okay. Jesus isn't going to have any moral blemish at all. These guys, you can't tell, so the outward evidences we'll talk about, with the importance being the inward quality of are you trusting in me over everything, including your standing, including how people think about you? That's — that's thrilling. And Leviticus 22, where the animal has to be perfect, also no blemish, perfect sacrifice — so the great high priest, no moral blemish, and the perfect sacrifice, no blemish. It's amazing and hope-filled.

JP: Yes.

JK: And disability is hard in every conceivable juncture of life. I don't get to not live with it or not live with disease in my wife. I have to live with it. But knowing that there are these promises embedded in the very hardest of texts, oh, man, I want to live anticipating when I come to the text that the Spirit will help me see what is really there rather than what my perception might want to rise up and say, "Oh, God, you're mean, you're cruel." Wait. Wait. That phrase is there.

And then to watch in Mark 2 where the man is lowered down through the roof, so he has people who care about him bringing him to Jesus, and Jesus notices their faith — their faith.

All three accounts. It's multiple, not just his faith. And then he doesn't even heal him for his sake. Jesus says to them, So that you may know I have authority over sin. And I just think the gentleness that he turns from the hard word to, Rise, pick up your bed, go home, okay, there's always more going on here, always more, and I want to know it.

JP: Amen.

JK: I just want to know it.

JP: Amen. Let's pray. Father, there is always more. You're always doing a thousand things in us, in our children, in this pain-filled world. You're always doing more than we can see. Help us and those who are watching to trust your Word. Even when they cannot see how a text works, may they have patience. May they say, God, have something

here for me, something hopeful, something pointing to Jesus, like a pure priest and a pure animal that will one day be broken someday in Christ, so that those who have been broken can be finally eternally made whole. So, God, have mercy upon us and those who watch to teach us and give us strength of faith. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

JK: Amen.

Topic: [The Sovereignty of God](#)

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