I need a volunteer – someone with limited eyesight. OK, thanks. Well, let me tell you something wonderful. Just a dab of this mud on your eyes will restore your vision to 20/20!

"You don't believe that? Pity. If you did, you'd probably feel demonstrably better. You might even be cured." So says Richard Morin in "The Healing Power of Sugar Pills." (The Washington Post, August 23, 1998, C5). "It's not magic. It's the placebo effect - the mysterious ability of our bodies to sometimes heal what ails us, if only we believe."

Placebo in Latin means "I shall please." In medical research, it refers to a pharmacologically inactive substance - like a sugar pill - that is administered as a control in testing the effectiveness of a drug or course of action.

Walter Brown, clinical professor of psychiatry at Brown University, is at the forefront of research into the placebo effect. He and others are trying to learn why about 30 to 40 percent of the people who suffer from conditions ranging from asthma to high blood pressure to depression actually benefit from taking a placebo.

"Make no mistake: The healing effects of placebos are real, and not merely delusions or wishful thinking," Brown and other researchers contend. "It's easy to document and prove the effectiveness of placebos," Brown asserts. The numbers again: 30 to 40 percent of people suffering from a range of illnesses benefit from taking a placebo.

In the ninth chapter of John, a man born blind receives sight. Jesus puts mud on the man's eyes, tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam, and when he comes back he is able to see. At first the man says that he does not know who Jesus is. Then he says that Jesus is a prophet. Finally, he stands before Jesus and says, "Lord, I believe." Although he never figures out just how Jesus has healed him, he knows that if Jesus were not from God, he could not have done anything. Call it the Messiah Effect - the mysterious ability of people to be healed, if only they come into contact with Jesus. But, at the same time, it is a placebo effect, because a mud-and-spit poultice plays an important part in this miraculous healing.

What a strange and wonderful story this is. Jesus refuses to put the label of "sinner" on either the blind man or his parents, but says that "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (v.3). With such an introduction, one might think that Jesus would go on to treat the man with courtesy and respect, but he does exactly the opposite: He treats him - like dirt. Jesus spits on the ground and makes mud with his saliva; then he spreads the mud on the man's eyes.

He uses wet, sticky, soft, dirty earth. He uses mud - a symbol of all that is degrading, such as when a person's name is dragged "through the mud." Jesus puts this man in an awkward position. In effect, Jesus says, "Here's mud in your eye"! Hardly the sentiments you expect to hear from a teacher who is healing by the power of God!

And yet, the man born blind believes. He believes enough to follow the command of Jesus to "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam," and to stumble through the streets of Jerusalem wearing a ridiculous mask of mud. We don't know exactly how far the man has to walk after receiving his mudpack in the eyes, but it could be quite a hike. John tells us that Jesus encounters the man after leaving the temple, but does not reveal the precise location of their meeting. If Jesus puts mud in the man's eyes right outside the temple compound, then the man has to walk at least 500 yards to the pool of Siloam - the length of five football fields! Quite a distance for a blind man to cover, groping and stumbling and trying to ignore the jeers of the crowd:

"Hey, dirt-face!"
"He's got a mudball for an eyeball!"
"What happened? Kids play mudpies on your noggin?!"

So, it's not a pleasant walk. It's degrading, embarrassing, humiliating. But the man has been in touch with Jesus, and for some reason he believes. He believes that this teacher who calls himself "the light of the world" is somehow going to bring an end to his lifelong darkness.
Besides, what has he got to lose? He’s blind! His pathetic progress down the rocky streets of Jerusalem might be mocked by townspeople whether he had mud on his face or not.

So he goes and washes ... and comes back able to see. He proceeds to testify that it was Jesus who gave him his vision. Standing before the Pharisees, he says, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see .... He is a prophet." When they counter that Jesus is a sinner, the man says, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." And the man asks the Pharisees mockingly, "Do you also want to become his disciples?" He might as well say to these religious leaders: "Here's mud in your eye!"

Finally, face to face with the one who healed him, the man discovers that Jesus is none other than the Son of Man. "Lord, I believe," he says, and he worships him. It is important to note that his healing comes BEFORE this statement of faith. The man does not believe in Jesus prior to his touch; the man receives the touch and then believes. The mudpack acts as a placebo, inspiring the man to trust that he will be healed.

Does this sound crazy? Whatever you do, don't scoff at the power of the placebo. Don't assume that dirt and spit had nothing to do with the healing of the blind man. At the very least, it helped to focus his faith.

What helps to focus our faith? Sometimes it's the unpleasant experiences that life throws at us. So often it is when we are “in trouble” that we are most likely to turn to Jesus, like so many of those who sought Him out for healing. The application of a "mudball" of trouble can lead to the healing of our bodies, minds and spirits.

The question is: What do we need packed in our eyes to really open them up today? What are the dirt-and-spit placebos that Christ will use to help us believe? Surprising healing can happen when a person is in close touch with Jesus.

Oddly enough, one of the placebos that can help us to be healed is pain itself. Yes, pain. Pain as unwanted as a mudball in the eye. We may want to deny the pain that threatens to disrupt our happiness and destroy our well-being, but we should not, because pain is sometimes the megaphone that God uses to get our attention.

In his book The Problem of Pain, C.S. Lewis writes, "I am progressing along the path of life, enjoying friends and work and holidays, when suddenly a stab of abdominal pain that threatens serious disease, or a headline in the newspapers that threatens us all with destruction, sends this whole pack of cards tumbling down. At first I am overwhelmed, and all my little happinesses look like broken toys. Then, slowly and reluctantly, bit by bit, I try to bring myself into the frame of mind that I should be in at all times. I remind myself that all these toys were never intended to possess my heart, that my true good is in another world, and my only real treasure is Christ. And perhaps, by God's grace, I succeed, and for a day or two become a creature consciously dependent on God and drawing its strength from the right sources" (C.S. Lewis, Readings for Meditation and Reflection [New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992], 71).

So pain can be a placebo: a surprising bit of mud in the eye that reminds us that our true good is in another world, our real treasure is Christ, and our ultimate dependence should be on God. Struggles in this life can take our eyes off worldly pleasures and give us a vision of the joy of God's kingdom. Financial problems can focus us on the priceless treasure of an investment with Jesus Christ. Even illness can help us to see that health is much more than freedom from disease - it is rooted instead in a life-giving and eternal relationship with God. Anything that makes us stop relying only on ourselves and our limited human resources can help. We don’t stop doing what we can, but we trust Jesus for the outcome and grow closer to Him. The closer we are to Him, the more likely we are to experience healing.

Surprising healing can happen when you listen for God's Word, and when you let Jesus get close enough to give you a mudpack placebo.

**Pastor Keith**