

Spiritual Blindness

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The man had recently been thrown out of the synagogue – the equivalent today of being excommunicated from a “church.” Jesus sought the man out and asked him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” (Jn. 9:35) This question probes more deeply into the man’s heart than he has so far committed himself. Though John’s account is not clear as to how much time has elapsed – probably less than a week, likely only a few days – but on a recent Sabbath, Jesus had healed this man who had been born blind. (Jn. 9:14) The Pharisees were religiously offended and interrogated first the man, then his parents and then the man again. (Jn. 9:13, 18, 24) In the second interrogation of the man, though the Pharisees tried to force the man to incriminate Jesus, the man, though not yet a disciple of Jesus, displayed such wisdom that he refuted the Pharisees and they, in a fit of rage, cast him out of the synagogue. (Jn. 9:33-34) Now Jesus asks the man if he believes in the Son of Man, the Messiah, the Expected One. (Dan. 7:13-14)

The man replies, “Who is He, Sir? Tell me so that I may believe in Him.” And Jesus answers him, “You have now seen Him; in fact, He is the One speaking with you.” (Jn. 9:36-37) Jesus clearly proclaims to this man that He Himself is the promised Messiah.

The man says, “Lord, I believe.” And then he bowed before Him and displayed reverence for Jesus, an action no Jewish person would do unless he believed he was in the presence of Deity. (Jn. 9:38)

Jesus then says to His followers: “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.” Some Pharisees, of the same party but not likely to be the same Pharisees who had interrogated the man born blind, heard Jesus say this and responded, “What? Are we blind too?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin. But now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.” (Jn. 9:39-41)

The Pharisees who had interrogated the man born blind were absolutely certain that he was steeped in sin at birth and therefore there was no possibility that the man might have clearer insights than they did. (Jn. 9:34) But Jesus had seen it differently. In fact, the man’s blindness from birth was what had first caused the disciples to ask, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus had answered them, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.” (Jn. 9:2-3) Jesus saw that God has allowed this man to endure several decades of blindness so that when Messiah arrived he would see and believe. The Pharisees were therefore greatly mistaken about many things – about the man, the purpose of God in his life, the nature and identity of the Christ, their own role in representing God to the people and even the very nature and identity of the God they claimed to follow. And yet they were so confident in their own ideas and beliefs that they were willing to oppress, persecute and even murder those who dared to follow God apart from their mistaken beliefs. This is spiritual blindness in its most visible expression.

But the Pharisees – those who overheard Jesus and asked Him if He thought they were blind too – remained guilty simply because they thought they could see. What these Pharisees had failed to grasp was that they were eating from the wrong tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and refusing to eat from the right tree, the tree of life, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

The Serpent’s Cunning

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from the simplicity of your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.” (2 Cor. 11:3) “Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God really say, “You must not eat from any tree in the garden?”’” (Gen. 3:1)

This question probed Eve’s grasp on the facts. “The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did says, “You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.”’” (Gen. 3:2)

Already exposed is Eve’s “religious” defense mechanism. God’s command was simply “you must not eat the fruit” (Gen. 2:17) – Eve has added the restriction to “not touch it.” Paul later wrote that the basic principles and rules of this world are “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch! ...Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.” (Col. 2:20-23)

Satan, the serpent, then proceeds to directly challenge what God had said (that they would surely die – Gen. 2:17), “You will not surely die” (Gen. 3:4) and the woman, practicing sensual indulgence, came to see “that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, [and therefore] she took some, ate it and also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked...” (Gen. 3:6-7) Suddenly they could *see* and, because mankind was now unqualified and unable to see through God’s eyes, their guilt and shame remained and overwhelmed them.

The Darkness of Cain

The Lord said to Cain, “If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you, but you must master it.” (Gen. 4:7) We know that Cain did not master his sin for in the very next verse he murders his brother Abel. (Gen. 4:8) When God speaks to Cain, however, he is at the crossroads of what will gain the mastery over his life. His offering of “the fruits of the soil” – the same soil already cursed by God (Gen. 3:17) – was not received by the Lord. (Gen. 4:3-5) Cain subsequently not only failed to master his sin but apparently disregarded God’s warning entirely and flung the door wide open to allow it to master him. As a result of surrendering to his sin, God’s curse upon Cain drove him from being able to work the land and forced him to be a restless wanderer in the earth. (Gen. 4:11-12)

“If you do what is right,” the Lord had said, “will you not be accepted?” Abel had brought “fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock” (Gen. 4:4) and he and his offering were favorable to the Lord. How Abel knew what “the right thing” to do was, the Bible does not say but the Lord’s remarks to Cain imply that he could indeed do that which was right and he could indeed master his sin. There is no indication that Cain even attempted to return before the Lord with an offering that would be favorably received by Him – instead, the very next thing Cain does is lure his brother out into the fields and he kills him there. From what we now know of God’s redemptive plan in Christ – information not fully available to Cain – it is right to infer that Cain, as was true of Abel, would have been able to overcome sin through the grace (mercy, favor and power) of God that is available to those who come to Him in obedient repentance. “God now [after Christ died and was resurrected] now commands *all* people *everywhere* to repent” (Acts 17:30) just as He had somehow commanded Cain and Abel to do. Man is given

the liberty to choose what he will do and therefore God holds man responsible for that choice because, wherever man is incapable of overcoming sin by his own strength, the grace of God is available to those who humbly seek His strength to overcome their own weakness. God still always resists the proud while He gives grace (favor and power) to the humble. (Jas. 4:6)

Those of us who have obeyed, repented and surrendered to God are then given a new command: “We should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother’s were righteous [right in God’s eyes].” (1 Jn. 3:11-12) Sin had mastered Cain and he became the expression of the devil’s hatred. (Jn. 8:44) We are to overcome sin and become an expression of God’s love and “This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.” (1 Jn. 3:10) This is not a standard merely for judging others – it is the standard we must apply to our own lives so that we might know whether we have genuinely received the life of Christ or we are merely deceiving ourselves.

The Struggle With Sin

Paul wrote clearly about the struggle with sin and the role that law has in showing us how far below God’s righteous standards we truly are. “But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good [God’s holy, righteous and good commandments], so that through the commandment sin might become [in our eyes] utterly sinful.” (Rom. 7:12-13) Those who believe there is no place whatsoever in a New Testament believer’s life for God’s laws are mistaken and are likely to remain ensnared in the subtleties of some sin.

Paul goes on to say, “Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.” (Rom. 8:5-8)

Cain had his mind set on his own natural desires and brought an offering that he thought the Lord should accept – his anger and dejection after being rejected by the Lord makes this clear. (Gen. 4:5) What was right in Cain’s own eyes, what the New Testament calls lawlessness (Greek *anomia* [459]), was rejected as unacceptable to the Lord – as must always be the case since there is no fellowship (unity, commonality, connection) between lawlessness (what is right in a man’s own eyes) and righteousness (what is right in God’s eyes – 2 Cor. 6:14) The sin that “crouched at his door” (Gen. 4:7) brought forth death – Abel’s physical death, the death of Cain’s life of peace and satisfaction in connection with the land and proved conclusively that Cain was not capable of being the promised Seed who would crush sin and shame’s head. (Gen. 3:15)

Paul also wrote, “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not covet,’ and whatever other commandments there may be, are summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law... Let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ [set your mind,

heart, life and being on what God's Spirit desires], and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature." (Rom. 13:8-10, 12-14)

Cain murdered Abel and was cursed to be a restless wanderer. (Gen. 4:12) Similarly, Paul participated in the murder of Stephen and others of the ekklesia (Acts 8:1, 9:1) and later spent his life traveling from one place to another spreading the gospel of Christ and the kingdom of God. Saul (as he was called then), zealous for God's law, a Pharisee (Phlp. 3:5) like the Pharisees who oppressed the man born blind, must have fought internally against the inconsistency of obeying God's law (as summed up in "Love your neighbor as yourself" – Lev. 19:18) and pursuing the course he was on of murderous persecution of those who followed Jesus as the promised Messiah, the Christ. Jesus personally intervened in Saul's life in a dramatic confrontation on the road to Damascus. (Acts 9:3-6) This confrontation, which involved light from heaven (Acts 9:3), left Saul blinded until a disciple from Damascus named Ananias laid his hands on him three days later. (Acts 9:8-9, 17) "Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again." (Acts 9:18) Saul was then able to preach fearlessly in the name of the Lord, proving to the Jews in both Damascus and Jerusalem that Jesus was the Christ. (Acts 9:22, 27-28) The Jews in both Damascus and Jerusalem each tried to kill Saul but the disciples in Damascus helped him to escape there (Acts 9:25) and the brothers in Jerusalem sent him back to his hometown Tarsus (Acts 9:30) where he would stay until Barnabas sought him out (some 13 years later) to bring him to Antioch to teach the disciples there. (Acts 11:25-26) Antioch would then become a center from which the gospel of Christ would spread throughout the Roman empire.

The Holy Spirit then chose Barnabas and Saul to be sent to the cities of the province of Galatia. (Acts 13:2) On this journey, they sailed first to the island of Cyprus (which was also Barnabas' homeland – Acts 4:36) and, in the first recorded confrontation of this trip, Saul comes face to face with Elymas, a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet, a magician who called himself "the son of Jesus." (Acts 13:6) "But Elymas the sorcerer...opposed [Barnabas and Saul] and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, 'You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun.' Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand." (Acts 13:8-11)

There is no indication that Elymas was a particularly evil man. He was simply a seer whom the Roman proconsul (governor) had found useful in trying to govern the island of Cyprus. It was only when the proconsul wanted to hear and follow the word of God through Barnabas and Saul (whom Elymas, at the least, viewed as competition and a threat to his power over the proconsul) that Elymas rose up to oppose them. (Acts 13:7-8) Elymas, in fact, is much like today's "pastors" who pervert and corrupt the right ways of the Lord, diverting the disciple away from Christ and after themselves. (also see Acts 20:30) Today's "pastor," with two millennia of refined deceptive "theology" at his disposal, is of course much more subtle in his practice of deception and there does not seem to be many Sauls raised up to pronounce blindness upon them as the "pastor" is simply and only performing the ear-scratching services his listeners pay him to perform. (All in fulfillment of prophecy – 2 Tim. 4:3-4) But the similarity is striking (for those who have eyes to see) and remains one of the key evidences that the apostasy, the

great falling away from the faith that occurs before the return of Christ (2 Ths. 2:3), is occurring now, primarily in the context of “church.”

Both Elymas and Saul (before his conversion) were active in their opposition to God – and both acted in the name of God. Both were struck blind when they were confronted with the truth and power of God. Saul repented, humbled himself, endured 13 years of relative obscurity and was used mightily of the Lord both in his own lifetime and in the lives of all those over the centuries who have read his writings. Elymas, it would seem, never repented, never changed and is never heard from in history again.

Light and Darkness

John wrote, “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.” (Jn. 3:19-21)

Paul wrote, “For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person – such a man is an idolater – has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partakers with them. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: ‘Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’” (Eph. 5:5-14)

The story remains the same – whether we look at Nicodemus, the premier teacher of Israel who came to Jesus by night because he too was blind to God’s truths (Jn. 3:2, 10), at Eve or Cain or Saul or Elymas or ourselves – because what is in view here is the sin nature which is common to every man, woman and child. Those who deny the existence of this sin nature need only observe that children, who require much discipline to practice anything resembling good behavior, never need to be taught how to lie or steal. They do this quite naturally because the sin nature dominating the human soul *is* the first consequence of Adam’s sin. Mankind did surely die the moment Adam sinned – not a physical death but a spiritual death wherein the soul (mind, will and emotions) was brought into bondage to wickedness and evil – and the physical death we must all face is only the consummation and proof of that spiritual death. Only in Christ, the second or last Adam, do we freely receive life by His Spirit. (1 Cor. 15:45)

There is no single piece of information whereby an individual can decide whether that item is truth or fiction and thereby enter into life in the kingdom of Christ and God. To enter into that process alone and unaided by the Spirit of truth is simply to re-enact Eve’s partaking of the fruit of the wrong tree. There must be an *encounter*, however dramatic or subtle, however “noisy” or “quiet,” with *the Person* of Christ Jesus. When we come into contact with Him who heals us from the blindness into which we were born, we then have two sets of eyes from which we can see: our natural eyes (corrupted with sin and death) or our spiritual eyes.

Jesus said, “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!” (Mt. 6:22-23) If we continue to rely on

eyes that are bad, we can convince ourselves that we still see. We can concoct whole “theologies,” build up great international “ministries,” do many great wonders in the name of Christ (Mt. 7:22) and it is all great darkness indeed. Only that which we see through the eyes of Christ, glean through the mind of Christ, partake of in the Spirit of Christ and God is the fruit of the tree of life – anything else is simply fruit from the wrong tree and the result will always and only be death.

Let he who has ears hear.

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