

Sight Marches Victorious Over Blindness

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Have you ever watched a movie or read a book that presents a character who doesn't see the full picture? They run headfirst into danger without even realizing it. As a viewer or reader, you just feel frustrated that they would be so oblivious about what is going to happen. The characters often blindly run right into trouble and make awful decisions. An insurance company once put out a commercial making fun of how this happens. They showed a bunch of young people running in a foggy dark night as if they were being chased by someone. They come to a creepy looking house. One of them says, "Let's hide in the attic." Another one says, "No, let's hide in the basement." Then a third person points to a dimly lit shack full of sharp metal objects and chainsaws and says, "Let's go hide behind all those chainsaws." They all proceed to run to the worst place possible. The commercial's point was that if you're in a horror movie you make bad decisions. It's just what you do.

Can you imagine God looking on at all that goes on in this world and in our lives? He doesn't need hindsight to know we're making bad decisions or heading into danger. He knows. And he sees how we are blind to the dangers and how we make bad decisions over and over, running headfirst into evil. That's what this whole world is like. It is like those characters in a movie making all the wrong decisions. This happens because of the spiritual blindness of this world.

How does God respond to all this spiritual blindness? We see the answer today as we turn to Acts 9. There we will consider one of the most important events to take place after Jesus' resurrection. A man is blindly running into all the wrong places making terrible mistakes until the Lord stops him. We see how sight marches victorious over blindness.

Saul is the same man we call the apostle Paul. He wasn't always the man we know as the writer of so many letters in the Bible. He is first mentioned as *an enemy* of Christ. Luke records how he was breathing murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. We first read of Saul standing and giving his approval to the crowd which stoned to death Stephen, a prominent Christian witness. And after that pivotal event Christians were scattered from Jerusalem. Then Saul's full character is revealed: *"Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison."* Saul later says that when the time came to put these men and women on trial, he gave the vote for the death sentence.

After about three years of hunting and killing Christians Saul was still at it. And it wasn't enough for him to exterminate Christians *in Jerusalem*. He took his campaign *to distant cities*. Today we read of how he worked. He didn't act on his own. He had the support of the highest authority among the Jewish people. His tactic was to go to the synagogues with authority from the chief priests. With those papers Saul had access to enter the synagogue, question its leaders if they knew of any members teaching about Jesus, and then they would hunt them down. Any followers of Jesus would be bound and led as a prisoner to trial in Jerusalem. Saul would then testify against that person. He then cast his vote for death. Mission accomplished. *This was the mission* he desired to carry out at Damascus. Apparently, there were reports of believers in the synagogues there. But he would take care of it.

Saul later wrote that he had carried out this work zealously. He thought he was serving God by defending the Jewish faith, the faith of his forefathers. I'm sure that as he and his holy police force drew near to Damascus, he felt pretty good about what he was doing to stop Jesus' people. But Saul was about to realize just how blind he had been.

The magnitude of what Saul was doing crashed down on him just as he was nearing Damascus. A light from heaven flashed around him. Saul –and all with him, fell to the ground. A voice came with the light. And while those with Saul only heard a voice and saw the light, Saul understood the voice and saw the risen Lord Jesus. *"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you sir?" "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting!"* In that event Saul learned something in a most shocking manner: He wasn't just persecuting Jesus' disciples; he was persecuting the real and living Lord Jesus!

That's the truth so many are blind to today. They attack and mock followers of Jesus. Blind to the truth that Jesus is alive they go headfirst against him. Sometimes they will even do it with great zeal and think they are serving God and a righteous cause. Just earlier this week I had someone mock our ministry because we teach Jesus as the living Lord. How does God respond to such blindness from this world that opposes him?

Such people are walking in great danger! Like Saul, they don't oppose us. They oppose the one we serve! What would happen to Saul? Now the payback! Right? To harm or damage a postal worker or his work is to harm or damage the United States government for which that postal worker works. It's considered a federal offense. To harm or work against a Jesus' worker is to work against the one for whom he or she works and belongs, it is to harm and work against Jesus himself. Worthy of more than the punishment of a federal offense, it is worthy of immediate destruction for fighting against God's one and only Son, the living God. That payback was now due Saul for his deeds!

This truth we see today: God gives spiritual sight that marches victorious over blindness. *"Saul, Saul,"* Jesus says with compassion toward his enemy. At that time Saul became physically blind. But spiritually he began to see.

Rather than destroying Saul as one who opposed him, in his grace, Jesus destroyed Saul's mission *and changed it*. 6 *"Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."* 7 *The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.* 8 *Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.* 9 *For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.* What had happened with Saul? Instead of uttering threats and murder, was praying to the Lord!

Saul's heart was clearly changed! He knew what these Jesus followers had been teaching. That's why he hated them! They taught about a God of *free grace*. Something Saul had opposed—until he realized just how far from loving God he really was! They taught about a God who came to take away all sins and freely take away the sinner's disgrace on the cross. They looked to Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. And they said that Jesus rose victorious over death, proving his deity and mission accomplished. Saul not only believed that the risen Lord had appeared to him, but that this God who blinded him on the road would be merciful to him. One thing needed to be fixed: "I am Jesus, who you are persecuting." God sent the man Ananias, a believer, to come to Saul and heal him of his blindness. "Wait a minute, Lord! I'm confused! I know this man Saul of Tarsus! His reputation precedes him!"

Ananias too would see the full picture of the grace of God. The Lord said to Ananias, *"Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name."* Ananias sees what God has done, goes to Saul and says *"Brother, Saul."* Did you catch that? The same man who was guilty of killing so many of the Christians is now called "Brother." Saul didn't do anything. He didn't have to pay back his debt to be forgiven. He didn't have to earn his sight. He was healed. He was baptized. He was given the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Then after three days God began to remove the blindness from others. This time he was using Saul to do it! *"At once he (Saul) began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God."* Through faith Saul joined the saints, believers in Christ. Those who believed in Jesus received the title saints, holy ones. Ananias called believers "holy ones" or "saints." This is the first time this title comes up for Christians in the New Testament. All believers are saints. Their wrongs were washed away by the blood of Jesus on the cross—even the sins of Saul who had killed the saints and persecuted Jesus himself!

How does God respond to the spiritual blindness of this world? He sends his gospel through his messengers. He sent Ananias to Saul. He sent Saul to the synagogues and the non-Jewish parts of the ancient Mediterranean world. He doesn't send them because they deserve it. He doesn't send them because he needs them. He sends them in grace.

He still in grace chooses and sends his saints. A class of kindergarteners once stood singing a song to their parents. The memory of this event stuck out for one of those children. What made me remember this event was that the teacher had me doing something different from the rest of the class. I was standing by the piano, which I really knew nothing of at that time. And I was hitting one key over and over as everyone else sang. I played one single tone: bum, bum, bum, over and over. I'm sure that there were other students taking piano lessons by that age who thought, "I could do better." I myself thought, "I don't know what I'm doing, but this is what the teacher said." Maybe the teacher chose me just because I happened to be closest to the piano. One thing I do know is the teacher didn't choose me because I asked or because I was good at it. She could play the piano 100 times better without me. Why has God chosen you to bear his name? He doesn't need us. He can do his work without us. But in grace he chooses and uses us to rescue others with his gospel. He did this for Saul, for me, for all his people in grace.

It has to be grace. If we ever begin to think we are called to share the gospel because we are better or wiser than others, we need to look at Paul. We too, were born blind and enemies of God. But in his grace, he called us out of darkness into his light. He opened our eyes to see his gospel. And regardless of the times when you failed, the times when you even spoke or against those who shared his name. We call each other "brother" and "sister" in Christ. Instead of hindering one another and fighting against each other in our blindness we turn to the risen Lord who has sent each of us to carry his name before the world. He chose us. He equips us. Like Saul we recognize that it is only by God's grace that anyone carries his name.

And like Saul we too have the assurance from our risen Lord that we belong to him. We have been baptized and cleansed from all our sins. The risen Lord has positioned each of us into a unique calling by which we have been equipped for the task. God has given you access to places where his name will be carried. As his chosen instrument you share it in a unique way in which others cannot: in the school campus, in your work lunchroom, with your next-door neighbors, even with your own family.

The world is marching in blindness against its God. On its own it makes all the wrong decisions and fights against the light. That's what a world lost in darkness does. But the Lord he has opened your eyes to see Jesus, the living one. You are now a saint, a holy one, precious beyond compare in the eyes of our God. No persecution or suffering for bearing his name can diminish that! Rather you carry his name to show his grace. This is the work of his saints! And by God's grace, even many of those who rage against the light will also come to know the risen Lord and his grace for sinners. And when they do, sight marches victorious over blindness.

