

“The Keen Sight of Blindness” (John 9:1-41)

Pastor Espinosa

Text: “³⁹*Jesus said, ‘For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.’* ⁴⁰*Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, ‘Are we also blind?’* ⁴¹*Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would have no guilt, but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains.’*”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. John Newton (1725-1807) wrote the hymn *Amazing Grace* and was raised in the faith. As a young boy he had memorized the Westminster Catechism, all of its Scripture texts, and all of Isaac Watts’ hymns for children. But he fell away from the faith. As one historical summary puts it, “*During his military service Newton tried several times to adhere to his mother’s religious principles, praying, reading Scripture, and even fasting, but some skeptical literature finally convinced him to discard them.*” (Precht, *Lutheran Worship Hymnal Companion*, 714)

Hard experiences followed: he deserted the navy, was caught, whipped, and demoted; he was treated badly by the sailors who disliked him *and* his superior attitude as a midshipman. By his own account, it was only the memory of his girlfriend that kept him from suicide. He eventually transferred from the navy to work for a slaver off Sierra Leone, but nothing really improved; the ill treatment continued and he owned nothing but the clothes on his back and the food the slaves would share with him. He was miserable, and so like a prodigal son sought help from his father.

The help came and he found himself on a voyage back to England and during that voyage, “Newton read Thomas a Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ* and began to reflect on his forgotten religious training. The ship became waterlogged in a storm, and, manning the pumps for hours on end, Newton prayed ‘*like the cry of the ravens, which yet the Lord does not disdain to hear.*’ (Duffield, *English Hymns*) Newton dates his spiritual birth from that experience on March 10, 1748.” (ibid, 714) Years later in 1764 he was ordained deacon and priest the following year. He carried on a fantastic evangelical ministry and never retired. “In his old age, he would be accompanied at the pulpit by a servant who helped him read his texts. He died December 21, 1807...his tombstone was inscribed with his own words:”

“John Newton

Clerk
Once an Infidel and Libertine
A Servant of Slaves in Africa
was
by the Rich Mercy of our Lord and Saviour
Jesus Christ
Preserved, Restored, Pardoned,
and Appointed to Preach the Faith
he had long labored to destroy.” (ibid, 715)

I am greatly impressed by his epitaph because immediately after his name and title, John Newton essentially confesses his sin (now there’s a legacy!) and then gives all glory and honor to the Lord Jesus Christ and then after briefly describing his life in the faith (namely “appointed to preach”), again confesses his sin in writing “[the Faith] he had long labored to destroy.” Ask yourself, what do you want to be remembered by? John Newton answered by saying, “that I was a sinner and that “by the Rich Mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ [was] Preserved, Restored, Pardoned.” Again, how’s that for a legacy!? It is easy to have a feverish need to do this, and to do that, to accomplish x, and to accomplish y, but is there a better thing you could possibly say about your life -- if it is lived well -- than what Newton wrote in the hymn that we just sang moments ago: “Was blind but now I see!”?

“Hmm,” says human reason (incredulous to the end), “let me see here, you want me to take some kind of solace or comfort in confessing blindness?! Something isn’t registering. This is not exactly what is considered to be a noble trait or praiseworthy virtue. Do I really want my children to remember me as someone who was blind? Is that the way I want to sum-up my life?!” Well – and to give answer to lofty reason – yes, if you want to be saved.

At John 9:39 our Lord Jesus Christ said, “***For judgment I came into this world...***”, and right off the bat, it’s easy to be confused. I mean consider John 3:16-17: “***For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.***” So here’s the possible point of confusion: if God sends Christ to save us and says specifically that Christ did NOT come to condemn, then why does Jesus at John 9:39 turn right around and say, “***For judgment I came into this world***”? It would be easy for someone outside of the faith to say, “that’s a contradiction!”

But what would be missing in this shallow analysis that smugly claims that the Bible contradicts itself is that amazing grace is given to us not so that we would remain in sin, but it is granted us – by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Word and Sacrament of Christ – so that we would be able to see with the keenest vision that we are by nature sinful and blind. We need to be able to see that by nature we cannot and do not see the way of God. By nature, our reason and all efforts to analyze in order to make our lives right, make us blind and lead us to engage in futile attempts that assert over and over again our pride, our stubbornness, and constant resistance to the work of God in our lives.

And one of the gravest errors we make as Christians is to believe that once baptized, believing and converted, that these things of blindness no longer occur. Yes, they do (in fact, they occur every day)! Thus to sing *Amazing Grace* as if referring to your conversion experience of oh so many years ago, is to miss the insight of the current application of the hymn. In fact, by nature daily are we blinded; daily our sinful, blind nature rises with us the moment we get out of bed (in truth, even while we sleep). Every day, there is this humongous part of us called our “flesh” or “sinful nature” that is as blind as a bat to the things of God.

We think that sanctification and spiritual growth means that blindness is only a former problem. “But it must be,” the holy Christian asserts, “I have been born-again, I see now, isn’t that what Newton is saying?” Yes and no, you see now so that you would see that every-day you behave as though you were blind and as a result, that amazing grace of Christ isn’t something you need just once in order to be converted, it is something you desperately need every, single hour of every single day of your life! You need grace to see your blindness otherwise you will be consumed by that blindness. Every day, amazing grace conducts optical surgery, but we will only lie down on the surgical table if we are utterly convinced that we are blind. This is why Jesus says, ***“For judgment I came into this world,”*** He went on to say, ***“that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.”*** In other words, yes, Jesus did come to save and not to condemn, ***but – and we mustn’t be shy about the conjunction – if you claim that you can see apart from God’s spiritual surgery of conviction, contrition and forgiveness in Christ, then what is the point of Jesus? Why would you need a Great Physician...Jesus said that He came for the sick (Matthew 9)? Why would you lie down for spiritual optical surgery if you are convinced that you can already see? In effect you say to God: “I don’t need Jesus; I’m good, thank you very much.” For these, Jesus says I bring judgment, because these are rejecting the only way to be saved and they shall become blind in the sense that their guilt will remain (John 9:39***

& 41). On the other hand, for those who confess, “I’m blind, I am desperately blind!” then Jesus says, “I have come so that you may see, that you may see me as your only salvation.”

Such spiritual insight generated by God’s amazing grace through the Word of Christ leads us to know that these things are true:

Proverbs 14:12: *“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”*

Isaiah 55:9: *“For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”*

1st Corinthians 2:14: *“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”*

So dear Christian be aware: in everything you face in life, you have two reactions, two instincts, two sights – and no, you are not losing your mind nor are you necessarily in possession of split personalities in a psychological sense – but to everything you have a blind response, and if through the amazing grace of God in Christ you see that blindness, you also have the keen vision of God’s response. The flesh says, “do not forgive,” God says, “forgive as I have forgiven you.” The flesh says, “all hope is gone,” the Spirit says, “nothing is impossible for God.” This is you...the real you...the genuine you when you are born again and have the keen insight that you are blind; you are trained and wise: you will truly have two responses. From the bottom of your heart and in your deepest person you will have a reaction of pure blindness and unbelief; and that part of you that is born again will perceive that first impulse and you will have another evaluation: the one that colors the world and everyone in it with grace, amazing grace. Thus, Christ prayed also for you on the cross when He saw nothing but misery, He still prayed, “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing (Luke 23:34).” He covered the one vision with another vision...He chose to view the rebellious blind sinner as being covered by His blood and now God Himself has a new vision of you: in Christ who died for you and rose for you, you were lost, but now you are found; you were blind, but now you see.