

Light for the Blind?—Acts 26:18

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Paul was defending himself before King Agrippa. In verses 12 – 18 he described his encounter with the glorified Jesus.

12 It was on one of those journeys, as I was going to Damascus with authority and a commission from the chief priests, 13 at midday, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven brighter than the sun, blazing around me and those traveling with me. 14 Well we all fell to the ground and I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language:¹ “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” 15 So I said, “Who are you, Lord?” And He said: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 16 Now get up and stand on your feet; because I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and a witness both of the things you have seen and of the things I will reveal to you, 17 delivering you from ‘the people’ and the ethnic nations, to which I am sending you: 18 to open their eyes, so as to bring them back from darkness into light and from the authority of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified, by the faith into me.”

I wish to focus attention on the missionary commission that Paul (he was still Saul) received. Matthew 28:19, Mark 16:15, John 20:21 and Acts 1:8 took place between the resurrection and the ascension, but to commission Paul Jesus returned from Heaven! One other detail deserves special notice—the responsibility that Paul received was primarily concerned with the ethnic nations ("Gentiles" is a translation of the same word that in Matthew 28:19 is rendered "nations"). For these reasons it seems to me that this missionary commission takes on a special importance for us, and the more so for whoever is going to do pioneer transcultural work. So let us consider this commission in more detail.

Paul is sent to the nations (defined ethnically), "to open their eyes, so as to bring them back from darkness into light and from the authority of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified, by the faith into Me."

I rendered the second verb as ‘bring back’ rather than ‘turn’ or ‘convert’ because I take that to be the correct nuance of the Text. It gives the impression that someone is in the wrong place or situation and needs to be brought to the correct one. And now for the main point: the purpose clause introduced by the conjunction ‘so that’ is subordinated to the verbal phrase dominated by the verb "bring back". In other words, before someone can receive forgiveness of sins, even, he must be freed from the power of Satan! Before a person can be saved someone must do something about Satan's influence upon him.

But I am getting ahead of myself; we need to start at the beginning, “to open their eyes”. If their eyes are shut, they are blind. What good is light to a blind person? It should be obvious that the glorified Jesus was not saying that all Gentiles were physically blind; He was referring to spiritual blindness. In Matthew 15:14 He referred to blind guides leading blind people, and He was not speaking of physical blindness, except as an illustration of the spiritual. In Romans

¹ A conversation between two Jews would naturally be in Hebrew.

2:19 Paul refers to the spiritually blind. In 2 Corinthians 3:14 he refers to that blindness as a 'veil'. In 2 Corinthians 4:4 Paul spells it out.

In verse 3 he refers to the Gospel being hidden from those who are perishing, or wasting themselves, and then proceeds: "among whom the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, so that the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should not dawn on them." The Text clearly states that Satan, 'the god of this world', is in the business of blinding the minds of unbelievers when they hear the Gospel, so they will not understand, so they will not be convicted, so they will not repent and convert. This is a terrible truth. The enemy has access to our minds, access in the sense that he has the power or ability to invade them, whether by introducing thoughts or by jamming our reasoning. The Lord Jesus had already declared this truth previously, when He explained the parable of the sower. "These are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown; but, as soon as they hear it Satan comes and takes away the word that was planted in their hearts" (Mark 4:15). In the parallel passage in Luke 8:12 Jesus adds the following words: "lest they believe and be saved". Note that the Word is already in the mind or heart of the person, but then Satan comes, invades the mind and 'takes away' that word. I am not sure just how this intrusion by the enemy works, perhaps he causes a mental block of some sort, but the practical effect is that the Word becomes ineffective, as if the person had not even heard it.

It seems obvious to me that whoever does not take this truth into account will be condemning himself to produce little effect in the spiritual realm, to work hard and achieve little. So how can we open people's eyes? We must deal with the cause of the blindness, we must free them from the power of Satan, we must do something about Satan's influence upon them.

The Lord Jesus had already said the same thing in different words during His earthly ministry. We find it in Mark 3:27. "No one can plunder the strong man's goods, invading his house, unless he first bind the strong man; then he may plunder his house." I have used the definite article with the first occurrence of 'strong man' because the Greek text has it, the point being that this particular strong man has already been introduced in the immediate context. 'The strong man' here is Satan. (The Jewish leaders tried to explain Jesus' authority over the demons by saying that He expelled them by the power of Beelzebub, prince of the demons. In His retort Jesus does not waste time with that name but uses the enemy's proper name, Satan.)

So then, the Lord Jesus declares that it is impossible to steal Satan's goods unless we bind him first. (From His use of 'no one' it seems clear that the Lord is enunciating a general principle or truth.) And what might the nature of those 'goods' be? In the context (see Matthew 12:22-24) Jesus had delivered someone from a demon that caused blindness and dumbness, and in their comments the scribes and Pharisees include other instances where Jesus had expelled demons—it seems clear that the 'goods' are people who are subject to Satan's power, in one way or another. Thus we have the same essential truth as that declared in Acts 26:18—we have to do something about Satan's power over a person so that he or she can be saved! So just what can or should we do? Since the point of handcuffs ('bind') is to keep someone from acting, I believe that in so many words, aloud or in thought, we must forbid Satan (who will usually be using demons) from interfering in the minds of our hearers, before we witness, preach or teach. Consider what Sovereign Jesus said in Luke 10:19.

“Take note, I am giving¹ you the authority to trample on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing at all may harm you.” In Matthew 28:18 Sovereign Jesus affirms that He holds "all authority in heaven and on earth", so He is clearly competent to delegate some of that authority to us. Now then, just how does "authority over all the power of the enemy" work, in practice? Authority controls power, but since we have access to God's limitless power (Ephesians 3:20), we should not give Satan the satisfaction of our using his (and he could easily deceive us into doing things we shouldn't). We should use our authority to forbid the use of Satan's power, with reference to specific situations—in my experience, we must be specific. (I have tried binding Satan once for all until the end of the world, but it does not work; presumably because God's plan calls for the enemy's continued activity in this world. We can limit what the enemy does, but not put him completely out of business, or so I deem.) But just how should we go about it?

In the armor described in Ephesians 6 we find “the sword of the Spirit” (verse 17). A sword is a weapon for offense, although it is also used for defense. The Text tells us that this sword is “the ρημα of God”—ρημα, not λογος. It is God's Word spoken, or applied. Really, what good is a sword left in its sheath? However marvelous our Sword may be (Hebrews 4:12), to produce effect it must come out of the scabbard. The Word needs to be spoken, or written—applied in a specific way.

In the Bible we have many examples where people brought the power of God into action by speaking. Our world began with a creative word from God—spoken (Genesis, 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26; and see Hebrews 11:3). Moses did a lot of speaking. Elijah spoke (1 Kings 17:1, 18:36, 2 Kings 1:10). Elisha spoke (2 Kings 2:14, 21, 24; 4:16, 43; 6:19). Jesus did a great deal of speaking. Ananias spoke (Acts 9:17). Peter spoke (Acts 9:34, 40). Paul spoke (Acts 13:11; 14:3, 10; 16:18; 20:10; 28:8). In short, we need to speak!²

I have been asked why Paul himself is not recorded to have forbidden Satan's activity; and if this is so important, why were not the other Apostles told as well. I would say that the other Apostles were indeed told, and three of the Gospels mention it (Matthew 12:29, Mark 3:27, Luke 11:21-2). As for Paul, he did not merely preach and teach, he gave visible demonstrations of God's power (1 Thessalonians 1:5). The first recorded example of his procedure is in Acts 13:6-12. Elymas was presumably demonized, but in any case was being used by Satan to keep Sergius Paulus from the truth. Paul discerned what was involved and took appropriate action, with the result that the proconsul believed, "when he **saw** what had been done". That this was not an isolated case may be seen from Acts 14:3, 16:18, 19:11-20, 2 Corinthians 12:12 and especially Romans 15:18-19. Paul declares that he made the Gentiles obedient "by word and **deed**", "by mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God", and on that basis he claimed to have "fully preached the Gospel of Christ". Which leads to the question of how the other Apostles understood their commission.

¹ Instead of 'am giving', perhaps 2.5% of the Greek manuscripts, of objectively inferior quality, have 'have given' (as in NIV, NASB, LB, TEV, etc.)—a serious error. Jesus said this perhaps five months before His death and resurrection, addressing the seventy (not just the twelve). The Lord is talking about the future, not the past; a future that includes us!

² For more on this subject the reader may consult my site: www.prunch.org, under the heading, “Biblical Spiritual Warfare”.

Paul did not share with the Twelve the advantage of observing the three years of Jesus' ministry at close range. Christ's preaching was inextricably mixed with His healing the sick and expelling demons. He knew exactly what was involved (cf. Luke 13:16). When He sent them out two by two His orders were explicit: "As you go, preach, . . . heal the sick, cleanse lepers, expel demons" (Matthew 10:7-8; cf. Mark 6:7-13 and Luke 9:1-6). In Mark 16:15-18 healing and expelling are expressly included in the Great Commission (I am prepared to demonstrate that verses 9-20 are of necessity the original ending of Mark, and therefore Scripture), and verse 20 affirms that the Lord confirmed their preaching "through the accompanying signs". Hebrews 2:4 repeats that their ministry was characterized by "signs, wonders and various miracles". The Apostles demonstrated the truth of John 14:12, where Jesus affirmed: "he who believes into me, the works that I do he will do also". The Gospel as preached by Jesus and His Apostles was with word and **deed**, miraculous deed, supernatural deed. How about the Gospel we preach?¹

I now return to an analysis of Paul's commission. When attempting to evangelize one or more pagans (non-Christians), there was a sequence of things to be done:

- 1) Since light is of no use to a blind person, the necessary starting point is to deal with their spiritual blindness, by cancelling the satanic strongholds and blind-spots in their minds (1 John 3:8).
- 2) "So as to bring them back from darkness into light and from the authority of Satan to God"—the prepositional phrases are parallel and basically synonymous. Having been delivered from the blindness, the person is now ready for light, the light of God's Good News. Once we have repelled the enemy's interference, I believe it is possible to introduce a positive influence, based on Matthew 18:18. I understand the 'binding' to include the repelling of the enemy's interference, and in that event the 'loosing' presumably includes the introduction of a positive influence. I invoke the Spirit of the Truth (John 15:26) and of conviction (John 16:8) to guide and encourage the person to believe into Jesus.
- 3) "So that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified"—this is the desired result. Strictly speaking, the Text has 'those who have been

¹ I wonder sometimes if we evangelicals do not regard the Apostles, especially Paul, as virtually divine. Scripture makes clear that the OT writers did not understand the full implications of what they wrote. They were kept from error while writing, but not when interpreting to themselves what they had written. I see no reason for supposing that the NT writers were treated differently. The Sacred Text itself records some of their failures. Why should we assume that Paul and the others had a full grasp of the complete range of options for spiritual warfare? Certainly no detailed procedure or technique is spelled out in the Bible. Why not? I suggest the following. This area of truth is so powerful that if an infallible procedure had been spelled out in an unmistakable way, Satan and his angels would have been wiped out long since. But that would have frustrated the purpose of God in allowing them to continue in operation even though defeated and with their final destination defined. Also, it seems to be God's purpose that our walk with Him not be easy or automatic—He is a rewarder of those who "**diligently** seek" Him (Hebrews 11:6). Further, to wield the power of God is a demanding privilege; it requires clean hands and a pure heart (James 4:8), it demands humility (James 4:6). God does not give up His secrets to the lazy and uncommitted (Proverbs 25:2).

sanctified', referring to the final result. However, it is well to remember that sanctification is also a process.

- 4) To receive that desired result, the person must believe into Jesus, 'into', not 'in'—the Text always has 'believe **into** Jesus', the point being that there is a change of position, from being outside to being inside, and commitment is involved.