Acts: Spiritual Self-Awareness
Acts 9:4-19

Part of my job as a pastor is counseling with people who are going through difficult times. I remember counseling with a woman who was in the process of divorcing her husband. For the first hour of our meeting she poured out all of the anger and resentment that she had against her husband which she had clearly rehearsed with others and in her own mind a thousand times. When I asked her to tell me what part of the broken relationship she was responsible for…what her sin and her contribution was to the failed marriage…she looked at me with astonishment, as though I hadn’t been listening to all her complaints. I asked again, more directly this time, “Have you done anything wrong in this relationship that would have contributed to your marriage failing?” With all sincerity she said, “Yes…I enabled him.” That’s all she could come up with. In her mind, she had done nothing wrong in 20 years of being married. She had never sinned, she had never acted selfishly, she had never withheld her forgiveness, she had never acted inappropriately…nothing…so she felt completely justified to divorce her husband and blow up her family. This lady suffered from a common condition called “spiritual narcissism.”

Spiritual narcissism is the condition of NOT being able or willing to see your own sin while feeling completely justified to point out everyone else’s sin. There is nothing more dangerous and destructive than a spiritual narcissist who claims to believe in the Bible, goes to church, and has religious zeal. That was Saul prior to his conversion…he was a classic spiritual narcissist, and such people inevitably become destroyers. Our story today reveals the only hope for a spiritual narcissist: a loving confrontation with Jesus that provides accurate spiritual awareness.

Last week we examined Saul’s confrontation with the glorified Jesus on the road to Damascus. Let’s pick up the story in Acts 9:4-19 and see how Saul was affected by this confrontation.

As we noted last week, Saul is absolutely confused when he is confronted by a voice from heaven saying, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” He doesn’t understand…he can’t see his own sin…in his mind he has been completely justified in persecuting, even executing Jesus followers. Then Jesus reveals Himself to Saul, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

The result of the confrontation is described in vss. 8-9, “Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.”

If you have time in the next week, rent the movie called “The Mission” with Robert De Niro and Jeremy Irons. I’ve never seen a movie so beautifully depict the repentance of a spiritual narcissist.
with such power as when the character played by Robert De Niro realizes that he has just slain his younger, beloved brother out of his unbridled rage. It is one of the most powerful scenes of any movie ever produced, and it will help you appreciate what happens to Saul on the road to Damascus. Saul…the spiritual narcissist turned terrorist, is completely undone when Christ show him his sin.

Can you see that Saul’s blindness is a powerful picture of repentance? This spiritual narcissist has had physical sight and spiritual blindness for many years; but look what happens in this loving confrontation with Christ. The light of Christ’s revelation is spiritually eye-opening, but physically blinding. It is the great reversal. Why? Because Saul’s power, determination, and mission was fueled by self-justifying anger and self-righteousness. However, when Christ confronts Saul and shows him his sin, all of that power is stripped away, leaving him as helpless as an infant…blind, powerless, and led by the hand like a child.

Saul will later write, “I have been crucified with Christ.” This is what he is talking about. The old Saul, the one who constructed his identity upon his self-justification and anger, has been undone. For three days he does not eat or drink. Why? Because for the first time in his life, Saul has seen his sin, and it has crushed him. Saul is no doubt replaying the tape of his life now in the isolation of his blindness. Over the course of three days he will reinterpret all of his actions, all of his hatred, all of his violence in light of his encounter with Christ, and the effect will be utter devastation.

Does this three days of blindness and repentance remind you of any other story in the Bible? Do you remember the story of Jonah? Jonah also had a dramatic encounter with God’s judgment, and when he recognized his sin in the midst of the terrible storm that his rebellion against God created, he volunteered to die by being thrown into the sea. He knew he deserved death…he knew his sin had placed many in harms way. But God sends a great fish to swallow him and for three days Jonah is confined in darkness as he repents and reflects upon his sin against God and others.

The cure for spiritual narcissism is being confronted by God, who is the only One who can convict us or our sin, so that we see ourselves appropriately in light of God’s law and God’s love. The first part of that confrontation removes the blinders from our spiritual eyes so that we can achieve appropriate spiritual self-awareness in light of God’s law. I remember very clearly being confronted by God in the Princeton Seminary chapel in the fall of 1995, and it was horrifying. God showed me my sin, and I was crushed…devastated…undone. My heart broke and I was blinded by the tears that poured out of the depths of my soul. I had been running from God…I had been arrogant…I had been deceitful and lustful and hypocritical and a thousand

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other horrible descriptors. Seeing your sin is terrible, but it’s also refreshingly honest. The mask comes off, and everything is brought into the light. When God confronts you and shows you your sin, there is nowhere to hide...the hiding is over.

That’s where Saul is right now. He has been exposed, he has seen his sin, and he knows he deserves death...he deserves hell. That’s what appropriate spiritual self-awareness reveals to every human soul...we all deserve hell on our best day, because our sin is a black stain against a beautiful, holy, unblemished God who is just in His judgments...and we can’t go back and make things right...we could never satisfy God’s justice.

But there is something else going on during the three days of darkness...both for Saul and for Jonah, and Jim West in the Princeton chapel. They are also wrestling with the irony of God’s love...the mystery that is bewildering and possibly even more disturbing and confusing than seeing their sin. All three men are also wrestling with the awareness that “God sees my sin, and I now see my sin, and I now understand that I deserve death and hell, and yet God has spared my life...He has saved me from the fate I most certainly deserve...and He has entrusted me with a purpose and a calling.” In the darkness of their repentance, Jonah, Saul, and Jim West must contend with God’s love and His unmerited grace.

I know for me, God’s grace was, in some ways, even more disturbing than my sin. Why? Because we are all wired to understand justice. In our spiritual blindness and narcissism we feel self-justified...but when our spiritual eyes are opened and we behold the black stain of our sin, the very first thought that enters into our minds is: I deserve death...I deserve hell. That’s what justice requires. If a fire came down from heaven at that moment and annihilated us...if the floor opened up and we fell into the pit of hell for all eternity, we would know without a shadow of a doubt...”It’s only right...it’s what I deserve.”

However, it is completely counter-intuitive for the sinner to contemplate that God so loves us in our darkness, that He has seen all of our evil thoughts, intentions, motives, actions and attitudes, and yet He continues to desire us! That part is other-worldly, and quite frankly...no human being could have made that up. The unmerited grace of God in Jesus Christ crucified is the most counter-intuitive truth in all of human history. That God would forgive sinners by sending His perfect Son to take on the punishment we KNOW we deserve...that God would restore, resurrect, and reinstate His rebellious, traitorous subjects...that He would even call us His beloved children and urge us to call him “Papa,”...after all we’ve done...it’s simply mind-blowing for the sinner who now has spiritual self-awareness.

This profound mystery is now racing through Saul’s mind during the three days of darkness.

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Now, at the same time that Saul is sitting in darkness and repentance, there is another man who enters the stage…his name is Ananias. Let’s pick up the story beginning with vs. 10: Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am Lord.” And the Lord said to him, “Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.”

Just a few notes: we don’t much at all about Ananias from the text. It would appear from what we read that Ananias is familiar with Saul but has never met him before. Clearly Saul’s reputation would have preceded him, and the underground church in Damascus has been notified that Saul was on his way to persecute those who “call upon the name” of Jesus, which was another descriptor of the early church.

Again, we must use our imaginations here, because logically we can probably assume a few things about Ananias. First, Ananias either came to the faith in Jerusalem or he was discipled by a believer from Jerusalem. That’s a fair guess because of the time frame we are dealing with. Either way, Ananias would have witnessed or been in close relationship with people who had suffered at the hand of Saul the persecutor. When the Lord calls Ananias to visit Saul and lay hands on him, Ananias cannot help but recall his evil actions against the church, and likely against people and families he had known. So he pushes back against the call of Christ.

Again, we see the parallel with the story of Jonah. Remember how Jonah was called to proclaim the judgment of God upon the terrible Assyrian city of Nineveh and call them to repentance that they might be saved from the wrath of God. These were the very people who had devastated the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC with indescribable brutality. Every Jewish person in the world at that time wanted God to smite the Assyrians…nobody wanted God to save the Assyrians.

Now why is this parallel significant for our treatment of Saul and Ananias? Here’s why: because one of the primary causes of spiritual narcissism is trauma. When we have been hurt, wronged, or traumatized…or people we love have been hurt, wronged or traumatized, we inevitably feel entitled and justified to hate those people for what they’ve done. That’s what our intuitive sense of justice leads us to do, and once we feel justified to judge and condemn another person, we are on our way to spiritual narcissism. Why? Because we will increasingly judge ourselves in comparison with our worst enemy, and in comparison to what we believe they have done, we will inevitably conclude that our sin pales in comparison…it will pale so much that we will
eventually lose sight of our own sin altogether as we become ever more fixated on the sin of those who have sinned against us. We will reason that we are protecting ourselves and our loved ones from further trauma, so once again, we will self-justify our condemnation of those people and people like them! That last part is important. Many of us were traumatized at a young age due to violence or abuse of some kind, and our walls of defense have been conditioned to fly up whenever someone even reminds us of the one who hurt us. Such is why we often punish the people close to us with inappropriate intensity or condemnation…not because of what they have specifically done to us, but because they have done something that reminds us of the one who did. I see that tendency happen quite frequently, particularly in marriage relationships or in parent/child relationships. Now I know what I just said will strike a nerve with many of you, and you may have many questions and objections to what you think I said due to the pain you have suffered at the hand of another. Listen to me: I’m not blaming victims of trauma for acting like victims of trauma! I’m simply making an observation that is well documented in many schools of thought including brain studies, psychotherapy, and biblical theology. Trauma is a key contributor to spiritual narcissism, and it’s one of the reasons that spiritual narcissism is so very difficult to address. The more we feel justified in our anger, resentment, and fear, the more likely we are to not see our own sin and to dwell on the sins of others. Such is likely the reason that Jesus taught us to pray, every day, “Forgive us our sins, for we forgive everyone who is indebted to us.” Forgiveness is the only cure for trauma, and in most cases the trauma must be addressed before we can be set free from spiritual narcissism…more on that in a minute.

Now, can you see how Ananias feels justified to question the Lord’s assignment because of trauma that he suffered by Saul’s persecution or the trauma those close to him endured by the hand of the Persecutor? That makes this moment in the story feel quite tense, because we recognize in Ananias what we see so often in ourselves: “Ask me to go visit someone else, Lord…but not him. Ask me to forgive someone else Lord, but not her. Ask me to invite someone else Lord, but not that family.” Many of us…many of us who attend church every Sunday…identify with Ananias.

Let’s see how Jesus handles the complaint of Ananias beginning with vs. 15: But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

First, notice that Jesus does not rebuke Ananias for his question. Unlike Zechariah who is struck mute in Luke 1 when he questions the messenger of God, Ananias is not punished. He is not rebuked. Jesus understands what it is like to suffer trauma…more than any of us can possibly know. Jesus understands that Ananias needs to ask that question and express his fear and concern. But Jesus does not allow Ananias the privilege of negotiating his call. As was the case

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with Jonah, Jesus says, “Go...” But notice that Jesus provides some clarity and rationale to the call. He says, “Saul is a chosen instrument of MINE...” Listen, who is most justified to be angry, hurt, and condemning towards Saul? Stephen, whom Saul assisted in murdering? No. Other believing families and individuals rotting away in prison due to Saul’s persecution? No. The singular person most justified in being angry, hurt, and condemning towards Saul is Jesus Christ of Nazareth, because as we just learned a few verses ago...Saul wasn’t just persecuting people, he was persecuting the Blameless One, the Perfect One, the Unblemished One, the Alpha and Omega, the Lamb of God! If anyone has the right to be angry and condemning, it’s Jesus. So when Jesus says, “I choose him...Saul is an instrument of MINE”...any remaining argument is moot. If Jesus forgives Saul for what he has done to HIM, Ananias must trust Jesus to complete the assignment of restoring Saul’s sight and welcoming him into the brotherhood of believers.

Notice also that Jesus has chosen Saul for an assignment that NO ONE else would want or could even hope to accomplish. It’s because of Saul’s great sin and now his deep repentance…it’s because of all the factors that made Saul the persecutor...that the redeemed Saul is now best positioned for the assignment that Christ has purposed for his life. This former persecutor of the faith will be forever humiliated with the assignment of carrying the Name he once despised before Gentiles, kings, and the Jews. That assignment will come with a great deal of suffering, and once again, Saul is the right man for the job. Because of his terrible sins, and because of his deep contrition and repentance, Saul will endure any and all suffering with joy and gratitude in his heart...he’ll never forget who he was and what he deserves...his endurance will be fueled by the gratitude of Christ’s unmerited love, grace, forgiveness, and election. By the way...that’s always what fuels the endurance and perseverance of believers in difficult places all over the world. I say this all the time, and I mean it: “Jesus showed me grace I do not deserve and saved me from the hell I do deserve, so I will do whatever He asks of me with joy, regardless of the cost. It’s the least I can do as an expression of my gratitude for what He did for me.” That will be Saul’s attitude from this point forward, even as he suffers terribly on his assignment. Who can forget the list of sufferings that Paul records in 2 Corinthians 11: “Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked.; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from my own people, danger from the Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.” In addition to all of the suffering listed in 2 Cor. 11, Paul also writes of a thorn in the flesh that was humiliating and painful, and yet when asked three times, the Lord denied his request and said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Clearly Jesus knows how to deal with repentant sinners...even those who were once terrorists. He forgives and restores, but listen: God does not spare us the natural consequences of our
behavior. Saul is forgiven and sent, but much of the suffering he will experience will come as a result of his past life and behavior. The amazing thing for us to see here is that God will use that suffering for the advancement of His Kingdom, so even the suffering that Saul experiences as a result of his sin is redeemed. I’ve seen this tendency throughout my life, and I’m sure you have as well. Who can forget the great Chuck Colson who was thought to be the meanest, most dangerous man in Washington D.C. leading up to his arrest in the Watergate scandal? The natural consequence of his sinful life and choices was serving time in prison. There Chuck saw his sin, repented, and was saved through the grace of Jesus Christ. Did that get him out of prison? No. God allowed Chuck to feel the consequence of his crime, but during his time in prison Chuck heard the call to begin a ministry to inmates, and that ministry which continues to this day has changed millions of lives, even now after Chuck Colson’s earthly life has ended.

Let’s return to our story and see how Ananias responds to the call of Christ in vss 17-19: So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. The he rose and was baptized, and taking food, he was strengthened.

I don’t know if you can see this, but I hope you can picture in your mind just how emotional this scene is. Here you have a first century believer who has no doubt been a victim or is associated with victims of trauma at the hands of the Persecutor, and he is now coming into the room with that very same man. In any other story we would expect Ananias to come in and kick Saul in the face for all this terrorist has done. Ananias would be justified; no one could blame him…but that’s not what happens. Ananias, as a recipient of God’s grace, sees this broken soul…blinded and undone…and no doubt he sees himself…he remembers that devastating moment when the Holy Spirit had shown him his sin. Thus with mercy Ananias extends the grace of Christ to Saul. He lays hands on Saul, calls him brother, and feels the power of the Holy Spirit shoot through him into the former persecutor. The change that happens in that room is almost instantaneous. Saul has been forgiven, saved, and he too…as the former persecutor and terrorist…has received the Holy Spirit, the gift of God, with all the power and benefits that comes with being a child of the Most of the High. He has been restored, redeemed, and welcomed home by his Father in Heaven. His spiritual eyes, and now his physical sight, has been restored. It is a very emotional scene…and not just for Saul. Should we not also imagine how powerful and healing this experience is for Ananias? For certainly he has been carrying the burden of anger, resentment, and fear against this man Saul for who knows how long, and now he has laid that down. Let us not forget that the mercy of Christ not only brings healing for those who have been forgiven, but also for those who are empowered by the Holy Spirit to forgive. Friends, we are almost always…at any point in our lives…either those who need forgiveness, or those who need to

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forgive, or both.

Find your place in this narrative…find your place in this story of forgiveness and redemption. Are you a “Saul?” Are you one who has wreaked havoc due to your spiritual narcissism? Have you been blind to your own sins and obsessed with the sins of others? Behold, even now Christ confronts us with the truth about our spiritual condition…the Holy Spirit reveals through God’s Word that we are all sinners…that our own sin punishable by death, which is what we deserve. Our own sin is what we must first contend with…not the sin of others. If Christ is showing you your sin, and you are horrified…if your spiritual eyes are being opened and the weight of your sin is crushing, look to the cross. For there you will see the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Call upon His name…call upon the name of Jesus…that you might be forgiven, restored, reborn, and sent according to His purpose for your life. Jesus is capable of making all things new for even the worst of sinners.

Are you an “Ananias?” Are you one who has received the unmerited grace of Christ and yet you resist extending that grace to another who has hurt you or has hurt those you love? Hear the call of your Lord to forgive…for your sake and for the sake of the one Christ chooses to save. Mean what you say when you pray, “Forgive us our sins Lord, even as we forgive all who have sinned against us.” Spiritual narcissism is the end for those who will not forgive, and Jesus says clearly in Matthew 6:15 that unforgiveness disqualifies us from the grace of Christ who so freely forgives our treason and transgression. Forgive as you have been forgiven…that is the mandate for all believers without exception. Trust God more than your trust your feelings, and you will see do grace of Jesus Christ accomplish miraculous works in you and through you.

Find your place in this story, and believe the gospel! Let’s pray.

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