

There Shone a Holy Light



How does someone come to believe? For a long time, people thought that what was needed was enough evidence. If you can get all of the arguments together, you could cause someone to overcome belief. But there are many people who have all of the evidence, they can even agree to the evidence, but they still do not believe. Evidence is important, but it's not enough.

Just think about how your brain works. Have you ever had a moment where you are trying to remember something but it just won't come to mind? What's the word...and you sit there and the harder you try the further away the idea goes. "It'll come to me," we say, recognizing that we have to move on.

But have you ever had a time where that "aha" moment just happened? It's like a lightbulb turned on. Suddenly you see things clearly. You understand. You remember. Some have called this "inspiration" or "illumination." And on a small level, that's what belief is like. Suddenly things make sense. You see clearly. It's like the light went on!

And this is how Paul describes what belief is like in becoming a Christian. It's the beginning of the light turning on and suddenly you see clearly. It was Paul's experience, and for many people it is their experience as well. From a spiritual perspective, let's consider why people do and don't believe.

Why don't people believe the gospel?

In v. 4, Paul is explaining why he doesn't get discouraged when people don't believe the message he shares. He says that he doesn't have to manipulate people or make things more appealing or marketable. He has confidence that the good news that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners is enough news to rescue people. But if people don't believe, he gives three reasons.

First, the problem is the god of this age. This is one of the ways that Paul refers to Satan. The devil is actively at work preventing people from believing the gospel. But Paul does not lose heart because of the devil's work. Why? Because he is the god of *this* age. While he is actively at work right now, there is another age that has come, and so the power of Satan is not equal with God. It is not as though God and Satan are equal powers, duelling for the souls of people. Satan is actively at work right now, but his time is limited. This age is coming to an end, and so Paul can have confidence that the gospel will prevail. But for now, in this age, Satan is at work to prevent people from believing.

Second, what Satan does is he blinds minds. It's an interesting phrase – he's not blinding eyes, but minds. To see is to know. And so Satan deceives people, causing confusion, clouding their minds. He might make them dull or just distract. He tempts. And this is common – Satan is actively working to keep people from seeing and knowing. Paul goes back to his discussion in chapter three about what happened when people saw the glory of God when Moses would go to meet God – Moses' face would shine, causing the people to fear. So Moses had to put a veil over his face to protect the people from the glory of God (see Exod. 34:35). The reason people don't see and know what God is doing is that it has been veiled. Moses wore this veil after meeting with God,

making atonement for the sin of the people, getting counsel from God, and understanding God's ways as to how he would forgive the sin of the people. This happened after the people had made an idol and worshipped it, and God had come to discipline the people for their sin.

This caused the people to miss out on the mercy and grace that God had brought by drawing near. And as a result of them not being able to see, they remained in unbelief. Even though they had been made in the image of God, the people had chosen to worship another image – the image of the calf – and miss out on the glory of God.

And this is why people cannot believe – Satan is actively at work, blinding people's minds, so that they do not see the true image of God and believe.

Paul came to understand these truths when he came to faith. He had been walking on the road to Damascus to eliminate Christians who were talking about Jesus as the rescuer of the world when suddenly a light stopped him in his tracks. He could no longer see. He heard a voice, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" In this moment, he suddenly saw everything clearly. Even though his eyes could not see, now the eyes of his heart knew. The way that Satan had lied to him had been defeated. Scales would later fall from his eyes (Acts 9:18). And his understanding of Jesus would become clear. He could see how he was a sinner, in need of mercy and grace. This moment of divine and supernatural light being imparted to his soul caused him to be regenerated, born again, and believing the gospel. So while the god of this age is blinding people's minds so that they do not see, Paul does not lose heart. Why? Satan's time is limited as the god of this age, and his blinding work over people's minds will not prevail. So then we need to ask...

Why do people believe the gospel?

Paul's encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus changed his life forever, including how he saw God. The reason Paul believes is not because he had superior knowledge of the Scriptures as a religious scholar, but because of the God who creates. Unlike the god of this age, the God who creates is before all and is the God who speaks. So Paul sees the superiority of the Creator God and hears the first words of creation, "Let there be light," and understands that this means that God is still creating. But the light that God is imparting is for a new creation. That new creation has begun already by rescuing people like Paul – former persecutors and blasphemers. People who thought they were good but needed mercy.

God brings light, and that light creates a second effect: enlightened hearts. These hearts know sin. And they are broken over it. They weep over it. It pains them. Paul had this experience. When the light on the road to Damascus came to him, the light shone through his eyes and into his heart. This light had enabled him to see how wrong he had been – how he had read the Bible incorrectly, how his zeal for God was misplaced, how he wanted to keep the law but he was unable to.

And the final effect of this new creation light is that it reveals the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. In the old covenant, glory was blinding. Moses had to veil his face. But in the new covenant of Jesus, God's glory in Jesus removes spiritual blindness. This is what Isaiah had said was coming for those who walked in deep darkness and gloom: the people who walked in the darkness would behold a great light. Those living in the land of shadows, on them a light would dawn (Isa. 9:2).

What is this glory? This glory is seen in Jesus Christ himself. Instead of seeing God and not being able to live under the old covenant, now we can see God's glory. And where is that glory? In the face of Jesus Christ. While Adam had failed to be the image of God, Paul shows us here that a new and better Adam has come who shows us God's glory. And he enables us to draw near to God. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we see the truth. I nailed Jesus to the cross. I am a sinner. I am in need of God's mercy and grace. I need help being changed from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18).

This is what God does by his Spirit. We are all broken people. We are all bound in sin. We fight against it our whole lives. But the god of this age has been defeated by the Creator God. The blindness caused by Satan can be overcome by the God who speaks a word and imparts his supernatural light to the soul. What was once veiled is now in flesh. What was once hidden behind a veil is now visible for all to see – mercy and grace and forgiveness.

So why does Paul not lose heart? Because the god of this age has been defeated. He still is working, but this age is coming to an end. His blindness will cause many to stumble and fall, but a new creation light is coming. And that new creation light enables people to see that Jesus has died and risen again to take your punishment for sin, to remove the scales off of your eyes, so that you can see Jesus. What was distorted when Adam believed the lies of Satan is overcome by looking at the face of Jesus Christ. The creation will not be destroyed but remade. We are made like Adam but remade to be like Christ.

These aren't just reasons why people believe, it's also a reminder that belief isn't something to boast in. The reason you believe isn't due to your reasoning or learning or smarts. The reason you believe is because God graciously broke into your life when you didn't know better, shone his light into your heart to give you the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. So what reason do you have to boast about your belief?

It's also why we have compassion when people are stuck in sin. Because we need God's light to shine into our hearts. We need to tell people the truth over and over and over. When people hear, God may be pleased to use your words to help someone believe.

It's also why we continue to remind one another of these truths. Sin binds us and ensnares us. When we tell the truth of the good news of God's plan, what it does is it breaks the power of cancelled sin. It sets prisoners free.

God has come. And it might take time for people to have that "aha" moment. Why? Because God works in his time and his way. If people don't see, it's not because there is a problem with the gospel. It means we have to keep humbling ourselves, praying for that supernatural light to be spoken, and be gracious and merciful.

So let's pray that God's light comes again and again and again. Just as God is active in making every snowflake and raindrop and beam of sun and pedal of a flower, he is active in making new creations out of sinners like you and me. Do you believe? Have you heard the voice? Let there be light! This is the hope of redemption!