

“Keep Your Eyes on the Prize”

Romans 11:7-10

August 16th, 2020

Kids, young people, my friends, I’m speaking to you now. From the time I was 9 years old until I graduated from high school when I was 17, my family and I lived in an old country farmhouse in northern Illinois, about a 2-hour drive from Aledo.

I am the oldest of 4 children, so I was often babysitting my two younger sisters and younger brother. At night, our house could be a scary place; it was dark out in the country! I had quite a healthy imagination, so I could easily think of fantastically bad things happening, like aliens from outer space landing their UFO in our driveway, or seeing someone staring back at me if I opened the curtain to look out a window – that would be the worst ever!

Late one Saturday night, after my sisters and brother went to bed, I walked into the kitchen to get something to drink. As I was filling a glass with water at the sink, I heard something making noises down the counter; as I looked at the toaster, wouldn’t you know a mouse popped up his head from inside the toaster! He was looking for toast crumbs. When he saw me, he took off, and I didn’t see where he went. I was hoping it was down in the basement!

Have you heard the rhyme/song “Three Blind Mice?” I learned it when I was young.

*Three blind mice. Three blind mice. See how they run. See how they run.
They all ran after the farmer’s wife, who cut off their tails with a carving knife,
Did you ever see such a sight in your life as three blind mice?*

This song goes back over 400 years to the days of Queen Mary I, aka ‘Bloody Mary’. The dark humor captured in these verses could relate to Mary’s execution of three leading Protestant bishops - Ridley, Latimer and Cranmer - who were actually burnt at the stake and not blinded.

We may not be able to see God, but we know He always sees us, right? May we always have the kind of sight that comes by faith in Jesus to help us here on earth now, and in heaven forever!

Romans 11:7-10:

“What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded. Just as it is written:

*“God has given them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see
and ears that they should not hear, to this very day.”*

And David says:

*“Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a recompense to them.
Let their eyes be darkened, so that they do not see, and bow down their back always.”*

With every text of Scripture I teach, I look for repeating words, phrases, or ideas. Often times that practice leads me to the main idea or theme of a passage of Scripture. *Perhaps you detect*

a theme in today's passage in **Romans Chapter 11**? Consider in just the four verses of today's sermon text:

- Verse 7 mentions the word "blinded."
- Verse 8 speaks of "eyes that...should not see,"
- Verse 10 mentions "eyes being darkened so that they do not see,"

The theme of these verses, then, has something to do with eyesight, or more correctly, the lack of eyesight (blindness). *We should ask, however, if this passage is teaching about literal blindness of our visual sensory organs, our eyes?* No, it teaches us a spiritual blindness that accompanies unbelief in Jesus Christ. In almost every occasion when the Bible speaks of blindness, it is not referring to our eyes losing sight, but rather to our not understanding the gospel or the Scriptures that plainly spell it out.

Last Sunday, we examined **Romans 11:1-6** and we learned there was a small number of believing Israelites in the days of both Elijah the Old Testament prophet, and Paul the New Testament apostle. Though God had chosen the Israelite people to be His own special people, only a remnant of them had come to worship God truly and believe fully in the Lord. Those missing the cut had worked zealously to follow the law of God. They sought to find God through their works, and not by faith.

So, that's where today's passage picks up. Verse 7 is another of those hard to understand passages of God's work in terms of those Whom He chooses. Let's look at it again – "What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded."

What was it that Israel (the nation) sought? Paul repeats the thought he posed in **Romans Chapter 9:30-31**. There, we read, "What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness." But, Paul says here in **11:7**, "the elect have obtained it." "By comparing our present passage with **9:30-31**, it becomes clear that historically the thing which Israel as a nation was constantly seeking but was not obtaining was right standing with God, righteousness." (Hendriksen, 364)

We must be careful not to take verse 7 out of its context here in Chapter 11. If we do, we might presume that those seeking righteousness earned their salvation by their earnest works. We see verse 7 teaches that the elect obtained what they sought. It was God, not they, Who had given them the desire to seek the righteousness they needed in order to inhabit heaven. These elect ones sought righteousness, and found it, because God had first determined that they would. If God had not purposed this, they would remain dead in their trespasses and sin.

As we've seen several times in our study of Romans, but especially so in chapters 9-11, Paul's teaching is founded in the Old Testament scriptures. In verse 8 of our text today, Paul looks to Moses and Isaiah, and in verses 9 & 10, he looks to David. Let's first look briefly at verse 8 –

“Just as it is written: ‘God has given them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear, to this very day.’”

This combines words from **Deuteronomy 29:4** and **Isaiah 29:10**. God had given to certain people a spirit of “stupor.” “Stupor” is an attitude of deadness toward spiritual things. It is mental and moral dullness or apathy (Hendriksen, 364). The hardening of heart that Paul addressed back in **Romans Chapter 9** comes round again in today’s passage. Paul quotes Isaiah who was paraphrasing Moses’ words in Deuteronomy, saying in essence, “Moses warned Israel in his day that their rebellion resulted in God giving them spiritual blindness...Isaiah told Israel that this had continued ‘to this very day’...Now I am telling you that this hardening is still ongoing.” (Keller, 87)

This blindness - this hardening - is addressed several times in Isaiah. For instance, **Isaiah 6:9 & 10**, read, “And He said, ‘Go, and tell this people: ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ ‘Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return and be healed.’”

Jesus referred to those two verses from Isaiah when He explained why He told such parables as are recorded in the four gospel accounts. Jesus also told the reason for parables when He said these words to his disciples about the multitudes in the **Gospel According to Matthew 13:11-13** – “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.”

Clearly, Jesus is speaking about the two different kinds of people we find throughout the Bible from **Genesis Chapter 3** to **Revelation Chapter 22** – those who are the children of God (elect) and those who are not. God gives those He chooses in Christ a spiritual understanding that is blindness to those who are not His children by faith.

Paul wrote two New Testament letters to the Church in Corinth – First and Second Corinthians. In **2 Corinthians 3:14-18**, Paul wrote – “...their minds were blinded. For until this day this same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless, when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same thing from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.”

Returning to verses 9 & 10 of today’s text, Paul quotes **Psalms 69:22-23**. There, the Psalmist David writes, *“Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a recompense to them. Let their eyes be darkened, so that they do not see, and bow down their back always.”*

“The table (spoken of here) is the place of food, of sustenance, and it is most unexpected when this source of nourishment becomes a source of trouble. Perhaps Paul is thinking that

the Scriptures, which should have been a source of spiritual nourishment to the Jews, are in fact the very thing that brings about their downfall, for they use them wrongly.” (Morris, 403-404)

Again, the eyes of some are dimmed so they cannot see – their need of salvation, nor the Redeemer Jesus Christ. What a pitiful existence to live only for one’s self. But, many in our day, sitting in evangelical churches of America (or participating via live-stream on social media) are attempting to do just that. God had instructed His people that eternal life, which we begin in this present life, is all of grace, not of our works.

Testifying to God’s work in our lives is what He uses to bring people who have lived spiritually blind lives into spiritual vision. We have no idea whom the Lord will call through our ministry. But, we do all have the command of Scripture to “Go...and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that (Jesus) has commanded (us)....” **(Matthew 28:19 & 20)**

How have you been reaching out to others during the coronavirus response? What kind of ministry have you had to your neighbors and friends? How are you presently ministering to others? Perhaps you’ve been praying for others, encouraging others, even accomplishing some form of hospitality to others. God will guide and protect us as we minister to others. He wouldn’t give us the command to ‘Go!’ and then let something keep us from doing so.

Last week’s sermon (like all of them preached since the pandemic began in mid-March) is saved to our Church Facebook page – Trinity Presbyterian Church of Aledo – PCA. You’ll remember I shared the story of Horatio Spafford whose wife and four daughters were involved in a deadly collision between two ships on the Atlantic Ocean. Spafford’s daughters drowned. And on his way to be with their mother, Spafford composed the words that became the great hymn, “It is Well with My Soul.” The tune was written by a man named Philip Bliss.

The story doesn’t end there, but it takes an interesting, though tragic turn. *Did you know that Horatio Spafford and Philip Bliss were contemporaries of evangelists Dwight L. Moody and Ira Sankey?* Spafford provided financing for their exploits, and Bliss contributed music and songs.

Philip Bliss would eventually write some of the wonderful gospel songs we know today – “Man of Sorrows, What a Name!” “The Light of the World is Jesus;” and “Wonderful Words of Life.”

Bliss and his wife Lucy had visited his mother at his childhood home in Rome, Pennsylvania during Christmas 1876. They were returning by train to Chicago on December 29th. About 8 PM, in a blinding snowstorm, they crossed a bridge near Ashtabula, Ohio, and the bridge collapsed. Their train plunged into a ravine 75 feet below and caught fire. One hundred passengers perished miserably. Bliss survived the fall and escaped through a window, but frantically returned to the wreckage in an attempt to rescue Lucy. But, he could not reach her; neither body was ever recovered. Bliss was just 38 years of age.

Miraculously, however, Bliss’ trunk had been placed on another train and it arrived safely in Chicago. Inside that trunk, his friends found Phillip Bliss’ last hymn. It serves as our concluding hymn this morning, “I will Sing of My Redeemer.”