

## Seeing, Hearing, and Understanding:

### A Biblical Perspective

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The event of 9/11 immediately brought to mind the biblical passage concerning the falling of the tower of Siloam. Consider Jesus' words about this tragic misfortune in his time and place, "... *But I tell you, you will all come to same end unless you reform.....take those eighteen who were killed by a falling tower in Siloam Do you think they were any more guilty than anyone else?*"<sup>1</sup> Jesus does not point to specific persons as the cause for the misfortunes of those involved but does imply this kind of event can occur in our lives unless we take change of mind, heart, and attitude seriously, for in doing so sharpens our spiritual senses to signs of danger.

Awareness of dangerous situations implies we need to see, hear and understand the signs developing before us. The indicators of 9/11 were there, but our senses, as a nation, were sufficiently dulled so that we were unable to discern them. God allowed, but did not send a punishment upon us, as the nation's spiritual insensitivity clouded the preliminary events, and we walked right into it. (Only the resources of the nation were in a position to see the indications of this danger.)

An interesting episode is told in the Old Testament story of the bronze serpent.<sup>2</sup> *The people complained against God and Moses. At this, God sent fiery serpents among the people; their bite brought death.* But the serpents were already situated in their habitat and it is more likely the people's discordant grumbling caused them to lose touch with divine guidance they were receiving in the desert and they therefore veered off the safe path. They led themselves into the nest of vipers!

Seeing, hearing, and understanding, are important biblical themes that relate to inner sensitivity. An early Old Testament reference concerns a king and prophet. Balak,

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 13:1-5

<sup>2</sup> Numbers 21:49

the king of Moab, summoned Balaam to curse the Israelites but the seer ends up blessing them in a sequence of four oracles. The third and fourth oracles begin with:<sup>3</sup>

*"..the utterance of a man whose eye is true,  
...who hears what God says,  
and knows what the Most High knows,  
of one who sees what the Almighty sees,  
enraptured and with eyes unveiled."*

Rabbinic commentators generally saw Balaam possessing prophetic powers but still an evil man and New Testament appraisals are also negative.<sup>4</sup> Even so, when Balaam sees, hears, and understands the will of God he can only do good.

But the main passages of seeing, hearing, and understanding arise in a somewhat difference context. The prophets are continually dealing with people who are obstinate and corrupt and God's words direct their spiritual senses to be completely dulled.

In the call of Isaiah, the voice of the Lord informs him of his mission:<sup>5</sup>

*Go and say to this people: Listen carefully, but you shall not understand!  
Look intently, but you shall know nothing!  
You are to make the heart of this people sluggish, to dull their ears and  
close their eyes; Else their eyes will see, their ears hear,  
their heart understand, and they will turn and be healed.*

The people hesitate and remain impenitent, so their obstinacy is merely occasioned by the prophet's warning, but not necessarily caused by it. Jesus referred to this same passage when he told his disciples:

*This is why I speak to them in parables, because 'they look but do not see  
and hear but do not listen or understand.' Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in  
them, which says: 'You shall indeed hear but not understand you shall  
indeed look but never see. Gross is the heart of this people, they will*

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<sup>3</sup> Numbers 24:2 ff and 24:15 ff

<sup>4</sup> 2 Peter 2:15-16, Jude 11, Revelation 2:14

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 6:1-11

*hardly hear with their ears, they have closed their eyes, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and be converted, and I heal them.'*<sup>6</sup>

Paul, blinded by the light of Christ in his conversion experience had a mission of *opening the eyes of those he was sent to, and to turn them from darkness to light.*<sup>7</sup> In Rome, he preached without success, to some prominent men of the community:

*Without reaching any agreement among themselves they began to leave; then Paul made one final statement. "Well did the Holy Spirit speak to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah, saying: 'Go to this people and say: You shall indeed hear but not understand. You shall indeed look but never see. Gross is the heart of this people; they will not hear with their ears; they have closed their eyes, so they may not see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and be converted, and I heal them.'*<sup>8</sup>

These three passages concerning seeing, hearing and understanding comprise a message in Trinitarian triplicate and this underscores the importance. God the Father speaks through Isaiah, Jesus, Son of the Father, relates to it, and Paul indicates the Holy Spirit is also involved. The phrase, "else they will be healed" needs the broad interpretation of "else they will be saved," rather than a narrow view of physical healing. The concept of "reform" is central to these passages because these are encounters with those who spurn justice, refuse to reform their ways, and are not open to good advice. In Isaiah 5 very specific associations are made with the people:

*They accumulate wealth and property unjustly; they call evil good and good evil; they attach themselves to perversity; feast on alcoholic drinks even in the morning; acquit the guilty for bribes, deprive the just man of his*

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 13:13-15

<sup>7</sup> Acts 26:18

<sup>8</sup> Acts 28:25-27

*rights; they are wise in their own sight, prudent in their own esteem;  
their very roots shall become rotten.*

From Ezekiel comes another type of unacceptable behavior. <sup>9</sup>

*Thus the word of the Lord came to me: Son of man, you live in the midst of a  
rebellious house; they have eyes to see but do not see; they have ears to hear  
but do not hear, for they are a rebellious house.*

For Jeremiah there is recognition of universal corruption when the prophet proclaims:<sup>10</sup>

*Pay attention to this foolish and senseless people  
Who have eyes and see not,  
Who have ears and hear not.  
Should you not fear me, says the Lord,  
Should you not tremble before me?*

He was speaking to those who lacked reverential fear of God, who turn and go their own way, who entrap the innocent and in greed grow rich and powerful. They give false assurances of well-being but this does not reduce the harm already done. Even prophets are false and priests teach as they wish, and the people accept it. The prophet Malachi notes<sup>11</sup>

*For the lips of the priest are to keep knowledge,  
and instruction is to be sought from his mouth,  
Because he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.  
But you have turned aside from the way,  
And have caused many to falter by your instruction;  
You have made void the covenant of Levi...*

There is another biblical sense in which seeing, hearing, and understanding is mirrored. The Psalmist says *they have eyes and see not; they have ears but hear not*, and Isaiah notes, *they have neither reason nor knowledge; their eyes are coated so they*

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<sup>9</sup> Ezekiel 12:1-2

<sup>10</sup> Jeremiah 5:21-22a

<sup>11</sup> Malachi 2:7-8

*cannot see, and their hearts so they cannot understand.... Their makers shall be like them, all who trust in them*<sup>12</sup> In both cases they are referring to idols, made of silver and gold, the work of human hands, and indicate *those who trust in them shall become empty themselves*.<sup>13</sup> Biblical authors declare that the "idol god" that the person thinks to be worshiping is in fact something weak, impotent, and worthless. Idols are, "dumb and worthless," "detestable things," "abominations," lead to "pollution of the land," "deceptions and falsehoods."<sup>14</sup> The point is that idolatry is spiritless and the person practicing it becomes very much the same and loses spiritual seeing, hearing, and understanding.

In contemporary culture idols can be in the form of persons, power, money, or the like, and idolatry happens when persons give of themselves to any of these to the extent that it interferes with their relationship with God. While very few of us are guilty of out-and-out idolatry, many of us allow our decisions and actions to be governed by powers other than those coming from God. We are easily influenced by the desire for approval, by determination to control others, by addiction to work in order to attain success, and personal gain at the expense of others. The Israelites were warned that pride, vanity, greed, lack of compassion, lack of fear of God, and stubbornness lead to blindness and deafness of spirit and it can be no different for us.

The determination of Yahweh to punish wrongdoers is, however, not inflexible. The Parable of the Potter<sup>15</sup> indicates how Yahweh, "the One who makes it happen," is capable of changing a whole nation. A startling opportunity for conversion is indicated by Jeremiah's great oracle of the "New Covenant", sometimes called the "the Gospel before the Gospel," which marks a new beginning in divine-human relationships:<sup>16</sup>

*..I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God and they will be my people. No longer will they have need to*

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<sup>12</sup> Psalm 115:4-6 and Isaiah 44:18

<sup>13</sup> Jeremiah 2:15

<sup>14</sup> Habakkuk 2:18-20, Ezekiel 20:7-8, Isaiah 44:19, Jeremiah 16:18, Jeremiah 10:14, 51:17.

<sup>15</sup> Jeremiah 18:1-10

<sup>16</sup> Jeremiah 31:31-34

*teach their friends and kinsmen to know the Lord. All, from the least to the greatest, shall know me,...*

This passage is considered a landmark in Old Testament theology and is Jeremiah's most sublime teaching. It is astonishing in that knowledge of the divine will is to be deposited within the consciences of all the people in the community. The understanding given to the "least" is to be on par with what is given to the elite and educated. A similar idea is presented by John:<sup>17</sup>

*As for you, the anointing that you received from him remains in you, so that you do not need anyone to teach you. But his anointing teaches you about everything and is true and not false; just as it taught you, remain in him.*

Just how do we get the message? Perhaps more simply than we realize: the constructive criticism of a friend; a comment exchanged by two people we are passing hits the mark; a brief comment heard as we surfed through TV channels; a paragraph in a good book; meditating upon scriptures that are sacred to our personal selves. Poetry often helps us express ourselves:

The tip of my pen startles me  
With a continuous infinitesimal effulgence of light  
Highlighting the words that appear.

I am given light  
To find and change the patterns  
That trap and delay me.

If I can't part the water  
I can help build bridges that free  
Those stranded on both sides.

I need to get to the other side  
Before the sun sets  
And daylight becomes darkness.

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<sup>17</sup> 1John 2:27

Silence will be my cloister  
Until I gain understanding.  
Why is it the birds cross my path  
When I drive too fast?

Every sound makes known its fruits,  
Every sight its signals,  
How is it that a bird can tell me  
Of my wrongdoing?

Elijah shut up the heavens and hid at Wadi Cherith,  
Ravens announced breakfast and supper  
Bringing bread and meat twice a day.

How is it that some religious people  
Balk at taking the Eucharist  
From other lay people  
While Elijah accepted the offerings of the birds?

I walked into church my mind loudly complaining,  
Doesn't anyone around here have a sense of humor?  
Genuflecting, the monstrance at the altar  
reflected a smiling face.

In the midst of typing this, the Bird Song began to play on NPR,  
The Great Humorist is reminding us  
That even humor heals and brings meaning.

In contrast with the New Covenant's writing upon the hearts, the old covenant with Moses was written upon stone. To the Israelite, the "heart" is the seat of his intellectual and moral life and the chief bodily focus of emotional activity. Ezekiel emphasizes the importance of a hearts of flesh when he speaks of what God will do:

*I will give them a new heart and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the stony heart from their bodies, and replace it with a natural heart, so*

*that they will live according to my statutes, and observe and carry out my ordinances; thus they shall be my people and I will be their God.*<sup>18</sup>

When Jerusalem was destroyed, as prophesied by Ezekiel, he was finally vindicated before his unbelieving compatriots. After this happened his prophecy concentrates on the promise of salvation in a new covenant that requires a change of heart by the Israelites before they will be able to obtain it.

It appears that the New Testament writers were uncomfortable with the term, "new covenant."<sup>19</sup> It comes from the lips of Jesus once, after the paschal meal when he offers the cup of wine saying:<sup>20</sup>

*This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you.*

Covenants were usually sealed with the blood of animal sacrifices but this conveys the idea that the shedding of Jesus' blood on the cross seals the new covenant God makes with humankind.

It would appear that Jeremiah's emphasis on the new covenant is awkward from the perspective of religious authority. Furthermore knowledge brings responsibility; there is laid upon the individual a greater personal responsibility, hence, one cannot point so readily to God as the source of difficulties and punishments.

The biblical call to conversion is not a call to strict moralism which reduces the potential of human values and instills a guilt-inducing conformism; in contrast it is a call to a life which brings us to our full potential. If, however, I have given the impression that seeing, hearing, and understanding are simple to achieve let me correct that now. Jesus' own disciples who spent many days with him and were taught by him were also often reprimanded by him for their lack of understanding. Consider:

*Are you, too, still incapable of understanding?*<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ezekiel 11:18-20

<sup>19</sup> The Anchor Bible Dictionary, Volume 4, K-N, p. 1090.

<sup>20</sup> Luke 22:20. Also mentioned in 1 Corinthians 11:25.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 15:16

*Do you still not understand?. Why is it that you do not see...?*<sup>22</sup>

*You have no understanding whatever!*<sup>23</sup>

Today there is much violence in the world; mothers killing children, children killing children, animals killing innocent people, not to mention terrorist acts such as 9/11. The psychoanalyst Jung coined the concept of the "collective unconscious", a kind of universal mind that we are all tuned in to. If so, it is in part gravely ill, in part saturated with hate and animosity with disrespect for life. Perhaps that aspect will always be present but we do need to foster changes toward gentleness and away from violence. Francis of Assisi would, no doubt, offer a radical approach and have us pray for those who have destroyed our peace, be forgiving to all those who have done us injury, show no envy for the success of those who have competed with us to our loss.

A simple but profound first step for change in all of us is to meditate upon the New Covenant and the words of the prophet Micah:

*You have been told, O man, what is good,*

*And what the Lord requires of you:*

*Only to do right and to love goodness,*

*And to walk humbly with your God.*<sup>24</sup>

Jesus often emphasized the presence of the "kingdom of God" in preaching the good news and Isaiah notes:

*In God's kingdom of justice the eyes of those who see will not be closed;*

*the ears of those who hear will be attentive.*<sup>25</sup>

Leonardo da Vinci says: "There are three classes of people: those who see. Those who see when they are shown. Those who do not see." Which type are you?

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<sup>22</sup> Matthew 16:9-12

<sup>23</sup> John 11:49

<sup>24</sup> Micah 6:8

<sup>25</sup> Isaiah 32:3

