



One Born Blind

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Readings:

Psalm 23

John 9

Emanuel Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia* §4531

Blindness is an image found frequently throughout scripture: the Sodomites were blinded for their disobedience; the Syrians were struck with blindness as they were about to attack the Israelites; in Isaiah we read of those who have eyes but cannot see, as well as the blind who will receive their sight; and in the Gospels, Jesus condemns the chief priests and scribes as “blind guides.”

And, of course, our reading from John. In order to understand its meaning, we begin with the general principle that the subject here is our own spiritual growth. The Word of God is for everyone, not just those born blind or suffering from a physical disability. Not all are born blind, but all are born in ignorance and misunderstanding. While the literal story is about natural blindness and healing, its inward meaning is about spiritual blindness and spiritual healing. Each character in the story represents some aspect of our inner life, our spiritual identity and growth. Now, what is spiritual blindness?

Sight is to the body what *understanding* is to the spirit. Our physical life, the life of our body, depends to a large degree on our ability to see. We can survive without physical sight, but our ability to interact with the outer world is greatly limited. Our spiritual life, the life of our mind, depends to a large degree on our ability to understand God. We can survive without spiritual sight, without understanding God, but our

ability to interact with our inner world, the realm of ideas and beliefs and values and purpose, the realm of love and truth, peace and power, is greatly limited. And it is our understanding of God, our spiritual sight, and the possibility of spiritual blindness, which is under discussion.

In this story especially, an important distinction is made between two types of spiritual blindness: on the one hand, we are given an image of blindness which represents a state of innocence and ignorance. The one born blind represents the natural state into which we are all born, living for ourselves and ignorant of a higher, spiritual dimension to life, and yet capable of being led to the light by the Lord. For such, the Lord is experienced as the sun that brings light and clarity; his Word is a lamp guiding their steps.

On the other hand, we are given an image of blindness which represents the intentional rejection of the truth, a state of willful falsity and misunderstanding. The Pharisees represent the refusal to acknowledge one's own blindness, one's own ignorance and lack of understanding, and for this they are described as guilty. Swedenborg writes that, "as light corresponds to truth, so darkness correspond to falsity; those in falsities are therefore called 'blind,'" that is, unable to see or respond to the light. [AC §4531] For these, the Lord is experienced as the blinding and burning light of the sun. Both types describe states that exist within each one of us. Let's look at the story.

1. Jesus encounters the blind man, and cures him with mud (the good of faith) and the water from the Pool of Siloam, rejecting the common understanding that his

condition resulted from sin. He was born that way, he explains, so that the works of God might be displayed. And because we are dealing with spiritual blindness, we understand that by the works of God in this instance is meant spiritual enlightenment and understanding. (What's more amazing, miraculous, more convincing, than restoring someone's sight? According to Helen Keller, restoring someone's *spiritual* sight!)

The limitations and struggles of our lives are not a question of sin or blame or punishment, but an opportunity for God to be revealed in our lives, an opportunity for healing. No matter what our limitations and struggles – and we all have all we can handle – we are all created to evolve from fear and doubt into love and wisdom.

2. The man's neighbors try to make sense out of this: is this the same one who used to beg? No, it only looks like him. No, it is him; how did you receive your sight? Where is the person who did this thing? Keeping in mind that the subject is spiritual sight, the understanding of truth, we can perhaps see ourselves in these questions. The neighbors represent thoughts and feelings that deal with external, practical matters, and are only indirectly related to our spiritual selves. On their own, they cannot understand spiritual truths. From this perspective of the mind, we ask similar questions. How is spiritual insight attained, what do you do? Are we the same person after we open ourselves to the influence of the Divine, or do we only look the same? To who? What happens when we can't lay our hands on the healer, when we realize we cannot control or possess truth on our own? This lower level of the mind, represented by the neighbors, finds it difficult to commit to God's truth, and just as difficult to deny it.

3. The matter is then turned over to the Pharisees, who try to make sense out of it on their own, and end up disagreeing with each other. Did Jesus sin by working on the Sabbath? Could a sinner produce these signs? Their logic leads to contradictions; their understanding doesn't make sense. The one born blind suggests that Jesus was a prophet, one sent from God.

4. The Pharisees interview the parents: they decline to get involved, saying they don't understand either. The parents represent what is often called the old self; those habits and patterns of thinking that support an ego-centered perspective. Their fear of the Jewish authorities represents our reluctance to speak out too strongly for the truth, especially when our situation in life could be affected in a negative way; the loss of standing, possessions, or reputation. They seek to distance themselves from the affairs of their son in the same way that we often distance ourselves from our potential to be genuinely spiritual beings.

5. Getting nowhere with his parents, the Pharisees get the man back again. He hits them with the illogic of their reasoning, and they employ the same illogics to dismiss his criticism; proving once again that, with the Pharisees, you just can't win! They doubt the healing; then they doubt the one healed; then they doubt the healer. Here, as always, they represent one of the essential ingredients of our own proprium: the ability to rationalize and cast doubt on any matter whatsoever, including truth in its simplest and most evident form. The title of "blind guides" is most appropriate, in that our proprium is incapable, on its own, of leading us to the Lord.

“From the beginning of the world,” the man tells them, “no one has opened the eyes of one born blind.” “From the beginning of the world,” that is, from the time we were born, from the beginning of *our* world, we are in spiritual ignorance until the Lord opens our eyes, until God’s Word finds a place in our consciousness, until we turn to the Lord and seek the Divine presence in our lives. Not by human reason, but by Divine revelation, are we directed away from ourselves and to God, away from the world and to heaven.

6. Unable and unwilling to deal with him further, the Pharisees drive him away: Christ finds him, reveals just what’s going on, and ends with a wonderful summary teaching: the two forms of blindness. He has come, he tells us, so that those without sight may see; that is, so that the ignorant may be brought to truth and understanding. But also, so that those with sight will turn blind; that is, so that self-intelligence might be revealed as empty and false.

Now, the Pharisees immediately insist that they are not blind: that is to say, they do not acknowledge the limits, the falsity of their understanding of spiritual matters: and so they intentionally reject truth, thus making themselves guilty. That is, even though faced with the truth, they do not believe and accept it, but cling to their own understanding. We see this clearly in their unwillingness to let go of the idea that the man’s blindness resulted from his sin. Jesus laid this to rest in verse 3, but they refuse to pick up on it, going back to it again in verse 34.

Notice how I have been describing the Pharisees’ response to the truth, to the Lord: they intentionally reject, they do not accept, they are unwilling to let go, they

refuse. “There are none so blind as those who *will* not see.” Swedenborg writes that “those who are ignorant of truth, like the one born blind, are able to be instructed by the Lord. But those in falsity, like the Pharisees, do not suffer themselves to be so instructed, because they are acquainted with the truth and have confirmed themselves against it; they have turned the light into darkness, which cannot be dispelled.” [AC §2383.7] Instead of being brought from darkness to light, the Pharisee within us resists the light, and intentionally chooses darkness.

This negative type of spiritual blindness is ultimately a matter of the will, of our intentions. Each of us is capable of clinging to what is false, even when faced with the truth; and we are each just as capable of choosing the light of truth, even when faced with darkness. Genuine enlightenment is a matter of the will, not just intellectual assent; it is a matter of intention, choice, love, commitment. Not *can* you see, but *will* you see! (And so the clay is used: the good of faith, the love that inspires understanding.)

Each time we encounter the subject of blindness in scripture, we must be clear about what type we are dealing with. The familiar Biblical image of the blind leading the blind is less comical than often thought: it uses both meanings of the term to describe a situation in which hypocrites lead the innocent astray.

And we must be clear about the presence of both types of blindness within us; the innocence of ignorance, and the burden and guilt of false beliefs. We must acknowledge the presence of both types of blindness, and deal with them both. We must not let our own tendency to hypocrisy lead us away from our impulses to spiritual innocence and peace, or blind us to the suffering of others. Let us instead be courageous

enough to bring our lower impulses and beliefs into the higher light of God's truth, so that we can be led to all that is good and right and true.

“As it is intelligence and wisdom from the Lord which appear in heaven as light, the angels being therefore called angels of light, so it is the folly and insanity which are from self that reign in hell, causing those who are there to have their name from darkness. It is true that in hell there is not darkness, but a dusky luminosity like that from a coal fire, in which they see one another, and without which they would not be able to live. This luminosity comes to them from the light of heaven, which is turned into such a luminosity when it falls into their insanities, that is, into their falsities and cupidities.

The Lord is everywhere present with light, even in the hells, otherwise the infernals would have no capacity to think and thereby to speak, but the light is according to its reception. This luminosity is what is called in the Word, the “shadow of death,” and is compared to “darkness,” and is also turned into darkness with them when they approach the light of heaven; and when they are in darkness, they are in folly and stupidity. Hence it is evident that as light corresponds to truth, so darkness corresponds to falsity, and that they who are in falsities are said to be in ‘blindness.’”¹

-Arcana Coelestia §4531

¹ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Arcana Coelestia*. Translated by John Faulkner. Potts. New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1982.