

Open your blind eyes and unplug your deaf ears! See and hear what the LORD has done!

¹⁴ “For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant. ¹⁵ I will lay waste the mountains and hills and dry up all their vegetation; I will turn rivers into islands and dry up the pools. ¹⁶ I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them. ¹⁷ But those who trust in idols, who say to images, ‘You are our gods,’ will be turned back in utter shame. ¹⁸ “Hear, you deaf; look, you blind, and see! ¹⁹ Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one committed to me, blind like the servant of the LORD? ²⁰ You have seen many things, but have paid no attention; your ears are open, but you hear nothing.” ²¹ It pleased the LORD for the sake of his righteousness to make his law great and glorious.

This past week National Public Radio interviewed a man named Bart Ehrman. His new book is entitled *God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer our Most Important Question – Why We Suffer*. Mr. Ehrman is a brilliant Bible scholar and a doctor of theology. But recently he lost his faith and left Christianity altogether. He saw a contradiction in the God of love the Bible proclaimed and the great amount of suffering in the world. Mr. Ehrman reasoned that since this “God of love” allowed suffering in the world, he was not the God he claimed to be in the Bible, which also led Mr. Ehrman to doubt that the Bible was 100% divinely inspired by God. He cited the fact that every five seconds a child in the world dies from starvation. Mr. Ehrman questioned, “How could a loving God allow that?”

Bart Ehrman misses the point. First of all, God’s Word reveals that ever since the fall into sin, the world has been going downhill. We did this to ourselves. As a result of our sinful nature we cause suffering in the world. Starvation, for example, is often caused by the sin of greed. Rich politicians in 3rd world countries care more about stuffing their wallets than stuffing the stomachs of their starving citizens. In the end sin is the reason we all deserve to die. Mr. Ehrman also fails to see that God is the God of love. If he is a Bible scholar, as he claims, he would have clearly seen in the Bible the greatest display of God’s love on the cross, allowing his own Son to suffer for the sins of the world, which takes care of our most important question which is not, “Why do we suffer?” but rather, “How do I get right with God?”

Bart is not the only one who has closed his eyes and plugged his ears to the Word of God. This morning, our sermon lesson is from the book of the prophet Isaiah. The LORD spoke through his prophet Isaiah to his chosen people Israel, specifically, the southern kingdom of Judah. The LORD accused his people of closing their eyes and plugging their ears to his Words and works. **“You have seen many things, but have paid no attention; your ears are open, but you hear nothing.”** (vs20) Throughout their history as a nation the people of Israel had seen their fair share of awesome deeds performed by the mighty arm of the LORD. The 10 plagues, the parting of the Red Sea and the Jordan River, bread fell from heaven for 40 years in the desert, the judges he raised up to rule the nation in times of turmoil, the kings he raised up to defend their borders and build his temple. The LORD reminded them of the greatest act he had done for them. He chose them out of all the nations of the world to possess the promise of the Messiah, the one who would come and save the world from sin. In vs19 he called Israel his servant and his messenger. The Israelites had even been called to take this promise of the Christ to the ends of the world!

Despite all of these great things they had seen and heard they ignored the God of love and turned instead to idols made of stone, precious metals and wood... who see and hear nothing. When they turned away from the LORD, he sent prophets to remind them of his words and works. They paid no attention. God even had his prophets do some wacky things to get the peoples’ attention. The LORD told Jeremiah to buy a clay pot from the local potter and to stand before the people of Jerusalem and tell them that unless they repent of their gross

idol worship, the LORD would smash them, and then Jeremiah smashed the clay pot on the ground. Very vivid... but they still didn't listen. God warned them to repent. Open your eyes! Unplug your ears! If they did not repent, the LORD was going to send the mighty nation of Babylon to destroy their city, the temple and carry the people off into exile.

This warning is not for Israel alone. Through these words from Isaiah the LORD is giving a clear warning to the Bart Ehrmans of the world; all those who flat out reject the God of truth revealed in the Bible. We might think to ourselves, "How could Israel have been so blind? How can people like Mr. Ehrman, who knew the truth about the God of love in the Bible, close their ears to his life-giving Words?" Very easily. Every human being who was ever born came into this world with their eyes closed and ears shut to the God of love. It's engrained into our very being. In our sinful self-delusion we blindly have the opinion that we must reject God and his free gift of grace and look for our own way to earn righteousness through good works, doing more good than bad or by trying harder. All of these ideas turn salvation from something God does for us to something we need to do – we've made ourselves false gods. Then we're just like the Israelites who turned to idol worship. And the LORD is very clear on how he feels about being the only true God. Earlier in this chapter he said, "**I will not give my glory to another.**" (vs8) The LORD is also very clear about that fate that waits for those who have closed their eyes and shut their ears to him. In vs17 the LORD says that on the Last Day they will look back at their life and see how many opportunities the LORD had given them to put their trust in him, and they will turn away, ashamed. They will be turned away from the LORD to face their own destruction, as Jesus himself said, "**Whoever does not believe will be condemned.**" (Mark 16:16)

Who then can be saved if all are born spiritually blind and deaf to God? If we cannot open our eyes and ears on our own how can anyone see and be saved? Only God could save us. If you read earlier in this chapter Isaiah prophesied that the LORD would send someone who would **open the eyes of the blind, release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness** (42:6,7). 700 years after Isaiah uttered these words a virgin mother gave birth to her first born son. Over that tiny village of Bethlehem a bright star shined against the dark sky heralding the birth of the Savior. This star was seen by wise men far to the east, who then opened their ears to the Scriptures, which opened their eyes and moved them to travel for several months to worship the Light of the world. The apostle John described Jesus' birth by saying, "Light came and dwelt among us," among us, the people of darkness of this sinful world. (John 1) That Light's perfect life of obedience shined brightly in contrast to the world where everyone lives in the darkness of rebellion and unbelief. That same Light's death defeated the darkness of sin and Satan. Although darkness covered the earth on Good Friday afternoon, the cross shined so brightly because of the payment for sins that was won upon it. The empty tomb shines brighter still as the darkness of death was defeated by the Light's resurrection.

And now the LORD promises you in vs16, "**I will turn the darkness into light before them.**" How does the light of Christ's life, death and resurrection become mine personally, although I came into this world blind and deaf? I want you all to close your eyes, put your fingers in your ears, and say *lalala* for 5 seconds, so you cannot hear or see anything. Go... While you did that you didn't hear a word I said or saw what I was doing. What would make you stop and listen? Only if someone physically pried open your eyelids or pulled your fingers out of your ears. In vs21 Isaiah said, "**It pleased the LORD for the sake of his righteousness to make his law great and glorious.**" In this context *law* refers to the whole of God's Word; the law and the gospel. The LORD was delighted to use his holy Word to bring his righteousness to you. God used his Means of Grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament to unplug your ears and to open your eyes.

He explains this in vs16 when he says, "**I will lead them down unknown and unfamiliar paths.**" Without Christ the only path you and I have known is spiritual blindness and deafness. The path of the Word of God is unfamiliar because only Christ can lead us there. But at some point in your life God created opportunities for you: in a sermon, a Bible study, in a passage you read in your Bible at home, through another Christian's witness or through your parents bringing you to the waters of holy Baptism. God sent his Holy Spirit to work through his Word and Sacrament, and it is the message of Christ's life, death and resurrection, which earned forgiveness of sins and eternal for you, contained in Word and Sacrament that had the power to open your eyes so that you could see what God had done for you. The message of

Christ's work for you had the might to unplug your ears to hear what Christ had accomplished for your salvation, so that you could believe and see that Jesus is your Savior.

Sometimes in your life it happens that as you walk the path of God's Word you shake his grip loose and begin to walk off into the darkness of sin. Temptation tries to make the path rough and uneven. Satan tries to get you to turn a blind eye and deaf ear to God's Word. At times you might be troubled by your own sinful disobedience and you sink into dark despair and you cannot find deliverance. It is then that God grabs you by the hand and leads you down the path of his Word again and opens your eyes to the light of Jesus. When you are feeling depressed by your sins, open your eyes to the light of your baptism, when the Holy Spirit removed the darkness of sin in your heart and created the light of life. When you feel unworthy open your eyes to the Lord's Supper. There Jesus removes your feelings of guilt and shame by reminding you that this body carried the guilt of your sin, this blood ran to cover over your disobedience. Open your eyes and unplug your ears to see and hear what he has done for you!

I feel bad for the Bart Ehrmans of the world, who once knew and believed the sweet message of Christ's substitutionary work for human kind, and then closed their ears and eyes to it. I can only pray that God would lead those who have rejected him on the unfamiliar paths of his Word. You and I can thank God that he has opened your eyes and ears to believe on his Son Jesus for the salvation of your souls. May the Holy Spirit always keep your eyes focused on Christ and your ears tuned his Word. Amen.