

Finding the Eye Opener

Don Richardson

In Acts 26:17,18, the Apostle Paul articulated before King Agrippa the formula that Jesus Christ—appearing to Paul in a vision on the road to Damascus—gave as a basis for ministering the Gospel. Follow carefully to see if I quote it correctly. I might make a mistake.

Jesus said to Paul, "...I am sending you to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."

Notice that I omitted an entire phrase: "...to open their eyes." At first glance, the formula seems complete without the missing phrase. And indeed many missionaries have set out without ever thinking of the importance of opening people's eyes so that they can see the difference between darkness and light. "Opening their eyes" means establishing a beachhead for the truth in the understanding. It's the equivalent of getting to first base in the game of baseball. Of course, getting to first base doesn't count as a run, but it is a necessary first step if a run is to be scored.

In baseball, it's not enough merely to touch all four bases. You have to touch them in the right order, first base first, second base second, third base third. I know of some missionaries who have gone out full of zeal into cross-cultural situations and have started in right away rebuking people for their sins. They were intent upon turning people from darkness to light but without *first* having opened their eyes to see the difference between darkness and light.

Often, when eyes are not opened first, people get their back up; they take offense and they start trying to avoid this obnoxious foreigner with his ministry of rebuke. The missionary soon finds he is not getting anywhere. Years pass and no church is established. There will be some who will take it and respond, but usually the majority will not. And then he will say, "Lord, what am I doing wrong? You want me to preach against sin, don't you? They



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need to be turned from darkness to light, don't they? I've preached faithfully against sin. I've rebuked evil. I upheld that which was good and the people don't respond."

But there is a missing element. He has not found the eye-opener that clears the way for that sort of ministry. What, then, do we need to "open their eyes"? You don't know? What do you need to open a tin can? A can-opener! What do you need to open someone's eyes? An eye-opener! And don't you think that the God who commands us to open people's eyes is responsible to provide the eye-openers we need to fulfill his command?

The Example of Jesus

In chapter 4 of John's Gospel, the Lord Jesus himself "touched first base first." In John 4, he's experienced what you might call a "close encounter of a cross-cultural kind." Jesus came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there.

That well was to Sychar what Valley Forge is to Philadelphia. If you had gone to visit someone in that town back in those days, you wouldn't have been in the home of your host and hostess very long before they would take you around to show you Jacob's Well. And they would give you the "tour guide's pitch" concerning how their forefather Jacob had dug it himself. So Jesus sat down by that very significant well—the thing that put Sychar on the map more than probably anything else.

His disciples had gone into the town to buy food. A Samaritan woman came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan." There's that cultural chasm. She was ever so much aware of the cultural barrier between him and her. "How can you ask me for a drink?" And here is the parenthesis—"for Jews do not associate with Samaritans." Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is who asked you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

"Sir," the woman said, "You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father, Jacob, who gave us this well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons, flocks, and herds?" That's the tour guide's pitch. Hear her civic pride coming through! She was determined that this strange Jew should be duly impressed with the fact that *that* was actually Jacob's Well and that it was given to her forefathers. But, notice that Jesus made her civic pride in the well to be his ally.

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again. Even though your forefather Jacob dug it himself and drank from it, as did his children and his herds and his cattle, it is still ordinary water. You drink it and you get thirsty again. But, whoever drinks the water that I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become inside him a well of water springing up into everlasting life!"

Now, how many wells are in the picture? Two. The external, physical, historically significant well and the internal, eternal, spiritually satisfying well of living water! He used this object of her civic pride as *an analogy* to talk

Yes, even then, when the person begins to see that he needs to make certain changes in his lifestyle in order to live consistent with the will of God, he's going to find that there is a power trying to keep him from making those changes. This is the power of the evil one himself and of his hosts of demons. Winning the victory against the unseen forces who are "behind the sins" in a person's life will bring you around to "third base". But a run is not scored until he himself "touches home plate". And that occurs only when that person receives from God the forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Him. What a beautiful formula—if only we can remember it! *Touch all four bases!*

The Example of Paul

I want to look at yet another example of an eye opener, found in Acts 17. First, here is some historical background to this story of Paul at Mars Hill.

Three ancient Greek writers, Diogenes Laertius, Philostratus, and Pausanias, referred to a plague that struck the City of Athens and began to decimate the population around 600 B.C. The people of Athens offered sacrifices to their thousands of gods, asking them to intervene and halt the plague. You would think that 30,000 gods could do something, but the sacrifices were futile. The plague persisted.

In desperation, the elders of the city sent messengers to summon a Greek hero known as Epimenedes. He came in response and they said to him, "There is terror in our city. No one knows who will be struck down next. We have done all that we know to do. We have offered thousands of sacrifices to our gods and the plague persists. Will you please apply your wisdom to our desperate situation and save our city? We have heard that you have rapport with the gods."

Epimenedes took stock of the situation, and then took a course of action based on two premises. First, he reasoned that there must be another god who did not consider himself represented by any of the thousands of idols in the city but who was hopefully good enough and great enough to do something about the plague. They had to contact him and enlist his help.

For those who replied, "What if we don't know his name? How can we contact him?", Epimenedes was ready with premise number two: *Any god who is great enough and good enough to do something about the plague is probably also great enough and good enough to smile upon us in our ignorance if we openly acknowledge our ignorance of him.*

Epimenedes called for the people to bring a flock of sheep to Mars Hill, a plot of sacred ground in the City of Athens. He specified that the sheep had to be of more than one color, reasoning that since they did not know which color of sheep that god might prefer, they would give him a choice. Then he commanded that this multicolored flock be released on Mars Hill.

Sheep so released on a grassy knoll will normally begin to graze. But as the sheep meandered, grazing across the hill, Epimenedes, first commanding the men of the city to follow the sheep, called upon any god concerned in the matter of the plague to cause the sheep to lie down on the spot where that god wanted that sheep offered as a sacrifice to him. This they would take as a

around and observed your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription, 'To the Unknown God'. Now what you worship as someone unknown, I am going to proclaim to you." Paul, in effect, was saying: "Foreign God? No! The God I proclaim is that God who did not consider himself represented by any of the idols in the city so many hundreds of years ago, but who delivered your city from the plague when you simply acknowledged your ignorance of him. But why be ignorant of him any longer, if you can know him?"

In this way Paul used that familiar Athenian altar as an eye-opener to get to first base. Then he went on to try to turn his listeners from the darkness of idolatry to the light of God's truth. He reminded the people of their gross ingratitude to that delivering, prayer-answering God. He found a residual testimony, didn't he, in this unexpected form? And he appropriated it. This was part, at least, of the testimony that God had reserved to himself in that pagan context. And this unknown God has left a witness to Himself in hundreds of other cultures around the world.

