

# Spiritual Blindness (Part One): The God Of This World

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God created human beings in His own image (Genesis 1:26). While our bodies physically resemble the descriptions of God given in Scripture, His greater purpose is to form His character image in us. However, human nature leans toward creating God in *its* own image.

Depending on background and experience, people will identify with some of God's attributes and actions while other aspects of His nature may seem foreign to them. Some who grew up in an environment where God's judgment was overemphasized may have difficulty accepting God's love for them, making a relationship with Him challenging. Conversely, those who have lived with constant reminders of God's grace and love may squirm at biblical passages regarding falling away, eternal punishment, and God's high standards.

Above such personal biases stand verses like Isaiah 45:7, which proclaim that our concepts of Him in no way constrain God: "I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the LORD, do all these things." To worship God "in spirit and truth" (John 4:24) requires us to continually refine our concept of Him based on what Scripture teaches, which at times necessitates challenging our preconceptions.

Due to this reality, God's actions at times make us uncomfortable. When a recorded deed or attribute of God does not fit our ideas, we tend to hurry past such disconcerting passages rather than allow the holy and pure Word of God to mold our minds.

One act of God that may seem ungodlike is that He blinds. More precisely, God exercises sovereignty over both physical sight and spiritual vision—that is, understanding. At times, He removes literal or metaphorical sight as He works out His purpose.

## **Biblical Examples of Blinding**

The Bible's first mention of blindness involves the restraining of physical eyesight, but in the environment in question, spiritual sight is also absent:

But the [angels] reached out their hands and pulled Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. And they struck the men who were at the doorway of the house with blindness, both small and great, so that they became weary trying to find the door. (Genesis 19:10-11)

In this instance, the violent Sodomites, determined to assault Lot and his angelic guests sexually, were physically blinded. God used the two angels He had sent to deliver Lot as instruments to take the men's sight.

Angels are not the only servants of God used to blind those who oppose Him. On occasion, His human servants have prayed for Him to restrain the sight of enemies, and He has answered. For example, Elisha asked for God to blind the Syrian army, and He did so temporarily (II Kings 6:18-20). In Acts 13:11, Paul called on God to blind Elymas the sorcerer for a time, which He did. Famously, Christ Himself struck Paul blind on the road to Damascus, and the apostle's temporary blindness potently portrayed the spiritual blindness in which he walked to that point (Acts 9:3-9).

Exodus 4:11 underscores God's sovereignty over human physical and spiritual abilities: "So the LORD said to [Moses], 'Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes the mute, the deaf, the seeing, or the blind? Have not I, the LORD?'"

In responding to Moses' resistance to His summons to service, God declares that He is responsible for the organs that work and those that do not. Whatever speech difficulties Moses had were entirely in God's hands. Moses had claimed he was "slow of speech," and if so, God counterclaims to be the source of that impediment and also the potential solution to it. Such a minor problem could not impede God's ability to work through him.

Likewise, whether one sees or is blind is in God's hands. Although God refers directly to physical capabilities here, His sovereignty certainly extends into spiritual ones as well. He governs humanity's ability to see (and hear) spiritually. As Solomon observes in Proverbs 25:2, "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter."

## **Spiritual Incomprehension**

John 9 records Christ's healing of the man born blind, and the story teaches that blindness *can* be a result of sin, but at other times, blindness happens because God has willed it for another purpose He is working out. This principle applies to both physical and spiritual blindness.

As part of God's warning to the Israelites against sin, He promises to hobble their ability to understand, reason, and think things through:

The LORD will strike you with madness and blindness and confusion of heart. And you shall grope at noonday, as a blind man gropes in darkness; you shall not prosper in your ways; you shall be only oppressed and plundered continually, and no one shall save you.  
(Deuteronomy 28:28-29)

God promises madness, blindness, and confusion of heart for disobeying His voice and failing to observe His commandments and statutes carefully (Deuteronomy 28:15). This curse shows the other side of the principle, that understanding comes with following His commandments (Psalm 111:10). Conversely, breaking the commandments destroys understanding.

The physical curses in Deuteronomy 28 are painful enough, but the mental blindness in verse 28 creates a dreadful situation. Amid the other curses, a person can at least analyze what is happening and perhaps find a way to deal with it. But this blindness—an inability to discern rationally—makes the person's plight far worse! He cannot even understand what is occurring, let alone identify a real solution like repentance and returning to God.

The nations of Israel are suffering under quite a few curses right now, yet because they are blind to the cause-and-effect relationship, there is little—if

any—thought that national immorality is the cause of their problems. Those God curses with “madness and blindness and confusion of heart” can only grope aimlessly for solutions, and those they choose cannot work because they exclude God.

God’s willingness to take away understanding and wisdom makes many uncomfortable. They do not believe He would actually do such a thing. They do not believe He means what He says.

Some people have a similar and related disbelief regarding scattering, another curse of God (Leviticus 26:33; Deuteronomy 4:27; 28:64). God scattered the post-Flood people at the Tower of Babel because of their rebellion against Him (Genesis 11:8-9). He likewise scattered the children of Israel for the same reason, just as He had promised (Deuteronomy 30:3; I Kings 14:15; Psalm 44:11; 92:9; Jeremiah 9:16; etc.).

The modern church of God has also suffered scattering, yet many have concluded that Satan scattered it because of their discomfort with God acting this way. Assigning blame to Satan may provide a measure of comfort, for if Satan were the prime mover, members would all just be victims of Satan. However, an unstated implication of this notion is that Satan somehow outsmarted or outmaneuvered God.

Yet, it is God who promises and claims scattering. Because of His sovereignty, He is the only One who can bring about what happened to Babel, to Israel, and to His church. On the other hand, Satan can only do what He allows him to do (see, for instance, Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7).

Do we believe that God will respond today to immorality, presumption, and spiritual neglect as He did in the past? True, God’s chastening of His saints is of a different quality than His punishment of Israel, but the principle of cause-and-effect has not disappeared. God’s scattering of the church differs from Israel’s in that it has been organizational rather than geographical and catastrophic. Yet, we are still scattered because God is faithful to His Word. Rather than being immune to God’s chastening, the church is even *more* accountable because of its privileged position (see Luke 12:48; also the principle in Amos 3:2).

Scattering relates to blinding in that it illustrates why it is so critical to have a correct concept of God so that we can recognize the respective actions of God and Satan. God's actions do not always match our assumptions. He says that He will cause madness, blindness, and confusion of heart when His people walk contrary to His way. We might think Satan would be the source of these works, yet God claims responsibility for them!

### **God's Prerogative to Blind**

The New Testament also demonstrates God's willingness to blind the mind. As mentioned earlier, John 9 contains the story of the man born blind. After healing the man, Jesus says, "For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind" (John 9:39). The Pharisees and others of the Jewish leadership were confident that they could see, yet Jesus declares that part of His ministry was to make some blind while opening the eyes of others.

John claims for Jesus the same prerogative in John 12:37, 39-40:

But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him. . . . Therefore they could not believe, because Isaiah said again: "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, lest they should see with their eyes, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them."

After three-and-a-half years and countless miracles, the Jews maintained a high level of disbelief, particularly among the religious leadership. Notice that the source of their doubt was God Himself! Isaiah's prophecy says *He* had blinded their eyes, and *He* had hardened their hearts. The reason for this is that if they turned to Him, He would heal them, which may also strike us as odd if we assume that it is *always* His will to heal.

Perhaps His actions seem unkind or mean-spirited to us, but this passage shows that it was not His will to heal the nation at that time (see also Matthew 13:11-15). The people were still disobeying His commandments and statutes and thus still under a curse. To heal them without repentance would reward their wickedness. God's curse of blindness was so effective that, though Jesus declared them to be blind, they were confident that they

saw clearly (John 9:40)! They had no reason even to consider repenting, and therefore, the blindness and other curses continued.

In his letter to Roman Christians, the apostle Paul explains more about Israel's blinded condition:

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.” . . . For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that *blindness in part has happened to Israel* until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. (Romans 11:7-10, 25; emphasis ours throughout)

Paul explains the fundamental reason for God's current blinding of Israel: God is working with the elect in a way He is not working with Israel yet. Thus, He has blinded Israel until He calls those Gentiles that He has determined to convert. Israel was disobedient, so He scattered and blinded her, intending to regather her and restore her understanding in the future. Then she will recognize her Savior and learn what a relationship with Him truly entails.

## **The God of This Age**

The following passage, II Corinthians 4:3-4, is commonly quoted with little consideration as to who it is truly describing:

But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, *whose minds the god of this age has blinded*, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.

Considering the verses and principles we have already seen, who did this blinding? Because the translators use a lowercase g, we assume that Satan

receives the title of “god of this age” or “god of this world.” But could this be another case of mistaken identity?

On a technical note, many translations use the phrase “god of this *world*,” but the NKJV is more accurate with its rendering of “god of this *age*.” The word is *aion*, which refers more to time (for example, “eon” or “age”) than to place.

We have seen clear and definitive scriptures in which God declares that He will blind and that He has blinded. The Bible contains additional scriptures on blindness, as well as ones about eyes being closed, that consistently show that the true God closes and opens eyes (see Deuteronomy 29:4; Job 17:4; Matthew 11:25-26; Luke 10:21; 19:41-42). He blinds, and He also heals the blindness that either He has caused or that men have chosen. But in no other place in Scripture is Satan said to blind or is shown blinding or closing eyes. If II Corinthians 4:4 is about Satan, it is a significant anomaly.

Rather than blinding, Satan deceives. He works to distort vision (rather than take it away) to influence people to sin, but the Bible never shows him opening or closing eyes, physically or metaphorically. Some may argue that this is a distinction without a difference. However, deceiving and blinding are indeed distinctive. Satan’s deceptions are active *oppositions* to truth, while God’s blinding is usually a temporary state in which He chooses to withhold complete understanding. God embodies truth, but He does not give all truth all at once. He is under no obligation to do so. He blinds, either temporarily or for judgment, but Satan actively opposes and distorts the truth.

In addition to God blinding men, numerous verses show that people can blind themselves, as Part Three will examine. As we have all experienced, the truth can be discomfiting, and if we are not resolutely devoted to it, we will close our eyes to those parts to which we do not want to submit.

II Thessalonians 2:10-11 speaks of those who lack love for the truth and God sending them strong delusion. In other words, these people prefer a state of blindness, and God gives them what they want. So, while we cannot open our eyes to greater truth without God’s involvement, we can close our eyes to what truth is available to us and thus blind ourselves.

## “No God Besides Me”

A second reason Satan does not fit in II Corinthians 4:4 is that nowhere else is Satan referred to as the god of anything. Undoubtedly, Satan fits within the general classification of false gods, referring either to idols or the demons behind them, or both (see I Corinthians 10:19-20). However, even though people may worship those idols and demons as gods, Scripture also maintains that these so-called gods are not truly gods:

» “. . . so that whoever comes to consecrate himself with a young bull and seven rams may be a priest of things *that are not gods?*”  
(II Chronicles 13:9)

» “Has a nation changed its gods, *which are not gods?* But My people have changed their Glory for what does not profit.”  
(Jeremiah 2:11)

» “Your children have forsaken Me and sworn by those *that are not gods.*” (Jeremiah 5:7)

» “Will a man make gods for himself, *which are not gods?*”  
(Jeremiah 16:20)

» “But then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those *which by nature are not gods.*” (Galatians 4:8)

In I Corinthians 8:5, God inspired Paul to call the demons—which would include Satan—“so-called gods”: “For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords) . . .” He then clarifies his description with a contrast in the next verse: “. . . yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” In other words, even though people worship demonic principalities—whether deliberately or inadvertently—the perspective of God and His servants is that they are not gods.

Paul tells the Gentile Galatians in Galatians 4:8 that, prior to their conversion, they served “those *which by nature are not gods.*” He



immediately describes them as “weak and beggarly elements” to which they were again turning (verse 9). Did this same apostle then bestow upon Satan the title “god of this age” when writing to the Corinthians? God answers this in Isaiah 45:5: “I am the LORD, and there is no other; there is no God besides Me.”

Of course, Isaiah 14:14 records Satan as saying that he wants to “be like” (or even “to be”) the Most High. The translators of II Corinthians 4:4, perhaps uncomfortable with God’s attributes and guided by Reformation tradition, may have given Satan his desire to be called a god. Similarly, Ezekiel 28 is about the prince of Tyre, a type of Satan, and God’s controversy with the prince is that he had set his heart as the heart of a god (verse 2). He is far greater in his own estimation than he is in reality.

But the true God never names the Devil as a god of anything. If II Corinthians 4:4 is about Satan, it is a highly significant exception to the pattern, and exceptions invite us to dig deeper. So, how does Scripture characterize him?

Instead of calling Satan a “god,” the gospel accounts consistently call him a “ruler.” He is “the ruler of the demons” (Matthew 9:34; 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15; see Ephesians 6:12), and three times in the book of John, Jesus calls him “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). Paul calls him “the prince [or *ruler*; it is the same Greek word] of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2). The Devil has authority, intelligence, and capabilities far above man, and we should never underestimate him (see Matthew 24:24). Yet, he in no way approaches God’s level, except in his own mind! While God rules supremely, the highest title Satan can legitimately claim is “ruler” over something but never “god.”

As mentioned, the word *aion* in II Corinthians 4:4 refers to this *age* rather than this *world*. God has not made Satan a god over this age—only a ruler with limited authority. Ephesians 1:21 declares that Christ is far above all principality and power, which includes Satan. Contrariwise, as we saw, Satan could only afflict Job with God’s permission, and likewise, he had to *ask* Jesus if he could sift Peter like wheat (Luke 22:31).

Part Two will cover scriptures that show Jesus Christ is sovereign over *all* ages. It will also examine the context of II Corinthians 4:3-4, which is about the same blinding that we have already observed in Romans 11:7-25 and John 12:37-40. Finally, it will relate the revealing history of interpretation of II Corinthians 4:4, which may have influenced the translators to use “god” instead of “God.”