

Does God Make Men Spiritually Blind?

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*Therefore they could not believe, because that Esaias said again, **He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart;** that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them (John 12:39-40)*

Some men hold to a theological system that claims that men who reject the gospel of Jesus Christ were created that way by God before they were ever born. It is taught that God pre-selected certain men to be saved or damned before this material world existed. Those who were selected to be lost are supernaturally declared by God to be “totally depraved”.

It would appear from the outset that John 12:39-40 supports this notion since it clearly states that God is the One who blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts in order that they might reject the gospel. But in another gospel Jesus said that one of the reasons for being anointed with the Spirit was for “*recovering of sight to the blind*” (Luke 4:18b). Furthermore, John himself in the earlier part of his gospel recorded Jesus saying,

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3:16)

Which one is it? Does God want men to believe so that He can save them or is he intentionally blinding certain ones in order to later condemn them? If it is the latter then what do such ideas say about the normal understanding of justice? Is God just in supernaturally blinding men to the truth and then punishing them for something they could do nothing about?

If John 3:16-17 is to be understood as God’s prevailing attitude towards men and the implications drawn from John 12:39-40 are untrue then how do we interpret passages in the inspired Word of God that make such implications?

God’s Prophetic Language

Quite often God is said to do certain things that He merely *allowed* or *permitted* to take place. We will demonstrate through the method of “interpreting Scripture with Scripture” how John 12:39-40 should be read in the “permissive” rather than in the “causative” sense.

Firstly, John 12:39-40 is quoting Isaiah 6:9-10 where God commissioned the prophet to speak truth to the people but to expect a disappointing response:

*And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and **shut their eyes**; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed.*

In God's commission to Isaiah, the prophet is told, among several things, to "shut the eyes" of the people. Some will read the passage as though God has given Isaiah divine power to supernaturally inflict the people with spiritually deaf ears, hard hearts, and spiritual blindness. To read the passage in this fashion is clearly a misunderstanding of Hebrew idiomatic expressions.

God actually desires to give His people an opportunity to repent of their wickedness and avoid judgment. Hence, He sends Isaiah to proclaim the truth to them. However, because God is fully aware of their hearts He knows the reaction that the prophet's message will receive. Instead of allowing God's Word through Isaiah to lead them to repentance, the people will become increasingly hardened and blinded against the truth.

While "blindness" and "hardening" is not God's intentions, He is fully aware that this is the effect that Isaiah's message will have. Therefore, He tells Isaiah to preach this Word but encourages him not to entertain any false hopes that he will get a positive reaction. In the Hebrew idiom, because the message of repentance that Isaiah will preach will cause these wicked people to shut their eyes and harden their hearts, Isaiah is said to be the one who does it. As one theologian writes, "In the stile of scripture, the prophets are said to do what they declare will be done."¹ James MacKnight uses Isaiah 6:10 as an example to explain how "active verbs" in the Hebrew express this particular truth:

Active Verbs, in some cases, were used by the Hebrews to express, not *the doing of the thing* said to be done, but simply *the declaring that it is done, or that it shall be done* Isaiah vi. 10. 'Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy;' declare, or foretell, that the heart of this people is fat.²

From this we can understand that God does not use supernatural divine influence to bring about spiritual blindness to the people of Isaiah's time. He is only declaring that people who prefer to remain in sin have a tendency to harden themselves and close their eyes to the truth.

However, knowledge of the thought behind the Hebrew idiomatic language helps us to read the passage with the understanding (and proper interpretation) that the people, of their own volition, willingly shut their eyes to the truth.

About three hundred years before Christ, a number of Hebrew scholars translated the Hebrew Scriptures into the Greek language (known as the Septuagint). Obviously they understood that the people in Isaiah's time were fully culpable for their own blindness so they translated, "*shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes*" as "*and **their eyes have they closed***;

¹ **An Epitome of the History of the World** (London: J. Walker, 1812), p. 378

² Macknight, James **A New Literal Translation, from the Original Greek of All the Apostolical Epistles** (Philadelphia: Desilver, Thomas & Co., 1835), pp. 28, 29

lest they should see with their eyes” (Brenton English Septuagint Translation). Since John 12:39-40 is quoting Isaiah 6:9-10, it should be understood in this same light.

Man is Free to Blind Himself

It has been well said that the Bible is its own Bible dictionary and its own Bible commentary. If the student of the Word runs into a passage such as John 12:39-40 and it seems to make God’s character appear questionable, then the most effective method for handling this dilemma is to *interpret the Scripture with other Scriptures*.

John is not the only New Testament author to quote Isaiah 6:9-10. This same passage is quoted in various parts of the New Testament (Matt. 13:13-15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 9:39; Acts 28:26; Rom. 11:8-10). Some of these passages, just as John 12:39-40, are interpreted in the sense in which God did the blinding. Thankfully, as we will see, some of them remove the blame from God and places it in the proper place, which is with those who are spiritually blind.

Calvinists obviously have no issue believing that God inflicts spiritual blindness on people. But for those of us who have come to understand the love and justice of God, this idea is unacceptable. But John’s rendering of Isaiah 6:9-10 as well as some of the other New Testament writers appears to teach just that. Yet, this contradicts what John wrote earlier in his gospel concerning men “living in the dark:”

*And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and **men loved darkness rather than light**, because their deeds were evil. (John 3:19)*

Seeing that Jesus attempted to give men light but men preferred darkness then this would make men fully culpable for their blindness. Yet, John says this in one place but then John as well as other New Testament writers quote Isaiah with an interpretation that makes God appear to be culpable for the blindness of men.

Since the Bible is indeed the Word of God we only need to find the solution for interpretation within its pages. God spoke His Word to men who lived in an Eastern culture in which everything that happened in the world was done by the ruling deity. However, the Holy Spirit ensured that sufficient information would be made available in other portions of Scripture to explain some of the difficult language that we find in passages such as John 12:39-40.

There are at least two places in the Bible where Isaiah’s prophesy is interpreted in the sense that the people are fully responsible for their blindness:

*For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, **and their eyes they have closed**; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them (Matt. 13:15)*

*Saying, Go unto this people, and say, Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and not perceive: For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, **and their eyes have they closed**; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them (Acts 28:26-27)*

In these other portions of Scripture, the Holy Spirit ensures us that this “blinding” was the free-will choice of the ones blinded. Therefore, Dr. Timothy Jennings, a minister and a psychiatrist in the Seventh Day Adventist church gives us an appropriate paraphrase of John 12:40:

“Their minds have been blinded by their rejection of truth, their hearts have been deadened by their selfish pursuits, therefore they neither see the truth with their minds nor understand it with their hearts, or will they turn from their evil ways; for if they did, I would heal them.” (John 12:40; The Remedy New Testament by Dr. Timothy Jennings)

Since the Holy Spirit inspired Matthew and Luke to interpret Isaiah’s prophecy in accordance with the freedom that God gave men to make their own choices and choose their own destiny, Dr. Jennings provides us with a paraphrase that is closer to how we should interpret the passage.

The above should help us to understand why it is so vitally important to interpret the Scriptures with the Scriptures. If we only read those passages that interpret Isaiah’s prophesy from the standpoint of God’s action then we will believe the erroneous Calvinistic idea that God has decreed that some are saved and some are lost based totally upon His doing.

The “Permissive Sense” of Scripture

If men are fully responsible for their own blindness and God is not the One who *literally* blinds them then does this mean that John 12:39-40 is not inspired by God? If it is inspired then does it mean that it has been incorrectly translated in multiple English Bible versions? I believe that the answer to both questions is “no”. All Scripture, including those difficult portions, were divinely inspired (2 Tim. 3:16). Furthermore, the problem is not the *translation* but the *interpretation* of Hebrew thinking to the Western mind.

Remember earlier we stated that in Hebrew idiomatic language, God is said to do that which He merely allowed or permitted. Therefore, John 12:39-40 would actually have been understood by Jewish readers to say that the people closed their own eyes and God merely *permits* this to take place.³

³ In his comments on John 12:40 John Brown writes, “But he withholds that special influence which is necessary to conversion from the man who obstinately goes on in his trespasses; an influence which nothing but depravity renders necessary, and to which, of course, no one has, or can have, any claim. He permits the sinner to take his own course.” Brown, John **Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Vol. 2** (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1860), p. 55

In reality, God is not the direct agent behind the spiritual blindness of the people. He merely withdraws from them. Some commentators have noted this truth:

How, then, are the words to be explained? Did he not “blind their eyes and harden their hearts?” Yes, we are free to admit that he did. But then remark, in the first place, what is the import of these expressions when employed in the Scriptures. They do not imply any positive act on the part of God, but simply a negation or withdrawal of his grace, the same which is elsewhere expressed by saying, “he gave them up to their own hearts’ lusts,”—he “gave them over to a reprobate mind.” He does not make the heart harder, he only leaves it to its native hardness and impenitence.⁴

In that case it is clear that the mode specified is not a *direct* agency on the part of God in blinding the mind — which we cannot reconcile with any just notions of the divine character—but *in suffering the truth to produce a regular effect on sinful minds, without putting forth any positive supernatural influence to prevent it.*⁵

John 12:39-40 is accurate but our understanding of God’s *method* or *mechanism* of blinding is not. He is only said to “blind” men by removing the restraint He used in His attempts to prevent the blinding. Sadly, men continued to close their own eyes and harden their own hearts. God had to respect their freedom of choice and *let* it to take place.

In Romans 11, Paul appears to teach the idea that God is fully culpable for closing men’s eyes, but explains the permissive sense within the context of his statement:

*(According as it is written, **God hath given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear;**) unto this day. And David saith, Let their table be made a snare, and a trap, and a stumblingblock, and a recompence unto them: **Let their eyes be darkened, that they may not see, and bow down their back alway.** (Rom. 11:8-10)*

Note the two phrases: “*God hath given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see*” and “*Let their eyes be darkened, that they may not see.*” Paul quotes an Old Testament passage in verse 8 and it is rendered in most English translations in a causative sense. Paul then quotes another in verse 10 that uses a more permissive phrase (“let”) to explain the more seemingly causative language in verse 8. The word “let,” of course, means “to allow or permit”.

“Given them” or “Given them up”?

Therefore, as we read verses 9 and 10 of Romans 11 in conjunction with verse 8 we should no longer have any doubt that where we read, “*God hath given them the spirit of slumber,*

⁴ Johnstone, Rev. Robert “*The Judicial Blindness of the Jews under the Ministry of Jesus*” in **The Scottish Christian Herald, Volume 3** (Edinburgh: John Johnstone, 1838), p. 155

⁵ Barnes, Albert **Notes, Explanatory and Practical on the Gospels, Vol. 2** (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1841), p. 324

eyes that they should not see,” that it is *not* in reference to an act of supernatural power on God’s part. It is a matter of God “giving them over” to the blindness that they freely chose for themselves. The late Baptist pastor, Herschel H. Hobbs, states that this is the case here:

The phrase “God gave” attributes it to God. However, to see him doing this arbitrarily is contrary to God’s nature. The Biblical record shows that Israel first adopted this attitude toward God’s revelation. In time, after repeated refusals of God, God acted in accord with their own actions. Out of respect for man’s free will God accepted as a fact what Israel had shown to be her attitude. As God gave the Gentiles up to their chosen path, he did the same to Israel (see 1:24, 26, 28).⁶

The word “given” is the Greek word “didōmi”. It is the root of another Greek word, “paradidōmi” which is found in an earlier part of Romans where Paul, speaking on the same subject, writes, “*And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, **God gave them over** to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient*” (Romans 1:28).

Since “giving people over to” blindness (permissive) rather than personally and supernaturally “giving them” blindness (causative) is the foundation of Paul’s teaching, then that is how Romans 11:8 should be understood. Three other New Testament translations recognized this fact and rendered verse 8 as follows:

*“...as the Scripture Says, ‘**God has given them over** to an attitude of insensibility, so that their eyes cannot see and their ears cannot hear, down to this very day.’”* (The Williams New Testament)

*“**God gave them over** to an insensitive spirit, having eyes that cannot see and ears that cannot hear, even to this present day.”⁷* (The Living Water Translation)

*“...as it is written, ‘**God hath given them up** to a state of insensibility, so that their eyes could not see, and their ears could not hear.’”* (Daniel Mace New Testament)

Dr. Timothy Jennings also recognizes this fact and in his *The Remedy New Testament* has paraphrased verse 8 as follows: “...as it is written: ‘When they rejected truth, God gave them over to a dull mind: eyes trained to no longer recognize truth and ears tuned to no longer hear truth; and this goes on to this very day.’”

Hence, if God “gave them over” or “gave them up” to the blindness rather than “giving to them” the blindness, then God’s only part in all of this is *permission*. God merely withdraws His

⁶ Hobbs, Herschel H. **Romans: A Verse by Verse Study** (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1977), p. 139

⁷ In a footnote in reference to this verse the translator writes, “God allowed, but Satanically induced, see 2Cor. 4:4”. See Mayfield, Roy **The Living Water New Testament: A Meaning-Based Translation for Modern Day Readers** (Centralia, WA: Roy Mayfield, 2014), p. 379. We fully agree and this “permissive sense” again vindicates God’s character from those who otherwise use passages such as Romans 11:8 to slander Him. We will touch on Satan’s role in this spiritual blinding momentarily.

protective grace and allows the consequences of their rebellion against Him to take place. In his Bible paraphrase, Dr. Jack Blanco (who is from the same denominational background as Dr. Timothy Jennings) gives us a clear understanding of how Romans 11:8-10 should be understood:

“As Moses said, ‘God will withdraw His grace from those who set their minds against Him, who close their eyes to truth and their ears to what God says. And so it is to this day.’ David said, May their prosperity work against them, may all their plans to get rich fail, may they reap the consequences of their actions, may it affect their health, making them prematurely old, may they taste poverty and may all this happen to them with the hope that they will wake up to their need of grace.” (The Clear Word by Jack Blanco, p. 1178)

God “giving them over” to the spiritual blindness simply means He withdrew His presence which attempted to restrain their fall into complete depravity. But since men persisted in rebellion, He finally allowed them to have what they desired for themselves. However, this also comes with “reaping what they sowed” (Gal. 6:7-8) and suffering the consequences of that rebellion.

In light of all of this information, when we are told in John 12:40 that God “*hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart,*” how are we to understand “God’s agency” in that statement? Again, Jack Blanco helps us with his paraphrase:

“God lets them close their eyes and hearts to truth because they don’t want to see and understand. Therefore, they will not see or understand, nor will they be converted and healed.” (The Clear Word by Dr. Jack Blanco)

From all that we have learned from other passages, Dr. Blanco’s paraphrase is the way that the Western mind must interpret John 12:39-40. God has the power to stop men from spiritual blindness and does all that He can to persuade men to listen to truth (See 2 Chron. 36:15-16; Psalm 81:8-12; Prov. 1:23-25; Isa. 65:2-3, 12; Jer. 7:13, 25, 26; Matt. 23:37 and many others). However, when men choose to exercise their free will to reject God then God, who respects the freedom that He has endowed man with, allows them to have what they want along with the automatic consequences.⁸

Satan’s Role in Spiritually Blinding Men

No treatment of the problem of evil and wickedness is adequate or complete without recognizing the overall spirit behind it. Numerous theologians who attempt to vindicate God from the things His enemies accuse Him of seem to be embarrassed by Satan and often leave him out of any treatment of the subject. Yet, we will never be able to confront issues such as why our

⁸ Here another modern Bible translation of Romans 11:8 is helpful: “... as it has been written [Isa. 19:10], “God gave them a spirit of numbness [i.e., they developed a spiritual insensitivity to God and His word]. [He gave them] eyes to see with [but they would not look], and ears to hear with [but they did not listen]. And they still have this spirit.” (An Understandable Version).

evangelism appears to be ineffective without acknowledging the supernatural hindering influence that we need to confront.

Paul faced a number of obstacles in his attempts to win over his fellow Jews. One of the problems that Paul faced was the blindness that the Jews encountered while reading their own God-inspired Scriptures:

But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which vail is done away in Christ. But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the vail is upon their heart. Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the vail shall be taken away. (2 Cor. 3:14-16)

No doubt that this same blindness is suffered today by many non-Jewish “Christian” theologians as well as some rabid atheists and agnostics as they read the Old Testament and see a god of wrath and hatred rather than the God of love and mercy that it actually teaches.

However, Paul did not attribute this blindness solely to their free choice. He also recognized that a supernatural satanic influence over their minds also had a part in this blinding:

*In whom **the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them** which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them. (2 Cor. 4:4)*

It is also important to note that if there *is* any supernatural influence upon any man freely and willingly blinding himself to the truth it does not come from God in the direct sense. This supernatural influence is from Satan.

Yet, John 12:39-40 appears to conflict with 2 Cor. 4:4. The former says that God does the blinding and the latter blames Satan. However, it goes back to the principle derived from the Hebrew idiom in which God is said to do that which He merely allowed or permitted. In this case, God allows Satan to give men what they want.

This is a truth taught in numerous parts of the Bible. In Scripture God is said to have moved David to sin (2 Sam. 24:1) but later we discover that Satan was the culprit that moved David (1 Chron. 21:1). This moving of David is a primary Biblical example of how God has often been said to do what He merely allowed Satan to do or what He allowed men to do to themselves (Job 1-2; 42:10-11; Ex. 12:23; 1 Chron. 10:4, 13, 14).

It is Satan who is responsible for blinding and deceiving the whole world (Rev. 12:9) though God does take responsibility for what He permits Satan to do (2 Thess. 2:7-11). While God has taken responsibility for Satan’s actions (because He has the power to prevent it), He is under obligation to respect the power of free choice He has endowed men with. Hence, God attempts to win mankind through persuasion (2 Chron. 36:15-16).

It is through the preaching of the gospel that God attempts to remove the “spiritual blinders” that Satan places over men through his deceptions:

To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me. (Acts 26:18)

Note that it is Satan who is equated with darkness. Satan keeps men in the dark about their sin, the love of God, and their need for a Savior. It is God's desire to "open their eyes" and remove the self-imposed blindness that men have subjected themselves to by yielding to satanic influence. In reality, God is warring against Satan for the souls of men. Satan's battle plan against God is to keep men blinded to the truth about Him. The full and complete understanding of all that the Scripture teaches about "spiritual blindness" leads us to this conclusion.

Conclusion

If we are having difficulty evangelizing the lost, it is due to the blindness that many people have subjected themselves to. Before we allow ourselves to become depressed about our lack of results, remember that it was Jesus who told us about the blindness of men because He experienced this same frustration in His earthly ministry. Are we better than our Master?

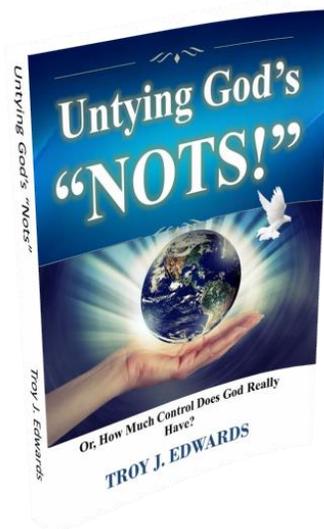
Our duty is to continue to pray for the lost and share the gospel with them. It is only through the light of the gospel that sincere hearts will open their eyes and begin to embrace the truth. However, those who love to and cling to the darkness will continue to do so, but God wants us to at least make an effort to reach them.

Our efforts will become more persistent if we see that Satan is the enemy who keeps men blinded. Our efforts will not be very fervent, that is, if we make any effort at all, if we believe that God Himself directly and supernaturally blinds people. Why attempt to persuade people to the truth if God is the One who blinded them? However, when I realize that Satan is God's enemy and my enemy, that it is Satan who blinds men in his ongoing war against God, and that my commission is to thwart Satan's plans against God and men by sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ, then I will have a better sense of urgency about the matter. The opening of men's eyes is not dependent on God. He did not literally blind them in the first place but He has provided us with the means of removing the blinders. The opening of men's eyes from spiritual blindness depends on God's people. Amen.

For a thorough understanding of the “how” or mechanism behind God allegedly hardening hearts, cursing men, creating evil, and other misunderstood passages of Scripture that appear to question the love and just of God, get our book, *“How? A look at God’s character in light of Biblical passages that are inconsistent with love”*



Also, for a better understanding about how Calvinistic ideology has infiltrated true Christianity, has contributed to the misinterpretation of God’s Word, and has caused many to denigrate and blaspheme the character of God, we highly recommend our book, *“Untying God’s ‘NOTS!’ Or, How Much Control Does God Really Have?”*



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