

The Cause and Ground of Blindness

by T. Austin-Sparks

T. Austin-Sparks explores the causes of spiritual blindness and emphasizes the importance of living a life in the Spirit to attain true enlightenment and freedom in Christ.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 3:7

Topics: "Spiritual Blindness", "The Role of the Holy Spirit"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks addresses the theme of spiritual blindness, drawing parallels between the Israelites' inability to see God's glory in Moses and the contemporary struggle of unbelievers to perceive the light of the gospel. He emphasizes that this blindness is caused by the 'god of this age,' who seeks to keep people from recognizing the glory of Christ. Sparks explains that true enlightenment requires a shift from natural ground to resurrection ground, where the Spirit of God illuminates our understanding. He urges believers to rely on the Holy Spirit for spiritual insight rather than human authorities, highlighting the importance of personal revelation in overcoming blindness. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a persistent quest to see Jesus, as this vision is central to fulfilling God's purpose.

Transcript

But if the ministration of death, written, and engraven on stones, came with glory, so that the children of Israel could not look stedfastly upon the face of Moses for the glory of his face; which glory was passing away: how shall not rather the ministration of the spirit be with glory? For if the ministration of condemnation hath glory, much rather doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory. For verily that which hath been made glorious hath not been made glorious in this respect, by reason of the glory that surpasseth. For if that which passeth away was glorious, much more that which remaineth is in glory. Having therefore such a hope, we use great boldness of speech, and are not as Moses, who put a veil upon his face, that the children of Israel should not look stedfastly on the end of that which was passing away: but their minds were hardened: for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remaineth, it not being revealed to them that it is done away in Christ. But unto this day, whensoever it shall turn to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:7-18; A.R.V.).

Therefore, seeing we have this ministry, even as we obtained mercy, we faint not: but have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by

manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled in them that perish: in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, Who is the image of God, should not dawn upon them. For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. Seeing it is God, that said, Light shall shine out of darkness, who shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:1-6).

We have been led in this Conference to be concerned with the matter of spiritual sight. Here in the scripture which we have read we have another portion touching upon this very matter of blindness and seeing.

First, there is the fact of the blindness - "the god of this age hath blinded": then there is the cause - "the god of this age"; and then there is the reason or object, namely; "that the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, Who is the image of God, should not dawn upon them." We will look at it, then, in that order.

The Fact Of Blindness

You will notice that a parallel is drawn between Israel in the days of Moses and the unbelieving in the days of Paul. In both cases it is said that there is a veil over their hearts, over their minds, a veil which shuts out, which excludes, and which is in the nature of darkening blindness. Moreover there is an element of judgment and condemnation in the way in which the apostle speaks of it. Even with regard to Israel gathered to the door of the tent of meeting, when Moses read the law, he says, in effect, that while Moses had to put a veil over his face because they could not bear to look upon the glory of his face, that was not really because the glory could not be beheld, but because of the state of their mind, of their heart, because of an inward condition in themselves. Had there been another inward state, the veil would have been unnecessary; they could have beheld the glory and dwelt in the light. But the veil was an outward representation of an inward condition, hiding the glory of God. It was never the Lord's desire to hide His glory, but rather to manifest it, and that man should dwell in it, should enjoy it, that there should be no veil between God and man at all. Veils have always been as something between God and man because of a condition which God would rather not have.

The Blinding Power Of Unbelief

Thus it must stand as a thing under condemnation and judgment, this darkness, this blindness, this hiding, this shutting out of the glory of God, and that inward condition in the case of Israel in the time of Moses, and of those in like condition in the days of Paul, and in the case of all in such a position, that inward condition which acts like a veil is, as we know so well from all that is said about Israel, incorrigible unbelief. It was Israel's incorrigible unbelief which blinded them. But to say that is not to be altogether helpful. It is a statement of a fact, a very oppressive fact. We know our own hearts sufficiently well to know that there is an incorrigible unbelief in us all, and we want to understand why that unbelief is there, and what the nature of it is, so as to discover how the veil can be removed; that is, how the unbelief can be dealt with so that we behold the glory of the Lord and dwell in the eternal light.

Light On Resurrection Ground

Well then, let us look again to see what the Lord was ever and always seeking to do in the case of Israel. We can put it this way: He was always trying to get them in heart, in spirit, in life, to occupy resurrection ground. That is first made evident in the Passover in Egypt, when the firstborn in every home in Egypt was

slain on that terrible night when death was everywhere. But Israel was not, as is too superficially supposed, exempt. The casual, superficial idea is that the firstborn in Israel were not slain, only the firstborn in Egypt. But the firstborn in all Israel were slain. The difference was that the firstborn in Egypt were slain actually, and the firstborn in Israel substitutionarily. When that lamb was slain in every Israelitish home, for every household, that lamb representatively passed under the same judgment as the firstborn in all Egypt, and in that lamb Israel passed representatively from death into life. In that lamb Israel was virtually brought through death on to resurrection ground. For Egypt there was no resurrection ground; for Israel there was. That is the difference. But all died, the one actually, the other representatively. Thus God, right at the very foundation of Israel's national life, sought to get them established upon the ground of resurrection, which means that a death has taken place, an end has been brought about. One whole order of things has been wound up and another entirely different order of things has been brought in, and to get them to take their position upon that new ground, in that new order, was God's great effort and meaning in the Passover. The keeping of the Passover year by year as an established ordinance throughout all their generations and their history was God's way of showing that they belonged to another order, the order of the resurrection. While darkness was in every house of the Egyptians and over all the land of Egypt, the children of Israel had light in their dwellings; for light is always on resurrection ground, but only on resurrection ground.

Then at the Red Sea the same great principle was repeated, passing through and out on to resurrection ground; Egypt again swallowed up, but Israel saved. They all went into the same sea, but for Israel on the other side there is a pillar of fire to be their light on resurrection ground - the Spirit of light and of life. They kept the Passover as they went on year by year under God's order, in order to preserve the testimony as to the ground upon which they stood nationally.

Then came the Jordan; and it is but a reiteration in the principle of the same thing, now made necessary, not by their naked condition, but by their recognition of it. It is doubtful whether in Egypt and at the Red Sea Israel had the subjective understanding of the meaning of what God was doing in the Passover and in the Red Sea, but now they have the subjective consciousness of its being a necessity. They have been discovering things for forty years and they agree at last; they agree with God that another ground altogether is necessary if they are to abide in the light. You see, God was persistently by every means seeking to get Israel to occupy and remain upon resurrection ground, from which there had been cut off entirely all the ground of nature. Their incorrigible unbelief had as its main constituent the clinging to unresurrection ground or ground of nature.

The Consequence Of Living On The Ground Of Nature

What is the ground of nature? Well, look at Israel and you can see quite clearly what the ground of nature is. The ground of nature is always a drawing of things toward oneself and a viewing of everything in the light of oneself, just how it affects self. You see right at the beginning it was that. Yes, of course, the deliverance at the beginning affected us rather well, and so we were very happy. The mighty deliverance at the Red Sea is a good thing for us, so we are full of joy to-day. It will always be like that while things are good for us. But let us find that we are being tested at all, bring us to-morrow to this place and that, where it is not so obvious that it is all to our profit, and the song ceases, joy goes out, and murmuring comes in "They murmured." Oh how often it is said that they murmured! Why? Because they occupied carnal ground, natural ground, which in a word, means "how it affects me"! That is natural ground, and on that ground there will always be the uprising of unbelief.

The strength of unbelief is just that very thing, personal natural interests and considerations, looking at things in the light of our own advantage or disadvantage. Allow that kind of thing to come in for a moment, and it will not be long before you are questioning and doubting, and found in unbelief; for the essence of faith is the very opposite of that. When things are going against you and your interests, and you are losing your life and all that you have, and you believe God, you trust God, that is faith indeed, that is the essence of faith. But faith is not real faith when we believe God merely while the sun shines and all goes well. Israel occupied natural ground so persistently that they were found more in unbelief than in faith. It was that which blinded them. So that blind unbelief, when we come to analyse it, is simply occupying ground that is other than resurrection ground; that is, we are occupying ground which God has put under the curse, which God has forbidden, upon which God has inscribed the warning to believers, Keep off! If only we could see in our hearts those warning notices of God strewn over the whole territory of self-interest, worldly considerations, and so on, we should be saved from very much of the misery which comes into our lives.

Well, you see, the whole life of nature is a blind thing, and the measure in which we are ruled by nature is the measure of our blindness. "The natural man", says the Spirit of God, "receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God... he cannot know them, because they are spiritually discerned" or "discerned by the spiritual" (1 Cor. 2:14). The whole life of nature is a blind thing. The measure in which we occupy that ground is the measure of our blindness. God was seeking to get Israel off that ground on to resurrection ground, to be governed, not by nature, but by the Spirit: and being governed by the Spirit means to walk in the light, means to have light, means to see.

A Life In The Spirit

"Now the Lord is the Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Cor. 3:17). Liberty from what? Why, liberty from the veil. "When it shall turn to the Lord, the veil is taken away"; bondage, limitation, is taken away. And "the Lord is the Spirit". To be on the ground of the Spirit, which is resurrection ground, with the life of nature set aside, is to be delivered from blindness and to be in the light. A life in the Spirit! Israel forever stands to declare with no uncertain note that religion is not necessarily enlightenment, and that even to have the Scriptures is not necessarily enlightenment. "When Moses is read, a veil lieth upon their heart". "When Moses is read..." Paul said a very strong thing about the Scriptures and the prophets which they read every day; that they know not what they mean, perceive not what they signify, but are still in blindness, in darkness. No, even to have the Scriptures does not necessarily imply enlightenment.

The message of 2 Corinthians is as much to Christians as it is to unbelievers, if it is not more so, this message about the veil, about blindness, about seeing; for where is the Christian who is fully and finally delivered from the life of nature? Enlightenment, after all, is only a comparative thing, that is, it is a "more or less" matter. Hence all those strong urges and exhortations to believers to walk in the light, to live in the Spirit, for only so can this matter of spiritual seeing and understanding develop and make progress. A life in the Spirit - that is only another way of saying, a life on resurrection ground.

What we have said thus far is that the blindness which is spread over the whole of the life of nature operates and has its strength in the choice and acceptance of that life of nature on the part of those concerned. It is not necessary, it is not God's will. God's desire is that we should dwell in the light, that we should see His glory, that there should be no veil at all. That is His desire, that the veil should be taken away. But one great thing is necessary, namely, that we should come to that Passover, to that death

which is the death to the life of nature and which brings in a new life altogether, a life of the Spirit, in which a new faculty, a new power, a new capacity for seeing is created. That is a very important thing. I could well spend all the rest of the time available on that, it is so important to us as the Lord's people.

When will the Lord's people who have the Scriptures, and who know the Scriptures so well in the letter, when will they come to realise and to recognise that, if truly they have been crucified with Christ, if they have died in His death and have been raised together with Him, and have received the Spirit, they have light in their dwelling? "The anointing which ye received of Him abideth in you, and ye need not that any one teach you, but... His anointing teacheth you concerning all things" (1 John 2:27). When will believers, when will Christians, come to realise that? Why must Christians who have the knowledge of the Scriptures in the letter run about here and there to seek advice from others on matters which vitally affect their own spiritual knowledge? I do not mean that it is wrong to get counsel, wrong to know what other children of God of experience think or feel about matters. But if we are going to build our position upon their conclusions, we are in great danger. The final authority and arbiter in all matters is the Spirit of God, the Spirit of the anointing. We may get help from one another, but I do hope that you are not going to build your position upon what I say now because I say it. Do not do that. I do not want you to do it, I do not ask you to do it. What I say is, listen, take note, and then go to your final authority Who is in you, if you are a child of God, and ask Him to corroborate the truth or to show otherwise. That is your right, your birthright, the birthright of every child of God, to be in the light of the indwelling Spirit of light, the Spirit of God.

I wonder where Paul would have been had he taken the opposite course to that which he did take? "When it pleased God, Who separated me from my birth... to reveal His Son in me... straightway I conferred not with flesh and blood: neither went I up to Jerusalem to them that were apostles before me: but I went away into Arabia" (Gal. 1:15-17). I wonder what would have happened had he gone up to Jerusalem and laid every matter before those who were apostles before him? We know from subsequent events that one thing they would have said to him would have been, Look here, be careful, Paul! You tell us that on the Damascus road Jesus is supposed to have said something to you about going to the Gentiles; be careful! They would have put him back about this Gentile business. You know what happened afterward. You know how on that point even Peter was caught in dissimulation years after. You know how those apostles which were before him at Jerusalem were all the time very chary (cautious) about this matter of the Gentiles, and had Paul capitulated to them, we should never have had the great apostle to the Gentiles, the great apostle of the Body of Christ, with his revelation of the mystery, of the oneness of all in Christ, Jew and Greek. He did not submit that thing even to those who were apostles before him to ask them whether he was right or not, whether this was sound or not. Oh no! He had the anointing in Damascus; Ananias laid his hands upon him and he received the Spirit, and from that day, although Paul was quite ready and happy to have fellowship with his brethren, though he never took a superior or independent position, though he was always open to conference, nevertheless he was a man governed by the Spirit.

I know you have to be careful how you take what I am saying. It will only be safe for you as you are one who does not set yourself up as some independent party with the Holy Spirit, but who keeps perfect fellowship, humility, submissiveness, openness of heart, with readiness to listen to and obey what may come through others, as the Spirit bears witness to the truth. But all that depends upon your inward condition, whether you are on natural ground or on spiritual ground, on old creation ground or on resurrection ground. But being on resurrection ground, where it is not the life of nature but the Spirit that governs, beloved, you have the right and the privilege and the blessing of knowing the Spirit bearing witness in your heart and the anointing teaching you all things, with regard to whether any given matter is

right or wrong. When will the Lord's people know that, recognise that?

You see, it is this other thing all the time that is robbing so many of the light that the Lord would give them. The Lord would lead them into the greater fulnesses of the knowledge of His Son, of the enlargement of their spiritual understanding, but they are neglecting the gift that is in them. They are neglecting the Holy Spirit as their illuminator and teacher and instructor and guide and arbiter, and they are going to this one and that one, to this authority and that, and saying, What do you think about it? If you think it is wrong, then I will not touch it! It is fatal to spiritual knowledge to do that. That is going on to natural ground.

Now the Lord wants us off of that ground. This matter of occupying resurrection ground, of living a life in the Spirit, is all-important in coming to the full knowledge of God's Son. How much more we could say about that! Let us be careful as to who our authorities are. So many dear children of God, individually and collectively, have come into dire and grievous bondage, limitation and confusion, by all the time going back to human authorities, to this great leader and that, to this man who was greatly used of God, this man who had a great deal of spiritual light. "The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from His Word" than even this or that servant of His possessed. Do you see what I mean? We get all the benefit of the light given to godly people and seek to profit by true light, but we will never come into bondage and say, That is the end of that matter! That must never be. We must maintain our resurrection ground. And who can exhaust that? In other words, who can exhaust the meaning of Christ risen? He is a boundless store, the land of far distances. No man yet has ever done more than begun to know the meaning of Christ risen. If there has been one man who has that meaning more than another, I suppose it was Paul. But to the last from his prison he still cries, "That I may know Him!": "I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for Whom I suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but refuse" (Phil. 3:8). Right at the end of a life like his, the life of a man who could say, Fourteen years ago I knew a man in Christ, caught up to the third heaven and shown unspeakable thing, which, it is not lawful for a man to utter (2 Cor. 12:2-3), he is still saying, That I may know Him! I say no man, not even Paul, has ever done more than begin to know Christ risen. "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him. But God hath revealed them unto us by His Spirit" (1 Cor. 2:9-10). You see, the Spirit has the unsearchable riches to reveal to us. So much, then, for the blindness which comes by occupying natural ground in whatever form that may take.

The Cause Of Blindness

A word or two about the cause. "The god of this age hath blinded." There are two things in that phrase. Firstly, this blindness is not, after all, only natural, it is supernatural. It is not to say everything to say that nature is a blind realm. No, there is something very much more sinister than that about this blindness. It is supernatural blindness, but it is evilly supernatural blindness. It is the work of the Devil. That is why, on the one hand, spiritual sight-giving is always fraught with such terrible conflict. No one ever really does come to see by the Spirit and understand without a fight, without a price having to be paid, without a terrible amount of suffering. Every bit of real spiritual illumination and enlightenment is a costly thing. For it Paul had to be much on his knees where the saints were concerned. "I bow my knees"; I pray "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him" (Eph. 1:17). It is something which has to be prayed through, and it is not without significance that prayer in the Letter to the Ephesians comes so much in association with what is revealed in chapter 6: "our wrestling... is against the principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenlies. Wherefore take up the whole

armour of God" - this and that and that - "...with all prayer and supplication praying at all seasons in the Spirit" (Eph. 6:12-18). "This darkness" - "praying always": "I pray that He... may give unto you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him". You see, it is all of a piece. The explanation lies here, in "the god of this age". We are up against something supernatural in this spiritual blindness. We are right up against the whole cosmic forces of evil, all those intelligences operating to keep people in blindness.

It is no small thing to have true spiritual sight. It represents a mighty victory. It is not going to come to you by just sitting passively and opening your mouths for it to arrive. There has to be exercise about this matter. You are right up against the full force of the god of this age when you are really out for spiritual understanding. It is a supernatural battle. So every bit of ministry that is going to be a ministry of true revelation will be surrounded by conflict. Conflict will go before, conflict will go on at the time, and conflict may follow after. It is like that.

Herein, then, is the need for you to be exercised about light, that, while you hear the thing, you shall not take it for granted that, having heard it, you have got it; that you should afterward have very definite dealings with the Lord, that what He is seeking to break through to you shall indeed be entered into, and that you are not going to delude yourself by assuming that you know now merely because you have heard it in its terms. You may not know it. It may not yet be delivering light; there may be a battle necessary in this matter.

If we did but know it, a very great deal of the conflict which arises in our lives is because God is seeking to bring us further on the road, to open our eyes to Himself, to bring us into the light of His Son. God is seeking to broaden our spiritual horizon, and the enemy is out against that, and he is not going to have it if he can help it. Conflict arises. We may not understand it, but very, very often, more often than not, it is just that, namely, that the Lord is after something, and Satan says, They shall not see that if I can help it! So there arises a mighty warfare. This blindness is supernatural, just as enlightenment is supernatural.

"The god of this age"! That designation may mean more than just a period in time. It may mean all of time, because Satan gained kingship over man right at the beginning. That is what he was after, to take the place of God and to get the worth-ship of man's life; to be god, to be worshipped; which simply means to take what man has of worth to himself. God made man with a view to his being a vehicle of bringing something to God for God's pleasure and glory, something worthy of God, that God should have a worth-ship out of man, and Satan said: I am going to have that worth-ship; God has something vested in that creation, something He is going to get for Himself; I am going to have it! So the whole of what took place in the Garden was Satan's way of supplanting God in man's heart, in man's mind, and getting from man that which was God's right - the worship. Thus, by man's consent and fall, Satan gained godship in this world, and has held it ever since. "This age" just means the course of this world. "The god of this age"!

Now, the greatest peril to Satan's godship is spiritual illumination. He will not hold that ground long once your eyes are opened. Oh, once a heart is enlightened, Satan's power is at once broken. So the Lord, consistently with that fact, said to Paul on the Damascus road - "...unto whom I send thee, to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan unto God" (Acts 26:17-18). The two things go together: From darkness to light; from the power of Satan unto God. I repeat that the greatest menace and peril to Satan and his position is spiritual illumination. Hence he must find ground on which to perpetuate and maintain his position, his godship, in this age. And what ground will satisfy him in that matter? The answer is, the ground of nature. You get on to the ground of nature and you have given Satan right of possession. Every time we do that, Satan's hold is strengthened.

The Object Of The Blinding Work Of Satan

Now just to mention and hint at the third thing. What is the reason or object of this blinding work of Satan? It is that "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, Who is the image of God, should not dawn upon them" (2 Cor. 4:4). The glory of Christ; the gospel of the glory of Christ; the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ; Who is the image of God; lest that should dawn upon them, and that it should not dawn upon them, the god of this age hath blinded them.

Then what is the object? We are taken back to some dateless time when in the counsels of the Godhead the Son was appointed heir of all things. He Who was co-equal with God was put in the way of inheriting all things. When that was known in heaven, there was one in the angelic hosts in whose heart iniquity was found. That iniquity was the pride of desiring that equality and aspiring to that inheritance. His heart was lifted up, and he said, "I will exalt my throne above the stars of God... I will be like the Most High" (Isa. 14:12-14; Eze. 28:11-19), in the saying of which he uncovered his jealousy of God's Son; and out from that iniquity of his heart, that pride, that jealousy of his heart, he lost his place there, and he has come down and pursued his course of animosity all through the ages, that men shall never see the Son if he can help it. That the light of the glory of Christ should not dawn upon them, he has darkened and blinded them. It is to exclude the Son.

That surely signifies something immense where Christ is concerned, if Satan, with all his great intelligence and understanding, recognises that, if men see that Son, it is the greatest thing that ever could happen. Everything of God's intention is bound up with that. All God's great purpose in the creation of this world, and this universe, hangs upon that. It is all vested in the Son, and if men see the Son, then God reaches His end and realises His purpose. Satan says, That must not be, they must not see the Son! The god of this age hath blinded their minds, lest the light of the glory of Christ, Who is the image of God, should dawn upon them.

What a thing it is to see the Son then! I cannot stay now with that immense matter. But let us finish on this note: What a tremendous shout will go up throughout the universe when at last we see Him face to face, when there is no more darkening veil at all in any degree. God has His end then; the Son appears, the Son is seen. When we see Him, "we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him even as He is" (1 John 3:2). That is what God made us for: "fore-ordained to be conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29). But oh, seeing now and seeing evermore unto the perfect day is necessary, for it is as we behold that we are changed into that image.

What is the prayer upon our lips and in our hearts as we go away? Let it not be mere sentiment, let it be a persistent cry and a persistent quest - We would see Jesus! In the seeing of Him all the purpose of God in this universe is bound up.

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