

The Gospel Veiled

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[0 : 00] Please turn with me this evening to 2 Corinthians chapter 4, page number 1161.

2 Corinthians chapter 4, and to the words we find in verses 3 and 4. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.

The God of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

It is a curious, difficult, and painful question to ask. Why are so few people in Scotland Christians? Why are our buildings half empty on a Sunday while the shopping malls are full? It's too easy to blame our ministry models.

[1 : 15] It's too easy to blame our evangelistic apathy as a church. There must be something more basic going on. And the Bible's answer is, there is. The God of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

The gospel is veiled. The significance of Jesus Christ is covered. Their minds are blinded. We have a phrase. There's none so blind as those who will not see.

The apostle Paul goes further. There's none so blind as those who cannot see. And so once again we ask the question, why are so few people in Scotland today Christians?

Not just because they choose not to see the truth about Jesus Christ, but due to the blinding of their minds by the God of this age, this is what the passage tells us, they cannot see the truth about Jesus Christ.

It is entirely as impossible for them to understand the truth about Jesus and his gospel as it is for a blind man to describe to us the colors of the rainbow.

[2 : 30] What was true in the first century for Paul is entirely as true for us in the 21st. This chapter, it seems to me, is the apostle Paul's experience of ministry.

On many occasions, he's been tempted to lose heart, to become discouraged. We can fully understand why. Take the shirt off his back and you'll see it marked by the scars of a whip.

Many church members prefer to listen to the silky speeches of the false teachers compared to Paul's rather plain setting forth of the truth. Paul knows how fragile he is.

Why is it that so few he ministers to respond in genuine faith and trust in the Lord Jesus? Is it because it's time for Paul to adopt new ways of communicating or to become more skilled as an evangelist?

No. It's because the vast majority of those to whom he is speaking have their minds blinded by the God of this age. It is not just that they do not choose to see the truth about Jesus Christ, but because of the blinding of their minds, they cannot see the truth about Jesus.

[3 : 47] Their mind is covered with a veil, so they are incapable of understanding the significance of Jesus Christ. There is a task facing the church in Scotland today, an altogether impossible task, that which cannot possibly be achieved in her own strength, that of preaching Christ to a generation who cannot hear, cannot see, and cannot understand.

I want to consider two things with you this evening and then to make two further applications. First, what can't they see?

The answer being the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. And secondly, why can't they see?

The answer to which is, their minds are blinded and the God of this age has placed a veil over their hearts. And before anyone switches off because they think this is too gloomy an assessment of the human condition, or perhaps because this has nothing to do with them, please don't.

Because unless we understand the barriers which are set up against the gospel, we will never know how to tear them down. First question, what can't they see?

[5 : 10] What can't they see? The world has never seen, nor will ever see, a greater glory than that which was seen in the Lord Jesus Christ.

His works of love and power are unequaled. His perfect righteousness and sacrificial death and glorious resurrection unparalleled. A couple of weeks ago, scientists produced the first ever picture of a black hole.

It was an amazing achievement from these highly skilled men and women. The whole world waited in expectation for this picture to be released. We wondered what new magnificence we would behold.

After all, a black hole is one of the high points of the scientific endeavor, connecting as it does Albert Einstein, Stephen Hawking, and Max Planck.

Well, I didn't expect to see a picture of a Krispy Kreme donut. To say the least, I was just a little bit underwhelmed by that picture.

[6 : 12] Perhaps that's because my science of astronomy is not as good as it should be, or because I've got Krispy Kreme donuts on my brain. Either option is a distinct possibility. However, what became apparent to me is that the greatest of all phenomena in the universe has no glory compared to that of Jesus Christ, the image of God.

In our passage, Paul describes that which the unbeliever cannot see as the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

It's a phrase which really is packed with meaning, which on one hand is carefully packaged together, and on the other hand, there's a series of logical forward movements. Christ here is first described as the image of God.

He is the icon of God. He is the exact representation of who God is. If you want to know what God is like, look no further than Jesus Christ, who is the image of God.

People from every culture in the world have always wanted to know what God is and who God is. And in Jesus Christ, we have him in the flesh, the exact image of God.

[7 : 35] And what of this? Yes, Christ came in the flesh and he made himself of no reputation. But the spiritual reality of the coming of Christ is that of the appearance of the glory of God.

He, the glory of God, stood among us, healing the sick and preaching the good news of the kingdom. And even on that cross, in the hour of his greatest humiliation, Jesus remained the outshining of the glory of God.

And yes, the majority of those who surrounded him during his earthly ministry did not see or understand his significance. They called him Jesus of Nazareth and their minds were blinded to the glory of who he really was.

Then Paul moves on to go backwards to remind us of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. The gospel which tells the story of his life and death and resurrection and attaches to that story of significance in terms of repentance and faith.

This is the gospel which is the truth about the glorious purposes of God and the cross and resurrection. This is the gospel which to the Christian is precious, but to the person who does not believe is as mysterious as the surface of Mars.

[8 : 59] What seems to us so simple, that Jesus died that we might live and all he commands us is faith. Such a simple message and yet to the person who does not believe it is more complex than the daily telegraph cryptic crossword.

It is not just that they choose not to believe it, they cannot. But then comes both the crux and the paradox of our passage. That the light, this light, this gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God, is the light which those whose minds have been blinded cannot see.

The light here in verse 4 seems to me to correspond to the logical, moral, ethical and spiritual consequences and call of the gospel. And they can't see the light.

It's not just that they can't see the general shape and contours of the gospel, but they can't see it as light compared to the darkness. Their minds have been blinded.

There are some people registered blind who can tell the difference between something that's light and something that's dark, but not those over whose mind the God of this age has placed a veil.

[10 : 18] There is nothing about the gospel of the glory of Jesus Christ, who is the image of God, which attracts them to him. It's like that old magic eye puzzle in which a 3D object is embedded in a

2D pattern.

For some people, seeing that 3D picture is impossible. All they see is a repeating picture pattern in 2D, and no matter how hard they focus, they can't see anything different.

It's a similar idea here. But because the God of this age has blinded their minds, this person cannot see the significance of the gospel of the glory of Jesus Christ, who is the image of God.

I was 15 when I became a Christian, but I can still remember what it was like to sit under the preaching of the word before I was a Christian. I went to church out of habit.

That was what was expected. And I didn't have anything else to do on a Sunday. I sat under the ministry of Reverend Ronald Mackay, former minister of this congregation.

[11:29] After I became a Christian, I had the privilege of hearing Ronald on many occasions. The voice was familiar, but that was it. Everything else he said was entirely new to me, even though I'd heard it from when I was a child, because the veil had been taken from my heart, and my mind was no longer blind to the significance of the gospel.

I had been blind, but now I could see. And I wondered if there are some in this congregation who can see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, just as well as I can.

But I've not yet publicly professed his name. I don't wonder if there are. I know there are.

There are those among us who understand Christ entirely as well as I do, and better, perhaps. Are you one of them? But this is what unbelievers cannot see, the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

They cannot see a wonder greater than the constellations of the sky or the great depths of the ocean. How tragic. That the Jesus before whom the angels bow down and worship, they can't see his glory.

[12:53] The relevance and the appeal and the urgency and the reason of the gospel, it does not reach their minds. They can't understand what the universe was created to worship.

They can't see the glory of King Jesus. Secondly, why can't they see? Why can't they see?

Well, our text answers this in two questions. First of all, the gospel is veiled to them, verse 3. That word for veil literally means covered or hidden. The gospel's hidden from them.

They can't see it. And it's not like a game of hide and seek, where the harder you look, the more chance you have of finding the truth. The problem is not just that the truth about the gospel of Jesus Christ is hidden from them, but they entirely lack the capacity to see it anyway.

Think about this. Before the invention of x-rays, there were no non-intrusive ways to see inside the body. The inner anatomy of the body was hidden, not just because it was covered with skin, but because human doctors lacked the capacity to see beneath the surface.

[14:09] In the same way, the truth about Jesus is hidden or covered in such a way that the unbeliever can't see it.

But in the second instance, as we read in verse 4, the God of this age has blinded the minds. Well, first of all, let's ask, who is the God of this age?

And there are, it seems to me, three options. You can choose any one of them. First, it could be a reference to the predominant religion of Rome and therefore to emperor worship.

Those who cannot see the eternal glory of Christ are blinded by the temporal glory of Caesar. And it's not hard for that to happen to a human being.

A quick example proves the point. Imagine that you are standing in front of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, this huge tower which is the glory of Europe. Now, if you were to hold a matchbox close to your eyes, that matchbox would take up the whole of your vision so that you could not see the Eiffel Tower anymore.

[15:18] But which is the most impressive object? That wee box of matches in front of your eyes or the Eiffel Tower? In the same way, the glory of Christ is so much greater than that of Caesar and yet because Caesar is so close, the vast majority of people in Paul's day couldn't see a greater, more eternal glory.

The second option is that the God of this age is a direct reference to Satan. And of course, Satan doesn't want anyone to see or understand just how majestic Jesus Christ is because he's so jealous of the Son of God and so proud.

And so he obscures people's mental vision and distorts people's processes of logic and reason.

The third option is that the God of this age is the prevalent cultural and social worldview of the day.

It cannot be personified and yet it is most definitely a strong power which forces us to conform. We may call it peer pressure but it's even more dominant than that.

It is the prevailing worldview of the culture in which we live. Which means that the God of this age changes from generation to generation.

[16 : 43] A hundred years ago, it was dominated by the Victorian worldview. Now it's dominated by materialistic secularism. In a hundred years' time, who knows what the God of this age will look like.

But whatever it is, through its media, through its art, through its music, through its culture, the God of this age will force us into conformity with itself. You can take use pick of which one of these three is your preferred option.

I personally plumb for option number three that the God of this age is the prevailing worldview and culture of our society. But what is it the God of this age does?

We read, He blinds the minds of unbelievers so they cannot see. And this in itself is a very curious statement because taken at face value, a mind cannot be blinded.

Eyes can be blinded. But the mind cannot be blinded. This is metaphorical language, the same kind of language we use when understanding something for the first time.

[17 : 50] We say, Oh, I see what you mean. But you will notice, it's the mind which is blinded. That faculty of the human being which thinks, which reasons, which makes logical connections.

It is the mind of a man which is blinded by the prevalent worldview of the culture around him. To apply a phrase we often use, they don't think straight.

Or we can say it another way. When it comes to the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God, they have a mental block. See how important the mind is.

Such that if the God of this age was to choose just one faculty of the human being to paralyze, it would be the logical, reasonable, thinking faculty.

Paul isn't saying for one second that Christians are cleverer than anyone else. But he is saying that when it comes to the significance of the gospel and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, the mind of the Christian has been opened.

[18 : 55] Whereas the mind of the unbeliever remains shut. One of the most important types of gospel story is one where Jesus opens the eyes of the blind.

Bartimaeus, for example. And in every case, the gospel writer is saying more than just that Jesus enabled the optical faculty of this man to work.

Whether it's Matthew or Luke, the implication is that by nature, we are all spiritually blind and we need Jesus to open our eyes. By nature, we are rather like that description, God provides Isaiah of the people to whom he is ministering in Isaiah 6.

all was hearing but never understanding. All was seeing but never perceiving. There are the kinds of people who listened to Jesus' parables and didn't understand what he was really saying.

We have a phrase, there are none so blind as those who will not see but according to Paul, his experience in ministry has taught him that there are none so blind as those who cannot see.

[20 : 10] He has spent months and years faithfully teaching people the truth about Jesus and yet there have been so many who having heard the same words as everybody else just don't get it.

Just don't understand. And Paul concludes it's because the God of this age has blinded their minds. One of the features of the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity is that the mind is blinded by sin and without the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit it will never see the truth.

And I want all of us to take a step back for a moment and take into account the teaching of the Apostle Paul. We can argue with him as much as we like but given that he is speaking only the inspired words of God then we're going to have to take our argument higher all the way to heaven. This is the plain teaching of Scripture. The reason there are so few people who openly profess faith in Jesus Christ is because our society has been blinded by the God of this age and we are entirely powerless to do anything about it at all.

It takes the sovereign work of God to open the eyes of the blind. Now you will notice that over the last few months I've been outlining, I've been emphasizing a biblical reformed view of evangelism with a big Christ and a loving Father and a sovereign spirit.

[21 : 49] We have to understand this. No amount of planning on our part will open the eyes of one blind man. No amount of leadership training will open the mind of the man who cannot see the light of Christ's gospel glory.

No amount of professional training in how to become a better preacher will open the eyes of a blind man. I'm not saying we shouldn't engage in these things but I'm saying that if we should think, if we should think that even for one second anything we can do can force open the mind of a blind person, a person who's been blinded by the God of this age, then we're either blinded than we think or we're so proud that we can do a better job than the Apostle Paul or even Jesus himself.

We need humility here, brothers and sisters. Let me conclude by providing us with two applications from this text. Pray to Christ, preach of Christ.

Pray to Christ, preach of Christ. Pray to Christ, first of all. It should be apparent from verses 3 and 4 that it is entirely impossible for one human being to remove the veil over another human being's heart, for one human being to undo what the God of this age has done.

Some people think that miracles belong only in the past but they don't. The greatest of all miracles takes place when someone whose mind, the God of this age, has blinded, can, for the first time, see.

[23 : 37] But it's also the hardest of all miracles to perform, a miracle only God can do. If only God could do this, if only God can open the eyes of the blind, then surely it should drive us to our knees in prayer, pleading with him that he shall do his miraculous work of opening minds to the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.

And so once again, I'm going to beat the drum. I always beat this drum. I'm doing it because I really believe, I genuinely believe, it is the most profitable and important drum to beat, namely our commitment to the prayer meeting of this church.

It's on a Wednesday night when together we gather as those who recognize our impotence to penetrate beyond the blinded minds of our loved ones.

We pray earnestly to the only one who can. Sure it's when we pray, God's hand is moved to open blind minds.

Listen carefully to what I'm saying. I believe it is relatively easy to grow a church by the transfer of Christians from other churches.

[24 : 52] Just make sure you've got the best community groups around. Just make sure you've got the best coffee. Just make sure you've got the best vibe and the best music. Surely we're deeper than that, right?

Surely we want to see our friends and our family those who do not yet know Christ surely want them to come to know Jesus.

If we do, then it's at the prayer meeting God's mysterious work of opening blind minds will begin. Pray to Christ.

And then secondly, preach of Christ. Preach of Christ. We might think to ourselves, well, if there's nothing I can do to effect change or to open hearts, then what's the point of preaching?

What's the point of you minister exerting sweat and tears to prepare sermons and to call us all to repentance and faith? Surely God chooses to open hearts.

[26 : 00] Surely he opens the hearts of those he chooses to help. well, Paul knew better than anyone else that God was sovereign in the opening of the minds of blind men and yet he continued to preach.

He says in verse 2, he continues to set forth the truth plainly. He keeps on preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ because he knows it is the means by which God will open the minds of those from whose hearts the gospel has been hidden.

He knew that although the work of mind opening is miraculous, it is the word read and preached which is the means God uses to work his medical.

And so Jesus kept preaching and Paul kept preaching and the fathers of our church kept preaching even though they believed in a God who alone can open the eyes of the blind.

And they preached knowing it is not their oratorical skill which produces conversion. It is altogether the mysterious work of God.

[27 : 16] We need to keep on reminding ourselves of that that the work of conversion is God's mysterious work and all he calls us to is to remain faithful to his charge to make known the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That's the means by which God will do his amazing work of opening minds. We pray and we preach. We pray and we preach.

We pray and we preach. That's what 2nd Corinthians 3 verse 4 is driving us toward. And this is not intended in any way to be a gloomy message delivered by a gloomy preacher or stereotyped woe is me dark Calvinist.

It is intended to be a challenge to all of us to renew our commitment to the work of God's mysterious converting grace whereby he opens minds the God of this age has shut. it is intended to drive us to our knees in prayer and to open our mouths in proclamation. We pray in confidence and with expectancy that God in his sovereign power and his grace will so work among us and every other church of Christ in Glasgow that multitudes in our city will be awakened to the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.

[28 : 45] To whom along with the Father and the Holy Spirit we all honour and majesty both now and always let us pray. We recognise oh Lord that you call us to do the impossible.

Your mysterious converting grace who shall you alight on this evening? Whose heart shall you open? whose mind will you open?

Will you frustrate the blinding actions of the God of this age and remove the veils from our hearts so that we may see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is your very image?

That's why we need your spirit oh Lord. we pray that you would keep us from any sense of self-sufficiency or the seeking of human wisdom rather help us to rely more deeply and more securely in the promises of scripture which tell us your word will not come back to you void it will accomplish the purpose for which you have sent it forth.

Be glorified then we ask and pray oh Lord in Christ's name we plead Amen Amen Amen .