

Deceptions

“The heart is deceitful above all things... “ (Jeremiah 17:9).

We live in a world that is saturated with lies and deceptions. Satan, the father of lies, “speaks his native tongue” (John 8:44), which means that lies and deceptions continuously flow forth from his mouth. Satan’s wicked servants, the demons, see to it that those lies and deceptions get implanted deep in our souls. And we have a sin nature that concocts lies all the time. So all humanity has a problem, a *huge* problem, one that needs to be understood and dealt with.

Unbelievers can’t help but be deceived. Satan holds them in an iron-tight grip and has no intention of releasing them. They’ve incorporated his barrage of lies and deceptions deep into their being, and they can’t on their own shake them off, no matter how much we plead and reason with them. Only the Spirit of God, who has access to their souls can reach them and free them on the basis of the liberating, redemptive work of Christ Jesus. Satan’s lies and deceptions are smeared all over society, and they keep coming. And due to humanity’s innate sin nature those deceptions with incredible ease get absorbed and believed and acted on. Unbelievers are lost in sin and Satanic deceptions.

The main basis of unbelief in our modern Western world is the notion of billions of years of time since a Big Bang, then the spontaneous origin of life followed by Darwinian evolution. This seems to be scientifically possible, arguably it’s even plausible. Therefore, the thinking goes, it is true and historical. And therefore God doesn’t exist. Of course, just because something is possible, that doesn’t make it true. But almost all educated people—and even many who aren’t—hold to this irrational and illogical nonsense. The issue isn’t billions of years and evolution anyway, but God’s existence. God’s existence cannot logically be denied! He is a transcendent Being, which means He cannot be experienced by our senses. So, what seems possible in this totally naturalistic world they imagine we live in, and what they base their lives on, depends entirely on the illogical and un-provable assumption that God doesn’t exist. For all their vaunted superior intelligence, moderns cannot recognize this error in their thinking. They’re deceived.

Of course, other reasons exist for unbelief, such as love of sin and belief in other religions. Regardless which of these obtains, the underlying assumption is that it doesn’t matter if we don’t believe in the God of Israel nor what religious ideas we hold. This too is a lie and a deception. That’s because as Creator, God has the sovereign right to determine how we’re to live and what we’re to think. So unbelief in God is therefore rebellion against Him, with consequences. The great issue is the reality of God’s existence. Sadly, tragically, people can’t think this through on their own, because of deep-seated deception. Intercessory prayer for unbelievers thus is needed. We hold to be true what we *want* to be true; and the Spirit of God can change what unbelievers want. (This means that due to our sin nature, we want false narratives and lies to be true. It doesn’t mean that we believe that the Bible is truth because we want it to be true; Scripture is true because it’s sourced in a holy God.)

But believers also harbor lies and deceptions. They come from outside us, that is from the world we live in and from demons who can influence our minds and thoughts. But they also come from within, from our sin nature. The easiest person to deceive is oneself. And we deceive ourselves all the time. We can’t help it, because the “heart is deceitful more than anything else.” Lies and deceptions remain deep in our soul from before we’re saved. Even after we’re saved, lies and deceptions continue to form. And they prevent us from maturing in Christ. They block our sanctification. They make it impossible for us to make the written Word of God real in our lives. We hide deep in our hearts a hornet’s nest of excuses for not obeying the Word, we invent lies alien to Scripture, and we import from our pagan culture ungodly worldviews and false beliefs that hinder our growth. All the preaching in the world, no matter how good, and regardless how much Bible study we may do, no matter how much theological truth we know exists, all this fails to transform us because of the lies and deceptions that reside deep in our soul.

The basis of all pulpit ministry and teaching in churches is the expectation that, if exposed to the truths of the Word of God, a truth encounter will occur and people will be changed by it. It must indeed happen for some people, but almost certainly not for the overwhelming number of people who attend church. The truths expounded and taught in church or thru personal study may even enter into our minds and remain there as cognitive knowledge, but fail to be apprehended in a way that results in a transformed life. An intellectual grasp of God’s love, of God’s Word, fails to impact our lives, our relationships, our responses to situations, our carrying out God’s will. There’s a disjunction between what we know to be true, and what we do. Deep-seated deceptions and lies – ones we’re probably not even consciously aware of – create that mind/emotions/will disjunction. Paul was aware of this problem. That’s why he gave us the Letter to the Ephesians. Let’s look at it.

In Ephesians chapters 1 and 2 and partly into 3, Paul fills our thinking with all the wonderful ways that God has lavished His love on us through Christ. Election, predestination, adoption, redemption, forgiveness of sins, sealing by the Spirit and the gift of the Spirit, all these and more . . . We have been gifted with a hope, an inheritance, a regeneration, a peace, access to God, a new citizenship, and a new relationship with others. Wow! Paul has given us this list of all these thrilling ways God's love has enriched us. But then, beginning at 3:14, Paul does something extraordinary. He prays. He prays that the Ephesians will not merely hold all those wonderful examples of God's love that he has just written as cognitive knowledge, but will, by the power of the Holy Spirit, allow the heart to take all that knowledge and transform it into a life of love. **"I kneel before the Father . . . I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts [note: not just head knowledge!] through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, have power . . . to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge [note: knowledge alone isn't enough!], that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God"** (3:14-19). The goal is God-likeness. All that God has done for us has to change us, it has to act on our emotions and our wills so that we make God's love our love. And then live lives of love, love for Christ and love for others.

The Ephesians needed to take the truths of the Word and make them real in their lives. But they couldn't do it on their own. Paul must have been aware that they harbored all manner of deceptions and lies that blocked them from doing that. They were living in a pagan, idolatrous, godless society ruled by Satan [as we are]. So Paul prayed for them. They couldn't pray for themselves, because that's the deceitfulness of deception. Paul had to pray for them. And the Spirit of God then, in response to such prayer, had to work in their hearts the will to translate the wonderful head knowledge of Chapters 1-3 into new life. It takes the Spirit of God to expose the deep-seated lies and deceptions that we hold. It takes the Spirit of God to move us to jettison those hindering lies so that we can embrace God's precious truths as something to love and to express. We need to pray for each other for this to happen, just as Paul had to pray for the Ephesians.

The Bible is filled with examples of deceiving and being deceived, so much that it's almost a sub-theme of all Scripture. From Genesis chapter 3 on to near the end of Revelation there's deception and more deception. The Jacob narrative in Genesis is drenched with deceptions: Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Laban, Esau, Rachel, all these were deceived and/or deceiving in one way or another. Samson's self-deceit was lethal. Nadab and Abihu harbored the lie that leadership meant special privilege even if contrary to God's Word. Solomon deceived himself similarly. Job's 3 deceived friends tried their hardest to deceive Job, but to his praise Job held to what he knew to be true. Jonah was appallingly deceived at multiple levels, supposing that if the Assyrians suffered God's condemnation, Israel would be more secure, and that disobeying God would result in a greater good. David's self-deception was supposing that because God loved him and had so obviously blessed him so wonderfully, he was free to do as he pleased. (This lie is widely held in churches today.) The Pharisees were self-deceived, thinking that only their particular interpretation of Scripture was true. (This lie is rampant among our various denominations.) Judas Iscariot was terribly self-deceived. Ananias and Sapphira were deceived in supposing that being saved and on their way to heaven meant that truth could be fudged. The Apostle John calls attention to the very worst deception in the Church in 1 John 1: 6.

Neurophysiologists claim that consciousness, our thoughts, and all that goes on in our minds consists of nothing more than reverberating electrical currents in our brain. That's because of their commitment to the lie that there's nothing more to existence than matter acted on by energy. Well, a spiritual dimension exists, and humans are embodied souls. Our minds are complexly organized and complex in function. Subconscious assumptions, motivations, the interface of our emotions and our will with our thoughts – all these operate at any given moment. And our minds are wide open to spiritual influences. So hear Jeremiah again: **"I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind . . ."** (Jer 17:10). Only God, who made us, understands our thoughts. He knows the lies and deceptions that are hidden deep inside us. That's why we need to pray for each other, that the Holy Spirit will reveal to us what we can't know otherwise and empower us to discard or defeat the hidden deceptions, so that we can allow God's Word to control how we live. (This is not to argue that the Holy Spirit reveals truths to us apart from the Word. The spiritual gift of "prophecy" ceased with the completion of the canon. During the Church age, the Spirit's work is to enable us to understand and apply the Word to our lives.)

Preachers suppose that careful exegesis and exposition of the Scriptures is all that's needed to effect discipleship. If people are just taught the Word of God, they'll be transformed and godly. That's a fatuity. No amount of Bible information or theology can change the human heart unless it's first opened by the Spirit. **"The LORD opened her [Lydia's] heart to respond to Paul's message"** (Acts 16:14). The Lord must enable us to respond to the Gospel to be saved and to respond to the Word for our sanctification, for our service, and for our maturity. We therefore must continually be praying for each other for this absolutely essential work of God. It's one reason the Scripture refers to us as priests. Let's be faithful.