Deception - Satan’s Chief Weapon

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In our previous study of antisemitism, we discussed some of Satan's tactics in this Spiritual War. His most-used tactic is deception, which is worth examining more closely. We will begin by looking at a passage in Ephesians 6, and notice verses 11 and 12, which warn all believers about this spiritual war.

> **Ephesians 6:10** Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. **11 Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. 12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.**
> 13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. 14 Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, 15 and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. 16 In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; 17 and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, 18 praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints,

Ephesians 6:10-18 describes the believer’s great struggle against evil and how we can win this spiritual conflict. It begins with a call to be strong in the Lord and in His mighty strength…to “be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." The NASB and NIV translate this as “schemes” of the devil, while the Catholic NAB translates it as “tactics” of the devil. The Greek word is *methodeia*, meaning cunning arts, deceit, craft, and trickery. I prefer “deceit” or “trickery.” Satan’s “tactics” involve deception rather than force. This fight is not physical but mental, a battle for your mind. Verse 12 continues this theme of deception in an odd way.

This word "wrestle" is the Greek word *pale,* and it is an interesting word. It comes from another root word that means (now get this) **"to throw a man down by deceit and craft."** Deceit? Greek wrestling, as practiced in the various "games" of the time, such as the Olympics, was more a mental test of skill and tactics than of brute force and strength. It relied more on tricking your opponent into a weakened position where you could apply force to your advantage. Get your opponent off balance or deliver force in a way and/or from a direction he is not expecting. And that is how Satan works.

If there is a key word in understanding Satan's "schemes," it is "deception." For us, that means always looking for the lie.

This theme of Satan as a deceiver runs throughout the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. We see him in the Garden, deceiving the woman who would later be called Eve. In 1 Chronicles 21:1, Satan provoked David to number Israel. The Hebrew word translated "provoked" implies seduction.

Job was deceived. See Job 1:16, where his servants deliver devastating news about his wealth and family.

> **Job 1:16** While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them, and I alone have escaped to tell you."

This calamity did not come from God; it came from Satan (Job 1:6-12). Satan led Job's wife to suggest that he curse God and die. Satan, not God, brought calamity upon Job, yet Job was led to believe God brought it upon him. Satan's deception was to get Job to curse God and reject Him, thus destroying his witness against Satan.

> **Job 1:20** Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. 21 And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." 22 In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.

Israel was deceived time and again, mostly into idolatry. Israel's history was a constant cycle of idolatry, followed by discipline, then periods of

“blamelessness” when they met the conditions of the Mosaic Covenant, with attendant blessing.

Christ also chastised Israel for adopting false teachings he called “traditions of men” that distorted God’s Word.

> **Mark 7:6** And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ 8 **You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.**” (Emphasis added)

> **Colossians 2:8** See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, **according to human tradition**, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. (Emphasis added)

Many modern religions do this today. Nowhere in Scripture can you find what they teach, because it is not from God; rather, it is merely “traditions of men” and false doctrines. **Substituting “traditions” for sound Biblical doctrine is creating your own god**, defining God by human viewpoint. **That is idolatry!**

In 2 Corinthians, Paul warns the Corinthian church about possible deception.

> **2 Corinthians 11:1** I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! 2 For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. 3 But I am afraid that as **the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray** from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. 4 For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. (Emphasis added)

Paul is very clear that we can be led astray (v. 3), as Eve was beguiled. The word means to defile or corrupt, to seduce or deceive. In the NKJV, it is rendered “corrupted.” The Greek *phtheiro* is from the root *phthio,* which

means to shrivel or wither, to spoil, as fruit withers as it spoils. Paul warns of those who might preach a doctrine or a gospel other than what he has taught; that doctrine or gospel is like withered fruit, unfit for consumption. The Word of God is often likened to spiritual food, but the food in view here is corrupt.

> **2 Corinthians 11:12** But what I do, I will also continue to do, that I may cut off the opportunity from those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the things of which they boast. 13 For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. 14 And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. 15 Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.

Paul tells us that this corruption, with its false doctrines, comes from "false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ" (v. 13). The word translated "transform" is *metaschematizo,* which means to change, transfigure, or disguise, with the idea of deception and a change that is only superficial. The underlying characteristics remain the same, but we see a beautiful false façade. The NASB translates it as "disguise," and the NIV as "masquerades." I believe "disguise" or "masquerades" are both better translations than "transforms" because the English word "transforms" suggests a real change. But the change Paul is speaking of is not real; it is only a deception that appears to be real. These false teachers will look and act like godly men and women, when in fact they are deceived and teach false doctrines.

How does Paul say we can be led astray? By false doctrines that "preach another Jesus whom we have not preached." By a "different spirit," an unclean spirit rather than the Holy Spirit, who should be our only source of divine illumination.

Now go back and look at this phrase at the end of verse 4: "… you put up with it readily enough" (ESV), "…you bear this beautifully" (NASB). Expositors are all over the place about its meaning, but given the context of Paul's concern about possible deception, I think Paul is saying they (the Corinthians) might find this "other (false) doctrine" acceptable—that is, "bear it" or "put up with it." This looks to me like Paul is expressing real doubt about the Corinthians' ability to resist these false teachers, and in

the Corinthian church, this was prophetic. They were often involved in apostasy that Paul had to correct.

It is also prophetic of the whole Church for the rest of this dispensation. The Church today is full of deceived denominations and cults that have embraced these false teachings and traditions of men, just as Israel did under the Law.

You had better believe we can be deceived. Many of us are deceived, and Scripture supports this.

Scripture says the unregenerate are deceived. In his letter to Titus, Paul reminds him of their condition before salvation. In chapter 3, verse 3, Paul says, “We ourselves were…deceived." Every unregenerate person is deceived by Satan. This is reinforced in 2 Corinthians 4:3 and 4, where Paul states that “those who are perishing” are blinded and tells us by whom: “the god of this world." That is Satan. The blindness Satan produces prevents the unregenerate from seeing “the light of the Gospel."

Just because you are born again does not exempt you from satanic deception. This blinding is removed at regeneration only insofar as the deceptive lies of Satan are revealed by the light of truth. Even though the heart is renewed by the new birth and the will has turned to God, man’s self-deception is so ingrained that it remains an issue. You are not born again with full knowledge of the truth. You must learn that, and the believer can still be deceived during that process! Consider the following verses:

- James 1:22 tells us we are deceived if we are hearers and not doers of the Word.
- 1 John 1:8 tells us we are deceived if we say we have no sin.
- Galatians 6:3 tells us we are deceived if we think we are something when we are nothing.
- 1 Corinthians 3:18 says we are deceived if we think we are wise by the world's wisdom.
- James 1:26 says we are deceived if we seem religious, but an unbridled tongue reveals our true condition.
- Galatians 6:7 says we are deceived if we think we will not reap what we sow.
- 1 Corinthians 15:33 says we are deceived if we think contact with sin will not affect us.

Satan will deceive you as an unbeliever. He will deceive you as a believer. He will deceive you even as a spiritually mature believer. And if you don't think so, I submit that you may already be deceived.

DECEIVED! Take a look at Matthew 24:4-5 to see what Jesus had to say on this subject.

> **Matthew 24:4** And Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives you. 5 For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many."

In this passage, Jesus speaks about a specific period of time, the Tribulation, as He warns about those who will come and claim to be the Christ, but the passage also applies to all dispensations.

The word translated "deceive" is *planao*, which means to stray from safety, truth, or virtue; to go astray, deceive, err, seduce, or wander. The word comes from *plane*, meaning a straying from orthodoxy or piety; to deceive, delusion, or error. Now remember, in this passage, Jesus warns against deception during the Tribulation. What circumstances prevail during the Tribulation? Believers will be awaiting the Lord's return and looking for all kinds of signs and wonders. There will be heightened awareness of the supernatural. Jesus says that under these circumstances, especially when we are highly aware of the supernatural, we are very vulnerable to deception. This is a particular issue in some churches and charismatic circles. They are looking for supernatural signs and wonders, and Satan has delivered them in the form of tongues and fake healings. They are deceived away from the truth and into apostasy.

Now look at verse 24, "For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect." Yes, even the elect can be deceived. These deceptions will be so cleverly executed and appear so authentic that even the regenerate will be deceived.

> **1 Timothy 4:1** Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, 2 speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron,

The warning comes directly from the Holy Spirit. “Expressly” is *the* Greek word *rhētōs*, used as an adverb meaning “outspokenly” or “distinctly.” This Greek word is the root of our modern word “rhetoric," which means speaking with eloquence or expressiveness. The Holy Spirit was very clear on this: “that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith…” Some take “latter times” to mean the Tribulation, but I believe Paul is referring to the Church and the closing days of this dispensation. During that time, there will be a falling away from the faith because of “seducing spirits and doctrines of demons.” These doctrines appear to be one thing but are really something else. They have a beautiful façade, but their core is still a lie.

The result will be that their conscience is seared with a hot iron. The word “seared” is *kauteriazo*, which means to brand or to cauterize, rendering something insensitive. This is the formation of “scar tissue” or calluses, a tough, leathery skin that becomes insensitive to stimuli like pain. This scar tissue acts as a barrier to the truth. Once you buy into the lie, scar tissue builds and makes you insensitive to the truth. One of my teachers called this “scar tissue of the soul.”

The conscience is the soul’s first line of defense. Your conscience is built on norms and standards that define acceptable ways of living. These norms and standards are not just for the saved but for society as a whole. Ideally, we learn them in the sanctity of a stable home, with both parents present, teaching good moral values, and in a community that reinforces them. This is a solid culture at work in a person's development. Yes, a single parent can instill high moral values in a child, but the God-designed ideal is a two-parent family.

For the regenerate, these learned moral values are augmented by spiritual norms and standards. The conscience becomes the first line of defense, applying these standards to what it encounters. Your conscience often warns you that something is wrong long before you can rationalize exactly why. You may still use your free will to do wrong instead of right, but if the conscience has sound norms and standards, you will at least understand that it is wrong and choose not to go along. The problem arises when moral standards are absent or corrupt, as in a broken culture. In such cases, the person is likely to make bad or immoral decisions. This is one of the chief reasons why the crime rate is so high in this country, especially in

certain communities. Moral values are not being taught in the home, schools, or society to the extent they were years ago. To make matters worse, our culture, through the media like movies and TV, has helped establish values that are often morally flawed. We live in a decadent, broken society. Under these conditions, the conscience can be "seared" and dulled, so it can no longer serve as an early warning and discern truth from lies.

There is no denying that any of us can be deceived. Scripture offers ample warnings about this danger. What you probably don't yet realize is how easily this can happen and how often it does.

I am sure it is obvious that if you are ignorant of a subject, you are susceptible to being deceived about it. If you know nothing about automobiles and take your car to a mechanic because of a problem, and the mechanic is unscrupulous and detects your ignorance, you are vulnerable to paying for repairs you don't need. The same applies to Satan. If he thinks you are ignorant of a subject, he will attempt to deceive you and is likely to succeed. The principle to learn here is that *protection from deception is found in knowledge.*

New believers are especially susceptible to deception. In their newfound faith and excitement, they are often too eager to follow the Lord at any cost. That mindset is not necessarily bad. We should indeed be ready and willing to follow the Lord at any cost—but never recklessly.

This is compounded by the fact that, very often, when we come to faith in Christ, we bring preconceived notions about the Christian life and spirituality. These preconceptions are often unscriptural and can lead the new believer into a false sense of security. One such notion is that God will protect you from deception.

You do not automatically receive protection from deception simply because you are born again. That would violate your God-given free will. God expects you to make intelligent decisions based on facts and faith. You are a free moral agent with an intellect, and you are expected to exercise it. The only ones who get a "free ride" are those who are totally incapable of making intelligent and moral choices because of mental limitations. The rest of us must use our brains and think with Bible doctrine. That implies a learning process.

Can “honest seekers of God” be deceived? Among believers, one notion holds that God will not allow “honest seekers after God” to be deceived. If you are “sincere” in your faith, God will protect you from deception. Where did that idea come from? If that were true, Jesus would not have warned us against deception. The truth is, even Christians who are “true and honest” can be deceived by Satan and embrace a false doctrine.

I have heard it said of some deceived believers, “but he has a good heart.” Their point is that they know the person’s theology is all screwed up and largely unscriptural, but since his heart is in the right place, he must simply be confused on some matters. That may be true, but he is still deceived. In that condition, he is a casualty in the angelic conflict, and his witness for God is ineffective or even damaging.

Pay attention — Good intentions are no guarantee against deception and having your witness for Christ destroyed by Satan.

At the moment of salvation, the believer receives newness of life in regeneration, but not full knowledge of God or Satan. Just as a baby doesn’t come out of its mother’s womb understanding algebra or world history, neither do regenerated “babes in Christ” understand all they need to know as children of God. These things must be learned, and that takes time. These learned doctrines are our protection against deception. Until a base of true knowledge is established as faith, we are very vulnerable to the lies of Satan.

Deception is based on ignorance, not moral character.

The only solution for ignorance is knowledge of the truth. The more you know from God’s inspired Word, the less susceptible you are to deception.

> **Ephesians 4:18** They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.
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> **2 Corinthians 4:4** In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Ephesians 4:18 tells us that, as unbelievers, our minds were darkened, and our hearts were blind. Second Corinthians 4:4 tells us that this blindness is a veil created by Satan. That veil is not destroyed at regeneration; rather, the light of truth can then penetrate the darkness.

We still have a decision to make: will we follow the light or continue to follow the lie? With little or no doctrinal foundation and unbridled enthusiasm, believers are susceptible to deception. That is why discipling new believers and getting them on solid doctrinal ground is so terribly important. This is why a serious commitment to the Word is essential to spiritual growth.

This is why there are so many cults and denominations. Do you think for a moment that God agrees with everything taught by all these "Christian" denominations, not to mention all the other religions and belief systems of the world? If they can't all be right, then some have the truth and a whole bunch are trapped in a lie.

We are compelled to conclude that if God expects something of us, He is obliged to reveal the truth about it to us. The challenge for us is to cut through all of Satan's deceiving lies to reach God's truth. Yes, the Spirit of God will make known to the believer what is true when it is presented to us, but we can and often do reject the truth for a lie instead.

Be Not Deceived

In both Matthew 24:4 and Mark 13:5, Jesus warned, "See that no one leads you astray." Would He have issued this warning if it were impossible for us to be deceived? Of course not. This warning clearly implies that we could be deceived.

As believers, we are expected to advance to spiritual maturity and grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18; Colossians 1:10; Ephesians 3:17). That implies a learning process, and a learning process requires us to submit ourselves to teachers who are qualified to teach us what we need to learn.

Some argue from Scripture that we have no need of teachers, but this misinterpretation stems from 1 John 2:27.

> **1 John 2:27** But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you **have no need that anyone should teach you.** But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie—just as it has taught you, abide in him. (Emphasis added)

The context of this passage is that John warns these believers about false teachers, in this case, a group called the "Gnostics" who claimed to know all things. The Gnostics were teaching a gospel different from what they had previously been taught, and John warns that it is false. John is really saying, "You have no need of **this** teaching," referring to the false teachings of the Gnostics. And the NKJV translates it that way.

If there is no need for a teacher, why is the spiritual gift of teaching firmly established in Scripture (Acts 13:1; 1 Cor. 12:29; Eph. 4:11; James 3:1)? The believer receives Spirit-inspired insight through the material presented. This material can be presented by reading the Bible, but the preferred and most efficient method is presentation by a Spirit-gifted teacher. The responsibility for accuracy rests so heavily on the teacher that James warns in James 3:1, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment." Teachers are held to a higher standard. But the choice to teach is not yours, and it certainly wasn't mine. God sovereignly bestows the gift.

Unfortunately, many teachers we will encounter in our spiritual advance may themselves be deceived and teach false doctrines. Second Peter 2:1 warns of this group. This is where denominations come from; false doctrines or traditions assume the authority of the truth and fragment the Church. The question arises: how do we protect ourselves from false teaching?

The Scriptures warn us, as believers, to keep an open mind and examine all teachings. We are not to accept everything presented to us.

> **1 John 4:1** Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

John explicitly tells us that many false teachers are in the world, and not all of them are led by the Holy Spirit. Paul gives a similar warning in 1 Corinthians 2:14-15.

> **1 Corinthians 2:14** The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. 15 The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one.

Since only spiritual people are able to receive spiritual truths, it follows that the man without the Spirit, an unregenerate person, would not and could not receive the message of wisdom regardless of his intellectual abilities or accomplishments.

The “natural man” is *psuchikos anthropos*, meaning “soulish man,” and refers to the unsaved, who cannot discern spiritual things. To them, spiritual matters are foolishness, *moria*, meaning silliness or absurdity. The unsaved lack Holy Spirit enlightenment, so spiritual matters are foolishness to them.

The unsaved are blind to the truth, and that blindness comes from Satan. By comparison, the “spiritual person” judges all things. The word translated “judge” is *anakrino*, meaning to scrutinize; by implication, to investigate, interrogate, discern, examine, judge, or search. The text implies that he is capable of judging all things. That capability, which only the believer has, comes from the indwelling Holy Spirit enlightening the believer concerning truth. It is assumed the believer is in right relationship with God—filled with the Spirit or “walking in the Spirit," if you prefer, as opposed to being out in the “weeds” of carnality. As believers, we have a responsibility to examine or spiritually judge all things presented to us by teaching spirits. Does it come from an anointed teacher filled with the Holy Spirit, or from a teacher led by an evil spirit? Consequently, we should reject all things that our spiritual judgment cannot accept, at least until we can determine with clarity what is truth.

This warning is all over the NT. In 2 Timothy 4:2, the believer is told to “mind” (be of full age or spiritually mature) and “bring to proof” (prove, examine). We are told to “prove all things” in 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

> **Philippians 1:9** And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, **with knowledge and all discernment**, 10 so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of

Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Emphasis added)

We are never told to accept everything blindly, because not everything is from God. Believers are to exercise discernment, test everything, and be certain. Unfortunately, many believers do not test what is presented to them. They accept everything and assume it is the truth. The worst are those who are "born into a religion." They go to church with mom and dad and never question what they are being taught. They accept the teachings and assume they are true. But do they square with the Word of God?

Then we have the lame excuse that no man is capable of knowing the truth, and we sink into a relativist doctrine that says truth is what you believe and that it is different for each of us. That implies there are no truths, and the truth is merely relative to your current environment, experience, or belief. If you accept that, you are compelled to accept what Muslims believe: that killing Jews and Christians is okay. Today something is unacceptable, but tomorrow, because values change, it is acceptable. The truth is: there is truth! Some things are truly "black & white" and never change, even if society does. Satan wants to deceive you into thinking otherwise. Satan wants to keep the truth from you any way he can. And many have bought into his lies.

God gave us free will
And we are expected to use it.
God gave us an intellect capable of discerning right from wrong
And we are expected to use it.
God gave us a physical body with certain strengths, talents, and abilities –
And we are expected to use them.
God gave us His inspired Word in the completed canon of Scripture –
And we are expected to use the wisdom and knowledge it contains.
God gave believers the indwelling Holy Spirit to lead us and enable us to do His work.
And we are expected to use those assets.

God does not need nor seek inactivity or passivity from the believer. God expects intelligent action. God expects the believer to use the assets he has been given to produce fruit. By contrast, the powers of darkness would make the believer a machine with its brain in neutral. Satan wants

the believer in a nonproductive state, distracted from the truth, so that he will not be a witness against him during the appeal phase of his trial.