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# Contents

CHAPTER	PAGE
Preface .....	vii
1. The Blind Who Will Never See (16:1-4).....	1
2. The Blind Who Are Made to See (16:5-12) .....	9
3. The Supreme Confession (16:13-17) .....	17
4. The Church That Christ Builds (16:18-20) .....	25
5. Offending Christ (16:21-23) .....	35
6. Winning by Losing: the Paradox of Discipleship (16:24-27) .....	45
7. Promise and Warning Concerning the Second Coming (16:27-28) .....	53
8. Preview of the Second Coming (17:1-13) .....	61
9. The Power of Faith (17:14-21) .....	73
10. The Believer As a Citizen (17:22-27).....	83
11. Entering the Kingdom (18:1-4) .....	93
12. The Danger of Causing a Christian to Sin (18:5-9).....	101
13. The Care of God's Children (18:10-14) .....	113
14. The Discipline of God's Children (18:15-20).....	123
15. Learning to Forgive (18:21-35).....	141
16. Jesus' Teaching on Divorce (19:1-12) .....	159
17. Jesus Loves the Little Children (19:13-15) .....	177

18. How to Obtain Eternal Life (19:16-22).....	185
19. The Poverty of Riches and the Riches of Poverty (19:23-29).....	197
20. Equality in the Kingdom (19:30—20:16) .....	207
21. The Sufferings of Christ (20:17-19).....	219
22. How to Be Great in the Kingdom (20:20-28) .....	229
23. The Blind Who Saw (20:29-34).....	247
24. The Humble Coronation of Christ (21:1-11) .....	255
25. Purging the Perverted Temple (21:12-17).....	265
26. The Way of the Fig Tree (21:18-22).....	275
27. The Authority of Jesus (21:23-32) .....	283
28. Judgment on Christ's Rejecters (21:33-46) .....	293
29. Responding to a Royal Invitation (22:1-14) .....	303
30. Our Obligation to God and Government (22:15-22).....	315
31. The God of the Living (22:23-33) .....	325
32. The Great Commandment (22:34-40).....	335
33. Whose Son Is Christ? (22:41-46) .....	343
34. The Character of False Spiritual Leaders (23:1-12) .....	353
35. The Condemnation of False Spiritual Leaders—part 1	
Expressing the Condemnation (23:13-33) .....	371
36. The Condemnation of False Spiritual Leaders—part 2	
Proclaiming the Judgment (23:34-36).....	389
37. Jesus' Last Words to Israel (23:37-39) .....	399
Bibliography .....	405
Index of Greek Words .....	407
Index of Hebrew/Aramaic Words .....	408
Index of Scripture .....	408
Index of Subjects .....	415

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# The Blind Who Will Never See

(16:1-4)



**And the Pharisees and Sadducees came up, and testing Him asked Him to show them a sign from heaven. But He answered and said to them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times? An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.” And He left them, and went away. (16:1-4)**

Good eyesight is a marvelous blessing, and in order to see better, Americans spend some five billion dollars a year on eye care. About seven percent of the population is considered legally blind. In many parts of the world, of course, the percentage of blind people is much higher.

It is even more significant that, since the fall of Adam, every person on earth has been born spiritually blind. They fall into two categories: those who will never see and know God and those who, by the grace of God and the illumination of the Holy Spirit, are enabled to see and to have intimate fellowship with Him. The deciding factor is how a person is related to Jesus Christ. The person who rejects the Savior remains forever blind; the person who confesses Him as Lord is given spiritual

sight as well as spiritual life. Unfortunately, men do not universally have the desire for spiritual sight that they do for physical. The vast majority do not know they are spiritually blind and do not care. Even when offered sight, many refuse it.

Jesus “was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1:9-11). Paul declares that, although “since the creation of the world [God’s] invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made,” rebellious mankind “did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened” (Rom. 1:20-21). Even with evidence of God plainly before them, unregenerate men refuse to see Him. Their eyes reject the evidence because their hearts reject the One who gives it.

“A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God,” Paul explains; “for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor. 2:14). Unredeemed men are “darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart” (Eph. 4:18).

The Old Testament writers also testified to men’s natural spiritual blindness. The wicked “do not know nor do they understand,” wrote the psalmist; “they walk about in darkness” (Ps. 82:5). The same writer confessed that before he came to know God he “was senseless and ignorant, . . . like a beast before Thee” (Ps. 73:22). We learn from Proverbs that “the way of the wicked is like darkness; they do not know over what they stumble” (Prov. 4:19). Because of their sin and rebelliousness, Jeremiah described God’s chosen nation of Israel as “foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but see not; who have ears, but hear not” (Jer. 5:21). Micah described Israel’s pagan enemies as those who “do not know the thoughts of the Lord, and they do not understand His purpose” (Mic. 4:12).

Three things contribute to man’s spiritual blindness. The first is sin. When God’s own Son came to earth as the light of the world, “men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). The second contributor to spiritual blindness is Satan. As “the god of this world [he] has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). The third contributor is God’s sovereign judgment. When, because of their sin and their allegiance to Satan, men persistently reject God’s light, He judicially confirms them in their self-chosen darkness. Of those in Jerusalem who rejected Him, Jesus declared, “If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes” (Luke 19:42).

Through the seven parables of Matthew 13 Jesus describes the characteristics of the age between His rejection and His coming again to establish His millennial kingdom. Those parables present “the mysteries of the kingdom,” truths not revealed in the Old Testament but given only to those who during this age trust in Jesus Christ for salvation (13:11). The singular purpose of those particular parables was

to teach that the mystery time, which has now lasted some 2,000 years, is a time of both belief and of unbelief, of receiving and of rejecting.

Following the seven parables, Jesus presented eight illustrations (Matt. 13:53—16:12), six of which focus on His rejection and two on His acceptance. History verifies that rejection of Jesus has been vastly greater than reception of Him, just as those parables and illustrations indicate.

The gospel accounts make clear that, beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist, the most vocal and determined rejection of Christ and His gospel was by the Jewish religious leaders, especially the influential and powerful **Pharisees and Sadducees**.

The events of Matthew 16 began just after the Lord crossed the Sea of Galilee from the Gentile area of Decapolis, where He had miraculously fed “four thousand men, besides women and children,” and came to the Jewish “region of Magadan,” on the western shore (Matt. 15:32-39). The exact location of Magadan, which Mark refers to as Dalmanutha (8:10), is unknown, but Jesus’ opponents came there as soon as they heard He had arrived.

In 16:1-4, Matthew records Jesus’ final invitation to those religious leaders; and by their persistent rejection of Him they confirmed themselves as among the spiritually blind who steadfastly refuse to see. In this brief passage we see four characteristics of those whose spiritual blindness will never end: they seek darkness, they curse the light, they regress still deeper into darkness, and finally they are abandoned by God.

#### THEY SEEK DARKNESS

The first characteristic is seen in the fact that **the Pharisees and Sadducees came up** to Jesus together. Although they ordinarily criticized and despised each other, the two religious groups found common cause in their opposition to Jesus. They were bound together by their love of spiritual darkness.

For the most part, the **Sadducees** were aristocratic, and they traditionally boasted the high priests and chief priests among their numbers. Many of them made fortunes operating the lucrative Temple concessions of money changing and selling of sacrificial animals. **The Pharisees**, on the other hand, were generally from the working class, and many of them, like Paul (Acts 18:3), made their living from a trade. Scribes and priests were found in both parties (see Matt. 3:7; 15:12; 21:15; 23:2-36; Mark 2:16; 3:6; Luke 7:30; 16:14; John 7:32; 8:3-6; 9:40-41).

**The Pharisees** were the more conservative and fundamental, but they held rabbinic tradition to be of equal authority with Scripture (see Matt. 15:2, 6). They were strongly separatistic, continuing the zealous protection of Judaism from Gentile influence that was begun several centuries earlier by the Hasidim in their resistance to the Hellenization campaigns of Antiochus Epiphanes.

The **Sadducees**, on the other hand, cared nothing for rabbinic tradition and had no compunction about making religious, cultural, or political compromises. Their cardinal principle was expediency. Although they claimed to believe Scripture,

their interpretations were so spiritualized that all significant meaning was lost. They were thoroughly liberal and materialistic, not believing in angels, immortality, resurrection of the dead, or anything else supernatural.

Once when Paul was brought before the Sanhedrin he capitalized on the great doctrinal differences between the two groups by identifying himself as a Pharisee and affirming his belief in the resurrection. When he did so, “there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. And there arose a great uproar; and some of the scribes of the Pharisaic party stood up and began to argue heatedly, saying, ‘We find nothing wrong with this man; suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?’” (Acts 23:6-9).

Matthew’s use of a single article (**the**) suggests that **the Pharisees** were the main group, with **Sadducees** intermingled among them; and from Mark 8:11 we learn that the Pharisees took the lead in confronting Jesus. Those “blind guides of the blind” (Matt. 15:14) enlisted the support of men who, if anything, were more spiritually blind than themselves. Instead of coming to Jesus for spiritual sight, they confirmed their love of blindness by making league with other ungodly men against Him. The ritualists and the rationalists joined forces on the basis of mutual contempt for Jesus. That is always the way of those who are willfully, sinfully blind. Their common trust is in themselves and in their own good works, and therefore their common enemy is God and His sovereign grace.

#### THEY CURSE THE LIGHT

A second characteristic of the willfully blind is the other side of the first: they curse the light. The person who is content in his spiritual blindness has no use for spiritual light, because it intrudes into his darkness and exposes his sin. “And this is the judgment,” Jesus said, “that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God” (John 3:19-21). The Pharisees and Sadducees did not come to Jesus in hope of finding truth for themselves but in hope of finding falsehood in Him. Therefore, **testing Him**, they **asked Him to show them a sign from heaven**.

They did not expect Jesus to perform such **a sign**, and if He had given them one, their unbelief would have remained just as strong. They had already seen sign after sign, the miraculous nature of which was irrefutable. They did not deny His supernatural power but refused to recognize it as being from God, having even accused Him of working as an agent of Satan (Matt. 12:24).

Popular Jewish superstition held that demons could perform earthly miracles but that only God could perform heavenly ones. **From heaven** indicates the desire

to see a miraculous **sign** in the sky. The Pharisees and Sadducees demanded a miracle they thought was beyond Jesus, hoping to prove that His power, and therefore His message, were not divine. He would be publicly discredited, and they would be vindicated.

In their blindness they could not see that Jesus Himself was a **sign from heaven**. Nor could they see that they themselves were helping to fulfill that sign. As the godly Simeon held the infant Jesus in his arms he prophesied, “Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed” (Luke 2:34). Because the unbelieving religious leaders refused to recognize God’s supreme Sign, His only Son, they could not accept His lesser signs, despite the evidence they saw with their own eyes. Physical sight is of no help to spiritual blindness, and had those leaders seen a hundred more miracles a hundred times more dramatic, they would simply have been driven to deeper darkness—as their rejection of the miracle of Jesus’ resurrection proved. As Abraham said of the brothers in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31). Like Pharaoh before Moses, the more they saw God’s power demonstrated, the more they hardened their hearts against Him (Ex. 7-11). Heavenly signs would come in the future (Matt. 24:29-30; Luke 21:11, 25; Acts 2:19; Rev. 15:1), but they would signal the very end.

If a person’s heart is set on darkness, when the light comes he curses it. Proudly confessing that very disposition, the French atheist Voltaire declared, “Even if a miracle should be wrought in the open marketplace before a thousand sober witnesses, I would rather mistrust my senses than admit a miracle.” Unbelief will always find a way to reject the truth, even to the point of denying the undeniable.

The liberal theologian does not prefer the speculations of philosophy or psychology because these are more provable or persuasive than the truths of Scripture but because he prefers man’s wisdom to God’s. And, contrary to his claim, the agnostic does not refuse to believe because he *cannot* know about God but because he *will not* know about Him. The person who turns to rationalism, evolution, skepticism, or simply to himself for meaning and purpose does not do so because of lack of evidence about God and Christ but in spite of it. The person who turns to man-made religion does not do so because no light about the true God is available but because he despises that light and that God.

Men turn to acts of penance, to self-affliction, to confessionals, and to every other human resource to try to expiate particular sins; but they refuse to deal with the root in their hearts, their basic sinful nature with which they do not want to part.

Knowing that the true intent of the Pharisees’ and Sadducees’ demand for a heavenly sign was to discredit Him, Jesus **answered and said to them**, “**When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.’**” Those sayings correspond to the age-old mariner’s ditty, “Red sky at night, sailor’s

delight. Red sky in the morning, sailor's warning." From many years of observation men learned that a red sky in the evening is usually followed by good weather, whereas a red sky in the morning is often followed by a storm. The religious leaders who confronted Jesus accepted the reliability of that folk meteorology without question.

**"Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky,"** Jesus asked them, **"but cannot discern the signs of the times?"** Both the Pharisees and Sadducees were proud of their religious heritage and considered themselves experts on the things of God. But despite their religious training and positions, their primitive and limited knowledge of weather was far superior to their knowledge of God. "Your sensitivity to weather," Jesus said in effect, "makes a mockery of your insensitivity to God's kingdom. You have no idea of what God is doing in the world. You are oblivious to **the times** in which you are privileged to live, the very times of redemption by God's own Son, before whom you now stand." It was the beginning of the messianic age that Jews had long hoped for, but those Jewish leaders did not recognize it. They were better weathermen than biblical scholars (cf. Luke 12:54-56). They were "blind guides of the blind" (Matt. 15:14). In Matthew 23, Jesus labeled them blind guides (vv. 16, 24) and blind fools (v. 17).

Modern society also has many people with great insight and discernment about the things of the world but who have no comprehension of the things of God. Experts are able to predict whether the stock market will go up or down, whether gold and silver will become more or less valuable, and whether the dollar will become stronger or weaker. Others can predict the direction of interest rates, fashions, the real estate market, and of import/export ratios. Others can predict trends in education, sociology, morality, and government. But our society is short of those who know what God's plan for the world is and that it is still the "last time," the time of the Messiah. What it means to be a citizen of His kingdom escapes them.

In answer to the disciples' question about "the sign of [His] coming, and of the end of the age," Jesus said, "You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars; . . . nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. . . . And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many. And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold" (Matt. 24:3, 6-7, 11-12).

Those signs that Jesus will return abound in our day. No period of history has experienced more wars or been so preoccupied with the prospect of war as our own. With unprecedented surpluses of food in some parts of the world, other parts still experience devastating famines. Cults and false religions of every sort are proliferating even in countries that have been nominally Christian for hundreds of years. The spirit of lawlessness and self-will is rampant.

Paul declared, "The mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. And then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming" (2 Thess. 2:7-8). The apostle explained to



Timothy that “the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1). Peter wrote of the great apostasy, false teaching, heresies, mockery, and denial of Christ’s return that would characterize the last days (2 Pet. 2:1-3; 3:3-4).

Ezekiel predicted that in the end times God would restore His chosen people to the land He had promised them (Ezek. 34:11-31); and in our present generation that promise has begun to be fulfilled with the reestablishment of the state of Israel. The same prophet wrote of a hostile power from the north that would attack Israel (Ezek. 38); and Russia’s great military might, geography, atheism, and anti-Semitism make that nation a prime prospect for being that hostile power.

Scripture also declares that the end times will be characterized by great concern for world unity, world government, world economics, and world religion (see Dan. 2; 7; Rev. 13; 17-18). The world is looking for stability and security and is ripe for the unifying role of a world leader who can stop wars and bring an end to political, economic, and social chaos—the role that one day will be filled by the antichrist.

All of those signs that mark the end times are characteristic of our day. There can be no doubt that we live near the end of the age, and the concern of believers should be for what the Bible says rather than for what men say and for what God is doing rather than for what men are doing.

#### THEY REGRESS DEEPER INTO SIN

A third characteristic of the spiritually blind who will never see is that they continue to regress deeper and deeper into darkness. They become more and more hardened and blinded, and the very things they suppose make them more pleasing to God drive them further from Him.

Jesus knew the true motive of the Pharisees and Sadducees was to entrap Him, not to be convinced of His messiahship. He also knew that another sign, no matter how astonishing, would not convince them about that which they were determined to reject. It was for this reason He spoke to them in parables, as indicated in Matthew 13:13-15. He would not capitulate to their hypocritical and wicked demand. **“An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign,”** He told them; **“and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.”**

**The sign of Jonah** was the final sign Jesus gave to the world, the sign of His victory over sin, death, and Satan through His resurrection. As He had declared to a group of scribes and Pharisees on an earlier occasion, “Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (Matt. 12:39-41; for further explanation, see the author’s commentary volume *Matthew 8-15*).

That **sign**, too, would be rejected by the Jewish religious leaders. When they heard of Jesus' resurrection, they bribed the soldiers who guarded His tomb to say that His body was stolen by His disciples (Matt. 28:11-15).

#### THEY ARE ABANDONED BY GOD

The fourth characteristic of those who persist in their love of darkness and rejection of the light is that they are finally abandoned by God, given over by Him to their lusts, impurities, degrading passions, and depraved minds (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). That which is willful, sinful, and satanic blindness becomes God's sovereign blindness.

Because the unbelieving Pharisees and Sadducees would not have Him as Lord and Savior, Jesus **left them and went away**. *Kataleipō* (**left**) means to leave behind, and it often carried the idea of forsaking or abandoning (see 2 Pet. 2:15).

That event marked an important transition in Jesus' ministry. Henceforth the Lord spent most of His time with His disciples and little time with the crowds or religious leaders. He turned **away** from those who rejected Him and focused His attention on His own. He gave no more arguments or signs for unbelievers, only additional truth for those who believed.