

Seeing the Invisible

“We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.”
—II Corinthians 4:18

OUR OPENING TEXT reveals to us the important truth that it is by the eye of faith that we can see what would otherwise be unseen things of God. If our faith is weak, we will find ourselves laying hold upon one object or another as visible supports to our belief—that is, things which can be seen by the

natural eye.

Everyone who is called of God must possess a certain degree of faith to respond to that call through a full consecration to do his will. Even the apostles realized that they did not possess sufficient faith when they requested, “Lord, Increase our faith.” (Luke 17:5) Likewise, we discover that our faith needs to grow if we are to be able to look beyond present temporal things, and receive the inspiration which comes from being able to see the invisible and eternal things of God.

ABRAHAM'S FAITH DEVELOPED

To begin with, Abraham's faith was sufficient to enable him to respond to God's call to leave his own country and journey to a land which would be shown to him. In conjunction with this, God promised him a child, or "seed." (Gen. 12:1-7) There was a long wait for this promised child, during which Abraham made two attempts to assist the Lord in fulfilling his promise. The first was in constituting Eliezer of Damascus his heir, and the second was the use of the bondmaid Hagar to be the mother of the seed. Neither of these arrangements, however, was accepted by God. It was his plan that Abraham and Sarah would be the parents of the promised seed.—Gen. 15:1-4; 16:1-4,15; 17:15-21

In God's due time Sarah did bear a son. (Gen. 21:1-3) Abraham's faith must have been strengthened by this. Later, when God asked him to offer up this miracle child as a sacrifice, Abraham's faith was so strong that he could envision the invisible power of God raising Isaac from the dead. Indeed, through faith he received Isaac "in a figure" from the dead.—Heb. 11:17-19

FAITH DURING THE JEWISH AGE

The history of God's typical people, Israel, reveals this development of faith on the part of those who believed the Heavenly Father, and the failure of those who had little or no ability to see the invisible. Two of the spies sent into Canaan reported their belief that, with the help of the God of Israel, they could enter and possess the land. Most of the spies, on the other hand, impressed with the visible strength

of the Canaanites, advised against a conquest of the land.—Num. 13:17-31; 14:6-8

Throughout Israel's wilderness journey, the people lost faith, charging that Moses had brought them out of Egypt to perish. An abundance of manna, quail, water brought miraculously from a rock, and other providences from God which produced visible evidences of his care, restored their faith temporarily. (Exod. 16:2-24; 17:3-6) Yet, it was not a faith sufficiently strong and constant to give them an assured standing in the favor of God.

The God of Israel was invisible to his people. Few, without some visible aid to their faith, could lay hold of his promises. When it came time to build the Tabernacle, Moses experienced no difficulty securing the needed material for it. The people realized there was to be some evidence of God in their midst which they could see, and so they gladly gave of their possessions to be used. In fact, Moses had to instruct them to cease their donations.—Exod. 35:29; 36:3-7

However, the Tabernacle did not satisfy Israel's desire for the visible very long. Throughout the Jewish Age the lure of idol worship, as practiced by surrounding nations, appealed greatly to Israel's lack of faith. They could not see God, but their heathen neighbors worshipped gods they could see—that is, they could see the various idols which represented their gods. At times these idols were even brought into the sacred Temple of the Lord.

JESUS' TEACHINGS

During the Jewish Age, God used physical objects to teach lessons pertaining to the present age of

the invisible—the age of faith. The Jewish people of Jesus' day, not understanding this, continued to lay great stress upon the visible. Whenever opportunity offered, Jesus presented the higher concept of those typical truths, but there were only a few who understood. To the scribes and Pharisees, he said, "Ye . . . have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done."—Matt. 23:23

The exercise of judgment, mercy, and faith, was an invisible form of worship and obedience which the scribes and Pharisees did not comprehend, so they could not appreciate the true spirit of Jesus' teachings. Note the points along this line made by Jesus in his sermon on the mount: "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness." "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth: . . . But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven: . . . For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."—Matt. 5:6; 6:19-21

"IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH"

This change of emphasis from the visible to the invisible is highlighted by Jesus in his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. The Samaritans had their origin long before Jesus' First Advent. They began as a group of people sent into the land of Israel during the time of desolation and captivity of the ten-tribe kingdom by Assyria. They were dispatched there by an Assyrian king as recorded in II Kings 17:24, being Assyrians either by birth or by subjugation. They were idol worshipers at the time, and later one of the captive priests of the ten-tribe kingdom was sent to teach them "how they should

fear the Lord.” (vss. 25-29) However, they “did not hearken, but they did after their former manner, . . . and served their graven images, both their children and their children’s children: as did their fathers, so do they unto this day.”—vss. 40,41

Jesus met the woman of Samaria at Jacob’s well. Her understanding being limited to the visible, she was surprised when Jesus said, “Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.” This was a tremendous thought to her, and with her limited faith she replied, “Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw.”—John 4:14,15

Not understanding the “invisible” nature of Jesus’ statement, she thought he was speaking of some sort of literal water which would render one who drank thereof forever free from thirst. To get a drink of such water, she thought, would save her further trips to Jacob’s well. Only those enlightened by the Holy Spirit can discern that Jesus was here using water as a symbol of the life that consecrated believers would receive from him. Such life, when perpetuated through the resurrection, will continue forever.

Through the centuries, even fewer have seen the further meaning in Jesus’ words concerning the fact that those who, in this age, receive life from him will become channels for life to flow out to others. Indeed, each consecrated recipient of life from Jesus will, if faithful, have the privilege of bestowing this water of life to others. The prophet refers to these faithful ones of the present age as “wells of salvation.”—Isa. 12:3

After the woman of Samaria realized that Jesus was a prophet of God, she engaged him in further conversation, saying, "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." (John 4:20) This was Jesus' opportunity to set forth the great truth concerning the worship of God, not from the standpoint of things visible and tangible, but invisible. He replied, "The hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what."—vss. 21,22

As expressed in II Kings 17:41, the Samaritans "feared the Lord, and served their graven images." It is no wonder that they were confused and did not truly know what they believed. Such is the inevitable result of endeavoring to serve God on the one hand, while compromising with error on the other hand. How different it was with Jesus. "We know what we worship," he continued. (John 4:22) What assurance is thus expressed! Jesus knew what he believed because he accepted and had full confidence in his Father's Word which had been provided through the holy prophets of the Old Testament. However, the Samaritan woman did not, nor could not, understand how Jesus could be so certain of his position.

She could grasp only those things which the natural eye could see, and must have wondered when Jesus said that the time was coming when the people would worship God neither in a mountain nor at Jerusalem. With her limited understanding, she must have speculated as to how a person could worship God, apart from some visible center or monument of worship.

“God is a Spirit,” Jesus said, “and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.” (vss. 23,24) Indeed, God is an invisible, all-wise and powerful, spirit being. (Col. 1:15; I Tim. 1:17; Heb. 11:27) Our faith must grasp this, that we might look to him in worship and praise at anytime, anywhere, and under all circumstances, without the help of visible assistance. Such is the faith that enables us to look at the things which are unseen by the natural eye.

GOSPEL AGE WALK OF FAITH

Beginning on the Day of Pentecost, when the enlightening influence of the Holy Spirit came to the church, God has expected his people to walk entirely by faith. A great change took place at the close of the Jewish Age and the beginning of the Gospel Age. In that former typical age God’s people had the Tabernacle, and then the Temple. They had visible sin offerings and burnt offerings. They had priests with robes of glory and beauty. In addition, they had the promises of the Law Covenant that God would bless them “in basket and in store,” and when they were faithful, he did bless them in this and many other ways.—Deut. 28:1-5

However, our “Tabernacle,” “Temple,” and “High Priest” are all invisible. Instead of offering up a visible animal in sacrifice, we deny self and give God our hearts. From then on, we sacrifice time and strength. We also offer our substance—whether of means or otherwise—to the Lord, but these sacrifices are made through the urgings of the heart. It is not a matter of one animal, or two, or some other number which we must offer, but all that the

desires of our hearts lead us voluntarily to give. The reward for faithfulness is also largely in the realm of the invisible.

God has not promised to bless us in “basket and in store” along temporal lines. He has assured us, however, the spiritual strength to endure the trials which his loving providences permit to come upon us, making a way of escape when they are more than we can bear. (I Cor. 10:13) It is only a faith that is strong enough to see the unseen things of God that, under these circumstances, enables us to think of our trials as light afflictions, which are “but for a moment,” and to be assured that they are working out for us a “far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”—II Cor. 4:17

NO “ARM OF FLESH”

During the present and past ages, mankind has sought to govern himself by the “arm of flesh.” (II Chron. 32:7,8) Human leadership has time and again been established. Those weak in faith have placed their confidence in the teachings and directions of their favorite leaders. Many have attained a measure of temporary security, but what rich blessings they have forfeited by not training their eyes of faith more resolutely upon the promises of God. They have looked too much at the things which are seen, and not sufficiently at the things which are not seen.

The one thing most nearly visible which the Lord has given us to lean upon is his inspired Word. However, it is not the ink and paper that constitutes his Word. It is the thoughts expressed by the words which are important. These thoughts—in the

form of instructions, warnings, corrections, assurances and promises—are invisible. They can be seen and appreciated only by a strong faith that enables us to see these unseen things.

How wonderfully God has prepared his Word for us. The prophets of the Old Testament contributed their part, and Jesus and the apostles theirs. We properly look up to the invisible, glorified Jesus, as our Head, Master, Advocate, Good Shepherd, and prospective Bridegroom. Indeed, we honor him even as we honor the Father. No individual prophet or apostle occupies such a prominent position in our hearts and minds. We do not depend upon any one of them alone for our spiritual guidance and strength. Even Jesus humbly testified, “The words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father . . . , he doeth the works.”—John 14:10

It is the sum total of these invisible thoughts of God that faith’s vision beholds and in which we find our security, and rejoice. When the apostles were visibly present in the Early Church, some of the brethren, in their weakness, chose favorites. Some in the church at Corinth wanted to be “of Paul,” and some “of Cephas [or Peter].” (I Cor. 1:12,13; 3:4-7) Paul exposed the error of this viewpoint, and in other ways discouraged the brethren from leaning upon him instead of the Lord.

By way of contrast, Paul congratulated the Jews of Berea for being “more noble” than those of Thessalonica because they “searched the scriptures daily” to ascertain whether he was presenting the Truth to them. (Acts 17:10,11) When one of the inspired apostles takes this position with respect to the ultimate authority of the Word of God, we

should surely hesitate to insist that the brethren accept our interpretations of the Bible simply because they are ours.

HELPERS

As we have seen, God's inspired Word has been made available through Jesus, the prophets, and apostles. As Paul points out in Ephesians 4:11, he also has provided helpers—"evangelists; . . . pastors and teachers." These are not inspired servants, but since they are provided by God, they are certainly needed by all his consecrated children. These uninspired servants have been furnished for the church throughout the age. A special "faithful and wise servant" was raised up in this end of the age, and we rejoice in the way the Lord used him to bring forth "meat in due season" from the great storehouse of truth, God's inspired Word. (Matt. 24:45; Luke 12:42) How this spiritual feast has strengthened and built us up in our "most holy faith."—Jude 20

To suppose that we do not need the help which the Lord has provided is to assume that we are self-sufficient—smart enough to study the Bible independently and obtain from it the glorious truths which it contains. In taking this position, we might reason that we do not wish to accept a man's interpretation. By so doing, we do not realize, perhaps, that we are looking to our own thoughts as being the only ones we can trust. We may make an idol of ourselves, which gets in the way of faith's vision of the unseen, and prevents us from worshiping God "in spirit and in truth."

On the other hand, all the Lord's people should continue to discern the difference between the

inspired Word of God and the uninspired teachings of other servants of the church. The “servant” Jesus spoke of in Matthew 24:45 was commissioned to give “meat” already provided in God’s storehouse—the Bible. How marvelously this has been done. The great fundamental teachings of God’s plan have been brought forth with unsurpassed clarity. This was accomplished by providing a “thus saith the Lord” for every precious doctrine of the Truth.

Our responsibility is to acquaint ourselves with the Scriptural proof of the various items of the Truth, so that by the eye of faith we will be able to “see” and know what we believe and why. The “why” should not be because a prominent brother or class elder said so, but because God has declared it in his inspired Word. Failing in this, we may well be in the position of leaning upon an “arm of flesh” which we have created by our own weak faith. In such a case, we are failing to see clearly the invisible riches of truth which we need as an encouragement to continued faithfulness.

THIS “MOUNTAIN”

We will be able to worship God “in spirit and in truth” only through faith’s vision of things unseen. To have such a vision, however, requires a stronger faith than that possessed by the Samaritan woman at the well. She was concerned over a mountain or a city in which God could be worshipped. She needed something visible. The history of the church during the age is cluttered with “mountains” and “cities.” Many visible edifices and man-made systems have been created in the professed cause of Christ, based on the mistaken

idea that such is the method by which God is to be worshipped.

Let us remember that the true worshiper and servant of God is not made holy by the place where he worships and serves. Rather, the place is made holy by the fact that it is used by those who therein worship God "in spirit and in truth." This is equally true of the humblest home in which there are a few uncomfortable chairs, or of a larger and more comfortable meeting place. The same principle would apply if we think of a "place" from the standpoint of a service opportunity, by which we can cooperate for the furtherance of the Truth.

INVISIBLE RESULTS

As we have seen, during the Jewish Age the rewards for faithfulness were visible and tangible. It is not so during this age of faith. We may strain every nerve to please God, and yet severe trials may come upon us. We may zealously labor to promulgate the truth, and see no results for our efforts. Do we wonder why the Lord permits us to have such disappointing experiences? If we do, it is because our faith is not sufficiently strong to see the eternal, invisible things of God.

By seeing the invisible things of God, we will know that our suffering is preparing us to share in the glory of the kingdom, and that our apparently unrewarded service is laying up for us "treasure in heaven." (Matt. 19:21) Therefore, no matter what the circumstances of our Christian lives may be, let us continue to look at the eternal and unseen things of God which are visible only by the eye of faith. Only thus will we be worshipping God "in spirit and in truth." ■