

Seeing the Invisible

“Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

—*Hebrews 11:1*

PAUL WRITES, “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 Cor. 4:18) It is through the eye of faith that we are able to see what would otherwise be the unseen things of God. If our faith is weak, we will find ourselves laying hold upon one object or another, as props to our belief; material things, which can be seen by the natural eye.

Everyone who is called of God has to possess a certain degree of faith in order to respond to that call through a full consecration to do his will. But, just as the apostles realized that they did not possess sufficient faith when they requested, “Lord, Increase our faith” (Luke 17:5), so we discover that our faith needs to grow if, through its power, we are to be able to look beyond the temporal things to which we cling, and receive the inspiration which comes from being able to see the invisible and eternal things of God. We think of Abraham as the

‘father of the faithful,’ yet, to begin with, his faith was sufficient only to enable him to respond to God’s call to leave his own country and go to the promised land. (Rom. 4:16) God had promised him a child. There was a long wait for this promised child. Meanwhile, Abraham made two attempts to assist the LORD in fulfilling his promise.

The first was in constituting Eliezer of Damascus his heir. By doing this, Abraham had a real person to look upon as his heir, not merely an invisible promise. But God did not accept this substitute arrangement. We read, “The word of the LORD came unto him, saying, This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir.”—Gen. 15:4

Having thus been informed that the child whom God had promised must be his own son, not an adopted heir, Abraham made another attempt to help the LORD. With the consent of his wife Sarah, he used their bondmaid Hagar, an Egyptian, to mother the seed. Thus Ishmael was Abraham’s own son, and in him he again supposed he had material evidence of the genuineness of God’s promise—something visible to support his lack of perfect faith.

Although Abraham pleaded with God to allow Ishmael to stand before him as the promised seed, he was told that this would not be acceptable. Not only must he be the father of the seed, but Sarah must be the mother. (Gen. 17:17-19) In God’s own due time, Sarah did bear a son. How Abraham’s faith must have been strengthened by this! Later, when God asked him to offer up this miracle child as a sacrifice, his faith was so strong that he could see the invisible power of God raising Isaac from

the dead; and through faith he did receive Isaac “in a figure” from the dead.—Heb. 11:19

The entire history of God’s typical people reveals this development of faith on the part of those who were faithful, and the failure of those who seemed to have 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. The majority of the spies, on the other hand, impressed with the visible strength of the Canaanites, as represented in their walled cities and their giantlike soldiers, advised against an attempted conquest of the land.

Time and again throughout Israel’s wilderness journey the people lost faith, charging that Moses had brought them out of Egypt to perish. An abundance of quail, water brought miraculously from a rock, and other providences of God’s which produced visible evidences of his care, restored their faith. But withal, it was not a faith sufficiently strong and constant to give them an assured standing in the favor of God.

Jehovah, the true and living God of Israel, was invisible to his people. Few of the nation, without some visible aid to their faith, could lay hold of his promises. When it came time to build the Tabernacle in the wilderness, Moses experienced no difficulty securing the needed material for it; for, when the people realized that there was to be some evidence of God in their midst which they could see, they gladly gave of whatever they possessed that could be used. In fact, Moses had to instruct them to cease their donations.—Exod. 36:6

The Tabernacle did not long satisfy their desire for the visible. 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. At times, idols were brought into the sacred Temple of the LORD.

JESUS' TEACHINGS

Throughout the Jewish Age, God had used the material as types 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 pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone."—Matt. 23:23

The exercise of 'judgment, mercy, and faith' was an invisible form of worship and obedience that the scribes and the Pharisees had not comprehended, so they could not appreciate the true spirit of Jesus' teachings. Note the telling points along this line made by Jesus in his sermon on the mount: "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled." "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God." (Matt. 5:6,8) "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break

through nor steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”—Matt. 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 climax of this conversation is in Jesus’ statement that the time would come when those who worship the LORD would “worship him in spirit and in truth.”—John 4:23,24

The historical background of the Samaritan woman throws light on this episode. The Samaritans were more than simply residents of the city of Samaria. They had their origin in a group of people sent into the land of Israel during the time of its desolation caused by the captivity of the ten-tribe kingdom in 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 worshippers at the time, and as the historian states, “worshipped a strange medley of divinities.” Later, one of the captive priests of the ten-tribe kingdom was sent to teach them “how they should fear the LORD.” (II Kings 17:25-29) Henceforth, in the language of II Kings 17:41, they “feared the LORD, and served their graven images, both their children, and their children’s children: as did their fathers, so do they unto this day.”

These were the people who so bitterly opposed the rebuilding of the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Then, under the direction of a man of priestly lineage, who was expelled from Jerusalem by Nehemiah, a temple

was built for the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim. Later, this temple was destroyed, but the Samaritans continued to consider Gerizim their holy mountain, and believed that there they could approach nearer to God than the Jews in Jerusalem.

Jesus met the woman of Samaria at Jacob's well. Her understanding being limited to the visible, her first surprise was 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

She still did not understand the invisible nature of Jesus' statement, for she thought he was speaking of some magic sort of literal water which would render him 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—life which, when perpetuated through the resurrection, will continue forever.

Even fewer through the centuries since 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 this life to flow out to others. Each consecrated recipient of life from Jesus will, if faithful, have the privilege of passing on that life to others. It is these "wells of salvation" that are evidently referred to in Isaiah 12:3.

After the woman of Samaria realized that Jesus was a prophet of God, perhaps even the Messiah, she engaged him in further conversation. She said, "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 that great truth concerning the worship of God, not from the standpoint of things visible and tangible, but invisible. He replied, "Woman, believe me, 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 know what they really did believe. Such is the inevitable result of endeavoring to serve the LORD on the one hand while compromising with error on the other.

But how different it was with Jesus! "We know what we worship," he continued. (John 4:22) What assurance is thus expressed! How did Jesus know? He knew because he accepted, and had full confidence in, his Father's Word that 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 sure of his position.

She could grasp and understand only those things that the natural eye could see. How she must have wondered when Jesus said that the time was coming when the people would worship God neither at Mount Gerizim nor at Jerusalem. With her limited understanding she would wonder how a person

could worship God at all apart from some such visible and material center, or monument, of worship.

“God is a Spirit,” Jesus said, “and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.” (John 4:24) Yes, ‘God is a Spirit’—an invisible being. (Col. 1:15; I Tim. 1:17; Heb. 11:27) Our faith must grasp this, and be able to look up to him in worship and praise at any time, anywhere, under any and all circumstances, without the help of visible assists. 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 with Pentecost, when the enlightening influence of the Holy Spirit came to the church, the LORD has expected his people to walk entirely by faith. Note the great change that took place at the close of the Jewish Age and the beginning of the Gospel Age. In that former, typical age the LORD’s people had, first the Tabernacle, then the Temple. They had their visible sin offerings and burnt offerings. They had their priests with robes of glory and beauty. They also had the promises of the Law Covenant (Rom. 9:4) that God would bless them in “basket” and in “store;” and when they were faithful he did thus bless them.—Deut. 28:5

But our tabernacle and temple are invisible. Our High Priest is 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 offer our substance—whether of money 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 animals, that we must

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

The LORD has not promised to bless us in ‘basket’ and ‘store.’ He has promised only to give us spiritual strength to endure the trials that his loving providence permits to come upon us; providing a way of escape only when the trials are more than we can bear. (I Cor. 10:13, *Wilson’s Emphatic Diaglott*) 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 fiery 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 “ARMS” OF “FLESH”

We sometimes sing, “The arm of flesh will fail you, ye dare not trust your own.” (*Hymns of Dawn*, #272) This expression was first used by good King Hezekiah, when the king of Assyria was threatening to attack and destroy Jerusalem. He assured the people of Judah by saying, “With him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the LORD our God to help us, and to fight our battles.”—II Chron. 32:8

We are told that “the people rested themselves upon the words of Hezekiah king of Judah.” Hezekiah, and those who shared his faith, could see the invisible power of God operating on their behalf, although for the moment there was nothing that the natural eye could discern; nor has the LORD given us anything visible upon which to lean.

However, down through the age, many have endeavored to provide their own ‘arm of flesh.’ Human

leadership has again and again been established. Those weak in faith have found it very helpful to place their confidence in the teachings and directions of their favorite leaders. Many have thus 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 that are seen, and not sufficiently at the things that are not seen.

The one thing most nearly visible that the LORD has given us to lean upon is his inspired Word. It is not the ink and paper that constitutes his Word. It is the thoughts expressed by the words outlined by the ink on the paper that are important; and these thoughts, instructions, warnings, corrections, assurances, and promises are invisible. They can be seen and appreciated only by that strong faith that enables us to see the unseen things.

How wonderfully the LORD 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 and Master—our Advocate, our Good Shepherd, and our prospective Bridegroom. Indeed, we honor him even as we honor the Father. But not one of the prophets or apostles occupies any such prominent position in our hearts and minds. We do not depend upon any one of them alone for our spiritual guidance and strength.

Together they have expressed the thoughts of God, and it is the sum total of these invisible thoughts that faith's vision beholds, and in which we find our security, and rejoice. When the apostles were personally 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 Peter. (I Cor. 3:4) Paul exposed the evil of this viewpoint, and in other ways discouraged the brethren from leaning upon him instead of the Lord.

Paul congratulated the brethren of Berea for being “more noble” than the Thessalonian brethren, because they searched the Scriptures in an effort to discover whether or not 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, then we too should not hesitate to insist on the apostle’s position of going to the Scriptures for a ‘thus saith the Lord.’

HELPERS

As we have seen, God’s inspired Word has been made available through Jesus, the prophets, and apostles. But, as Paul points out in Ephesians 4:11, he also has provided helpers—pastors, teachers, and evangelists. These are not inspired servants; but, since they are provided by God, they are certainly needed by the brethren—by all of us, that is.

These uninspired servants have been provided for the church throughout the age. Certainly a “faithful and wise” pastor was raised up in this end of the age; and how we rejoice in the manner in which the LORD used him to bring forth “meat in due season” from the great storehouse of Truth, the inspired Word! (Matt. 24:45; Luke 12:42) How this rich, spiritual food has strengthened and built us up in the “most holy faith.”—Jude 20

To suppose that we do not need the help which the LORD has provided would be to assume that we

are self-sufficient—brilliant enough to study the Bible independently and obtain therefrom the glorious truths that it contains. In taking this position, we might reason that we do not wish to accept a man's interpretation, not realizing, perhaps, that we are setting ourselves up as being the only one we can trust. Thus we make an idol of ourselves, which, when we would worship God in Spirit and in Truth, gets in the way of faith's vision of the invisible.

The LORD's people should continue to discern the difference between the inspired Word of God, and the uninspired teachings of the lesser servants of the church. That "servant" (Matt. 24:45), was commissioned to bring forth and serve 'meat' already provided in the storehouse—the Bible. And how marvelously he did this! He brought forth the great fundamental doctrines of the Divine plan with an unsurpassed clarity. He could do this because there was a 'thus saith the LORD' for every precious doctrine of the Truth.

Our responsibility is to acquaint ourselves with the scriptural proof of all the various items of Truth, and thus by the eye of faith to be able to see, and thus know, what we believe and why. The 'why' should not be because some favorite class elder, or pilgrim, said so, but because the LORD 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. If such be the case, then we are failing to see clearly those invisible riches of the Truth that we daily need as an encouragement to continued faithfulness.

We recognize the intrinsic worth of Paul's compliment to the brethren at Berea because they insisted

upon examining his teachings in the light of the inspired Word, so we should recognize that the same principle applies with respect to all the servants of the church. The noble Bereans of old did not risk their standing in the Truth by the course they took with respect to the teachings of Paul; nor will we, when we apply the test of the inspired Word to every teaching which may be presented to us, no matter by whom it may be presented.

THIS ‘MOUNTAIN’

We will be able to worship God in Spirit and in Truth, only through faith’s vision of the things unseen. But to have such a vision 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 to see. Have we actually progressed beyond that point? The history of the church throughout the age is cluttered with ‘mountains’. Some indeed, weak in faith, have made mountains out of God’s arrangements for promulgating the Gospel of the kingdom and serving the brethren.

Let us discern the difference between utilizing a medium, and looking upon it as a center of worship. The true worshipper, 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 worship God in Spirit and in Truth. If we think literally of a ‘place,’ this would be true of the humblest home in which there are a few uncomfortable chairs, and it would also be true in a more commodious meeting place. The same principle would apply if we think of a ‘place’

from the standpoint of a service medium through 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. Not so during this age of faith. We may strain every nerve to please the LORD, and yet severe trials may come upon us. We may zealously labor to promulgate the Truth, and see no results of 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.

In his Word, God has revealed that it is only through “much tribulation” that we can enter the kingdom. (Acts 14:22) Do we really believe this? If so, we will not wonder why the LORD permits us to suffer. He has also made it plain in his Word that only a comparatively few will give heed to the Truth in this age—just one here, and one there. Do we believe this? If so, why should we be discouraged if there are no apparent results from our labors in the vineyard?

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 ‘treasures in heaven.’ So, no matter what the circumstances of our Christian lives may be, let us continue to look at the eternal and unseen things of God that are visible only by the eye of faith. Thus, and thus only, will we be worshipping God in Spirit and in Truth. ■