

Looking At the Invisible
II Corinthians 4: 17-18

INTRODUCTION

The man of faith sees more than others. His faith-sight can take in "unseen" realities. Paul bears witness to this dimension in life in our text. "While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen."

This "look" involves more than just seeing. It means to fix the attention upon, to seriously consider, to aim at. In a practical way Paul is affirming that he has set his goals for life in light of these unseen realities. His life goals are a reflection of his faith. Later, he will explain that "we walk by faith, not by sight." What we see by faith molds our lifestyle.

It is helpful to keep in mind that the Apostle begins this passage with the words. "For this cause we faint not." One of the primary things that kept him from heart-failure in the face of grave difficulties was what he could see by faith. Since he was looking at the invisible, he had reason to take heart.

The reason offered by the Apostle for giving priority to the invisible is that it is eternal. "For the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal." Everything we can see is temporary, but that which you call see only by faith is permanent. Which is dominating your life this morning? Which is determining your life priorities and goals?

To understand this text, we need to identify some of these unseen realities. There are at least four of them suggested to us by the larger text. Consider them with me in order that you and I might fix our attention upon them.

I. WE SHOULD BE LOOKING AT OUR CHARACTER

Character is an "unseen" thing. While it may express itself in deeds, it is not readily available for observation to the natural eye. Yet, it is the one thing about you that is permanent. You will not be able to take any of your possessions to heaven with you even though they are "seen" daily. They are all temporary. None of them are permanent. This means that what you are is more important than what you have when you are a man of faith.

This explains part of this text. "For our light afflictions, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." The afflictions we undergo in time are temporary. When you consider what they may accomplish in your life, they are considered "light" to the man of faith. While they may be painful for the moment, they are profitable in terms of character transformation. The man of faith sees something that no else can see. He sees these trials as working for his good. He sees them purifying his life and making him more of what God wants Him to be.

Just how much will you look at character in the coming year? Do your goals reflect a conviction that character is a very important thing about your life? Will you be giving attention to the things that perfect in you the likeness of Christ? This is a searching thought. Far too many of us have set our goals strictly on the basis of what is seen. They in no way reflect a concern about becoming Christ-like. Faith would move us to give priority to character development in our personal lives.

II. WE SHOULD BE LOOKING TO CHRIST

The great "unseen" reality is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. For the man of faith the relationship with Jesus Christ is the most important relationship in life.

Comparatively all other relationships are temporary. As an example, my relationship to you as a pastor is temporary. You have learned this past year how painfully temporary it can be. My relationship with my family is temporary.

While I do believe that my family will enjoy heaven together, it will not be in the family context. In truth, the relationships we enjoy now are only for a time. My relationships with my associates are temporary. The one relationship in my life that is eternal is that with Jesus Christ. And yet, He is "unseen".

To put Christ in the "unseen" category is not to indicate that He is unreal. Peter alludes to this, "Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory." (I Peter 1:8). The living Christ is real to the believer, but it is through his faith that He is

made real. He is so real that He is the supreme devotion of life, and the cause of great rejoicing in the life of the Christian.

How much priority is this relationship to receive in the coming year? This relationship should be the great determinate in all ethical and moral decisions. To look to Him better should be a major goal for the year. Will the accomplishment of your present goals involve knowing Jesus Christ in a more intimate way in your personal life? It is so easy to let the temporary relationships of life crowd out this one that is permanent. We can let these temporary relationships take us away from a regular pattern of worship. We can let these temporary relationships keep us from having a regular devotional life. We can let these temporary relationships cause us to do things that hinder the permanent relationship with Christ. We need to make sure that we are looking at the "invisible."

III. WE SHOULD BE LOOKING TO THE CITY

Heaven is an "unseen" city for us. Yet faith enables us to "see" some of the realities of this city. But when we compare heaven with Lubbock, where we now live, it is comparing the temporary with the permanent. Our citizenship in Lubbock is temporary, as well as the city itself. Our citizenship in heaven is permanent, as well as the city itself.

The Apostle draws our attention to the contrast between the two in the very next paragraph. We will explore it in more detail later, but for the present just listen to the thrust of it. "For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our house which is from heaven; for so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked." Paul likens our present body to a tent, a tabernacle. A tent is designed to be a temporary place of dwelling. There is nothing permanent about it. At its very best it will last only a few years. In contrast our existence in heaven will be like a building. It will be a house not made with hands. It will be permanent in every way.

Do your goals for 1981 reflect the fact that you are a citizen of heaven, and that it is the permanent citizenship of your life? One of our problems is that heaven remains rather unreal to some of us. We know about Lubbock, but we are not too sure about heaven. We can see Lubbock, but we are not that sure about heaven. But heaven is just as real as Lubbock to the man of faith. Paul affirms, "For we walk by faith, not by sight." We live by what we know to be true by faith, not just what we can naturally observe. This makes heaven so real that we become anxious to be there rather than in Lubbock at least this was true for Paul. It also makes it so real that the difficulties of the present are made light and bearable. Looking to the invisible really makes a difference.

Let me be practical with you for a moment. One way you can tell whether or not a man is looking to the invisible city is to observe where he is placing his treasures. If he is storing all of his treasures in earthly containers, it is obvious that his attention is still focused on earth. But if you see him transferring his treasures into the heavenly vaults through giving and ministering, you can know that he is looking to the invisible. Do your 1981 giving goals reflect such a life view?

IV. WE SHOULD BE LOOKING TO THE COMMENDATION.

All of these invisible things that we are considering are closely related. You cannot really separate them in the way that we have for the sake of our consideration. The commendation that is "unseen" is to take place in the "unseen" heaven by the "unseen" Christ, in part on the basis of the "unseen" character.

Human approval and commendation is obviously "seen". It is something that can warm the heart, and bring encouragement to you in life's pursuits. However, human disapproval and condemnation can be very painful realities. They can be so real that if you are not careful they can completely dominate your life. You can find yourself living for human approval, and seeking diligently to avoid at all costs human disapproval.

But like Christ Himself, His commendation is something strictly unseen. It is only by faith that we are sure there will be a day in which we shall stand before the judgment seat of Christ. The only basis we have such a conviction is the word

of Christ. Our faith makes this Coming even more real to us. Faith made it so real in the life of Paul that his unseen encounter with Christ became a cause of great motivation in his life. "Wherefore we labor, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that everyone may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad." "Accepted" is better translated "well-pleasing".

Paul's object is not to get in to heaven but rather to have the approval of Christ when he gets in. He had a goal to hear Jesus say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

Do we dare probe our hearts with this? Just how much attention are we giving to this future encounter with the risen and glorified Lord? Just how important is it to us that we be pleasing to Him on that day? Do your 1981 goals reflect such a priority? Based on your goals for the New Year, can you be relatively sure that you will receive His commendation if you accomplish those goals? We must be ever mindful that human approval is at best temporary. The coming "fire" will burn up all of the evidences of human approval that you may have acquired. The only commendation that is permanent is that of Christ Himself.

Conclusion:

Meditation on this text has made me painfully aware that most of the time I am looking to the "seen". This is a sure sign of my little faith. I am committed this morning to re-evaluate my goals for the coming year, and my commitments in light of this unseen reality. Will you join me in such a commitment? It is something that will require some time and some changes in my life style, but I am ready. Will you join me in this?