

THE NEED FOR A VISION

In speaking of the Acts of the Lord's Apostles, the Spirit records how that Philip was engaged in "preaching *the things concerning the Kingdom of God*, and the name of Jesus Christ" - and that those who heard and believed his sayings "were baptised, both men and women" (Acts 8:12). This illustrates the vital importance of "the things concerning the Kingdom of God" - they are principles that formed half of what the Apostles taught as the Gospel! And in the case of Philip's preaching, they were "things" to be accepted and believed as a prerequisite to Baptism - by implication therefore, they are "things" to be the object of faith, in order that Forgiveness and Salvation might be received. But those "things" are not simply doctrines to be believed; they are fundamental principles for daily life. Our Lord Jesus taught that the primary things to be sought after in this life, are those "things" pertaining to the Righteousness of God, and His Coming Kingdom: "*Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness ...*" (Mat 6:33). The Kingdom of God then, must feature predominantly in our daily prayers, thoughts and meditations. No matter what evils the day brings - and they may be many - they are but the transient affairs of this life of mortal travail and sorrow. But "the things" of the Kingdom are eternal, and whilst being hidden from the natural eye, they present themselves to those that believe in bold relief - a glorious picture of coming reality. So it is, that with the Apostle Paul, "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*" (2Cor 4:18).

Maintaining such a vision of the things promised by the Father is a characteristic of all the faithful. In our New Testament reading for today, we consider those outstanding characters enumerated in Hebrews 11:

"These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but *having seen them* afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (verse 13).

These brethren had not yet "received the promises", yet had "seen them", which means they visualized the fulfillment of them in their minds. And having been "persuaded" of them, they "embraced them", which means that they held on to them in love. But more than this, in actually seeing these promises in faith - in seeking their fulfillment "first" above all other things, these saints were taught that they belonged, not to this age of iniquity, but were citizens of a Kingdom yet to come - they confessed themselves to be but "strangers and pilgrims on the earth".

It was their faith in that future age of glory that taught them the need to "come out" from a world of sin, and journey towards "a better country":

"truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he hath prepared for them a city" (Heb 11:15-16).

Like Abraham of old, they "looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (verse 10), that is, New Jerusalem - the City of the Great King.

So it is, that although the promised inheritance is yet future, we must learn to live the standards and principles of that age now in the age of our sojourning, for we belong not to this benighted kingdom of sin, but to the brightness of the age to come, when all nations shall walk according to the standards and dictates of Almighty God: “the night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light. Let us walk honestly as in the day ...” (Rom 13:12,13, cp. 1Thes 5:5). In forsaking a world of sin, iniquity and death, a world which is soon to pass away with all its’ lust (1Jno 2:11), we commence a journey through life to a new Kingdom, whose values and ordinances, we must walk in accordance with now, “as in the day”.

THE EXAMPLE OF ABRAHAM

Hebrews chapter 11 sets forth Abraham as an example of faithfulness, providing three occasions in his life to illustrate the point. In each of these three, we have an example of spiritual sight, looking with the eye of faith to those things that are hidden to the natural man.

“By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went: (Heb. 11:8).

The account where this is recorded is Genesis chapters 11 and 12. The occasion is well known to us: Abraham is told to forsake his unbelieving family, and commence a journey to an unknown place, where he would be blessed sevenfold. So Abraham (then called Abram) went in faith, following the directions given to him, and “dwelt in the land of Canaan” after he had separated from his nephew, Lot. In the land, Yahweh appeared to Abraham:

“And Yahweh said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated from him, ***Lift up now thine eyes, and look*** from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward, for all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever ...” (Gen. 13:14-15)

Abraham was told to *lift up* his eyes, *and look* over the land - and he spent the rest of his life wandering through that land, looking at it, and waiting patiently for it to be given to him. The only portion of land that he ever owned was the cave of Machpelah, purchased by him to bury his dead. Even then, Abraham recognized the incongruity of a Gentile providing the land as a gift, for he trusted that Yahweh, not the Gentiles would give it to him. So, he bought it with his own money, and continued his wait in faith. Like Moses after him, Abraham saw from his vantage point up a mountain, the Promised Land. Unlike Moses however, he continued to walk through it for the rest of his life, with a seeing faith, anticipating that it would be given to him in due course.

There is another point in the Genesis record, which Hebrews 11 brings out. After Abraham and Lot parted company, we are told: “Abram dwelled in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelled in the cities of the plain, and pitched his tent towards Sodom” (Gen. 13:12). Later on, we find that whilst he initially pitched his tent “towards” the iniquitous city, he further moved ***to live in*** that city. And no longer

living in a tent as a stranger and sojourner, he had made it his home: he lived in a house (see Genesis 19). Abraham however, in the land of Canaan, lived away from the cities, and dwelt in a tent. Hence Hebrews 11 points out in its second reference to Abraham:

“by faith, he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: **for he looked** for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11:9-10).

Here is an aspect of Abraham’s faith, which perhaps we do not readily remember: that he dwelt in tents (tabernacles), in the spirit of a stranger in the wilderness, whereas Lot set up his home in the city, in a house. Though the Scriptures calls him “Just Lot” and a “righteous man” (2 Pet 2:7), with his “righteous soul” being vexed daily at the sinfulness of those around him; his choice to live in Sodom was not wise. We can see this when we compare the example of Abraham – a sojourner living away from the distractions of city life, a wandering nomad, awaiting for Yahweh’s promise to be fulfilled.

In our own circumstance, away from the hot climate of the Middle East, it would not be practical to live in tents: we need ‘permanent’ housing to last us as many years as we live, or till the Lord come. But we can try to life out the spirit of Abraham: King David had the need for a house, and he lived in the city of Jerusalem. But he did so as one living in a foreign country: “hear my prayer, O Yahweh, and give ear at my cry; hold not thy peace at my tears: **for I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were**” (Psa. 38:12). We must also live in that spirit. Like Abraham, in the places where we sojourn, we find no permanent abiding place, but look forward with the vision of true faith towards our future residence in “a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11:10).

The third reference to Abraham in Hebrews 11, is to the occasion when he was commanded to take Isaac, his only accounted son, and to offer him up as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah. Here, the record takes us back to Genesis chapter 22, where God said:

“take now thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of” (Gen. 22:2).

Notice that again, Abraham went out without knowing where he was to go: to “one of the mountains” that Yahweh would reveal to him. So it was that he went in faith – but notice the words of verse 4:

“then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, **and he saw the place afar off**” (Gen. 22:4).

This phrase is picked out by the Spirit, and used again in Hebrews 11:

“these all died in faith, not having received the promises, but **having seen them afar off**, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Heb. 11:13).

Abraham “*saw the place afar off*”. What he saw was the place of sacrifice, where he was to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. But the record in Hebrews continues:

“... accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure” (Heb. 11:19).

What Abraham saw “afar off”, then, was also the place of resurrection. He believed that Isaac, once slain, would rise again from the dead; and although his hand was stayed by the Angel, he nevertheless received him again as one brought from the dead – in a figure. So it is, that in meeting week by week to reflect upon the death and resurrection of Yahweh’s only begotten Son, we also as it were, visit the place of sacrifice and resurrection. Beholding the significance of the emblems of bread and wine with spiritual sight, we partake of them in faith, knowing that Yahweh’s son was sacrificed, and raised up from the dead literally. In Him is the source of life, and to him, we also look, that we also might be delivered from the hand of death.

STRENGTH IN TRIBULATION

Those who like the faithful of old, are persuaded of and embrace the promises of the Lord who has “delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son” in prospect through faith (Col 1:13, Eph 1:11, cp. v 14,2:7), will inevitably find that they will face trials, and difficulties because of their separation. As it is written:

“whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye illegitimate, and not sons” (Heb 12:8).

And so the Lord will bring trials upon us to purge us as gold is purified in the fire, (1Pet 1:7, Job 23:10) that we might learn how to do the will of God. As the Psalmist testified, “before I was afflicted I went astray, but now have I kept thy word” (Psalm 119:67,71) and as the apostles taught, “we must through much tribulation enter into the Kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22 cp. Rev 7:14). The form and intensity of those trials do vary greatly; but they will come, for they are necessary for our spiritual growth and development into beings suitable for the bestowal of Immortality and Glory.

We must “think it not strange” then (1Pet 4:12), concerning the trials that will come upon us, but we must rather learn to endure, being encouraged and strengthened by our sight of things yet future, to remain steadfast to the end “for we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7). We must rather “rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy” (1Pet 4:13). And if we have a vision of that coming revelation of glory firmly fixed in our minds, like the faithful ones in Hebrews 11, we shall have the strength and determination to overcome. As we have seen, like Paul, we shall be able to compare our present difficulties with the blessings of the future, and say:

“though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while 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**” (2Cor 4:16-18).

And for an example of One whose thoughts were always directed towards the world to come, we look to the Lord Jesus Christ, who, “though he were a Son”, we are informed “yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered” (Heb 5:8). The Lord Jesus certainly bore a weight; the weight of the cross upon which he was crucified. But his is the supreme example of endurance, for he looked beyond his present suffering to the greater eternal weight of glory laid up for him at his Father’s Right Hand. He, “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down on the right hand of God” (Heb 12:2). It was this joyous vision of the future that was ever set before his mind that ensured his separation from the world, and enabled him to remain faithful even unto death. We then, must be “looking unto Jesus” as an example. Like him, we must have a vision of the future in order for us to maintain our separation, and endure trials faithfully.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A VISION

In Proverbs 29:18, the importance of such a vision is expressed:

“where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he”.

Here, those who have no vision, are contrasted with those who keep the Law of God - the clear implication being, as we have seen, that it is by maintaining a clear focus on the Kingdom that we might be able to remain obedient (i.e. keeping the Law) in times of adversity. But here, the Hebrew word rendered “perish”, literally, is “*to be loosed*”, and can have the sense of the removal of a garment. Hence, an alternative rendering is, “where there is no vision, the people *is made naked*” as in the AV margin. Being the brethren of Christ, we must seek to be clothed with righteousness, as with a garment. And rather than to allow ourselves to be drawn into the world around us, allowing our fine white linen garments to be “spotted by the flesh” (Jude 23) the exhortation is given “Blessed is he that watcheth and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame” (Rev 16:15). We must therefore remain fully clothed with the purity of righteousness; we must use that vision Scripture presents us with to remain faithful, and separate, to “keep” our garments, that we might not walk naked and shamed before the Son and his Angels at his appearing. Let us therefore, rather than being mindful of the world from which we have come out (Heb 11:15), be as the faithful of all ages, “forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before” (Phil 3:13). The value of maintaining such a vision of those promises that are “before” us is self-evident - for without it, we cannot remain a holy people prepared for the coming of our Lord. We have Christ Himself to look to as the supreme example, and so let us share his joy that we also might learn to endure, that we might reign with him.

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