

Roland Burrows, 27 June 2021

Looking at the unseen things

2 Corinthians 4:18 “We do not look at the things which are seen, but the things which are not seen.”

This verse has a very spiritual theme, so we might be surprised that the apostle Paul is writing it to the Corinthians! The city of Corinth was renowned for being worldly-minded, corrupt, promiscuous, godless and superstitious, so much so that on the theatre stage, a character from Corinth was usually portrayed as a drunkard. The Christians in Corinth had come out of this background: “such were some of you”. Once saved, however, their vision had been enlarged, their perspectives widened, and their expectations changed.

Paul’s secret of endurance

Elsewhere in the New Testament Paul speaks about all the troubles and difficulties he has experienced. He has been “troubled on every side” but not destroyed, and he has not lost his vision or enthusiasm. This was not because he was the kind of stony-hearted man who can carry on regardless - in fact he was a very sensitive man. Rather, it is because he was looking at the things which are invisible.

Christians experience all the troubles of this world but are not overcome. Matthew Arnold, the famous head of Rugby School, once saw an elderly preacher toiling in the August sun in the unpleasant surroundings of Bethnal Green. The overworked preacher was able to keep going because he was “cheered by thoughts of Christ, the Living Bread”.

If we are going to live our lives usefully and spiritually, we need to have our eye firmly on eternal things.

What is meant by things which are seen, and things which are not seen?

The things which are seen are the everyday things, the stuff of our day-to-day living.

1. The natural world - the sky, stars, animals, plants etc.
2. Things of the senses - our impressions, judgements, troubles, joys, fears and hopes.

These ‘things which are seen’ are important and we do have to think about them! The great Christian scientists such as Faraday didn’t lose sight of the things that are seen, but they also had an eye on the things that are not seen. Christ has enlarged our vision to show us these things.

The things which are not seen are spiritual realities. They include:

1. God - no man has seen Him, but Christ has revealed Him.
2. God’s amazing love, shown in the death of Christ

3. Angelic beings, fulfilling God's purposes and bringing blessings we are unaware of.
4. God's providence. He is upholding all things by His powerful word.
5. Love
6. Faith

Historical figures who "looked beyond"

At the time of Columbus, King Charles V of Spain had a motto meaning "something beyond" Christopher Columbus was inspired by the thought that there was "something beyond" in the Atlantic, and his vision included taking the Gospel to unknown lands. He dedicated the first new land he discovered to San Salvador, Christ the Saviour.

Similarly, Francis Bacon, one of the founders of modern science, had the motto "more beyond".

When Parliament was first created in the Middle Ages, it met in St James' Church, because people believed that it must have an eye on things that are not seen as well as the everyday matters of government. After Parliament was bombed in the second world war, Churchill insisted on keeping the original layout, in the style of a church, because he wanted to retain that spiritual element.

Why we should look at the things which are not seen

None of the things which are seen are permanent - even our local churches. Everything dies. "Here we have no continuing city" (Hebrews 13:14). We are looking for another country (Hebrews 11:16). Christ commanded us not to lay up treasures on earth, but in Heaven, and to work for the bread that endures to eternal life.

In this world we will not find our hell or our heaven. Poverty, sickness, and distress will end with death. We may have a foretaste of heaven, but we will never really be content in this world. We will only be truly satisfied when we find eternal things - and in particular, when we find peace and reconciliation with God.

We need the Spirit of God to see these unseen things. The world sees Christ as having "no beauty that we should desire Him" (Isaiah 53:2) but with the eye of faith we see the Saviour who carried our sorrows. Once we see His amazing love, it satisfies our soul.

We must ask God to help us to see these unseen and eternal things of true value and worth.