

THE LIVING PULPIT,

OR

EIGHTEEN SERMONS

BY EMINENT LIVING DIVINES

OF

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.

WITH

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE EDITOR,

BY GEO. W. BETHUNE, D. D.

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## SEEING THINGS INVISIBLE.

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We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen.—2 COR. iv. 18.

AND this furnishes a key to the changed conduct and life of Paul after his conversion. His sundering of personal, social, and domestic ties; his voluntary renunciation of so many things that were gain to him—wealth, distinction, and honour—for the sake of Christ. However appalling to others the prospect before him—disgrace, poverty, extreme bodily peril, and probable martyrdom—yet none of these things moved him. There were other things, and greater far than these, by which he was influenced, and which had a substantial presence, though invisible to the eye of sense. Those grand and awful realities of the unseen world that were hidden from others were visible to him. Hence the apostle acted as if the Judge of quick and dead, to whom he was to give account, was ever present to counsel, direct, and overawe him. But what is here asserted by the

author of our text concerning himself, is verified in the life of all who are governed by his principles. While the things that present the predominant motives of their conduct are not seen, they act as if they were habitually before them, as really as are the objects of sense, which so much affect the conduct of others. This is the truth on which it is proposed to enlarge in this discourse, and use for our practical advantage.

The thought here is complex, and may be expressed in the two following propositions :

I. That the things which furnish the most cogent motives to a religious life are invisible, but

II. That the consistent believer lives habitually as if he saw them.

The former of these propositions, it is well known, has been urged by the sceptical as a serious objection to our religion, viz : that its motives are, to such an extent, derived from things unseen, and not from objects best suited to affect us in our present condition ; that its rewards and punishments are, in the main, prospective, and look to a future state, and not the present. The same has been said of its doctrines generally, that they are abstruse and incomprehensible. What a dense and impenetrable mist of darkness hangs over the grave ! Death, we are taught, is but the beginning of an endless life ; that it is not the end of consciousness, but a physical change merely—a separation of the mortal from the immortal part of man for a season only, when they are to be reunited in a state of eternal retribution. But how little of this is warranted by what we see ? Even the Saviour, who is represented as the only

hope of the guilty, is also concealed; and God *no man hath seen nor can see*. He dwelleth *in light which no man can approach unto*, and why is this? Why should that sort of truth, on whose practical influence depends the eternal welfare of the soul, be so hidden from our senses? Why not indulge us occasionally with the sight of a resurrection—a favour which it is so easy for God to grant? Why not permit the reappearing of a departed acquaintance or relative, to tell us about the invisible world? Why could not Paul, or Augustine, Luther, Baxter, Watts, or some other distinguished saint, come back to the earth for a time, as Moses and Elias did for the special instruction of Peter and John? What a confirmation of our faith if we might be permitted to see them!

The objection implied in these and similar queries would be reasonable, if the evidence of sense were the only sort that is satisfactory and conclusive; or were the main obstacles to a practical belief of the truth to be found in the mind, and capable of being dislodged by argument, and not in the heart beyond the reach of any appeals merely to the reason; or had not the impotency of ocular demonstration been exposed by repeated cases of restoration to life, and in none more signal than the example of Lazarus. But the influence of vision was tried, and its inefficiency shown, under both the Old Testament and the New. The Saviour tested its power in the case to which I have just referred, and had he opened the door of the unseen world a hundred times, and evoked Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and scores of departed Hebrews from the unseen world, it could have

proved no more concerning a future state of existence than was witnessed in thus recalling the spirit of one of the family at Bethany. The Jews, who saw this resurrection, were just as sceptical afterwards as they had been before. Nor would your heart, reader, nor mine, be more impressed by the sight of apparitions from the other world than theirs were. It is equally true concerning us, that if we hear not Moses, the prophets and apostles, neither will we be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.

It is a mistake, therefore, to assert that the motives of religion are so inoperative, because they are drawn from things *not seen* or remote. On the other hand, it could easily be shown that our knowledge, even of sensible objects, is rather presumptive than real, and that our senses are continually leading us into error. Indeed, the terms of what we call *science* are rather symbols of what we do not know, than exponents of what we do know. There is much that is mysterious and inexplicable in matter, motion, electricity, life, &c., as well as in original sin, the Trinity, or regeneration. The technical definitions of philosophy would seem to be invented to conceal her ignorance; and we are just as unacquainted with the real nature or essence of things that we see, taste and feel, as we are with *the invisible things of God*. It is well known that Dr. Berkeley, bishop of Cloyne, disproved the existence of matter in opposition to the testimony of the senses, and not by quibble and sophistical reasoning, but, as Reid says, by taking up the principles laid down by Descartes, Malebranche, and Locke, and carrying them out to their legitimate conclusions.

It is the boast of those who reject the supernatural and unseen in religion, that we have a competent guide and instructor in reason; but the history of the inquiries which philosophers have instituted into the powers and laws of the mind, is suited to impress us far more deeply with the imperfection of our faculties than their greatness.

It is now the nineteenth century of progress in human philosophy since the advent; ample time, we should say, for arriving at definite conclusions on the most familiar subjects, as, for example, the problem of our own nature, the number, the office, and the laws of our several faculties. We should naturally suppose it to be easier to gain a knowledge of these than of the elements and laws of the material world. And yet there is no question, among the metaphysicians of the day, more absolutely unsettled than this. Some of them tell us that "God is the only cause in the universe, and that we are but the subjects or organs of effects which he immediately produces. Others, that we are real and responsible agents. Some teach that creatures are a part of God; others, that God is but the aggregate of his creatures; and others again, that we are wholly material, mind, soul, and body, and that we perish at death; most, however, that we have a spiritual and immaterial, as well as corporeal nature. Some maintain that none of our perceptions and thoughts are any thing more than sensations; others that we have ideas of immaterial things, as well as of those that are discerned by the senses. Some that we indeed have conceptions of God, but are without any proofs of their truth; others that we are capable of a real

knowledge of him. Many contend that we put forth our choice under the impulse of blind power, and others that we exert our volitions for reasons of which we are conscious."

Here then, are no less than twelve proposed solutions of this problem of our nature, which appears to be just as open to debate now as it ever was. We might turn, then, upon the boaster of the sufficiency of reason and inquire, Why is this? Why is knowledge derived through the senses or by study so uncertain and unsatisfying? Why are things tangible and visible so deceptive, that we need only love and follow them with all our heart to be involved in certain ruin? Though they inspire us with the highest hopes, they fulfil none of their promises. They never make us happier in this world, nor fit us to be happy in the world to come. What other explanation can be given of this perplexing fact than that which is furnished by the volume of Revelation? Here we learn that *the whole creation groans* and sympathizes in the lapsed and unhappy condition of man. That the "things seen" are in their very nature uncertain, unsatisfying and fallacious, and that those which are real and worthy of our love and confidence are invisible. And while they who look only at the former will be disappointed and lost, those will be infallibly happy as well as safe who look at the latter, and who rely on that higher good which lies beyond and without the scope of mortal vision. To those who have not made the trial, this may seem impracticable, but it is just the reverse with those who have made it, and who, like the apostle Paul, judge from experiment

Of these there has always been a "little flock" in the world, from Abel and Enoch downwards, and the day is fast approaching when their number will be greatly increased.

Having offered these few hints concerning the former, and the power of those motives which are drawn from things invisible, I proceed to notice the other truth inculcated by the apostle, that

II. The consistent believer lives habitually as if he saw them. He "looks not at the things that are seen, but at those which are not seen." That wonderful faculty, by which a man is enabled to realize the paradox of seeing the things that are invisible, is called faith. And because both classes to which I refer, they who look at the visible as well as those who look at the things not seen, lay claim to this faith, the Scriptures discriminate. In the nomenclature of theology the faith of the one is called speculative, and the other an evangelical faith; a difference founded not on the comparative amount of their intellect, advantages of education, standing in society, or extent even of their religious knowledge, but solely on the different state of their hearts.

The things unseen, though commended to the mind with the cogency of moral demonstration, are repelled by the one, because they are distasteful. The mind assents to the truth of them as things that are proved, but they are not obeyed because they are rejected by the heart, just as a patient often admits the excellency of a medical prescription, which he will not follow because it is nauseous. This is the faith of one class of believers. In the case of the other, these invisible things receive at once the

approbation of the mind and the heart. By the influence of the Spirit their heart has been so prepared, that its affections and tastes are brought into conformity with those invisible realities of the spiritual world, which are now made to influence their conduct. Hence their view of the unseen things, by faith, is not only more accurate, but it is more operative than are any discoveries of reason, or even of sense.

IT IS MORE ACCURATE. Indeed, as it is the province of reason to correct the errors of sense, it is the prerogative of faith to correct the mistakes of reason. If we look upwards and survey the heavens, the planet Venus appears to the eye as diminutive as the blaze of a candle. This is an error of sense, which reason corrects by having discovered that it is nearly the size of our earth, and the cause of its seeming so little is its distance. So the rejecter of Christianity is equally deceived by his reason in his estimate of Jesus Christ, and the cause is the same—his immense moral distance. "This mistaken man accounts the Saviour and his glory a smaller matter than his own gain, honour or pleasure; for these are near to him, and he counts them bigger, yea, and far more valuable than they really are." But they who, like our apostle, can look at things that are not seen by others, and by help of the telescope of faith can see the remote glories of Christ in their proper dimensions, regard the coveted pleasures and honours of the world as dross; they are but a taper, when compared with the light of the sun.

It is well known, moreover, that constant sight produces familiarity, so that the effect of objects

seen grows less. It is not so with faith; this becomes stronger by continuance, and the more frequently we dwell upon any object by faith the more we feel its power; a familiar fact, which suggests another answer to the objection against Revelation, already noticed, founded on the want of sensible evidence. We see that faith is better adapted to bring the sublime truths of the gospel home to the soul, and make them to be felt at once, and more permanently, than if they were apprehended by reason only, or sense.

Reason, says Pascal, acts so tardily, and on the ground of so many different views and principles, which she requires to have always before her, that she is continually becoming drowsy and inert, or going actively astray for want of seeing the whole case at once. It were well, then, after our reason has ascertained what is truth, to endeavour to feel it, and to associate our faith with the affections of the heart. For *with the heart man believeth unto righteousness*. "The heart has its *reasons*, of which reason knows nothing. We find this in a thousand instances. It is the heart which feels God, and not the reasoning powers; and this is faith made perfect; God realized by feeling in the heart."

BUT THIS VIEW OF INVISIBLE THINGS BY FAITH IS MORE OPERATIVE.—The unseen heaven is constantly before such a believer as his home, and the place of his everlasting rest. The unseen hell is before him, not as a figment of the Christian school, nor a frightful invention of pagan mythology, but a reality, to be escaped for his life, as Lot fled from the fire and brimstone that were bursting on Sodom. The law

of God is before him ; it was invisible once, like the angel with his sword in the path of Balaam, or, like Saul of Tarsus, he was alive without it ; but the scales have fallen from his eyes also, and he sees it plainly now. His faith renders the truths of Revelation all palpable and real. As the apostle so emphatically defines this grace, *it is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*

Such, then, is the characteristic difference between the two classes of believers to which I have referred. How they are divided, or what the ratio of real to nominal or speculative believers, who but the Searcher of hearts can tell? But if only they belong to the former who evince their faith in the unseen realities of religion by their lives, the number is very small compared with the multitudes who are known as religious professors. Where is the man who lives as if he felt the eye of the invisible and rein-trying God to be continually upon him? Who is he that obeys the precepts of the law as if the omniscient Author were always present, to bestow its gracious rewards or enforce its penalties? And if you look abroad, from the Church to the world, how are we impressed with the abounding practical atheism?

*Who is the Almighty, say the multitude by their conduct, that we should serve him, and what profit should we have if we pray unto him?* To them he is only a Deity in theory, an article of a creed, a metaphysical abstraction, a God afar off, and not at hand. But how soon must this epicurean dreaming be over, and the curtain fall which separates the seen from the invisible? It may seem remote to

many of you at the same time that it is fearfully near. A slip of your foot, a mistake of your apothecary, a cold, a fever, an attack of epidemic disease, or some arrow from the ten thousand which fill the Almighty's quiver, may lay some of us low even before another week, and reveal the retributions of eternity. Happy, healthful, and sanguine as you now are, so short a time as this, may bring you to the bar of this unseen but disregarded and dishonoured God. Nor are these things any more distant and unreal, because so many live as if they were at an infinite remove; because they are little more heeded than if they were the mere epic fictions of a Virgil or Dante, and not the inspirations of God. It was amazing effrontery in Jehoiakim to treat the message of Jeremiah with so much contempt, in spite of the expostulations of Elnathan, Delaiah, and Gemariah. But his despising of the prophecy did not rescue this infatuated prince from being made a captive, put to death, and having his body cast into a common sewer, like the unburied carcass of an ass. His coolly taking the prophet's roll, cutting it with a penknife, and casting it into the fire, did not prevent its fulfilment. And however the gay and the worldly may disregard the inspired roll of warnings, expostulations, and promises which are addressed to them, the time is coming when they will all be verified. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but His word shall not pass away. The distinction between a life of Christian virtue, and a life of sin, which so many will not see now, they will be compelled to see and acknowledge when they begin to feel its results. And, in view of such humiliating

facts in human experience and conduct, who, that reflects and feels their import, can doubt man's need of supernatural aid? He is not an alien and a wanderer from God, because his true condition has not been revealed to him. He does not reject the Saviour because he does not hear him preached, and even listen with assent to the recital of his advent, life, and death, as the substitute and friend of the guilty; but with all this persuasion of the mind and conscience, like some spectators at the resurrection of Lazarus, the truth does not reach his heart. The real beauty and excellency of the Saviour are invisible, nor are any teachings of the pulpit and pen sufficient to make them known. There is an obstacle to knowledge here, which man has neither the desire nor the power to remove.

Imagine a garden of exquisite beauty, and adorned with every plant, fruit and flower that money and taste can collect, with fountains and rivulets to enhance its varied attractions. Suppose that you meet a stranger here, who, with an eye to all appearance healthful, passes along without bestowing the least attention upon a single object. In your bursts of ecstatic delight, as you look at this or that beautiful parterre, so blooming and fragrant, he is silent, returning only a vacant gaze. Surely, you would say, this stranger is blind; he cannot see as I see, or what I see; and, upon inquiry, you find your conjecture to be correct; this man has eyes that see not. What you perceive and enjoy is invisible to him, and something more is needed than you can impart by your taste and botanical knowledge to make him share in your enjoyment. The case sup-

posed is easily interpreted: *the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.* Some time ago, a young man of gay and dissipated habits, on returning from a meeting of kindred spirits, at a late hour of the night, discovered on his table a printed sheet, left there he knew not by whom; he was a despiser of tracts, and scarcely less of those who distributed them; but, wearied and exhausted, and yet, unsatisfied as he was with the pleasures of the evening, he was in a mood for any thing that would occupy his thoughts. This little sheet proved to be a messenger of God; his mind had been well instructed in the truths of religion before, but they had never reached his heart; the night was spent in a state of deep and overwhelming conviction, but morning came at length, and with it the beams of the sun of righteousness; he left his chamber, he knew not what, so changed were his feelings and views of every thing; he looked upwards, and "the heavens declared the glory of God." He never saw it there before; he looked abroad, and every object, and every stream, plant, flower, tree, bird and beast, reflected the same. The Bible was new and full of God, especially as manifested in Christ.

When God revealed his gracious name,  
And changed his mournful state,  
The rapture seemed a pleasing dream,  
The grace appeared so great.

The whole creation was teeming with beauties, thrown over them by the hand of God, and, though hidden before, they were visible now. And can you

tell me, reader, why? The heavens were not changed, nor the earth, nor the objects that cover it; these were all the same, but the change was in himself. And does any one inquire in what respect? How were his eyes opened? He was a trophy of the Spirit; the man was born again; old things had passed away, and all things had become new. Are there not some among the readers of his story who need the same change? Do you know that this life giving Spirit is promised to all who seek his influences? And what is so ineffably important as that you should know or practically feel the teaching of the Saviour to the Jewish ruler, *except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.*