

# Keeping Our Focus

by Debbie Meroff

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*To live a life of faith and effectiveness, we must keep our eyes on Jesus and maintain spiritual sight by following the prescription in 2 Peter 1:5-7 and practicing spiritual discipline.*

**Duration:** 43:11

**Scripture:** Numbers 22:28, Nehemiah 8:1-3, Psalm 34:5, Matthew 6:33, 2 Corinthians 4:18, Hebrews 11:27

**Topics:** "Focus"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the concept of not being able to see spiritually and lacking the eyes of faith. He emphasizes the need to open the eyes of our hearts and see beyond the obvious circumstances. The sermon references the story of Ezra the scribe bringing out the book of the law of Moses and reading it aloud to the assembly. The preacher also mentions the importance of looking to Jesus and filling our hearts with the vision of Him before facing our daily lives.

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## Transcript

Can we read the scripture? Sure. Nehemiah, chapter 8. You know the background to this. Nebuchadnezzar's men had come and knocked down the walls of Jerusalem, taken them off into captivity.

And after many years, some 70 years, they'd now started to come back under the direction of Ezra and Nehemiah. And they'd started to rebuild Jerusalem. And so it begins here, now they've built it, and they're called to read the law, to bring out the law.

Because it was because they'd broken the law that they were taken into captivity. So, chapter 8 begins. When the seventh month came, and the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people assembled as one man in the square before the water gate.

They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel. So on the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women, and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon, as he faced the square before the water gate, in the presence of the men, women, and others who could understand.

And all the people listened attentively to the book of the law. Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform, built for the occasion. Beside him, on his right, stood Matityah, Shema, Aniah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and

Meselach.

And on his left were Padaiah, Mishal, Malkijah, Hashem, Ashpenadad, Zechariah, and Meshlam. Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him, because he was standing above them.

And as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God. And all the people lifted their hands and responded, Amen, Amen.

Then they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Hallelujah. Thank you Lord for this challenge right there from the book of Nehemiah.

Thank you that we worship you, oh living God. The same living God we read about right through the whole of your word. It's just overwhelming to think that you would fellowship personally with us at this time of worship.

You are actually recording your omnipotence. We just bow down before you. We humble ourselves before you as it says in Peter.

And receive your grace for another day, for another challenge. In a world so full of pain and yet a world where you are obviously working in amazing ways. Which despite even great books like Operation World can never be recorded.

Only in glory. We worship you, oh God, together now in spirit and truth. In Jesus name, Amen.

Well, I especially felt very burdened to have our sister Debbie Meroff share with us from the word of God. She seemed a little reluctant but she took up the opportunity. So thank you Debbie, I'm sure you've been preparing and praying.

So please come up here because we have to record it. It's out on sermonindex.net and other websites. I don't know why I agreed to do this.

Let's just pray for Debbie. Lord, we thank you for Debbie. What a model she's been.

We're so privileged to have someone on our team who's touched so many lives. Hundreds and hundreds of thousands through her writings. We know you've given her a spoken ministry as well.

Just give her grace now to exercise that. In Jesus name, Amen. Well, I would far better to be sitting where you guys are sitting and listening to one of you because there are far greater preachers and teachers in this room than me.

But it's hard to say no to George. I wonder if we could sing one more song because it kind of goes with the theme. Open the eyes of my heart.

You know that one, open the eyes of my heart. I want to see you. See you high and lifted up, shining in the light of your glory.

Pour out your power and love as we sing. Holy, holy, holy. Let's just try to sing that prayerfully.

Open the eyes of my heart, Lord. Open the eyes of my heart. I want to see you.

I want to see you. Open the eyes of my heart, Lord. Open the eyes of my heart.

I want to see you. I want to see you. See you high and lifted up, shining in the light of your glory.

Pour out your power and love as we sing. Holy, holy, holy. Holy, holy, holy, holy.

I want to see you. A few years ago, it was my birthday, and I was on the bridge of the Love Us To. And we were sailing just north of Scotland.

We were going by John O'Groats. And it was pretty rough water up there. And Tom Dyer's captain then.

And so he asked me if I wanted... I can't remember if I asked him. I probably asked him, since I know him pretty well. I asked him if I could steer the ship just for a birthday present.

Just so I could feel what it was like. So, of course, all the guys are up there. So it was pretty safe.

And Tom was there. It's just an amazing thing just to put your hands on the wheel and to feel the ship under you. But I learned when I was doing that how difficult it is to steer.

Because every moment you are there, you've got to keep your eyes on the compass reading. And you've got to make sure you're heading exactly on the degree that you're supposed to be. And when you're bouncing around on the waves, you're constantly adjusting the wheel so that you can keep on that compass heading.

And it takes a lot of concentration and effort. But just one degree off a compass reading, and you would miss your destination by a mile. And that multiplies each time you're out more at sea.

For every 60 miles, it's another degree. So say if you were a thousand miles out at sea, and you were just one degree off your compass reading, then you would miss your destination by 17 or 18 miles. So my theme for this little talk is keeping our focus.

And making sure that we're on course. And Hebrews 12.2 tells us exactly how to keep on our course. How to steer our course.

And the only way that we can do it as Christians. You can turn there if you want, but I'm sure all of you know it very well. And particularly Hebrews 12.2. And of course it says, let us fix our eyes on Jesus.

And this is our compass reading. Fixing our eyes on Him. And in verse 3 it says, consider Him who endured, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

So this is how we keep our focus. Keeping our eyes fixed on Him. And the moment we take our eyes off Him, we can certainly count on going off course.

We can count on losing heart. And it's so easy to do that. So easy, just for a second.

We get so distracted by our problems and by issues of life. And we're more than just one degree off course. We're way off course.

And it can happen so quickly. Acts 17.27 assures us that He is not far from any of us. And we know that.

We know that. We've told that all the time. We know that the Lord is with us.

But living in that reality is so different. To know it and to live it. What if Jesus were in the same room with us physically? Would you be aware of it? Would you know Him? Just stop and think.

What if He was in this room physically? Would you know Him right away, do you think? Well, His own mother didn't know Him when she saw Him physically. Remember after the crucifixion? And in John 20.10, it says, Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. And as she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white seated where Jesus had been.

They asked her, Woman, why are you crying? It always amuses me that she just, you know, it didn't seem to faze her that she saw a couple of angels, you know, and just was able to answer them, you know. They've taken my Lord away, she said. And I don't know where they put Him.

She's so distressed. She doesn't even care if they're angels. She says, My Lord is missing and I don't know where He is.

At this she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but did not realize it was Jesus, her own Son, her Lord and Savior. Is it Mary Magdalene? Oh, sorry. Well, anyway, somebody who knew Jesus very well and would have, you would have thought, been able to recognize Him.

Sorry. And then He speaks. He speaks, this familiar voice, and says, Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for? You'd think, well, even if she didn't recognize Him, she would recognize His voice, but she didn't.

Thinking He was the gardener, she said, Sir, if you've carried Him away, tell me where you've put Him and I will get Him. And then Jesus speaks her name. Then, when He says Mary, she knows.

But only then. I mean, why did she not recognize Him? By sight or by hearing? Because she was tear-blinded. And because she didn't expect to see Him.

What about the disciples? Who had also spent years with Him, laughing with Him, talking with Him, sleeping with Him, working ministry. Knew Him so well inside. They thought.

And there they were after the crucifixion. Two men walking down the road. And another joins them.

They didn't know it was Jesus on that road to Emmaus. They spoke with Him for hours. Didn't recognize Him until much later when they sat down to eat together.

And then Peter also. Peter the fisherman went out fishing because he didn't know what else to do after his Lord and Savior was crucified. And the others went with him and fished all night to no avail.

And didn't catch a thing. And then they saw someone standing on the shore watching. Did they know Him? No.

They didn't recognize this figure. And he even called out to Him. Called out, Friends, haven't you any fish? Still they didn't know that voice.

And when they said no, he advised, throw your net on the other side of the boat and you will find some. And only after the miracle happened did John, just John, know and said this is Jesus. They didn't see Him probably because they didn't expect to see Him.

And so often in our own lives we know mentally that He's not far from us. But in our circumstances, in our situation, so often I think we don't see Him because we don't expect to see Him in this situation. And we're so distracted by our tears, by our situation that we don't see Him.

We don't hear His voice. He is not far from any of us and that's a fact. And we talk about non-believers not seeing the spiritual dimension of things.

This morning, Matilda and I were comparing notes and she was explaining that she's able, very interesting, to be very spiritually sensitive to situations when she comes into a room and she senses all these things. And I was saying, I'm not like that. I'm afraid I'm not very spiritually sensitive that way.

And it's easy to say, oh well, non-Christians, they never see the spiritual dimension of things. But you know, the truth is as believers we are also very spiritually blind I think sometimes. And I know that the Lord gets frustrated with us.

He's probably standing a few inches away and saying, why? Why don't they see me? Why don't they understand? Why aren't they listening? In fact, in Isaiah He's speaking to His own people in Isaiah 42. This is not to unbelievers. He says, oh how deaf and blind you are toward me.

Why won't you listen? Why do you refuse to see? Who in all the world is as blind as my own people, my servants? Who is as deaf as my messengers? You see and understand what is right, but refuse to act on it. You hear, but you don't really listen. And I think that He says that over and over again to each of us.

Who is as blind as my servants? Who is as deaf as my servants? Why won't they listen? We look but don't see because we don't have the eyes of faith. And that's why I wanted to sing that song, Open the Eyes of My Heart. And I feel like that really needs to be the prayer of my heart so often.

Open the eyes of my heart. I can see, I think, but I don't see spiritually. I don't see with eyes of faith.

We see the obvious situation, the circumstances, but we don't look beyond it. Some of us, by nature, are nearsighted and we're good at seeing things right in front of our nose and doing things that are right there. But we don't see too well beyond the distance.

We don't see the long-term goal or the long-term vision. What's on the horizon? We're really good nearsighted, but we're not very good farsighted. Other people are very farsighted.

They see the horizons. They see the goal. They see that distant thing, but they're not very good with what's right in front of their nose and dealing with those things.

I've heard a proverb saying all is dark at the foot of the lighthouse because the lighthouse is good at beaming the light way out there, but at the foot of the lighthouse it's totally dark. I think some people have the gift of reaching far out, but their own personal situation, maybe the people closest to them are in the dark and are suffering and are needing attention. But it's still also bad to be just so nearsighted that all you see is right in front of you and you can't see the goals beyond.

So that's why we need our vision corrected. And it's so easy to go through life without realizing that you don't have such great vision. And spiritually, that can happen to us as well.

I'm sure all of us who wear some kind of corrective lenses before we got the corrective lenses never realized really how badly we were seeing things. And so we got those corrective lenses and it made such

a difference to us. Most of us know people who have had cataracts or have cataracts.

And here in this country and in the West, it's no big deal. As we know, everybody just goes and gets laser surgery and in a few seconds you can correct. It's an amazing thing.

We just take it for granted here. But it's the leading cause of blindness in many countries. Because they just can't get that laser beam the way we can.

And it's just a thin little opaque film over the eye. And in the same way, I think we can get spiritual cataracts so easily. And we need to pray constantly for the laser beam of the Holy Spirit to break that up.

To help us to see as we ought to see. To see the way God sees things. And not just humanly.

Once I went to the London Zoo and in one place they have all the fish. And in one particular section was deep water. The deepest part of the ocean.

They have what kinds of living things there were and fish and life in that part. It's so interesting. And one particular small fish I noticed.

And they said these fish are born with eyes like all fish. But because they're in the darkest and deepest part of the ocean they never have to use their eyes. And they never see.

There's nothing to see. And so gradually a film covers over their eyes. And even though they still have the eyes they're blind.

I think, wow, what a lesson for me. Use it or lose it. If we don't use eyes of faith we may very well be unable to see the invisible.

And that's what we need to do. Max Lucado wrote this. Faith is trusting what the eye can't see.

Eyes see the prowling lion. Faith sees Daniel's angel. Eyes see storms.

Faith sees Noah's rainbow. Eyes see giants. Faith sees Canaan.

Your eyes see your faults. Your faith sees your savior. Your eyes see your guilt.

Your faith sees his blood. Your eyes see your grave. Your faith sees a city whose builder and maker is God.

Your eyes look in the mirror and see a sinner, a failure, a promise breaker. But by faith you look in the mirror and see a robed prodigal bearing the ring of grace on your finger and the kiss of your father on your face. I love that.

So how do we be sure that we don't lose our vision, our spiritual sight? How can we sharpen our spiritual vision and develop those eyes of faith? Well, 2 Peter gives us a prescription. If you want to look at that for a moment. 2 Peter 1 verse 3. It says, His divine power has given us everything we need.

Amen. And down below it says, so that you may participate in the divine nature. So, for this very reason, verse 5, make every effort, here's the prescription, to add to your faith, does anybody have that? What? What do we need to add to our faith? Goodness.

And what do we add to goodness? Knowledge. And to knowledge? And to self-control? Perseverance. And to perseverance? And to godliness? And to brotherly kindness? Love.

Love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.

So this is the prescription. If we don't want that film, that cataract to form, we need to go for these qualities in increasing measure through the Holy Spirit's power. But of course that takes a lot of work, that takes a lot of practice and diligence, and it doesn't always come easily.

It's something that's constant. You know, I used to teach writing classes on the ship, in some of the ports. And when I did that, I would challenge my students to each day take a notebook, and each day choose one of their senses, taste, sight, feeling, smelling, and write down from the moment they woke up to the moment they went to sleep all of the things that, for instance, that they smell, the aroma of coffee, the aroma of cigarettes, whatever, going through the day.

Because, you know, as we grow older, we lose that sensitivity so easily. You know, we no longer see or touch or smell the things that we used to, as a child, sense so keenly. We become so used to them.

We no longer do that. And we need to refine our senses. We need to tune our senses so that we can be better at recording them as a writer or a person.

And it's the same. You've all had the experience of getting a picture, buying a picture, or putting one on the wall. And for a while there, you really admire it, you really enjoy it.

But, you know, after a few months, after a few years, you hardly even look at the thing. You hardly notice it. And it's like that.

It's so easy to become so used to things that we no longer really look and we no longer have the eyes of faith. Psalm 34.5 says, Those who look to Him are radiant. Their faces are never covered with shame.

I love the little poem that says, Every morning, lean your arms a while on the windowsill of heaven and gaze upon your Lord. Then, with the vision in your heart, turn strong to meet your day. So we need to gaze upon our Lord.

We need to fill our eyes, our hearts, with the vision of Jesus and gaze upon Him, good and long, before we turn to meet our day. Because if we keep our eyes on Him, we'll keep on the right course. Spurgeon preached a wonderful sermon on this whole message of looking to Jesus.

And he used the points, look to Jesus Christ in His life on earth. Really consider that. Look to Him on His cross and think long and hard about what He endured.

Look to Him in His resurrection. Look to Him in His intercession right now. And lastly, look to Him for His second coming.

But look, looking unto Jesus and let your whole vision be consumed by the sight of Him. I remember so well Howard preaching once on Behold the Lamb. And that just blew me away, that message.

Behold the Lamb. And the more we look to Him, the more we will be able to see the invisible. We will see with the kind of eyes that God wants us to look with.

In Hebrews 11.27 it says, By faith Moses persevered because... What does it say? Anybody remember? How did Moses persevere? Because he saw Him who is invisible. That was Moses' guiding light. He was able to see the invisible.

And as someone has said, only when you see the invisible can you do the impossible. And that's what we are called upon to do as believers, to see the invisible so we can do the impossible by God's grace. 2 Corinthians 6.16-18 says, So we fix our eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen.

For what is seen is temporary but what is unseen is eternal. We have so many examples of God opening the eyes of people in the Bible and numbers. You remember the story of Balaam and the donkey and the donkey who spoke.

And Balaam was trying to ride in a certain direction and the donkey planted his feet and he wouldn't go. And poor thing was being beaten by Balaam. Keep going! And he wouldn't go.

And finally it says, in Numbers 22.31, Then the Lord opened Balaam's eyes and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he changed his mind about his donkey at that point. His donkey was a lot smarter than he was.

His donkey saw that angel with the sword drawn. But Balaam didn't until the Lord opened his eyes. And then he bowed low and fell face down.

Then another incident that I really love is in 2 Kings 6 when the king of Aram who is really upset because Elisha keeps telling his plans to the king of Israel because he is a prophet. Elisha is a prophet. He knows what is going to happen.

The Lord tells him. And so the king of Aram says, Okay, let's get rid of Elisha. He keeps foiling our plans.

So he sends a great big army. Horses and chariots to destroy Elisha. And it says, When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city.

This was from the king. Oh my Lord, what shall we do? the servant asked. And the prophet answered, Don't be afraid.

Those who are with us are more than those who are with them. And Elisha prayed, Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see. And then the Lord opened the servant's eyes and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around.

So not only does the Lord open people's eyes, but sometimes he uses us to pray for others to open their eyes. And that's an important part of our ministry as well. You know, it's easy to say, Well, that happened in the good old days and Bible days, you know, but, you know, those kind of things don't really happen now.

Back in 1990, when Mozambique was still suffering a civil war, tens of thousands had been killed and the land was totally torn up, burnt out vehicles on the road. But OM sent its first team into that country because the people were in desperate shape. I mean, there were no medical facilities.

People were walking around with malaria, with all kinds of diseases. Children's running sores were treated with battery acid. There was no way to help them.

And so this team was a medical team and also an evangelistic team. And they went in to do what they could. And one day they made camp up near some houses in a field.

And there was still people. I mean, everybody walked around with grenades and guns and everything else. And rebel soldiers were everywhere.

And sure enough, as soon as they had set up camp, there was fighting that broke out very near them between two rebel forces. And they were almost caught in the middle. And they lay there on the ground with their heads in the earth, praying and knowing that a bullet could hit them at any moment.

The next day, a woman who lived nearby came to see the team. And she said, Do you know, I saw three heavily armed rebel soldiers walking up the path toward your camp. When they got to the gate, they suddenly stopped.

And on their faces was a look of total shock and terror. And they turned and they ran as quickly as they could in the opposite direction. What did they see? I guess we'll never know.

Maybe they saw, as Elisha's servant, servants and chariots of fire all around. We don't know. But it still happens.

And it still is real today. You know, I've always wished when the old Logos went down, when we were shipwrecked, on that night and that morning, that I'd have the kind of spiritual eyesight that I could put on, and see. Because I am very sure that around that ship were angels.

And just from hearing the accounts of things, of individuals on that ship that night, I know there were miraculous powers at work. Because there was no explanation. Just one thing.

One of our lifeboats, which is normally worked by hydraulics, was stuck in the chocks. And nobody could budge it. Now, a lifeboat weighs about the amount of a lorry truck.

And nobody could just physically move that thing out. But four guys went over there, and they picked it up, and they moved it. And as I say, many things were going on on that ship.

And I always just wish that I could have seen. But I think if we could put on our eyes of faith, even here in this room, who knows what we would see. And not always angels of light either.

There's the other kind at work. So maybe it's a blessing we can't see the other side as well. I've always loved the chorus, Turn your eyes upon Jesus.

Look full in His wonderful face. And the things of this world will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace. You know, that song, that chorus, was written by a blind woman.

And it wasn't Fannie Crosby, whom we know was blind, but a woman named Helen Lemel. She was actually born in the UK. The daughter of a Wesleyan pastor.

And then they emigrated to the States when she was 12. And she had a wonderful singing voice. And so her parents saw to it that she had good teachers and training.

And then eventually she went back to Europe to have more vocal training. Met and fell in love with a European. And they married.

But some years later she became blind. The tide turned. He left her.

She returned to the States. She taught at Moody for a while. But she wrote 500 hymns during her lifetime before she died at age 97 and impoverished in a tiny little bedsit.

But that song speaks so clearly. And she said, she had heard a statement once that said, so then, somebody had told her this, so then turn your eyes upon Him, look full into His face, and you will find that the things of earth will acquire a strange new dimness. When she heard those words, she said, I stood still, and singing in my soul and spirit was the chorus.

The verses were written the same week, dictated by the Holy Spirit. Another blind woman named Helen, also named Helen, Helen Keller, was once asked, what would be worse than being blind? And she said, worse than being blind is to have sight, but no vision. The worst thing that can happen to us as Jesus followers is to have sight, but no vision.

I wonder if we can end by singing this chorus together. And then maybe we can just pray together that God will open the eyes of our heart to be more spiritually perspective, to see with the eyes of faith the way He wants us to. So let's turn your eyes upon Jesus.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace. Let's just have a time of prayer and just pray this individually to ourselves.

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