

An Obscured Vision

by J. Wilbur Chapman

The sermon emphasizes the importance of having a vision, which is an appreciation of God's purposes and plans, and a desire to know his will.

Scripture: Proverbs 29:18, Matthew 9:36, Matthew 28:19, Luke 19:10, John 1:18, Acts 1:8, 1 Corinthians 2:10, 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 12:2, James 1:22

Topics: "Spiritual Vision", "Church Revival"

Description

J. Wilbur Chapman preaches on the importance of having a vision from God, using Proverbs 29:18 as the text. He emphasizes the need for individuals and the church to seek God's vision, drawing examples from biblical figures like Abraham, Moses, and Paul, as well as modern figures like Zinzendorf, the Wesleys, and Moody who had visions from God. Chapman highlights the hindrances to receiving visions today, including disrespect towards Jesus, irreverent criticism of the Bible, lukewarmness in the church, and ministers losing their passion for souls. He calls for a renewed vision of the Bible's true nature, a deeper understanding of Christ, and a fervent commitment to rescuing the perishing through service.

Transcript

(Preached at the opening of the Winona Lake Bible Conference.)

TEXT: "Where there is no vision, the people perish."--Proverbs 29:18.

It is not altogether an easy matter to secure a text for such an occasion as this; not because the texts are so few in number but rather because they are so many, for one has only to turn over the pages of the Bible in the most casual way to find them facing him at every reading.

Feeling the need of advice for such a time as this, I asked a number of my friends who knew me intimately and knew the occasion which was before me to suggest what in their minds would be an appropriate Scripture, and in their suggestions I have had the most singular indication of the leading of Providence.

One said, "Use Hosea 5:4, where God in speaking concerning his people Israel says, 'They will not frame their doings,'" which means that his people would not set before themselves the way in which they were going; or it might mean that they would not set up a plan for their lives which would be according to his will and which he might bring on to completion.

Another said, "Use Genesis 26:18," where we are told that Isaac digged again the wells of his father Abraham. This is a suggestive incident and has in it a message for to-day, for if there is one thing needed more than another it is that the old wells at which our fathers drank and were refreshed and which, alas! in these modern times have been filled in, at least to a certain extent, should be opened and men be summoned once again to drink of their living waters.

Another said, "Use Jeremiah 6:16, 'Ask for the old paths;'" for as a matter of fact we cannot improve upon the ways in which our fathers walked, so far as the revelation of God is concerned or the doing of his will.

Still another suggested that I should use Isaiah 62:10, "Gather out the stones, lift up a standard for the people," in which the description is of a great prince coming and all hindrances should be removed that the journey might be robbed of its difficulties and dangers.

You will notice if you have watched the suggestions of these Christian workers that the texts are practically all the same, and then when I tell you that the line of thought they have indicated was the very line which God suggested to me weeks and months before the conference you will be impressed as I have been that this subject is not of my own choosing, and therefore must be a message from God. Neither is the text one of my own choosing, for God pressed it in upon me again and again and from it I was afraid to turn away.

I like the text because it is in the book of Proverbs. This book is not simply a collection of wise sayings and affectionate exhortations, for you will remember that the Proverbs were put down after the event and not before its occurrence. This being true, Proverbs presents an established fact: here we find what the wise men in all the ages have learned to be truth. If they speak of sin and its penalty they do it in the light of their own experience; if they say the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge they mean that they have tried other sources of wisdom and all have failed but this. All this makes the text exceedingly valuable, for the wise men of other days must have tried to walk without the vision and not only failed themselves but have set the people astray.

By a vision we do not mean simply an imagination or dream which might come to some person who had little practical understanding of the ways of life, but we mean an appreciation of God's thought and approximate understanding of his plan and a desire to know his will.

The word "perish," does not mean destruction, but rather the idea is to "run wild"; so the literal rendering of the text is, "Where there is no revelation the people run wild"--that is to say, if God is put out of thought every man is a law unto himself and therefore is dangerous to the community in which he lives. He is like a ship sailing for a harbor without chart or compass and with utter indifference to the pole star. Whatever your impressions, convictions or purposes, they should always be squared by reverent, careful and profound study of God's will and word.

The first sentence of the Bible is this, "In the beginning God," and it must be the first sentence of every plan and of every purpose of the individual and the community or there is danger ahead.

I

There ought never to be an age without a vision, indeed without repeated visions. If there should be such a time it might be a time of prosperity, but inevitably souls would be neglected. There ought not to be an individual without a vision. If there should be such an one he is missing the best of his life. If there be no vision the horizon of man may be bounded by his office, his store, his home, his own city or his native

land, while as a matter of fact this is only a part of what God meant him to do and to be. God's plans are from everlasting to everlasting. The wonderful work he is doing in this world is only a part of the plan, for in the ages to come he expects to show forth the manysidedness of his grace and reveal to us the depth of his love to us in Christ.

John McNeill's friend had an eagle which he had reared in the farm yard with the ordinary fowl that lived there. This friend sold his property and determined to move to another part of Scotland. He could dispose of his horses and sell his chickens but no one wanted the eagle. What should he do with it? He determined to teach it to fly, and threw it up in the air only to have it come down with a thud upon the ground. Then he lifted it and placed it upon the barn yard fence and was holding it for a moment when suddenly the eagle lifted its eyes and caught a glimpse of the sun. It stretched forth its head as far as it could, threw out one wing, then another, and with a scream and a bound was away flying upward until it was lost in the face of the sun. This is what we are needing to-day--namely, to lift up our eyes and see God's plan and try to understand his purposes. The eagle so long had held its head down that it had lost the vision of the sun; the first glimpse of it set him free. What we mean by a vision, therefore, is an appreciation of God's purposes and plans and a hearty yielding to him for service in the accomplishment of the same.

Joseph Cook when he was making a plea for China's millions said one day, "Put your ear down to the ground and listen and you will hear the tramp, tramp, tramp of four hundred millions of weary feet." I have to say this morning, Lift up your eyes and look, open your ears and listen and you will both see and hear that God has a great plan for us which he will reveal to all if only we will permit him to do so. In proportion as a people loses its faith in a revelation from God it falls into decay. The student of history recalls vividly the story of the French Revolution, which is a proof of this statement.

God has always spoken concerning his plans and it has been to living men and women that he has granted visions. He came to Abraham and he saw Christ's day and was glad: he visited Moses and he endured as seeing him who is invisible: he was lifted up before Isaiah and he first confessed his sin and shame, then cried, "Here am I, send me." He granted Saul of Tarsus a vision of himself as he approached Damascus until he cried, "Who art thou?" and then began to walk in fellowship with him until like the hero that he was he mounted from the Eternal City to that City which has foundations whose Builder and Maker is God. He stood before John as in apocalyptic vision he saw him with his head and his hair, white like wool, as white as snow and his eyes as a flame of fire.

But if you should say, "Oh, yes, but this is in Bible times and we are living in a different age," then hear me when I say that he has come to living men and women in our own day with a revelation of his will. He spoke to Zinzendorf and we have a mighty work among the Moravians. He revealed himself to the Wesleys and we have the mighty movement of Methodism. He talked with Edwards and we have the great Revival of New England. He revealed himself to Finney and we have the great manifestation of power in the state of New York. He walked and talked with Moody and we have the greatest evangelistic work of his day and generation with Moody as his instrument. These were all men with visions. He has come to great missionaries like Paton who saw the New Hebrides Islands evangelized while yet they sat in darkness, because he saw God. He has spoken to our own Fulton in China, who writes that the people are flocking to Christ. To him it is no surprise, for he knew that they would do it while others were still skeptical. He knew it because he knew God.

Let us remember that, however true it may be that God speaks in conscience, providence, through the church and by the preaching of his Word, his supreme revelation is in his own Word. This Book contains

the revealed will of God and this Book is his Word.

II

Why are we not having revelations to-day as we know they have been given at other times? Why is not some one in our own land especially working out some of the great plans and purposes of God? The question is easily answered. The difficulty is not with God. He is the same forever. We alone must be at fault. Without any spirit of harsh criticism and with a prayer to God that he will make my spirit as he would have it, permit me to say that I fear the visions are not being given to us for the following reasons:

First: Because of the disrespect shown to his Son. We have come to a time when men seek to limit his knowledge, and occasionally they are saying that he did not know concerning the things of which he spake. Such blasphemy makes us shudder. There is a disposition to misinterpret his teaching. They did it in Paul's day and he spoke by inspiration when he said, "If any man present another gospel than that which I have presented let him be accursed." There is a disposition to rob him of his deity. "Is Jesus divine?" was the question asked not long ago of one who called himself a minister, and he answered, "Yes, in the sense that Buddha is divine or Confucius is divine." Our faces grow white with fear as we listen to such blasphemous statements in such an age as this. This helps to overcast the sky and God can hardly trust us with a vision in such an atmosphere.

Second: An irreverent criticism of the Word of God. That there is a reverent criticism all will allow, and that many who are walking these paths are devout believers in God and in his word I would like to be among the first to acknowledge. There are three kinds of critics to-day. First: Those who honestly want the best and who are studying carefully and prayerfully to know the truth. Second: Those who ape scholarship. Third: Those whose lives may not be right, and for them if any part of the Bible could be cut away they would be less condemned. We need not fear, however; our Bible is not in danger, for this is largely a question of scholarship. Some of you who listen to me may not class yourselves as scholars. I certainly do not put myself in that company, but one thing I know: I have seen the Bible work as no other book has ever worked, and I have seen Jesus Christ save miraculously multitudes of poor lost sinners. I am not disturbed for the future; there are as great scholars as the world has ever known who still hold to your mother's Bible and who have lost not one whit of confidence in it.

Thomas Newberry, a devout English student, spent fifty years in study to give the world his Newberry Bible. He said, "I accept the theory of the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures. I have studied every 'jot and tittle' of the Word of God and after these fifty years I see no reason for changing my position." Scholars' names almost without number could be mentioned as believing in the Scriptures as the divinely inspired Word of God. For myself I would have great assurance in standing side by side with Dr. Paton, and I would not think of trembling so long as our sainted Dr. Moorehead walks courageously along life's journey as he nears its end with faith in God's Word unshaken, with confidence in God's Son constantly growing. This blessed old Book has been railed at in all the ages. Men have professed to overthrow it, they have cut and slashed at it like Jehoiakim of old, but it is better than ever to-day. It is the Word of God. Heaven and earth may pass away but this Word, never.

Not long ago I attended a conference of Christian workers and was told by one of them that I could not appreciate the Bible except I read it with the thought of literary criticism in mind. My friend interpreted a portion of the Word of God for me in this way and it was beautiful. It reminded me of nothing so much as a diamond perfectly cut, kissed by the sunlight and throwing back its sparkling light to me as I gazed upon it.

Another said that I would never be able to understand the Bible until I read it from the standpoint of the elocutionist in the best use of that expression, and he read in my hearing the story of Joseph and his brethren and I felt that I myself had never read the Bible before and really had never heard it read.

Still another came with his higher criticism and said that much of the Bible was mythical, that the stories I had loved were simply allegorical; and I listened to him and went back to my Bible to read, only to find that you may read it any way, spell it out in your youth letter by letter, read it through your tears as you reach middle life and your heart is aching, hold it against your heart when your eyes are too dim to read its pages, and it will yield to you a sweetness which is actually beyond the power of man to describe. This is a wonderful Book and in this Book God reveals himself. Handle it irreverently and you will have no vision.

Third: It seems to me that the church is not what she ought to be, and this being true the vision is denied. One of my friends said the other day that the difficulty with the church is that she has lost her interrogation point. At the day of Pentecost people were saying, "What do these things mean?" To-day they never think of saying it. I have been told in a little pamphlet issued by an English writer that the church has lost her possessive case, which means that somehow she has gone on without realizing that the risen, glorified Christ is her blessed Lord. It is a great thing to say "Jesus"; infinitely greater is it to say "My Jesus." The church has lost her imperative mode. In days that are past it was possible for the church to stand in the presence of evil and say, "In the name of Almighty God this iniquity must stop." But to-day it is not possible. The church has lost her present tense. We are constantly looking for blessings in the future. God's promises are all written for the present. It is to the church on fire that God grants a vision.

Fourth: Some of the difficulty must rest with us as ministers of the Gospel. I fear that some of us have lost our message. It has loosened its grip upon us, and you never can move another man until you are first moved yourself by the message you would give to him.

At a great gathering not long ago I heard a distinguished Eastern professor speaking. The topic of his lecture was "My Foster Children," and these foster children were some animals which he had had as pets, whose habits he had carefully studied. One was a Gila monster from the plains of Arizona, another was a horned owl, the third was a rat, and the fourth was an opossum. If you can imagine more uninteresting subjects than these you are more imaginative than myself, and yet he thrilled me and held three thousand people in breathless interest. Oh, my brethren, if I believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and as a Savior able not only to save to the uttermost but to keep through eternity, and that message grips me, I am a poor preacher if I fail with it to grip and move other men. I fear we have lost our boldness. I am a minister of the glorious Gospel of the grace of God and I have a right to demand a hearing and to give my message, not because of what I am myself--God forbid--but because of what my Savior is. Some of us have lost our passion for souls; we mourn over it, we know that when we once had this it was the secret of a successful ministry. It is not wrong for me to say to you this morning that to the minister without a message, to the minister who has lost his holy boldness, to the minister who has anything less than a burning passion for souls, God cannot give his vision.

III

I know that I have your deepest sympathy in the longing which I now express for this great gathering--namely, that God would give to us a vision.

First: As to what the Bible really is. One of my friends told me the other day of a blind girl who could not read because she had been too busy and somehow had not thought that she could use the raised letters

which have been such a boon to God's blind children. I am told she learned that she might read while on these grounds last summer. It was made possible later on for her to have a teacher and she began to study little books until she could read quite fluently. One day unknown to her there was brought into her home a Bible with raised letters and without telling what the book was it was opened at the fourteenth chapter of John and she was bidden to read in it. She had no sooner touched the page, her fingers enabling her to read, "Let not your heart be troubled, ye believe in God, believe also in me," than with radiant face she exclaimed, "Why this is God's Word; the very touch of it is different." I would that we might have this vision.

Second: I wish that we might have a vision of Christ. He is the chiefest among ten thousand, and the one altogether lovely. He is a mighty Savior and a mighty helper. I cannot bring him a burden too great, nor talk to him about a trial too insignificant. Oh, that we might see him as he is!

And finally, I wish that we might know what service is, for knowing this we would be instant in season and out of season. Some years ago Fannie Crosby, the blind hymn writer, was speaking in one of the missions in New York City. Suddenly she stopped and said, "I wonder if there is not some wandering boy in this audience this evening who would have the courage to step out from this audience and come up and stand by my side so that I might put my arms around him and kiss him for his mother?" There was a hush upon the audience; then a boy from the rear seat started and came to the platform, and with her arms around about him and her lips against his cheek for his mother's sake, Fannie Crosby said, "Oh, my friends, let us rescue the perishing." From this meeting she went to her home, and sitting in her room wrote:

"Rescue the perishing, Care for the dying, Snatch them in pity from sin and the grave, Weep o'er the erring one, Lift up the fallen, Tell them of Jesus, the Mighty to save."

Years afterward she spoke in St. Louis at a great meeting and related this incident. Before she had finished a man in the audience sprang to his feet and said, "Miss Crosby, listen to me. I am a prosperous merchant in this city, a husband and a father, a Christian and an officer in the church. I was that boy around whom you threw your arms." Such an experience as that is worth a lifetime of service. I wish to put myself on record. I know that many of you are with me. I stand for nothing in these days that would in the least obscure men's vision of the power of God, or their vision of the glorious majesty of the Son of God, and I count nothing worth while except to do that thing which would mean the winning of a soul to Jesus Christ.

I believe God is giving to some men in these days a vision as to what may be accomplished if only a mighty work of grace should be given to us. He certainly is ready to pour out his Spirit upon his own people, and it is only necessary that we should first of all realize our weakness, then understand his power, realize that souls are lost and dying and then know that he is able to save to the uttermost; and above all to realize that in all ages he has used human instruments for the accomplishment of his purposes, and realizing these things to see that our lives are right in his sight, to have such a victory for God as the world has never seen. For this day we hope and pray and cry aloud, "O Lord, how long, how long?"

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