

Are You Looking?

by J.C. Ryle

The sermon emphasizes the importance of looking to Jesus in three ways: looking backward to His atonement, looking upward to His priestly intercession, and looking forward to His second coming.

Scripture: John 3:14, Hebrews 12:2

Topics: "Faith in Christ", "Hope in Salvation"

Description

J.C. Ryle emphasizes the importance of 'looking unto Jesus' as a fundamental aspect of the Christian faith. He explains that believers should look backward to Jesus on the cross for forgiveness, upward to Jesus at the right hand of God for intercession, and forward to Jesus' second coming for hope. Ryle warns against relying on anything other than Christ for salvation and encourages a steadfast focus on Him throughout life. Ultimately, he asserts that true peace, strength, and hope come from these three perspectives on Jesus.

Transcript

The question which heads this page may seem an odd one at first sight. To whom or to what does it apply? The words of St. Paul, below it, supply the key to its meaning. It is an inquiry concerning your soul and the Lord Jesus Christ. It means neither more nor less than this,---"Are you looking unto Jesus?"

"Looking unto Jesus" is a very simple expression: it is soon spoken and soon written; it contains no words hard to be understood. But it is an expression rich in contents, and filled to the brim with food for thought. Here is a brief account of the Christian's character: he is one who "looks to Jesus." Here is the secret of running successfully the race that leads toward heaven: we must be ever "looking to Jesus." This is the way to begin well; this is the way to go on prosperously; this is the way to end in peace. Here is the photograph of patriarchs and prophets, of apostles and martyrs, of holy fathers and holy reformers, of holy saints, in every land and age: they were all men who "looked to Jesus." Here is the marrow of all creeds, and articles, and confessions of guilt: to "look to Jesus." Reader, if you and I wish to be saved, let us begin by asking ourselves the simple question, Am I looking to Jesus?

But how can you look to Jesus? He is not here. He has ascended up into heaven in the body, and is there sitting at the right hand of God. As God, no doubt, He is everywhere present, and fills heaven and earth: as Man, He can only be in one place at once,--and that place is the place of honour at the Father's right hand. The notion that He is present in the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper is a weak invention of man, and one that has led to many superstitions: it is a notion flatly opposed to Scripture, and flatly contradicted

in the Prayer-book of the Church of England. You may look at the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, and as you look and eat and drink, your memory may be quickened, your soul refreshed, and your faith increased. But you cannot literally and corporally look at Jesus. His body and blood are in heaven, and not there. How then are you to look at Him?

Reader, there is but one answer to this question. You must look to Jesus by faith. True believing with the heart is the "looking" of which St. Paul makes mention to the Hebrew Christians. Faith is the eye of the Christian's soul. As Moses lifted up the brazen serpent in the wilderness, and the suffering Israelite who looked at it was immediately healed, so must you look at Jesus Christ with trust, confidence, reliance, and expectation. This is what St. Paul meant when he talked of "looking unto Jesus."

In what point of view ought you to look to Jesus, in order to get full benefit from Him? This is a very important inquiry, and one which I propose to answer in this tract. Vague, general, and indistinct notions in religion are dangerous things, and do great harm. Thousands are continually saying "they trust in Christ and no one else," and yet can hardly tell you what they mean: no wonder they feel little comfort in their Christianity. Weak, indistinct perceptions of Christ will always produce weak consolations. Reader, let me try to put you in a right position of soul: let me show you how to look to Jesus, so as to get the greatest amount of good from Him. It is an old saying, that there is a right way and a wrong way of doing everything; in nothing is that saying so true as in spiritual things, and specially in the relations between Christ and the soul.

There are three points of view in which your soul should look at Jesus Christ. Let me set them before you in order, and tell you what they are.

- I. You should look backward, to Jesus on the cross.
- II. You should look upward, to Jesus at the right hand of God.
- III. You should look forward, to Jesus coming again at the last day.

Happy is he who takes these three looks every day that he lives! This is the man who will be found a peaceful, a strong, and a cheerful Christian. Let me now explain fully what I mean.

I. In the first place, you should look backward, to Jesus on the cross. Let your faith's eye daily look on Christ crucified, and rest in the sight.

What will you see, as you look at Jesus on the cross? You will see the eternal Son of God suffering, bleeding, agonizing, dying, in order to pay your soul's debt, and make satisfaction for your sins. You will see the most wonderful transaction taking place that ever took place since the foundation of the world. You will see a Divine Substitute suffering in your stead, the Just for the unjust; bearing your sins, carrying your transgressions, allowing Himself to be reckoned a curse and sin for you, in order that you, sinner as you are, might be set free from all guilt, and counted innocent before God.

What will you get from the sight? Clear views of the way of pardon and peace with God,--clear knowledge of the true medicine for an aching conscience,--clear perception of the only plan of forgiveness,--justification, reconciliation, and acceptance with God. Nothing but Christ's atonement on the cross can ever clear up these things. Christ's substitution, Christ's satisfaction, Christ's atoning death, Christ's sacrifice for sin,--this is the grand secret of peace with God. To know that when we were guilty, One bore our guilt,--that when we were lost, One died that we might be saved,--that when we were ruined,

One died that we might be redeemed and set free,--to know this is to know the foundation of all saving Christianity.

Reader, look steadily at Jesus on the cross, if you want to feel inward peace. Look to anything of your own, and you will never feel comfortable. Your own life and doings, your own repentance and amendment, your own morality and regularity, your own church-going and Sacrament-receiving, your own Bible-reading and your prayers, your own almsgiving and your charities,--what, what are they all but a huge mass of imperfection? Rest not upon them for a moment, in the matter of your justification. As evidences of your wishes, feelings, bias, tastes, habits, inclinations, they may be useful helps occasionally. As grounds of acceptance with God they are worthless rubbish. They cannot give you comfort; they cannot bear the weight of your sins; they cannot stand the searching eye of God. Rest on nothing but Christ crucified, and the atonement He made for you on Calvary. This, this alone is the way of peace.

Look steadily to Jesus on the cross, and listen not to those who would persuade you to look elsewhere. Thousands of people in the present day are constantly looking to something else instead of Christ crucified, and secretly wondering that they do not find rest and comfort. They look to the Church, or the Sacraments, or the service,--or the ministry, and insensibly use them as ends, instead of using them as means. They must change their plan, if they wish to find peace. It is the blood of Christ which alone can purge the conscience, and take the burden off the soul.

This is the point to which I see many come at last, after holding very different doctrine for many years. Nothing strikes me so much as the fact that we often hear of some divine, high in office, who has spent all his life in condemning what is called "Evangelical religion," clinging simply to Christ crucified in his last moments! The favourite doctrines of "High Churchmanship" seem to fail and break down in the valley of the shadow of death. Nothing seems to cheer and support but the "precious blood of Christ," and simple faith in the atonement. Reader, you will never have cause to be ashamed of the doctrine of the cross. Let the first look of your soul to Jesus, be a look backward. Look at Him dying for your sins on the cross, and as you look, say to yourself, "This was done for me."

II. In the second place you ought to look upward, to Jesus at the right hand of God. Let your faith's eye see Jesus as your Priest in heaven, and rejoice in the sight.

What will you see there? You will see the same Saviour who died for you exalted to the place of highest honour, and doing the work of an intercessor and advocate for your soul. All was not done when He suffered for your sins on Calvary. He rose again and ascended up to heaven, to carry on there the work which He began on earth. There, as our Priest and Representative, He ever lives to make intercession for us. He presents our names before the Father; He continually pleads our cause. He obtains for us a never-ending supply of mercy and grace; He watches over our interests with an eye that never sleeps. He is ready, morning, noon, and night, to hear our confessions, to grant us absolution, to strengthen us for duty, to comfort us in trial, to guide us in perplexity, to hold us up in temptation, and to preserve us safe on our journey heavenward until we reach home.

What will you get by looking upward to Jesus? Comfort and strength in all the daily battle of life. What thought more cheering than the thought that Jesus is ever looking at you and watching over you! What idea more strengthening than the idea that you are never alone, never forgotten, never neglected, never without a Friend who is "able to save to the uttermost all them who come unto God by Him!" (Heb. vii. 25.)

This daily upward look at Jesus is a most important point. The life of Christ for His people in heaven is only second in importance to His death for them on the cross. The blood, the sacrifice, the atonement, the satisfaction for sin can never be too much prized or thought of. But the session in heaven, the priestly intercession, the daily advocacy of Jesus ought not to be forgotten. I sadly fear they are not so much considered in this day as they ought to be.

It is a striking and painful fact that many English people just now are hankering after that most dangerous invention of Popery, the Confessional. Clergymen who ought to know better are constantly urging on people the usefulness of private confession and private absolution. Men and women in all directions are greedily drinking in the doctrine, and flattering themselves that it is the way of peace. To kneel before God's ordained minister, to confess our sins to him, to receive at his hand complete absolution,--all this is becoming most attractive to many consciences. Hundreds are persuading themselves that it is a valuable medicine for labouring and heavy laden souls.

To what may we trace the spread of this delusion? To nothing, I believe, so much as to ignorance of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. Men have lost sight of the fact that we have a Priest and confessional provided for us in the Gospel, and that we need none beside. They have been content with looking backward to the cross, and dwelling on Christ's death, and have forgotten the resurrection, and Christ's life as an Advocate at the right hand of God. They have confined their thoughts of Christ to the atonement He made for sin when He died. They have not remembered that He rose again, ascended up into heaven, and there acts as our Priest and Advocate when we come unto God by Him. In a word, they have looked backward to Christ's crucifixion, but they have not looked upward to Christ's priesthood and intercession.

Reader, beware of falling into this mistake. Beware of leaving out any part of the truth concerning Jesus. That great divine, John Owen, declared, two hundred years ago, that there was no office of Christ which Satan hated so much as the priestly one, and none which he laboured so incessantly to obscure and bring into contempt. Understand that office thoroughly, and cling to it firmly. No earthly priest can be so wise, so sympathizing, so trustworthy, so able to help, as Jesus, the Son of God. From no confessional will you go away so light-hearted, so cheerful, so satisfied, as from the throne of grace, and from communion with Christ. Look up to Him daily, if you would be a happy Christian; pour out your heart before Him, if you would enjoy the consolations of the Gospel. This daily look to a living interceding Jesus is one great secret of strength and comfort in religion.

III. In the last place, you ought to look forward to Jesus coming again. Let the eye of your faith look onward to the day when Christ shall come again the second time.

What will you see when that great event takes place? You will see the eternal Son of God return in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. He will come to raise the dead saints and to change the living ones, to punish the wicked and to reward the godly, to summon every one before His bar, and to give to every one according to His works. He will come to bind Satan, and deprive him of his usurped dominion, to deliver the earth from the curse, and to purify it as the eternal dwelling-place of a holy nation; to cast out sin, and all its accursed consequences,--disease, death, sorrow, wars, poverty, injustice, and oppression. You see the world defiled now by the presence of evil. You will see it at length restored to its former state, and the days of paradise before the fall brought back again.

What will you get by looking forward to Jesus coming again? You will get that which is the best remedy against disquiet and depression,--hope shed abroad in your heart about things to come. When the minds

of others are cast down with perplexity, you will feel able to lift up your head and rejoice; when all around seems dark and gloomy, you will see light, and be able to wait patiently for better days.

Few things are so remarkable in the present time as the universal anxiety and suspense about the future. On all sides, and among all classes, you hear of want of confidence and gloomy forebodings of coming evil; Church and State alike seem shaken to their foundations: no one seems to know what to expect next. On one thing alone men seem agreed: they look forward with more fear than hope to the future. Governments seem afraid of their subjects, and subjects seem to have no confidence in their Governments; the rich seem unable to satisfy the poor, and the poor seem unable to trust the rich.

On all sides you hear of restlessness, anarchy, lawlessness, disquiet, envy, jealousy, distrust, suspicion, and discontent. The cement seems to have fallen out of the walls of society: the bands which kept nations together seem to be decaying, snapping, and giving way. One might think that the devil was putting forth special efforts, and allowed to have special power. Never, to my mind, was there such a striking fulfilment of the words of our Lord in St. Luke: "There shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken." (Luke xxi. 25, 26.) Which ever way I turn my eyes, I see something very like an accomplishment of these words. Whether I look to Europe or to America,--whether I look to the Continent or my own country,--whether I look to England or to Ireland,--whether I look to political matters or to ecclesiastical,--from every quarter I get the same report. Every where I see men looking forward with alarm.

In a day like this there is no comfort like that of looking forward to Christ coming again. The Christian who reads his Bible, and believes what it contains, can behold the shaking of all things round him unmoved. He, at any rate, is not uncertain about the future: he, at least, can explain to any one the nature of his expectations. He expects nothing from the rulers of this world: he knows that their boasted laws and reforms will never satisfy mankind, or give peace and freedom to the earth. He expects nothing from the Churches and ecclesiastical systems of Christendom: he knows that they are all breaking down, going to pieces, and melting away. He expects but little from missions, either at home or abroad: he knows that they will call out an elect people for the glory of God: but he looks for little more. His expectation is wholly fixed on Christ's second coming and reign. This is the great event to which he is continually looking forward; this is "the blessed hope" that sustains him, and makes him calm amidst confusion. His eye is steadily fixed on his Saviour's return. In the darkest hour he does not despair: "Yet a little time," he says, "He that shall come will come, and will not tarry." (Heb. x. 37.)

From the bottom of my soul I pity those who look for the perfecting of the Church or the world by any existing agencies. I pity politicians who dream that any reforms will ever pacify and content mankind; I pity Christians who dream that missionary societies will gradually regenerate the nations, and fill the earth with true religion, till it silently and gently blooms into a state of perfection. Both parties are sowing for themselves bitter disappointment: they might as well expect grapes from thorns or figs from thistles. The only comfortable stand-point in looking into the future, is that which is occupied by the Christian who fixes his hope on the second advent of Jesus Christ.

Does false doctrine rise and spread among professing Christians? Are many falling away on the right hand and left, some going towards Rome, and others leaning towards infidelity? Are myriads bowing down before such idols as the Church, the priesthood, the sacraments, intellect, reason, liberality, charity,

earnestness, and the like? The courage of the believer in a personal advent and reign of Christ will not fail. He falls back on the thought that all is ordered for good: all is permitted for wise ends, for the purification of Christians and the exercise of their graces. There is a good time coming: the Lord of the harvest shall soon appear, and send forth His angels to separate the wheat and the tares; then shall the righteous shine forth like the sun. The time is short, the Lord is at hand.

Do kings and rulers throw the nations of the earth into confusion, changing, pulling down, mismanaging, disestablishing, rearranging, in their feverish anxiety to make everything work smoothly? Does everything in society gradually become more disorderly, more out of joint, and more full of confusion? Does a grand crash seem impending, when the whole machine of government shall break down and come to a standstill? The believer in Christ's second advent and reign, can view it all without dismay. He knows who has said, "I will overturn, overturn, overturn, until He comes, whose right it is." (Ezek. xxi. 27.) He expects no perfect peace or rest until the Prince of Peace comes, and the King's Son has His own kingdom again, and the prince of this world is cast out. He believes that all shall end well: "The kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of our God and of His Christ." (Rev. xi. 15.)

Do the best believers seem to die off and leave the Church below? Are the gaps in families and congregations apparently increasing, which nothing seems to fill up? Do the friends ahead in the voyage of life, who have crossed over and got home before us, begin to seem far more numerous than the friends astern? Does heaven seem to become every year more full, and earth more empty, the Church above more rich, and the Church below more poor? The man who believes in the speedy coming and kingdom of Christ can bear it all without despair. He sorrows not, as those who have no hope; he believes that the parting is only for a small moment, and the meeting shall be for ever; he believes that the time is short, the fashion of this world passing away, the first resurrection drawing near, the Conqueror of death about to return. He knows that he shall soon see all the saints again; the whole family shall be reassembled: them that sleep in Jesus shall God bring with Him. Happy is he who believes Christ's second personal advent. Happy is that man who can look forward.

Reader, remember these three looks at Jesus, backward, upward, forward; and make use of them every day. The first is the secret of peace of conscience: no peace unless we look backward at the cross of Christ!--the second is the secret of real daily strength and comfort in our walk with God: little solid comfort unless we look upward to Christ's intercession!--The third is the secret of bright and cheerful hope in a dark world: no bright prospect unless we look forward to Christ coming again! Backward, upward, forward,--these are the three ways in which we should look at Jesus. He that looks at the cross is a wise man; he that looks at the cross and the intercession also, is wiser still; but he that looks at all three,--the cross, the intercession, and the coming of Jesus,--he is the wisest of all.

(1) Come, now, my reader, and let me wind up all this tract by asking you a friendly question. Let me ask you what you are looking to for your soul's salvation?

You have a soul, you know full well: there is something within that bears witness to that. That there is a world to come, and a judgment too,--that there is a life to come for which this life is only a preparatory school,--that you were not sent into the world to live the life of a beast, to eat and drink and sleep and care for nothing but your body,--all this your conscience testifies. You may not live, perhaps, as if you believed all this,--a man might often think you did not believe it; but for all this, you do believe it. In your heart of hearts, you know that what I say is true.

Once more, then, I ask, what are you looking to for your soul's salvation? Anything or nothing? Something solid and substantial, or something weak and infirm? Reader, for your soul's sake, and as one that must die one day, I charge you to give an answer.

Will you tell me, "You don't know: you hope it will be all right: at any rate you don't pretend to make any profession." You cannot surely think that excuses like these are reasonable, or satisfactory, or sensible, or wise. To leave that uncertain on which your eternal happiness depends,--to make no insurance against the future necessities of the only part of you that never dies,--to float down the current towards the fall, and yet make no provision for your safety,--to muddle away life in meaning, and hoping, and intending, and resolving, and yet never really prepare to meet God,--to know that death and judgment are every day drawing nearer, and yet never to make up your mind how you are going to meet them,--this, this is not the conduct of a wise man. This is the conduct of a simpleton, an idiot, a madman, or a child.

Oh, "awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light."--"Repent and be converted, that thy sins may be blotted out."--"Strive to enter in at the strait gate," before the Master arise and bar that gate for ever.--"Labour for the meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of Man is ready to give thee."--"Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near."--"Come to the waters," while the fountain is yet open, "and buy wine and milk without money and without price."--"Come to the throne of grace, that you may obtain mercy and find grace."--"The Spirit and the Bride say, Come."--"Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made white as snow: though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."--"What meanest thou, oh sleeper? arise and call upon thy God."--"Come unto Christ, and He will give thee rest."--"Ask, and thou shalt receive. Seek, and thou shalt find."--"Him that cometh unto Christ, He will in nowise cast out."--"The blood of Christ can cleanse thee from all sin." (Eph. v. 14; Acts iii. 19; Luke xiii. 24; John vi. 27; Isa. lv. 6; Heb. iv. 16; Rev. xxii. 17; Isa. i. 18. Jonah i. 6; Matt. xi. 28; Matt. vii. 7; John vi. 37; 1 John i. 7.) Oh, rest not, rest not, rest not, till thou knowest what thou art looking to for thy soul! Make use of the beautiful passages of Scripture here just put before thee. Look to Christ, and thou shalt live.

(2) Reader, if you know anything of looking unto Jesus, I have only one piece of advice to give you. That advice is, to keep on looking unto Jesus to the end.

That old way, in which saints have now walked for eighteen hundred years, is the only way of safety and the only path of peace. All the wit and wisdom of man will never discern a better way to heaven, and a surer way to keep our souls in comfort. All the Councils that have ever met together,--from that true one which met at Jerusalem under James, down to that sham one which met in Rome under Pope Pius IX.,--all, all together can never frame a better answer than St. Paul gives to the question, "What must I do to be saved?" They cannot add one jot or tittle or grain to the Apostle's prescription: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." (Acts xvi. 31.) In other words, that prescription means, "Look to Jesus Christ." Reader, stick to that prescription till you die. Add nothing to it, and take nothing away. You cannot mend or improve it. The least addition or subtraction spoils it altogether.

We hear much in these latter days of the vast progress of intellect, and the enormous results of deep learning. Men tell us complacently that a free handling of Scripture, and a closer critical study of its contents, will give quite a new colour to Christianity. I do not believe it for one moment. I believe that all the intellectual power of England, Scotland, Germany, and America will never add one word to "the short faith of the saints," or one article to the substance of the Eunuch's confession,--"I believe on Jesus Christ as the Son of God." (Acts viii. 37.)

Reader, beware of novelties. Never leave the old paths. They are marked with the footsteps of myriads of old pilgrims. Not one ever found the old paths lead him wrong. The footsteps are all in one direction.--Beware of short-cut paths, however speciously they may be recommended. Priestly absolution, confessionals, human absolutions, may be pressed on your attention as useful helps towards heaven. Beware of them all: they have not profited those that have been occupied therein. They have proved opiates to drug and deaden conscience, but not healing medicine to cure its wounds; they have healed the diseases of the soul slightly, and made them in the end nothing better, but rather worse. Nothing will ever prove better than the old Gospel plan of looking by faith to Jesus Christ. Visible sacrifices will never fill the place of the one true Sacrifice. Visible priests will never prove substitutes for the great High Priest in heaven.

Keep on simply looking to Jesus. Other plans of religion look well in the days of health and prosperity, but break down entirely in the hour of death, and on the bed of sickness. Faith in Jesus will be found better, more useful, more cheering, more comforting, the more it is used.

Keep on looking unto Jesus. Faith shall soon be changed to sight, and hope to certainty. Looking to Jesus on earth by faith, you shall end with seeing Jesus eye to eye in heaven. Those eyes of yours shall look on the head that was crowned with thorns, the hands and feet that were pierced with nails, and the side that was pierced with a spear. You shall find that seeing is the blessed consequence of believing, and that looking at Jesus by faith, ends with seeing Jesus in glory, and living with Jesus for evermore. When you awake up after His likeness, you shall be satisfied.

I remain,

Your faithful Friend,

J.C. RYLE.

HYMN.

Oh, eyes that are weary,

And hearts that are sore,

Look off unto Jesus,

And sorrow no more!

The light of His countenance

Shineth so bright,

That on earth, as in heaven,

There need be no night.

Looking off unto Jesus

My eyes cannot see

The troubles and dangers
That throng around me.
They cannot be blinded
With sorrowful tears.
They cannot be shadowed
With unbelief--fears.
Looking off unto Jesus.
My spirit is blest,--
In the world I have turmoil,
In Him I have rest.
The sea of my life
All about me may roar--
When I look unto Jesus
I hear it no more.
Looking off unto Jesus,
I go not astray;
My eyes are on Him.
And He shows me the way.
'The path may seem dark
As He leads me along,
But following Jesus
I cannot go wrong.
Looking off unto Jesus,
My heart cannot fear:
its trembling is still
When I see Jesus near:
I know that His power

My safeguard will be.
For, "Why are ye troubled?"
He saith unto me.
Looking off unto Jesus,
Oh, may I be found,
When the waters of Jordan
Encompass me round!
Let them bear me away
In His presence to he:
'Tis but seeing him nearer
Whom always I see.
Then, then shall I know
The full beauty and grace
Of Jesus, my Lord,
When I stand face to face:
I shall know how His love
Went before me each day,
And wonder that ever
My eyes turned away.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/jc-ryle/are-you-looking/>

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