

Where Are You Looking?

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of looking unto Jesus and avoiding the dangers of looking back, around, short-sighted, downward, and inward in our spiritual lives.

Scripture: Proverbs 4:25

Topics: "Divine Purpose", "Spiritual Focus"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the importance of maintaining a focused spiritual gaze, urging believers to look straight ahead towards Jesus, the ultimate example of faith and purpose. He warns against various distractions such as looking backward, around, short-sightedly, downward, and inward, which can hinder spiritual progress. By keeping our eyes on Christ, we can avoid the pitfalls of nostalgia, discouragement, selfishness, and introspection, and instead embrace the divine purpose set before us. The sermon encourages believers to look off from earthly distractions and focus on the eternal values of God's calling. Ultimately, a sustained upward look towards Jesus is essential for spiritual growth and fulfillment of God's purpose in our lives.

Transcript

Let thine eyes look right on, and let thine eyelids look straight before thee.

Make level the paths of thy feet, and let all thy ways be established.

Turn not to the right hand nor to the left. (Proverbs 4:25-27)

"Looking unto Jesus..." (Hebrews 12:2)

For the man in Christ life has a clear and definite objective. The Spirit has seen good to fill the whole Bible with that truth, continually urging the believer to realise that his life is set in the context of divine purpose. The letter to the Hebrews not only appeals to us to press on to this goal, but it portrays Christ as the great example and proof that the goal can be reached. Jesus has gone this way; He has gone the whole way, and He has arrived at the destination. More-over He has done it all for us, and by His accomplishment has given us the ground of confidence that the goal can be attained and the prize received. He took upon Himself our humanity, accepted the challenge of our circumstances and experiences, never faltering until the divine end was reached. We are reminded that He has triumphantly fulfilled God's purpose, and that by His present position He offers us the assurance that we too can share in His triumph. We must keep

looking unto Jesus. More correctly this should be stated as: 'looking off unto Jesus'. This matter of the direction of our spiritual gaze is of the utmost importance. The wise man equated a straight and established path with the straight look ahead and with no turning aside to the right or to the left. The Word of God gives clear warning about getting off the road of His will, for God knows the hazards involved in so doing and wishes to save us from the hindrance to progress which can result when we look or face in the wrong direction. In this article we shall consider some of these looks which must be avoided by those who wish to make spiritual progress.

The Backward Look

The Lord Jesus was most emphatic about this matter when He stated that the one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is not fit for the kingdom of God. This backward look can lead to grave tragedies. In the wilderness this is what Israel did. Egypt lay behind them and should always have been turned away from, but in the difficulties of the way they called one another to look back. "They turned again and tempted God, and provoked the holy one of Israel" (Psalm 78:41). They spoiled their whole course by this action, and for many years they made no progress at all but went round and round in circles; and all because of the backward look. That generation failed to enter into what God had prepared for them, simply because they yielded to the temptation to look back, which was - and always is - the wrong direction.

Similar perils beset God's people in New Testament times. The Galatian believers were unsettled by the voice of the Judaizers, calling them to look back, not to the world with its ungodliness, not altogether to forsake Christ, but to face towards a religious procedure which was not the spiritual life to which they had been called in Christ. They had already half looked back, and had come to a standstill because of this. Previously they had been making good progress, as we always do when we keep our eyes on Christ, but now they had stopped and were raising the question as to whether they would in fact go on any more, or whether they would go back to the beggarly elements which should have been left behind. The letter was meant to warn them of the dangers of the backward look. The letter to the Hebrews was written for the same purpose. Those concerned could easily be made to feel the emotional nostalgia of the system from which they had been delivered, so they had to be reminded that they would forfeit God's pleasure if they drew back, and urged rather to press on, looking away from the past and focussing their gaze on the exalted Christ. However advanced we may be in our Christian experience, there seems to be no point when we can afford to take our eyes off the goal set before us and indulge in the follies of the backward look.

The Look Around

When the spies brought back the wrong report concerning the promised land, they did so because they had only looked around them, and never measured what they saw with the reality of an all-powerful God. They did not just imagine the difficulties; they did not need to do so for the cities and giants were real enough. But they kept their gaze down to the things around them, never lifting up their eyes to the one from whom help comes, and so they were discouraged themselves and they discouraged God's people with what was called an evil report. The trouble was that they only looked on their visible surroundings and took their eyes off the Lord. There were only two of them who kept their gaze in the right direction, and they were the ones who eventually went through to the end. Their eyes looked right on, and so their ways were established.

In the New Testament Peter is the great example of the peril which comes to those who look around. So long as he kept his eyes on Christ he could actually walk on the water, but he began to sink as soon as he turned them away, changed the direction of his attention and began to look at circumstances - "When he saw the wind..." (Matthew 14:30). Once again let it be said that he had plenty of reason for his fear. Indeed there are ancient manuscripts which read, 'the strong wind'. However it was his foolishness in letting outward circumstances distract his attention from his Lord which earned him a wetting, even though the hand of Jesus so graciously rescued him from anything worse. At all costs we must beware of looking around in unbelief when we should be looking off and up in faith.

The Short-sighted Look

Paul had to blame the Corinthians for limiting their vision to the things immediately before their eyes: "You look at the things which are before your face" (2 Corinthians 10:7). To be spiritually short-sighted, focussing only on what is near at hand, is to become too easily satisfied and contented in the realm of things spiritual; to have a small and narrow horizon and to fail to appreciate the much more which God has in mind. It is so easy to settle into a limited and very circumscribed area, thinking only of the spiritual things with which we are familiar and which seem so important to us, while we fail to take note of the much more which lies beyond us and to which we are being called. There are few things more stultifying in the Christian life than an assumption that there is nothing beyond the small sphere of our experience. It is possible to get so shut-in, so near-sighted, that we go round and round in circles, never looking out to the new dimensions of spiritual experience to which God is calling us, and almost imagining that we know all there is to know about God's Word and His purposes in Christ. The Corinthians seem to have done this, so to have focussed down on their own affairs, even their own spiritual gifts, that they were almost at a standstill spiritually. They were looking at themselves, full of concern for their own assembly, which was right enough, but apparently not able to appreciate the large purposes of God as represented by Paul's ministry. Even the matters which have been clearly shown of God and blessed by Him can become a hindrance when they arrest and hold the attention as things in themselves. These are the things before our face, but we were intended always to look beyond them to the Lord, and always beyond the immediate factors to the eternal values in Christ. We can be short-sighted even with the Word of God, if we concentrate only on what we have already known of Christ and fail to appreciate that God has much more light and truth to break forth from His Word.

The Downward Look

To the Philippians Paul wrote: "...not looking each of you to his own things..." (Philippians 2:4). He was urging them not always to be governed by how things affected them personally, not to measure every matter as to whether they stood to gain or lose by what was happening. Self-forgetfulness is one of the secrets of spiritual progress. When, in His talk with the needy Samaritan woman at Sychar's well, Jesus had demonstrated this gracious turning aside from personal concerns to care for others, He followed up His example by exhorting His disciples to lift up their eyes and look upon the fields. A selfish look is a downward look, and as such is to be avoided by those who wish to make level the paths of their feet. Paul's concern was not only with the spiritual good of the individual believers but with the onward march of the fellowship of God's people, and he knew that this would be seriously impaired if each one became preoccupied with his own affairs, even though it was in the realm of spiritual things.

The Inward Look

The last of these mis-directed looks is perhaps the commonest in the case of those who wish to follow the Lord. How much of the Scriptures seems to be concerned with getting God's people to stop looking inwards. Perhaps there is nothing more calculated to arrest spiritual progress than the inward look. What are we looking for? Something good in ourselves? We will never find that, as Paul makes quite clear when he affirms: "I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing" (Romans 7:18). Introspection is the very opposite of faith, for it searches for some evidence of God's holiness and power in ourselves, instead of rejoicing in the perfection of the Saviour. It has a spurious appearance of humility and piety, but in fact it leads to self-preoccupation, instead of preoccupation with Christ. We need to be sensitive so that the Holy Spirit can lead us ever continually to the appropriation of the cleansing power of Christ's blood, but we must never keep gazing inwards when we should be looking off and up to our Substitute and Saviour. It is not a healthy person but a sick one who is always feeling his own pulse and taking his own temperature. Salvation is health; the health of those who know that their righteousness is in heaven. We do right to let the Lord search us, but we will have nothing but trouble if we persist in looking within. If we think that it is necessary to keep looking in to avoid falling into Satan's snares, the psalmist will assure us that the Lord will watch our feet if we keep our eyes on Him: "My eyes are ever toward the Lord, for He will pluck my feet out of the net" (Psalm 25:15). This is one more argument for the upward look.

The Upward Look

It is becoming apparent that a great deal depends on our looking, so we are not surprised that towards the end of the letter to the Hebrews which reminds us that we are called to partnership with Christ and urges us to press on towards fullness in Him, there should be this call to look off unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. We are to look off from what is behind, from what is round about, from what is near at hand and what is essentially selfish; to look off from ourselves to Jesus. Abraham, the great man of faith, looked for a heavenly city and a heavenly country, and so was saved from looking back or settling down. Much was bound up with this sustained look of his. So often he was tempted to seek more immediate benefits, some middle ground which was less than God's best, and the Lord had constantly to call him to take his eyes off earth's distractions and rewards so that he could look away to the essentially spiritual and heavenly goal of his calling.

The passage in Proverbs stresses the close relationship between looking straight ahead and having a clear and direct path of progress. Abraham found that this looking away from the things of earth kept him constantly on the move. From time to time he could have settled down in satisfaction with his own position, but "he looked for a city", and he was saved from stagnation by keeping his eyes on God's promised goal. A very relevant passage in this connection is: "Our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:17-18). It is the eternal which is in view, and this calls for adjustment in many respects of our affairs, so that our lives can be directed towards the permanent glory of God's purpose for us. Our procedure should always have eternity in view. When we are considering a relationship, we should see it in the light of God's end. If we have to decide where to live or what work to take up, we should let our eyes look right on, not choosing what seems good just at the moment, but making sure that eternal values are also considered. Just as Satan tempted Christ by offering Him the kingdoms of this world and their glory, so he will try to distract our attention from the will of God by offering seeming advantages now. We shall always be saved by the upward look.

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