

“Materialistic Religion, or What?”

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Texts: Isaiah 6:1-6. Luke 5:1-11 and Acts 9:1-16

**4 For indeed He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God. For we also are weak [a]in Him, yet we will live with Him because of the power of God *directed* toward you.5 Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you [b]fail the test? 6 But I trust that you will realize that we ourselves [c]do not fail the test.<sup>1</sup>**

“We have no visions now.” How can we have? We may eat and drink (and sedate) all visions away. The glutton and the drunkard (and the addict) can have nothing but nightmare. A materialistic age can only have a materialistic religion. We may r=grieve the Spirit, quench the Spirit; we may also eat and drink (and drug ourselves) and live (so) as to divest the mind of its wings.” This was the opinion of J. Parker, an English Congregationalist minister (b. 9 April 1830 – d. 28 November 1902) I added the addiction piece to fill out the materialistic range of those who deny visions. These earth-bound folk remind me of the resurrection deniers that Paul addresses in 1 Cor. 15:12-19. They don’t seem to realize that if you start off with the premise that men don’t rise from the dead; then it follows logically and rationally, that not even Christ rose from the dead *because we assert, a priori, that resurrection doesn’t happen!* Even in our day, some scoffers demand that we definitively prove Jesus rose from the dead. Such posturing throws us immediately on the defensive *when our position is one of faithful proclamation.* We say on the basis of many reliable witnesses, including eyewitnesses, that Jesus, after three days in the grave appeared and manifested himself fully alive to hundreds of people—therefore the historical witness is enormously strong even if physical evidence is absent—historically timed out so to speak. However, witnessing contemporaneous with the events testifies that Jesus’ resurrection was real—neither a vision, nor hallucination, nor even an event of group hysteria (where people imagine what they urgently desire to see). The demand for definitive proof is *materialistic* and has its roots in skeptical scientism where nothing is true except what is immediately apparent to the senses. If we say that only things that can be measured, or sensed are true and useful, our universe will be more than half emptied of things that matter, and are immaterially real.

If visions are narrowly defined as “inspired revelation truth,” there are grounds, such as the sufficiency of Scripture and the closed canon which support that exclusion. But if by visions we mean appearances of the glorified Christ who can appear whenever and wherever He so chooses—in consequences of His free and sovereign will, then we have gone too far. It is unquestionable that “strong impressions, unaccountable impulses, uncontrollable desires, and unexpected combinations of events (surprises even) continue to occur and this validates affirmations of continued Presence in such holy visions as gladdened the early Church in both the apostolic and post-apostolic church. God is completely able to make His presence known through the Scriptures and outside the bounds of the Bible. The power of these appearances to

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<sup>1</sup> Footnotes

- a. 2 Corinthians 13:4 One early ms reads *with Him*
- b. 2 Corinthians 13:5 Lit are *unapproved*
- c. 2 Corinthians 13:6 Lit are *not unapproved*

convert remains evident in thousands of changed lives through out the ages. And if these appearances conform to Scriptural truth, their truthfulness is confirmed. Truth has no expiration date.

In our sample of conversion events (Isaiah in the year that King Uzziah died, Peter at the miracle of the fishes on the shores of Galilee, and Saul confronted on the Damascus Road) there is evidence for the timelessness and timeliness both. There are many, many other examples of visions: Moses at the the burning bush, Gideon threshing wheat in a wine press. Manoah's wife announcing Samson's birth, Jacob's wrestling match, Abraham and Sarah's God encounters which punctuate the Biblical record with surprise and salvation. Each one astonishing, awesome, if not terrifying—each leaving the recipient wondering that he, or she is still alive! My point is not found in the multiplicity of these visions, rather their dispersion through time with the idea that their continuance is not exceptional.

In Isaiah 6 the prophet records that he saw the Lord, high and lifted up, seated on his throne and his royal robes filled the temple. It was an awesome and majestic sight that left Isaiah speechless—that is, undone, stunned, struck dumb with amazement. The holiness and purity of God highlighted his personal sin, defilement and pollution. He knew he as a sinner had no business in the presence of the Holy One of Israel. To remedy this situation one of the seraphim flew towards him with a coal from the altar of the blood sacrifice, known as *Paraclete*, where intercession and expiation was made for human sin. He was cleansed, purged and purified by the power of God symbolized by fire—prepared for dedicated service to the Lord. This vision relates to the call, and the commissioning of Isaiah.

When we move forward in time to the preaching ministry of Jesus on the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, (Luke 5:1-11) we observe that the Lord himself enters a fishing boat so as to speak to the pressing crowd. Afterwards Jesus told Peter to launch out further and to let down his nets for a catch. Though exhausted from a long, frustrating night of fishing—during which they caught nothing!—Peter obeys the Lord and they catch such a large amount of fish that two fishing boats are filled with fish practically to sinking, from nets which were near to bursting with their payload. It might be possible to suggest that this was repayment for the boat rental but that would miss the whole point that this was a miracle of God that brought Peter to his knees in astonished amazement—just like Isaiah in his vision—and he cries out **Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinful man. *There were many witness of this.*** But the Lord far from leaving him, enlisted Peter as his disciple and altered his career: **From now on you will be fishing for/catching men** in a supernatural mission of kingdom expansion. The holiness of Jesus elicited the same results as the holiness of God did upon Isaiah in his temple revelation!

A third instance, this time with the crucified and glorified Lord, we read in Acts 9:1-16, about the encounter of Saul (later Paul) on the Damascus Road some 138 miles from Jerusalem. Again there is a sudden, amazing and astounding even that knock Saul on the ground and leaves him both blind and speechless. He is entirely aware of his sinfulness in the presence of Divine holiness and he cries out, **What would you have me do? *There were many witnesses of this occurrence!*** The calling, cleansing and commissioning of Saul as he becomes God's loving servant Paul are strikingly reminiscent of Isaiah's earlier experience. Paul like Peter was driven to his knees and he prayed fervently—a far cry from the persecution (**breathing threats and slaughter**) which he had planned to inflict on Christians in Damascus!

These three examples of our spiritual religion should quell the materialists who maintain that such things do not, yea, cannot happen in these days. But the record says, they do! With Peter

and Paul there were witnesses, far more witnesses than there were attest to Isaiah's vision encounter according to the record—but measured by the results in all three men's lives, we can, indeed, must infer that something rather radical had occurred—they were radically converted!

So as we examine ourselves to see **if Christ be in us**, let us note the commonality of the religious experience of Isaiah, Peter and Paul. They all had encounters with the divine that left them stunned, amazed, speechless and humbled. Everyone of them had a realization of personal sinfulness and that sense of sin carried an affect of woe, of dismay at one's un-entitled wretchedness, unworthiness and sense of dislocation. By that I mean such a keen sense of God's holiness, purity and majesty that each would declare that either their sins be remitted, or forgiven or they should properly die! However, each encounter was an engagement (a call, a commission, a summons to service); they were at the beginning of a mission—and not checking in to check out! This then is the template for divine encounters—the sorrow for sin, coupled with an awareness of unworthiness of self in the presence of the Other and particularly a sense of the utter worth of the God with whom they had to do.

Is it too much to suggest that if we have no visions of God anymore, in this age of materialism—yes, inside and all around us, the church, gluttony, drunkenness, addiction!—**Who will rescue, or redeem, us from this body of sin?!**

**21 I find then the [a]principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. 22 For I joyfully concur with the law of God [b]in the inner man, 23 but I see a different law in [c]the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner [d]of the law of sin which is in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from [e]the body of this death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.<sup>2</sup>**

If we have no such encounters with the holy on an ongoing basis, perhaps we have no conviction, no remorse and no genuine conversion either. If we do not sense **Jesus Christ living within you/us** in the course of self-examination, what do we have to testify of? **See if you are in the faith**, Paul exhorts us. Isaiah, Peter and Paul are **in the faith** assuredly, their soul condition is certain; but what of our standing?

Earthquakes have aftershocks. Well, what of Christian conversion? Do the results, after shocks, of our Christ encounter demonstrate the reality of our new birth? What evidence do we have to cite regarding our new nature, our **new creatureliness**? Is it a temperate appetite? Sobriety? The maintenance of a clean, drug-free life going forward? And if these are in place in the testimony of our inner life, what has followed that signifies our godly servanthood? Our spiritual stewardship?

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<sup>2</sup>

Footnotes

- a. Romans 7:21 Lit *law*
- b. Romans 7:22 Or *concerning*
- c. Romans 7:23 Lit *my members*
- d. Romans 7:23 Lit *in*
- e. Romans 7:24 Or *this body of death*

As we embark on this new year, having examined ourselves and discovered that we are indeed **of the faith**, or that we are aware of **Christ living in us the hope of glory**, we should be asking the Lord, “What would you have us do?” Paul’s experience is instructive. He went into Damascus, fasted and prayed and waited. He waited for healing of his blindness and he waited to hear **what he should do—or learn of all that he should suffer to bear/exalt the name of Jesus before the Gentiles, kings and the people of Israel!** Winston Churchill, on May 13th 1940, declared, “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.” I hope I do him no dishonor to suggest that there is some parallel here, in these words, to what the Lord may have disclosed to Paul regarding his future suffering. Yes, there was a crown, a future glory, high tribute and praise for Paul but that was for later—the other side of suffering . . . and eventual martyrdom on the orders of Nero. Yes, an ironically, Paul’s execution occurred after Nero himself had perished!

If we be true Christians, we will ask the Lord, What would you have us suffer that your name might be glorified? What can we do to make our lives all about you? Show us the work, give us brave testimonies so that in the banquet hall of heaven, something good might be said about our faithfulness, and our service as we are introduced! To God be the glory and the honor.

**Amen.**