

A scenic mountain landscape with two cyclists on a trail. The background features a large, snow-capped mountain peak under a clear blue sky. In the foreground, two cyclists are riding on a dirt trail on a grassy slope. One cyclist is wearing a red jacket and the other is wearing a blue jacket. The overall scene is bright and clear, suggesting a sunny day.

the
VISION
thing

28 vision devotionals for your team

Cory Hartman

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FOREWORD

Vision is cool.

We want vision from our leaders. Companies want it for themselves. Churches want it too.

When I say that vision is cool, I don't just mean that vision is hip and trendy. I mean that vision really is cool when you have it or when you're around people who have it or are in an organization that has it. As Will Mancini puts it, "[Vision] clarity isn't everything, but it changes everything."

I'm defining *vision* as "**human beings' spiritual 'sight' to see things the way God does.**" Here are twenty-eight short devotions to Bible-ground and Spirit-charge your thinking on the topic.

Included with each devotion is a set of three questions. Use these not only to fire your own thinking but also to lead a conversation with your team. Select a devotion and print out a copy of it for each team member before your next meeting.

I pray you see clearly!

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(All scripture references are from the New English Translation unless otherwise marked.)

#1 – SEEING GOD

Q1 – In your experience, when people say that their group needs vision, what do they hope to gain by getting it?

When churches (or other organizations or individuals) first grasp their need for vision, when you first hear people in them say something like, “We need vision,” it’s usually closely followed by something like, “. . . because need to know what to do.” This is both right and wrong.

It is right because, for one, vision (as defined previously) usually (though not always) requires people to do something. It is also right because usually the people who say, “We need to know what to do,” truly don’t know what to do and really ought to be doing something different from what they’re doing.

But it is also wrong. If your attention to vision is entirely focused on what you are supposed to do, you will never find it and you are likely to make great mistakes.

Remember that vision, true vision, is what God sees. And **what God sees first of all is himself.**

In fact, there is a recurring pattern in Scripture, especially in the first ten books of the Bible, that we can expect of a true vision from God. Let’s look at Moses as an example.

In Exodus 3, as Moses, Pharaoh’s-adopted-son-turned-fugitive-shepherd is tending to the flock in the wilderness, he sees a bush on fire that doesn’t burn up. When he comes closer, God reveals that it is he, intoning, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (v. 6) So the first thing that Moses has a vision of is **God himself.**

Then God continues,

I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. I have come down to deliver them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up from that land to a land

that is both good and spacious, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the region of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites [vv. 7-8].

Note that what God is telling Moses here is what God has been up to and what he plans to do next. So the second thing that Moses has a vision of is **what God is doing**.

It is only then that God says to Moses, “So now go, and I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt” (v. 10). Now at last, finally, the third thing that Moses has a vision of is **what he is supposed to do**.

To repeat, the pattern of vision is

- **God himself**
- **what God is doing**
- **what we are supposed to do**

But this is easy for us to miss. It was even easy for Moses to miss. Because once God finished his statement, Moses’ first words were, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, or that I should bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (v. 11).

Now see that Moses was both right and wrong. He did correctly hear his assignment—that was truly part of the vision—but he starts at the end: what he is supposed to do. That was the focus, as it ever is with us most of the time.

God addresses Moses’ concern by assuring Moses that he would be with him (v. 12), which also reminded him that *God* is really the one bringing the Israelites out of Egypt. Then God repeats the pattern of vision over again to see that Moses gets it.

- In vv. 14-15 God reveals again who he is, **God himself** (“I Am Who I Am”).
- In vv. 16-17, he tells Moses to bring together Israel’s elders and tell them **what God is doing** (“I have attended carefully to you . . . I will bring you up”).
- Then in v. 18 God tells Moses **what he is supposed to do** with the elders (“go to the king of Egypt and tell him . . .”).

Then, as a final encouragement to Moses, God returns to what he is going to do in vv. 20-22 (“I will extend my hand and strike Egypt . . . I will grant this people favor with the Egyptians”). Poor Moses is still wrapped up in what he is supposed to do, so 4:1-17 entirely revolves around Moses’ protests about what he is supposed to do and God’s replies to him about how he is supposed to do it.

You can see the same pattern of a true vision in a number of places. You see it with Abraham, Jacob, Joshua, Manoah, and Samuel. And you see it with Jesus. Jesus, himself God, the only one who had seen God the Father completely (John 1:18), said,

I tell you the solemn truth, the Son can do nothing on his own initiative, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him everything he does, and will show him greater deeds than these, so that you will be amazed. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes [John 5:19-21].

So even the vision that Jesus, the Son of God, had was first of **God himself**, then of **what God is doing**, then of **what he is supposed to do**.

The bent of humanity—the bent of sin—is to focus so intently on ourselves that even when we want to do good for God or others (or are called to it like it or not), we still focus on ourselves. But if you truly seek vision, the first thing is to surrender your attention to what you are supposed to do. Don’t even seek what God is doing. The first and most important thing to see is God himself. That’s where true vision begins.

Q2 – *How have you seen this three-stage vision pattern play out in another biblical, historical, or contemporary example?*

Q3 – *What, if anything, do you have to **stop** doing in order to **start** seeing God’s vision God’s way?*

#2 – SEEING GOD THROUGH JESUS

Q1 – What do you think it means that “no one has ever seen God” (John 1:18) when the Bible and history tell of lots of people who have seen God?

No one can have God’s vision without first gaining a vision of God. But there’s a problem: **no one can have a vision of God**, not a full and unobscured one anyway (Ex. 33:18-23). God “lives in unapproachable light, whom no human has ever seen or is able to see” (1 Tim. 6:16). “No one has ever seen God,” says John. But the good news is that “[t]he only one, himself God, who is in closest fellowship with the Father, has made God known” (John 1:18). “We saw *his* glory—the glory of the one and only, full of grace and truth, who came from the Father” (v. 14, emphasis mine). Whose glory? Jesus’, the Word become flesh.

As “the radiance of [God’s] glory and the representation of his essence” (Heb. 1:3), the Son’s glory is the glory of the Father. In fact, it might be appropriate to say that **the Son himself is the glory of the Father**. But because of the incomprehensible fact of the Son’s incarnation, we are able to see the Son even though the Father is hidden from us in light. Because the Son is exactly like the Father and represents him perfectly—all that is true of one is true of the other except that the Son is fathered by the Father—when we see Jesus the Son, we see God the Father. “[T]he one who sees me sees the one who sent me,” Jesus said (John 12:45). “The person who has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9).

But a great difficulty appears. It seems impossible that we who cannot see Jesus with our eyes the way Jesus’ twelve disciples did are able to see the Father. But after Jesus ascended to heaven God made a way that all people could see his Son. “God, who said ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ is the one who shined in our hearts to give us the light of the glorious knowledge of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). God implants the face of Christ, the radiance of God’s glory, inside people’s psyches so that even though they don’t see him with their eyes, they see him just the same.

Furthermore, everyone who sees the Son not only sees the Father but also sees the Holy Spirit, and vice versa. “[T]he world . . . does not see him or know him,” Jesus told

the Twelve, but they saw and knew him, because he was with them in Jesus “*and will be in you*” (John 14:17). **So the person with the Spirit within “sees” the Spirit, by seeing him sees the Son, and by seeing the Son sees the Father who cannot be seen.**

Therefore, anyone who wants true vision, who wants to see things the way God sees them, has to begin by **fixing their eyes on Jesus**, because this is the only way to see the God who is the beginning and the end of all true vision. And steadily viewing Jesus is not possible without the knowledge that comes by the Holy Spirit.

So how does one get the Holy Spirit? That’s easy—you just have to ask the Father (Luke 11:13)! But I believe it’s important (more for yourself than for him) to specify just what you’re asking for. You are not asking for the Holy Spirit so that you can have a vision of what to do. You must ask for the Holy Spirit to give you a vision of the Son of God, the Word, so that in him you would see the Father. **When the sole vision you crave is a vision of the Father, he will give it**—and with it much more vision besides.

Q2 – *On a scale of 1 to 5, how prominent is the name of Jesus Christ in the day-to-day language of your church? What persons, concepts, or terms take his place?*

Q3 – *What steps could you take to help those who lead fix their eyes on Jesus in the next thirty days?*

#3 – THE IMPORT OF THE VISIBLE

Q1 – Who have you known who couldn't "see the forest for the trees" on a particular issue?

When people long for vision—that is, to see things as God sees them—it is not because they are physically blind. This is obvious, but it bears repeating. People are generally capable of seeing what is around them, but **they often cannot grasp the meaning, value, and significance of what they are seeing.** In large part, that is what vision is.

Some think and teach that any person can attain vision if they simply look more closely, more intently, more methodically, more deliberately at the world around them, if they don't just *see* but *look at* the world that passes before their eyes continually. There is a good deal of truth to this. I remember in a seminary class being assigned to list seventy-five factual (and thus easily demonstrable) observations about one verse in the Bible. It sounds impossible (and actually, I think it was), but it was amazing how much detail one can see if one takes the time to look at it. And **from detail may spring insight.**

But insight is not guaranteed. When it comes to seeing God's vision, close observation of the world he made and silently orders and directs may be a strong preparation for vision, and if God blesses someone with vision it may come through their close observation of the world—but **only if God blesses them, only if he intervenes supernaturally.** A person may spend a lifetime observing nature far more carefully than the average person does and yet never see God's nature reflected in it (Rom. 18:1-23). A person may spend a lifetime scrutinizing the Bible far more than the average person does and yet never see the glory of God reflected in the face of the Christ revealed on every page (2 Cor. 3:12-4:6; John 5:37-40). A church may spend thousands of dollars and man-hours gathering data about their community or target demographic and yet never see the ripened grain and the lost sheep and why it matters so much to God to bring them in or what bringing them in actually means.

Vision is truly seeing what is in front of your physical eyes, but **true vision doesn't come merely by looking harder. It comes from a spiritual revelation** that by default every person lacks, that only God bestows, that opens the eyes to see.

Q2 – *Where (if anywhere) are you or your team overbalancing paying attention to what you're doing at the expense of seeking God for insight?*

Q3 – *How would you explain the difference between close observation and supernatural insight to a hard-working leader-in-training?*

#4 – MISAPPLYING THE VISION

Q1 – When have you seen someone's vision turn into "tunnel vision"?

I propose that when people seek vision most of them are seeking what they ought to do. Some thoughtfully seek a vision of what is as God sees it. But before seeing either of these, a person needs a vision of God himself. This is not only because God generally does not give a vision of what is or what we ought to do before displaying himself. It is also because **people who see the world as God sees it without seeing God are liable to misapply the vision they have seen.**

The Book of Job is a prime example of this. One of Job's erstwhile friends, Eliphaz, describes a vision he had in which it was revealed to him that not a single human being is righteous before God, as evidenced by the sudden deaths that afflict humankind (Job 4:12-21). But Eliphaz could not apply this true principle properly to Job. In fact, God angrily rebukes Eliphaz "because you have not spoken about me what is right, as my servant Job has" (42:7).

But Job himself had received his own rebuke from God. Job had seen that God destroys and renders impotent the mighty and important and uncovers their supposed wisdom for the foolishness it is (12:13-13:2). But that true vision of Job did not prevent God from reproving him as one "who darkens counsel with words without knowledge" (38:2).

What Job, Eliphaz, and the rest were missing was not a grasp of true principles but a vision of the God of truth himself. Once Job saw God in his dreadful majesty, he despised himself and repented in dust and ashes (42:6). Then he really saw, and then he was saved.

Knowing what the world is and how it works form an important element of vision. But these, even if correct, will lead us foolish humans astray if we lack a vision of the God from whence they come. We are bound to misapply the principles if our eyes wander from the God who speaks them.

There are so many people and churches with no vision at all. But **of those who have grasped God's vision, how many succumb to the temptation to apply it with such singleminded enthusiasm that God himself moves offstage?** What havoc visionaries without a vision of God can wreak.

Q2 – *Think of a time that a leader's or organization's zeal to do good resulted in destructive consequences. Did God move out of their focus, and if so, how do you think that happened?*

Q3 – *What regular disciplines can keep God at the center of your vision while you're working to implement his vision?*

#5 – FOR GOD’S GLORY

Q1 – What is a biblical example of a person who crashed because they did not give glory to God? What caused them to stumble?

When you actually get vision, it’s pretty awesome. Paul the Apostle experienced an extreme example of this (2 Cor. 12:1-7). He once got a vision from God so awesome that God allowed “a messenger of Satan” to afflict him ever after so that he wouldn’t get full of himself. Vision can be that exhilarating. That might partly explain why it’s so rare.

For this reason, **it is crucial that everyone who seeks vision from God be focused like a laser on the glory of God.** Vision is empowering, but ironically it can also distract from the Vision Giver. Those who are fired with zeal over the wonder of God’s vision but get distracted from the Visionary God do more damage than a person with no vision at all. These people have much more energy than the average person, which makes their inadvertant misdirection that much more destructive. (Does this explain certain heresies and cults?) That’s why God always starts the vision with a vision of himself.

Also for this reason, **the vision doesn't just come from God but goes to God. He is both the beginning and end of true vision.**

Joshua learned this lesson. Like other true visionaries of the first few books of the Bible, when Joshua met God as “the commander of Yahweh’s army,” he saw God (Josh. 5:14-15), then he saw what God was going to do (6:2), then he saw what he was supposed to do (6:3-5). The thing that God did—toppling the wall of Jericho in one instant with no siege equipment—was so far out there, so astonishingly impossible, that no one but God could get the credit. God gave Joshua that vision for God’s own glory.

The next episode proves the point (7:1-8:29). Joshua led Israel to attack the small city of Ai, believing that it would fall without special assistance. To the contrary, without God helping the Israelites, the defenders of Ai routed them. Why? Because Israel did not adequately give the glory of the previous vision to God.

One way this happened was through Joshua's failure to inquire of God how Ai was to be captured. But the bigger issue was that a guy named Achan took plunder from Jericho rather than leaving it for the Lord. The whole city, its inhabitants, and all it contained was to be devoted to God like a whole-burnt offering of the firstfruits of the conquest of Canaan—putting all the valuables in Yahweh's treasury, slaughtering everything that breathed, and torching the remainder. Achan's sin was attributed by God to all Israel as a failure to give him the glory he deserved. The glory he deserved, you see, was all of it. The barely noticeable fraction that Achan took for himself entirely compromised the whole. **God's vision is for God's glory.**

True, "the glory of God" is not specific enough to constitute vision in the concrete—that vision is about *how* God gets glory for himself, the specific way he intends masterfully to use frail and clumsy people as his instruments. Also truly, every person, church, or whatever should have as its ultimate objective the glory of God. **So the glory of God is a given. But taking it as a given does not mean taking it for granted.**

There is a grave temptation to fail at just this point. In fact, **only those who have experienced the euphoria of truly grasping a vision and implementing it are allowed to reach the place where this temptation arises.** It is they who have the greatest power to harm by failing at it. And so it is crucial on the front end, even before the vision is revealed perhaps, to be firmly convinced that God's vision is always, ever, only for God's glory.

When the only glory the visionary craves is to bask in the glory of the Vision Giver, then he or she is on the right track.

Q2 – *How comfortable are you emotionally with God getting all the glory for the success of your ministry?*

Q3 – *Who is the humblest person that you know who has experienced notable success? What would you ask that person about the temptations that success brings to the ego? (Consider asking them.)*

#6 – RIGHT NOW

Q1 – Give a situation in which a sudden message from God required a sudden change of direction from someone.

Anyone who has received true vision must remain open to new vision. Vision may be augmented. It may also expire. It's not enough to have seen what God sees in the past if there is something he intends to show you right now.

Past vision was not enough for the Exodus generation of Israel. They had seen all the signs of God's power in Egypt and in the wilderness, but it was not enough for them the first time they reached the promised land. They were not looking to see God's power proceed before them again, so they did not obey and march into the land to take it (Num. 14:21-23).

Past vision was not enough for Nathan the Prophet. As a seer he had probably seen numerous visions of God and his ways. When David shared his plan to build a permanent temple for God, Nathan thought it was a fine idea and blithely told him to go ahead. But God had an entirely different plan—David wouldn't build God a house, but rather the other way around—and God confronted Nathan in the middle of the night to tell him (2 Sam. 7:4-17).

Understand: when God gives you a vision, don't quit following it, no matter how long it takes. Sometimes a single vision lasts for years. But always remain attentive to new vision for new circumstances. And **never rely on past faith or past experiences to serve you in the present.** Always seek God for his vision for right now.

Q2 – How are we to remain open to new vision while we are working to accomplish what we already know to do—and vice versa?

Q3 – What disciplines can your team adopt so that when one person receives new vision from God, the rest of the team is open to it?

#7 – DREAMS

Q1 – Have you ever had a (sleeping) dream that seemed to tell you something important? What was it?

Have you noticed that in the Bible, a lot of the time when people get a vision of what God sees for the world it's in a dream? I'm not talking a metaphorical (though very real), Martin Luther King, Jr.-style dream. **I'm talking about a literal, I'm-physically-sleeping-when-I-see-it kind of dream.** Abraham had one (Gen. 15:12-21). So did Jacob (actually twice [31:10-13; 46:1-4], not counting his vision of God [28:10-17]). Then there's Joseph, Jacob's son (37:5-11), Joseph, Mary's husband (Matt. 1:18-2:23), and many others. And this isn't just a before-Jesus thing either, because Paul had at least two (Acts 16:9; 18:9-10).

I don't think I've ever heard anyone teach much about acquiring a vision from God by dreaming, perhaps because it's hard to know how to apply it practically. But if we're going to be biblical in our approach to vision, I guess we had better be open to it. **Attend to your dreams, because you never know when the Lord is going to show up.**

Q2 – How might a person discern whether the dream that they had is a message from God?

Q3 – What would be necessary to prepare your team so that if one of you heard from God in a dream, the others would respond positively to the message?

#8 – SEEING GOD ‘WITH’ SOMEONE

Q1 – Who have you seen whose skill or success convinced you that God was with them?

I have maintained that in order to have true vision—which is seeing what God sees—we first need to see God himself. **Very often the glimpse that people have of God—thus getting them started on their path to vision—is seeing God “with” someone else.**

Let’s take Joseph, for example. His master Potiphar’s first vision of Yahweh, the true God, was “observ[ing] that the LORD was with [Joseph] and that the LORD made everything he was doing successful” (Gen. 39:3). This man who didn’t worship Yahweh was seeing what God was doing for the first time. He saw that God was going to keep blessing Joseph, so it was wise for him to get in line with that.

A few centuries later, Balaam, who had been hired to curse Israel, refused to do it but rather blessed Israel instead because he saw that Yahweh was with Israel (Num. 23:7-10; 24:1-9, 15-24). His “eyes were open” to God’s favor on that nation; he saw what God saw and got in line with it.

When King Solomon made his famous verdict between the two prostitutes, word got around throughout Israel, and “they held the king in awe, because they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice” (1 Kings 3:28, NIV). With God in Solomon’s mind, no one could get away with anything, so they got in line with God’s intentions.

Not everyone in your world will see the vision that God gives you or your church. In fact, most will not, at least not initially. But if your vision really is from God, then you won’t just have God’s vision but God himself. **The first glimpse people get of the vision is the powerful, prospering presence of God with you.**

In order to properly communicate vision, **we must communicate God by revealing him through our impossible power and success.** When people wonder, “How could someone so ordinary do something so extraordinary?—it must be God,” they have started down the path to catch the vision.

Q2 – *When is prosperity a marker of God’s favor, and when is it a fleshly distraction?*

Q3 – *How do you respectfully redirect the attention of one of your “fans” from yourself to God’s kingdom-activity?*

#9 – SEEING THE INSIDE

Q1 – What about a person is most likely to influence your first impression of them?

True vision is seeing what God sees, and a lot of what God sees is people. As Samuel learned when he was sent to Jesse's house to anoint the next king (1 Sam. 16:1-13), God doesn't look at what people look at when people look at people. **We see what's on the outside, but God looks at the heart.** God saw the heart of a warrior, of a ruler, of a passionate lover of himself (and others, for good and for ill) in the smooth-faced, overlooked shepherd, David.

Where others saw deeply and genuinely holy people when they looked at their religious leaders, John the Baptist saw children of vipers (Matt. 3:7-10). Peter looked into the heart of Simon the sorcerer, ostensibly an excited new convert from occultism to Jesus, and saw a heart still mired “in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity” (Acts 8:23, NASB). But when Peter looked into the heart of Cornelius, whom he would earlier have considered an unclean Gentile, he saw someone who did what was right and was welcomed by the God he feared (10:34-35).

But the master of this vision was Jesus, who read everyone he saw. He saw that Nathanael was “a true Israelite, in whom there is no deceit” (John 1:47), that an earnest young man had made wealth his god (Mark 10:17-21), that a thoughtful scribe was close to God's reign (12:28-34), and that a widow's two copper coins were the extravagant gift of all she had (Luke 21:1-4).

No vision that involves people will be successful unless it is invested with a true vision of people. And no matter how perceptive we are, we will always fall short of a true vision of people without the whisper of God's Spirit as in the ear of Samuel and in the mind of Jesus. God sees what's on the inside, the heart. To be true visionaries, we must also.

Q2 – What are some negative consequences for ministry when you assess a person based on outward indicators rather than on God's view of their heart and mind?

Q3 – *How would you illustrate the difference between how people view people and how God views people to a pastoral search committee that asked for your advice?*

#10 – SEEING THE PRESENT

Q1 – What part does present assessment play in casting future vision?

Generally, when people talk about vision, they are talking about imagining and articulating a future for people to press toward. But vision isn't just about the future—it's about the present. In fact, **your vision of the future won't do much good if you don't have true vision of where you are right now.**

The Old Testament prophets were masters of this. For example, before Ezekiel saw his spectacular visions of apocalyptic war and a reconstituted, resettled Israel (chs. 38-48)—and much, much else besides—he saw God's vision of the current detestable idolatry of the denizens of Jerusalem (chs. 8-11). Ezekiel didn't just have a vision of the future but a vision of the present.

One particularly interesting prophet in this regard is Jeremiah, because through Jeremiah God repeatedly urged Judah to see his vision of themselves. Yahweh urged Judah to see that when they submitted to other nations when they asked for help, they were rejecting their God and humiliating themselves (Jer. 2:14-19). He urged them to see that despite their protests of purity, they had made themselves unclean by relentlessly pursuing Baal in worship (2:22-25). He urged them to see that their freewheeling worship of any deity they could find was adulterous promiscuity (3:1-10). He urged them to see which way is the good way to go, the way he had showed them generations before, that would lead them to peaceful rest, but they would not go there (6:16-17). He urged them to see the desolation at Shiloh, where he had once dwelt, so that they would understand that the mere presence of his temple in Jerusalem was not enough to spare them from his judgment (7:1-15).

True vision isn't just a vision of where you are going. It's a vision of where you are. And **you can't motivate people toward God's vision of the future if you don't convince them of God's vision of the present.**

Q2 – How do things go wrong when a church pursues a future-oriented vision without a clear view of the church at present?

Q3 – *What has God revealed about the condition of your church and its people at the present time?*

#11 – SEEING THE FUTURE

Q1 – In your opinion, what is the biggest (so to speak) prophetic vision recounted in the Bible?

People generally assume that vision means seeing the future—specifically, a good future that motivates people to strive toward it. And in one sense, it is. But even in this sense, **our visions often fall far short of the biblical scale.**

Where vision appears by far the most often in the Bible is in the prophetic books of the Old Testament and Revelation in the New Testament. Isaiah’s entire sixty-one-chapter book is entitled “The *vision* concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (Isa. 1:1, NASB, emphasis mine), setting the tone for the entire prophetic corpus. And one quickly loses count of all the times that John says “I saw” in his visionary book of prophecy (Rev. 1:1-3).

But **the visions of these men were not happy, stretching-but-reachable futures that motivate human striving.** They were far, far bigger. Their visions were not “private,” by which I mean that they did not pertain to a particular group or slice of the pie of reality. **At their furthest extent, they encompassed the entire cosmos.** And their visions generally did not depict a short- or medium-term goal. **Usually the end of the vision was far beyond the visionary’s lifetime;** usually it was the end of history itself. And the content of the vision was not something that any person, nation, church, movement, or even all humanity together could possibly produce. That was the whole point—**it is within the capacity of God alone.**

This is not the only kind of vision God gives; he does give vision to persons and groups that come to pass within months or years and in which human obedience has a major role to play for the vision to become reality. But it is very important that we keep those visions in perspective. **Whatever vision we may receive that God employs us to achieve, no matter how large it seems to us, it is a mere pixel in the vast expanse of God’s vision of everything.** And don’t rule out that he may give you that vision—a vision you are not to strive for, but simply to stand in awe of.

Q2 – *In light of the cosmic scope of God's activity, does your church's vision loom too large in your eyes? Or not appear large enough?*

Q3 – *How would you describe the importance of the huge visions of the biblical prophets to a young leader eager to cast vision for his or her ministry?*

#12 – SEEING THE PAST

Q1 – In your opinion, how big a role should a group's past play in discerning its future?

When people talk about gaining vision, they are almost talking about a vision of the future. Some recognize that true vision also requires a vision of the present. However, **true vision also includes a vision of the past.**

This is counterintuitive to many people, because they assume that vision is all about where you are going. But **it is foolish to underestimate the impact on where you are going that comes from where you came from.** It is also foolish to underestimate the difficulty in gaining a clear vision of the past. The proverb that “hindsight is always 20/20” is frequently untrue. While it may wear well as an observation about an individual’s experience, it is far less true as an observation about the task of the historian.

Reality is mind-bogglingly complex, so all of us, when we look at the dynamic relationships between persons (as in our families) and masses of persons (as in the world at large), inevitably make generalizations and simplifications to try to take all the data and make sense of it, reducing it to conceivable size. This isn't bad—as a matter of fact, it is a necessary part of really understanding it. But **how do we know that our generalizations and simplifications are the right ones?** We don't without God's vision.

God sees all (which we don't) and has the definitive interpretation (which we lack). At times he reveals his vision of history so that people can serve him more faithfully in the present. This is why so much of the Bible is composed of books of history. Chronicles is a particularly good example, because we see there that the people who could be trusted to write reliable histories were always prophets. Samuel the seer, Nathan the prophet, and Gad the seer wrote the complete chronicles of the life and reign of David (1 Chr. 29:29-30). Nathan the prophet, Ahijah the Shilonite, and Iddo the seer did the same for Solomon (2 Chr. 9:29), as did Iddo the seer and Shemaiah the prophet for Rehoboam (12:15). Later, the account of Hezekiah's reign would be recorded in Isaiah's “vision” (32:32).

God sees all, past, present, and future, at once. So if we're to be graced with his vision, we will see clearly not only the future or even the present, but also the past. **We need to see the past clearly to live the present faithfully and enter the future confidently.**

Q2 – *How would you describe the impact that a group's past experiences has on its present behavior?*

Q3 – *How would your team go about acquiring a clearer vision of your church's past and its relevance to its present and future? How about your community's?*

#13 – SEEING SIGNS

Q1 – Have you ever seen a miracle? How did you know it was a miracle?

Some hope that by achieving a true vision from God, they will see miracles, and rightly so. Others recognize that getting a vision from God is a miracle itself. But it is also important to understand that **without vision, one cannot recognize a miracle for what it is.**

The label that John uses for miracles in his Gospel is translated “sign.” The choice of that term is—there is no better way to put it—“significant.” When God momentarily upsets the normal pattern of nature at the command of the Son—i.e., when Jesus works a miracle—it is not for nothing. And it is not merely for the immediate benefit of the recipients of the miracle, whether the host and guests at a wedding reception (John 2:1-11) or a pair of bereaved sisters (ch. 11). As a sign, the miracle points to something else. If a person sees a miracle but does not see what the miracle signifies, it is like hearing a beautiful song in an unknown language—a measure of its loveliness may be perceived and enjoyed, but the point of the performance is lost.

Perhaps the supreme illustration of this is when Jesus fed five thousand men (plus women and children), the only miracle performed by Jesus that appears in all four Gospels. John goes out of his way to demonstrate how this miracle was a sign (ch. 6). The day after the miracle, the huge crowd pursued Jesus to the synagogue in Capernaum, where Jesus told them, “I tell you the solemn truth, you are looking for me not because you saw miraculous signs, but because you ate all the loaves of bread you wanted” (v. 26). Note—these are the people who had not only seen but *tasted* the miracle Jesus had performed, but **they never saw the sign because they failed to grasp what the miracle communicated.**

In the course of the conversation Jesus says, “. . . my father is giving you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. . . . I am the bread of life. The one who comes to me will never go hungry, and the one who believes in me will never be thirsty” (vv. 32-33, 35). The multiplication of bread to many to keep them alive a few more hours was a sign of God’s gift of his Son to keep myriads of believers alive for eternity.

The crowd did not see this. They really had a problem when Jesus asserted that “the one who believes has eternal life. . . . The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. . . . The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (vv. 47, 51, 54). The miracle was a sign of this reality, which is itself a miracle. Because they lacked vision, the crowd saw the first miracle but had no grasp of the one it pointed to.

Millions of people think that if they only saw a miracle, they would believe. Nothing could be further from the truth. **Miracles do not make people believe. Miracles make believers believe.** God the Father once spoke publicly from heaven to an entire crowd assembled around Jesus. A few thought they heard an angel. Most merely heard thunder (12:28-30).

A contrasting example is the Roman centurion who oversaw Jesus’ execution. Wild things happened when Jesus died—the curtain in the temple split, a massive earthquake struck, and dead people got up out of their graves and started walking around the city. Most of the people in Jerusalem experiencing this concurrence of unprecedented miracles would never know or believe why they happened. But the man assigned the job of killing Jesus knew. “[W]hen the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and what took place, they were extremely terrified and said, ‘Truly this one was God's Son!’” (Matt. 27:54).

That is vision. Vision isn’t seeing the miracle. **Vision is seeing that the miracle is a sign, and where the sign is pointing.**

Q2 – *What is the thought process in a person who sees a miracle but does not recognize it as a sign?*

Q3 – *How do your biases need to change for you better to recognize miracles and what God is communicating through them?*

#14 – SEEING CHRIST

Q1 – *What does it mean to be “Christ-centered”?*

Repeatedly I have asserted that all true vision starts with a vision God gives us of himself, **a vision that is really the invisible God’s self-emanation seen in his Son, Jesus Christ**. I’m back to that assertion again. The prophets who had overwhelming, world-shattering visions that extended far beyond their earthly careers were seeing visions of Jesus—and they knew it.

According to Peter, even though their vision came from God, a vision from outside themselves that they could take no credit for (2 Pet. 1:20-21), nevertheless they thought deeply and carefully about its implications and fulfillment:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who predicted the grace that would come to you searched and investigated carefully. They probed into what person or time the Spirit of Christ was indicating when he testified beforehand about the sufferings appointed for Christ and his subsequent glory. They were shown that they were serving not themselves but you . . . [1 Pet. 1:10-12].

These prophets tried to figure out whom the Spirit of the Anointed One was talking about. They couldn’t get a clear fix on him—though they were told that future generations would—but they knew it was Someone specific they were being shown. Though the portrait was blurry and the image was obscure, they knew that they were seeing Christ. Abraham saw Christ’s day (John 8:56). David saw Christ’s resurrection (Acts 2:22-36). Isaiah saw Christ’s glory (John 12:37-41). **They didn't know who the Christ was, but they saw him.**

This might seem like a historical curiosity for us, who have been granted to know exactly whom these prophets wrote about. But there is an application for us as well. These prophets' visions, though wide-ranging, **all came down to Christ in the end**. The visions were based on him, were centered in him, were concluded in him. Likewise for us, if our vision is truly God’s vision, it too will be based on Christ, centered on Christ, and conclude in Christ. Our vision will be all about Christ—it will be such that **if there was no Christ, our vision would be logically absurd**.

Test your vision, your family's vision, your church's vision, your organization's vision by this: when I see the vision, am I by necessity seeing Christ?

Q2 – *How prominent does the person and supremacy of Christ appear in your church's language to a stranger?*

Q3 – *What steps can your team take to ensure that the person of Christ pervades your team's language?*

#15 – SEEING HEAVEN

Q1 – When you think about heaven, do you think about a place that is far away or that is nearby? Why?

Heaven isn't too far away from the person who has a vision from God, because that person **sees the stuff of heaven here and now in this age**. This is best illustrated in Jesus' conversation with a well-schooled Jewish religious teacher named Nicodemus. (You can read the whole thing, with the biblical author's commentary, in John 3:1-21.)

Nicodemus recognized that Jesus had come from God in some sense and that God was with him because of the miracles he was doing. But while Nicodemus was still warming up for his question for Jesus, Jesus interrupts him with, "I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

A couple things in this sentence are worth explaining. First, Jesus is talking about the kingdom of God, which is God's authority to rule his world as king. It is his royal government. That government is real now, but it is obscured by the flawed (at best) and defiantly rebellious (at worst) governments that we see and live under now, which in turn are silently and invisibly manipulated by the Evil One. When Jesus returns, the invisible government of God will become visible and permanently up-end all other governments. Nevertheless, **even now God's government is visible to and among all those who acknowledge him as king** and obey him as such.

Second, the people who do see God's kingship even now and respond accordingly are people who are "born from above." The Greek word translated "from above" might best be understood as "from the top." "From the top" can have to do with time, as in "from the beginning" or "once again." (Musicians at once recognize the direction, "Take it from the top," to mean, "Go back to the beginning of the piece and play it again.") So "born from the top" has frequently been rendered "born again." As Nicodemus' response indicates, this might have been what he thought Jesus meant.

But it is more likely that Jesus intended "born from the top" to mean "born from above," from heaven. **Heaven is the spiritual realm where God's royalty is plain right now**. People who are born from there, and only they, see God's royalty plainly on earth.

Jesus explains that the way people are born from heaven is to be born by the Spirit of God. Humans come into being physically alive and spiritually dead. Just as it is absurd that a person would perceive the physical realm before their body was conceived, so also **only by God fathering us spiritually by the Holy Spirit do we perceive the spiritual order in which God is king.**

For those who have been fathered and born like this—evidenced by their faith in Jesus alone as the one who made possible their birth—heaven is not foreign territory. In fact, somehow, even though our physical eyes cannot see it, we are already there even as we dwell with our bodies here (see Eph. 2:1-10 for all this). Likewise, **we can see the activity of heaven here on earth.** We can imperfectly recognize fellow residents of heaven when we meet them. We not only see the effects on earth of the exertion of the power of heaven, but we recognize the source.

When we articulate our vision, it will necessarily entail concepts and evidences that make sense to earthly people, because we are earthly people with a vision of what God intends to do through us on earth. But **if there is not some heavenly dimension to the vision,** some way that it simply does not make sense to people who have not been “born from above,” **then it does not come from above itself** and is not a true vision at all.

Q2 – *Does your church’s vision make more sense than it should to a person who thinks on an earthly plane? Why do you think this?*

Q3 – *How would you illustrate to a curious unbeliever what it means to see the activity of heaven here on earth?*

#16 – SEEING THE NEEDY

Q1 – Who is the most recent needy person that you've seen? How did you know they were needy?

God's vision is tied to his compassion. He sees the needy people that others don't see, because he has a ceaseless motivation to meet the needs of all the dependent beings he has made. **He sees, and so he wants to help. He wants to help; therefore, he sees.**

This is best illustrated by the Son, God Incarnate. If you are like me, you expect to see Jesus paying attention to needy people that we are prone to overlook. And he does—for example, when he observes and calls attention to a poor widow, easily lost in the crowd, dropping a couple lepta (think a couple dimes) into the temple offering receptacle (Luke 21:1-4). Jesus sees this needy woman whom the rest ignored, and he honors her for giving more than all the rest, because she gave all she had. In this case, **Jesus saw a needy person whom we all would agree was needy, but whom we would overlook.**

But Jesus sees needy people in just the opposite fashion too. When a wealthy young man (Matt. 19:20), who happens to have been a community leader (Luke 18:18), ran up and dropped to his knees in front of Jesus, no one standing around would have overlooked him. Both his station and his unusually demonstrative action would have grabbed everyone's attention. But Jesus was the only person who saw that this rich man was needy (Mark 10:17-22). He lacked love for God, freedom from the possessions that possessed him, and the promise of eternal life. **Jesus saw the needs that others could not see.**

Jesus's vision of the needy was turned on all the time, and tied to his compassion as it was, he yearned for others to catch the vision too.

Then Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were bewildered and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples,

"The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest [Matt. 9:35-38]."

(See John 4:27-38 for Jesus expressing a very similar wish in a different situation.)

This is the vision he wants you and me to catch. True vision from God is seeing what God sees, and **what God sees are the needs of the whole world**—the easily identifiable needs that we easily overlook and also the profound needs of those who appear to have it all together. If we have true vision, we will see both sorts of needs all the time, and we too will not be able to turn the vision off. And we will plunge in to reap a harvest as we urge God to grant his vision to even more.

Q2 – *Are you less likely to recognize the conspicuous poverty of overlooked people or the overlooked poverty of conspicuous people?*

Q3 – *What two or more steps can you take to be quicker to perceive the needs in the human harvest around you?*

#17 – SEEING STRENGTH

Q1 – What enables a person to demonstrate resilience when the implementation of their vision comes under attack?

Everyone who devotes themselves fully to obeying the vision that God has given them will have a power encounter. It is the day that the Evil One, through those who deliberately sin, who accidentally sin, or who are simply confused and ignorant for now, tries to stop you in your tracks. He may use intimidation or temptation or discouragement when he comes, but he will come, and the stronger of the two of you will win.

When he comes, the vision may seem to unravel before your eyes. It may look hopeless. You may start thinking that you failed God, that you were not good enough to see it through. You may question whether you heard God at all. You may wonder if your calling was predestined to fail, given just to build your character somehow.

When the devil attacks and you think about quitting, may God give you vision.

Elisha the Prophet was gifted by God to see the battle plan of the king of Aram against Israel before he executed it. Elisha shared his intelligence with the king of Israel, and Israel was always waiting in ambush whenever Aram invaded. When the oft-defeated king of Aram finally discovered what the secret of Israel's success was, he adopted a new strategy: get Elisha.

Elisha and his assistant went to bed one night and woke up in a city besieged by an Aramean strike force. His assistant started freaking out: "Oh no, my master! What will we do?"

Elisha was unimpressed. "Don't be afraid, for our side outnumbers them," he said casually. And then he prayed,

"O LORD, open his eyes so he can see."

Elisha's valet raised his head and dropped his jaw. There, between the city wall and the Aramean force, was a host of blazing, angelic chariots and horses ready for battle.

Think about it: Elisha didn't act like this was a big deal. **He saw his security detail all the time.**

When the Arameans began their assault on the foes they could not see, Elisha asked God to strike them blind, and God promptly obliged. Then, in one of the most bizarre moments in the often bizarre collection we call the Bible, Elisha walks out and offers to lead the Arameans to the guy they're looking for. Then he leads this column of helpless, blind Aramean charioteers ten miles into the Israelite capital of Samaria—probably suffering an injury on the way from trying to keep from laughing—where at Elisha's request, God opens their eyes, and they find themselves surrounded. Then Elisha convinces the king of Israel to throw these marauders a huge party and send them home, with best wishes to the king of Aram. The Arameans never raided Israel again (2 Kings 6:8-23).

God opens eyes, and he blinds them, and he opens them again if he pleases. And while the world and its invisible ruler, hell-bent on crushing the church, froth and rage, **God steals their vision whenever it suits him while he gives his servants the vision of his power and protection.** Those who have true vision have a vision that they cannot be stopped.

I have frequently freaked out like Elisha's servant in the face of attack. But before I give up, God always opens my eyes so I can see his flaming chariots ensuring victory.

Q2 – *In times of opposition, what can a person do to keep standing on faith that God's deliverance will come before it arrives?*

Q3 – *In adversity, how can a person discern between opposition to be resisted stoutly and rebuke to be received humbly?*

#18 – SEEING THE DETAILS THAT MATTER

Q1 – What do you think are the three most important trends or stories in the world right now?

We are deluged with information as never before in history. That any one of us can access virtually the sum of human knowledge through a device that fits in one's pocket is astounding. In addition to the information that we may actively pursue, there is the information that is shot at us uninvited in the course of our pursuit of information or pleasure (through advertising and through the static and rabbit-trails of web searches gone awry). There is also the information we ask for (knowingly and unknowingly) through our e-mail subscriptions and social media feeds.

Amid the swirl of all the information we have at our disposal, **true vision includes picking out the details that matter, which turns haphazard “knowledge” into insight and wisdom.**

Jesus teaches an example of this which is extremely important in its own right but also serves as a model of what true vision does across a range of situations. In Matthew 24 (and parallels in Mark 13 and Luke 21), Jesus answers his disciples' two questions, “When will [the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem] happen? And what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (v. 3). As the disciples' questions were lumped together, so Jesus blends his answer to the two, alternating subtly between short-distance prophecy of Jerusalem's destruction and long-distance prophecy of his return and the end of this world.

Jesus begins by giving examples of information that does not matter. “Watch out that no one misleads you,” he warns.

For many will come in my name saying, “I am the Christ,” and they will mislead many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars. Make sure that you are not alarmed, for this must happen, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise up in arms against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these things are the beginning of birth pains [vv. 4-8].

So let's review. According to Jesus, the following information is next to meaningless as an indicator of when we are close to Jesus' return and the end of this age:

- People who claim to be Jesus returned
- Wars (yes—even in the Middle East!)
- Famines
- Earthquakes

These things are just the beginning of labor pains, which may begin long before the baby is born and are no indicator of how long labor will take.

It is amazing, therefore, how many Christians through the centuries have read these words and entirely missed Jesus' point. He clearly says, *This is the information that doesn't matter. Do not draw any conclusions about these factoids. Ignore them.* And yet believers without vision hear “rumors of wars” and conclude that the world is about to end.

But Jesus then continues by identifying three indicators that do matter, the bits that are worth picking out of the deluge of information the world floods us with.

Then they will hand you over to be persecuted and will kill you. You will be hated by all nations on account of my name. Then many will be led to sin, and they will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will appear and deceive many, and because lawlessness will increase so much, the love of many will grow cold. But the person who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole inhabited earth as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come [vv. 9-14].

Again, let's review. Here are indicators of the nearness of the end of the age that matter:

- True Christians will be hated by all nations and put to death.
- Many professing Christians will, in word or action, give up the faith and its moral requirements, being led astray by people who claim to be promoting the truth

who actually aren't, and these surrendering Christians will inform the authorities of the whereabouts of faithful Christians.

- The good news about the royal government of God in heaven about to overthrow the governments of this earth will be proclaimed and heard among every *ethnos* ("people-group") on the planet.

The first two indicators Jesus gives have happened ever since the first century, often in waves of persecution and apostasy, and in fact are happening now, in some places more than others. But we have not yet seen either of them as a truly global phenomenon—Christians hated and killed everywhere at once, and defections from the faith by compromise with the dominant society and state everywhere at once. The third indicator has gotten closer to completion every decade, especially with the rapidly accelerating pace over the last two centuries, though there are still *ethnē* composed of millions with no indigenous, attention-getting Christian witness.

This is all extremely important for followers of Jesus to know. But my point in this post comes from Jesus' conclusion: "Learn this parable from the fig tree: Whenever its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also you, when you see all these things, know that he is near, right at the door" (vv. 32-33). **True vision involves a discriminating, analytical perception shaped by the Word of God that picks out the few details that matter from the many details that don't.**

Let's face it—media, whether "established," "social," or "underground," will always be talking about wars, famines (especially famines of money), and earthquakes (and hurricanes and climate change and so on). They may even talk about the occasional false Christ, though they will *always* give loads of airplay to false prophets.

As a rule, the media will rarely talk about Christians being persecuted and killed for their faith, even though it happens every day. They will not report on defections from the faith in those terms. And they will hardly ever report on the swell of proclamation of the Christian gospel that even now is sweeping the globe and transforming the world.

But this is the information that is really telling the story of history. At the end of the age, everyone will finally discover that that is what it was all about. While we live in

this age, wars, famines of all sorts, and natural disasters surely are important, and of course Christians would not and should not be indifferent to them and the suffering they cause and how they might be prevented righteously. But without vision one would never guess that they are ultimately beside the point of it all.

As it is in the world, so it is in your church. As it is in history, so it is in your life. **The details are endless, the stream of facts overwhelming. But only a few details really matter.** Vision from God shows you which they are.

Q2 – *In what ways does the Lord bring clarity to the minds of his disciples (including yourself) amid the flood of information?*

Q3 – *What do you believe to be the most important details in your area of ministry? How confident are you in that belief?*

#19 – FOR EVERYBODY!

Q1 – What qualities and characteristics are held in common by the people who realistically have genuine access to the vision-defining process in your church? (List as many as possible.) What are the converse qualities and characteristics held by those who do not have realistic access to the vision-defining process?

True vision is for everybody!

It was a motley crew meeting daily for prayer after Jesus ascended to heaven (Acts 1:13-15). There were men and women (together in first-century Palestine?—shocking!), Judeans, Galileans, and Hellenists, patriots, Pharisees, former tax-collectors and prostitutes, widows, businessmen, probably old and young. The only things they had in common were their experiential conviction that Jesus was Lord and their heritage as the children of Abraham (though that would be redefined sooner than they would have imagined).

Part of that heritage was the tradition of the prophets—men (and sometimes women) who were filled with the Holy Spirit to bring a message from the Lord. Those prophets were special people, few and far between, an elite and awesome spiritual fraternity.

Could these praying disciples have guessed that they were all about to join it?

After the fiery wind of the Spirit burst upon them and they spontaneously went into the streets proclaiming the good news of Jesus in languages they did not know (Acts 2:1-6), Peter rose to make sense of it all, hearkening back to the words of the prophet Joel:

*“And in the last days it will be,” God says,
“that I will pour out my Spirit on all people,
and your sons and your daughters will prophesy,
and your young men will see visions,
and your old men will dream dreams.
Even on my servants, both men and women,*

I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy” [Acts 2:17-18].

From that moment on, vision was no longer the privilege of the spiritually elite few. **Vision belonged, in principle, to anyone on whom rested the Spirit of God.** No human distinctions had any bearing on whom the Spirit came upon. Every believer who asks for the Holy Spirit will receive him and the vision that he brings (Luke 11:9-13).

The early church was not a group of loyal followers of a few visionary leaders. It was a group of visionaries. That’s why they took over the world. What would happen if your church and mine were groups of visionaries too?

Q2 – *What are the pros and cons of limiting access (intentionally or unintentionally) to the group who participates in vision-definition in your church?*

Q3 – *What steps might you take to ensure that the visions God gives to people on the margins of your church would be recognized and respected by those in the know?*

#20 – ONE FOR OTHERS

Q1 – In your opinion, when a prophet spoke in the Bible, what made listeners think he or she had a genuine message from God before the prophesied result came to pass?

In my last post I asserted that since the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, true vision is available to everybody. But that doesn't mean that it's available to everybody at the same time. **Sometimes one person gets the vision for everyone, and everyone else has to trust the visionary.**

That one-person-speaking-to-all-people model isn't just an Old Testament thing. The activity of Agabus in the early church bears this out. Even in that assembly that was full of people who saw visions and had dreams from God, at least twice Agabus received messages for the whole church that no one else received directly (Acts 11:27-30; 21:10-14).

The most amazing example of this in the Bible in my opinion is the crisis Judah faced under King Jehoshaphat when the nation was threatened with invasion by the combined forces of Moab, Ammon, and Edom (2 Chr. 20:1-30). Jehoshaphat calls the people together to pray for deliverance and guidance. God answers their prayer right away by filling a Levite named Jachaziel with his Spirit. In front of thousands of praying Israelites, Jachaziel informs the nation exactly where their enemies will be positioned and also that they won't have to fight because Yahweh will do all the fighting for them.

Can you imagine the guts it would have taken for Jachaziel to break the silence and effectively take responsibility for Judah proceeding on this unusual course of action? And can you imagine the guts of Jehoshaphat, who so believed Jachaziel's message that instead of placing elite warriors as his vanguard on the way to meet the enemy, he had his worship team go first! (Think about your church's worship team. Would you do that?)

Even today, sometimes God only gives the vision to one—not necessarily the expected leader either—but he expects the rest to trust and follow.

As I read the Old Testament, I am struck by how prophets emerge and people just know that they're legit prophets. (See Samuel for one of many examples—1 Sam. 3:19-21.) Sure, after a while a prophet could develop a track record. But in Jachaziel's case, for instance, the assembly (or at least Jehoshaphat) knew that he was the real deal just by hearing it the first time.

On the other hand, there are many examples in the Old Testament of false prophets, prophets who say whatever people want to hear, whom people believed even though they hadn't really seen a vision from the Lord. (See a good example of the contrast between false prophets and a true one in 1 Kings 22:1-38.)

So when someone says to your church, "I have a vision; here's what God wants us to do," how do you know that it's true? Paul gave practical instructions about this kind of situation, which he expected to be routine in the church. He wrote, "Do not extinguish the Spirit—do not despise prophecies—but test everything: hold on to what is good; stay away from everything that looks wrong" (1 Thess. 5:19-22, my translation). In 1 Corinthians 14:29 he says that, as a general rule, **prophets should be allowed to speak when the church gathers, but once they do "the others should evaluate what is said."**

Without going into much detail here, suffice it to say that the primary criteria for evaluating the vision that someone recounts are (1) does it cohere with what we already know to be true, especially from Scripture? and (2) does it enjoin an action we're supposed to take or adjustment we're supposed to make that glorifies Christ? Beyond these criteria there is also a certain gut-level sense that believers full of the Spirit have. Like in Jachaziel's day, when a true vision is recounted, the Spirit-filled believer often just knows—especially one who has the gift of discernment—and they often just know when it isn't true either.

So what does this all mean for vision in our churches? First it means, **when you get a vision, don't expect someone else to go first.** Don't hold back until someone else has seen the same thing. Sometimes God gives the vision to one person for the sake of all the others, and that one person might not be in charge either. It might just be ordinary you. If you don't speak it, it won't be spoken, and the church will stumble into danger. Speak up!

Second, **be open to hearing the vision coming from only one person, including someone you don't expect.** Leaders, be open to the vision coming from a person outside of the leadership circle. Be as wise as Jehoshaphat was—listen to your Jachaziel wherever they're located on (or off) the organizational chart and submit to the message even though you're the king.

Imagine how nimble and faithful the church would be if everyone was prepared to adjust and obey as soon as a mere one of us received a vision from God.

Q2 – *If a person in a junior position on your team—or off the team entirely—were to receive insight from God about your team's or church's direction, what might prevent that insight from impacting your team or church?*

Q3 – *What system, procedures, or principles could your team design to ensure that such an insight would impact your team or church?*

#21 – UNUSUAL CONNECTIONS

Q1 – Have you ever become friends with a sort of person who is somehow unlike your other friends? How did that friendship come about?

Quite often, **true vision creates connections between people that wouldn't happen otherwise.**

In the Book of Acts, a man named Saul was on his way with a band of Sanhedrin-authorized thugs to kidnap Christians in Damascus and haul them back to imprisonment or death in Jerusalem. Then he saw a vision of Jesus, and he discovered that he was bound not only to serve this Jesus as Lord and Messiah, not only to be connected as a brother to the very people he was doggedly hunting down, but even to have a special mission to bring the good news about Jesus to unclean Gentiles that he had never met and would never dream of associating with (Acts 9:1-9; 26:12-18).

Three days later, a Christian in Damascus named Ananias was praying and saw a vision of Jesus, and he discovered that Saul had been completely turned around and that he, Ananias, was to pray for him in person to regain his sight. When he entered the place where Saul was staying, he addressed him as “Brother Saul” (9:10-19).

In the following chapter (ch. 10), a Roman officer in Caesarea named Cornelius saw a vision of an angel, who told him to send messengers to Joppa to bring back a man named Peter. Peter saw a weird vision of a sheet full of all sorts of animals being lowered from heaven and heard a voice call them clean to eat, because God can call the unclean clean. When the messengers showed up at his door, Peter heard the voice tell him to go with them. When he got to Cornelius's house and heard the Roman's story, he saw that God doesn't play favorites but accepts the person from any and every nation who fears him and does what is right. Then he saw Cornelius and his household filled with the Holy Spirit, and he saw that if Jesus saw fit to baptize them in the Holy Spirit, then surely he shouldn't withhold baptism in water. Suddenly the Christian movement extended beyond the borders of Judaism.

A few chapters later, Saul (known as Paul now) was wandering through modern-day Turkey, prohibited by the Spirit to announce the good news in all these places that had

never heard it. Then once he got to the Aegean Sea, he saw a vision of a man of Macedonia, across the water, urging him to come and help them. A few days later, the good news had a new foothold in Europe (16:6-10).

There are so many barriers between people in the world—barriers of prejudice, of conviction, of custom, of affinity, and of mere routine. Whether obvious or covert, **what surmounts the barriers is a willingness to go and do the unnatural thing**, and what spawns that willingness is **a vision from God of the strangers who turn out not to be so very different from us after all**: people with the same desperate need of the salvation in the name of Jesus Christ and the same surprising craving to receive it.

Q2 – *What factors or conditions stimulate you to view someone in a different light than you had before?*

Q3 – *Which individual or group do you not have a firm connection with who deserves a fresh look? What will you do to gain a new perspective on them from God?*

#22 – MUSICIANS

Q1 – Have you known a church musician who was clearly gripped by a vision of God? Have you known one who was not? How would you compare and contrast the results of their musical labors?

You know who needs true vision? Musicians.

A composition professor at my Christian college used to groan when a kid in chapel would introduce his musical offering by saying, “God gave me this song.” “If God gave you that song,” the prof would intone to those around him, “it wouldn’t have parallel fifths and octaves. And it would have more than four chords!”

You might not understand the professor’s technical terms, but you might still catch his drift. No doubt, the “God gave me a song” thing is way overplayed (pun intended). But it does happen—in fact, for the sake of God’s people, it *must* happen. (And incidentally, though it isn’t fair to attribute to God lousy-to-mediocre music, if God inspired the awful grammar [“parallel fifths and octaves”] of the Book of Revelation and the small vocabulary [“four chords”] of the writings of the Gospel and Epistles of John, then he may be inspiring more dull or ugly music than refined tastes care to admit.) The point is that **those who make musical worship possible in the church need God’s vision if worshiping God is really going to happen.**

Of the many notable things King David did in his life and reign, one of the less familiar is his thorough reform of the organization and duties of the tribe of Levi (1 Chr. 23-27). During Israel’s journey from Egypt to Canaan the Levites were responsible to transport the tabernacle, the mobile temple, but once Israel settled in their new land the Levites kind of lost their way.

One of the jobs David gave to a particular subgroup of Levites was to make music in the temple that David’s son Solomon would build. David selected three families, one from each of the three Levite clans, to constitute these worship choirs and bands forever after. The leaders of the three families were named Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun (also known as Ethan). **All of them were prophets.**

We know they were prophets because they wrote Psalms (including some or all of these: 39, 50, 62, 73-83, 88, 89), and writing God-breathed, holy Scripture makes one a prophet by definition. But we also know this because they are called such in the Bible. Heman was David's seer (1 Chr. 25:5). So was Asaph (2 Chr. 29:30). During David's reign, other seers, Gad and Nathan (29:25), gave musical directions that came from God himself about the playing of cymbals and stringed instruments. Seers see. **These worship leaders had supernatural vision.**

If worship musicians don't have vision, they write and lead people in trite songs that at most generate an emotional froth with the nutritional value of a spiritual Twinkie. **If musicians do have vision, their vision compels other people to see God by faith themselves.** The experience of the worshiper and sometimes the songs themselves stand the test of time.

I met a young woman from a non-religious background who had been exposed to Christianity by her aunt. Once she got to college she connected with the Christian group on campus. As a musician, what was most appealing to her about Christianity was the abandon with which she could sing and sway to songs like The David Crowder Band's "How He Loves." Now, I dig "How He Loves" as an element of a well-balanced worship diet. But this poor girl had never heard the gospel (or at least never knew that she heard it or had never been invited to do anything about it) and never knew that sleeping with her presumed Christian boyfriend was contrary to the very love of God that she loved to sing about.

Where there is no vision in worship, it is easier for this kind of thing to happen. This is why **the church needs its musicians to have true vision of God, the origin of true vision from God.**

Q2 – *How does a musician grow as a visionary?*

Q3 – *If you are a church musician, how can the non-musicians in leadership support your efforts to conduct vision-driven worship? If you are not a church musician, how do the musicians in your church desire you to support them?*

#23 – GOD WITHHOLDS IT

Q1 – Does the thought that God intentionally withholding insight from some people make you uncomfortable? Why or why not?

If true vision comes from God, then **not to have true vision is also from God in at least some sense**. Undoubtedly our failure to see what God sees is because our perception has been obscured and perverted by our depraved nature. But if God bestows vision on some people despite their depravity, then God’s disinclination to give it to others constitutes his decision to withhold it from them.

This idea might make people uncomfortable, but there is some subtle corroboration of it in the Gospel of Luke.

In Luke 9:43-45 Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to be betrayed. “But they did not understand this statement; its meaning **had been concealed** from them, so that they could not grasp it.”

In Luke 19:41-44 Jesus weeps over Jerusalem: “If you had only known on this day, even you, the things that make for peace! But now they **are hidden** from your eyes.”

In Luke 24:13-35 two of Jesus’ disciples (not among the Twelve) are walking to Emmaus two days after Jesus had died. The risen Jesus encounters them and explains to them why it was “necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and enter into his glory” (v. 26), but “their eyes **were kept** from recognizing him” (v. 16).

Who concealed Jesus’ prediction of his betrayal from his disciples? Who hid the things that make for peace from Jerusalem? Who kept the disciples’ eyes from recognizing the risen Lord? God did.

The underlined phrases above are best understood as what are called “divine passives.” Divine passives are verbs in the passive voice that respectfully avoid identifying God directly—e.g., “they are hidden” rather than “God hid them.” Divine passives are not unusual in the New Testament, and these three examples seem to fit the mold, because

God could tear the veil off whenever he wanted to (as he did with Saul/Paul, for example). And in fact, he did.

Notice that though God concealed the meaning of Jesus' prediction of his betrayal in Luke 9, in chapter 24 Jesus "opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures" that were fulfilled by that betrayal (vv. 44-47).

In Matthew's rendition of Luke 19:41-44 Jesus says, "You will not see me from now until you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!'" (Matt. 23:37-39). The one who hid the things that made for peace will eventually make Jerusalem yearn for the one coming from him, and he will open their eyes to see him (see Rom. 11).

And with the two disciples headed toward Emmaus, God kept them from recognizing Jesus only until the moment that Jesus broke the bread, when "their eyes were opened" (24:31, another divine passive).

So why does God do this? Why does he choose to keep people from gaining vision? Timing. **God is a God who reveals, but he gives the vision at the right time for each person according to his perfect plan.** So what does this teach us about vision? Two things.

First, **we simply cannot take credit for vision, ever.** The God who gives it is just as powerful to keep us in the dark. He deserves all the credit, we none.

Second, **if we have the vision but others don't yet, we must remember that they never will until God is ready to open their eyes.** Jesus didn't successfully communicate true vision about his impending suffering to his disciples, and it wasn't because Jesus was a poor communicator. It was because God had concealed the plain truth that Jesus was speaking.

Though we can't blame people for our poor communication, our excellent communication of the vision must be accompanied by patience, because we know that only God will open their minds to grasp it. And the patience must be accompanied by

confident trust that God's timing is always best, and he won't let them see until it is just the right time.

Q2 – *What is the experience like for a person who doesn't get the vision when others around them do—more pointedly, when they don't even to recognize that there is a vision to get?*

Q3 – *How will your compassion and patience increase for people who are presently blocked from grasping and embracing God's vision for your church or team?*

#24 – FALSE CLAIMS

Q1 – In your opinion, how might a person become convinced that they have a clear vision from God when they do not?

God is delighted to give true vision to those who lack it. But he is equally determined to withhold it from those who insist that they have it but do not. **Making an empty claim to vision is the worst thing we can do.**

John 9 contains a fascinating story about spiritual vision that involves literal, physical vision. Jesus heals a man born blind so that he sees. The Pharisees are trying to figure out how this happened, especially as it happened on the Sabbath when no work was to be done, and what this event indicates about Jesus.

As the story develops, the once-blind man increasingly “sees” Jesus to be the One Sent from God while the Pharisees become hostile to the seeing man and strenuously reject his conclusion. “You were born completely in sinfulness,” they say, seething. “And yet you presume to teach us?” (v. 34).

Upon meeting up with the once-blind man again, Jesus asserts, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that those who do not see may gain their sight, and the ones who see may become blind” (v. 39). In other words, Jesus came into the world so that those who lack vision could gain it. However, those who claim to have vision Jesus would judge on the basis of their claim. **If these people actually lack vision because the vision they claim to have is merely self-invented, then Jesus would punish them by cementing them in their unwitting blindness.** Jesus confirms this verdict when Pharisees around him bait him with the question, “We are not blind too, are we?” Jesus’ reply: “If you were blind you would not be guilty of sin, but now because you claim that you can see, your guilt remains” (vv. 40-41).

I don’t believe that God is pleased if a person has a vision of God and from God and modestly claims not to have one. Imagine what God would have done if one of the prophets had pulled that stunt! But on the other hand, vision is an awesome, precious thing, because it is a faculty of God himself that only he can bestow.

If you don't have vision, and you humbly admit it, you're in a good place, because the Son may give it to you. But the false purveyors of vision who have concocted it themselves, copied it from others, or mimicked it from the world get blinder all the time the more they claim to see.

Q2 – *How would you explain the justice in Jesus' decision to make some "see" and others "blind" spiritually?*

Q3 – *What checks can your team establish to prevent yourselves or any one of you from becoming overconfident in your grasp of God's vision?*

#25 – MORE GIVEN, OR TAKEN AWAY

Q1 – When have you gotten more because you made the most of what you already had?

One day Isaiah had a vision (Isa. 6). He saw himself in the innermost recess of the temple of God, and he saw the Lord in blazing, humanoid form sitting on an elevated throne, and, in a mysterious, impossible-to-picture phrase, “the hem of his robe filled the temple.” Fiery, multi-winged beings swirled around him crying out, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD who commands armies! His majestic splendor fills the entire earth!” The sound of praise was so deafening that the building shook, and smoke filled the temple.

It was only by seeing the terrifyingly awesome, barely describable visage of God that Isaiah could truly see himself: “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts” (v. 5, NASB). When Isaiah saw God’s holiness, he saw his own uncleanness, and he saw the uncleanness of the people of whom he was an inseparable part, and he believed that he was a dead man for having somehow disgustingly invaded the presence of the all-powerful, unyieldingly clean God.

But God intervened. The unimpeachably Pure One purified Isaiah with the symbol of a burning coal on his mouth, separating and sanctifying Isaiah from among his people to speak God’s pure words to them. And at that moment, having seen God and then seeing himself, Isaiah saw his people, Israel, as God saw their present and future:

*Listen continually, but don't understand!
Look continually, but don't perceive!
Make the hearts of these people calloused;
make their ears deaf and their eyes blind!
Otherwise they might see with their eyes and hear with their ears,
their hearts might understand and they might repent and be healed.*

Isaiah had seen a vision of God and did exactly the right thing—he humbled himself and submitted to the One he saw. As a result, Isaiah was given a vision of his people.

He was given many more visions from God—according to the first verse of his book, all sixty-six chapters of it describe them. **He received more vision because he cherished and obeyed the vision that he had already been given.**

Israel had been given a vision too—a vision of God on Sinai, visions of him through his acts of deliverance on their behalf over centuries, and prophets’ recounting of their visions of God as instructions for the people. But rather than cherish and obey the visions, they treated them casually and neglected them. The result for them was that rather than getting more visions, they received less. Even the visions they did receive were hidden from their eyes. **Having chosen not to see, they could not unchoose—they could not even see enough to recognize seeing as an option.**

Isaiah asked God how long he would have to proclaim this message: *see, you will be blind!* God replied that it would be until Israel’s blindness took them all the way into devastation and exile.

So Isaiah proclaimed this message. One time he excoriated the people for going to occultists for a message when the vision in God’s Law and prophetic oracles were right in front of them (8:16-22). Their stubbornness revealed that they had “no dawn” (v. 20, NASB), no light by which to see. Hungry, angry, in “distress and darkness, gloom and anxiety,” they would perish in their blindness (vv. 21-22).

The very words that God gave Isaiah in Isaiah 6 were on the lips of Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, were commented on by John (12:37-41), and were on Paul’s lips as recorded in Acts 28:17-28.

Jesus taught using figures of speech that he sometimes deliberately chose not to explain, because the lack of understanding of those to whom he spoke was a self-confirming judgment, just as it was in Isaiah’s day (Matt. 13:13-15). But Jesus called out a few students to see truly and listen fully just as God had called Isaiah. “You have been given the opportunity to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven,” he said, “but they have not. For whoever has will be given more, and will have an abundance. But whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him” (vv. 11-12).

This is the awesome, frightening, and exciting principle of vision: **God gives more vision of himself, of ourselves, and of the world to those who keep our eyes fixed on the vision we already have. On the flip side, whoever neglects or ignores the vision God has given them lose even that and wander around blind.**

This applies to all people. The person who obeys the little light they have gets more; the person who avoids the vision of God for the self-concocted or world-promulgated vision they want for themselves winds up with no vision at all.

It also applies to all churches. The church that devotes itself to seeing God, seeing what God sees, and obeying what God has shown that church to do will find its vision widened, deepened, and multiplied, touching lives that would have been unimaginable. The church that neglects the vision of God for a vision of its own institutional comfort, stability, and security loses all its sight and soon wanders, gradually but inexorably, into annihilation.

What a high-risk privilege! **We have access to more of God's sight than we can conceive if we only follow what we have. And yet if we neglect it, we may never see God again.**

However, if you have stumbled into darkness by neglecting the vision God gave you, there may yet be hope. **Sometimes by his grace God does break the deserving blind out of their trap so that they see again.** Isaiah prophesied, "The gloom will be dispelled for those who were anxious. . . . The people walking in darkness see a bright light; light shines on those who live in a land of deep darkness" (9:1). Jesus himself is the light of the world who shines in the darkness, and though the darkness cannot make sense of it, some do take that second chance to see and believe (John 1:1-18).

But if you have taken that second chance, why risk it again?

Q2 – How would you evaluate how good a job you are doing now in making the most of the vision from God that you have, no matter how limited it may be?

Q3 – How would you help a leader who feels “stuck” be encouraged and challenged by these principles?

#26 – SEEKING AND SEEING

Q1 – How have you personally experienced the principle, “Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things will be added to you”?

A person doesn't attain true vision merely by looking harder at the world around them. No matter how hard one looks, God's supernatural revelation is required. This comes entirely from him by his sheer grace.

Nevertheless, that does not mean that vision and attention are totally unrelated. **What we're looking at—and more importantly, what we're looking for—goes a long way toward determining what we see.**

Consider Jesus' teaching. Jesus proposed a truly novel solution to individual poverty. “So then, don't worry saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ . . . But above all pursue [God's] kingdom and righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt. 6:31, 33). In other words, *look for, anticipate* God's just government that's coming over everything—even let it come early into your own life by obeying him above all other demands and desires, even pray for its arrival before you ask for your own needs (Matt. 6:9-13)—and before the day is done you will *see* God providing for your needs when you need them. **If you look for God's reign, you will see your needs met,** but ironically if you look to meet your needs you may fail to see it happen.

If we look for God's reign, it's because we consider it to be supremely valuable. Jesus taught not to be about accumulating earthly valuables, because they are inherently insecure. By contrast, what is valuable in heaven—that is, what is valuable to God—is inherently secure; it is eternal and can never be lost.

Jesus points out that “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (v. 24). Our minds are on our money and our money is on our minds. But if what is most valuable to us is God's reign, then *that* will be on our minds all the time. Then suddenly having enough money becomes no problem, both because we have a revised standard of what constitutes “enough” and because God fully supplies it.

But be careful. There are people around us who have trouble seeing God's coming-and-already-here reign. Sometimes we think we see what the obstacle is that is obscuring their vision. But if, because we are looking for what blinds *other* people, we fail to see what is blinding *us* (which may be much larger!), then we are of no help to the other person. "You hypocrite!" Jesus says. "First remove the beam from your own eye, and then you can see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (7:5). **He does want us to remove the hindrance to the other person's vision, but we have to attend to ourselves first.** That may take a while.

If we seek a vision of God and for all obstacles to that vision to be taken away, we will not only see God but everything else besides. If we're careful, our vision may allow others to see him too. But if we seek a vision of anything less than him, we will remain blind—and since we are prone to compare ourselves favorably to other people, we will not know that we cannot see.

Q2 – *What things are your mind on the most, and what does that reveal about what is highly valuable to you?*

Q3 – *Is there someone you are serving with or discipling who doesn't clearly see God's vision? What will you do to discover whether you are unknowingly laboring under a similar handicap?*

#27 – DISTRACTED BY OUR FAILURES

Q1 – *Why is it that a person's failures or inadequacies can become their fixation?*

When the disciples went to the other side, they forgot to take bread. "Watch out," Jesus said to them. "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." So they began to discuss among themselves saying, "It is because we brought no bread" [Matt. 16:5-7].

True vision *from* God starts with having a true vision *of* God. One of the many obstacles to attaining a vision of God is one's own failures. I don't mean that your failures disqualify you from seeing God. If so, no one would see God—at least, no one would see him and live to tell about it. I mean that **your failures can grab your attention so fully that you are blind to the glory of God right in front of you.**

This is Jesus' disciples' situation in Matthew 16:5-12. Jesus warns them against "the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees," and all these poor guys can think is that Jesus is chastising them for not having remembered to bring the bread. Jesus could certainly be cryptic, but comparing their supply of bread to "the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees" is a stretch even for him!

Besides that, as Jesus reminds them, they had recently experienced him multiply five loaves of bread to feed five thousand men and later multiply seven loaves to feed four thousand. Why would Jesus care about whether they had remembered to bring bread? Hadn't Jesus already proven that they would never starve as long as he was around? Almost exasperated, Jesus sighs, "How could you not understand that I was not speaking to you about bread?" (v. 11).

And yet, this is exactly what Jesus' disciples thought he was speaking about. **Their eyes were so quick to look at how they had messed up that they couldn't see what Jesus was saying to them.** And they couldn't see what Jesus was saying to them because they couldn't see Jesus himself—the true bread from heaven that a person could eat and not die (John 6:43-51), who proved his inexhaustible power to give life by astoundingly multiplying bread twice.

Fortunately, Jesus' admonition broke their gaze from their mistake of forgetting bread and redirected it to his glory. "Then they understood that he had not told them to be on guard against the yeast in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matt. 16:12).

May Jesus' word interrupt our focus on our failures and replace it with a focus on his all-sufficient excellence! Then we too will see the world around us rightly, be warned of dangers, and recognize the mission he has for us.

Q2 – *Who do you know who most needs to be encouraged not to be obsessed with their failures? (Is it you?)*

Q3 – *What concept, example, or experience might be sufficient to redirect that person's attention from their failures to Jesus' grace and glory?*

#28 – WHAT KEEPS US GOING

Q1 – How have you suffered as a consequence of vision you have received from God?

A true vision from God cannot but entail hardship.

Every person in the Bible who saw a vision of God and a vision from God suffered because of it. All were hated by someone. Some were cast out. Some were even killed. All had to give up something comfortable and familiar as a result of what they saw and step into the air where only God could support them.

Amos the Prophet is illustrative (Amos 7:10-17). A priest at Bethel, where Yahweh was worshiped in golden-calf form, vigorously opposed the prophet for his doom-and-gloom messages. “Leave, you visionary!” he said. “Run away to the land of Judah! Earn your living and prophesy there!”

Amos, the visionary, replied, “I was not a prophet by profession. No, I was a herdsman who also took care of sycamore fig trees. Then the LORD took me from tending flocks and gave me this commission, ‘Go! Prophesy to my people Israel!’” Amos’ vision impelled him out of an ordinary life into a world of hostility.

But the vision that drives us into suffering is the very thing that keeps us going through the suffering. What we see ahead is what makes it all worth it.

Paul’s magnificent exposition of the implications of seeing the glory of God in the face of Christ bears this out (2 Cor. 3:17-5:10). “[W]e are not looking at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen,” he writes mysteriously. “For what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal” (4:18). It is this vision of the invisible that compels us to endure “momentary, light suffering”—which in Paul’s case, as he describes elsewhere, included severe floggings (five times with the lash, three with the rod), stoning, shipwreck (twice), hunger, exposure to the elements, muggings, and rejection and disgrace from all directions (11:23-33)—because it “is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (4:17). So “we live by faith”—by a vision of and from the invisible God—“not by sight” of this world (5:7).

All the heroes of the faith did this (Heb. 11:1-12:3). Abraham lived and died a nomad, seeing the eternal city promised him in the distance (11:13-16). Moses “regarded abuse suffered for Christ,” who was to come far in the future, “to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for his eyes were fixed on the reward. . . . [H]e persevered as though he could see the one who is invisible” (vv. 26-27). And finally the climax of this train of visionaries, Jesus himself, “endured the cross, disregarding its shame” because his eyes were fixed on “the joy set out for him.” Therefore, as we keep *our* eyes fixed on *him*, we too “may not grow weary in [our] souls and give up” (12:2-3).

Paul prayed for the church at Ephesus that, because “the eyes of your heart have been enlightened . . . you may know what is the hope of his calling, what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the incomparable greatness of his power toward us who believe” (Eph. 1:18-19). **That enlightenment**, God’s opening of our heart’s eyes so that we can see his glory, the glory coming for us, **drives us inexorably into conflict with this dark world** and into suffering at the hands of its human and angelic powers. **But it also keeps us going**, driving ever onward, ever upward into the glorious rest that is himself that our heart’s eyes have beheld and can’t be torn away from.

True vision is not a light thing. It is not a buzzword; it is more than a diagram on a napkin, though those things might in a humble way exhibit it. **True vision compels people to sacrifice everything**. But the same vision assures us that **the suffering it requires is worth it**. Oh, yes—it is so worth it!

Q2 – *In light of the hardship you have experienced as a result of grasping a vision of God, have you ever wished you had never received it? Why or why not?*

Q3 – *Do you need a fresh view of “what cannot be seen” to keep you going? What will you do to seek it?*

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