

Now, and Then

by C.H. Spurgeon

C.H. Spurgeon teaches that while believers now see spiritual truths and themselves imperfectly, in heaven they will see all things clearly and fully, including themselves, the church, God's providence, the gospel doctrines, Jesus Christ, and God Himself.

Scripture: Job 42:6, Romans 8:1, John 1:14, Hebrews 12:2, Revelation 21:23, Romans 8:17, 1 John 3:2

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Heavenly Vision", "Providence of God"

Description

In this devotional sermon, C.H. Spurgeon explores the contrast between our limited earthly understanding and the full clarity believers will experience in heaven. He reflects on how we now see ourselves, the church, God's providence, gospel doctrines, Jesus Christ, and God Himself only imperfectly, but will one day behold all these in their true and glorious light. Spurgeon encourages believers to live with hope and faith, anticipating the day when all mysteries will be revealed and all spiritual truths fully known.

Transcript

"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face."—1 Corinthians 13:12.

There are some things which we count very precious now, which will soon be of no value to us whatever. There are some things that we know or think we know, and we pride ourselves a good deal upon our knowledge; but when we shall become men we shall set no more value upon that knowledge than a child does upon his toys when he grows up to be a man. Our spiritual manhood in heaven will discard many things which we now count precious, as a full grown man discards the treasures of his childhood. And there are many things that we have been accustomed to see that, after this transient life has passed, we shall see no more. Though we delighted in them, and they pleased our eyes while sojourning on earth, they will pass away as a dream when one awaketh; we shall never see them again, and never want to see them; for our eyes in clearer light, anointed with eye-salve, shall see brighter visions, and we shall never regret what we have lost, in the presence of fairer scenes we shall have found. Other things there are that we know now and shall never forget; we shall know them for ever, only in a higher degree, because no longer with a partial knowledge; and there are some things that we see now that we shall see in eternity, only we shall see them there in a clearer light.

So we shall speak upon some things that we do see now, which we are to see more fully and more distinctly hereafter; then enquire how it is we shall see them more clearly; and finish up by considering what this fact teaches us.

I. Among the things that we see now, as many of us as have had our eyes enlightened by the Holy Spirit, is OURSELVES.

To see ourselves is one of the first steps in true religion. The mass of men have never seen themselves. They have seen the flattering image of themselves, and they fancy that to be their own facsimile, but it is not. You and I have been taught of God's Holy Spirit to see our ruin in the fall; we have bemoaned ourselves on account of that fall; we have been made conscious of our own natural depravity; we have been ground to the very dust by the discovery; we have been shown our actual sinfulness and how we have transgressed against the Most High. We have repented for this, and have fled for refuge to the hope set before us in the gospel. Day by day we see a little more of ourselves—nothing very pleasing, I grant you—but something very profitable, for it is a great thing for us to know our emptiness. It is a step towards receiving his fullness. It is something to discover our weakness; it is a step essential towards our participation of divine strength. I suppose the longer we live the more we shall see ourselves; and we shall probably come to this conclusion: "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity:" and cry out with Job, "I am vile." The more we shall discover of ourselves, the more we shall be sick of ourselves. But in heaven, I doubt not, we shall find out that we never saw even ourselves in the clearest light, but only as "through a glass, darkly," only as an unriddled thing, as a deep enigma; for we shall understand more about ourselves in heaven than we do now. There we shall see, as we have not yet seen, how desperate a mischief was the Fall, into what a horrible pit we fell, and how fast we were stuck in the miry clay. There shall we see the blackness of sin as we have never seen it here, and understand its hell desert as we could not till we shall look down from yonder starry height whither infinite mercy shall bring us. When we shall be singing, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain," we shall look at the robes that we have washed in his blood, and see how white they are. We shall better understand then than now how much we needed washing—how crimson were the stains and how precious was that blood that effaced those scarlet spots. There, too, shall we know ourselves on the bright side better than we do now. We know to-day that we are saved, and there is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus; but that robe of righteousness which covers us now, as it shall cover us then, will be better seen by us, and we shall discern how lustrous it is, with its needlework and wrought gold—how much better than the pearls and gems that have decked the robes of monarchs are the blood and righteousness of Jehovah Jesus, who has given himself for us. Here we know that we are adopted. We feel the spirit of sonship; "we cry, Abba, Father;" but there we shall know better what it is to be the sons of God, for here it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but when we shall be there, and when Christ shall appear, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is, and then we shall understand to the full what sonship means. So, too, I know to-day that I am a joint-heir with Christ, but I have a very poor idea of what it is I am heir to; but there shall I see the estates that belong to me; not only see them, but actually enjoy them. A part shall every Christian have in the inheritance undefiled and that fadeth not away, that is reserved in heaven for him, because he is in Christ Jesus; one with Christ—by eternal union one. But I am afraid that is very much more a riddle to us than a matter of understanding. We see it as an enigma now, but there our oneness with Christ will be as conspicuous to us and as plain as the letters of the alphabet. There shall we know what it is to be a member of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones; there shall I understand the mystical marriage bond that knits the believer's soul to Christ; there shall I see how, as the branch springs from the stem, my soul stands in union, vital union, with her blessed Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, one thing that we see now which we shall see in a much clearer light hereafter, is "ourselves."

Here, too, we see the CHURCH, but WE SHALL SEE THE CHURCH MUCH MORE CLEARLY BY-AND-BY.

We know there is a church of God. We know that the Lord has a people whom he hath chosen from before the foundation of the world: we believe that these are scattered up and down throughout our land, and many other lands. There are many of them we do not know, many that we should not particularly like, I daresay if we did know them, on account of their outward characteristics; persons of very strange views, and very odd habits perhaps; and yet, for all that, the people of the living God; Now, we know this church, we know its glory, moved with one life, quickened with one Spirit, redeemed with one blood, we believe in this church, and we feel attachment to it for the sake of Jesus Christ, who has married the church as the Bride. But, oh! when we shall get to heaven, how much more we shall know of the church, and how we shall see her face to face, and not "through a glass, darkly." There we shall know something, more of the numbers of the chosen than we do now, it may be to our intense surprise. There we shall find some amongst the company of God's elect, whom we in our bitterness of spirit had condemned, and there we shall miss some who, in our charity, we have conceived to be perfectly secure. We shall know better then who are the Lord's and who are not than we ever can know here. Here all our processes of discernment fail us. Judas comes in with the apostles, and Demas takes his part among the saints, but there we shall know the righteous, for we shall see them; there will be one flock and one Shepherd, and he that on the throne doth reign for evermore shall be glorified. We shall understand then, what the history of the church has been in all the past, and why it has become so strange a history of conflict and conquest. Probably, we shall know more of the history of the church in the future. From that higher elevation and brighter atmosphere we shall understand better what are the Lord's designs concerning his people in the latter day; and what glory shall redound to his own name from his redeemed ones, when he shall have gathered together all that are called and chosen and faithful from among the sons of men. This is one of the joys we are looking for, that we shall come to the general assembly and church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven; and have fellowship with those who have fellowship with God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thirdly. Is it not possible, nay, is it not certain, that in the next state WE SHALL KNOW MORE OF THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD THAN WE DO NOW?

Here we see the providence of God, but it is in a glass, darkly. The apostle says "through" a glass. There was glass in the apostles' days, not a substance such as our windows are now made of, but thick dull coloured glass, not much more transparent than that which is used in the manufacture of common bottles, so that looking through a piece of that glass you would not see much. That is like what we now see of divine providence. We believe all things work together for good to them that love God; we have seen how they work together for good in some cases, and experimentally proved it to be so. But still it is rather a matter of faith than a matter of sight with us. We cannot tell how "every dark and bending line meets in the center of his love." We do not yet perceive how he will make those dark dispensations of trials and afflictions that come upon his people really to subserve his glory and their lasting happiness; but up there we shall see providence, as it were, face to face; and I suppose it will be amongst our greatest surprises, the discovery of how the Lord dealt with us. "Why," we shall some of us say, "we prayed against those very circumstances which were the best that, could have been appointed for us." "Ah!" another will say, "I have fretted and troubled myself over what was, after all, the richest mercy the Lord ever sent." Sometimes I have known persons refuse a letter at the door, and it has happened, in some cases, that there has been something very valuable in it, and the postman has said, afterwards, "You did not know the contents, or else you would not have refused it." And often God has sent us, in the black envelope of trial, such a precious mass of mercy, that if we had known what was in it, we should have taken it in, and been glad to pay for it—glad to give it house room, to entertain it; but because it looked black we were prone to

shut our door against it. Now, up there we shall know not only more of ourselves, but perceive the reasons of many of God's dealings with us on a larger scale; and we shall there perhaps discover that wars that devastated nations, and pestilences that fill graves, and earthquakes that make cities tremble, are, after all, necessary cogs in the great wheel of the divine machinery; and he who sits upon the throne at this moment, and rules supremely every creature that is either in heaven, or earth, or hell, will there make it manifest to us that his government was right. It is good to think in these times when ever; thing seems loosening, that "the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." It must come out right in the long run; it must be well; every part and portion must work together with a unity of design to promote God's glory and the saint's good. We shall see it there! and we shall lift up our song with new zest and joy, as fresh displays of the wisdom and goodness of God, whose ways are past finding out, are unfolded to our admiring view.

Fourthly. It is surely no straining of the text to say, that, though here we know something of THE DOCTRINES OF THE GOSPEL, AND THE MYSTERIES OF THE FAITH, by-and-by, in a few months or years at the longest, we shall know a great deal more than we do now. There are some grand doctrines, brethren and sisters, we dearly love, but though we love them, our understanding is too feeble to grasp them fully. We account them to be mysteries; we reverently acknowledge them, yet we dare not attempt to explain them. They are matters of faith to us. It may be that in heaven there shall be counsels of eternal wisdom into which no saints or angels can peer. It is the glory of God to conceal a matter. Surely, no creature will ever be able, even when exalted to heaven, to comprehend all the thoughts of the Creator. We shall never be omniscient—we cannot be. God alone knoweth everything, and understandeth everything. But how much more of authentic truth shall we discern when the mists and shadows have dissolved; and how much more shall we understand when raised to that higher sphere and endowed with brighter faculties, none of us can tell. Probably, things that puzzle us here will be as plain as possible there. We shall perhaps smile at our own ignorance. I have fancied sometimes that the elucidations of learned doctors of divinity, if they could be submitted to the very least in the kingdom of heaven, would only cause them to smile at the learned ignorance of the sons of earth. Oh! how little we do know, but how much we shall know! I am sure we shall know, for it is written, "Then shall I know even as also I have known." We now see things in a mist—"men as trees, walking"—a doctrine here, and a doctrine there. And we are often at a loss to conjecture how one part harmonizes with another part of the same system, or to make out how all these doctrines are consistent. This knot cannot be untied, that gnarl cannot be unravelled, but—

"Then shall I see, and hear and know

All I desired or wish'd below;

And every power find sweet employ

In that eternal world of joy."

But, my dear brethren and sisters, having kept you thus far in the outer courts, I would fain lead you into the temple; or, to change the figure, if in the beginning I have set forth good wine, certainly I am not going to bring out that which is worse; rather would I have you say, as the ruler of the feast did to the bridegroom, "thou has kept the good wine until now." HERE WE SEE JESUS CHRIST, BUT WE DO NOT SEE HIM AS WE SHALL SEE HIM SOON. We have seen him by faith in such a way, that we have beheld

our burdens laid on him, and our iniquities carried by him into the wilderness, where, if they be sought for, they shall not be found. We have seen enough of Jesus to know that “he is altogether lovely;” we can say of him, he “is all my salvation, and all my desire.” Sometimes, when he throws up the lattice, and shows himself through those windows of agate and gates of carbuncle, in the ordinances of his house, at the Lord’s Supper especially, the King’s beauty has entranced us even to our heart’s ravishment; yet all we have ever seen is somewhat like the report which the Queen of Sheba had of Solomon’s wisdom. When we once get to the court of the Great King we shall declare that the half has not been told us. We shall say, “mine eyes shall behold, and not another.” Brethren, is not this the very cream of heaven? There have been many suggestions of what we shall do in heaven, and what we shall enjoy, but they all seem to me to be wide of the mark compared with this one, that we shall be with Jesus, be like him, and shall behold his glory. Oh, to see the feet that were nailed, and to touch the hand that was pierced, and to look upon the head that wore the thorns, and to bow before him who is ineffable love, unspeakable condescension, infinite tenderness! Oh, to bow before him, and to kiss that blessed face! Jesu, what better do we want than to see thee by shine own light—to see thee, and speak with thee, as when a man speaketh with his friend? It is pleasant to talk about this, but what will it be there when the pearl gates open? The streets of gold will have small attraction to us, and the harps of angels will but slightly enchant us, compared with the King in the midst of the throne. He it is who shall rivet our gaze, absorb our thoughts, enchain our affection, and move all our sacred passions to their highest pitch of celestial ardor. We shall see Jesus.

Once again (and here we come into the deep things), beyond a doubt WE SHALL ALSO SEE GOD. It is written that the pure in heart shall see God. God is seen now in his works and in his word. Little indeed could these eyes bear of the beatific vision, yet we have reason to expect that, as far as creatures can bear the sight of the infinite Creator, we shall be permitted to see God. We read that Aaron and certain chosen ones saw the throne of God, and the brightness as it were of sapphire stone—light, pure as jasper. In heaven it is the presence of God that is the light thereof. God’s more immediately dwelling in the midst of the new Jerusalem is its peerless glory and peculiar bliss. We shall then understand more of God than we do now; we shall come nearer to him, be more familiar with him, be more filled with him. The love of God shall be shed abroad in our hearts; we shall know our Father as we yet know him not; We shall know the Son to a fuller degree than he has yet revealed himself to us, and we shall know the Holy Spirit in his personal love and tenderness towards us, beyond all those influences and operations which have soothed us in our sorrows and guided us in our perplexities here below. I leave your thoughts and your desires to follow the teaching of the Spirit. As for me, I cower before the thought while I revel in it. I, who have strained my eyes while gazing at nature, where the things that are made show the handiwork of God; I, whose conscience has been awe-struck as I listened to the voice of God proclaiming his holy law; I, whose heart has been melted while there broke on my ears the tender accents of his blessed gospel in those snatches of sacred melody that relieve the burden of prophecy; I, who have recognised in the babe of Bethlehem the hope of Israel; in the man of Nazareth, the Messiah that should come; in the victim of Calvary, the one Mediator; in the risen Jesus, the well-beloved Son—to me, verily, God incarnate has been so palpably revealed that I have almost seen God, for I have, as it were, seen him in whom all the fullness of the Godhead bodily doth dwell. Still I “see through a glass, darkly.” Illumine these dark senses, waken this drowsy conscience, purify my heart, give me fellowship with Christ, end thee bear me up, translate me to the third heavens; so I may, so I can, so I shall see God. But what that means, or what it is, ah me! I cannot tell.

II. We proposed to enquire, in the second place, HOW THIS VERY REMARKABLE CHANGE SHALL BE EFFECTED? WHY IS IT THAT WE SHALL BE MORE CLEARLY THEN THAN NOW? We cannot altogether answer the question, but one or two suggestions may help us. No doubt many of these things will be more clearly revealed in the next state. Here the light is like the dawn: it is dim twilight. In heaven it will be the blaze of noon. God has declared somethings of himself by the mouth of his holy prophets and apostles. He has been pleased, through the lips of his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, to speak to us more plainly, to show us more openly the thoughts of his heart and the counsel of his will. These are the first steps to knowledge. But there the light will be as the light of seven days, and there the manifestation of all the treasures of wisdom shall be brighter and clearer than it is now; for God, the only-wise God, shall unveil to us the mysteries, and exhibit to us the glories of his everlasting kingdom. The revelation we now have suits us as men clad in our poor mortal bodies; the revelation then will suit us as immortal spirits. When we have been raised from the dead, it will be suitable to our immortal spiritual bodies. Here, too, we are at a distance from many of the things we long to know something of, but there we shall be nearer to them. We shall then be on a vantage ground, with the entire horizon spread out before us. Our Lord Jesus is, as to his personal presence, far away from us. We see him through the telescope of faith, but then we shall see him face to face. His literal and bodily presence is in heaven, since he was taken up, and we need to be taken up likewise to be with him where he is that we may literally behold him. Get to the fountain-head, and you understand more; stand in the center, and things seem regular and orderly. If you could stand in the sun and see the orbits in which the planets revolve round that central luminary, it would become clear enough; but for many an age astronomers were unable to discover anything of order, and spoke of the planets as progressive, retrograde, and standing still. Let us get to God, the center, and we shall see how providence in order revolves round his sapphire throne. We, ourselves, too, when we get to heaven, shall be better qualified to see than we are now. It would be an inconvenience for us to know here as much as we shall know in heaven. No doubt we have sometimes thought that if we had better ears it would be a great blessing. We have wished we could hear ten miles off; but probably we should be no better off; we might hear too much, and the sounds might drown each other. Probably our sight is not as good as we wish it were, but a large increase of ocular power might not be of any use to us. Our natural organs are fitted for our present sphere of being; and our mental faculties are, in the case of most of us, properly adapted to our moral requirements. If we knew more of our own sinfulness, we might be driven to despair; if we knew more of God's glory, we might die of terror; if we had more understanding, unless we had equivalent capacity to employ it, we might be filled with conceit and tormented with ambition. But up there we shall have our minds and our systems strengthened to receive more, without the damage that would come to us here from overleaping the boundaries of order, supremely appointed and divinely regulated. We cannot here drink the wine of the kingdom, it is too strong for us; but up there we shall drink it new in our heavenly Father's kingdom, without fear of the intoxications of pride, or the staggerings of passions. We shall know even as we are known. Besides, dear friends, the atmosphere of heaven is so much clearer than this, that I do not wonder we can see better there. Here is the smoke of daily care; the constant dust of toil; the mist of trouble perpetually rising. We cannot be expected to see much in such a smoky atmosphere as this; but when we shall pass beyond, we shall find no clouds ever gather round the sun to hide his everlasting brightness. There all is clear. The daylight is serene as the noonday. We shall be in a clearer atmosphere and brighter light.

III. The practical lessons we may learn from this subject demand your attention before I close. Methinks there is an appeal to our gratitude. Let us be very thankful for all we do see. Those, who do not see now—ah, not even “through a glass, darkly”—shall never see face to face. The eyes that never see Christ by faith shall never see him with joy in heaven. If thou hast never seen thyself a leper, defiled with sin and

abashed with penitence, thou shalt never see thyself redeemed from sin, renewed by grace, a white-robed spirit. If thou hast no sense of God's presence here, constraining thee to worship and love him, thou shalt have no sight of his glory hereafter, introducing thee to the fullness of joy and pleasure for evermore. Oh! be glad for the sight you have, dear brother, dear sister. It is God that gave it to thee. Thou art one born blind; and "Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind." This miracle has been wrought on thee; thou canst see, and thou canst say: "One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see."

Our text teaches us that this feeble vision is very hopeful. You shall see better by-and-by. Oh, you know not how soon—it may be a day or two hence—that we shall be in glory! God may so have ordained it, that betwixt us and heaven there may be but a step.

Another lesson is that of forbearance one with another. Let the matters we have spoken of soften the asperity of our debates; let us feel when we are disputing about points of difficulty, that we need not get cross about them, because after all there are limits to our present capacity as well as to our actual knowledge. Our disputes are often childish. We might as well leave some questions in abeyance for a little while. Two persons in the dark have differed about a color, and they are wrangling about it. If we brought candles in and held them to the color, the candles would not show what it was; but if we look at it to-morrow morning, when the sun shines, we shall be able to tell. How many difficulties in the word of God are like this! Not yet can they be justly discriminated; till the day dawn, the apocalyptic symbols will not be all transparent to our own understanding. Besides, we have no time to waste while there is so much work to do. Much time is already spent. Sailing is dangerous; the winds are high; the sea is rough. Trim the ship; keep the sails in good order; manage her and keep her off quicksands. As to certain other matters, we must wait till we get into the fair haven, and are able to talk with some of the bright spirits now before the throne. When some of the things they know shall be opened unto us, we shall confess the mistakes we made, and rejoice in the light we shall receive.

Should not this happy prospect excite our aspiration and make us very desirous to be there? It is natural for us to want to know, but we shall not know as we are known till we are present with the Lord. We are at school now—children at school. We shall go to the college soon—the great University of Heaven—and take our degree there. Yet some of us, instead of being anxious to go, are shuddering at the thought of death—the gate of endless joy we dread to enter! There are many persons who die suddenly; some die in their sleep, and many have passed out of time into eternity when it has scarcely been known by those who have been sitting at their bedsides. Depend upon it, there is no pain in dying; the pain is in living. When they leave off living here, they have done with pain. Do not blame death for what it does not deserve; it is life that lingers on in pain: death is the end of it. The man that is afraid of dying ought to be afraid of living. Be content to die whenever the Master's will shall bid thee. Commit thy spirit to his keeping. Who that hath seen but the glimpses of his beaming countenance doth not long to see his face, that is as the sun shining in his strength? O Lord! thy will be done. Let us speedily behold thee, if so it may be—only this one word, if so it may be. Do we now see, and do we expect to see better? Let us bless the name of the Lord, who hath chosen us of his mercy and of his infinite lovingkindness. On the other hand, let it cause us great anxiety if we have not believed in Jesus, for he that hath not believed in him, dying as he is, will never see the face of God with joy. Oh! unbeliever, be concerned about your soul, and seek thou after him, repair thou to him. Oh! that God would open thy eyes now in this very house of prayer. Blessed for thee to know in part. Thrice blessed, I say; for as surely as thou knowest in part now, thou shalt fully know hereafter. Be it your happy lot to know him, whom to know is life eternal. God grant it, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—2 Corinthians 5.

SOME of the Sermon readers may not be aware that we issue a monthly magazine, entitled The Sword and the Trowel, price 3d. In it will be found interesting descriptions of holy works in all denominations, theological articles, and periodical information as to the various institutions connected with the Tabernacle. It is believed that The Sword and the Trowel has the largest circulation of any magazine of its class, with the exception of those which attract readers by religious novels; such a mode of gaining popularity the Editor will never employ.

The volume entitled Feathers for Arrows was compiled by us with the view of furnishing fresh illustrations to religious teachers. The first edition of ten thousand was sold at once, and we went to press with a second ten thousand. It is a beautifully bound volume, and a very cheap half-crown's worth. Passmore & Alabaster are the publishers.

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