

Visions

Happy Sabbath to everyone.

Earlier this week, I attended a work-related conference in which presenters discussed matters such as economic and technological development. While the ideas that they shared with the assembled group generally involved secular matters, there were a couple things mentioned for which I could see some obvious spiritual principles... and some worthy of sharing with the brethren.

One of the main ones that I can recall is that idea that an obstacle to true progress (the topic was technological innovations, but you will see easily how it applies to spiritual growth) is fear. This specific thing is not a new topic for us, but it was interesting for me to see just how broad the application of this principle actually is.

When new ideas are introduced to a society, or a culture, the initial reaction is often one of hesitation, of mistrust, and of sometimes excessive caution. In a sense, this is human nature, because the source of the changes is as unknown as the result of the changes themselves. There is a sort of survival instinct involved, at least for the “natural man,” because he already knows how to react to familiar situations, while new experiences force us to develop new skills, new ways of relating to, and dealing with, our environment.

The solution, as indicated by one of the presenters, is to provide people with a vision, with a glimpse of where they are going so that, even if they do not see the full picture, they open up, because they begin to become excited about where they are going, and what will happen when they get there. This automatically brought two things to my mind – well, three things, but the first two are related, and I would like to talk about them first.

My first thought was about a camp meeting that the CSDA Church held some time ago, for which the theme involved a “Vision of Excellence.” I next thought about the writings of Ellen G. White. Even though she is considered an inspired writer by our Church, we nevertheless promote the “Bible only” as the foundation for every doctrine that we teach.

In fact, we often point out that everything we teach as Church-wide doctrine is actually drawn directly from our understanding of the Gospel – that in Christ, those who are born again do not commit sin. Everything else we teach, from our understanding of the Godhead, to obedience to the 10 Commandments, to the keeping of feasts (because doctrines, after all, extend beyond tests of fellowship) come forth from this understanding.

And yet, even if we do not teach the writings of Ellen White as the foundation of our doctrines, this does not mean that the things she wrote are without a critical purpose. It does not mean that the things she saw, and recorded, are not for our benefit. We believe, and teach, that a Spirit-filled mind will find blessings in the writings we have received from Mrs. White, and our other SDA pioneers as well. The visions of Christ performing the atonement for us, of details from the past not included in the Biblical record, of the Heavenly society awaiting the redeemed, these all serve to give us a “vision,” to give us a foretaste of what is to come, so that we will become joyful in the knowledge of what is ahead.

Some of Mrs. White's descriptions of the Heavenly scenes, the flowers that never fade, and the temple on the hill, are quite moving... and are designed to (among other things) give us a sense of excitement about the things awaiting us in eternity.

Looking at how the term "vision" is used in the Scriptures, it would appear that the Word of Yahweh confirms this understanding of their purpose. We may read, for example, "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions." (Joel 2:28) Well, this tells us what will happen, and what has happened in Yah's remnant Church, but what about the purpose?

Here is one from Paul: "For the Lord Himself shall descend from Heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words." (1Th 4:16-18)

So that is one stated purpose, to comfort us in our times of sorrow or temptation.

As we read further, we see that, "The word of Yahweh was precious [rare] in those days; there was no open vision." (1 Sam 3:1) And the result is that, "Where there is no vision, the people perish; but he that keepeth the Law, happy is he." (Pro 29:18)

The "vision" of Yahweh is clearly very important to the health of His people. Now, there are a couple different ways of using that term, and they are both important. We may, by "vision," indicate a foretelling of events to come. We have these by way of the Book of Revelation, by the Old and New Testament writings, by our understanding of last day events, and by the things that Yah reveals to His people as they walk along the path. But in addition, and just as importantly, we need to maintain a "vision of excellence," which means an idea, a goal, of what it is that we shall be... of the always-before-us "next step" in becoming more manifestly loving, holy, and Christ-like.

Now, to an extent we all already know this goal. We are told the purpose of sanctification, which is that, "we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." (Eph 4:13)

But let us look at the elements here, and meditate upon them. We see Paul describing the mature Christian, one prepared for the Kingdom of Heaven. The first thing he mentions is that we all "come in the unity of the faith." This may have been a reference to Pentecost specifically, when the believers were all together in one accord, but even if it is not, we know that the Spirit cannot work through a people unless they are united. Thus, unity must be our goal; and there is no stopping point either. We cannot say, "Today we are united enough." No, this is a principle that is always worth pursuing – we must always press together, share our thoughts and prayers one with another. We must communicate our blessings, and encourage one another heaven-ward when trials appear. If we are challenged because of the distances involved, then let us press together the more firmly that the Spirit of Christ should overcome it. And do not consider this to be some theoretical idea... there is a great unity of heart, and Spirit, a joy of fellowship, that we must always EXPECT to enter into (remember, there is no fulfillment without the expectation!) that the faith may make it so. But it is clear that we shall not mature, we shall not see the

fulfillment of the vision of excellence, if we do not press into this unity of faith that the apostle here describes.

Next, in Paul's vision of the mature Christian, we have "the knowledge of the Son of God," and the thought is continued, "unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." This is the "perfection of character" that is the result of victory over sin, and righteousness by faith. This is the goal, the vision of which John also speaks, saying, "When He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is." (1John 3:2)

A connection is made between "seeing" and "being." When we see Yahshua for who He is, then we shall be like Him. When our vision is clear, then we take the step to that place from which He bids us "Come up hither."

Now, the connection between these three ideas: The vision, the unity of the faith, and the perfection of character, should be clear. Our Father has given us visions of what our inheritance shall be like, both in terms of the inheritance itself, and its inheritors – redeemed humanity. It is not a complete picture, for it has not yet entered into the heart of man the fullness of those things that await us. Nevertheless, our Father holds our hands, and brings us, step by step, to our Home, at each step pointing the way forward. But, with regard to the "unity" of our faith, while our Father does have us by the hand, we may look about and see that others are also being led along the narrow and narrowing way. We are given a Church, a Covenant, a spiritual Family that makes the journey with us; for as it was written in a separate but related context, "It is not good that the man should be alone." (Gen 2:18)

At times, it may seem that we are isolated in our trials. At times it may seem that none other could understand what we are experiencing; but of all people, Creation Seventh Day Adventist Christians are the least alone. Our Father is ever with us (for we do always those things that please Him). His angels are pledged to surround us. We have a Family of dear friends, and wise counselors, whom our Father has appointed to assist us on the journey. And do you know this? Do you feel and believe and know that it is so? If you do not feel that you are a part of such a Family, then you must only choose to enter in. Only choose it, and it is yours.

Remember, the obstacle to sanctification is fear, but the solution is embracing the vision of Yahweh. Yes, hear and believe the visions from the apostle John, and the other servants who have said, "Yahweh has spoken to me and said thus and so..." But also believe the "vision" of Christ your Savior, who leads you by His Spirit, who presents His divine character before you, and says, "Enter into the joy of my rest." These words will be spoken from the Throne of Judgment, but they are not words that the saints will hear for the first time when Yahshua returns. Everyone who hears those words aloud, among the sheep upon the return of Christ, will have heard – and accepted – these words already: Enter into my rest. Leave the fear behind in the world, rest in your decision to follow Me and you will fulfill the vision.

Now, the people of Yahweh are born again. They have put away the flesh, and are no longer subject to its domination. They will not fall, nor will they be deceived. And yet, they do not become careless, prideful or lazy in this knowledge. They know that the reason WHY they do not fall is because they are "watching and praying." Even "enduring to the end" is the effect of a cause. They know that Satan seeks to drive them from the path, but they stand firm, and endure to the end, because they maintain a firm vision of the Son of Yahweh before them, and do not permit themselves to become distracted or discouraged. And each

may ask himself, or herself, then... if these things are so, am I a child of Yahweh? But let each then say, boldly, "Yes!" Let each say, "I claim these things as true of me, having made the decision to stand in the light of my Father, to stand with the brethren, so that no sinful flesh, no outside influences, no societal or family or any other pressure, shall cause me to take my eyes off the Savior."

In this way, we will grow, and mature, both in unity of the faith, and in the character of Christ.

Now, this led to that third thing that came to mind. How is it that human beings resist the vision of Yahweh? How is it that they turn away from the invisible things that are nevertheless clearly seen? (Rom 1:20) Well, one of the main ways they do this is to substitute something that can be seen with the natural eye. In other words, they create for themselves an idol.

What is an idol? There are many definitions that may be given, but for the purposes of sanctification, we may identify an idol as an image created by the human mind out of fear. I would suggest that an idol is ALWAYS the result of fear, and therefore its presence indicates fear, whether consciously realized or not.

When John wrote his first letter to the Churches, the very last thing he said to them was, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen." (1 John 5:21) This was the thought he wanted to leave lingering in the ears of those who heard his epistle read. This was the final idea he wanted to impress upon the congregation. Keep yourselves from idols.

Consider this: Demons present themselves to be worshipped by humans, but they never give them idols... not directly. The demons inspire temptations, fears, anxieties, wrath, unlawful lust, and so on... but then they leave the human minds to fashion an object that most clearly represents (to those humans) these negative principles. We read, "And Aaron said unto them, 'Break off the golden earrings, which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them unto me.' And all the people brake off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them unto Aaron. And he received them at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf; and they said, 'These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.'" (Exo 32:2-4)

Now, while Moses was among them, such a thing would never have been done. But in the absence of a visible leader, Israel's fears once again began to manifest – that they were trapped in a desolate wilderness, that they were lost and doomed to wander homeless until their death, that they had been misled, or that the Egyptians would eventually come after them again. These were the thoughts among the people that were not eliminated, merely suppressed, but they came out and showed themselves when given the opportunity. The result of all these fears coming to the surface was the creation of an idol. And again, I would suggest that this is always going to be the result of such a situation, to the degree that, if you discern that someone has an idol, you might very well ask them, "What is your fear?"

It is the flesh that wishes to be a slave, rather than truly be free. It is the flesh that seeks a cruel master, telling it what to do. It is the flesh that fears death, destruction, and loss, but that relies upon another to tell it how to escape these things. It is the flesh that must "see" a visible way of salvation.

By relying on the flesh, Israel lost sight of the "vision." They built an idol on which they could focus their adoration, but in truth they were merely trying to cover their fear. They knew that a graven image of gold would not protect them from hunger and thirst, but they convinced themselves that if they could pray

to a god that they could see and touch (as the Egyptians had done in their sight) it was better than merely waiting for Moses to return.

Today, men's idols are not usually physical, at least, not statues and graven forms. But modern idols serve the same purpose as their ancient counterparts. They are an attempt to cover up fear, uncertainty, anxiety, by giving the mind something on which to focus, rather than the vision that comes from Yah... which would eliminate the initial dis-ease. We have spoken before about idols and idolatry. We have seen that they may be hidden, or they may be open. We have seen that they may be an opinion, a habit, or a cherished thought. It has been obvious that they are distractions from the sanctification process, but we also need to understand why that is.

It is because of the connection between "seeing" and "being." It is because unless we have a clear image of the mature Christian character, we can never claim it with "the knowledge of the Son of God." If, as Paul points out in Romans 1, mankind substitutes the "vision" of Yahweh with earthly things, his mind becomes reprobate. Idols cover sins, which ought to be recognized, confessed, and forsaken... but as long as Israel danced before that golden calf, they could not see their own sins – that they feared the future, and they had not all left behind the influence of their Egyptian captivity.

Had they done this, had Aaron and others stood firm and helped them to see this, then how might the history of Israel, and all the world, have been different? These are things we cannot know... but what we CAN know is that for us, Yah has given us this time, of which it is written, "Now for a little space grace hath been shewed from Yahweh our God, to leave us a Remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in His holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage." (Ezra 9:8)

I hope you see how this verse speaks to us in these last days, and I pray it becomes a focus of your thoughts on this Sabbath day, to be contemplated with solemnity, but also with joy. Yah has given us "a little space," a time of grace, for seeing and putting away any hidden idols that may remain within us, anything we may be using to cover up some unconscious fear, some unidentified defect of character. And if we will do this, through prayer, through the guidance of the Spirit, and through the help of our loving brethren, then our Father will "lighten our eyes." He will give us a strong vision, a vision of excellence, so that we may have a knowledge of the Son of Yah, that we may come into the perfect unity of the faith, one with another... that we may step forward boldly along the path to the perfection of Christian character. He will, and He has, set before us a vision – individually and as a people – that will allow us to endure any trial, to bear any insult, slander or attack. We shall weather any challenge, and will arrive at our intended inheritance – fixed, like a nail, in His holy place.

As it is written, and quoted beforehand, "Where there is no vision, the people perish; but he that keepeth the Law, happy is he." (Pro 29:18) We are the people of Yah's law of love. We are the people of Yah's vision, and His vision of excellence. We are they who endureth to the end. Do we know this to be so? Do we receive this as a promise from our Father? Then let us be free indeed, and fearless in our victory.