

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



**PATREON**

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

*THE OPEN EYE.*

STUDENTS of Holy Scripture are well aware of the abundance of illustrations to be found in it drawn from the physical framework of man. If their study is confined for this purpose to the Book of Psalms, how fertile and how suggestive it is in its lessons! Not a limb, not a feature, escapes the poet's fine, imaginative instinct, and each becomes an object-lesson for the spiritually minded. The head and feet, the arm and hand, the back and breast, the face and neck, are not only looked at as parts of the fearful and wondrous handiwork<sup>1</sup> of man's Creator; but furnish types of his richer spiritual endowments, of his capacities of using them, of his freedom, alas! to abuse them. These stand as symbols of powers higher and mightier than physical; they point to analogies where the body of our humiliation lies in the background, to the gifts of mind and heart, to the processes of thought and the energies of love, to obedience and self-control, to duty and service, to enterprise and effort. But if attention is thus drawn for spiritual instruction to these external features of our bodily organization, it will be observed that the teaching becomes at once more frequent and more pertinent when our finer parts and powers come under review. Take, for instance, the senses, and of these only hearing and eyesight. Both, as it were, become vocal. Both become full of lessons to him who is endowed with them and wills to employ them aright. Nor is it true to say that the Psalmists and other poetically-minded contributors to sacred writ do but express ideas common to all didactic literature. For this forcible, nervous, direct application of the features and functions of the human body, so as to teach higher than human lessons, one looks in vain outside Scripture, where also one alone finds the conception

<sup>1</sup> Ps. cxxxix. 14.

of the redemption of the body. It is not to be discovered in Greek, Roman, or other literature until that moment comes when a language is penetrated by Christian sentiment. Then this element of illustration and instruction appears, and its source is plainly and wholly Scriptural, as any one may note who reads the *Divina Commedia*<sup>1</sup> or the poems of George Herbert. It is not a common property of literature; it is, in source and origin, a peculium of inspiration.

Thus with a bold freedom do the writers of both the Old and New Testaments fasten the attention upon the sense of hearing. Throughout, the ear is the symbol of obedience. As by its common use the sense is the medium of interpretation of sounds, whether of nature or of the articulate expression of fellow men, so, by further reference and deeper analogy, it stands as the avenue through which Divine communications may pass to the soul,—it may be in a still small voice. One might suppose, considering the high esteem in which obedience is held in the sacred polity of Israel, considering that obedience is ever regarded in the Old Testament as the test of national and individual loyalty to Jehovah, that the metaphor of the ear would occur more frequently than that of any other sense. Yet it is not so. A glance at any serviceable concordance will show that it is from the eyesight that evangelist and apostle, as well as psalmist and prophet, are furnished with their most telling spiritual illustrations. The reason for this is plain. If the sacred penman made the sense of hearing his object-lesson, it could only be one. It could only help him to emphasise the single conception of the duty and blessing of learning to obey. With the eyesight the manifold character of the teaching answered exactly to the complex faculties of the organ of vision. A concordance, better still an intimate knowledge of Holy Scripture, suggests obedience as the primary lesson of the Old

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Dante, *Purgatorio*, canto xiii.

Testament. The metaphor of the "ear," when found in the New Testament, is commonly discovered in a setting of some Old Testament passage. Another illustration is wanted, correspondent to the greater fulness of a fresh revelation; and this illustration, common indeed to both covenants, is Eyesight.

Ages before science had made its investigations into this sense, men had been struck with awe by it. The wonder will remain, whether one regards the eye in its adaptability to the varying circumstances and conditions of light and distance, or in its actual mechanism, or in its inherent power of expressing the emotions of sympathy and antipathy and the delicate phases of feeling lying between these. It would be surprising indeed if the sacred writers, who were not slow to ascribe the power of vision to the immediate gift of God,<sup>1</sup> should not also find in this sense many a pertinent lesson for the spiritual life. The force and variety of the teaching thus conveyed are indeed striking.

Intelligence and candour, receptiveness and perseverance, faith, hope, and charity,—such are some amongst the many lessons inculcated through and in the possession of sight. The instruction was put now negatively,<sup>2</sup> now positively, now indirectly, now directly; and no faithful Israelite, no devout Christian, could fail to be reminded in the light of the body,<sup>3</sup> of the light not physical—the light of the soul; and thus the sense itself received a consecration through faith in God, and in Christ whom God sent.

But passing away from the immediate and direct suggestions of the figure, it will be marked as a note of Scriptural teaching that the spiritual eye is an open eye. Physical blindness is traceable to the unhappy causes of old age, disease, or accident; or sight may be temporarily suspended by the protective fall of the eyelid, or in the action of sleep.

<sup>1</sup> Prov. xx. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Isa. xlii. 18; cf. St. Matt. vi. 23.

<sup>3</sup> St. Matt. vi. 22, and St. Luke xi. 34.

But the spiritual eye knows none of these suspensions ; it has in some faint reflection somewhat of the ceaseless watchfulness of the eye of the Lord.<sup>1</sup> It is not the victim of accident or senility, although its clearer powers of vision may often be marred by sin and hampered by indolence. The spiritual eye is an open eye, full of meaning and purpose, cleansed by the tears of penitence, lighted up by faith and love. The eye is open, but not of that pitiful kind that is recognised as vacant. It is bright with significance, clear in its aim, strenuous and persevering in its direction. Since then the eye of the spiritual man is neither blind nor blank, it has certain characteristic ranges of vision, and these, so Scripture and experience alike teach, are threefold. It looks inward, outward, and upward. As its gaze is directed within, it contemplates the soul ; as outward, it looks upon the world both of nature and humanity ; as upward, to God.

I. First, then, is the inward look. "Know thyself" may be claimed as the earliest and choicest maxim of philosophy ; but its teaching had been long familiar to the sages of Israel, as it was current in the Church of the apostolic age. What stress is laid upon its truth by psalmist and prophet, by apostle and evangelist ! To look with open, fearless eye upon one's self, upon personal character and conduct, upon wish and motive, yet not in any morbid self-absorption, is regarded, according to both Old and New Testament teaching, as the first step in rising "from the dead self to better things." Herein lies the profoundest wisdom,—the first task of the spiritual eye,—to know the worst, and to know the best of one's self. It is the function of the eye to read, mark, learn, and inwardly discern ; and then of the conscience to speak out as the inward monitor of the soul.

The eye first marks the worst within, an evil so general, so potent, that the main feeling is one of despair. The analysis seems to yield nothing else, nothing goes up

<sup>1</sup> 2 Chron. xvi. 9 ; cf. Zech. iv. 10, and Jer. xxxii. 19.

but a cry of heart-rending significance<sup>1</sup>—a passionate longing, at the spectacle of such deep-seated mischief, for deliverance out of the whole scene and circumstance of its energy. But the open eye, in its inward look, is straight-way cheered by a more inviting prospect. It has learnt the worst; it may now see the best that lies also within. For here in the human heart it perceives the work of the Holy Spirit, with the expulsive power of a strong affection casting out that which offends, transfiguring the affections, purifying motives, consecrating hopes and aims, ennobling life, confirming feeble knees and strengthening weak hands, placing poor, shipwrecked souls upon a Rock higher than themselves. It is, indeed, from this vision of the work of the Holy Spirit within the heart of man that the Christian faith draws its unconquerable hope. One may read philosophical treatises from Plato down to the latest novel in which philosophy is made palatable to the nineteenth century taste without discovering the trace of a suggestion how the soul of man may be aided in any upward striving. But as to the eye of the spiritually-minded, there beats a fiercer light upon the *θηρίον* within him; so he discerns in himself a “power not his own making for righteousness”; he not only knows, but exhibits the proof of the power of the Holy Ghost.

II. But next, the open eye has an outward look. And here it finds two directions of its vision—it regards the world of nature, and the world of society. It may be that the impression of nature, fierce in tooth and claw, will have its distressing features. Her inexorable laws are painful reading to those who have only mastered the alphabet. Is it not wiser to look up trustfully through Nature to Nature’s God? Are not the poets as good spiritual guides as the scientists? What is the first impression of the open eye as it gazes upon that which is purely God’s handiwork, not

<sup>1</sup> Rom. vii. 21-25.

touched and marred by the finger of man? Let any one possessed of spiritual intuitions take his stand upon the margin of the Lakes of Killarney, or upon some Scotch moor or beside some rushing reach of the Wye, and see if his soul is not enriched by views of God at once more large and more tender.

Again, there is the outlook of the open eye upon the world of humanity. Here, too, there are, by the nature of the case, aspects which are painful to contemplate. But instead of profitless speculations upon the "martyrdom of man" down the ages, the spiritual eye scans the history of the race in the light of the Incarnation. Strip away the cardinal facts of the Gospel, and a dull, cold pessimism is the natural, indeed the logical, attitude for men to take up about mankind. If, however, life is once invested with these facts, it not only becomes pregnant with a new meaning, but the service of man to men is inspired with a fresh and undying hope, and pessimism is impossible. Nor must the inheritance of the past be here overlooked. Time failed when the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews would enumerate the heroes of the faith of Israel;<sup>1</sup> but the catalogue of the saints of the universal Church has now to be vastly enlarged. That most consolatory doctrine of the communion of saints is one which is ever increasing in its significant value. So to the open eye of the spiritual man the page of history, as "disclosing the critical changes of society," can never be quite dark, because the light of a Divine guidance and discipline is thrown upon them and God is revealed in the annals of the race as He is seen in the face of Nature. Hence it follows that Christians are not "comfortable moles"; they will not lag behind the most ardent politicians and the most enthusiastic philanthropists in watching every social movement of the day, in sacrificing, it may be, health, wealth and happiness, so that out of each crisis the life of humanity may emerge the gladder, freer, purer.

<sup>1</sup> Heb. xi. 32.

III. There remains yet another outlook for the spiritual eye. This is upward, Godward. It has been seen that the inward and outward look must now and again be depressing. The upward look is not merely the antidote to despair, but it is the promise and pledge of love and joy. Seeing is indeed here believing. And despite the mysteries which remain, the vision of God—that is, the knowledge of Him—is ever growing to the Church and to the individual less imperfect. The high courage of the psalmists amazes us in the thought of their distance from the realization of the Messianic hope; but they know the responsibility of clear, spiritual eyesight; nor did they neglect

“The one talent that is death to hide.”

With us it is different; and Christians are the more, and not the less, responsible because the Word is incarnate and God hath spoken to them in these last days in His Son.<sup>1</sup> It is their life to look upon Him; it is their life's work to help others to see Him, whose eyes may yet be holden by ignorance, by prejudice and pride. To help to reveal God must be the noblest enterprise of man, and it is an enterprise denied to none.

Nor is the upward look of the eye of the soul to God merely a passing act of worship,<sup>2</sup> but the very foretaste of His favour and His aid. His face does not dazzle the worshipper, but promises all that the suppliant asks aright. Nothing is more telling in this regard than those parables in action spoken by our Lord in His miracles upon the blind. In one of the most suggestive of these<sup>3</sup> it lies on record that, after Christ had spoken the word of His power, “straightway the blind man received sight and followed him on the way.” The power to see is followed by the capacity to pursue, and discipleship is the true consequence of spiritual vision.

<sup>1</sup> Heb. i. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ps. xxv. 15.

<sup>3</sup> St. Mark x. 51; St. Luke xviii. 41.



Only as men steadfastly follow where Christ goes before will they win the eternal benediction of the open eye; for it is only the heart which is pure of earthly aims and hopes that shall at last reach the perfect vision of God.

B. WHITEFOORD.

JEREMIAH: THE MAN AND HIS MESSAGE.

III. IDEAL.

SOMETIMES the prophets, besides teaching by words, resorted to symbolical actions, for the purpose of emphasizing their messages. They would appear in public in some peculiar situation or attitude which attracted notice; and, when they were asked to explain what their singular behaviour meant, they obtained the opportunity of pressing home the truth. Thus a prophet might be seen lying on his side for months on the ground, like an Indian fakir, because he wished to enforce a truth which this attitude symbolized.

Jeremiah never did anything so *outré*; but he was fond of this realistic mode of teaching, and he is often seen practising it. His chosen symbols do not, as a rule, strike us as being happy or imaginative; on the contrary, they are generally extremely prosaic. But this may have been intentional. As the prophet Habakkuk, a man of the highest poetic endowment, as his book proves, took a board and set it up in the market-place, with only two or three words written on it, in which the pith of his prophetic message was expressed, so the very bluntness and plainness of Jeremiah's images may have been intended to suit dull minds, which needed to have instruction thrust under their very eyes.

Among the most successful of his efforts in this line was