

## STRONG FOUNDATIONS

LET'S WORK TOGETHER TO CHANGE OUR WORLD

# The Things Not Seen

“So we fix our eye not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen, for the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:18)

It's much easier to look at the things which are seen, the things which are known and experienced. We can believe those things. It's much harder to look at the things which are yet to be, the things which are not yet real, and work to make them real.

In seeking to understand the Christian life and how to live it, the Church inevitably looks back at the Old Testament – and is right to do so. After all, we have been given the Old Testament so that we can learn from it. The question is: what do we learn? And what *should* we learn?

The Old Testament is full of things we can see: things we can see with our eyes (like the Temple and the Priests), and things we can see – understand – with our mind (like the Sabbath and the system of Law).

And while these things were not perfect, they worked – at least, they worked well enough for us. For thousands of years, God's people lived with them. We can read the Old Testament, see it all working out and understand what is going on – or, at the very least, we can feel that we can begin to understand what was happening then, and what God was doing.

We can look back at Israel under David's rule. It was real. We can read the stories, visit the places and dig up the pottery. It was imperfect, but we understand that, too, and can see ways it could have been better.

Then Jesus comes along, and threatens to turn everything upside down. This is a big deal for us: we don't really want everything to change, we just want things to be better. Most of us are quite convinced that, with what we now have – with what Jesus came to bring – we could do much better than David. We understand grace, we have the Holy Spirit living in us 24/7, how could we not do better?

But Jesus does not want to do the Old Testament things better, with a better Priesthood and a better set of moral principles. Jesus wants to build something which has never been seen before

The Kingdom which Jesus wants to build is not a small strip of land in the Middle East: it extends over the whole world, over everyone. He wants everybody to enjoy the benefits, whether they follow Him or not.

In this Kingdom, there is no Priesthood, no people set apart for God's service, because all of God's children are Priests, all set apart for God's service. There is no Temple, no special place set apart where we can meet with God, because God's children are the new Temple and He makes Himself present in His people. There is no Sabbath, no special day devoted to God, because all our days are devoted to God.

We find this hard. It is much easier for us to keep the things we can see and baptise them. We are told to fix our eyes on the things not seen, but find it much easier to set our heart on fixing the things we can see.

There is a coming Kingdom, a Kingdom built on unlimited, genuine, costly love, a Kingdom which seeks to include everybody, a Kingdom where dirty, broken, dysfunctional people are accepted just as they are, a Kingdom where everybody who seeks it can find redemption, a Kingdom where the last are somehow transformed into the first. I suspect that this is also a Kingdom where people care more about dealing with the structural sins which harm and limit people, rather than the individual sins which stain our souls until we discover we have been forgiven.

We have a choice. We can continue to do what we have always done: we can fix our eyes on the things we can see, like the services and worship songs, and on the things we can understand, like the denominational structures and creeds; we can do this, sometimes living with them as they are, sometimes trying to fix their brokenness.

Or we can fix our eyes on the Kingdom that does not yet exist, the Kingdom which is made possible only because Jesus chose to die, the Kingdom which can only be made real if we choose with Him to die to all the things we can see, and live for all the things which really matter.

We have to live *in* the world of finance and politics, of competing groups and conflicting agendas, of denominations and creeds, of projects and targets. We have to seek to make these things better, to bring them into line with the way things are done in our Father's Kingdom. We live *in* this world, but not *for* it; we work as hard as we can to fix what is broken, but we don't set our heart on succeeding.

Much of the challenge of the Christian life lies in holding on to both – the things seen and the things not seen – and maintaining the right relationship between the two: working for the one, but fixing our eyes and hearts on the other.

## ***Next steps***

This was written by Paul Hazelden as a contribution to the *Strong Foundations* exploration. You are welcome to use it and distribute it how you like, but feedback would be appreciated.

- Is it helpful?
- Would you change anything?
- Would you like to talk about how we can learn from each other about how best to follow Jesus where we are?

You can contact me through the web form at mad-bristol or join the conversation on the *Strong Foundations* site.

- Web form: <http://mad-bristol.org.uk/contact/>
- Strong Foundations: <http://strongfoundations.pbworks.com>