

The Discerning Eye

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Dark Eye" by Dafco

Prayer of Illumination

Living and Loving God, help us so to hear your holy Word that we may truly understand; that, understanding, we may believe, and believing, we may follow in all faithfulness and obedience seeking your honor and glory in all that we do and say, through Christ our crucified, risen, and reigning Lord.

Amen.

Background

Take a look around you right now. Every second your eyes send 100 billion signals to your brain. Your brain does a lot of work to decode these signals—recognizing faces, interpreting movements, spotting danger. In fact, one third of your cerebral cortex is dedicated to vision. We really do see with our mind's eye. The biggest part of seeing is not really seeing, but making sense of the images in our brains.

I need to make a confession. I am not only a Presbyterian. Over the last few years I have become a Presbyopian... the fancy word for a person needing reading glasses. :)

It takes about 200 milliseconds for the information to get from your eye to your brain to be processed and interpreted. This is actually a substantial lag time, roughly one fifth of a second. So your brain does a brilliant thing—it forecasts what the world will be like in one fifth of a second.

In other words, you live in the future—not in real-time. The future is your present. We live our entire lives in a world that does not yet exist.

The speed of sound and the speed of light travel at different speeds. Your brain knows that—and so it tricks you into thinking that they're arriving at the same time, like when you see and hear a plane go by. We all have blind spots—and our mind also tricks us into thinking they're not there.

Picture this: Cacti are green and the sky is blue, right? Well, not entirely. In your mind they are, but not in the real world. Unconvinced? I have an experiment for you. Take a bar of soap or even liquid soap. It may be blue, pink, or yellow—pick a color, any color. Have you ever noticed that when you lather the soap with water, the soap suds are always white—no matter the color of the soap? The soap didn't miraculously change color. It's the same molecularly. Foam reflects light in a different way than solids or liquids. Same with ocean water—blue-green waves, white foam. It's all in your head—the rich colors of the universe. Color is not a fixed reality—it's a perception.

All this leads us to our passage where Paul talks about spiritual perception. What we see with the naked eye isn't the ultimate or lasting thing. Eternity is the unseen reality, seen with the eyes of faith.

We've heard it said, "seeing is believing." I think that needs to be corrected. It's more accurate to say, "believing is perceiving."

So let's hear now from the Apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 (REB)

No wonder we do not lose heart! Though our outward humanity is in decay, yet day by day we are inwardly renewed. Our troubles are slight and short-lived, and their outcome is an eternal glory which far outweighs them, provided our eyes are fixed, not on the things that are seen, but on the things that are unseen; for what is seen is transient, what is unseen is eternal.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – The Discerning Eye

One of my favorite adults in my home church of First Presbyterian Church of River Forest, Illinois was and is John Erickson. I looked up to and loved John and his wife Jane as a kid. They were both so good to me. John has such a great sense of humor and quick wit. His attitude toward life is so refreshing. You immediately feel his warmth and kindness when you meet him. There's a goodness about his presence. You feel like he really sees you. But John can't see you. John is blind.

At age sixteen in 1972, after nine failed eye surgeries, it looked like John was going die. The priest at the hospital administered Last Rites. At the eleventh hour, his parents approved a high risk surgery. Miraculously it worked. John began his life-long journey of learning to live as a legally blind person.

In his book "*What I Saw When I Went Blind*" he shares about when he was learning Braille at a school in Berwyn. At the time his vision was very blurry and getting worse. There he met a brother and a sister—both younger than him. They were smart, fun, and friendly. The difference between John Erickson and John and Carolyn Novotny was that the two siblings were both born without eyes. Their friendship taught John to be grateful. At the time his vision was blurry and diminishing, but he had

eyes. The two siblings helped John see how blessed he was. John may be blind on this side of heaven, but Christ is visible in him. God's work in him is on full display for all to see.

God is at work in us, too. Even in the wear and tear of our lives. Paul reminds us not to dwell upon what's fading away: things like looks, attention, status, accolades, and honors, houses, cars, toys, and fashion. Instead, concentrate your attention on the eternal, on faith, hope, and love. Service and being a blessing to others. Gratitude.

"A moment is long," says John Calvin, "if we look at the things around us; but once we have raised our minds to heaven, a thousand years begin to be like a moment."

Hear the good news: our eternal destiny is in the making. Our present is already being redeemed and taken up into God's reality. We have a foretaste of the fullness that is yet to come in the Holy Spirit. And so we're focused. Keeping our gaze upon the eternal, our very real challenges are reframed and put into proper perspective. So we keep focusing and refocusing, asking God to show us our blind spots—praying that God would correct our vision. "God, give me eyes to see."

I think of the Apostle Paul in the book of Acts in his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Instantly something like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he regained his sight. A new journey was about to begin. With the eyes of faith, we do not lose heart. We're not discouraged, even in discouraging times. We can endure. Never give up. Or as Paul says earlier in the chapter, through good report and bad report, in glory and in shame dying, we live on. We're sorrowful, yet ever rejoicing, hard-pressed but not crushed, perplexed but not despairing, persecuted but not abandoned, struck down but not destroyed.

Outwardly, we're getting older every day. Scientists say as early as age fourteen things start declining in the human body, even as it grows. And of course with time, our hair gets a little grayer and a little thinner, our waists get thicker. Our joints creek and our backs ache. With time, if we are blessed to live long enough, we all have our senior moments. Slowly but surely, we're all shuffling off this mortal coil. But inwardly—inwardly we're getting stronger day by day, every day. We're being renewed. Our physical strength fades, but our souls keep growing.

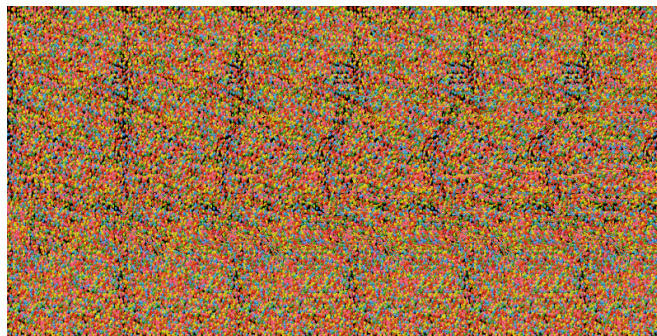
Someone once said that life is like a roll of toilet paper, it goes faster the closer you get to the end. It's true. Viewed from this vantage point, life is like a slow descent down a slope that leads to the valley of the shadow of death. Some of us get there faster than others, but we all end up there... everybody. But with the eyes of faith, we see something additional happening: Life is a climbing up of the hill that leads to God's presence on Mt. Zion, the Celestial City. If you are advanced in years right now, see yourself nearing the summit of the mountain rather than merely the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Each day we're one day closer to death. Yes, that's true, but also each day we're one day closer to seeing Jesus face to face. Whenever Jesus talked about his death in the gospels, he always mentioned his resurrection, too. This is the secret of endurance, knowing the two are linked—crucifixion and resurrection. We're aware of our mortality, but also know immortality is at work. Abraham had the eyes of faith—and he persevered because he saw him who is invisible. You see, trusting in God convinces us of unseen realities.

Remember how the human eye and brain see in the future? How we live in the future? So too with the eyes of faith and the mind of Christ, we see beyond this present world to the future world. We allow the future to break into our present. The future shapes our present. We're a resurrection people, and that changes how we view this life. We have hope—a living hope.

The things you see with the naked eye are all eroding, withering, crumbling, rotting, or rusting. They're real, but they are also temporary and transient. God's reality endures the test of time—for all eternity. Our mortality is absorbed into his immortality. And in Christ, we enjoy the abundant and eternal life—now. Faith is our guide, not sight.

Have you ever done an autostereogram before? Well, here's your opportunity. I've never been good at these, but I've gotten better this week as I've practiced. Stare at the image here and see if another image jumps out at you from within it.



What did you have to do to see it? After staring at it semi "cross-eyed" for a while, an image of a shark appears. You don't merely glance at it or look at it, you gaze upon it. You have to stay with it. Fix your eyes on the image—almost look beyond it or through it. It's then that the new image appears. The eyes of faith work similarly. We're "cross-eyed."

One of my favorite definitions of prayer is "a long, loving look at the real."

- Long, in that it isn't rushed—it's focused and intent. You notice God's activity and you pay attention. You push through the distractions. You wait for it.
- Loving, in that you know that God is love, God loved you into being, and God loves you in this very moment. No matter what's going on, God will always love you.
- Look, in that you don't merely glance at it. You also don't just coldly analyze God, but you contemplate God, you feast your eyes upon God.
- Real, in that God is real. God is lasting, enduring, and eternal. And God is intimately involved in the reality of our lives. God helps us perceive what is really real.

The Psalms remind us we are the apple of God's eye. God will see us through—our pain, our fear, our uncertainty, our loss. Give God, give life, a "long loving look at the real." Walk by faith, not by sight. Set side by side the momentary with the eternal, the outward with the inward, the present with the things to come, the light with the weighty, the affliction with the glory. The tough things we face, whether they be opposition, hardship, accident, failure, tragedy, sickness, aging, loss, or death, they are all very real. They can be severe and unremitting, but they are limited to this passing life. They are temporary compared to the everlasting glory that awaits us. It is but a passing moment.

Sure, our outer body is wearing down, but our inner soul is growing. The outward is the paradox of the inward. The present reality is diminishing while the future glory is constantly advancing.

God in his infinite wisdom is mysteriously using all things, even these pesky and painful temporary trials, to bring about an eternal good in us.

Amen.



PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Let us pray.

In our walking—God.

In our talking—God.

In our life—God.

In our strife—God.

In our seeing—God.

In our being—God.

In our days—God.

In our ways—God.

In our nights—God.

In our plight—God.

In every season—God.

God we are bound all around.

And so Triune God—encircle me.

Father—profound.

Jesus—confound.

Spirit—abound.

With God we are bound all around.

And so Lord, you hold the world in your hands. We pray for your world—

Those suffering from accidents and hardship, from illness,

Those suffering from the travails of grief and loss,

From natural disasters, from disappointments.

We pray for those who feel hopeless and struggle to find meaning in their lives.

We pray for Immanuel, we pray the Church universal—

For every Christian and every Church—

That we might look not at the seen, but the unseen.

That the invisible Christ would be made visible in us,

That God's glory would be displayed in us, even in the midst of our affliction.

That we would be a people and church infused with hope and life,

That even in the midst of these light and momentary afflictions,
Help us to know in our inner being
That you are using all these things towards an eternal weight of glory
And you are renewing us day by day.
For we are your new creation.

*And now with the confidence of God's children,
we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray:*

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

CHARGE AND BENEDICTION

Receive now this blessing from John O'Donahue:

May you know serenity
When you're called
To enter the house of suffering.
May a window of light always surprise you.
When suffering knocks on the door of your life,
May you glimpse its eventual gifts.
May you be able to receive the fruits of suffering.
May memory bless and protect you with the hard-earned light of past travail;
To remind you that you have survived before,
And though the darkness now is deep,
You will soon see approaching light.
May the grace of time heal your wounds.
May you know that though the storm might rage
Not a hair of your head will be harmed.

*And may the blessings of God Almighty,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be with you now and always.*

Sermon Art: "Dark Eye" by Dafko, Deviant Art

Revised English Bible (REB)

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