

The great Illusion dispelled

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Have you ever seen a mirage? It is a fascinating sight, not easily forgotten.

Travelling, some years ago, with a companion on the Cape Government Railway between De Aar Junction and Beaufort West we were fortunate enough to see one. Away to our left there appeared a large lake dotted here and there with islands. The contrast with the dry and scorched veldt was delightful. Just as we were wondering whether it could be a mirage or not our questionings and doubts were settled.

In an extraordinary way the whole picture began to move, and as it faded it became apparent that the waters of the lake were nothing more than the shimmering heat-waves, and the islands the tops of kopjes in the distance. A few more moments and the lovely lake vanished away, and

*Like the baseless fabric of a vision
Left not a rack behind.*

Probably you have not seen a sight of this description, yet certain it is that you are perfectly familiar with the greatest mirage, or illusion, of all. The name of this greatest of all illusions is – *The world*. By this, of course, is meant, not the material earth, not the people comprising its population, but the great “world-system” with its supply of every imaginable gratification for human desires, without God.

In this fearful and wonderful organization, evolved by the master-mind of Satan, we have all had our share. Its favours fall to the few, its miseries are tasted by the many; but whatever may have been the particular part played, my reader, if unconverted, is inevitably involved in it with the prospect of sharing in its ultimate ruin.

If converted, you no longer belong to the world-system. As to this the words of the Lord Jesus are plain. He said of His disciples: “They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world” – repeating these words twice (John 17: 14, 16). Even so there is danger lest – though delivered from it by the work of God – you should be only half-alive to its true character. Easy then to become entangled in its meshes and greatly damaged in soul. It is for any in such peril that these lines are penned.

In his first epistle the Apostle John has some strong warnings on this matter. Will you slowly and thoughtfully read from the middle of 1. John 2: 14 – 17?

1Joh 2:14–17 I have written to you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one. 15 Love not the world, nor the things in the world. If any one love the world, the love of the Father is not in him; 16 because all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. 17 And the world is passing, and its lust, but he that does the will of God abides for eternity.

He addresses himself, you will note, to “young men,” that is to Christians not in their earliest stage of Christian life and experience – these are classed as “babes”; not to such as have by

long experience matured in their knowledge of Christ – these are “fathers,” but rather to those who have reached a kind of middle condition. They have gained such a knowledge of God’s Word as has fortified them against Satan’s wiles in the matter of anti-Christian teachings, yet they have not such a deep and soul-satisfying knowledge of Christ as has made them, like Paul, to count all things but loss for it. They are, therefore, susceptible to the attractions of the world.

As a matter of fact, if converted young, as is the case with the great majority of Christians, and if normal progress is made, the “young man” stage of growth is reached when life is at its best and fullest; and relationships by marriage and parentage exert their greatest influence. Hence many a Christian, who as a “babe” has had a bright history, gets captured more or less by the world in later life, and his light is obscured.

Let us pause, and, as to this, ask ourselves the disciple’s question, “Lord, is it I?”

In the verses cited above, the Apostle John states certain facts which if really received will quite dispel the great world-illusion. We may approach them by asking a series of questions.

First of all we will inquire:

Upon what foundations is the World System based?

Mark the answer! “All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life...” Here the three foundations are plainly named.

1. The “lust of the flesh” is the desire of *having* – the restless longing to have or acquire everything that can minister to any desire having its seat in the body. The phrase covers the whole range of such desires from the lowest animal passion to the highest refinements in the way of creature comforts.
2. The “lust of the eyes” is the desire of *seeing*. The eye, be it remembered, is only the organ of sight. It is the brain that really sees. This phrase, therefore, covers the whole range of desires connected with the living, intelligent soul which man possesses, rather than with his body. The world provides every kind of spectacle and show to please the eyes or ears. You may visit the lowest kind of music hall imaginable or the finest and most cultured theatre. If your desires are more intellectual you may wander in paths of science and philosophy, ever gratifying the lust of seeing mentally some new thing, though never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.
3. “The pride of life” is the desire of *being*. The worst of the three, this lust lies most deeply ingrained in humanity. It covers every desire connected with the immortal spirit which was man’s chief possession and glory in creation. It is essentially one desire, the desire of being supreme and first – first amongst the smallest and most insignificant coterie of humanity, or rising in its full height and daring impiety to challenge the supremacy of the God who sits on the circle of the heavens.

On these three foundations then, we repeat, is the world-system constructed. What must its character be?

Or, changing the figure, let us put it thus: This glittering bauble called the world, perfumed as it seems with otto of roses, is handed to us for analysis. We submit it to the simple test of the Word of God, and what results? Its glitter vanishes, its perfume dies away, and there is left only these three primitive elements of fallen humanity, hideous and malodorous: that is all.

But is this really so? Can it be true? Well, you have only to investigate a little with prayerful desire to know the truth and you will be convinced. *Self* is the great motive spring of the world-system, and selfishness the great principle on which it is run. This being so, the things that are in the world, though many of them innocent enough in themselves, are tainted, and must not be loved by the Christian any more than the world-system which has tainted them.

Now let us inquire:

In what will the World System eventuate?

or to what end is it travelling? The answer of our Scripture is very plain. "The world passeth away and the lust thereof." It eventuates in *nothing*, for its end is to pass away.

This is an amazing reply. "This is a hard saying: who can hear it?" we feel tempted to say. Yet it is true.

The field of human activities in connection with the world is vast indeed. There are worlds within worlds. Worlds of "thought," consisting in speculations, philosophies, and investigations: worlds of "word," consisting in mighty literatures in many tongues and the records, bewilderingly extensive, of the results of human observations and activities: worlds of "deeds," some bright and gay, some dark and mournful. The worlds of society, fashion, politics, and pleasure are amongst the former. The worlds of labour, poverty, and vice amongst the latter.

And the sum total of these mighty activities, worked to their fullest extent and carried on from generation to generation to their climax, is ... nothing!

An Oriental fable has it, that a tyrannical prince once bade one of his wise men to give him a motto which should be equally applicable to everything within his kingdom, under penalty of death. The wise man reflected for a moment and then replied: "You have but to write upon everything, O King, these words, 'And this, too, shall pass away.'"

He was undeniably right. His motto was eminently scriptural. The mirage will certainly dissolve. All human achievements will fade into nothingness. The time will come when the last remains of the great pyramid will have crumbled into sand and been blown by hot winds into the Sahara desert, when the very sites of London and New York will have been forgotten, when all human sciences and philosophies will have but entangled men in dreadful and self-inflicted catastrophes and ruin, and when all human greatness and renown will have been hushed in the presence of the Lord.

With all this in view there rings in our ears the apostolic injunction: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world." Lay great emphasis on that first word.

We are not asked to live like a hermit, or to follow a monastic life. We pass through the world, though not of it, and with the things in the world we have to do every day, following our callings and gaining our daily bread. And just because we do thus handle the world's things continually the exhortation "Love not" is so needful.

The world has rejected our Lord and Master. Its princes "crucified the Lord of Glory." Remembering this, understanding, too, the foundations on which it is reared, and knowing the nothingness in which it will eventuate, can we love it? Impossible!

But we can go a step further and ask another question:

Is there anything real and satisfying that supplants the World?

There is: It is "the love of the Father" (v. 15). The world-system took its rise directly after the fall of man. It has been evolved in the vain attempt to fill the void in man's heart made by the loss of communion with his Creator. Now nothing but the knowledge of and intercourse with God will satisfy the heart, and in Christianity we have such communion re-established, only in a far more intimate way than was possible when man was originally in innocence. We, Christians, know God, not merely as an all-wise and beneficent Creator but as Father, and that in connection with His very nature – love.

"The love of the Father" is the very kernel of all that has been revealed by Christ. The Epistle of John opens with reference to all that the apostles came into contact with revealed in "the Word of Life." And that which they knew they communicated to others so that the circle of communion might be extended – communion "with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ."

Here then are plainly two great spheres or systems. The world-sphere filled with innumerable objects, the fruit of man's inventive genius, but all based upon lust and pride. The Christian sphere, filled with unseen and eternal things, all centring in the Father and His love. The former very imposing and noisily aggressive, like Bunyan's Vanity Fair, yet really unsatisfying and transient; the latter as yet only seen by faith, yet satisfying and eternal.

And mark this: It is impossible that both should hold the heart at one and the same time. "If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." The converse is equally true. If any man have his heart filled with the love of the Father it is impossible that he should love the world. For him the great mirage has no allurements. He not only knows its true character, but he finds himself possessed of positive good and blessing which supplants its vain show altogether.

And yet so deceiving is the world, so alluring, so insistent, that all too often we find the love of it creeping back into our hearts and dimming there the shining of the Father's love. How great our folly when this is so. Let us be on the watch as to this, lest, like the dog in the fable, in attempting to grasp the shadow we foolishly let go the substance.

To some minds, what we have just been saying may appear a little dreamy and mystical. Such would like to remind us that life is made up mainly of hard facts and multifarious activities. That is so. Let us therefore ask one more question. It shall be one asked first by Solomon three thousand years ago.

What Profit hath a Man of all his Labours which he taketh under the Sun

To that Solomon had but a mournful reply. In his book of Ecclesiastes he was limited in vision to the world-system, already in his day highly developed. He could only say, "All is vanity!"

Now let us hear the reply of the Apostle John. Turning from the world, empty and fading, and with his heart rejoicing in the love of the Father, he says, "He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever." How great the contrast.

It is quite true that there is the active side of life as well as the contemplative and that for most people the former greatly overshadows the latter. It is equally true that in Christian life both sides are provided for and both sides are properly proportioned and balanced. On the contemplative side there is the love of the Father to fill our hearts with joy. On the active side there is doing the will of God for the employment of our energies. The former is the spring of the latter, for only as we learn what the will of God is shall we be able to do it.

It is doubtless true that Spirit-given energies spent in doing God's will can never fail of abiding result. When the world's activities have come to nothing the results of labour for Christ according to God's will shall shine forth in their beauty, yet what is said here is rather that "He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever." Such an one stands as an enduring exception to the transient nature of everything in the world.

Christian reader! do you realize this? You walk through this vain and fading world-system as one already put in touch with the heavenly system of things centred in God the Father and the Christ in whom His love reposes. You are left here to do His will and represent these abiding realities in the midst of the dying shadows, and not to attempt any reformation of the world and much less to associate with it. You are privileged to labour for the furtherance of Christ's interests with the certainty that time will not cause the fruit of such work to crumble into nothingness. The world's greatest things, compared with God's smallest things, look small indeed!

Again we ask, Do you realize this? Oh! wake, thou Christian that sleepest, and arise from amidst the dead world that surrounds thee; then Christ shall shine upon thee.

Then, with the world-illusion dispelled, you will tread more firmly that abiding path of doing the will of God which is indeed a path of the just, which is "as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day." The language of your heart will be:

*'Tis the treasure I've found in His love
That has made me a pilgrim below.*

Extracted from *Simple Testimony*, vol. 32, 1915, p. 151

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