

# **The Why and How of Doing Godly Vision Work: An Appeal to do Work with Eternal Potential**

by

Nick Howard, Psy.D.  
www.drnickhoward.com

## **Introduction**

Applying the ideas in this essay could change your life. The whole point of this essay is to help you make the time to be led by the Holy Spirit to see possibilities of what Jesus would very likely love to do in your life in the future. Please take the time to read this the whole way through (you can do it!) as part of your experience of being coached and from there move into doing the actual vision exercise. I believe you won't regret it!

To begin we need to look at the sobering reality that there is someone out there who desperately wants to keep you as far away from the life-giving and kingdom-enhancing benefits of fully engaging in godly vision work.

## **Satan's dreams**

We know that our arch enemy Satan came to steal and kill and destroy (John 10:10). Tragically, we know that he loves to kill even the most precious things in our lives...things like hope, a sense of possibility, focus, or deepening relationships. It is true that he loves to deepen our sense of hopelessness, or worthlessness, and nurture a spirit of passivity, fatalism, or reactivity. Further, he longs to make us slaves to drivenness, self-reliance and self-protection. That's just how he is.

One of his favorite places to steal and kill and destroy these things is in the world of Christian ministry. I believe it brings him great delight to see people with hearts that long to please the Lord, over time be beaten down by ministry; to find themselves crazy busy and greatly depleted through their service, and yet not experiencing the joy of bearing richer fruit. I believe he loves to entice us into becoming more and more superficial over the course of ministry. He loves to nudge us towards caring more about the worldly norms or values that have seeped into our Christian culture (such as focusing more on appearance or honoring sacred cows), rather than becoming more transparent and more secure in the love of Christ in order to do minister from a place of love and freedom. That's just how he is.

In sum, Satan dreams about ways to distract us, discourage us, diminish us, and get us ultimately to a place where we leave ministry because we are so defeated. Or, if that doesn't work out, he loves to have us stay in ministry but end up focusing on the minor things, or simply lapse into a reactive place and just go through the motions, playing church and playing it safe until we retire. That's just how he is.

## **Jesus' Dreams for Us**

On the other hand, we know that our hero and Savior Jesus came to give our lives hope and possibility (Eph. 1:18), through overcoming the power of Satan and his lies. His Father sent him to give our lives value (John 3:16). Jesus came to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 61: 1-2, by setting us free from sin and even things like the fear of disappointing others, or of being worthless, or being doomed to conform to superficiality or playing church. He came to give us new identities in him, that we might truly know ourselves as members of the family of God (John 8:32, Eph. 3:14) securely rooted and established in love (Eph. 3:17). He came to give our lives meaning, focus and energy, by giving us good gifts (James 1:17) and good works to do (Eph. 2:10), with a clear sense that we will be rewarded for our humble efforts through his amazing grace (Matt 16:27, Eph. 6:8, Rev. 21:12). Through Paul we know that we are called into bearing richer fruit by desiring greater gifts (I. Cor. 12:31), and growing in our gifts (I. Cor. 14:12).

In sum, Jesus came that we might know the greatest joy possible by abiding in him, (John 15:4) and that we might make more and more of a difference for good with our lives by the fruit we bear in him (John 15:8, 16). This is meant to culminate in a glorious sense of fulfillment and satisfaction, as we cooperate with him well, through us honestly knowing more and more of life to the full (John 10:10). I pray you have had glimpses of these deep truths.

## **The Big Battle**

Of course these dreams held respectively by Satan and Jesus for our lives are in a huge battle. We knowingly and unknowingly cooperate with each side every day, to varying degrees. You might say that our whole life is about gradually cooperating more and more with the dreams that Jesus has for our lives, and dismissing and turning away from the deceit and defeat that Satan wants to tempt us with. One of the biggest questions we face them with our lives is: how do we set our lives up to give us the best chance at fulfilling the call of Christ on our lives, and not falling for Satan's traps?

## **The Basics on How We Fulfill our Calling**

Of course the foundation of how we fulfill our calling are through growing in obedience (John 14:21) and through growing in love and wisdom (e.g., Phil. 1:9-11, Eph. 1:17-19). The time we spend in the Word and in Prayer are vital as well to fulfilling our calling. Vision work, where we take time to prayerfully consider the ideal realities that motivate us to grow and serve and obey in even richer ways can be an excellent supplement to the above practices.

## **High Performers and Vision Work**

Let me take a moment too to underscore the significance of vision work in other fields. One of the most fascinating discoveries in the world of high-performance in the world of

sports, leadership and the arts in the last 20 years or so has to do with the power of being able to look at current reality or current performance closely, and then hold that reality up against the vision or ideal performance. Outstanding violinists (such as YoYo Ma), or quarterbacks (such as Tom Brady or Peyton Manning) or golfers (such as Jack Nicklaus or Tiger Woods) or leaders (such as Bill Hybels or Jack Welch) are known for their ability to toggle back and forth between what is (current reality) and what they hope for (the vision). Great coaches such as Hank Haney (former coach of Tiger Woods), Tony Dungy (former professional football coach), and leadership gurus such as Daniel Goleman and Peter Senge, also see this skill as central to performing at a high level. (For further reading please see: Primal Leadership by Daniel Goleman et. al, and The Talent Code by Daniel Coyle, and The Fifth Discipline by Peter Senge.) Consequently, if we are to be all we are meant to be as Christians and Christian leaders, it is vital for us to understand and embrace the skill of being vision-focused while being able to acknowledge current reality.

### **What is Vision Work:**

Essentially vision work is about prayerfully developing or imagining ideal scenarios in the areas of your life that are the most important to you, that fill your heart with hope and energy and focus and perhaps even wonder. Where, when you think about those images, you can't help but feel lighter in your chest, and more alive. This is about stepping into faith, particularly around your character, manner of living, and your ideal style of engaging and/or leading the most important people in your world.

The next part is also important, where you take those images and translate them into words. The core idea then is to write out the images from your prayerful visioning/imagination work in the way that *for you* best taps the positive emotions and energy that you experienced in the vision work. You then write out these images in the present tense, as if they are already happening, or have already happened. (This is where the faith component enters in.) An example would be: "I am really enjoying my time with God during my devotions. It feels so good to move further into a deeper relationship with Him and take in more of his peace, perspective and wisdom." An example of a vision statement for a pastor in a local church could be: "I am enjoying engaging with my parishioners more and more from a place of strength, vision and love. It is exciting to see our church grow in maturity and in numbers of believers." An example of a vision statement for an educator might be: "I am loving interacting with my students in ways that inspire them and challenge them to serve in meaningful ways."

Vision work does not guarantee anything of course, it does not bind God to doing our bidding. It helps us prime our minds, as we will see later on.

### **What makes vision work so important?**

As we saw in the section on Jesus' Dreams for Us, Jesus longs for us to live in hope, with a sense of possibility about the future, and a corresponding focus and energy in our lives that gives us the greatest chance of bearing the richest fruit. Vision work in conjunction

with values clarification, is one valuable way to nurture hope, and create a sense of possibility, focus, and energy in our lives.

Why does vision work help? Well, when we look at the sources of some major energy drainers in our lives, they often have to do with times when we are overwhelmed, lose our focus, lose hope and lapse into a reactive posture. Vision work, or having an intentional focus for our thinking that taps positive emotions, is an excellent counter to those energy drains. When we gain greater and greater skills in monitoring, or being aware of our thinking and our emotions, and learn to channel them in productive ways, we are much more able to handle difficult situations, and move forward with our lives more effectively. Research points out that when we learn to monitor and intentionally shape our thinking, that we make it easier and easier to respond mentally and emotionally to various events as we would hope.

### **A Scriptural Look at Focusing our Thinking Around Vision**

By now many of you have been thinking about how does this idea get played out in the Word? When we take a step back reflect on the importance of focusing our thinking on vision, the Scripture has countless examples of the vital importance of focusing our thinking in order to persevere well and do what we feel called to do.

#### **Jesus and Vision**

We know that Jesus spoke often of the kingdom of heaven, and framed many of his parables in light of that eventual reality for us as believers (e.g., the Parable of the Talents, and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25). What is especially striking about Jesus and vision though, is how we possibilities in Hebrews 12:2, that Jesus himself used the power of vision to enable him to persevere and obey his father in the most excruciating trial imaginable. Clearly at some point in his ministry he knew that he was going to be the sacrificial lamb, and would offer himself as a perfect sacrifice. The temptation to give into fear or avoidance must've been overwhelming at times, especially in the Garden of Gethsemane. Yet what did he do? Let's look at Hebrew 12:2b which reads: "...who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame." I believe it is very fair to say that Jesus chose to focus on the joy set before him, and likely all the amazing good that his sacrifice would bring to those who would believe in him, in order to be able to persevere and obey during that torturous event. Vision, how we focus our hearts and minds, especially in trials, is critical to responding well to them.

Further, much of Paul's writing in the New Testament is ultimately vision focused in terms of how draws on the ultimate future reality of Christ's return, and how Jesus will usher in the kingdom of God and raise and reward the children of God (e.g., II Thessalonians chapter 1). Peter also shares that theme as we will see as well. Let me now, for the sake of brevity just list some of the major verses we find sprinkled throughout the New Testament that speak to the importance of focusing our minds around future realities, and how ideally we hope to live to please God.

"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, *set your hearts* on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. *Set your minds* on things above, not on earthly things. Col. 3: 1-2.

"Let us *fix our eyes* [or minds] on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith." Heb. 12:2a

"...take *every thought* captive to make it obedient to Christ." 2 Cor. 10:5b

"The end of all things is near. Therefore be *clear-minded* and self-controlled so that you can pray." I Peter 4:7

"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is praiseworthy—*think about such things.*" Phil. 4:8

"Therefore, *prepare your minds for action*; be self-controlled, set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. I Peter 1:13

It seems very clear that, in light of the above verses, that we are to be very intentional about where we direct our hearts and our minds. It makes sense to me that having a godly vision, deeply shaped by prayer, is an excellent way to focus on whatever is praiseworthy, and to prepare our minds for action in terms of the kind of person and leader we hope to be, and the kind of fruit we hope our lives to bear.

## **Vision Categories**

### **Ideal Images of Heaven**

In light of the above verses, a few basic categories emerge in terms of how we are to focus our thinking. One is clearly focusing our thinking around heaven, such as fixing our eyes on Jesus, and setting our hearts and minds on things above. One way to set our minds on things above is by developing meaningful images of the core realities of heaven, such as: encountering Jesus, rich interactions with him, celebrating with other saints, rejoicing with your family members, enjoying the amazing peace and freedom from fear and oppression, and delighting in how good and perfect and glorious things are in heaven, including golf courses, hiking, beaches, and trips to the end of the universe! ☺ It is almost impossible not to be encouraged, energized, and re-focused when we honestly take time to focus our hearts and mind on heavenly realities. I encourage you to take some time to reflect on these things on a regular basis to bring peace and calm and focus and hope to your heart and mind. If you would like to receive a script to guide you through that process, please email [Nick@dr.NickHoward.com](mailto:Nick@dr.NickHoward.com) for that.

### **Ideal Images of Life and Ministry**

As alluded to above, another emphasis would be focusing our minds on ideal scenarios and virtuous acts taking place *in this world*, things that are, such as Paul says, lovely, or true, or noble, or praiseworthy or right. This is where short term vision work begins to naturally enter the fray. This kind of work would likely entails regularly envisioning ourselves acting in loving ways, seeing ourselves and those we love grow in fullness, seeing people growing in Christ, seeing people brought to the Lord, or seeing employees carrying out the vision of your organization in a Christ-like manner. In a church setting, it could mean seeing an elder board and staff fulfilling their roles in beautiful ways leading ultimately to more effective discipling efforts (imagine that! ☺). Or in a school setting, it could mean seeing teachers and staff genuinely modeling Christ and training and inspiring students for service. Or, seeing yourself deal with detractors from the vision in redemptive, mature and effective ways. As you begin to fill your mind with these images, somehow I believe it helps us orient ourselves in that direction, empower us in some way, and also could even somehow prompt God to begin to orchestrate circumstances to help those God-honoring dreams come true.

### **The Importance of Reviewing Your Vision Work**

The next obvious question has to be, what do we do with the vision work when it is done? Well, just like with the Scriptures, it is ideal to read and reflect on our vision work regularly in order for it to sink deeper into our souls, and eventually have it shape how we live in profound ways. And, as you review your vision work, and let your heart embrace the hope and possibility it brings, it then helps deepen your commitment to honoring God with your life. It also helps crystallize and renew your focus so that you are more and more able to overcome obstacles (that Satan is likely magnifying) and are increasingly able to lead from a place of godly power in your work and ministry. My recommendation is to review your vision work at least once a month, if not weekly. And, then when you go away on let's say a quarterly retreat, it is something you take with you (plus your values work as well), so that you can go deeper with it, and also see how you are coming along in moving toward these ideals.

J. Oswald Sanders had this to say about the importance of vision, and more importantly, the significance of having it go deep in our souls:

“The healthiest exercise of the mind of a Christian is to learn to apprehend the truth granted to it in vision.... By prayer and determination we have to form the habit of keeping ourselves soaked in the vision God has given. The difficulty with the majority of us is not that we will not seek to apprehend the vision, we get a glimpse of it and leave it alone...it is not a question of intellectual discernment or of knowing how to present the vision to others, but seeking to apprehend the vision so that it may apprehend us.”

### **Wrapping Up**

Well, there's probably a lot to take digest with these ideas. Let me first say in wrapping up that vision work is not a cure all, nor should it be considered a rival to Scripture. Vision work is designed to flow out of ideals that we encounter in Scripture relating to heaven and how things are ideally to be in our lives, our work, and our ministries.

Getting back to the initial ideas of the essay, one of the major obstacles to effectiveness is when the leader gets overwhelmed with demands, where it feels like current reality is pressing in so hard that ideas around vision are blocked out.

Vision work is a way to push current reality away a few feet (if you will) to allow perspective and hope and energy, (rooted in the Lord's power and ideals) to emerge, so that a leader can re-engage from a place of strength and efficacy. Having your vision work in place brings focus to your day to day work and gives you a greater sense of purpose while you go about your day to day work. It also serves as a kind of armor against Satan's attacks as it gives you another place to go with your mind when he is working to discourage and deflate your commitment to your good commitments to the Lord.

The next step now is to launch into doing the work through doing the exercises in the document entitled "Three to Five Year Vision Work."

May God guide and bless your vision work!