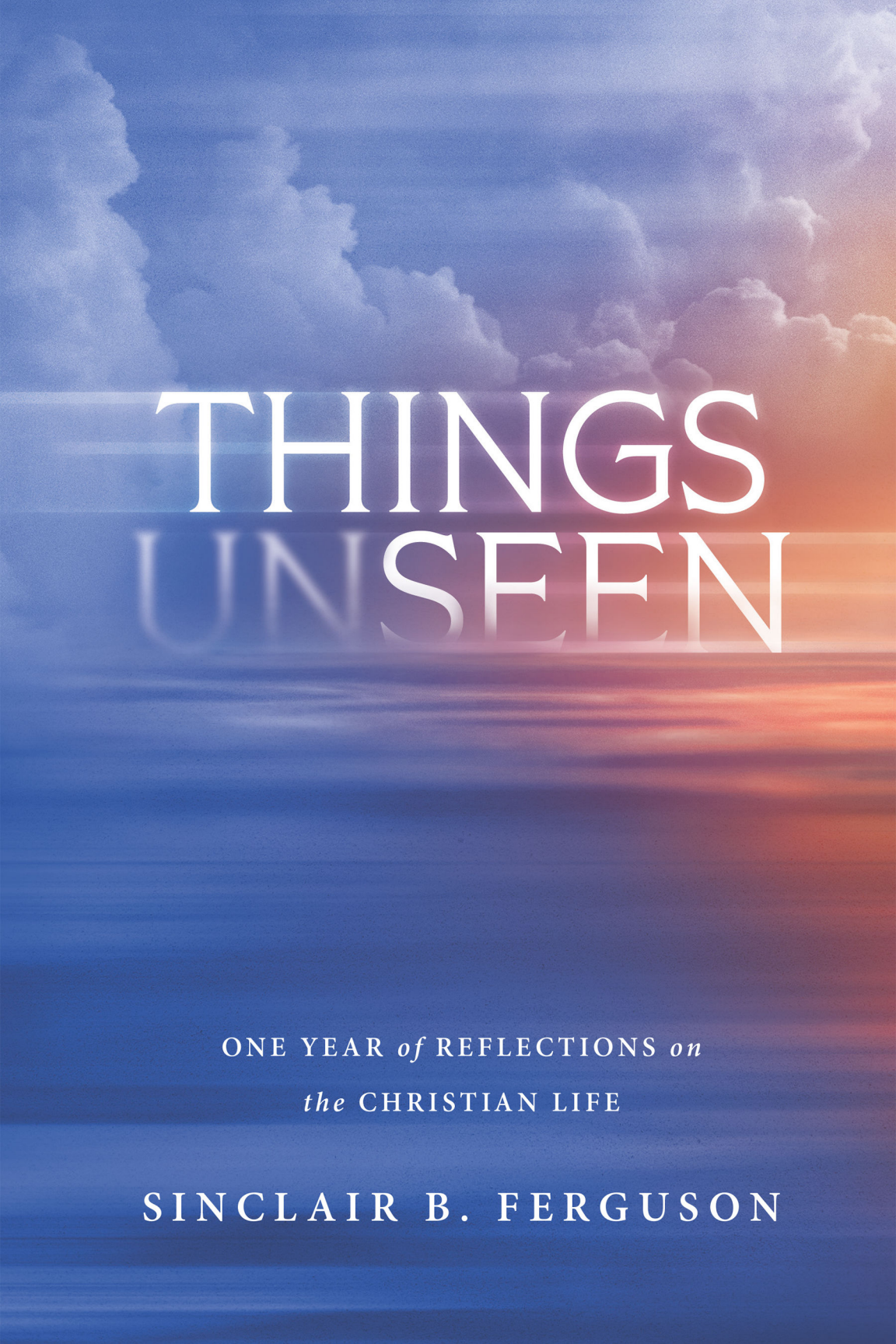

THINGS
UNSEEN
ONE YEAR of REFLECTIONS on
the CHRISTIAN LIFE
SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

"The *Things Unseen* podcast is a very great gift to the church, and now that blessing has been further multiplied in this published format. In these pages, you will not only find the fruit of faithful learning and profound reflection but also, beautifully, the fruit of humble living before the face of God and loving devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ. Winsome and wise, gentle but robust, full of truth and grace, this devotional guide will nourish and edify the youngest believer and the most seasoned saint. You are holding in your hands a treasure to which you will want to return again and again and a wellspring in which you will discover new depths year after year."

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"It is difficult to find the correct set of superlatives for these podcasts/devotionals now published as a book. Listening to them as they appeared each day was transformative. Dr. Ferguson has been a friend for more than forty years, but having him in the passenger seat each day as I drove to church was like a throwback to a time when we served together at the same church.

"These are much more than devotionals. They are a digest of bibical and systematic theology in bite-size pieces. Having these podcasts published in a book helps you see that a little clearer. I am tempted to ask, What should every Christian know about the Christian life? Answer: The contents of this book! I have read many devotionals that take you, day by day, through the year. This one exceeds them all. A triumphal achievement."

—Dr. Derek W.H. Thomas
Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries
Chancellor's Professor, Reformed Theological Seminary

"It is a true delight to see Dr. Ferguson's podcast made into a devotional book. As I listened to the daily episodes of *Things Unseen*, I often wished that I could have them in written form, both for looking back over them myself and also for giving them to other people. I'm very grateful to have that become a reality. So much wisdom is packed into this book, and I look forward to passing copies along to others. There is help here: help in knowing, in loving, and in living for the Lord Jesus Christ."

—Rebecca VanDoodewaard
Author and editor
Greer, S.C.

THINGS UNSEEN

One Year of Reflections on the Christian Life

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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TO

The Board and Faithful Staff
of
Ligonier Ministries

whose service is unseen
but whose ministry
reaches
the ends of the earth

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INTRODUCTION

THINGS UNSEEN **BEGAN AS A DAILY DEVOTIONAL** podcast released each weekday throughout 2023. It contains all 260 episodes edited from the spoken to the written form. I am grateful to the team at Ligonier Ministries, who first suggested the idea of a podcast to me, for allowing me the privilege of entering the lives and sometimes the families of Christian people—and perhaps some non-Christians, too—in many parts of the world. I am also grateful to the staff who in different ways encouraged and helped me in the recording process, to those who worked very much behind the scenes to make the podcast possible, and to those who helped with the editing that has transformed the spoken word into a book. Above all I am grateful for the many listeners who, over the weeks and months, became part of the "podcast community of *Things Unseen*."

Recording 260 podcasts is a more major undertaking than it might seem, and the sheer number of them helps to explain their format. Rather than attempting to cover 260 random topics during the year, I thought it seemed more helpful to select 52 topics, one for every week of the year, and follow each theme through from Monday to Friday.

In the nature of things, a limited number of the podcasts were "time-sensitive." While the first and last weeks of the year and Christmas week always come at the same point in the calendar, this is not so with Easter week, Ascension week, or Pentecost, which are all "movable feasts" in the Christian year. Some readers may want to take note

of these particular weeks and adjust the order in which they read the corresponding podcasts. If so, then Passion and Easter weeks (14 and 15), and also the weeks of Ascension and Pentecost (20 and 22), should be read at the appropriate point in the current year's calendar.

One of the privileges afforded by a podcast is receiving messages from listeners. Some of my favorites reflected the fact that the sound of our voices can divulge not only our nationality but even our age group. Messages to me that reflected this included one from a young student who, listening as she drove to college each day, said that it was like having your grandfather in the back seat. That theme was also echoed by a mother whose children thought it was their grandfather she was listening to—and therefore wanted to know why he never came to visit them!

Now that the podcasts are in readable as well as audible form, I hope that they will continue to be an encouragement and blessing and that readers will find something worth reflecting on each day. But I also pray that, in the kind providence of God, there will be occasions when readers feel that what they have read seems to have been written just for them, and just for today.

So may these daily reflections be a reminder that it is the things that are unseen that are eternal.

—Sinclair B. Ferguson

WEEK 1

Happy New Year

1

Beginning a New Year Well

AS WE BEGIN OUR JOURNEY TOGETHER, I'd like to wish you a blessed and happy new year. In fact, that is going to be our theme this week: a happy new year.

Back when I was a student, I once preached on New Year's Day at a service in a Methodist church in a fishing village in the northeast of Scotland. I didn't know enough about the Methodist tradition to appreciate that it was actually a rather special service.

And although I, and probably they, have completely forgotten what I preached on, the service left an indelible impression on me because it was the church's annual new-year covenant-renewal service. And after the sermon, the whole congregation in unison committed themselves afresh to the Lord with the words of a very personal and moving covenant.

I was quite surprised by that because I associated covenant theology with Presbyterians, the Reformed tradition, and the Puritans—not the Methodists, and certainly not the Wesley brothers. But John Wesley had borrowed the idea of a living covenant from some of the Puritans that he had read at an earlier stage in his life. It deeply impressed me, and I wanted to introduce it to the churches I later served.

Occasionally, I found people objecting to doing this, saying that it wasn't really sincere to commit themselves to the Lord using someone else's words. To be honest, this slightly amused me because I watched them every Lord's Day, morning and evening, heartily singing other

people's words of commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ. But the vast majority of us found it very helpful, and I personally found it deeply moving to join with people I loved and to whom I was committed as together we committed ourselves afresh to the Lord for another year.

So I want to begin this new year by sharing that covenant with you, and inviting you to commit yourself to the Lord and to pray for His help through this new year.

I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things
to thy pleasure and disposal.
And now O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

I hope you want to say, "Amen and amen."

2

Growing in Love for the Church

YESTERDAY, I RECOUNTED THE INDELIBLE IMPRESSION made on me at a New Year service in a Methodist church and how moved I was when

the whole congregation joined together in the words of a personal covenant. We also sang from the Methodist hymnbook, which I had never used before. But I was so struck by the words we were singing that sometime later I bought a copy.

It came with a bonus that has lasted all through my life.

The Methodist hymnbook not only included the first line of a hymn; it included the first line of every verse of a hymn, which meant that when I could remember how the third verse began but couldn't remember what hymn it came from, I went straight to the Methodist hymnbook to help me.

But the really important thing was the hymn we were singing. It was written by Charles Wesley. His brother used it as the opening item of praise at the annual meeting of the Methodist Societies to help them praise God for the blessings of the previous year. And its first lines express that desire beautifully: "And are we yet alive, and see each other's face? Glory and praise to Jesus give for His redeeming grace."

I wonder if you'll feel that way at the first church service you go to this year. Even better, shouldn't we really feel that way every week when our church family meets together? We tend to live very much outside each other. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:11 that no one knows a person's real thoughts except the person himself. We are very much individuals. And yet the wonderful thing that happens to us when we come to faith in Jesus Christ is that not only are we bound together in Him, but because of that, we are bound to one another.

As the Shepherd calls His sheep to come to Him, they come nearer to each other. They are bound together in love, bound together in grace. Isn't it true that you feel nearer to fellow believers who may be a thousand miles away than you often do to the people standing next to you? And that is because we belong to a family—a family that one of my colleagues used to describe as the worldwide, eternity-long family of God.

I hope, therefore, that this new year will be one in which we will grow in love for the church, and that we will express the kind of admiration of God's goodness to us that is found in this hymn. And as we grow in love, we'll be able to sing with one another:

And are we yet alive,
And see each other's face?
Glory and praise to Jesus give
For His redeeming grace.

What troubles have we seen,
What conflicts have we passed,
Fightings without, and fears within,
Since we assembled last.

But out of all the Lord
Hath brought us by His love;
And still He doth His help afford,
And hides our life above.

Then let us make our boast
Of His redeeming power,
Which saves us to the uttermost,
Till we can sin no more.

Let us take up the cross
Till we the crown obtain;
And gladly reckon all things loss,
So we may Jesus gain.

3

A Resolution for the Christian Life

SO FAR THIS WEEK, WE'VE LOOKED at a covenant for a new-year commitment and a hymn for a new-year praise. Today, we'll explore a text for the new year from one of the Apostle Paul's letters. You're probably familiar with it, and perhaps you even know it by heart. But even if you don't know it, I think you'll be able to remember it quite easily. It's Paul's personal resolution in Philippians 3:10–14:

> That I may know him [Christ] and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.
>
> Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

At the beginning of Philippians, Paul indicates that his young colleague Timothy was with him. Paul often dictated his letters, and I've sometimes wondered if he mentions Timothy because he served as his secretary for this letter. It begins with the words "Paul and Timothy," and I wonder if he gave his son in the faith a slight smile when he told him to write his own name down.

But if that were the case, I'm pretty sure that as Paul came to this passage, "But one thing I do," Timothy might well have looked up at Paul with a quizzical stare. And if Paul asked if he'd said something that

Timothy didn't understand, perhaps he would have had the courage to respond: "Paul, do you really want me to say that you do only one thing? As long as I've known you, you've always been doing many things, and at the same time. You're the ultimate multitasking Apostle. You're always traveling; you're always preaching; you're always praying; you're always visiting; you're always counseling. I've never seen you do just one thing."

I think Paul would have smiled back to his young friend Timothy and said: "I know what you mean, Timothy. No one knows better than you what I do and how busy I am. But you need to understand that I'm not busy doing many different things. I'm busy doing one thing in many different ways. And all of them are about getting to know the Lord Jesus Christ better, sharing His life and becoming like Him. That is the heart—in some ways it's the secret—of everything I do, in every waking hour and every different activity. They are all simply different ways of doing this one thing."

When I was a small boy in Scotland, each New Year's Eve (Hogmanay, as it's called), my parents would tell me to go to my room and write out ten New Year's resolutions for the year to come. Looking back, I laugh now when I remember how hard I thought it was to find ten ways that I needed to improve. I could write them out much more easily today, I suspect.

But if you are a Christian, you really need only one New Year's resolution, and Paul's will be a great help to you. Especially if you're a younger Christian or a younger person, few things can be more helpful to you than to understand that this is the way to both simplify and integrate your life. This is what will give you direction. This is what will help you answer the great question, "What am I really here for?"

As one of the older translations puts it, "All I care for is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, to share the fellowship of his sufferings and be made like him, that one day I may attain to the resurrection."

What a great New Year's resolution. This one thing I do: I want to know Christ.

4

How to Be Happy

I HAVE A LITTLE PROBLEM AT this time of the year. What do I say to people when I meet them for the first time? What words should I use? Maybe you think that is a bit strange, but here's the issue: When I was a young Christian, I was taught that God is more interested in my holiness than He is in my happiness. So I thought it would seem very strange if I started saying to people, "Have a holy new year." Even Christians might have cooled off to me if I'd greeted them in that way. But there is another problem: you could wish someone a happy new year and then later in the year regret that you'd said it because their life had been so filled with unhappiness. So with thoughts like that, you can understand how I sometimes puzzle over what adjective to use when I greet people at the beginning of the new year. I usually end up saying something like, "I hope you have a blessed and happy new year."

But maybe my conscience is too tender, because the Bible does speak about our being happy. Just as it's the desire of every earthly father that his children will be happy, then surely that is all the more true of our heavenly Father. Some of us struggle with the idea of a God who wants us to be happy, perhaps because of our own experience of fatherhood, perhaps because of the doubts and fears of our own hearts.

This is why the Holy Spirit has been sent to us, so that once we have been adopted into God's family, we might be persuaded that He is our loving heavenly Father. Although we cannot fully understand the ways in which He accomplishes this, He does ultimately want us to be happy, to be happy with Him, and to be happy forever.

The thing is, God knows better than we do how we can be truly happy. He knows that we can be truly happy only when we fully belong to Him, only when we are growing in our knowledge of Christ and

want to live for Him. There is a real happiness for the Christian to experience, but he or she is brought to experience it in many different ways. And some of them are actually very sore to us because we're still seeking happiness in places where happiness can never be found, rather than seeking it in the Lord.

Augustus Montague Toplady wrote a great hymn titled "A Debtor to Mercy Alone," and there is a verse in it that has always moved me. Toplady writes:

> My name from the palms of his hands
> Eternity will not erase;
> Impressed on his heart it remains,
> In marks of indelible grace.
> Yes, I to the end shall endure,
> As sure as the earnest is giv'n;
> More happy, but not more secure,
> The glorified spirits in heav'n.

Those final lines are ones to remember. They—the saints in heaven—are happier; they see the face of Christ; they are set free from sin. But they are not more secure, because you and I are held in the hollow of His hand. They are happier, but because He is ours and we are His, we can be happy here.

Of course, we'll know perfect happiness only when we are with those saints in glory, when we're perfectly holy, and when we're in the presence of Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant. That is where our lives are heading: to be conformed to the image of God's Son.

But if we are His, we can already be happy. Happy in Jesus, and learning sometimes through difficult experiences, as many of us will know this year, that our true happiness lies not in the things of this world, but in our fellowship with Jesus Christ. And as we're still in the very first week of this new year, let me wish you a very happy new year.

5

A Life-Changing Experience

MOST OF US FORGET MORE THAN we remember, it seems. But the events that shape our destiny or change our future are events that we remember forever. I suppose most of us can point back to a single moment, a single hour, an experience we had, or someone we met that has radically changed the direction of our lives.

Often at the beginning of the new year, I think about the experience of the prophet Isaiah. If we imagined all the prophets who lived before Jesus climbing a mountain to look over the summit and see His coming, then John the Baptist would be the man standing on the summit, wouldn't he? But I suspect that the man standing right behind him would be the prophet Isaiah, straining his neck to see who the Suffering Servant of his fifty-third chapter really was.

God prepared Isaiah for that ministry very early on in his career.

Isaiah 6 contains the great biblical chapter on the holiness of God, in which Isaiah encounters the manifestation of God's holy majesty—the Holy, Holy, Holy One. Isaiah never forgot that year. It was the year that King Uzziah died, a year of sadness for the people. But it was also a new year that shaped every year of Isaiah's future life—indeed, every single day that he lived from that point onward.

Yesterday, we spoke about being reluctant to wish someone a happy new year when we know that people can't really be happy unless they are holy. And I think it was Isaiah's encounter with God that made him realize he could never be truly happy until he was really holy. For that reason, if you read through the rest of his prophecy, you'll notice that his favorite description for the Lord becomes "the Holy One."

Isaiah 6 teaches us so many things. One of them is how to respond to God. You've probably noticed that Isaiah's response seems to have

been three-dimensional. One dimension was an awareness of his own sinfulness. He felt as though he was disintegrating before God.

What interests me as a preacher is that Isaiah was undoubtedly the most eloquent prophet of his day—perhaps, for that matter, of any day in the Old Testament. But what he felt his sin had polluted was the very instrument God had given him to proclaim His word. Isaiah says, "I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5). It's very telling that he was conscious that his sinfulness was not just found in what he or others regarded as one of his weaknesses, but actually embedded in his greatest gift and his greatest strength.

If you read through Isaiah from the beginning, you'll notice that in Isaiah 5, he had already pronounced six woes on others. And where there is the number six in the Old Testament, we should always be looking for the seventh. And in chapter 6, he pronounces the climactic seventh woe. But it's not on others; it's on himself. Those whom God uses have always been those who are conscious of their sinfulness.

The second dimension of his experience, of course, was that of God's pardoning grace—that electric moment when the seraph takes the burning coal from the altar with tongs and puts it on Isaiah's lips and cleanses him. That is exactly what he needed, and it's also what we need at the beginning of the year: cleansing. As the hymn "Rock of Ages" teaches us to sing, "Be of sin the double cure, cleanse me from its guilt and pow'r."

But then the third dimension of his experience was this: an unreserved willingness to serve the Lord without question. He didn't even know what God wanted him to do, but he was willing to say: "Here I am! Send me" (Isa. 6:8).

May this new year be one in which God marks our lives in the way He marked the life of the prophet Isaiah.

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