

Sermon Notes  
for Sunday, 6 February

# To See God

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn  
6 February, 2022

No one can see God directly and live. Even Moses, who led the Children of Israel as God's representative, and communicated with God daily, was not able to get more than a glimpse:

And he said, "Please, show me Your glory."

Then He said, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion."

But He said, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live."

And the LORD said, "Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen." (Exodus 33:18-23)

This was not an instance of God being aloof or distant on a whim. It was for Moses own safety. Had he directly looked on God he indeed would not have been able to live.

This is counterintuitive and deserves some focus. God is love itself, pure love, nothing but love; how would that harm someone if they were exposed to it? One way to think of it is as contrasting opposites. The more starkly two things are opposed, the more the opposing qualities are drawn out. If you're used to eating average food and then have a slightly better meal, you don't notice it. But if you are used to totally subpar meals and then have a decent one, that decent meal is like a feast. When you have been drinking water periodically all day it isn't noticeable. But when you have been working hard in the hot sun for hours the first sip of water is incredible. The more high quality something is the more it highlights the lower quality of the things around it.

Now put that in terms of infinite love contrasted with what little goodness we can muster. It's not even as if the Lord has a lot of love and we have a little. He has *infinite* love. That's something we cannot even fathom. Mathematically, compared to infinite, any amount is reduced to zero. Five versus five billion are equally miniscule compared to infinity. Likewise with God's infinite love: if you were exposed to it directly everything good within yourself would pale into nothingness. Now imagine the devastation that that would bring. It hurts to be around someone who's goodness and integrity highlights where we fall short. How much more would it hurt to fully realize that in every last tiny bit of life, even the best of us fall infinitely short?

So God veils Himself, covering Himself in obscurity so that in our approach to Him we can survive and thrive and remain whole and healthy and happy. And yet much of the time God's approach leaves us frustrated. I would say that in Kainon School one of the most common questions I get from the children, from a young age, is, "why can't we see the Lord?" It's a sweet question when children ask it, and I try to give some answer that is even moderately adequate. But as adults that seem question leads to something darker. Many people have turned away from God because they cannot see Him. Many have lashed out at Him for not being there when they needed Him most.

A common argument against the existence of God, and especially of a personal God, is that if He did exist He would reveal Himself more fully and directly to us. Why would a loving God hide Himself from His own creations? It is not satisfying to think that it may be to test us, which is how some people would answer; as if a loving God would consciously attempt to trick us into not believing in Him so that He might gauge who is worthy of His love. This is not the answer. Rather He veils Himself, as we have seen, so that we can live and not die. And yet in spite of veiling Himself for our sake, His desire is that we do see Him and relate with Him as fully as possible, and more and more fully to eternity.

The contradiction of a God who must remain distant to protect us, yet whose purpose is to be close to us in order to bless us, is resolved in the incarnation. The word "incarnation" literally means "in the flesh" or "to be made flesh." God chose to be born in time, as Jesus Christ, His eternal humanity taking flesh, and yet still embodying perfectly His own Divine Being. We encounter the fullness of God in the person of Jesus Christ. The Lord is God in the flesh. This is nowhere more obvious than in the story of Doubting Thomas. Much like us, who have a hard time believing in a God we cannot see, Thomas did not believe his fellow disciples when they told him they had seen the risen Lord:

Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said to him, "We have seen the Lord."

So he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace to you!" Then He said to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing."

And Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus said to him, "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:24-29)

Thomas claimed that he would not believe in the Lord until he could literally touch and feel Him. Yet simply at the Lord's physical appearance and the offer of His body for investigation moved Thomas to belief. He believed in the Lord, having only seen Him in the flesh.

Jesus did not stop there however. He pushes us to believe even if we have not seen: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Many have taken this to mean we should have blind faith, which can even be worn as a point of pride: I believe in spite of no visible evidence whatsoever, so my faith must be strong! I think this is wrong. It is true that we cannot see the Lord with our physical eyes, and that in place of sight we need faith. But faith in itself is a kind of sight, a sight of the heart and mind. If faith is blind than it is no faith at all, it's just empty words.

The teachings of the New Church describe that this inner sight is the only real way that we can "see" the Lord:

For the only way in which the Lord can make Himself present before a person is through the person's inner seeing, which happens through faith from charity. If the Lord does manifest Himself in an outward visible form to someone, it is still the inner levels of mind that are affected, for the Divine reaches into the deepest parts of him. (*Secrets of Heaven* §6849)

Even where the Lord shows up in physical form, it would mean nothing if we did not also see Him from within, in the sense of having faith in Him, and having charity as the source of that faith. In fact, the physical sight would only distract, rather than add, to the spiritual seeing.

But what actually does it mean to see the Lord through faith from charity? And why is it possible to do that when as we've already seen we can't handle fully encountering God's infinite love? The answer still lies in the incarnation. God was not embodied for a short few years only to return to being an abstract spirit. That embodiment remains an avenue through which we can come more and more to see the God of the universe. As Jesus said of Himself, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). In Jesus God is a person who we can contain in our minds; we can picture Him, imagine Him, converse with Him, and get to know Him.

But this is not something that happens just by imagining Him. It comes through the faith of charity, or faith rooted in charity. It is when our belief in the Lord is paired with living a good life that we can more and more see in Him God Himself. Ultimately this means keeping His commandments. This is the only way to love, and so to see, God.

Anyone who supposes that he can love the Lord without leading a life in keeping with His commandments is very much mistaken; for leading a life in keeping with them is what constitutes loving the Lord....

From all this it may be recognized what loving the Lord is, and also what seeing the Lord or His face is, namely seeing Him with that kind of faith and love.

(*Secrets of Heaven* §10578)

When we see the Lord in our mind's eye and learn from Him, and do as He taught, and follow the example He set, through that kind of faith we gain a better knowledge of what He is truly like, and so see Him more fully; and from that sight we may be better able to learn from Him and follow Him, and so gain an even truer sight of the Divine itself.

We cannot directly encounter the Divine itself; and even getting a glimpse takes effort and work. But if we are willing to do that work than we can indeed come to see the Lord, from within ourselves. When you face a certain selfishness that you struggle with, and acknowledge it, and overcome it, you approach the Divine. When you address a harmful habit, and remove it from your life, you approach the Divine. When you recognize how you have caused harm to another, and repent, and reconcile with that person, you approach the Divine. As you do these things, keep in mind that imagine of our Human, personal, approachable, tangible Lord; remember that your growth in keeping His commandments is not just abstract personal self-help; it is the presence of a personal God, His very spirit working within you to change you.

The combination of an image and knowledge of the Lord and working with Him through how you live your life is how we can see God and live. One without the other will be empty and hollow. Simply knowing and picturing the Lord as a man, Jesus, cannot connect you with His true essence and character. And simply living a decent life without giving any thought to the Lord's involvement ignores the infinite source of all that is good. It's as if having a picture of the Lord is a gateway, and living His teachings is walking through that gateway to get to what lies within.

We will have moments when God seems distant, absent, and even non-existent. In those moments we will want, perhaps even desperately, to see God face to face, to receive some physical, clear, confirming sign. And God will give us a sight of Himself, but perhaps not in the way we want. He will appear to prove His presence in the world around us. But He will give us an opportunity to picture Him, to then act on His teachings, and in that we will, from within, and in time, come to see Him more truly than ever we could from the world without. It is the heart that sees the Lord. As He Himself taught,

Blessed are the pure in heart,  
For they shall see God. (Matthew 5:8)

*Amen.*