

Visions of God

By

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“Now He said to Moses, “Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar. “And Moses alone shall come near the LORD, but they shall not come near; nor shall the people go up with him.” So Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the judgments. And all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words which the LORD has said we will do.” And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD. And he rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young men of the children of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. And Moses took half the blood and put it in basins, and half the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, “All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient.” And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, “This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words.” Then Moses went up, also Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and they saw the God of Israel. And there was under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and it was like the very heavens in its clarity. But on the nobles of the children of Israel He did not lay His hand. So they saw God, and they ate and drank. Then the LORD said to Moses, “Come up to Me on the mountain and be there; and I will give you tablets of stone, and the law and commandments which I have written, that you may teach them.” So Moses arose with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up to the mountain of God. And he said to the elders, “Wait here for us until we come back to you. Indeed, Aaron and Hur are with you. If any man has a difficulty, let him go to them.” Then Moses went up into the mountain, and a cloud covered the mountain. Now the glory of the LORD rested on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day He called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. The sight of the glory of the LORD was like a consuming fire on the top of the mountain in the eyes of the children of Israel. So Moses went into the midst of the cloud and went up into the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.”

-Exodus 24:1-18

I wanted to start this study with a bit of a confession. Given the holiday season that we are in, I didn't really have the time to write out a full essay like usual. Instead I wanted to give my general thoughts on this passage to help me better meditate on this passage, but also, I hope, give you an interesting reflection on this very important passage. Last

week we spoke about the complexities of serving a Holy God, and this passage gives us an acted out representation of our conversation, but it also gives us, what I believe, is an important example of one of the ways that God mediates His presence to His people in the Old Covenant, visions.

Seeing God

At first glance this passage seems to contradict my previous statements. If God is holy and no image can be made of Him, then how did the elders “see God”? The idea that they actually saw God’s form is contradicted in the book of Deuteronomy:

“Take careful heed to yourselves, for you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure...”

-Deuteronomy 4:15-16

But if they didn’t see a form, what did they see? This is one of God’s mediating structures, visions. Like the other mediating structures, God can’t directly manifest His presence, and so He uses something else to partly reveal His nature, but partly to obscure it. The visions of God are actually symbols that God uses to help people understand His nature without directly seeing Him. There are a total of 11 times in Scripture that God gives a vision of His glory to various people. All of these images use varying symbols of God, angelic beings, and even visions of thrones or temple structures, but all have the same purpose, to partially reveal God’s nature to His people. This is how Thomas Aquinas put this point:

“Hence He cannot be fathomed by our intellect: but our most perfect knowledge of Him as wayfarers is to know that He is above all that our intellect can conceive, and thus we are united to Him as to something unknown. In heaven, however, we shall see Him by a form which is His essence, and we shall be united to Him as to something known. Because, to wit, the Divine essence... remains undemonstrated by the impression on our intellect, and consequently is "hidden from all knowledge." Therefore if anyone in seeing God conceives something in his mind, this is not God but one of God’s effects.”

-Thomas Aquinas - “Summa Theologica”

This helps us understand a later passage that says much the same thing:

“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

If Moses had already seen God, why ask to see His glory here, and why does God refuse? Thomas was commenting on this passage when he said: *“Therefore if anyone in seeing God conceives something in his mind, this is not God but one of God’s effects.”* The visions of God are themselves an “effect” of God. Like the law, the priesthood, the temple, and even the creation itself, these are all “effects” of God that we can perceive, but they are not God Himself.

Believing is Seeing

This passage is a response to the favorable answer of Israel. They have heard the beginning of the law, and they have consented to God’s framework, before they have had a chance to try out the Law in their community, and before they have heard all of it. This is the correct structure. Perfect knowledge in the most important commitments of our lives is not actually possible, career, marriage, children... In all these instances a type of “leap of faith” is required. This doesn’t mean that we make these leaps of faith on no prior knowledge, the Israelites do have some prior knowledge. However, we must act in faith since our knowledge is imperfect, we don’t know everything and we can’t.

Just as I can’t really know if a marriage will work until I am married, nor if I will be able to handle children until I have them, so a relationship with God works in much the same way. We can’t wait for perfect knowledge of God, for all our questions to be answered, or for perfect certainty, we must act on what we know, we must choose to believe. This is a quote from the French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal:

“Reason can decide nothing here... you must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked. Which will you choose then?... You have two things to lose, the true and the good; and two things to stake, your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to shun, error and misery. Your reason is no more shocked in choosing one rather than the other, since you must of necessity choose. This is one point settled. But your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing.”

-Blaise Pascal - “Pensees”

This is often called “Pascal’s wager”. He is not saying that we might as well act as though there is a God out of some sort of mercenary interest, but instead he is saying, first, faith in regards to God is not optional, we must take a leap of faith. Second, no matter which way we leap, there are consequences if we are wrong, and sacrifices that we must offer for our decision. If we choose to believe that God is real, then we must serve Him, if we choose to believe that God isn’t real, then we are choosing not to serve Him and must find something else to ultimately serve. Finally, the main point he is making, is that once we choose, we will see the fruit of our choice. No one will be able to approach God unless they first believe:

“But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.”

-Hebrews 11:6

This sounds strange, but it is how it works with other things like marriage and family. If I insist that my girlfriend shows herself to be perfectly faithful to me before I marry her, I will remain single. If I propose to know all I need to know before I have children, I will never have children. I must choose to act, and then I will see. We have to believe in God and serve Him before we begin to see Him.

Personal God

“The likeness of the firmament above the heads of the living creatures was like the color of an awesome crystal, stretched out over their heads. And under the firmament their wings spread out straight, one toward another. Each one had two which covered one side, and each one had two which covered the other side of the body. When they went, I heard the noise of their wings, like the noise of many waters, like the voice of the Almighty, a tumult like the noise of an army; and when they stood still, they let down their wings. A voice came from above the firmament that was over their heads; whenever they stood, they let down their wings. And above the firmament over their heads was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like a sapphire stone; on the likeness of the throne was a likeness with the appearance of a man high above it. Also from the appearance of His waist and upward I saw, as it were, the color of amber with the appearance of fire all around within it; and from the appearance of His waist and downward I saw, as it were, the appearance of fire with brightness all around. Like the appearance of a rainbow in a cloud on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the brightness all around it. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. So when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard a voice of One speaking.”

-Ezekiel 1:22-28

The vision of Ezekiel has many similarities to the vision that God gives to His people in Exodus, with added details. The main one I want to focus on here is that God appears *“with the appearance of a man high above it.”* Though not explicitly stated, the fact that the elders of Israel *“...saw God, and they ate and drank.”* Shows this same basic idea, that God is revealing Himself to be personal. This is also shown when God expresses to Moses that: *“You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live.”* in Exodus 33.

By revealing Himself to be Holy, it would be easy for the people of God to liken God's nature to something impersonal, like a celestial body or a great creature. But God appears like a man, and communes with the elders of Israel like a man to show something interesting about Himself. That though He is beyond mankind and personality in general, this doesn't make Him impersonal, but superpersonal. I like how C.S. Lewis puts this point in *“Mere Christianity”*:

“A good many people nowadays say, ‘I believe in a God, but not in a personal God.’ They feel that the mysterious something which is behind all other things must be more than a person. Now the Christians quite agree. But the Christians are the only people who offer any idea of what a being that is beyond personality could be like. All the other people, though they say that God is beyond personality, really think of Him as something impersonal: that is, as something less than personal.”

-C.S. Lewis - “Mere Christianity”

The idea that God has a “face” means that God can be known, for the face is the intersection point between a person's soul and their body. This is why we look at someone's face when speaking to them, this is the part of their body that their spirit expresses itself. By saying that God has a “face” this is not to say He has a material face, but that He is not aloof and beyond all comprehension, but in being “super-personal” God is showing what “knowing” Him is like. It isn't like understanding a creature or a phenomenon, “seeing” God is like knowing a person.

When we meet a person, we have only begun to know them. In order to truly “know” someone else, we need to devote ourselves to that knowledge. We have to relate to them and live our lives with them so that we might see how they interact and relate to other things and people. God being super-personal means that we can know God like a person, but we can't ever fully know Him on this side of heaven. Since God's person is infinite, it would require an infinite amount of time to know Him. This is what heaven is for and why we can't see God this side of heaven. But this is part of the ministry of Christ:

“All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

-Matthew 11:27-28

Above All Things

“Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne. And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald. Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads. And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices. Seven lamps of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. Before the throne there was a sea of glass, like crystal. And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, were four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back.”

-Revelation 4:2-6

Another thing shown in this vision of God, that is in most visions of God, is a type of “sea of glass...” That God is sitting above. What is this? The sea of glass, that is described as a firmament in Ezekiel 1, and “*a paved work of sapphire stone, and it was like the very heavens in its clarity.*” In Exodus 24 can be understood as the heavens themselves, or the sky during the brightness of day. God revealing Himself above the very heavens is a way to signify two important things, one that He is above all things, and two He is glorified by all things.

The first is rather obvious. To be enthroned above the very heavens, and seated in the place of the sun, for the sun is what is above the blue sky during the day, is to show His sovereignty over all things. God is not a part of His creation, but He rules over it absolutely. There is no higher good, higher power, or higher authority than His own. To be above all things means to be greater and higher than all things. He demands the glory suited to His position.

Which is revealed in the second point, that the blue glass reflects the glory of God. This is what glass does, it reflects light. To have the glory of God above the heavens, is to see God as being the source of all light, and to have all creation being for His glory and

exaltation. All that is below merely reflects what is above. This truth is explicitly stated later in the same vision of God in Revelation 4:

“Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying: “You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, And by Your will they exist and were created.”

-Revelation 4:9-11

The Danger of Pride

“And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.”

-2 Corinthians 12:7

Paul here acknowledges the inherent danger in seeing more of God than his fellow man. To see more than others is to risk believing yourself to be better than other people. It should be noted that most of the elders who saw God, including Moses himself, fell to pride.

The Fair Beauty of the Lord

“Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.”

-1 John 3:1-3

Though there is a danger in being puffed up, the pursuit of God’s image is still the highest aim of the Christian life. The Bible is explicit and clear that the beauty of our Lord is beyond compare, and that all we do should be done with the intent of seeing more of God. If our pursuits of goodness, truth, or beauty are for any other purpose than glimpsing more of our Lord’s beauty, then they are becoming idols in our minds. They are here to reflect the glory of God, not to be ends unto themselves.

Remember that Mount Sinai itself is an image of the Law. The purpose of the Law is nothing more than giving the people of God a better vantage point to see God. Having lost that purpose, the Pharisees saw their ascent in the Law as being for standing above other men instead of “seeing God”. If our desire is to see God, then we will never be puffed up. Our pursuit will make us more like God since His glory will humble us rather than pervert us. Though the leaders of Israel will eventually fall, in this passage they are faithful to God and to His appearance.

This point is made fairly eloquently by the Medieval poet Dante Alighieri in his three part epic poem “The Divine Comedy”. The entirety of the “comedy”, which most people only know the first part “Inferno”, is about this, seeing God. Dante braves the fires of hell, which represent his own fallen passions, up Mount Purgatorio, which represents his pursuit of self-control, and into the spheres of the stars, each representing a separate virtue, all to see God. The poem ends with this:

“With fixed heed, suspense and motionless, Wond’ring I gaz’d; and admiration still Was kindled, as I gaz’d. It may not be, That one, who looks upon that light, can turn To other object, willingly, his view. For all the good, that will may covet, there Is summ’d; and all, elsewhere defective found, Complete... Here vigour fail’d the tow’ring fantasy: But yet the will roll’d onward, like a wheel In even motion, by the Love impell’d, That moves the sun in heav’n and all the stars.”

-Dante Alighieri - “The Divine Comedy”

The love that moves the sun and all the stars. It is God’s beauty that all creation revolves around and therefore it is right that all our pursuits find their end in His perfect glory, otherwise they end in tragedy. C.S. Lewis sees this point most poignantly revealed in the Psalms themselves:

“I want to stress what I think that we (or at least I) need more; the joy and delight in God which meets us in the Psalms... These poets knew far less reasons than we for loving God. They did not know that He offered them eternal joy; still less that He would die to win it for them. Yet they express a longing for Him, for His mere presence, which comes only to the best Christians or to Christians in their best moments. These saints long to live all their days in the temple so that they may constantly see “the fair beauty of the Lord.” Their longing to go up to Jerusalem and “appear before the presence of God” is like a physical thirst... Lacking that encounter with Him, their souls are parched like a waterless countryside. They crave to be “satisfied with the pleasures” of His house. Only there can they be at ease, like a bird in the nest. One day of those “pleasures” is better than a lifetime spent elsewhere... I find an experience fully God-centered, asking

of God no gift more urgently than His presence, the gift of Himself, joyous to the highest degree, and unmistakably real.”

-C.S. Lewis - “Reflections on the Psalms”

And it is in this pursuit that the hope of heaven finds its true glory:

“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.”

-Titus 2:11-14