



THE BEATIFIC VISION

Contemplating Christ as the Future Present

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SEEING GOD IN CHRIST (1):

CONTEMPLATION IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

When in social gatherings people ask me what I am working on and I answer, “The beatific vision,” this regularly earns me a puzzled look: It turns out that the beatific vision is a topic Christians do not commonly discuss, and many are entirely unfamiliar with it. As a result, I have learned to give a somewhat longer response to the question: I now say that I’m studying what it means to see God in the hereafter, in the eschaton. Whatever the reasons for the lack of familiarity with the topic of the beatific vision, it poses a serious problem, considering the Bible and the broad tradition of the church understand the beatific vision as the final purpose or aim of human existence. We have every reason, therefore, to reflect on the topic of seeing God. Such reflection is important especially because the beatific vision in the eschaton is intimately connected to our contemplation of God today. The main point of this chapter is that the vision of God begins to take initial shape already in our contemplative practices today. Learning about the beatific vision, therefore, teaches us also about our everyday spirituality that anticipates this vision. And, conversely, the more we learn what it means to contemplate God in Christ, the better prepared we are for the eschatological vision of God.

One of the most well-known biblical passages that speaks of the vision of God (*visio Dei*) occurs in Jesus’ farewell discourse to his disciples (Jn 13–17). As he encourages them by explaining that he is leaving them so as to prepare

a place for them (“In my Father’s house are many rooms,” Jn 14:2), Thomas and Philip engage Jesus in discussion. Thomas expresses his incomprehension: He doesn’t know where Jesus is going, let alone how to get there. In response, Jesus points to himself: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6). In some sense, it would seem from this that the Father is the destination, while Jesus is the means through which one arrives at it. But Jesus then adds a comment that complicates this understanding. He points to the eternal mystery of the Father-Son relationship: “If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him” (Jn 14:7).¹ Jesus indicates, therefore, that when we look at him, we already see the Father as well. At least for those who look with eyes of faith, there is no distance separating the Father from the Son.

This gift of spiritual sight seems to be in short supply with Philip. He presses the point: “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us” (14:8). Philip, like many others in John’s Gospel, displays culpable ignorance: Jesus has just indicated that by knowing and seeing him, we also know the Father; yet Philip is still asking to see the Father. As Philip makes this request of Jesus, the answer is (quite literally) staring him in the face: When we contemplate Jesus, we contemplate the Father. Since the Father and the Son are one (see Jn 10:30; 12:45; 13:20), it makes no sense to look for the Father behind Jesus. Though it is true that Jesus is the means to the Father, it would be erroneous to suggest that another divine person is hiding behind Jesus. To explain this to Philip, therefore, Jesus makes the matter as plain as possible: “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” (Jn 14:9-10). According to Jesus’ dialogue with Thomas and Philip, then, Jesus is the way to the Father, and the reason is

that Father and Son are one. Seeing the Son necessarily entails seeing the Father.

One of the key lessons to draw from this dialogue is that contemplation of God is centered on the incarnate Christ. It is by seeing Christ in the flesh and by recognizing in him, through eyes of faith, the eternal I Am that we gain life (or happiness, beatitude). We may put it even stronger: Seeing Christ with eyes of faith not only leads to beatitude, it is beatitude. In Christ, end and means converge. When we see Christ, we see God. It is with good reason that many in the tradition have taken a Christ-centered approach to the vision of God. The basis for this lies in Jesus’ allusions to the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation. His remark to Thomas, “I Am the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6)—the sixth of seven “I am” sayings in this Gospel—is a claim of identity with the Father. When Jesus states that he is the I Am (*egō eimi*), he identifies with the I Am who revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush with the name, “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex 3:14).

Thus, when the prologue to John’s Gospel identifies Jesus as the “true light” (Jn 1:9), the Evangelist is suggesting nothing less than that in Jesus the glory of God’s own presence has come to dwell with his people.² Much like God used to come down in the theophany of fire within the pillar of cloud in the tabernacle and in the temple (Ex 33:9; 40:34-35; 1 Kings 8:10-11), so he has now come down in Christ in human flesh and blood: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt [or tabernacled—*eskēnōsen*] among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). The vision that renders us truly happy (the Latin *beatus* meaning “happy”)—or, as John’s Gospel would put it, the vision that genuinely gives life (Jn 1:4; 8:12)—is the vision of Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of God who has taken on flesh and blood (Jn 3:16; 6:50-54). Vision of God is always vision in and through the human Jesus who is identified as the Son of God, in and through whom alone we come to know the Father. The future beatific vision is, therefore, not a stage beyond the vision of Christ (though we will see God in Christ much more clearly in the beatific vision than ever before). Rather, we see God himself (and as such we could even say that we see the divine essence) when we indwell the incarnate tabernacle of God through

¹Biblical scholars commonly suggest that this passage primarily refers to the Son’s mission and only in a secondary sense speaks of the ontological unity between Father and Son (e.g., Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John XIII–XXI*, Anchor Bible 29A [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970], 632; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004], 431). I agree with this assessment, distinctly keeping in mind, however, that from the economy we know of the inner trinitarian life. We need not downplay the latter in favor of the former. In and through God’s self-revelation in Christ, we come to know God as he truly is.

²Cf. Jesus’ comment in Jn 8:12: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

union and communion with Jesus. Sacrament and reality coincide in him. The divine essence does not lie behind or beyond Christ; rather, those who have eyes of faith can see the very character or being of God in the unity of the person of Christ.

Jesus' conversation with Thomas and Philip in the Gospel of John is key to understanding the beatific vision, even though the passage does not mention the eschatological vision of God directly. Biblical passages that explicitly address the topic are obviously central (and there are quite a few of them), but we need to incorporate these into a broader theology of seeing God (and of contemplation of God), which we draw from the Scriptures as a whole. Since Jesus is the true and ultimate revelation of God (Heb 1:2), Jesus manifests him in a way unmatched by any previous manifestations and unsurpassed by any future revelation: Jesus is the true and ultimate sacramental theophany of God, made present in and through the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in the Son of God. We know about the beatific vision by turning with eyes of faith to the Christ whom we behold in the gospel and in the sacrament.³

Thus, though an eschatological barrier prevents us from obtaining direct access to the beatific vision, we do have recourse to reliable insight into what this beatific vision entails: God's self-manifestation in Christ does not mislead; when in faith we look to him, we come face to face with God himself. Whenever we look to God through faith in Christ, we engage in contemplation of him. As such, contemplation is not in the first place a kind of ecstasy (though I don't mean to exclude such experiences); nor is it something reserved for elite Christians. Rather, it is an activity in which many of us engage without recognizing it as such: Whenever we take time to reflect on who Christ is and what he has done for us, we contemplate also the Father. When we do this we share, therefore (albeit provisionally), in

³Herbert McCabe comments: "The story of Jesus is nothing other than the triune life of God projected onto our history, or enacted sacramentally in our history, so that it becomes story." (Herbert McCabe, "The Involvement of God," in *God Matters* [London: Continuum, 1987], 39-51, at 48). McCabe goes on to write, "Watching, so to say, the story of Jesus, we are watching the processions of the Trinity. . . . They are not just reflection but sacrament—they contain the reality they signify. The mission of Jesus is *nothing other* than the eternal generation of the Son" (ibid. 48-49 [emphasis original]). I am indebted to Fr. John Behr for this reference. For Jesus as the "primordial sacrament" (*oersacrament*), see Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 1963).

the eschatological vision of the Father himself. The reason is simply that Christ makes the future present.

SEEING GOD IN CHRIST (2):

BEATIFIC VISION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

My suggestion that we approach the doctrine of the beatific vision christologically has implications for the way we read the many biblical passages that directly refer to the beatific vision. Without dealing exhaustively with the biblical witness, it may nonetheless be helpful to discuss some of the key verses. In his sixth Beatitude, Jesus comments, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8). Jonathan Edwards, in a 1730 sermon on this verse, makes clear that just as God once spoke on Mount Sinai to Israel, so he speaks here on a mountain to his disciples—though God reveals himself here in the incarnate Christ much more clearly and perfectly than he once did on Mount Sinai.⁴ In Christ, God is present once again, only this time in a much more glorious manner. This means, for Edwards, that the vision of God is not just mentioned in the Beatitudes but actually takes place on this momentous occasion. The disciples see God in Christ; they see him in a way that used to be foreclosed to the ancient people of Israel—for only in Christ does God assume human flesh.

On my understanding, therefore, it seems to me that the Beatitudes (and in particular the one that holds out the vision of God to the pure in heart) have Jesus himself as their focus. Jesus does not position himself as a third party between God (the promised object) and his audience (who are told to be pure in heart); Jesus is not an outsider imposing on others an extraneous condition (purity of heart) for seeing God. Rather, in his Beatitude on the *visio Dei*, Jesus puts himself forward as the subject of both the first and the second part of his saying. In terms of the first part, it seems obvious that Jesus is the very definition of what it means to be "pure in heart." We obtain purity only by participating in his purity. We participate in the life of God—in his purity—only inasmuch as we are united to Christ. The second part of Jesus' saying makes clear that this purity of heart enables us to discern who

⁴Jonathan Edwards, "The Pure in Heart Blessed," in *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 17, *Sermons and Discourses, 1730-1733*, ed. Mark Valeri (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 59. See edwards.yale.edu.

God is in Jesus. If Jesus is the true revelation of God, then in him we see the character or being of God. Jesus' words, then, hold out to the disciples the way to greater intimacy with himself. Both parts of this Beatitude dispel any notion of Jesus standing aloof from or in-between the two parties (God and humanity) that he reconciles. It is in the hypostatic union of the Son of God that we come to know ourselves as well as God. Jesus does not simply pronounce this Beatitude; he is himself its subject. He is both the one in whom we are blessed ("blessed are the pure in heart") and the contents of the promise ("they shall see God"). Again, therefore, in Jesus means and end converge: Since the three persons of the Trinity are not three individuals, but are one in substance, there is no vision of the Father outside of Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul, in his encomium on love (1 Cor 13:1-13), holds out the promise of face-to-face vision of God, saying that "now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face" (1 Cor 13:12). He explains that in this beatific vision, partial (*ek merous*) knowledge (1 Cor 13:9) will give way to full knowledge (*epignōsomai*), corresponding to God's full knowledge of us (*epignōsthēn*) (1 Cor 13:12).⁵ Thus, both in terms of sight and in terms of knowledge, the eschaton marks a transition to a much more glorious future. The Puritan theologian John Owen expounds on this transition in his posthumously published *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ* (1684). As long as we see Christ's glory merely by faith, explains Owen, we have a view that is "obscure, dark, inevident, reflexive"⁶ and thus unsteady and uneven.⁷ By contrast, our vision of the glory of Christ in heaven will be "immediate, direct, intuitive," and therefore "steady, even, and constant."⁸ Owen then goes on to say:

Christ himself, in his own person with all his glory, shall be continually with us, before us, proposed unto us. We shall no longer have an *Image*, a

Representation of him, such as is the delineation of his Glory in the Gospel. We shall see him, saith the Apostle, *face to face*; 1 Cor. 13. 12. which he opposeth unto our seeing him *darkly as in a glass*, which is the utmost that faith can attain to.⁹

Owen does not explain here the reason for his christological reading of the passage. Presumably, what drives it is his conviction that God reveals himself fully in Christ and that we can be "fully known" only when God accepts us in him. Christ, according to Owen, will forever be the means of communication between God and his saints. Owen's theological disposition seems to me exactly right: The virtue of love that abides (1 Cor 13:13) is the saints' eternal participation in the love that defines God in Christ, that is to say, the character or the essence of God. To know God in Christ—whether on earth today or in heaven in the hereafter—is to know (something of) the character or essence of God. There simply is no other vision of God.

Just as 1 Corinthians 13:12 contrasts today's partial (*ek merous*) knowledge with the full knowledge (*epignōsomai*) of the hereafter, so John's first epistle too emphasizes the ineffable character of the future face-to-face vision: "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is [*kathōs estin*]" (1 Jn 3:2). The meaning of this saying is not immediately transparent. What does it mean to "see him as he is"? Who is "him"? Is it the Father or is it the Son?¹⁰ And what does "as he is" entail? The exegetical questions are numerous and complex. One thing is undisputed, however: the eschatological vision will far surpass anything we may experience by way of contemplation today.

Those who think it is the Father whom we will see "as he is" (*kathōs estin*) often conclude that in the eschaton (and, therefore, not today) we will see

⁵Though Paul contrasts knowing in part with knowing fully (*epignōsomai*), we should not give too much weight to the use of *epi* in the verb. Rudolf Bultmann comments that "ἐπιγινώσκειν [*epiginōskein*] is often used instead of γινώσκειν [*ginōskein*] with no difference in meaning" ("γινώσκω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964], 1:703) and that "even in 1 C. 13:12 the alternation is purely rhetorical" (*ibid.*, 704).

⁶John Owen, *Meditations and discourses on the glory of Christ, in his person, office, and grace with the differences between faith and sight: applied unto the use of them that believe* (London, 1684; Wing O769), 174.

⁷*Ibid.*, 178.

⁸*Ibid.*, 179 (emphasis omitted).

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Simon Francis Gaine argues that John has the Father in mind, since (1) John has just mentioned our adoption as "God's children" in the same verse; and (2) John also seemed to have the Father in mind as the one who "appears" in 1 Jn 2:28 and the one of whom we are born in 1 Jn 2:29 (since elsewhere in the letter John makes clear that we are born of God, 1 Jn 3:9; 4:7; 5:1). Simon Francis Gaine, *Did the Saviour See the Father? Christ, Salvation and the Vision of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 26-29. Others, however, argue that John has the Son in mind: In 1 Jn 3:5, 8, John says of the Son that he "appeared," and so it may seem more likely that the Son is also the subject of "he appears" in 1 Jn 2:28 and in 1 Jn 3:2. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles: A Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, trans. R. Philip O'Hara, Lane C. McGaughey, and Robert W. Funk, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 48.

the divine essence itself. This is Thomas Aquinas's argument. After stating that face-to-face vision (1 Cor 13:12) implies seeing God's essence, the thirteenth-century Dominican adds: "Further, it is written (1 Jo. iii. 2): *When He shall appear we shall be like to Him, because we shall see Him as He is.* Therefore we shall see Him in His essence."¹¹ Now, Thomas is appropriately cautious in how he affirms this vision of the divine essence. In an important sense, he acknowledges that this vision of God's essence does not mean that we will comprehend God.¹² This built-in reservation, meant to safeguard God's transcendence or otherness vis-à-vis the creature, seems to me important: Regardless of what it means that we will see God "as he is," it cannot mean that the Creator-creature distinction will disappear.

This does raise the question of what we mean by seeing the divine essence. Eastern and Protestant theologians often—though the latter by no means universally—avoid saying that the beatific vision involves seeing God's essence. The underlying reason is the same in both traditions. Notwithstanding Saint Thomas's claim to the contrary, there is a lingering concern among Orthodox and Protestants that the prospect of an eschatological vision of God *per essentiam* entails a denial of divine transcendence. It is a concern we should not dismiss lightly. Thomas Aquinas speaks a great deal about seeing the divine essence, but to my knowledge he does not speak of the beatific vision as a vision of Christ. This cannot but lead to the question of whether Aquinas thought that the final object of our vision is something that lies beyond Christ, namely, the very essence of God.

The questions that we face here are difficult. The seventh-century theologian Saint Maximus the Confessor, in response to questions from the Libyan monk Thalassius points out that our understanding of these matters

¹¹Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica* (ST), trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 5 vols. (1948, repr.; Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1981), suppl. q. 92, a. 1 (emphasis original); cf. ST I, q. 12, a. 1.

¹²ST I-II, q. 4, a. 3. Thomas explains here that our eschatological comprehension of God is not the kind in which God (the comprehended) is included in us (the comprehensors). Instead, comprehension here means "holding something already present and possessed: thus one who runs after another is said to comprehend him when he lays hold on him." In ST I, q. 12, a. 1 Thomas briefly comments that God is "not comprehended." And in ST I, q. 12, a. 7, he explains that no created intellect can know God infinitely, so God cannot be comprehended in the sense that he would be included within a finite being. Saint Thomas does claim, however, that in some sense it is possible to comprehend God, "for he who attains [*atingit*] to anyone is said to comprehend him when he attains to him" (ST I, q. 12, a. 7). Thomas means to convey that in some way we can reach or attain the essence of God without grasping or including it within our finite being.

is limited. He discusses the question of how to hold together the ignorance that John appears to confess ("Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared," 1 Jn 3:2) with Paul's claim to knowledge ("For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God," 1 Cor 2:10).¹³ Maximus suggests that though the two verses both speak of the eschatological future, each deals with a different aspect of it. We already know the divine aim, or *skopos*—we know that we will be deified—but we do not yet know precisely what this will entail; we do not know how exactly we will be deified. As Norman Russell puts it, according to Maximus "the reality of the form of future goods has not yet been revealed. For the present we walk with faith."¹⁴ The question of how we will be deified or how we will see God is one that reason cannot adequately or fully address.¹⁵

Especially in the light of Maximus's word of caution, it seems to me that St. Thomas gives an unduly speculative answer to the question of how the *visio Dei* is possible.¹⁶ He would not have faced this question in the same way had he not separated the light of faith (which allows for indirect vision today) and the light of glory (which enables us to see the essence of God directly in the hereafter). If we truly see the character or *ousia* of God in Christ, then it is the same God in Christ who has been seen in a variety of ways in history and whom in the hereafter we will see in glory. God does not reveal a different part or aspect of himself at different points of salvation history, so that at death the one aspect that remains veiled would be the

¹³Maximus the Confessor, *Ad Thalassium*, no. 9. See Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 284-85.

¹⁴Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 285.

¹⁵Maximus distinguishes between essence and energies, arguing that though human beings can participate in the divine energies of God, they will never see his essence. Gregory Palamas codified this distinction in the fourteenth century. See John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 202-27. If the essence-energy distinction is meant as a real, rather than just a nominal distinction, it may be difficult to retain the simplicity of God—and it is unlikely that Palamas had in mind nothing more than a nominal distinction. It seems to me that we alleviate the Palamite concern about seeing the essence of God by recourse to Christology: All vision of God (and of his essence) has always been and always will be only a partial and theophanic vision of God's being in Christ.

¹⁶Thomas suggests that the light of glory (*lumen gloriae*) will serve as a created gift elevating the natural intellect so that it can see the divine essence (ST I, q. 12, a. 2). But this raises the question of how a created light can have a deifying effect. Aquinas's defense that God gives the created light of glory this deifying power seems to me inadequate: Only God's own power suffices to enable us to see him. For a similar critique, see Nicholas J. Healy, *The Eschatology of Hans Urs von Balthasar: Being as Communion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 172. See further Michael M. Waddell, "Aquinas on the Light of Glory," *Tópicos* 40 (2011): 105-32.

vision of the divine essence. Rather, throughout history God has trained his people to see him by means of self-revelation. It is just that we can see his character much more clearly in the incarnate Christ than in any manifestation of God prior to this. But at all times—even in the eschaton—this self-manifestation (or disclosure of the divine essence) is a manifestation of God in Christ.

The Puritan theologian Thomas Watson, while affirming that 1 John 3:2 depicts the sight of God as transforming in character, remains cautious in how he expresses this. Commenting in his 1660 treatise on the Beatitudes that the saints “shall have some rayes and beams of Gods glory shining in them,”¹⁷ Watson then makes the following comparisons:

As a man that rowles himself in the Snow, is of a Snow-like whiteness; as the Crystal by having the Sun shine on it, sparkles and looks like the Sun; so the Saints by beholding the brightness of Gods glory, shall have a tincture of that glory upon them; not that they shall partake of Gods very essence; for as the iron in the fire becomes fire, yet remains iron still; so the Saints by beholding the lustre of Gods Majesty shall be glorious creatures, but yet creatures still.¹⁸

Watson’s language is fascinating. He claims that the saints will have a “tincture” of God’s own glory. And though he doesn’t explicitly use the language of deification, by saying that “the iron in the fire becomes fire,” the unspoken inference is that those who participate in God become divine. At the same time, in order to safeguard the Creator-creature distinction, Watson then explains that we will not partake of the divine essence itself. As I have already made clear, I am not convinced that we need to avoid the language of seeing the divine essence: There is every reason to say that, inasmuch as God’s theophanic appearances in the Old Testament Scriptures were sacramental appearances of God in Christ, God revealed himself from the beginning the way he really is. Still, Watson’s underlying concern is salubrious: As human beings we will never usurp the place of the transcendent God. His love in Christ is infinite; our capacity properly to apprehend it always finite.

It is hardly coincidental that the Puritans, including Watson—and, in the eighteenth century, also Jonathan Edwards—often connected the beatific

¹⁷Thomas Watson, *The beatitudes: or A discourse upon part of Christs famous Sermon on the Mount* . . . (London, 1660; Wing [2nd ed.]: W1107), 261.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 261-62.

vision with seeing Christ in the hereafter. It is in and by seeing Christ that we also see God himself. Through union with the humanity of Christ we will not just see his divinity, but inevitably we will see (in a spiritual sense) each of the divine persons, since they are one God. Edwards puts this beautifully: “The spouse of Christ, by virtue of her espousals to that only begotten son of God, is as it were, a partaker of his filial relation to God, and becomes the ‘King’s daughter’ (Ps. 45:13), and so partakes with her divine husband in his enjoyment of his Father and her Father, his God and her God.”¹⁹ Even in the eschaton, it is through union with Christ in his human nature that we attain to the eternal Word of God and so to union with the triune God.

If the argument thus far holds—namely, that we have to construct the doctrine of the beatific vision as a vision of Christ—then this means that whenever and wherever we see Christ on earth, we anticipate the beatific vision. This is the case most clearly in the incarnation—hence Jesus’ comment to Philip, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9). By contemplating Christ we also contemplate the Father. We simply cannot separate seeing Christ during his sojourn on earth from seeing the Father in the eschaton. When by faith we are united to Christ, we already participate, in a proleptic way—sacramentally—in the beatific vision. Indeed, whenever and wherever we see truth, goodness, and beauty, it is as though the eschaton comes cascading into our lives and we receive a glimpse of God’s beauty in Christ. While the eschatological face-to-face vision is the reality (*res*) of our deifying union with God in Christ, rays from the light of God’s presence already shine into our lives today. In these rays, God himself—none other than he—appears to us; these rays are theophanies (divine appearances), sacraments (*sacramenta*), which render the future present to us.²⁰

¹⁹Jonathan Edwards, “True Saints, When Absent from the Body, Are Present with the Lord,” *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 25, *Sermons and Discourses, 1743–1758*, ed. Wilson H. Kimnach (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 234. Kyle C. Strobel helpfully comments: “Our call is not simply to gaze on the beauty of Christ, to see Christ as beautiful, but to be caught up into this beauty itself—that our whole being would consent to his, and that we would partake in his filial relationship with the Father.” Kyle Strobel, “Theology in the Gaze of the Father: Retrieving Jonathan Edwards’s Trinitarian Aesthetics,” in *Advancing Trinitarian Theology: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 147-70, at 160-61.

²⁰Cf. John Panteleimon Manoussakis’s comment that “a pre-eschatological vision of God is precisely made possible only retrospectively by eschaton itself—that is by the kingdom—which is to come and yet always coming, flowing, as it were, into history.” John Panteleimon Manoussakis,

**VISION AS PEDAGOGY:
CONTEMPLATION IN IRENAEUS OF LYONS**

The second-century theologian Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130–202) was keenly aware that the eschatological vision of God in Christ is already given to us in the revelatory anticipations (or sacraments) that precede it. The bishop of Lyons repudiated the Gnostic and Marcionite devaluation of both the created order and the Old Testament narratives of ancient Israel. Through his Logos, God reveals himself in both, Irenaeus maintained, so that in some fashion one can contemplate God in both. Saint Irenaeus had a high view of the materiality of the created order.²¹ He purposely used earthy vocabulary such as *plasma*, *plasmatio*, *caro*, *artifex Verbum*, *plasmare*, and *fabricare* to speak of the origin of creation.²² Irenaeus regarded the Redeemer and the Creator as one and the same God—seeing as the “one God . . . by the Word and Wisdom created and arranged all things”²³—so that the vision of God at the end of time meant for him the completion of a manifestation of God that began with creation itself.

Irenaeus articulated this conviction in his famous words: “For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God. For if the manifestation [*ostensio*] of God which is made by means of the creation, affords life to all living in the earth, much more does that revelation [*manifestatio*] of the Father which comes through the Word, give life to those who see God [*qui vident Deum*].”²⁴ For Irenaeus, we first see God in creation, and so the process leading to the beatific vision begins with his self-manifestation in creation. The created order, we could say, functions for Irenaeus as a theophany that makes God present in some way, so that to see

him there—and to treat creation accordingly—is to engage in contemplation of God.²⁵

In book four of *Against Heresies*, the bishop outlines the pedagogical process through which God slowly but surely apprentices his human creatures so as to enable them to see him. The entire salvation history is a narrative in which God takes his children by the hand and with pedagogic skill leads them to maturity so that in the end they will be able to sustain the sight of God in his kingdom.²⁶ This divine pedagogical approach moves through three successive stages, according to Irenaeus. With prophetic vision the prophets saw beforehand, through the Spirit, God’s coming in the flesh, when he would be seen, not according to his greatness and glory but “in regard to His love, and kindness, and as to His infinite power.”²⁷ Next, in adoptive vision God manifests himself to us today through his Son. Finally, paternal vision is the ultimate vision of the Father, a vision of such brilliance that it will render human beings incorruptible in the eschaton. Irenaeus summarizes this gradual increase in vision by commenting:

For as those who see the light are within the light, and partake of its brilliancy [*claritatem*]; even so, those who see God are in God, and receive of His splendor [*claritatem*]. But (His) splendour [*claritas*] vivifies them; those, therefore, who see God, do receive life. And for this reason, He, (although) beyond comprehension [*incomprehensibilis*], and boundless and invisible, rendered Himself visible, and comprehensible [*comprehensibilem*], and within the capacity of those who believe, that He might vivify those who receive and behold Him through faith.²⁸

“Theophany and Indication: Reconciling Augustinian and Palamite Aesthetics,” *Modern Theology* 26 (2010): 76–89, at 86.

²¹This stands in contrast to the Gnostics, for whom material substance originated in “ignorance and grief, and fear and bewilderment.” *Irenaeus against Heresies* (hereafter *haer.*), in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 1.2.3 [1:318].

²²J. T. Nielsen, *Adam and Christ in the Theology of Irenaeus of Lyons: An Examination of the Function of the Adam-Christ Typology in the Adversus Haereses of Irenaeus, Against the Background of the Gnosticism of His Time* (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1968), 16–17. See also John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 38.

²³*haer.* 4.20.4: 488.

²⁴*haer.* 4.20.7: 490.

²⁵Eastern theology often speaks in this connection of “noetic contemplation” (*theōria physikē*). See Bruce V. Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature: Environmental Philosophy and the Holy Beauty of the Visible* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

²⁶Irenaeus argues that God could have created Adam and Eve perfect from the beginning but did not do so because they were mere infants. Even when in Christ God recapitulated all things, he did not come in his glory, but instead merely “as we were capable of beholding Him. He might easily have come to us in His immortal glory, but in that case we could never have endured the greatness of the glory” (*haer.* 4.38.1: 521). Cf. *haer.* 3.22.4: 455; Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. Joseph P. Smith, *Ancient Christian Writers* 16 (New York: Paulist Press, 1952), 14:56.

²⁷*haer.* 4.20.5: 489. Statements such as this led to the Eastern distinction between the essence and energies of God. We should keep in mind, however, that Irenaeus does not use this technical language, and we should probably read no more into it than an acknowledgment that we cannot grasp or comprehend the entirety of God’s infinite life.

²⁸*haer.* 4.20.5: 489; parentheses original.

Salvation history, for Irenaeus, is a process of increasing perception of the light of God's brilliance (*claritas*), which gives one a share in this light and so in the divine life.²⁹

The three stages are not separate, as if the saints see a different object at each stage. Rather, according to Irenaeus, at each stage they see the same God—though both ontologically and epistemologically, the stages differ from each other in important ways, especially since only in Christ does God take on human flesh.³⁰ Vladimir Lossky comments that each stage “is virtually contained in the other,” so that the prophetic “vision of ‘the likenesses of the splendour of the Father’ already contains the premises for the perfect vision which will be realized later.”³¹ Put differently, for Irenaeus, although the prophets did not yet see the actual face of God, the final telos was in a mysterious sense present from the beginning of God's self-manifestation. Irenaeus's understanding of the beatific vision was sacramental inasmuch as he believed that the eschatological reality was in some way already present in both of the stages leading up to it.³²

Irenaeus's understanding of salvation history, therefore, is not simply one that progresses chronologically from creation, via the fall, to redemption and consummation. Rather, the bishop understood this history as the progressive revelation of the Christ, who in an incipient, inchoate manner was always already present.³³ Speaking of the relationship between the (Old

²⁹Cf. Mary Ann Donovan, “Alive to the Glory of God: A Key Insight in St. Irenaeus,” *Theological Studies* 49 (1988): 283-97, at 288-89.

³⁰Although Irenaeus depicts the Logos as already present in Old Testament theophanic appearances and visions (*haer.* 4.20.11: 491-92), he regarded the Old Testament theophanies and prophetic visions as nonbodily manifestations of the Logos and as such inferior to God's physical self-manifestation in the incarnation. Jackson Jay Lashier, “The Trinitarian Theology of Irenaeus of Lyons” (PhD diss., Marquette University, 2011), 144-50.

³¹Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God*, trans. Asheleigh Moorhouse, 2nd ed., Library of Orthodox Theology 2 (Leighton Buzzard, UK: Faith Press, 1973), 34. Irenaeus takes the expression “similitudes of the splendour of the Lord” from Ezek 1:28 (2:1) (*haer.* 4.20.11: 491). Ezekiel actually speaks of “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD” (see *haer.* 4.20.10). For Irenaeus, the genitival construct indicates distance: The prophets did not see the Father himself; he remained invisible.

³²Irenaeus makes this particularly clear when he comments: “In this manner, therefore, did they also see the Son of God as a man conversant with men, while they prophesied what was to happen, saying that He who was not come as yet *was present*; proclaiming also the impassible as subject to suffering, and declaring that He who was then in heaven *had descended* into the dust of death” (*haer.* 4.20.8: 490 [emphasis added]).

³³Cf. John Behr's word of caution regarding the term *salvation history*: “‘Salvation history’ certainly unfolds in scripture as a narrative, as we read from the opening verses of Genesis onwards, but

Testament) Scriptures and the gospel, John Behr comments on their relationship as follows:

Irenaeus does not understand this in terms of a history recorded in the “Old Testament” continuing on to a new phase in the “New Testament,” as two bodies of literature between which, if we so wish, we might be able to discern correspondences, or “types,” and continuities. There is, rather, a strict identity between the Scriptures and the Gospel, both speaking of the “once for all” work of God in Christ: at length and diachronically, on the one hand, through various figures in the Scriptures; in brief, on the other hand, recapitulated together, synchronically, in the Gospel, drawing from the Scriptures.³⁴

The strict identity of which Behr speaks indicates that Christ was not just foreshadowed, but was actually already present within the Scriptures themselves. The difference between the various stages of God's pedagogy is the increasing clarity with which he reveals himself. Like a good teacher, God constantly adjusts himself to his students' capacity.

THREE THEOPHANIES: MOSES' CONTEMPLATION OF GOD

It is not only the overall history of salvation that is akin to a pedagogical program leading toward the *visio Dei*. When we isolate a narrow slice of this history, namely, the book of Exodus, we see that here too God makes himself increasingly visible and more intimately present, both to Moses individually and among the people of Israel corporately. Although we could turn to a variety of biblical passages, the exodus narrative is particularly instructive, since it forms the backdrop to the Pauline promise that in the hereafter we will see God face-to-face (1 Cor 13:12).³⁵ Perhaps, therefore, we need to turn to the book of Exodus in order to see how it anticipates (and sacramentally instantiates) the face-to-face vision of God in the eschaton. The narrative makes clear that from the beginning God has been unveiling himself to his people, so that the beatific vision lies anchored sacramentally within the

reading this narrative as ‘salvation history’ is nonetheless a statement of how these scriptures appear retrospectively in the light of Christ” (*The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death* [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006], 88).

³⁴John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 139 (emphasis added).

³⁵The theology of God's progressive self-manifestation through theophanies begins in the book of Genesis. For reasons of economy I will restrict myself to some highlights from the book of Exodus.

very early stages of salvation history. From the beginning, the Son of God was the treasure hidden in the field (see Mt 13:44) and could be discerned by those who had eyes to see.³⁶

So, how does the book of Exodus concretely depict God as the divine tutor, leading his people to the beatific vision in glory? Moses first encounters God in the burning bush (Ex 3:1-6). It is the “angel of the LORD” who “appeared” (*yērā*) to Moses (Ex 3:2)—though God himself calls to him from the bush (Ex 3:4). Moses, awed by the appearance of the God of his fathers, “hid his face [*pānāyw*], for he was afraid to look [*mēhabbīt*] at God” (Ex 3:6). God’s appearance in created form—as the angel of the Lord in a burning bush—comes in the context of God’s redemptive love for his people: The narrative is bracketed by expressions of God hearing, seeing, remembering, and knowing (Ex 2:24-25; 3:7), indicating his attentive care for his oppressed people. The theophanic experience opens up a call narrative, in which God enlists Moses to become their leader.

Once Moses has led the Israelites out of Egypt and they have arrived at Mount Sinai, God appears to him a second time. He instructs Moses to consecrate the people and to have them wash their clothes, since he will come down upon the mountain “in the sight of [*lā ’ēnē*; literally, “before the eyes of”] all the people” (Ex 19:11). To be sure, they have already experienced God’s presence throughout their journey: He has traveled with them continuously in a pillar of cloud and of fire (Ex 13:21-22).³⁷ But the requirement of purification intimates that he is about to manifest himself in a more direct fashion. Still, even this time, the divine self-revelation is veiled and takes the form of “thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast” (Ex 19:16), with the mountain being “wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire” (Ex 19:18). The Lord warns Moses that the people will perish if they “break through to the LORD to look [*lir ’ôt*” (Ex 19:21). After giving Israel the Book of the Covenant (Ex 20:1-23:33), God then invites Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, as well

as seventy of the elders to “come up to the LORD” to “worship from afar” (Ex 24:1). Once they have gone up, these leaders experience an encounter with God that is much more intimate than what the rest of the people have witnessed: “They saw [*wayyir ’û*] the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld [*wayyehēzû*] God, and ate and drank” (Ex 24:10-11). The text mentions emphatically that despite their vision of God, the leaders of the people do not perish. Instead, they celebrate a meal of fellowship in God’s presence.³⁸ When Moses and Joshua proceed even higher up the mountain, on the seventh day Moses approaches the cloud and actually enters it (Ex 24:18). His second encounter with God thus concludes with Moses entering the very place of God’s presence. The absence of a description this time around surely is an indication of the ineffably glorious character of the experience.

God then makes preparations for a more permanent presence among his traveling people. He gives detailed instructions for the building of a tabernacle (Ex 25-31), and the book concludes with a description of its actual construction (Ex 35-40). In between these two sections, we find the narrative of the golden calf, followed by the account of Moses’ third vision of God and of his plea for God to accompany his people on their journey. God initially shows himself reluctant to do so after the golden calf incident, indicating he will send an angel before them instead (Ex 33:2). This attitude toward the people contrasts sharply with God’s stance vis-à-vis Moses. Moses speaks with the Lord in the tent of meeting, with the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance (Ex 33:9). The intimacy of the encounter is thus far unparalleled: “Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face [*pānim ’el- pānim*], as a man speaks to his friend” (Ex 33:11). In what follows, God does end up promising that his face (*pānay*) will accompany the Israelites, after all (Ex 33:14).

Moses, however, continues to worry whether or not God will actually be true to this promise, and he exclaims, “Please show me your glory [*kābōdekā*” (Ex 33:18). The Lord’s response makes clear that there are limits to one’s ability—even that of Moses—to endure the light of God’s face:

³⁶For Irenaeus’s use of Mt 13:44 in support of his sacramental reading of the Scriptures, see *haer.* 4.26.1: 496. Cf. Hans Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 16-17.

³⁷Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch comment that “we have to imagine the cloud as the covering of the fire, so that by day it appeared as a dark cloud in contrast with the light of the sun, but by night as a fiery splendour.” Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 1:346.

³⁸The meal is commonly interpreted as a covenant meal. For an alternative view, based on historical-critical considerations, see E. W. Nicholson, “The Interpretation of Exodus xxiv 9-11,” *Vetus Testamentum* 24 (1974): 77-97.

“I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face [*pānay*], for man shall not see me and live.” And the LORD said, “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory [*kābōdī*] passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back [*’āhōrāy*], but my face [*pānay*] shall not be seen.” (Ex 33:19-23)

God reveals his gracious character but stipulates that despite this unveiling of his name (and so of his identity), he will in some sense remain veiled: Moses can only see God’s back.³⁹

Many theologians have mulled over this passage, since God’s refusal to show Moses his face (Ex 33:20, 23) seems directly to contradict the earlier statement that Moses had already seen God face-to-face (33:11). An Irenaean lens may help us make sense of this puzzle. That is to say, it seems to me that God is educating Moses, revealing himself with increasing clarity.⁴⁰ The Lord first appears to Moses in a burning bush (Ex 3:1-6). Next, he shows himself to Moses on Mount Sinai, initially in the company of the other leaders and subsequently by himself within the cloud (Ex 24:9-18). Finally, God speaks to Moses face to face in the tent of meeting, and Moses is allowed to see God pass by, as Moses watches within a cleft of the rock (Ex 33:7-23). Within this progression of increasingly direct and intimate contact, God’s word of caution that “man shall not see me and live” (Ex 33:20) serves as an indication that God’s face-to-face encounter with Moses as his friend has not erased the Creator-creature distinction. In some ways, God remains veiled, even in this remarkably personal and intimate encounter. Moses’ sight of the merciful character of God (Ex 33:19; 34:6-7)

³⁹Cf. Walter Brueggemann’s comment: “The culmination of this chapter is a vision of God (vv. 22-23). It is, however, a vision that embodies exactly the tension and juxtaposition we have seen all through the chapter. Moses does get to see God—but not God’s face. Moses’ ‘seeing’ is honored—but not fully. Moses anticipates Paul: ‘For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face’ (1 Cor 13:12 NRSV).” Walter Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:942-43.

⁴⁰John Calvin has a similar understanding of a face-to-face vision of God that develops throughout salvation history in line with a divinely accommodated pedagogy. See Arnold Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation in Calvin’s Theology: Analysis and Assessment*, Reformed Historical Theology 16 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 217-19.

does not mean that he now comprehends God. In its very nature, God’s mercy is infinite and cannot be exhausted by human sight.

This inexhaustibility of God’s being is precisely what Gregory of Nyssa had in mind in his reflections on Moses’ ascent up the mountain: “He [i.e., Moses] shone with glory. And although lifted up through such lofty experiences, he is still unsatisfied in his desire for more. He still thirsts for that with which he constantly filled himself to capacity, and he asks to attain as if he had never partaken, beseeching God to appear to him, not according to his capacity to partake, but according to God’s true being [*hos ekeinos esti*].”⁴¹ Gregory rightly postulates that regardless of the intimacy of our vision of God, we will never capture or comprehend the infinity of his being. Even in the eschaton, God continues infinitely to transcend us. Our progression into the life of God will continue forever—a teaching to which Jean Daniélou referred as *epektasis*, an eternal stretching forth into the life of God.⁴² Contemplation of God progresses without end, even in the eschatological reality of the beatific vision itself.

CONCLUSION

Contemplation is a practice we learn by recognizing the presence of God in theophanies—manifestations of God. From the moment of creation God’s ultimate aim and purpose for human beings is that they may see him. Irenaeus’s celebrated saying that “the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God” captures the key insight that the purpose of humanity is always to see God.⁴³ The biblical narrative, therefore, shows us that God gives ever-greater opportunity for contemplating him, so that we may get a foretaste of the beatific vision through these early sacramental anticipations of it. The created order itself, as Irenaeus recognized, is such a theophanic anticipation. And the Old Testament presents us with numerous narratives of God making himself present to his people by way of theophanies. A christological understanding of divine revelation implies that we should recognize Christ’s presence already in the creation and in these Old

⁴¹Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. and ed. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 2.230.1-6: 114.

⁴²Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique: Doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nyse*, rev. ed., *Théologie 2* (Paris: Aubier, 1944), 291-307.

⁴³*haer.* 4.20.4: 488.

Testament theophanies. Christian contemplation, therefore, is not something outlandishly esoteric or strange. It is, first and foremost, recognizing Christ as the real presence of creation and of Old Testament theophanies. Every adumbration of the Christ event is a kind of sacrament, which makes the reality of Christ present to those who have eyes to see. Christian contemplation, therefore, is a sacramental way of seeing: It means we approach creation and the Scriptures as filled with the presence of Christ.

The contemplation that I have just mentioned is in some ways rather ordinary: It involves simple acceptance in faith that what we see in the natural world and in the Scriptures is not something purely natural but is stamped with the presence of Christ. Still, degrees of contemplation vary. The Christian tradition contains multiple accounts of saints who hoped to ascend into the presence of God so as to contemplate him more intimately and to see him more immediately. This seems to me a quite legitimate desire, which is rooted in the biblical understanding of the beatific vision. Moses himself had three theophanic appearances and in each one progressively contemplated God more intimately and directly. Even though Moses already had a face-to-face vision of God (Ex 33:11), he still longed to see God's face more clearly (Ex 33:18). What is more, John's Gospel makes unambiguously clear that there is no more brilliant theophany than the incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ. When we contemplate him in faith, we see the Father (Jn 14:7, 9). When we turn to Christ, therefore, this transforms us far beyond anything that even Moses experienced: we change "from one degree of glory to another" (*apo doxēs eis doxan*, 2 Cor 3:18). And even this contemplation is merely preliminary to a vision that will be "face to face" (1 Cor 13:12) in a way that Moses' vision cannot possibly have been "face to face" (Ex 33:11). The expression "face to face," therefore, is one that allows for degrees: God's face in Christ is an inexhaustible source of life. So as to enter more deeply into this boundless life of God, Christians deliberately take time to reflect on who God is for them in Christ—how the future is present in Christ. After all, it is such contemplation that enables them to see the face of God more clearly.

I suspect we sometimes think of contemplation as something strange and out of bounds for ordinary Christians. I have tried to make clear that this is not so. To be sure, contemplation does sometimes lead to remarkable spiritual

experiences. But it is the presence of Christ, not the experience, that is central. Although Moses reaches astounding heights of contemplation, none of the narratives describe him as interested in an experience as such. Moses is consistently concerned for his people, as he wants the face of God to journey along with them ("Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?," Ex 33:16). Perhaps the most startling aspect of the book of Exodus is its ending. Once more it describes the presence of God, this time after the construction of the tabernacle is finished. At that point the glory of the Lord fills the tabernacle (Ex 40:34), and God continues to travel with his people through his presence in the tabernacle: "The cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of [*la 'ênê*; literally, "before the eyes of"] all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys" (Ex 40:38). The book of Exodus does not conclude with one of the theophanies of Moses; it ends with God's presence among his people, reminding us that contemplation is by no means an isolated activity. The beatific vision is the result of God's indwelling of his people. As such, we never have to fear that it is out of bounds for ordinary Christians. When Christ is made present to us, both in Word and in sacrament, we experience the future present—the theophanic brilliance of the glory of God—a genuine anticipation of the beatific vision itself.