

The Beatific Vision

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

The Beatitudes in Matthew Chapter 5 describe a kingdom citizen. These characteristics describe the person who is fit to dwell with Jesus in His Kingdom: Being poor in spirit,* humility, obsession with righteousness, mercy, peace-loving, and being persecuted. And being “pure in heart.” Pure in heart? What’s that? It must be important because evidently they, and only they, will see God.

In modern Christianity (which sadly is barely distinguishable from medieval Roman Catholicism), our religion is something we add to our lives. We believe in Jesus to have forgiveness of sins and the expectation of being in heaven when we die, and we go on with our lives as before. Family, work, our home, church, whatever other interests we may have, all these occupy us as we go thru life. But this is not biblical Christianity, it’s not even close. So what is biblical Christianity? It is living in the here-and-now the kind of life we’ll have in the future Kingdom. It’s all the beatitudes,** including *especially* the pursuit of a pure heart so that we can see God.

What’s a “pure heart”? It’s the single-mindedness of wanting to be godly in this life. To the one who is pure in heart, loving, trusting and obeying Jesus is all-consuming. He has no other desires contaminated by sin or idolatry or worldliness, no thoughts that aren’t pleasing to God. Such a person wants to know God, see God, please God, be with God. That is the “beatific vision.” Only such people may see God. Such a heart can only exist in one who is justified, regenerated and sanctified, who has Jesus’ Spirit united to his spirit, who is actively pursuing Christ-likeness by yielding to the Spirit and obeying the Word of God. Those whose heart is filled with everything and anything else are excluded from seeing God.*** This is serious!

Jacob encountered the pre-incarnate Lord (Genesis 32), and it changed the course of his life. Moses wanted to see God. It was audacious of him to ask, but after all, Moses was serving the Lord at great personal risk, and it was in love that he asked this. So he was allowed to see only God’s back (Exodus 33:18-23). Job also wanted to see God (19:25-27); the Lord spoke to him, but Job didn’t actually see Him. Elijah desired to see the Lord (1 Kings 19:9-13), and the Lord spoke to him (in a “whisper”). Isaiah had a startling vision of the Lord (6:1-5). Ezekiel saw unique visions of God (Chapter 1). But when the eternal Son of God came to earth in human form, three of Jesus’ disciples, Peter, James and John, were privileged to actually see God, face to face. That happened at the Transfiguration, where Jesus was radically changed so that His glory as deity was manifest, fully visible. For those few minutes, they beheld God in His glory.

On the road to Damascus, Saul briefly encountered the exalted Lord. He was blinded by what he saw as he fell to the ground. That was life-changing in the extreme. From that vision on, for the rest of his life, he was a transformed person. John also saw the exalted Jesus on the Isle of Patmos, and he fell to the ground as though dead (Revelation 1:12-18). He received a further vision of the Lord returning to earth (19:11-16).

John wrote, **“When he [Jesus] appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure”** (1 John 3:2-3). John has our beatitude in mind in verse 3, but what does he mean in verse 2, “we shall be like Him because we shall see Him as He is”? Doesn’t this refer

* *The “poor in spirit” have nothing to contribute to the Kingdom. They have no self-righteousness; they don’t merit being there; they’re totally dependent on God for whatever He gives. They are broken by an awareness of sin and failure and know that only by grace will they be in the Kingdom.*

** *The word for “blessed” (for which reason these are called beatitudes) means “happy.” But the happiness in view here is neither transient nor situational, but deep, permanent and fulfilling. God is happy, and He desires to share His ineffable happiness with us. Whatever pleasures (or trials) we encounter in this life don’t even compare to the happiness and privileges awaiting those who are “blessed.”*

*** *Relying on rituals and rules, the Pharisees and all who depend on such externalities, are excluded. Also evidently excluded are those who are indifferent to the repeated demands of Jesus to follow Him.*

to Jesus' manifest glory? And that we'll be glorified too? We'll be transcendently blessed when we see Jesus at His Return in glory. We'll see Jesus and that vision will transform us, it'll radically change us.

The work of the Incarnate Son does vastly more than merely restore us, thru redemption, to God. Peter writes that Christ has given us everything we need for godliness (2 Peter 1:3). That means, being like God Himself! Christ does in us a supernatural work of grace that so fulfills us and changes us that we'll be eternally blessed by being in God's presence. Jesus' Spirit now makes us "able not to sin," but He will change us so that "we're not able to sin." Our sanctification will be complete. We will be able to behold God.***

Paul writes that our hope and desire is to see Jesus: "We wait for the blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13. And Paul wrote again, **"The crown of righteousness, which the Lord the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing"** (2 Timothy 4:8). At His appearing, we will see the glory of God in full manifestation. And we'll be transformed by it. In 2 Corinthians 3 and 4, Paul writes that that glory is evident now, in this life, for us who love Jesus, who see in His face the glory of God (4:5-6). And the glory that we now see is transforming: **"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit"** (3:18). This is the "treasure" that we have in us (4:7), viz., the knowledge of Jesus' glory. And so Jesus lives His resurrected life in us and thru us. And waiting for us is an eternal weight of glory (4:17-18). Our obsession in life is to love Christ, and to love all who are *in Christ*.

According to the Psalmist, all creation declares the glory of God (19:1). It is so glorious that even atheists marvel at nature's perfection, aware that this entire physical cosmos in all its minute detail has been brilliantly designed. If such a great revelation of God is available now, how much greater, more splendid, more majestic will the glory of God be when Christ returns! Or when we're called up to be with Him, to see Him face to face. Our love for Jesus will endure forever. But according to Paul, we should be living that future transcendent love *now*. The future beatific vision is the end or purpose of our present earthly existence. The beatific vision is the reason for and goal of salvation, the purpose of all Scripture, the meaning of "eternal life." It's why we're here! The Christian life is making the beatific vision real now, proleptically, by communion with God thru prayer, and by obedient service to Christ, sanctification, voluntary sacrifices, the practice of Christ-likeness, and more. We live out the written Word of the eternal, living Word.

Moses' experience should be ours. He loved God and desired to see Him. He couldn't wait for the distant future. And amazingly, God allowed it, partially anyway. And so, while hidden in a cave and seeing only God's back as He passed by, was so transforming that Moses' face was radiant, glowing with the glory of God. Think of it: Some of God's inherent glory passed to Moses. Moses looked like the Lord. God's glory transforms! That glory is there for us to see now, in Jesus. To behold the glory of Christ in the Gospels is to behold the glory of God. It's a foretaste of heaven. It anticipates the reality of the beatific vision.

Adam was created to enjoy face-to-face fellowship with the eternal God in the Garden. By disobedience, he forfeited that blessedness. Jesus not only reverses that, but heightens the blessing on offer by making us partakers of the divine nature. That means union with God. It doesn't get any better than this!

John Piper wrote, "the chief delight of the soul is seeing and savoring Christ." He means in this life, not in some future heavenly existence. Jonathan Edwards wrote that heaven is "a world of love." Let's live now as if we're already in heaven experiencing the joy and peace and love of the Godhead.

*** *Two necessary caveats: First, today's evangelicalism is saturated with the mystical notion that God inhabits the praise of His people, so that during worship services our soul supposedly directly encounters God. This is nonsense. There's nothing mystical about the beatific vision. It's Scripture, and it's truth. Be discerning! And the second is this, Don't assume that the beatific vision comes automatically to all who profess to be Christians. The beatitudes are for those who are in a love relationship with Jesus, and biblical love makes demands. Don't presume upon God's grace!*