

Christians, do you desire to know God? I don't mean just knowing a few more facts about him, like learning 10 things about God you can rattle off again later. I mean truly knowing God for who he is, to know him as he is in himself, and to see him face to face. Consider the words of Psalm 27 verse 4: "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that I will seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple." Does that describe you? Do you long to be in the presence of the Lord, to gaze upon his beauty, and to be with him forever? Moses certainly did in our Old Testament reading for today, because after he hears all the promises of God, he then asks the Lord, "Please show me your glory." So do you think the same way that Moses does? Do you want to see the glory of God?

To answer that question, of course, we first have to understand what we mean by the glory of God. What it is and what it isn't. And very simply put, whenever the Bible talks about God's glory, it's talking about who God is, in himself as he is as God. And so when we talk about his glory, you're talking about literally who God is.

But Christians, the Israelites had misunderstood something about who God is. Because this reading which we have in Exodus chapter 33 comes right after the event of the golden calf, the golden calf which Israel had made while they were being impatient for Moses to come back. And they said of this golden calf: "This is your God. This is the one who has brought you up out of the land of Egypt." To use the words of Psalm 106: "They made a calf in Horeb and worshiped a metal image. They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt." And the great sin of Israel here, Christians, was not that they had broken the commandment, making an image when they weren't supposed to. The great sin was the fact that they had done so thinking that this calf could somehow represent the glory of God.

Think about it. The calf, on the one hand, is a created thing. It is something which Aaron himself made with his own two hands. How could that ever compare to God as he is, the uncreated one? The one who is our creator, the one who created all things, the one who himself was created by no one? God has always existed, and he is the one who brought all things into existence. How could this idol ever represent God as our Creator?

And this calf which Israel created was also a finite, limited thing. It had certain dimensions. It was so big and with a certain weight to it, made out of certain materials, something that they could hold onto and carry and move from place to place. How could that ever represent the Lord, who himself is infinite? God is without beginning. God has always existed. And God is without end. He will always be, even when everything else has passed away. God simply is, outside the bounds of time. And more than that, God is also outside the bounds of space. Heaven and earth are too small to be able to contain him. It's like Solomon said at the dedication of the temple: "Heaven and earth are too small to be able to contain you, much less this temple which I have built!" You take the whole universe, Christians, from one end to the other, and it would be far too small to be able to contain God. God is without limits. So how could this idol that Israel had made ever begin to represent God who is infinite?

The calf, on the one hand, was an inanimate object. It couldn't act. It couldn't speak. It couldn't do anything. It was just a thing, something for them to look at. How could that ever represent the Lord, who himself is alive, who himself does things, who himself has spoken to us in all things? God moves. God lives. God acts. How could this idol ever begin to represent the living God?

The calf was also made in the image of an ox, one of God's own creatures, with its own nature, with its own glory. How could that ever begin to represent God who is so completely different from his creation that there is nothing like in heaven or on earth? There is none beside him. There is none like unto him. He is totally and utterly unique. So how could this idol ever begin to represent the uniqueness of God?

And the calf was also a thing. To put it in another way, it was a "what," something which they could handle, something which they could hold with their own two hands. But God is not a thing. God is a "who." He is a person. He has personality. He has a will. He is someone and not something. God is, in the words of Revelation, "the one who is and the one who was and the one who is to come." The Most Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. How could this idol ever represent God as a personality?

And yet God is still more than all of these things. Because the calf was just that. It was just a thing, and that's all it was. But God is more than this still. Because God is all holy. God is the one who is completely righteous. God is the one who is completely good. If you want to know what is good and right and true, you don't have to look somewhere else, but only to the Lord, who himself is all holy.

God is also sovereign. He can do whatever he chooses to do. His will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. If he decides to do something and speaks it, there is nothing in heaven or on earth that will be able to stand in his way. God can do whatever he chooses to do.

But God is also love, Christians. And God is love even without us. Because in eternity, the Father loved the Son, and the Son loved the Father, and both of them love the Holy Spirit. And the love which the three members of the Trinity have for each other means that God will always be love. And God in love created us and made us his own, so that we would love him too. God has made us to come to himself, to be one with him for all eternity.

I could go on for days, Christians. We could spend weeks talking about who God is, and we still wouldn't scratch the surface of who he is in himself. But it is this glory which belongs to God and this glory that Moses wanted to see. To know God face-to-face, to know him as he is, and to see him as he is. So let me ask you again, Christians. Do you desire to know the Lord? Do you want to see him face to face? Or do you sometimes just find yourselves maybe a little too busy to even think about God, too busy to worry about the things of God? Forgetting that he is in fact our highest joy? That he is the one who has given us all things? Or maybe more to the point, do we sometimes treat God as a thing, something to go to when we need help, something that we call on whenever we need somebody to do something for us, but not someone to love, someone who is our highest joy? We don't like it when people treat us that way. Why would we treat God in that way at all? Yet Christians, God is not just a thing, something to be used. God is someone who has come to us in love, so that we might be with him forever.

But there is a problem, of course. The problem is that we cannot see God as he is, at least not yet. And that's what the Lord told Moses in our reading. "You cannot see my face," he says, "because man shall not see me and live." The reason for that, of course, is that we are sinners, that we have become separated from the Lord. And because we have sinned, because we have separated ourselves from God, we're not able to stand in his presence. To behold his glory would mean our destruction. Take the example of Isaiah in Isaiah chapter 6. Isaiah sees the glory of the Lord, and he describes his feet, just one tiny glimpse of who God is. And what does Isaiah say? "Woe is me! For I am undone. For I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips. For my eyes have seen the glory of the Lord of hosts." Or you think of Ezekiel, who after seeing the great vision of the wheel within a wheel had to sit overwhelmed for a week, realizing that he might very well have died. Or even John in Revelation chapter 1, who sees a vision of the glory of the ascended and resurrected Christ and falls down at his feet as though dead. Yes, Christians, for us to see God as he is right now would mean our destruction. It would mean our death.

But God wants to be with his people. God wants to dwell among us. God wants us to see him face-to-face. That's why God covers Moses with his own hand as he hid in the rock, so that after the glory of the Lord had passed by, Moses would then see a glimpse of God's glory. Only his back. But in doing so, God had answered his prayer. Moses saw the glory of God, even if only in part.

And we too have seen the glory of God, if only in part, in his Son Jesus Christ. Because, as John tells us in John chapter 1: "We have beheld his glory, the glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." To know Jesus Christ is to know the Father. To know the Son is to know something of the glory of God. God has come down among his people and wants to be with us, just as we see in the incarnation of his Son.

But still only in part, because we are waiting for something more. As Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians chapter 13, we know in part, as if we are looking into a mirror darkly. We have not yet seen God face-to-face. But that day will come, Christians. Because when Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead, we shall see him as he is, as John tells us in 1 John chapter 3. And then we will be like him, seeing him face-to-face forevermore. Now we know in part, but then we shall know him, even as we have been fully known. What a glorious day that will be, Christians! To see God face-to-face, to see the face of our Savior who has come to be among us. May the Lord give you the desire to see the Lord as we wait for him to return on that day.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, to whom belong all things, who is and who was and who is to come, give us the desire to see you, O Lord, that we may behold your glory in your Son Jesus Christ, eagerly waiting for that day when we shall know him even as we have been fully known. To him be the glory, now and forever. Amen.