

# Show Us God

John 14:8-9 | Dec. 25, 2016 | Bryce Beale

The man Moses had seen the glory of God.

He stood alone before a bush that burned but did not burn up, and was required to remove his sandals because God dwelt in the bush. We imagine he felt the heat of this fuelless flame against his face.

Sometime later he walked through the wilderness with half a million of God's people, newly freed from slavery by devastating expressions of God's power. And Moses looked at the large cloud beside them and saw the glory of God within it.

And then, when Moses had returned to the mountain of the bush with this people, more than a bush was burning. The whole peak of the mountain was aflame and shrouded in dark cloud, because God was on the mountain. Moses went up the mountain and spoke to God.

Moses had seen God's glory.

So we wonder why, when Moses goes up the mountain again and is speaking with God, after God affirms his favor toward Moses so that, we might assume, Moses could ask for anything he would like, we hear him utter this request to the LORD: "Please show me your glory."<sup>1</sup>

Why ask for this? The simple answer is that Moses wanted *more*.

He wanted to see God more. He wanted to know God more.

And in the conversation which surrounds this request we find out why. Moses was about to take these weak and stubborn people into a land filled with strong and wicked men. The cities there were fortified, and the Israelites were like grasshoppers before the giants which inhabited them.

Moses was afraid. He was afraid that God wouldn't be with him. "If your presence will not go with me," he said, "do not bring us up from here."<sup>2</sup>

And so he cries out to God to show him more of himself, to reassure him that he is with him.

Have you never longed for the same thing?

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<sup>1</sup> Ex. 33:18 (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> V. 15.

Yes, you have had moments when it felt that God was near. You have seen his glory several times.

But then, as quickly as this sense came, it left. Difficulties like foreboding shadows begin to creep in around the edges of your sight, and make their slow progress toward you. Life feels suffocating, and God feels far away. You feel like Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett's famous play, waiting for a "Godot" who is promised to come "surely tomorrow," but who never appears.

And what do you desire most in that moment? That God would return; that your sense of God, once so strong, would come back. You want to feel that nearness of God again.

And you cry out, "Please show me your glory."

What is God's answer? Are you doomed to an unending heavenly silence?

No. We find something we do not expect. God's answer is, "You already see me."

We find this in our text today, in John 14:8-9, when one of Jesus' disciples makes the same request that Moses did.

Philip said to him [i.e. Jesus], "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father...."

There are two things in this passage: first, Philip's request to see God; secondly, Jesus' rebuke of Philip. Let's consider each in turn.

## It is enough

First, see what Philip wants.

Look at verse 8: "Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.'"

We are not surprised by the request. Philip is a friend of direct experience; when Nathanael wondered whether any good thing could come from Nazareth, Philip simply said, "Come and *see*."<sup>3</sup>

We are not surprised, again, because his request resonates with our own hearts. Do we not long to see God, to know him so directly? And so

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<sup>3</sup> John 1:46; emphasis mine.

although Philip will be rebuked for his question, yet we recognize that it contains a desire and a truth we must not overlook.

“Show us the Father,” he says, “and *it is enough for us.*”<sup>4</sup>

Like Moses, he could not be satisfied by less than knowing God closely. But, no doubt like Moses, he would be satisfied with that. Smaller things, the minor happinesses of this life, would not be enough for this hungry soul. But to see God—that would be enough.

This is a principle that goes beyond Philip and Moses. It is true of all. Men and women do not exist for small things; these can never be enough.

Dogs—dogs exist for small things, like bones and barking. You do not.

You do not exist for small things like money, and politics, and work, and family.

Start from the bottom with me, and use your own sentiments as a guide.

Imagine that your friend starts collecting stamps as a hobby, and you observe how over time this hobby grows into an obsession. Every conversation with this friend terminates on the newest stamp released by the postal service. His family is neglected, he quits his job. Everything is about stamps—he lives as though stamps were the whole of his reason for being.

You would, if you were a good friend, rebuke him. Man is not made for stamps, that is too small, it is not enough.

Well, climb the ladder upward. Let’s take family.

A woman whom you know devotes herself with all her heart to her children—here is her whole purpose. This is better than stamps. But then her children grow up, leave the home, and marry. Now she wavers between a deep depression and a tenacious clinginess to her grown children, interrupting their marriages. She acts as though she has no higher purpose than her children.

You would, if you were a good friend, rebuke her. Woman is not made for children, that is too small, it is not enough either.

Add together all those things which seem to make life meaningful for us—our families, our occupations, our interests, our ministries, our friends—and yet these together are too fragile to bear the weight of a

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<sup>4</sup> Emphasis mine.

single human soul. They are not enough! Our lives may contain these things, yes—but our lives must contain much more than these. We were made for something bigger, nothing else is enough.

As a contemporary song puts it:

I could walk the world forever  
Till my shoes were filled with blood  
It's not enough<sup>5</sup>

For if our purpose is family, then the orphan has no reason to be here. We know that is not true. If our purpose is work, then the unemployed are meaningless. If our purpose is politics, what happens when our country ceases to be?

Our purpose must be much bigger; our own minds demand it.

So what is your purpose? What is enough? “Show us the Father, and it is enough.” Philip’s desire to see was really a desire for something bigger—he wanted to *know* God more. He wanted to directly experience God so that he might better know him.

Collect the fragments of your complicated life and place them like subheadings under this single, great title: KNOWING GOD. That is a lofty aim, an ambition substantial enough not only to comprehend your whole life, but also big enough for you to lose yourself in. It is something so much larger than you, and that is why it satisfies so completely.

It is enough.

It is enough for the stay-at-home mother with three children, and she can in her circumstance be just as happy and alive as anyone else in the entire world. It is enough for the high school student in the midst of a million pressures; it is enough for any young person in a way that video games and T.V. shows and cliques never can be.

It is enough for the retiree; it is enough for the empty nester.

Hear the thousand souls, all unique in their design and situation, breathe a sigh of relief in unison. This is enough!

And obviously our thirsty souls respond to this news with enthusiasm. We have had so much of what cannot satisfy, and have seen so many mirages in this desert of a world, that we almost fear to hope.

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<sup>5</sup> Dustin Kensrue, “It’s Not Enough,” *The Water & The Blood* (BEC Recordings; Mars Hill Church, 2013).

We can hardly argue the fact that knowing God is big enough to carry our weight of purpose. But our question immediately is: *Can* I see the Father; *can* I know God? Maybe others can know God, we have read about them in books and perhaps even seen a few of them, these saints. But can you yourself know God, and take a drink from this all-satisfying stream? Can you finally have your soul recline and say, "It is enough."

## The face of Christ

And for the answer we return to Moses, that figure outlined against the flame of Sinai.

### Face and back

He asked to see God, and what was God's reply?

"I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.'"<sup>6</sup> Here is what seems a full disclosure of God on the mountain!

"But," he adds, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live."<sup>7</sup> But then, this: "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory 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, but my face shall not be seen."<sup>8</sup>

If you are familiar with the Bible, this may surprise you. You might say, "I thought God was spirit. He doesn't have a body like us, and so he doesn't have a face or a back."

You are right.

What then does God mean by his "face" and his "back?"

It seems that he means this: when you see someone from behind, your knowledge of that person is limited. You see no facial expressions, you likely do not hear them speaking to you directly. To know someone's back is to know them in a limited way. But to know someone by face is to know them fully, we might say.

The LORD explains that, although our longings are to know God more, we cannot know him fully in this life. Otherwise this life would end for

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<sup>6</sup> Ex. 33:19.

<sup>7</sup> V. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Vv. 21-23.

us; to see God, to know him fully, is too much for our feeble frames. We would simply die.

Then what is to be done about our craving to see God? Ah, God provides. He allows a sight of his “back.” He puts sunglasses upon us; he masks his glory for us, in the way a loving mother might puree solid foods for her child. We cannot take more, we must have a lesser view.

We see the same principle at work immediately after this event, when Moses came down from the mountain. The glory of God’s back was so great that it left its residue on his face. When he spoke to the people, his face shone. And so, to keep them from being afraid of even the reflection of God’s glory, Moses put a veil over his face.

### God in side profile

Now, at this point in our message you may wonder, “What does this have to do with Christmas? What does the fact that our greatest satisfaction comes from seeing God, together with this idea of God providing a true but limited sight of his glory, have to do with the babe in the manger?”

Look again at our text in John 14, now in verse 9, where Jesus replies to Philip’s request: “Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip?’” And then these words, these universe shaking words: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

From this text we draw our central idea—really, an idea central to all that is. Before it all our other preoccupations fade away. The gifts under the tree lose their glitter and sheen; the lights that line our roofs grow dim past visibility. The green and red that sparkle like a million fireflies across the midnight cityscape shut off in deference to this one bright, glorious star still hovering over Bethlehem.

The baby that we celebrate on Christmas is God’s way of giving us the greatest possible happiness we can ever know in this life. This is why the angels proclaimed good news of *great joy*.

What follows I say with trembling and all reverence. Moses yearned for a sight of God, and was granted to see God’s back. But when this child was born, this deity incarnate, men were permitted to see, so to speak, God in side profile.

God cannot turn around any further, cannot let us see any more of himself, in this life, than he shows us in his Son, Jesus Christ.

But it is such a sight that Jesus could truthfully tell Philip, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

You may read of Moses and envy his experience. He spoke to God directly, and was given this thunderous audience with the Almighty. God passed by before him and let him see his back.

And then you turn your eyes from that blazing mountain to this manger scene. The one looks very much like God; the other very much like a baby.

Yet hear what Scripture says concerning which is greater. When Paul writes of the glory Moses saw, and the glory we experience in Christ, he says, “Indeed, in this case, what once had glory [Moses’ experience] has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it.”<sup>9</sup>

What kind of glory could surpass this direct revelation of God to Moses? The “ministry of the Spirit,” Paul says.<sup>10</sup> And what is that ministry? It seems that Paul offers part of the answer when he writes: “...God...has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God [not in the face of Moses, but ] in the face of Jesus Christ.”<sup>11</sup>

In other words, you cannot see the face of God, but when God enlightens the eyes of your heart to see the face of Jesus, you see far more than Moses could have dreamed about. Were God himself to pass by outside your house and let you see his back, this would have no glory at all compared to what you even now can experience in Christ.

So when we cry, “God, show us your glory! Father, let us see you!” Jesus can reply, “Why are you saying that? You already see him—in me.”

## Perceiving God

You might object at just this point and say, “Well, that all sounds nice in theory, but at the end of the day Moses was on a blazing mountain, and we’re just sitting here in a church, thinking about lunch. How is what we have better?”

For the answer look one last time to our text, to Jesus’ reply to Philip in verse 9: “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip?”

Take Philip as your example. If seeing Jesus were as glorious as we claim, as soul-satisfying and exquisite, then why would Jesus’ close associate ask to see the Father, and *that* would be enough for him?

Because although Philip saw Jesus with his eyes, he did not see him with his heart. That is, in Jesus’ words, he did not “know” him. As one commentator observed, “It is not a seeing but a perceiving that is

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<sup>9</sup> 2 Cor. 3:10.

<sup>10</sup> V. 8.

<sup>11</sup> 4:6.

important.” That is why we, who are many years removed from the opportunity of seeing Jesus with our eyes, are at no disadvantage in this matter. It is a matter of perceiving with the heart, then and now. Seeing with the eye profits nothing.

May I ask, do you perceive Christ?

Don't you feel how sleepy our hearts are? How else could we explain our fascination with what is not fascinating? If we were unbiased observers of human life, how would we ever make sense of the fact that men and women spend 95% of their lives on things they will forget or regret on their death beds?

Our country has long been familiar with the babe in the manger. Every year we are exposed again to the old familiar story. But if we do not perceive the true Christ in the tale, then we are like Philip, growing dull by familiarity. If Christ himself were to appear in our city on Black Friday, would we be surprised to hear him say, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Evansville?” He is accustomed to there being no room in our homes for him; he was born outside the inn, where the animals were kept.

But how long must this persist before our unrest shakes off its apathy? In Christmas you are offered the greatest pleasures possible.

Friends, let us choose this better part.

When God shines into your heart, and takes the veil off of it, when the eyes of the heart truly see Christ—this is happiness. You who have known this happiness do not need me to try to sell it to you. Is there anything you have found afterward that satisfied you near so much? I know the answer.

Then why should we deprive ourselves of that same happiness this Christmas? You might crave in this hard season that the heavens would open and God himself speak. But behold, the Word is near you, the Word made flesh who not only dwelt among us, but dwells among us still, and is perceived by faith.

When this same Jesus, this God-made-man, breathed his final aching breath from the cross—having absorbed the Father's wrath for his people's sins—the veil of the temple, that ever barred our way to God, was torn from top to bottom, almost as if the veil on Moses' face should be torn top to bottom. One member of the triune God has welcomed us into the inner life of the Supreme Being. This is why he came, that through him we might know God.

If God accomplishes nothing else through this brief message this morning, may it be this: that you would be unable to forget, in every

holiday happiness you find, that there is a happiness always waiting that is incomparably better, richer, fuller. Always Christ is opening himself to those who trust him. Always he is attending to his children, as they pursue him, and obey, and pray, and search the Scriptures.

So, I wish you all a very merry Christmas today, full of all kinds of earthly happinesses. But I wish you much more than that. I wish you what Moses sought on the fiery mountain, and what Philip asked for.

I pray that the eyes of your hearts may be enlightened, that when by faith you join the shepherds and gaze into the manger, you would see the glory of God in the face of Christ, and thereby be able to turn your eyes away from every other competitor for your heart, and with open eyes say, "It is enough."