

John Owen on the Beatific Vision

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 02 February 2014

Preacher: Billy Gaines

[0 : 00] Now the beatific vision. Beatific, the word, means blissfully happy. It comes from the Latin *beatus*, meaning blessed.

When someone is beatified in the Roman Church, it is recognized that they are in heaven with God, as opposed to purgatory. You've heard of these processes, right?

And when somebody is sainted in the Catholic Church, it's called beatified. That's a little bit of the etymology of the word. So when you hear beatific vision, think of the blessed vision of God in heaven, which is sure to make one blissfully happy.

When most Christians think of going to heaven, besides their reunion with loved ones, they imagine that there they will meet God in person, and they are right to.

Revelation 22, verse 4 says, God's servants will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 1 Corinthians 13, 11 says, Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.

[1 : 08] 1 John 3, 2, 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.

But is it really as simple as that? 1 Timothy 6, 16, just to stay in the New Testament, says, Who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen, or can see, to him be honor and eternal dominion forever.

Amen. John 1, 18, see this is the same authors, John and Paul, No one has ever seen God, the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

Now to the eternal king, now to the king eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

God is invisible, and does not dwell in bodily form. However, even if there were something to see, Scripture tells us that we are not able.

[2 : 19] When Moses asked to see God's face, God tells him, No, for no one shall see my face and live. When Gideon saw God's angel, he expected to die.

He said, Alas, O Lord God, for now I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face. But the Lord said to him, Peace be to you, do not fear, you shall not die.

You see the expectation. What's going on here? There's an obvious tension in Scripture about the nature of the face to face relationship between God and his people in glory.

An obvious tension in Scripture. But the expectation remains, as is captured in the Lord's Beatitude, Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

This is Matthew 5.8. The doctrine of the beatific vision is an attempt to lay out what will actually take place in this glorified interaction. It is a doctrine that quickly fell into obscurity in the Reformed churches, and it certainly remains there today.

[3 : 24] There are likely a number of reasons for this. It is often seen as a Roman Catholic issue. Most writers were and are Catholic who have written on it, who have engaged.

This has to do with their understanding of metaphysics and ontology that underlies their theology, which is a bit different than classically Reformed. Another reason, many are unaware of the theological tension.

We simply don't ponder what it will be like to see God in Heaven. Many of us assume that in a lot of ways, one of two extremes, either we'll just be on clouds playing harps, which has some merit.

Theologically, you might even say there are apparently harps in Heaven.

Or at the other extreme, we kind of imagine that life will go on much like it is now, only better, more perfect, but that we'll still go to our favorite pubs and do our favorite things and play cards.

Really, when you begin to think about even how you conceive of Heaven, certainly how you ask around, these are the common conceptions of what Heaven will be like. And we just don't give much thought to the fact that we're going to see God, but He's invisible.

[4 : 34] Oh, and He's Trinity, which is kind of confusing too, right? Like how, what does that mean? Will that be clear to us all of a sudden? Will we know God? And this is what those who have written on the doctrine of the beatific vision have attempted to sort out.

A third reason, if and when we become aware of this tension, it is perhaps thought that the answer is too obscure and therefore unimportant. A question of metaphysics and ontology, as I already mentioned, with little to do with the Christian practice or duties of morality, to quote Owen.

And even if one finds interest and purpose in it, it would be easy to become overwhelmed by the subject matter and that which has been written on it in the tradition.

After only three weeks in this seminar, I can affirm that this would be very possible. I'm reading Plato and Plotinus, the pre-Christian philosophers, and then the great saint of the church, Gregory of Nyssa.

There's much truth to this idea of obscurity and difficulty to understand. So it's understandable why people don't go there a whole lot. That being said, it was John Owen's belief that meditating upon the beatific vision is a vital practice, a vital practice for all Christians to cultivate.

[5 : 56] As far as Owen is concerned, our Christian life and thinking should, indeed must, be oriented toward the hope of the beatific vision and shared by the foretaste we receive of it here and now.

Okay, so it is my contention that if John Owen is one of the most important and influential theologians to have ever lived, as we said in our first subsection, and it was his contention that the doctrine of the beatific vision was of vital importance, then I want to know what it is that he has to say about it, and I hope that you will too.

So now we turn to John Owen on the beatific vision. From here, I shall attempt to lay out Owen's specific theology of the beatific vision.

We will do so by exploring the questions what or who, how, and why. So who, how, and why. What or who is it that we shall behold in heaven?

How is it that we shall behold them? And why is it important for the Christian life? The little sermon punch at the end. Why is it that this is important to us?

[7 : 16] This is just interesting to study as it can affect our metaphysical ontology as soon as we figure out what those things exactly are and mean. Or does it have practical implications for the Christian life?

I believe that it does, and Owen certainly did, as I've already said. So first, the who. As we've already talked about a bit, the tradition, both Jewish and Christian, as well as the Platonic idea of the Supreme One, which intermixed with and preceded it, has always held that the Creator God, Creator being the key word, does not dwell in bodily or in material form, and is thus invisible.

As the Creator of all matter, He, in His essence, cannot consist of it. You understand what I mean by that? He created matter, therefore, it can't be a part of His essential nature, because then it would have been eternal.

Matter would have been eternal. Thus, the promises of God's word have always been received with some consternation and bewilderment. All of the Christian tradition believes that Jesus is the means by which we attain to the vision of God.

Thomas Aquinas certainly was Christocentric in this way. Gregory of Nyssa, all those who knew of Christ and knew the Scriptures believe that Jesus was the means by which we attain to the vision of God.

[8 : 37] The grace through Christ, empowerment of the Holy Spirit, that's how we get to heaven, right? Which is the beatific vision. But Owen is sharply different than his predecessors, in that for him, the face of God which the redeemed will glory in, both now and for all eternity, is none other than that of Jesus Christ Himself, as opposed to the Father Himself or the Trinity in some way.

Owen is dogmatic that it's the face of Christ which we shall behold. The one, Jesus, the one who being fully human actually has a face, so to speak, and who being fully God, fully God and the fullness thereof, displays and mediates God's triune presence both now and again eternally.

Were it not for the incarnation, writes Susan MacDonald, a scholar who I'll be relying a lot on today, on Owen, were it not for the incarnation, Owen maintains, that God would remain essentially

invisible now and for all eternity.

If God had not become incarnate, we as His creation would never have beheld Him, as Owen's contention. We never would have seen God. The promises of Scripture would have become come to nothing.

This would be a great time to break away and get into a channel of the predetermination of the incarnation. This idea of the cross being written from the foundations of the world.

[10:16] The idea of the incarnate Christ, the Son of God, coming and dying on a cross wasn't a response of God to the fall of Adam, but was in fact in His mind from the foundations of the world.

Wherefore, writes Owen, the blessed and blessing sight which we shall have of God will always be in the face of Jesus Christ.

To use Karl Barth's idiom, Owen maintains a Christological concentration, that's the Barthianism, Christological concentration that many of his predecessors, and I think us, often, modern day Christians, lack.

It's very hard to stay focused on Christ. Even in, I think, his telling, and we could all talk, what do you think about in heaven? What are we going to see? We have to talk about God. We almost talk about God as though He's this one and it's always this idea of God the Father.

We slip into it. I slip into it all the time, I'll be honest. I'm a graduate student in theology and I slip into it all the time and I hear it in our churches and in our preaching. It's just hard to keep that Christocentric concentration.

[11:31] That was what Owen was on about. He's entirely Christocentric in his appropriation of the doctrine of the beatific vision and his theology in general for that matter, holding firmly to the Orthodox Chalcedonian confession about Christ, that is, Jesus is both fully God and fully man.

There are a couple of scriptural texts and theological reasons for Owen's Christological emphasis. He's quite the exegete and quite the theologian. John 17, 24 says, Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am to behold my glory that you have given me before the foundations of the world.

For Owen, John 17, 24 means we have to place Jesus Christ himself, the eternal word made flesh at the heart of whatever it means to behold the glory of God in heaven.

He explores at some length what it is that is glorious about Christ's person and how that also shows us the glory of God. In effect, Christ's glory is the glory of God who for our sake and for our salvation assumes flesh.

the glory of God, the fullness of the glory of God is represented in Jesus Christ. And this was so again before the foundations of the world.

[13:01] 2 Corinthians 3, 18 says, And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. This passage can and should be interpreted alongside that which follows just a few verses later. 2 Corinthians 4, verse 6, For God, who said, Let the light shine out of darkness, has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

For Owen, it is through the Spirit in beholding the glory of the Lord in the face of Jesus Christ, as suggested in 2 Corinthians 4, 6, that we are brought into the sphere of the transforming power of true knowledge of God, and are changed more and more into the image of Christ, which is the image of God.

2 Corinthians was imperative for Owen. This brings us from our scriptural reasons to those theological. Owen says, God will be conceived of unto eternity according to the manifestation that he hath made of himself in him and no otherwise.

That is in Jesus Christ. If Christ is at the center of our present beholding of the glory of God by faith, he will be at the center of our eternal beholding of and rejoicing in the glory of God by sight.

[14:44] God will be conceived of unto eternity according to the manifestation that he hath made himself in him and no otherwise. I said that already. He will not change the way in which he reveals himself.

at the consummation of all things as if making himself known in the person of the incarnate son were merely a temporary emergency measure to be discarded when we can finally have perfection. It will be part of God's glory and our glory too that the one who has glorified human nature by assuming flesh will be the mediator of our knowledge, love, and adoration of the Trinity and the

salvation that comes from the Trinity in heaven just as he is the mediator of all those things while we are still pilgrims in *Via* on the way.

That's the who or the what of the beatific vision for John Owen and it's really important that I stress for historical reasons that this is unique, this is new, that the beatific vision would be beholding the face of Jesus Christ with glorified eyes on his glorified body is a clear break.

As I said, all of the tradition preceding believe that Jesus was the means by which we would behold God but not that he would also be the substance of our beholding. Now we turn to the how.

[16:13] And again, this is a reiteration but important. Most of the tradition, though affirming of both the bodily resurrection of Christ, all of the tradition worked hard. The Chalcedonian confession, in a sense, came out of some of these struggles.

The bodily resurrection of Christ must be affirmed and that in the eschaton, the end of all things, the second coming, all Christians will also be so.

But they tended to see matter, our flesh, to borrow Paul's language again, as something which weighed down the human spirit. It was, and often is still, believed that it is in the human soul that the *Imago Dei* is born.

We bear the image of God on our souliness, not on our body, not on our hands, in our hair, in our feet, in our eyes. This topic, we've broached it a bit already, is much broader than we shall have time to discuss this morning, but its implications have a direct impact on the doctrine of the beatific vision.

For if the true good, the true good, the true one, is without bodily form and thus essential, that is, senses, nature, then it cannot be by our senses, be it touch or sight, that we ultimately behold Him.

[17:26] It just can't be the case. For them, that is, those who preceded, the beatific vision is wholly intellectual. The language of sight is metaphorical to indicate the clarity with which we understand in contrast to seeing through a mirror dimly by faith.

Our bodies have no part to play in it, essentially. Owen, before we want to discard it too quickly, Owen would want to affirm this intellectual seeing as of primary importance in the beatific vision. It is the consummation of faith, which is the sight of Him that we have on this sight of glory. So this is already how we behold Him, right? So in the same way that we are arguing Christ was it now, so therefore He will be eternally, we behold Him by faith now.

So there must be some aspect, Owen might even say a primary aspect, of that which will continue in eternity. By way of example, when I stand on a bluff overlooking the ocean at sunset, which we're pleased to do as often as possible, I see great beauty and wonder at the majesty of what is before me.

Though I am educated and spent a number of my growing up years by the seaside, my knowledge of that which I behold is quite limited. I see water, birds flying, barge in the background, some mountains, I think, or islands, I'm trying to, you know, but it's quite limited.

[18:54] Compare this to someone who has not only grown up on the water but has also spent a great time, a great deal of time studying and seeking to understand what is before him. Say, to be idyllic, the son of a fisherman from the Sunshine Coast who works as a marine biologist.

Okay? Their knowledge of what takes place beneath the waves at the various levels of life enlivens the imagination. You can imagine. When they stand on that same bluff next to me, do they not see more than I?

Right? They have an understanding or somebody who understands light in the way, why is this guy pink and purple? They understand, I see great beauty, I enjoy it, but to know what's going on there and still to be able to see it and enjoy it provides a depth of knowledge which must be more than mine.

Tina and I love art museums. We have spent hours walking slowly through halls gazing at great masterpieces. The times though which I have been most enriching are when I have someone telling me a bit about what the artist was going through and when they created it.

Somebody that I know, it's not necessarily the CD that you can attach to your side or the big groups and those are okay, they're important, but it's when I'm with somebody who knows the work, who I know and I trust what they're telling me and they start telling me about this artist and this piece.

[20:20] That painting in a sense comes alive for me. See how he's using light there, Rembrandt. See how he's using light there and all of a sudden this painting starts to come alive for me. This is the type of knowledge we hope to have of God when we see him face to face in glory.

Only infinitely better. But, if Owen were here, he'd want to say, could our marine biologist friend or an art expert ever be content simply knowing about that which they love? Even perfect knowledge, perfect intellect in engaging these things, or would they insist on seeing it? In some ways, the man sitting next to me on the bluff who knows vast amounts more than I about what's going on out there, about the light reflecting in the sky and what's going on beneath the waves and all these things, he knows it even perfectly. If he were blind and I could see and knew none of these things, would he want more or would he be content with his knowledge? I think I would want. I'd want to see it. To Owen, to deny a place to our glorified bodily senses is scripturally and theologically wrong-headed. So he insists that with regard to the beatific vision, the body is glorified with its senses and we shall see our Redeemer with our eyes. [21 : 54] Not only does Owen make sure that we place the ascended, glorified humanity of Christ at the heart of the vision of God, that's what we talked about in the what or the who, but he insists that we integrate the resurrection of our bodies with that doctrine of the beatific vision in ways that the tradition preceding did not.

It is Christ himself in his own person with his glory who shall be continually with us. As a man sees his neighbor when they stand and converse together face to face, so shall we see the Lord Christ in his glory.

Amen. That's the how. Actually with our eyes. Maybe even our touch. Firm handshake. A hug. I don't know.

Now we turn to the why. As already mentioned, John Owen offers a good deal of theological reflection on the beatific vision and believes it is a vital practice for all Christians to cultivate. As far as Owen is concerned, our Christian life and thinking should be oriented toward the hope of the beatific vision and shaped by the foretaste we receive of it in the here and now.

[23 : 12] This is especially so in the sacraments and the contemplation by faith of the incarnation and of what he's done for us. In fact, he takes it so far to say that no man shall ever behold the glory of Christ by sight hereafter who doth not in some measure behold it by faith here in this world.

For surely we cannot expect to enjoy the consummation in heaven of what we have shown no interest in whatsoever here. This takes our understanding of salvation, of justification just on a different bent, right?

Why would we get to see God in heaven if we don't wish to see him now? It's the motivation of the heart. For Owen, it matters for our lives now and for all eternity that we should set aside time for our minds to be shaped by the foretaste that is offered to us by the beatific vision.

In part, because if this does not shape our minds and mold our desires, something else will. And then the longing for heaven which we have can become misguided.

We are changed into the likeness of whatever most stamps itself upon our thoughts and our actions reflect the molding of our minds. This means that spending time reflecting on the glory of God in anticipation of the beatific vision can never be seen as detached from one's daily life.

[24 : 46] We await the blessed hope of meeting our Redeemer face to face in glory. We ought to reflect on that hope and learn to desire it all the more. That's the end of the lecture.

I've brought a little poem I did not write. Many of you will know it. I'll read it. It's short. It doesn't have to do with the beatific vision directly.

It has to do I think with the incarnation with the Holy Spirit which we'll talk about in a bit maybe in the Q&A; time was one of the things that Owen is criticized for not having much in his doctrine of the beatific vision as the role of the Holy Spirit.

But it's a great poem. It's by a guy named Gerard Manley Hopkins. As king fishers catch fire dragonflies draw flame as tumbled over in rim and roundy wells stones ring like each tucked string tells each hung bells bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name each mortal thing does one thing and the same deals out that being indoors each one dwells selves go itself myself it speaks and spells crying what I do is me for that I came I say more the just man justices keeps grace that keeps all his goings graces acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is Christ for Christ plays in ten thousand places lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his to the father through the feature of men's faces thank you