

THE BEATIFIC VISION

1 John 1:1-2:2

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of Life. The Life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us. My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

John 20:19-31

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. “Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

MESSAGE:

“Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe....” Ever since Thomas spoke these words, he has been known as “Doubting Thomas.” But that’s neither fair nor accurate. Thomas wasn’t evincing doubt, all he was saying was that *“Seeing is believing.”*

Sir Francis Bacon would say the same thing fifteen hundred years later and we don’t call him “Doubting Francis”; as a matter of fact he is regarded as the father of modern, empirical science. And no one can deny the achievements of modern, empirical science. By focusing on what can be observed and measured in nature, scientists have made breakthrough after breakthrough in understanding the laws that govern our physical universe. That knowledge, in turn, has spawned technological innovations which stagger the imagination...So we’re inclined to accept wholeheartedly the scientific principle that *“seeing is believing.”* If so, then instead of calling him “Doubting Thomas,” we should call him “Scientific Thomas.”

We ourselves tend to be “Scientific Thomases” when it comes to truth claims regarding the supernatural. I suspect that if you and I were told that someone who had died was up and walking around, we would be skeptical. We would demand solid proof. We would want to see for ourselves. On the other hand, when we do see something with our own eyes, we are inclined to believe it. I would wager that every one of us thinks that if Jesus were to physically appear to us it would greatly strengthen our faith. Then, we think, we could REALLY believe in Him as our Living Lord; He would have proven his existence to us “beyond a shadow of a doubt.” But I wonder about that. If we really saw Jesus in person walking down the aisle of this church, would that strengthen our faith?

He didn’t look the least bit like God, you know. He was no Brad Pitt or George Clooney: except for one brief moment on transfiguration mountain he was a plain, common looking man. Isaiah wrote, “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.” So would seeing him increase your faith—or would it be an impediment to your faith? Might you be tempted to say to yourself: can this possibly be God?

Maybe that’s what Jesus had in mind, when he said to Thomas: *“Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who **have not seen** and yet who have believed.”* What Jesus is speaking about here is *faith*. He is saying that the knowledge we receive through faith is superior to the knowledge we acquire through observation and experience. And that can be a hard pill for us to swallow.

Many people who consider themselves Christians are of the opinion that the Bible is trustworthy only insofar as it agrees with what science declares to be true. When push comes to shove, they trust human knowledge more than they do the revelations of Scripture. *“Faith is fine,”* they say, *“as long as what you’re asking me to believe makes sense—and agrees with modern science.”*

But of course by that definition, faith is not faith at all. It doesn’t require faith for me to believe that this floor is going to hold me up. Experience and reason give me all the

confidence I need to believe that it will. It doesn't require faith for me to believe that the sun will rise tomorrow morning; my experience has been that it always does. But to believe that God created the world in six days? That He divided the Red Sea to allow the Israelites to pass through? That Jonah was swallowed by a large fish and then regurgitated alive? That God laid all our sins on His Son Jesus Christ so that He could die with them and then rise from the dead to give us eternal life? It requires faith to believe those things—and faith rests on God's word and not on human reason or experience.

But why does God ask us to believe things that go against reason and experience? Why can't it all just make sense? The answer to that question is: *what makes sense to us doesn't necessarily **make** sense.* If things made sense, men would ride side-saddle. What makes sense to us in our frame of reference may or may not make sense in God's frame of reference. He spoke through the Psalmist, "*My thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways, for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*"

Our frame of reference is finite and mortal, but God's is infinite and eternal. We can understand this finite world through our powers of observation and reason, but we can come to know Jesus Christ only through faith.

Faith is a window God has created in your mind through which He allows you to gaze into His kingdom. It is a third and better eye than the two you have in the front of your head. If you have it, consider yourself blessed; if you don't, pray to God that He will give it to you. But take it for what it is, or leave it alone.

Don't attempt make your faith conform to what seems reasonable to you: you'll end up in a bad place. A faith which insists upon evidence to support it—whether in the form of scientific proof OR miraculous signs—is not faith at all. It's the opinion of the old man who says: "*I'm from Missouri: you'll have to show me.*" You know what's wrong with a "show me" faith? ***It can never get enough of what it needs.*** Like the charismatic who imagines that he has to be able to speak in tongues in order to be sure that he has received the "full, foursquare Gospel" and is saved. Pretty soon he finds that he has developed an appetite for speaking in tongues, and when it doesn't happen, he begins to worry about whether or not he has enough faith. This is a very real problem among Pentecostal Christians.

The Scriptures tell us that the Holy Spirit breathes when and where *He* will—not that we can call him into action when and where *we* want. Or the Christian who measures the strength of his faith by whether or not God grants him what he prays for. If what he prays for doesn't come to pass, it must mean that he hasn't got enough faith. Or even worse, that God isn't really there. Or the Christian who demands to see a miracle as a sign of God's existence. Would you like to know how effective a miracle is in producing a lasting faith? Only three days after God parted the waters of the Red Sea to allow the Israelites to escape from Pharaoh's army, they began to doubt that He could get water to them in the desert! Three days! That's the value of a major miracle in terms of producing a lasting faith: about three days' worth.

Faith has nothing to do with signs or miracles or proofs or evidence—or anything else in this world—thanks be to God! And nothing in this world can produce and sustain faith in us because faith comes only from the Holy Spirit. It is a gift of God for which all we can do is bow our heads and humbly say: Thank you! And since faith is a gift of God, anytime we try to understand it in worldly terms we are exchanging the sacred for the profane, gold for lead and the truth of God for a lie.

For us to try to understand faith through our power of reason is like a flea trying to understand the *Declaration of Independence*. Throughout history, philosophers from Plato to Thomas Aquinas to Frederick Nietzsche have sought knowledge of the divine through their powers of observation and reason, and they have failed miserably, time and time again. Jesus does not wish to be found in those ways. Instead, he finds us and allows us to know him through faith, and faith alone. And so this is the greater blessing that Jesus was referring to when he spoke to Thomas: the beatific vision of Jesus Christ that comes through faith.

Faith has no appetite for worldly things: it is nourished by the Word of God, which will never pass away. Just consider the blessings God gives us through our faith. By faith the Scriptures are opened up to us and we can see beyond our earthly horizons into the Kingdom of God! By faith we can know that God is personally with us when we gather to worship in His Name, and that Jesus comes to us in His body and blood when we go to the communion rail. By faith our sins are washed away and we are made new creations in Christ Jesus every day! By faith we know that God causes all things to work together for good in our lives. And by faith we know that when we leave this world we will go to be with God and that He will wipe away every tear from our eyes. So always remember, beloved of God, that this faith which you have is FROM God, and not from the world or from yourself. And no matter how small its flame may burn at times, don't be discouraged. *"A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out."* You and I will change. But God will not: He is the same yesterday, today, tomorrow and forever. And God is the Author and perfecter of your faith. So stop doubting, and believe! Amen.