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To Gaze upon God The Beatific Vision in Doctrine, Tradition, and Practice

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Though the doctrine of the beatific vision has woefully been forgotten in the church today, Samuel Parkison argues that the beatific vision is central for the life of the church today. Through close readings of Aquinas, Dante, Calvin, and more, Parkison reminds us of the beatific vision's historical and contemporary significance.

Biblical Foundations for the Beatific Vision

Part of what it means to be Reformed and evangelical is that one affirms without any reservation the conviction of *solā Scriptura*. Such a conviction is the inheritance of the Protestant reformers, who recovered and codified this biblical and ancient allegiance to divine authority. To affirm that our ultimate authority is Scripture alone is not to say that the only authority we recognize is Scripture. The Bible itself testifies to the legitimacy of other authorities, including the authority that parents exercise over their children (Eph. 6:1-3), husbands over their wives (Eph. 5:22-24), pastors over their flock (1 Tim. 3:2-7; Heb. 13:17), congregations over their wayward members (Matt 18:17), and governments over their subjects (Rom. 13:1-2). Even the authority of tradition is recognized and legitimized within the Scriptures (2 Thess. 2:15). In many an evangelical circle, this latter authority has been all but lost, and *solā Scriptura* has been misrepresented to signify a narrow biblicism that functionally amounts to an antipathy for tradition. In some cases, it can eventuate into gross and sinful hubris. In direct contradiction to biblical instruction, we can come to disobey the commands to "honor our fathers and mothers" (cf. Ex. 20:12) and "remember our leaders" (Heb. 13:7), and come to embrace a chronological snobbery in the stead of a humble disposition to gratefully receive the riches of God's gift of history. This is why our next two chapters unabashedly embrace our long Christian history. I believe we ought to have a deferential instinct toward tradition, and therefore part of my justification for retrieving the lost doctrine of the beatific vision is its historical pedigree. If we are to depart from such an ecumenical doctrine, we ought to have very good reasons, drawn faithfully from the Scriptures (and in this chapter, I intend to demonstrate that we do not).

Having said all of this, we would not help our current situation if we swung the pendulum too far in the other direction and concluded with a slavish subservience to tradition that functionally renders Scripture unable to speak for itself. The Scriptures' perspicuity and sufficiency are, after all, essential attributes that accompany the Reformation conviction of *solā Scriptura*. While *solā Scriptura* does not mean that every other relative authority ceases to exist, it does mean something. *Solā Scriptura* means that every authority bends the knee to God's authority exercised in the Scriptures. Our allegiance to the Bible is a direct reflection of our allegiance to God, since the Scriptures are his breathed-out, authoritative words (2 Tim. 3:16). The great tradition is a derived authority—carrying a real authority because, and only insofar as, it faithfully transmits what the Bible grants as the "faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). It is the whole counsel of God, including both that which is expressly taught and that which is binding by good and necessary consequence, that stands as the measuring stick for all other authorities.

I mention this conviction regarding biblical authority because while the historic witness of the beatific vision is significantly authoritative, it is authoritative only insofar as the doctrine has a biblical rationale. This chapter is dedicated to the biblical warrant for the beatific vision. I will here survey a handful of major biblical passages and themes that conspire together to give the great tradition (and us today) every justifiable reason for holding firm to this glorious doctrine.

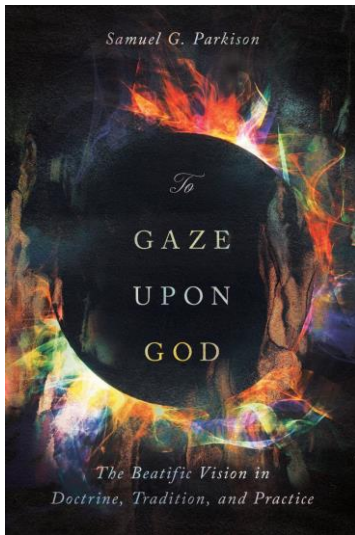
We may categorize the Old Testament's teaching on the beatific vision in two broadly distinct categories: (1) passages about theophanic encounters with God, wherein the beatific vision is signaled to or longed for or partially glimpsed by individuals throughout the Old Testament, and (2) passages about eschatological promises of a consummate theophanic encounter with God. Several examples of each category are worth mentioning.



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The first example of an Old Testament theophany we must mention is the first Old Testament theophany recorded: Genesis 3, which tells of how Yahweh himself would walk “in the garden in the cool of the day” (Gen. 3:8). Here, in this unfallen state of innocence and original righteousness, Adam and Eve had unhindered access to the presence of Yahweh, and it was this access from which they were driven after their treachery with the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:22-24). Such a primeval experience should not properly be called *beatific*, since this whole episode bespeaks a future promise that Adam and Eve forfeit. What they experienced was a theophanic encounter with Yahweh, which hinted at a fuller future fulfillment of beatitude associated with the tree of life (cf. Gen. 2:9; 3:22-24; Rev. 22:2). They never enjoyed this fuller experience, which explains the severe heartbreak of this episode. The tragedy lies not simply in what they *had* and lost but also what they *could have had* and forsook.

Despite Adam and Eve's treachery, theophanic encounters did not altogether cease at the fall. Throughout the Old Testament, Yahweh graciously grants partial glimpses of his glorious face, which often serve to awaken a desire within his saints for a greater beatific vision. These theophanic experiences are often portrayed as encounters with “the angel of the Lord.” Some of these encounters may be properly described as “Christophanies”—that is, instances where the angel of the Lord is more specifically conceptualized as the pre-incarnate *Son* taking on a temporary *form* of a man—but not all. Examples of “angel of the Lord theophanies” would include Genesis 16:7-16, when the angel of the Lord came to Hagar to promise the birth of Ishmael (note verse 13, when Hagar “called the name of the Lord *who spoke to her*”), or Genesis 32:22-32, when Jacob wrestles with the angel of the Lord and plainly declares, “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is delivered” (v. 30), or Joshua 5:13-15, when Joshua meets “the commander of the Lord's army” and is told to remove his sandals, since the ground on which he stands is made holy by the commander's presence (v. 15; cf. Ex. 3:5), or Judges 13:8-25, when the angel of the Lord comes to the wife of Manoah to promise the birth of Samson, which elicits the terrified exclamation of Manoah, “We shall surely die, for we have seen God” (v. 23).

There are also examples throughout the Old Testament of theophanic encounters that do not directly involve the angel of the Lord, but rather describe God powerfully manifesting himself in glory in other ways. Such examples would include Genesis 28:1-22, when Jacob receives his dream of a ladder to heaven (cf. Gen. 35:1-15), or Exodus 3–4, when Moses encounters the presence of God on Mount Horeb and is given his covenantal name for the first time: “I am who I am” (Ex. 3:14). His second theophanic encounter with Yahweh on Mount Horeb in Exodus 33–34 (more on this episode below) could also be included; or Exodus 40:34-38, when the glory of the Lord fills the tabernacle upon its completion; or Isaiah 6, when Isaiah receives his vision of Yahweh enthroned in his heavenly temple; or Ezekiel 1:4-28, when the prophet's vision includes his sight of “the likeness of the glory of the Lord” (v. 1:28).

In all these examples, theophanic encounters with the “face” or “glory” of Yahweh awaken fear and reverence from their participants. And yet, these episodes intrinsically maintain a hint of longing and intrigue. While Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Isaiah, and Ezekiel are terror-stricken by their theophanic encounters, we get no hint of *regret* or *resentment* for having experienced them. These figures get a taste of what Adam and Eve forfeited, which means there must have been, at some deep image-bearing level, a sense of gratification. And yet, they experienced this taste of Eden from a state of fallenness, which explains the sense of fear and humiliation (and in some cases, we might even say *terror*) that is characteristic in such episodes. These theophanies, therefore, rightly awaken within the careful reader a sense of expectation and hope for a full and unhindered consummate experience *without* the obstacle of sin.

—taken from chapter 2, “Biblical Foundations for the Beatific Vision”



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