

WHOEVER HAS SEEN ME

John 14:7-11

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“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” (Jn. 14:9).

Most Christians have known the feeling expressed by Philip’s plea, “Lord, show us the Father” (Jn. 14:8). For there are times when God seems distant to us, and our hearts desire a tangible sign of God’s presence and reality. Jesus’ disciples were confused and distressed about Jesus’ impending departure, so Philip asked Jesus for an experience that would make their belief in God real. Bruce Milne writes, “His plea articulates the longing of the heart of humanity across all the ages to see and to know the living God.”¹

Not only does this scene connect with experiences many of us have had, it more generally addresses the situation of all Christians in this current age. Jesus was preparing his disciples for that time when he would no longer be physically with them, after his death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. This is the very time in which we experience our entire Christian lives. We have come to faith in Christ through God’s Word, so we love and follow him. Yet not only have we never seen God, but we have never seen Jesus or heard his human voice in our ears. God the Father and Jesus in heaven *are* distant from us, so we need a way to experience their presence. This is the great subject of John chapters 14-16, in which Jesus tells of his provision precisely for our situation today.

¹ Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here Is Your King!* (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity, 1993), 213.

SHOW US THE FATHER!

Philip's question was not only prompted by the occasion, but it was also provoked by Jesus. Having told the disciples that he was going to the Father's house to prepare a place for them, Jesus wanted further to awaken their knowledge of the Father. He told them, therefore, "If you had known me, you would have known my Father also" (Jn. 14:7). The disciples did know Jesus, of course, having spent three years in his company. Yet their poor understanding of the Father showed their inadequate grasp of Jesus himself. Leon Morris explains: "They had known him well enough to leave their homes and friends and livelihood to follow him wherever he went. But they did not know him in his full significance."²

The events that were about to transpire would change this situation. Jesus thus added, "From now on you do know him and have seen him" (Jn. 14:7). His expression "from now on," indicates that the events that were about to take place would change the situation. Through Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension into heaven, and outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the disciples would gain a deep and profound knowledge of God. In anticipation of these certain events, Jesus said, "You have seen the Father" (Jn. 14:7).

However certain this future knowledge was, Philip showed that it had not yet happened, pleading, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us" (Jn. 14:8). Philip was evidently thinking about Old Testament saints who were granted an immediate revelation of God's being. Moses had asked God, "Please show me your glory" (Ex. 33:18). God replied, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD'" (Ex. 33:19). Elijah also was granted divine theophanies. Exhausted from his confrontation with the false prophets and wicked Ahab and Jezebel, Elijah had fled to Mount Sinai, probably seeking the experience of God's nearness. God then shook the mountain with a great wind, and an earthquake and a raging fire (1 Ki. 19:11).

² Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Revised), New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 570.

Probably with events like these in mind, Philip expressed his belief that if the disciples could only experience an audiovisual divine display, it would be “enough for us” (Jn. 14:8). Such a confirming experience would pull the disciples through whatever ordeal lay ahead of them, Philip reasoned, just as so many Christians today seek spiritual experiences to propel them through the travails of faith and life.

“SEEING” JESUS

Another way to understand Philip is to realize the connection he was making between *seeing* and *believing*. His whole point was that if the disciples could see the Father, then they would be able to believe in him. Jesus challenged this assertion by asking, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip?” (Jn. 14:9). There was probably a bit of exasperation in Jesus’ statement, marveling, “Can you really not understand these things, having known me for so long?” But Jesus was also making an important point. Philip said that he could believe if only his eyes could take in a visual display of the Father. But Philip had seen Jesus in this way for roughly three years, yet he had not thereby come to understand him and fully believe. Jesus thus refutes the idea that seeing is believing, at least when it comes to the kind of seeing that Philip had in mind.

It is helpful, in this respect, to realize that the Greek language of the New Testament employs a number of different words for “seeing”. We can compare these words by observing how they are all used in a later account in John’s Gospel, the story of Peter and John’s inspection of the empty tomb after Jesus’ resurrection.

The most basic word for “seeing” is *blepo*, meaning a visual apprehension of physical objects. This is word used when we are told that John “saw the linen cloths” (Jn. 20:5) in the empty tomb. Then there is a second word for seeing that is used when Peter arrives at the tomb. Pushing in after John, Peter “saw the linen cloths lying there” (Jn. 20:6). Here the Greek word is *theoreo*, from which we derive our word “theory” or “theorize.” Peter not only saw the cloths but that he marveled over them and wondered what they meant. How could Jesus’ body be gone and why were the grave clothes still in the tomb? Later that evening, Jesus appeared in the room where the disciples

were staying, showing them his hands and side. We read that “the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord” (Jn. 20:20). Here, the Greek word is a form of *horao*, which means “to see with comprehension.” This is the word the disciples used in speaking to Thomas when he later arrived, speaking of their faith in Jesus: “We have seen the Lord (Jn. 20:25).”

The distinction between these words for “seeing” becomes important for understanding Jesus’ answer to Philip’s request to see the Father: Jesus replied, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9). The word for “seen” here is a form of *horao*: Jesus means that anyone who has *comprehended* or *understood* him has also *understood* the Father. Philip asked for a vision, using the verb *deiknumi*, signifying a demonstration of God. All this time, Jesus had been providing the demonstration that Philip sought! If Philip had understood Jesus, he would have comprehended the Father in Christ.³

Jesus’ answer to Philip is a most significant statement concerning the Christian faith: “whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9). This is the very heart of our belief, that Jesus Christ came to this world to reveal God to mankind: to show us in his life and ministry what God is like and to reveal to us by his gospel what God intends for our salvation. This teaching is so important that John cited it in the prologue to his Gospel: “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (Jn. 1:18). This truth is one of the most important elements of our witness to others about Christ: in proclaiming Jesus, we must explain that he is the One who came from heaven to show us God.

There are a number of ways in which Jesus might have shown us God, two of which are particularly noteworthy. One is by demonstration. If you know someone personally and have spent time with that person, then you are able to depict him or her to others. I had an experience of this a few years after my father died. My uncle, his only brother, was visiting my mother on an occasion when I was with her. As the conversation progressed, I found that I could not pull myself from his presence. Why? Because, as my father’s

³ These paragraphs are drawn from James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), I:1089-1090.

brother, he looked like my dad and his voice sounded like the voice I had not heard since my father's death. The way he stood and his mannerisms were precisely those of my father. Seeing him, it was like I was looking at my dearly missed dad and the experience was overwhelming.

In a similar way, Jesus represented God the Father to mankind. Because of our alienation from God in sin and because of our own idolatrous tendency to erect false images of God, our race had lost contact with our Maker. But Jesus came into the world and his posture, his tone of voice, his attitude, and his reaction to events were those of God. Jesus was familiar with God the Father, having come from the presence of God's glory in heaven. Indeed, Jesus is God's own Son, so he possesses all the family traits and mannerisms. Each of us has a desperate need to know God, and John 14:9 makes the vitally important statement that Jesus reveals God the Father.

To see Jesus and comprehend his mind and heart, his character and his habits, is to comprehend God. God is always and only Christ-like, so that the more we know of Christ the more we know of God. This revelation of God is the impetus to our faith, for to comprehend God in Christ is to trust and adore him. "Whoever has seen me," Jesus declares, "has seen the Father." William Barclay exclaims, "Jesus is the revelation of God, and that revelation leaves the mind of man staggered and amazed into wonder, love, and praise."⁴

It is not enough, however, to state that Jesus represents God because of his intimate familiarity with the Father. Jesus grounds his revelation of the Father deeper, as it were, speaking of the mutual indwelling of the Father's being with his own being. Jesus said, "How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?" (Jn. 14:9-10). Not only does Jesus show us what the Father is *like*, but Jesus shows us the Father, since the Father is *in him*. While Father and Son are distinct persons, they possess a unity of being so that Jesus *reveals* God because he *is* God. Jesus reveals the Father because the Father is in him, as they not only collaborate in their works but also share the interpenetration of their being. George Hutchinson writes, "The true

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2:187.

ground of our knowing the Father in the Son is his unity in essence with the Father.”⁵ Jesus has come to earth as more than a divine envoy, a servant who brings a message from God. Were he only a messenger, Jesus would never say that by seeing him we see the Father. Instead, the Father has come to us in his Son, that we might know him who cannot be seen and be reconciled to him through faith in Jesus Christ.

When it comes to knowing God, Jesus is like the Rosetta Stone. This was part of a 2nd B.C. Egyptian monument discovered during Napoleon’s Nile campaign in 1799. Its value comes from being inscribed with a text in three languages, including hieroglyphic and Greek. Given the Greek translation of the ancient hieroglyphic, scholars were able to greatly advance their understanding of the ancient Egyptian language, which otherwise remained a mystery to them.

Likewise, God the Father would remain a mystery to us unless Jesus had come. We had learned God’s basic character and requirements in the Old Testament. But we could not see God and have a personal knowledge of him until Jesus came. Just as linguists looked at the Greek on the Rosetta Stone and were able to read the hieroglyphic, so also we see Jesus and are able to interpret God the Father.

Therefore, any idea of God that does not square with the Bible’s portrait of Jesus is false. Likewise, any questions you have of God are answered by seeing Jesus. You may wonder if God is compassionate. Look at Jesus touching the mottled arm of a leper who had called to him for mercy, healing him with tenderness and love (Lk. 5:13). You may wonder if God is able to handle your problems. Look then at Jesus standing amidst the storm, calming the winds and the waves with his mere voice (Mt. 8:26). You may doubt that God could ever forgive you and receive you back when you repent. Then listen as Jesus cries out from the cross, seeking mercy for the very men who had crucified him, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk. 23:34). God’s attitude to children was seen when Jesus received them for blessing (Mt. 19:14). God’s grief over death is revealed in Jesus’ weeping at the tomb of his

⁵ George Hutchinson, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001), 299.

friend Lazarus (Jn. 11:35). God's desire for our salvation is displayed in Jesus' gospel call: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28). "Whoever has seen me," Jesus declares, "has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9).

WHAT IS ENOUGH?

We hear Jesus' claim and we return to Philip's question: "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us" (Jn. 14:8). Philip wanted a display of divine power. Jesus' answer confronts this thinking: a sensory experience of the divine presence is not what we need. It is not in such demonstrations that we perceive God and are thus enabled to face our challenges. This was God's message to Elijah, when that great prophet came speeding to Mount Sinai, wearied and frightened from his battles with wicked Ahab and Jezebel, and needing reassurance of God's presence. God put Elijah on the mountain and gave him what he wanted: demonstrations of power, but the prophet learned that the Lord was not in them:

The Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire, the sound of a low whisper (1 Ki. 19:11-12).

Where did Elijah "see" God? The Lord was in the "low whisper": the quiet revelation of his Word. How, then, do we overcome our sense of God's distance? Where do we turn to see God and gain strength and hope? The answer is in God's Word, by understanding Jesus Christ. We will see God in the Bible, open on our laps, often in a quiet place, as we study his Son Jesus Christ. If we want to experience power to tear down strongholds, Paul says it comes from God's Word, which will "destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God" (2 Cor. 10:5). If we want the fire of God to burn in us, let us remember the words of the downcast disciples whom Jesus had taught on the road to Emaus: afterwards they said, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he... opened to us the Scriptures?" (Lk. 24:32). While spectacular displays and spiritual highs are not enough to carry us through our trials, the knowledge of

God through Jesus Christ as he is comprehended in the Scriptures is more than enough for us.

Does this suggest a rationalistic spirituality? The answer is no, for the reason that Jesus went on to give later in this chapter. “The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name,” Jesus said, “he will teach you all things” (Jn. 14:25). It is the third member of the Trinity, whom the Father and Son send, who gives the Word of God power in our lives: by his presence the Father and Son live in us as well. True spirituality, then, is biblical faith, seeking diligently to know and understand Jesus, in this way seeing God, and receiving the Spirit’s power to live in accordance with the teaching of God’s Word.

In his second epistle, the apostle Peter reminded us of the divine displays he received. Peter refers to being present at the Mount of Transfiguration, where “the voice was born to him by the Majestic Glory,” and “we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain” (2 Pet. 1:17). Did Peter then say that we need the same: an audiovisual display of divine glory, and that will be enough for us? To the contrary, he continues: “We have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Pet. 1:19). God’s Word is enough for us, Peter says, and it will make God present and real to us, if we will see and understand Jesus in the Bible. For, Jesus declared, “Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9).

REASONS TO BELIEVE

Jesus concludes his thought with two reasons to believe, which together supply our calling as his witnesses in the world. The first is the compelling authority of his Word: “The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works” (Jn. 14:10). Jesus does not mean that he is like a ventriloquist’s dummy, with strings attached to his mouth. Rather, due to his obedience to the Father and the unity of being in the Godhead, when Jesus speaks it is God who is acting in and through his Son. Those who have believed on Jesus know this, since it was by

God's power in Christ's Word that we came to new life and saving faith. The way that we press on in faith, knowing that God is near to us, is to hear Christ's voice and to know it as the truth of God.

Christ's Word is and should be enough for our faith, Jesus says. But if we think we need more, he points us to his works: "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves" (Jn. 14:11). We think immediately of Jesus' miracles, which he often pointed to as proof of his identity (cf. Jn. 5:36). But we can more fully grasp Jesus' meaning here by remembering his answer to John the Baptist, when the great forerunner was tempted to doubt during his dark days in prison. Messengers came from John inquiring: "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Mt. 11:3). Jesus answered, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me" (Mt. 11:4-6).

If Jesus of Nazareth was not the Savior sent from God then there will never be any Savior. But Jesus is the Savior. He validated his coming by fulfilling all that was foretold of him in the prophecies and he displayed in his words and deeds the work of God for the salvation of men. His dual testimony – his words and his works – leave us without excuse if we remain in unbelief: there is literally nothing that God could do for our salvation if we will not believe in his Son through his teaching and his saving deeds.

These reasons to believe reveal to us how we are to serve as Christ's witnesses today. Jesus said that those who see him see God. So what do we need to show the world today, but Jesus as he is revealed in the Scriptures? What good do we do the world if we give money, help, and encouragement but do not show them Jesus? The world today is asking, "Where is God?" By proclaiming Christ's Word and doing his work – both of them together as one witness – we provide not only what the world really needs but what will truly be enough for all who believe. Our calling is to show them Jesus and through Jesus to bring them to a knowledge of God in saving faith.

ENOUGH FOR US

It was enough for Elijah to hear God's Word in the quiet voice on the mountain, and the prophet went down from the mountain back into the world to do God's work. It will also be enough for us to see and comprehend Christ through faith in his Word: to feed upon his promises, bow our heads before his commands, and receive his saving benediction upon our hearts. Yet how easy it is to live without comprehension of Jesus, just like the earlier disciples: "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me," Jesus might lament of us (Jn. 14:9). Let us ensure that we do know him, that we hear his call, that we comprehend what he has revealed to us about the Father, most especially his grace for our salvation through so costly a gift as his own Son.

"Show us the Father," our hearts cry with Philip. In answering, Jesus says, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn.14:9). This means that the key to the Christian life – to endurance in faith and growth in grace – is looking always to Jesus and in him to see God displayed. We will never advance from needing to be with Jesus and we will never graduate from looking at him for the answer. We will never grow out of needing the life and power that only he can give. Jesus is himself God's provision for us, through the Holy Scriptures, that we might feel the presence and know the reality of God in our lives. In this way, Jesus really is enough for us.