

Heaven & The Beatific Vision

(Talk #2 “Living in the Heavens” series)

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by Don James

“Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.” (1 John 3:2-3)

Introduction

As mentioned in talk#1, a revival often starts with one or more people who encounter God in such a profound way that they are horrified at what is justly due them for how they’ve lived their life, and yet, they are convinced of God’s great mercy for them given in the person of Jesus. This “two-pronged vision” produces a strong conversion in them, where they see sin and temptation for what they are and experience the power of the Holy Spirit as they say “yes” to God and choose to live for him, keeping themselves alert and sober minded. *The Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10).*

The last talk focused on the consequences of sin. This talk is about the glory in heaven that all who remain faithful to God will enjoy. The goals for this talk are: (1) to stir a greater desire and longing for God, (2) to help us look at our life on earth as a *journey* toward our final destination (rather than our home), (3) to help us weigh our choices to see whether we are exchanging the glory of God for lesser things that cannot last or satisfy, in particular, being more discerning about what we fill our minds with - for they are meant to “behold God.”

The Beatific Vision

No talk can do justice to our final end in heaven, because the glory of God is so far beyond us. Yet, it was for the glory of God that we were created – both to manifest God’s glory as well as to experience it. This talk should serve as a *beginning* to our contemplating heaven, and contemplating heaven will serve to open our hearts to the love, joy, freedom and glory of God.

God created our soul with an intellect and free will, giving us the ability to understand and to love. The intellect allows us to learn, to understand what is good. The will allows us to pursue the good as well as to act for the good, and in particular to love the good. When we experience what is “good,” we also experience a satisfaction or pleasure, which reinforces our understanding that the particular object of our delight is good.

This was designed to work for our benefit in the pursuit of God, yet it can work to our detriment as fallen people. For example, we can indulge in some activity that brings us some kind of pleasure (eating, entertainment, shopping, sensuality, gossip, even responding to someone in anger). Because they bring us some kind of pleasure, we perceive the act as a “good” and start to form a desire for it, possibly even a habit of it. When we are not using our intellect and will as they were intended (to embrace God), we do not have the ultimate good (God) to compare other perceived goods with. But in heaven, all of this is transformed because of the beatific vision.

WHAT IS THE BEATIFIC VISION?

Now this is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ. (John 17:3)

The essence of eternal life is *knowing God*. When Jesus speaks about knowing God, he is speaking from his own experience, *from what he enjoys within the life of the Trinity*. We’ve had a taste of this and understand the difference between “knowing about God” and “knowing God personally.” Yet, what we’ve experienced can hardly compare to what will be experienced in heaven. When Jesus speaks of “knowing” God, he is speaking of the intimacy that only one who is sinless can truly experience. In some sense, we are in the courtship stage and he is speaking of the perfect union stage, where there is nothing separating us.

The Beatific Vision consists of three acts: (1) the sight/vision of God, (2) the love of God, and (3) the enjoyment of God.

(1) The Vision of God

What we know of God in our earthly lives comes to us through mediation. In other words, we come to know God through what we can understand in the world around us. Through the universe we can understand that God is the Creator, that he is powerful, and that he provides for us. When God reveals himself and his will to us via revelation through the Holy Spirit, he uses imagery and concepts that we understand from the world around us, things that are inadequate to truly reveal the glory of God to us. That God desires us to know him is shown through the ultimate revelation of himself to us in Christ. He not only stoops to our level, communicating in ways that we can understand, but he becomes one of us, uniting mankind to himself for all eternity, showing us his ultimate design for us – to bring us into his divine life. Yet even the incredible revelation of the incarnation is mediated through the physical person of Jesus. In our earthly life, we can never “see” God as we will in heaven.

Because of his transcendence, God cannot be seen as he is, unless he himself opens up his mystery to man’s immediate contemplation and gives him the capacity for it. The Church calls this contemplation of God in his heavenly glory “the beatific vision”. (CCC 1028)

When we think of “contemplation,” we can tend to look at it as a difficult exercise of the mind – but this is not so. In heaven, we aren’t going to be struggling to learn something new about God – it is something that will come as easily to us as sight, for it is God who will give us both the capacity to see him and the vision of himself.

When the Church speaks about the Beatific Vision, it uses the word “vision” to indicate a direct knowledge of God, one without mediation, one where we see God face to face, as he is. It is an intuitive knowledge, one where God infuses into our minds the light of his presence, the knowledge of his beauty and goodness. The Church uses the word “beatific” to indicate that this is the soul’s ultimate state of perfection and happiness. In other words, we were created to experience the life of God directly, an experience that surpasses our earthly understanding.

Pope Benedict XII declared that the blessed see God as a dogma of the faith saying:

*We define that the souls of all the saints in heaven have seen and do see the Divine Essence by direct intuition and face to face, in such wise that nothing created intervenes as an object of vision, but **the Divine Essence presents itself to their immediate gaze, unveiled, clearly and openly; moreover, that in this vision they enjoy the Divine Essence, and that, in virtue of this vision and this enjoyment, they are truly blessed and possess eternal life and eternal rest**” (Denzinger, *Enchiridion*, ed. 10, n. 530--old edition, n, 456; cf. nn. 693, 1084, 1458 old, nn. 588, 868).*

(2) The Love of God

As mentioned earlier, we were created in such a way that we love what is good. Unfortunately, with our fallen mindset and our limited view of God, we often treat sin and the things of this world as “good” and so we often say “no” to our ultimate good which is God. But those who behold God face to face, who see his divine essence cannot help but be changed in their innermost being whereby they embrace God’s love and goodness with all that they are.

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

Currently, our vision of God is as dim as a fading light bulb in comparison to the brilliance of his glory – yet even now, with the little taste we’ve had of him, we are drawn to him. Imagine when his goodness and glory eclipses all else in our minds, how could one not be moved to love one who is pure love and who has created us to share in that love?

No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God. (1 John 3:9)

We will *know* God as he is (though our capacity to know him will be finite). We will see the love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit and will be brought into their beatitude. We shall be like him – pure, holy, filled with love, joy, peace, awe, and thanksgiving. In the same way the Son offered himself in love to the Father, we will do the same and we shall never grow tired of making our lives an offering of praise to Him, for it will be our greatest delight, it will be our nature to do so. Our love for God will burst forth from our souls in an eternal hymn of praise.

(3) The Enjoyment of God.

It is not enough for God that we behold him from a distance, for his desire is that we “enter into our master’s joy.” Suppose a starving beggar is brought to a rich man’s table that is filled with every good thing to eat. Will he be satisfied at the sight of the food if he cannot eat it? Not at all, in fact, it would only add to his sorry state to see what he longs for and be unable to obtain it. God created us not only to behold him, but to enjoy him. God allows us to partake of him – for he fills us with his divine nature through the Holy Spirit to unite us to himself (2 Peter 1:3-4). This not only gives us pleasure, but it is pleasing to God to do so, because he is so utterly generous.

In his Encyclical Letter on the Mystical Body of Christ (*Mystici Corporis*, 1943), Pius XII refers to a passage in Pope Leo XIII’s Encyclical Letter, *Divinum Illud* (On the Holy Spirit). He writes:

“Thus, when ... Leo XIII was treating of this union of ours with Christ and the indwelling of the divine Paraclete within us, he appropriately turned his gaze to that beatific vision wherein one day in heaven this mystical union will find its perfect consummation. ‘This wonderful union,’ he wrote, ‘which is properly called indwelling, differs only by reason of our condition or state from that in which God embraces and beatifies the citizens of heaven. In that vision it will be granted to the eyes of the mind, its powers augmented by supernatural light, to contemplate the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, for all eternity to witness closely the processions of the divine Persons, and to enjoy a beatitude very similar to that with which the most holy and undivided trinity is blessed.’”

There is no greater happiness than what God experiences within himself, and he gives his Saints a share in that happiness by allowing them to draw not only close, but to be brought into the life of the Trinity. A small example would be when my daughter sees my wife and I hug each other, she draws closer and says “group hug,” and we’ll pull her into our hug. This is what the Father has done for us - by filling us with the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son and who shares in their beatitude. We are brought into the love and joy (the eternal hug) of the Trinity.

BROUGHT INTO THE LIFE OF THE TRINITY - REVELATION 21

Revelation 21- describes the new Jerusalem, showing that the saints are caught up into the life of the Trinity where they dwell in God and God dwells in them. The Bride gleams with the splendor of God for she is filled with him!

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I also saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, God’s dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, [for] the old order has passed away.” (Revelation 21:1-4)

*⁹One of the seven angels ... said to me, “Come here. I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” ¹⁰He took me in spirit to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. ¹¹**It gleamed with the splendor of God.**” (Revelation 21:9-11)*

In Revelation 21:15-16, the angel measured the city and found it to be square and as tall as it is wide. It is in the shape of a cube, like the holy of holies in the temple (1 Kings 6:20). Unlike the temple before Christ, there is no more outer court, no more need for sin offerings, no more need for 1 high priest to enter the holy of holies on behalf of the people – for now all God’s people in Christ offer themselves perfectly as a living sacrifice to God (Romans 12:1), giving all that they are in love and worship to God. We are the living stones (1 Peter 2:5) that have been brought together to form the Bride, God’s temple.

²²I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God almighty and the Lamb. ²³The city had no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gave it light, and its lamp was the Lamb. (Revelation 21:22-23)

We are God’s temple, and he is our temple for are brought into God’s divine life, we dwell in God. In a similar way that God created Eve from the rib of Adam, he has now created his Bride from his own flesh and blood, soul and divinity. This is similar to what St. Paul writes in Ephesians 5 where he says:

In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. (Ephesians 5:28-32)

Degrees of glory (based on merit)

On July 6, 1439, the Council of Florence declared:

*“... the souls of those who have incurred no stain of sin whatsoever after baptism, as well as souls who after incurring the stain of sin have been cleansed whether in their bodies or outside their bodies, as was stated above, are straightaway received into heaven and clearly **behold the triune God as he is, yet one person more perfectly than another according to the difference of their merits.** (Council of Florence 1439 AD Session 6 (July 6, 1439))*

“Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. (Revelation 22:12)

“Consider this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” (2 Corinthians 9:6)

We can tend to think that our “reward” for a holy life is heaven. But heaven is a free gift of God, it cannot be earned, it is a great mercy that we receive with our “yes.” Our true reward is the degree to which we see, know, and enjoy God. Those who have given more to the Lord experience him more perfectly in heaven just as they did on earth, for they made choices to love him more perfectly.

In Matt 25:14-30, Jesus talks of the parable of the talents where those who bear fruit receive a reward and those who do not lose what they were given. Jesus states that the master gave talents to each person according to his ability and it seems they were expected to produce a return according to their abilities. What is interesting is that though the faithful servants showed their master the fruit they produced (2 or 5 more talents), their master did not take it from them but let them keep it.

*“... Also the one who had received the two talents came up and said, ‘Master, you entrusted two talents to me. See, I have gained two more talents.’ ‘His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; **enter into the joy of your master.**’” (Matt 25:22-23)*

When the servant with the 1 talent buried it and then gave it back, the master said:

“take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away.” (Matt 25:28-30).

In this case, even though the man still had 1 talent, Jesus said that he “does not have.” He still has the deposit of grace, but what he doesn’t have is fruit born from it. God expects us to produce fruit from the grace that he lavishes us with. And the fruit that we produce for the glory of God, though we offer it to God through our love and obedience, it remains with us – we have worked it into our nature, forming Christ in us. It adds to our capacity to partake in the divine life. Those who put God’s grace to work through their obedience in love to him will have a greater capacity to enjoy God in heaven (to enter into their master’s joy). We’ve all had a taste of this already - when we tend to focus on God more, pray more, and lay our lives down for others, we have a greater sense of walking with God and being close to him than when we don’t do these things.

*“Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and **His bride has made herself ready.**” It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for **the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.** (Rev 19:7-8)*

Our righteous acts of obedience are what clothe us in heaven. They are precious to the Lord and will remain with us for they not only show our love for him, but they allow us to be clothed with Christ (Gal 3:27). St. Paul speaks about building God’s temple and that those works of ours which are most pure will remain with us:

“According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.” (1 Corinthians 3:10-17)

All of these scriptures show us that God has created us to be his dwelling place and that it is up to us, through our acts of love and obedience to determine what kind of a dwelling place that will be - to what degree will God be honored there, what level of access will he have, what will it be decorated with. Will we put our all into it, building with gold, silver, or precious stones, or will we give less of ourselves, building with things that cannot stand the fire of God's love. In other words, will we consider the kingdom to be worth selling all we have to buy that pearl of great price (Matt 13:46)? King David wanted to build a house for the Lord - the truth is, we are all building a house for him and what we choose to build while here on earth will determine the quality of the house we have in heaven.

An example to help us understand it is this: suppose two men are invited to hear the top orchestra in the world, one man has trained his whole life to be a composer, the other man spent most of his time rapping in the streets. Who do you think would appreciate the orchestra more? Both are present and hear the same thing, but the rapper is not used to it and would have a harder time appreciating it whereas the composer enjoys it more because he has lived for the symphony all his life.

"The last shall be first" (Mark 9:35) does not indicate that there is an equaling of merits in heaven. Rather, it has to do with the state of one's heart - those who make themselves the least of all, the servants of all, build in them a greater capacity to love and enjoy God than those who do not "lower themselves" to the same degree - because those who embrace the role of "servant of all" have developed a greater capacity to love and therefore a greater capacity to enter into the divine love of God.

Perfection in Relationships: Freedom & Love Among God's Holy Saints

Then the angel showed me the river of life-giving water, sparkling like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of its street. On either side of the river grew the tree of life that produces fruit twelve times a year, once each month; the leaves of the trees serve as medicine for the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will look upon his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. Night will be no more, nor will they need light from lamp or sun, for the Lord God shall give them light, and they shall reign forever and ever. (Revelation 22:1-5)

The heart of heaven is the throne of God from which flows life itself, in abundance. It is important to recognize this truth. God is the one on the throne and all that is good flows from him. There will be no seasons of drought, no seasons of famine, no form of want or need. These existed because of the lawlessness of sin whereby mankind took God off of the throne of his heart. But those in heaven have died to sin and behold and embrace God as he is: as creator, savior, source of life, provider, healer, Father, brother, master. They have been transformed to be like him.

This passage also mentions that we shall reign forever. Other passages mention that we shall receive a crown. The crown signifies victory and authority. It shows us that God does not withhold himself from us but allows us to share freely in all that he is - even his royalty. But what do we reign over? Right now, we share in Christ's authority and are called to bring our lives under his authority, into conformity with his will, and to exercise his authority to advance his kingdom. But at the end of time, all things will be put under Jesus' feet and he will then offer the new creation back to the Father, even as we offer to him the fruit of our labors.

"...then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. ²⁵For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. ²⁶The last enemy that will be abolished is death. ... ²⁸When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all. (1 Corinthians 15:24-28)

We will reign over our thoughts and desires. There is new law at work within the sanctified - the law of the Spirit, the law of love. The saints are now perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

IMAGINE A LIFE WITHOUT SIN

In heaven, there is no doubt, no second guessing, nothing within the saints to distract them from their union with God and one another. There will be no temptation, no greed, no envy, no lust, no fear, no sadness, no sense of inadequacy, no complaining, no indifference, no division, no embarrassment, no shame, no thought of self whatsoever other than to praise God for his grace. Our greatest need, our greatest desire, will be to pour our life out in love and honor for God, to be completely generous in the giving of ourselves. **We will all be fully known and entirely loved.**

The good of one is a blessing for everyone else. That one receives a greater reward does not make others envious. All will be delighted to see the saints enjoy their just rewards. Not only that, but those who are rewarded more (like Mary, the Mother of God or the other saints) will display more perfectly the great love and glory of God and this will be greatly enjoyed by all who gaze on them. And the greatest of the Saints, being most like God, will consider themselves servants of all, boasting only in the greatness of God's grace. Even the least in heaven will be thrilled by God's love and mercy and will rejoice greatly to be in the presence of his holy Saints.

Our Attitude – Bear Fruit for God, Love Him in Your Actions

Be a good steward of the grace God has given you. Look to produce fruit – and look to produce it with your whole heart. Build God's temple with gold, silver, precious gems, not with a token effort that could be lost when tested with the fire of God's love. Be willing to sacrifice your time, your effort, your desires, to give God the love and honor he is due and to win over as many to Christ as possible. *Tip: as fallen people, we are going against our nature - so pray to desire this.*

We are about trying to bring the heavenly reality into our daily life. **Consider how you would relate with others (family members, neighbors, coworkers) if you did not have sin**, ... and do your best to act that way in love. Be quick to forgive, quick to serve. Love one another with affection. Take up the authority Christ has given you to reign over your thoughts and to let love and humility prevail.

Be careful with what you fill your mind with. Seek the things that are above (Colossians 3:1). Consider if what you're about to fill your mind with is really a good in light of God's desire for you. Are you exchanging the glory of God for something that won't last? Give God the time he needs to form you in prayer - let him build your hunger for heaven.

Build the Lord's house, **practice the beatitudes**. It is the pure in heart who see God. Be merciful – intercede for the world, show mercy to those around us. Be a peacemaker, help people to be reconciled to God and to one another (take up our role as ambassadors of reconciliation).

Resources for Prayer & Reflection

Scriptural passages on approach to life:

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| Matthew 5:3-12; 5:48; 7:21; 6:14; 10:32-33; 13-44; 19-23; 25:1 | Colossians 3:1 2 Tim 4:6-8 | 1 Cor 9:24-27 2 Cor 5:1-10 |
| John 14:23; 12:25; 17:3 | 1 Peter 1:13-19, 22-24; 4:7-11 | 1 John 3:3 |
| Philippians 3:7-14 | 2 Peter 3:8-14 | |

Reward in heaven:

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| Revelation 3:5; 22:12 | James 1:12 | 2 Corinthians 5:10 |
| Matthew 6:19-20; 16:27 | 1 Peter 5:4 | 2 Timothy 4:6-8 |
| Luke 18:22 | 1 Corinthians 3:8-15; 15:41-42 | |

Becoming one with God:

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| John 17:20-26 | Ephesians 5:31-32 |
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Catechism of the Catholic Church: 1023-1029

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What kind of a "house" do you want to build for the Lord?
2. Think about entering the gates of heaven, where there is no sin – what is it like (how would you relate with God and with other Saints)?
3. What do you think about degrees of glory/enjoyment of God in heaven?
4. What do you think you're building God's temple with: gold, silver, costly gems, wood, straw?