

“Seeing God”

*“No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only He has seen the Father” (John 6:46).*

This summer we attended a wedding in Wichita, Kansas. It was the wedding of one of my wife’s cousins, and it happened to work out that my wife’s entire family could come to Wichita for the event. Sonya, Maddie, Ella and I; Sonya’s mom and dad; Sonya’s sister and her family; and her two brothers and their families; all twenty of us gathered in Wichita. It’s very rare that we are all able to get together, and it’s even rarer that all of us are dressed up at the same time, but that’s exactly the situation fate found us in as we gathered to leave for the wedding.

Of course this meant pictures.

This may not seem like a big deal to you, but with ten kids ranging in age from two to twelve, and the clock to the processional ticking down, I felt like I had suddenly been transported into an episode of “Everybody Loves Raymond.” I and the other “in-laws” quickly stepped aside as my wife, her sister and her mother began to debate the best location for the pictures. Apparently the corner of the yard that provided the most desirable backdrop also left the subjects looking into the Sun. The discussion about the location for the picture continued for a few minutes and then, with a pointed warning from Sonya’s dad that time was getting short, two of the debaters (who will remain unnamed) threw their hands up in disgust and gave-in to the pose that placed us in the Sun. You can imagine the challenging task of herding the kids into the pose of choice and bribing/threatening them into smiles while all of their little eyes involuntarily squinted in the face of the bright sunlight. Needless to say, the pictures didn’t turn out the way the directors had hoped.

The Sun is 93 million miles from Earth. It’s hard to get your mind around that kind of number, but even at that astronomical distance, you cannot and should never look straight into the Sun. It is so powerful that even though it is such a great distance away from the Earth, looking directly at the Sun, even for just a few seconds, can permanently damage the human eye.

People have tried all kinds of filtering techniques to allow them to safely study the Sun, but even filters don’t always work. A NASA report, written to prepare people for the solar eclipse of 1999, details the danger involved with looking at the Sun through unsafe filters. In the words of the report, “The fact that the Sun appears dim, or that you feel no discomfort when looking at the Sun through the filter, is no guarantee that your eyes are safe.” The report goes on to say that even many of the “solar filters...often provided with telescopes are unsafe. These glass filters can crack unexpectedly from overheating when the telescope is pointed at the Sun, and retinal damage can occur faster than the observer can move the eye from the eyepiece” (NASA Report 1383. Total Solar Eclipse of 1999. August 11, April 1997, p. 19.).

From our youngest days we are told by our parents, and our own experience, that looking at the Sun is extremely dangerous. Believe it or not, the Bible describes seeing God in a similar way. In today’s reading from the book of John, Jesus simply states “No one has seen the Father” (John 6:46), but we find other references to seeing God in the Bible that paint a much more frightening picture. In Exodus 33, when Moses asks to see God, God says “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live” (Exodus 33:18).

In the account of God’s call to Isaiah, the prophet knows very well what seeing God means, and when, Isaiah is shown God’s glory in a vision, he responds not with excitement or praise, but with fear. “Woe to me...I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty” (Isaiah 6:5). The truth expressed by Isaiah, and found throughout the Bible, is that our sin makes it impossible for us to see God.

God is ultimate perfection, and like darkness that is driven away by light, sin simply cannot exist in God's presence. An ancient Hebrew legend does a great job of expressing this belief. In Leviticus 16, God established the Day of Atonement, a ritual in which once a year the High Priest would go into the area of the Tabernacle called the Holy of Holies to offer sacrifices for the people. According to the legend, the fear of seeing God was so great that before the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies a rope would be tied around his waist so that if he was struck dead by the sight of God, the other priests could pull him back into the outer Holy Place without having to risk their lives by going in after him. There is no mention of this practice in the Bible; it is strictly a legend. But this story does present us with a vivid illustration of the truth that, for sinful human beings, seeing God means death.

Seeing God means death. That is what Jesus Christ is all about! For us to be able stand before God, for us to be able to have a relationship with God, for us to be able to see God, it took a filter and that filter was the death of Jesus Christ. We can see God, we can have a relationship with God, we can stand before God only because Christ's death has taken away our sin. Paul writes, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (II Corinthians 5:21). That is what the cross is all about – that is what our faith is all about! Jesus took the punishment for our sin and because of this truth, we no longer have to fear seeing God.

Like a filter that hides the destructive radiation of the Sun, God has hidden Himself in a way that allows us to see Him. John describes this filter when he writes, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only...No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known" (John 1:14,18).

God has revealed himself through Christ! This is the truth that Jesus was sharing with the Jews in today's reading when he said, "No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God" (John 6:46). God has made Himself known through Christ, and through the filter of Christ – through the filter of the cross – we truly can see God.

Not only is this true, but through the filter of Christ, God see us in an entirely new way! Paul writes, "You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:26-27). Through the filter of Jesus, God sees you as perfect and pure. The sin that separates us from God has been removed, and through faith in Christ, we can be confident that when God looks at us He doesn't see our sin – He sees His Son! That is what Christ's death means for us.

Through Jesus, we see God! This is the message of the Gospel, and today as we consider the meaning of this message for our lives, we also need to hear that through our witness, God shows himself to others. Don't ever discount or downplay the power that God has given you to be a filter for Christ. In II Corinthians Paul writes that we are "Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us" (II Corinthians 5:20), and when we communicate God's forgiveness, He reveals Himself to others in a way that creates faith and changes hearts.

How do you communicate God's forgiveness? It could be through something you say or it could be through something you do. The specifics of witnessing are different for each of us, but be assured that even in life's most mundane settings this is your purpose! God has put you on the earth to share His forgiveness. He has given you a unique personality and unique gifts, and by the power of His Spirit living inside of you, He will use you to be a filter for Christ and a witness of the Gospel. As you communicate God's forgiveness to the people He has placed in your life, you will be a filter that allows others to see God.

God, grant us the confidence and vision to do this most important work! Amen.

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