

Jesus Changes Everything: New Year 2010

Hidden God Revealed

January 2/3, 2010

Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

Jesus Changes Everything: Hidden God Revealed

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Texts: John 1:18; Exodus 33:7-23; 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12-18; Hebrews 2:5-9; Colossians 1:15-23

Introduction

The Romans believed in Janus, the god of "gates, doors, doorways, beginnings and endings." The month of *January*, which begins the new year, is named after him. His usual representation is with two faces or heads, facing in opposite directions. If C.S. Lewis was correct about the role of mythology as subtle carrier of truth, though much disguised and distorted, he likely would see in Janus humankind's yearning for new beginnings, doorways to the future, and the possibility that the savage cycle of time can be broken.

As it turns out, the last study in our Advent series concludes with a consideration of John 1:18, a passage which speaks about seeing the unseen God. Since our considerations of that text fall during the New Year weekend, we decided to take our cues from the themes of hiddenness as they pertain to an unknown future and also as they lead us to consider the sometimes hidden ways of God. God is unseen and so is the future. Yet, when we consider the miracle of Advent, the hidden God suddenly appears within the framework of human time, drawing back the curtain and giving us a glimpse of His otherwise inscrutable will and purpose.

If God has emerged from the mystery of His hiddenness, full of glory in the face of Jesus Christ, then the future need not remain fearfully concealed. After all, God declares Himself to be the One Who is, Who was, and Who is to come (Revelation 1:4, 8; 4:8). Temporal categories find expression in the person of God who is their source. They hold no fear for those who rest in God's eternal love. Paul affirmed this at the climactic point of Romans 8:

38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, **nor things present nor things to come**, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The primary message of Advent converges on the love of God where the Word became flesh, revealing the glory of God's only Son — and His own glory as well. When we think about the hidden events of 2010, our key text invites us to celebrate God's Son who reveals the hidden God.

This Week's Main Text: John 1:18

18 No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

The Unseen God

Karl Barth drew considerable attention to the *Deus Absconditus*, The Hidden God, an idea already present in the theology of Thomas Aquinas and later emerged in the writings of the Reformer, Martin Luther. Present in each of these thinkers' theology is the notion that God always remain in control of His own disclosure to His creation. No knowledge of God is automatic or purely objective, otherwise God would lose His supreme independence as sovereign Lord. God is not an object to be studied or examined, as one might turn over a specimen in the laboratory in search of data about it. God cannot be objectified, but always remains the "Wholly Other," what Jewish philosopher Martin Buber characterized in his "I-Thou" encounter. Just as human beings possess an innate sense of personal privacy, so God conceals Himself.

Yet, God is love, and it is this attribute which dynamically moves God out into the world He has made, reaching, touching, and embracing His creation. Such is the overarching theme of Advent. By becoming flesh, God emerges from the darkness of His hiddenness and stands face-to-face with His creatures. God loses nothing of His self-determination in this act, though He surrenders Himself to the frailty of human nature: truly God and truly human. The church fathers may not have offered the tightest arguments for *how this can be*, but they were deeply convinced that this is *how it must be*.

Ironically, as Barth was given to say, even in His act of revealing Himself, God conceals Himself. For when His love shines forth in Bethlehem's child and on Calvary's cross, something of God's awesome power and majesty recedes into the darkness. Consider the stage lighting of those two significant events. In both cases, darkness descends. Both shepherds and magi witness the Christ child *at night* where angels and celestial bodies pierce the darkness. But then consider the sun which hides itself as the dying Jesus surrenders to the rigors of death. When love appears and mercy flows, God yet conceals Himself.

Such apparent paradoxes belong to the Gospel story. Who can know the ways of God? It has been said, the moment we think we understand God is the moment we no longer need Him. Dare we submit to that possibility? Can we?

That is why there is wisdom in affirming God's full control of His own self-revelation. The prophet Isaiah penned the following words as he considered the "hidden face of God:"

Isaiah 64:1 Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence- 2 as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil- **to make your name known** to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence! 3 When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. 4 **From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you**, who acts for those who wait for him. 5 You meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember you in your ways. Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? 6 We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. 7 There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you; for **you have hidden your face from us**, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities. 8 But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. 9 Be not so terribly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people.

Perhaps the hiddenness of God presents itself severely in the face of terrifying evil. Cancer. Murder. War. Frightening words, filled with the concealment of God. Or so it seems. Isaiah knew about being cut off from the presence of God as it manifested itself in the earth-shattering exile of Israel. How does one reconcile the covenant love of God with His seeming abandonment of His people? "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down..." The "heavens" stand for the concealment of God, acting as a sort of veil which the prophet wants God to rip apart. Eye and ear prove shallow in their grasp of God. More alarming still is the thought that God was "angry," for who can withstand the fury of the Almighty God, especially in light of "our sins" where we have been "a long time." Faced with the hiddenness of God and conscious of our own sin, what else can we imagine when we address God: "You have hidden your face from us." His concealment seems like an abandonment to "our iniquities." What sort of prayer takes shape on our lips but the one Isaiah himself offers: "Please look, we are all your people."

It is easy to believe in a good God who intercedes on our behalf when things are going well, when the world make sense. It is much more difficult when our sense of order and goodness is overthrown by loss and tragedy. We are haunted by prayers unanswered. During these times, when God seems unavailable, we are forced to ask about the very nature of God's self.

Old Testament scholar Richard Nysse wrote an article titled, "The Dark Side of God..." In it, he writes, "I use [the phrase 'the dark side of God'] because it snaps us to attention. The phrase is shocking in a religious culture

that has reduced God to either a useful notion or a dispenser of enhancements to our lives.”¹ The notion of the “dark side of God,” refers, not so much to some evil-causing part of God’s nature, but more accurately, the “dark side of God” reflects the fact that God is more complex than we would have God be. It is daring to even ask difficult questions of God, especially ones in which we wonder if God is with us at all. An unquestioning faith is a naïve faith. Isaiah himself shows us what it means to relate to God in all of God’s complexity. He acts as intercessor between God and the Israelites. He remembers, as we do now, the God of his ancestors and remembers that things just don’t seem to be the same.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from a German concentration camp in 1944, dared to draw this conclusion: “God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him.... The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us.”²

Bonhoeffer is saying that God is with us—especially in our abandonment. He calls on Mark’s gospel, where Jesus on the cross cries out to God: “*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). And so, it is Jesus who truly knows what it means to feel that God has hidden God’s self. And because of that—because he suffered as a human, because he felt that ungodly godly abandonment, because he died on a cross —because of all this, we know that God has not ultimately abandoned us. It is mind-boggling ...complex beyond our full understanding. Discussing the hiddenness of God might seem to be a bleak way to end the Advent season — a season presumably to be filled with joy and excitement — and begin the New Year. But there is great truth that for many of us, Advent is a season in which a people confronted with darkness wait for a great light to shine again in every corner of the world. The New Year chases that light off into the future.

Such is the trust of the prophet, Isaiah, who speaks to God from a community in real pain, but speaks to God out of real trust. Isaiah is honest. Honest with himself, honest with the people, and, most importantly, honest with God. We have a God with whom we may be ourselves and with whom we may voice our deepest fears, even of abandonment by God, all the while trusting that we are not ultimately abandoned. “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand,” writes Isaiah. “Now consider, we are all your people.” We learn from Isaiah that faith in God does not mean that we live in some kind of utopia, or that we understand the reason behind everything that takes place in the world. Faith in God does not mean that we can predict how God answers us every step of the way.

Faith in God during Advent and on the threshold of the New Year means acknowledging the real and present darkness we face: war, disease, poverty, hunger, and, of course, personal darkness, as with depression, grief, anger, etc. Acknowledging their presence and yet being able to cry out to the God of hope and promise, this is what Advent means for the New Year. We look to the birth of the Christ child, even as we look to the communion table and remember his sacrifices, even as we look to the day when all will be redeemed.

As we come to our text from John 1:18, we are immediately met with a categorical claim, one which stops us in our tracks. It's the sort of claim which provokes a protest: "No one has ever seen God." The Greek is equally abrupt and unwavering: *theon oudeis heōraken pōpote*. A certain rhythmic and clipped cadence surrounds the words: "God — no one — has seen — ever!" might capture the heartbeat.

1. The writer chooses to use *theon* ("God") in its anarthrous form (that is, without the definite article, "the"). This parallels his use of the word in 1:1 when he wrote, "and God (*theos* — without the article) was the Word." His focus is on the essential character of God and not just on a particular appearance of God. People in the Old Testament certainly were blessed with periodic revelations of God, symbolized variously

¹ Richard Nysse, "The Dark Side of God: Considerations for Preaching and Teaching," *Word & World*, 1997.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

as God's "arm, hand, feet, etc." The notion of "glory" permeates the Hebrew Bible (Hebrew: *kabōd*) — that iridescent and majestic disclosure of God involving forms of light. But the writer of 1:18 wants to clarify his meaning: the essential nature of God has always remain hidden from human sight. That was the unequivocal message to Moses in the *Exodus* passages we explored last week. Let's review them once more:

Exodus 33:18-23 18 Moses said, "Please show me your glory." 19 And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. 20 But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live." 21 And the LORD said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, 22 and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. 23 Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen."

Exodus 34:29-35 29 When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. 30 Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. 31 But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them. 32 Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the LORD had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. 33 And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. 34 Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, 35 the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

The closest Moses comes to "seeing God" is when God's "glory passes by" him, and the great prophet remains concealed in the "cleft of the rock" "covered" by the hand of God so as to protect him from the overwhelming glory of the divine presence. "For man shall not see me and live.." "But my face shall not be seen." Those direct sentences say it all. The God from whom all life proceeds cannot be seen by His creatures or they will die. There is something of the irony of Midas' touch in that rendering of the situation! Even though God says, "I will make all my goodness pass before you...", that is but one of an infinite number of divine attributes which belong to the character of God.

Still, Moses himself becomes the instrument for the reflected glory of God to be momentarily glimpsed by the people. But even in this instance, *the people* cannot look on the shining face of Moses, but shrink away in fear, requiring the veiling of Moses' face. In a simple, typological sense, Moses pre-figures the coming of Jesus in whom the fullness of the divine glory dwells, and in whose "face" the one true God becomes visible.

2. Recognizing the implications of Moses' experience, Paul writes:

2 Corinthians 3:12-18 12 Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, 13 not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. 14 But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. 15 Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. 16 But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

The language of fear is replaced by the language of hope and boldness. The hiddenness of Torah is replaced by the lifting of the veil, as human beings "turn to the Lord." After all, it is now possible to actually "see God" by turning to Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit allows the people of God to "behold the glory of the Lord."

Paul's comments reveal the underlying reasons for the hiddenness of God through the statement, "their minds were hardened." Seeing God is not just a matter of staring at Him or studying Him, but of "being transformed" by Him. That process takes place progressively, "from one degree of glory to another." For the possibility of "seeing" is not only about making something visible, but also about possessing the

capacity for seeing it. The Word needed to become flesh in order to make God accessible to His human creatures. Yet, paralleling that event, was the need for human creatures to undergo a new birth, constituting them as the children of God by the Spirit of God and making them capable of seeing the God who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. This was the burden of John 1:12-13. It is also the theme of John 3 when Jesus teaches Nicodemus that the new birth is the indispensable requirement of human beings to "*see* the kingdom of God."

Human beings ability to "see God" is substantially affected by the purity of their hearts. In his "Sermon on the Mount" Jesus declared, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall *see God*" (Matthew 5:8). That assurance is a far cry from the words of Isaiah who witnessed an appearance of God in the Temple:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" 4 And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:1-5).

The clauses, "I saw the Lord" and "my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh of hosts," lead the prophet to utter a lament: "Woe is me!" But those who receive the vision of God through the person and work of Jesus Christ are given a different experience: "*Blessed* are you!" When the Lord Jesus purifies our hearts by forgiving our sins and giving us faith, he simultaneously grants us the vision of God. As the writer to the Hebrews tells us: "Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). The Holy God of Isaiah 6 meets unholy humankind on the cross, and in the paradoxical crisis of human history, the Word who became flesh also becomes the Word who purifies by his blood and thereby reveals the face of the merciful God.

There is a future, eschatological dimension to the vision of God, and this, too, has been made possible by the incarnate Jesus. From the writer of 1 John 3:2 we hear and even more profound

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, **because we shall see him as he is.**

Progressively, we eventually see what Moses longed to see. The words "No one has seen God at any time" give way to the assuring saying of Jesus: "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:7, 9).

Jesus: The Authorized Revealer of God

In the middle of John 1:18, we find the identification of the One who makes known the hidden God. The writer refers to this revealer as: *monogenēs theos* = "only begotten God." Textual scholars point out that some manuscripts have a different reading: *ho monogenēs huios* = "the only begotten Son." As Bruce Metzger points out³, the discovery of two papyri manuscripts (p⁶⁶ and p⁷⁵) strengthens support for the *theos* ("God") reading. Apparently, some later scribes found the "only begotten God" reading to be problematic and proceeded to "correct" the text to bring it more into line with John 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9. Following the rules of textual criticism, given the earlier external manuscript support, the more difficult reading is preferred. It is unlikely that a scribe would attempt to correct *huios* to *theos*, although he might mistaken *huios* for *theos*.

Recent English translations have preferred a translation along the lines of "God the only Son,"⁴ taking the word *monogenēs* to mean "unique Son," as we noted in our previous *Notes* on John 1:14. The writer of 1:18 holds firmly to his original assertion in 1:1 that the Word is *theos* (God), but with the further development that the

³ *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, United Bible Societies, 1971, p. 198.

⁴ See *New Revised Standard Version*. The ESV has "the only God;" NIV has "God the One and Only;" the NLT has the more expanded form, "the one and only Son is himself God;" the NAB translates "The only Son, God." In each case, there is every effort to preserve two main ideas: the Word is the Son and the Word is God, much in keeping with John 1:1 where this entire section began.

Word is God's Unique Son (*monogenēs*). What appears in human form, making God visible, is himself God. The New Testament affirms this fact in passages like this one from Paul's letters:

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things were created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:15-17).

The lead-off phrase is "image of the invisible God," from *eikōn tou theou tou aoratou*. This is consistent with what John 1:18 affirms about the Word being truly God while at the same time revealing this God to humankind. By using the word *eikōn*, Paul offers a fresh understanding to the Old Testament proscription of idol-making. Human beings must not make an "image" of God:

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth (Exodus 20:4).

All such efforts to replicate God using earthly materials were doomed to failure, not the least because human beings lacked *first-hand knowledge* of God's true "appearance." Granted, the various *theophanies*⁵ of God were described in written form on the pages of the Hebrew Bible, but such word pictures did not constitute a violation of this commandment, since they were directed by God Himself. However, when the pagan nations presumed to liken God to animals or other chimeras⁶, they formed images driven by "vain imaginations," as Paul plainly discloses in Romans 1:21-23. Products of "darkened foolish hearts," these images were distortions of the One true God.

By contrast, God authorized the Word-become-human so that this Word might authoritatively represent His true nature to the world. The writer of 1:18 locates the Word as *ho ōn eis ton kolpon tou patros*: "the one being near the Father's bosom." Sometimes translated "side," the word *kolpos* literally means "chest" or "bosom." Classical Greek includes the meanings: "bosom, womb, fold of a garment, any hollow, bay, gulf, vale." Technically, the word refers to the region of the body extending from the breast to the legs, especially when a person is in a seated position. In the parable of Lazarus (Luke 16:23), we find the phrase "Abraham's bosom" as a way of denoting where the dead go who are in covenant with God. At the Last Supper, the person known as the "beloved disciple" reclines on Jesus' *kolpos* (John 13:23). The general meaning of the metaphor is that the Word enjoys active and vital relationship with the Father as His beloved Son. No one shares the degree of intimacy with God as does the Son, and thereby the Son becomes the authorized revealer of the Father to the world. The reader is encouraged to study John 17 where Jesus prays to the Father, using words which pull back the curtain on the closeness of the Father with the Son.

Put simply, Jesus, the Word, God's beloved Son, is the only one in a position to reveal God to humankind. Borrowing words from Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, we summarize:

11 Amen, amen, I say to you, we speak of what we know and we testify to what we have seen, but you people do not accept our testimony. 12 If I tell you about earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has gone up to heaven except the one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man (John 3:11-13).

Because Jesus, the Word, comes down from heaven, having been "closest to the Father's heart," he is able to bear witness "to what [he has] seen." This testimony is not only about God in a *factual* sense, but carries with it the nuances of the *relationship* between Father and Son. When people saw and heard the incarnate Jesus, they could confidently testify that they had been with One who himself had been with God (and still is!). That is why John 1:18 uses the present active participle for the verb "to be" in conjunction with the Word's relationship to the Father: *ho ōn* = "the one *being*..."

⁵ As we have explained in previous *Notes*, the word *theophany* refers simply to an "appearance" of God in a physical form. Such visionary representations of God were metaphorical and intended to emphasize some aspect of God's nature without actually being identical with God substantially. God might appear to Moses in a "burning bush that is not consumed," but this does not mean that God *is a bush* or that His true nature consists of material *fire*. Rather, the character of God as holy is underscored as the text of Exodus 3 makes clear.

⁶ The grotesque combination of multiple animal forms into a single being, presumably to represent the Deity. Such representations appear in the biblical books of *Ezekiel* and *Revelation*, but with careful qualifications.

How, then, does the Word reveal the hidden God? The writer's choice of Greek words is interesting. The root verb used here is *exēgeomai* which literally means "lead, direct, govern." Additional shades of meaning include "to go first, lead the way, to show the way by going before, to conduct business, to lead an army, to prescribe, to order." One noun form is *exēgēsis* from which we derive the English, "exegesis," which means to explain or interpret a text, but which was ordinarily translated, "to tell at length, relate in full," and was applied in classical Greek to statements, narratives, and explanations. Another variant form is *exēgētēs*, "one who leads, an advisor, expounder or interpreter of dreams, omens, and sacred customs."

The answer to our question lies with this word. Only God the Son, closest to God, himself God, is able to properly "tell at length, relate in full, and be the authoritative interpreter of God." He who has eternally been the confident of God the Father may legitimately claim to give a complete account of what this God is like. All other would-be expounders of God are mere pretenders and false prophets, precisely because they have never been in the privileged position to know the nature of God. John Calvin, in his commentary on this verse, remarks:

...the Son knew the most hidden secrets of his Father, so that we may know that we have, so to say, the breast of God laid open to us in the Gospel.⁷

To which we add the words of John Wesley:

The expression denotes the highest unity, and the most intimate knowledge.⁸

Recent commentator Leon Morris writes:

We may have confidence that God is as Christ revealed Him. The word is used in the mystery religions and elsewhere as a technical term for the revelation of divine secrets. Often it is used of the gods themselves making a disclosure. Such associations fitted the word to be used of a full and authoritative revelation of the divine Being. Such a revelation could, of course, be made only by One uniquely qualified in the manner made clear by the references to Him in the earlier part of the verse.⁹

According to Jewish tradition, a blind man once addressed a rabbi with these words: "You have greeted one who is seen and does not see; may you be counted worthy to greet him who sees and is not seen. (*Hag.* 5b, 32; cited in Strack and Billerbeck 2:362-363). Commentator Beasley-Murray clarifies:

Moses saw no more than God's back (Exodus 33:21-23), and out of that encounter issued the revelation of *the Law*; claimants to open visions and revelations from God must be judged in the light of such facts. By contrast, however, the only Son, who shares the nature of God (*ho monogenēs theos*), has given an authentic exposition of *God* to man.¹⁰

When the Jewish historian Josephus wrote about the rabbis' official commentaries on the Law, he used the word we find in John 1:18, namely, *exēgeomai*. Again, Beasley-Murray:

The object of the exposition from the Logos-Son is the Father. This "exegesis" is peculiarly authoritative by virtue of the unity of the Son with God, expressed in the phrase "who is in the bosom of the Father," i.e., in closest fellowship with him (cf. 13:23). The prime reference is to the relationship to God of the Son in his life of flesh and blood, but it naturally extends to his pre-existent and post-Resurrection relationship with the Father. The finality of the revelation of God through the Logos-Son could hardly be more strongly expressed.¹¹

But We See Jesus (Hebrews 2:5-9)

5 For it was not to angels that he subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. 6 Instead, someone has testified somewhere: "What is man that you are mindful of him, or the son of man that you care for him? 7 You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor, 8 subjecting all things under his feet." In "subjecting" all things (to him), he left nothing not "subject to him." Yet at present **we do not see** "all things subject to him," 9 **but we do see Jesus** "crowned with glory and honor" because he suffered death, he who "for a little while" was made "lower than the angels," that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone (Hebrews 2:5-9).

⁷ *John*. The Crossway Classic Commentaries. Edited by Alister McGrath and J.I. Packer. Crossway Books, 1994 [originally published in 1553], p. 31.

⁸ *Explanatory Notes*, John 1:18. Newest edition by General Books, LLC, 2009 [originally published 1754-1765].

⁹ *The Gospel According to John*, pp. 114-115.

¹⁰ *John*. Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 36, pp.15-16.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 16.

Where all other visions of God fail us, the one who was "made for a little while lower than the angels" reveals "glory and honor." With reference to the human race generally, the world is "not yet subject." But the one whom we now see is Jesus, the revealer of God, and he has "tasted death for everyone," thereby opening in full view the merciful heart of God, the bringer of grace. While we might still say, in a certain sense, "no one has seen *God*," we must quickly add, "but we see *Jesus*," and in that vision arrives the true vision of God Himself. This one is, to borrow a phrase from John A.T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God*. Robinson has written further: "We are concerned with whether it can be said of this man's life and death that '*God* was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.'"¹² This Jesus is "the man who lived God."

C.H. Dodd has skillfully drawn out the meaning behind the saying of Jesus in John 5:19ff:

A son can do nothing on his own;
He does only what he sees his father doing:
What father, son does;
For a father loves his son and shows him all his trade.¹³

Bonhoeffer, the German martyr, accurately put it this way:

One does not first look at a human nature and then beyond to a divine nature. One looks at the whole historical man Jesus and says of him, "He is God."¹⁴

Further, from Pittenger, this rich explanation:

The *most complete*, the *fullest*, the *most organic and integrated* union of Godhead and manhood which is conceivable is precisely one in which by gracious indwelling of God in man and by manhood's free response in surrender and love, there is established a relationship which is neither accidental nor incidental, on the one hand, nor mechanical and physical on the other; but full, free, gracious unity of the two in Jesus Christ, who is both the farthest reach of God the Word into the life of man and also (and by consequence) the richest response of man to God.¹⁵

"But we see Jesus," and through him, the paradoxical is true: "We see God."

Unseen God and Unknown New Year

We may draw confidence from John 1:18 in relationship to the New Year which lies ahead of us. It too is *hidden* and *unseen*. Concealment and mystery surround all future time. Yet, the one who reveals the hidden God also calls himself, "Alpha and Omega," beginning and end (Revelation 21:6; 22:13). Aptly called the one Who Is, and Who Was, and Who is to Come, the Jesus who makes God known sheds his light forward onto the path which brings us into the future. The Gospels add their optimism and assuagement of our fears:

26 "Therefore do not be afraid of them. Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed, nor secret that will not be known (Matthew 10:26).

2 "There is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, nor secret that will not be known. 3 Therefore whatever you have said in the darkness will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed on the housetops (Luke 12:2-3)

To be sure, the unknown future remains the "secret," at least from us, and it can, given opportunity, rob us of our joy.

But Jesus is the Word who makes God known, and with God, also time. He is the penetrating Word before whom no future event can have the last word. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of the revealing power of this Word, using a fitting metaphor:

12 Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart. 13 No creature is concealed from him, but everything is naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must render an account. 14 Therefore,

¹² John A.T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, Westminster Press, 1973, p. 181.

¹³ C.H. Dodd, "A Hidden Parable in the Fourth Gospel," *More New Testament Studies*, Manchester University Press, 1968, pp. 30-40.

¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, Fontana Books, 1971, p. 107.

¹⁵ W. Norman Pittenger, *The Word Incarnate*, Nisbet, 1959, p. 188.

since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin. 16 So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help (Hebrews 4:12-16).

The phrase "the word of God" comes from the Greek *ho logos tou theou*, also applied to Jesus in Revelation 19:11-16. Since this is a Johannine concept, we are not surprised to see further connections to John 1. The writer to the Hebrews may well have both the Scriptures *and* Jesus in view when he chose the language found in 4:12-16. The revealer of *God* is also the revealer of *Creation*, including *ourselves*. Christ as wielder of the sword of God penetrates "reflections" and "thoughts" of the "heart," and "no creature is concealed from him...everything is naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must render an account." Yet, in his thorough investigation of human hearts, the Word also becomes the sympathizer with our weaknesses, and meets us with "mercy and grace." The timeliness of his help is described with the Greek adjective *eukairos* which literally means "good *time*." Just as Jesus arrived *at the right time* to reveal the hidden God to the world, so also, he arrives in a *timely* fashion to meet the needs which meet us in the future. Neither too late nor too early, the Lord comes *in the fullness of time*, and makes available his care as our high priest.

Not all that Christ reveals is known to us. Indeed, Scripture cautions against a preoccupation with prognostication. Fortune telling was a sin under Torah, and nothing in that regard has changed substantially. As we recall from our *No One Knows* series, God discourages us from peering too obsessively into the future where the divine purpose rules supreme. God is Lord of time, and Jesus remains "the same, yesterday, today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). We have the Lord's assurance that when we arrive in the future, he will be there to meet us. The psalmist encourages us with the promise:

My times are in your hand; rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my persecutors! (31:16).

The prophet saw world history unfolding, following the principle:

He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding (Daniel 2:21).

The Father has fixed "times and seasons by his own authority" (Acts 1:7).

Speaking about the future in terms of "times and seasons," the Scripture recognizes both the chronological aspect of time (*chronos*) and the qualitative dimension (*chairos*). God deliberately "changes" both, and that, in part, is why our meager attempts to forecast the future are met with frequent miscalculations. No sooner do we have it all figured out than God re-directs His purposes and reveals a fresh direction of His will. Was not the coming of Jesus, the Word, one such supreme example? Did anyone really expect God would pierce the present tense with a future reality like the incarnation? "He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world did not know him" (John 1:10).

Concluding Thoughts

"No one has seen the future," might be a fitting re-mix of John 1:18 in light of the coming New Year. God embodies the future and reveals Himself in Jesus the Word become flesh. Insofar as we have a relationship with this Jesus, our connection to the future is marked by *hope* and not *fear*. The words of a gospel song ring true in this regard:

*"I know who holds the future,
And I know who holds my hand,
With God things don't just happen,
Everything by Him is planned;
So as I face tomorrow
With its problems large and small,
I'll trust the God of miracles-
Give to Him my all."*

—A.B. Smith

Similarly, another poet penned these lines:

*Many things about tomorrow
I don't seem to understand
But I know who holds tomorrow
And I know who holds my hand.
-Ira Stanphill*

Since the revelation of the hidden God belongs to the unique achievement of Jesus, the emphasis falls on knowing *God* better rather than on knowing the *future* better. Confidence in our relationship with the God revealed in Jesus Christ anchors our souls to face the future. What is concealed to us is known fully to him. And if we walk with him, the path we tread ceases to be marked by frantic concerns about how things will turn out. The love of God, revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord, surrounds us with protection. Paul knew this best when he wrote about the future in light of that love:

38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, **nor present things, nor future things**, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).

"I am convinced," the apostle affirms. Present and future are among those things which God's love secures. They cease to be that which "separates." In another place, Paul would confidently add:

21 So let no one boast about human beings, for everything belongs to you, 22 Paul or Apollos or Kephas, or the world or life or death, **or the present or the future**: all belong to you, 23 and you to Christ, and Christ to God (1 Corinthians 3:21-23).

Notice the cascading flow of trust: present and future "belong to you" precisely *because* "you [belong] to Christ, and Christ [belongs] to God." Christ, the revealer of God, belongs to God, and therefore, we know that we belong to Christ. Given the truth of such matters, present and future are held firmly in the grip of God.

Glory to God! Amen.

Digger Deeper: *Jesus Changes Everything: Hidden God Revealed*
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *Jesus Changes Everything: Hidden God Revealed*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. Our focus this week falls primarily on John 1:18, which comes at the end of *John's Prologue* (1:1-18). Read the entire passage, concluding with 1:18. In what ways does the last verse summarize and climax the general theme of the Prologue?
2. Think about the bold statement: "No one has seen God at any time." In what sense might we say that God is a *hidden* God? What is responsible for His hiddenness? Using Isaiah 64:1-9 as a background text from the Old Testament, suggest ways God was hidden from His people.
3. Using Exodus 33:18-23 and 34:29-35 as additional resource texts, discuss the experience of Moses and Israel with respect to God's concealment. Why did God not show Himself fully to Moses? How was Moses able to reveal something of God's glory to the people? What limitations did this revelation have? Compare this with Paul's understanding in 2 Corinthians 3:12-18.
4. Isaiah saw God and was terrified. Explain that statement in light of Isaiah 6:1-5.
5. How did Jesus himself experience the hiddenness of God (see Mark 15:34).
6. What promise did Jesus make about "seeing God," and what precondition did he give (Matthew 5:8)? Compare this with the teaching found in Hebrews 12:14. In what sense is "seeing God" an experience yet to be had in the future (1 John 3:2)?
7. How did Jesus connect himself with "seeing God" (John 14:7, 9)?
8. Returning to John 1:18, in what sense is the following true: "Jesus is the authorized revealer of God"? What makes this possible. Also read Colossians 1:15-17 and John 3:11-13 as you consider your answer.
9. According to 1:18, how close is Jesus to the Father? What does Jesus and the Father share in common?
10. Read Hebrews 2:5-9. What do we *not* see, and What do we *see*, according to this passage? Explain what this "seeing" actually means.
11. Applying this text to the New Year, in what sense is the hidden *future* like the hidden *God*? Using Revelation 21:6 and 22:13 for additional insight, suggest ways that Jesus, the revealer of God, helps us face an unknown future. Take note also of Jesus' words in Matthew 10:26 and Luke 12:2-3.
12. The Word reveals what else, according to Hebrews 4:12-16. According to 4:16 *how* does the grace of God come into our lives?
13. Knowing God through Jesus Christ, helps us face the future. Use the following texts to shed further light on this teaching: Hebrews 13:8; Psalm 31:16; Daniel 2:21; Acts 1:7; Romans 8:38-39; 1 Corinthians 3:21-23.