

He in Heart, They will see God"

by PAUL THIGPEN

My five-year-old, Lydia, had been in bed an hour when I passed by the half-open door of her darkened room. She was weeping uncontrollably.

"Honey, what's wrong?" I asked, sitting on the edge of her bed and gently taking her hand. "Did you have a bad dream?"

Lydia tried to respond, but tears choked her words. I stroked her hair to soothe her.

After a moment, she cried in little-girl anguish, "Oh, Daddy! I—I just want to see God!"

Her words startled me. Now it was my turn to weep. I drew her close and said, "Darling, do you know why you want to see God so much? Because that's the reason He made you. You were created to see God. And if you love Him with all your heart, one day you will see God face to face. That's His promise."

Comforted, she nodded her head, lay back down, and was soon fast asleep.

After 16 years, I still find myself amazed at Lydia's

words that night. In the depths of her five-year-old soul, she had realized intuitively what theologians over the centuries have carefully reasoned out: *In our heart of hearts, we long above all things to see God face to face.*

God has made us for Himself, and we will be satisfied with nothing less than the unobscured sight of His face as we stand in His glorious presence:

Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He appears we shall be like

him, for we shall see Him as He is. —1 Jn. 3:2, RSV

Theologians call it the "beatific vision"—the final vision, in heaven, of our Alpha and Omega; the destiny for which we were designed; the fulfillment of all our desires, which alone brings us perfect happiness.

DISTRACTED AND DIVIDED

God longs for our view of Him to grow wider and clearer and brighter, so that the "glass" through which we see "darkly" at last gives way to our encounter with Him "face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12, KJV). To see Him is to know Him, and to know Him is to love Him.

Unfortunately, sin has blinded us, leaving our spiritual eyes swollen shut. Unable to see God, we grope in the darkness, searching desperately for someone or something to make us happy. Only

the healing light of divine grace can restore our sight, can begin to open our eyes to the glory of the one who calls us to Himself. Even after our eyes have been opened by grace, we often fail to see God. Our vision of Him may remain a cursory glance; our knowledge of Him, a passing acquaintance; our love for Him, a fickle fondness.

Why does our vision of God remain so feeble? Most often, God is not in view simply because we aren't paying attention to Him. We are otherwise occupied. Recall how the 10 lepers were miraculously healed by our Lord, yet 9 of them dashed off to celebrate without even a backward glance or a word of thanks (Lk. 17:11-19). In much the same way, we receive "grace upon grace" (Jn. 1:16, RSV), only to desert our redeemer again and again in our pursuit of lesser things. Our distractions blind us to God.

Our heart is thus divided or—more precisely—splintered and scattered. We run to and fro, gathering first this trinket, then that one, dropping both for the next shiny bauble we spy. As we pursue countless idols—for that is what they are—they compete for our attention, our allegiance, our devotion. The result is a

civil war of the soul. All the while our Father stands close by, waiting for us to turn around and run into His arms.

No wonder Jesus tells us, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Mt. 5:8). In this context, we must understand *pure* to mean what is intended when we say, for example, “pure gold”—that is,

unmixed, unadulterated, unalloyed. If our vision of God is to grow wider, clearer, and brighter, our will must be united in a single focus on Him and an overriding desire to know and love Him.

TOWARD PURITY

How do we purify our hearts in this way? We can at least begin, I believe, with two motivating insights. The first is this: God is the fountain of all we desire. Whatever we long for—love, acceptance, truth, strength, beauty, delight, adventure—we will find it at its best and most complete in Him. Once we recognize that our deepest hunger is for God Himself, that all other hungers are only faint rumblings of this one, then our longings can drive us to seek Him above all else.

The second insight is found in the scriptural promise: To see God is to become like Him (1 Jn. 3:2). In the end, the reason we pursue what we see, know, and love is that we desire to be united to it, to take it into ourselves and to be one with it. The more clearly we see God, the more intimately we know Him, and the more passionately we love Him, the more completely we will be changed into His likeness.

Augustine put it succinctly: We become like what we love. The Apostle Paul described it this way:

We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another. —2 Cor. 3:18, RSV

That is why the pure in heart are *blessed*. If we desire the holiness, the goodness, and the beauty of God above all things, then we will in the end see face to face what we have desired. We will become holy and good and beautiful—like Him—and we will experience utter blessedness.

That is His promise. That is our hope. If we allow it to, such a hope will purify and transform us even now, day by day: “Every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 Jn. 3:3, RSV). ♦