

# The Face of God

## A sermon about our connection with the Lord.

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, April 26, 2020

*“And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. <sup>4</sup>They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads.” Revelation 22:3,4*

We often hear that people are social creatures and that isolation is one of the hardest things for us to endure. Being cut off from other people, as so many of us are today, has an impact on our lives. We are fortunate that we are mostly able to remain connected through technology.

It is clear to most of us, though, that this is a substitute for the real thing, for actual closeness. It is like having someone we love go away on a trip. We can stay connected, but there is nothing like being there.

Something similar is going on in the Easter story, which we celebrated two weeks ago. Separation from the one we love is an important theme of the story.

The Easter story is about the salvation of the world. But the way that the story plays out in the Gospels is much more personal – about the loss and resurrection of the Lord, and the heartbreak and hope surrounding it. It is like the way that we feel when a beloved family member passes away.

Changing the world is the reality of what happened at Easter, but the story emphasizes the disciples’ love for the Lord, their need to be with Him in person, and it ends with them eagerly looking forward to the day when they will see Him again.

### Our sight of the Lord’s face

Our topic this morning is this personal connection with the Lord, and especially one aspect of it, our sight of the Lord’s face, the face of the Lord Jesus Christ, which is the face of God.

As we live and work during this epidemic one of the nice things is the technology that allows us to see and talk to other people remotely. Talking on the phone is better than exchanging letters, but seeing

them on our screens is even better.

A person’s face is an almost magical part of them.

The Most Ancients communicated by facial expressions, rather than audible speech. Nothing communicates love and caring better than the face of someone you love.

*“In the other life when anyone thinks about another, he pictures the person’s face and also the other things of their life - and the person is present, as if he or she had been called or summoned.” Heaven and Hell 494*

When you think about another person you almost inevitably think about their face. It doesn’t

matter whether that face is perfect or imperfect, it somehow holds that person’s essence. If you love the person, you long to see their face.

So why can’t we see the face of God?

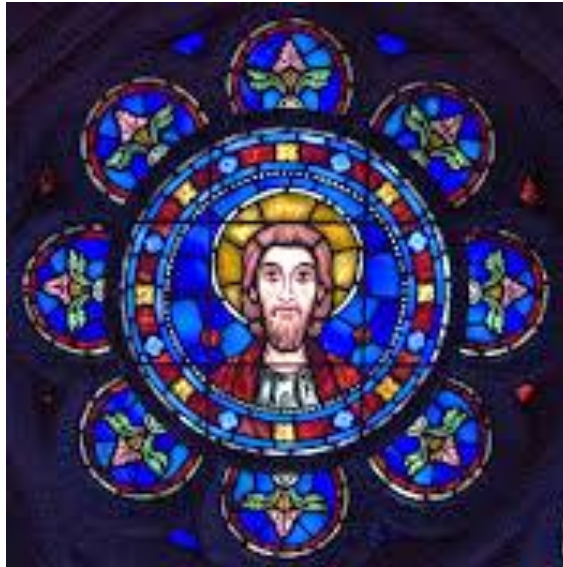
There is a well-known story about a first-grade girl drawing a picture. Her teacher asks what she’s drawing, and she says that she is drawing the Lord’s face. The teacher says, *“But no one knows what He looks like.”* The girl says, *“In a minute they will.”*

Does she really know? She does know, in the way that we all know when we are children, and forget as we grow. It’s not actually about His face, but about her connection with Him because she loves Him. The Lord said:

*“See that you do not despise any one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven always see the face of My Father.” (Matthew 18:10)*

*“No one can see God’s face except by virtue of having innocence.” (Arcana Coelestia 5608)*

Maybe that says it right there. We would see it if we were innocent.



## Can we see His face?

The teachings of the Word are contradictory about our ability to see the Lord's face. Some passages say that we can and will see it, and others that this is impossible.

A good example is what happened with Moses. As we read in our lesson *"the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend."* The Writings explain that the Lord *"showed Himself to Moses in a human form suited to his reception, which was an external form - as a bearded old man sitting with him, as I have learned from angels. For the same reason the ancient Jews had no other idea of Jehovah than of one who was very old with a long white beard."* (Arcana Coelestia 4299)

Moses saw His face in that way, but when he asked to see His glory, the Lord made it clear that Moses was not actually seeing His face: *"You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live."* He then covered Moses with His hand while He passed by, and then took His hand away, explaining *"I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen."*

Clearly there was a distinction between the old man that Moses saw regularly and the Lord in His glory whose face could not be seen.

Our text promises that in heaven His servants will see His face, saying, *"They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads."* But the Writings quickly explain that they won't see His face:

*"To see the face of God and the Lamb, or the face of the Lord, does not mean to see His face, because no one can see the Lord's face such as He is in His Divine love and wisdom and live, for He is the sun of heaven and of the whole spiritual world. Indeed, to see His face as He is in Himself would be like entering the sun and being consumed in a moment by its fire."*

Instead, *"seeing His face"* means *"that they will see the truths from Him contained in the Word and will know and acknowledge Him by means of them."* (Apocalypse Revealed 938)

## Seeing from essence to person

There is no actual contradiction here. The difference is just between an external seeing and an internal one, which is well explained in many passages. One that is often repeated is this advice of a teacher in heaven to his students:

*"My pupils, think about God in terms of His essence and from that about His person, and do not think in terms of His person and from that about His essence. For to think about His essence in terms of His person is to think materially also about His essence, whereas to think about His person in terms of His essence is to think spiritually also about His person."* (Apocalypse Revealed 611.7)

That is, when you think about God think about His love and kindness, about His wisdom and strength, not about what He looks like. But this isn't telling us not to think about what He looks like at all. We can't think about Him without a mental image, but the image should come from loving His essence.

A good example of this might be what Swedenborg wrote in his *Journal of Dreams* just after Easter 1744. He writes of a spiritual struggle and his desperate prayers, when he felt a hand on his:

*"In same moment I was sitting at His bosom and beheld Him face to face. It was a countenance of a holy mien, and all was such that it cannot be expressed, and also smiling, so that I believe that His countenance was such also while He lived [in the world]. He spoke to me and asked if I had a bill of health. I answered, "Lord, Thou knowest better than I." He said, "Well, then do." This I found in my mind to signify, "Love Me truly," or "Do what thou hast promised." O God, impart to me grace for this! I found that it was not in my own power. I awoke, with tremors."* (Journal of Dreams 54)

This conveys a picture of His connection with the Lord and a sight of His face that was all about his love for Him. He doesn't describe the face, but he says that He was smiling and that he believed that His face was like this when He was in the world.

What does He look like? This whole idea has often been an issue for people, but it is about love.

## Make no graven image

About twenty years ago in this cathedral I had just finished reading the lessons and was singing the hymn when a man who I didn't know came striding down the center aisle to the front of the church. He handed me a note, and walked out. I quickly read the note, which said something like: *"This is a beautiful church, but unfortunately you are condemned by God. He has commanded that we make no images. Your windows are full of them."*

He was perhaps Muslim. Islam takes the commandment to *"make no graven image"* (Exodus

20:4) literally and seriously. This commandment means not to think of God from person to essence, don't be attached just to what He looks like, don't make an idol.

Even in the New Church we have often had something of this view, being appropriately cautious about depicting the Lord. Sometimes we have just used a light, or a figure turned away from us, but at other times we have had people playing His part and not hesitated to display pictures of Him. At the front of this church you can see His face portrayed at the top of the great east window, a stylized face similar to other depictions commonly found in the Christian world.

One of the things we try to be careful about today is depicting our Lord Jesus Christ's face as it is likely to have actually looked, and not, for example, as a blue-eyed blonde-haired European. The more important thing, however, is an idea of Him that matches His infinitely loving and wise essence.



The Writings tell us that confusion about the Lord in Christianity has caused many of us to think of Him as a cloud or a force (*True Christianity* 836), or to have no distinct idea at all, or no belief at all. But the Lord is clear in His words to Philip in *John 14*: "He who has seen Me has seen the Father."

### Seeing the Lord on other planets

The importance of this idea of the Lord's face can be seen from our reading from *Earths in the Universe*, or *Other Planets*, as it is called in the newest translation, which we read from today. In that reading some spirits ask spirits from the planet Mercury if it is true that it had been promised to them that they would one day see the Lord. They said yes, but were not sure if it was true. Then the sun of heaven appeared to them, but they said that this was not the Lord because there was no face. So then the Lord's face did appear, which profoundly moved them, causing them to bow down in humility. Next, spirits from our earth came, people who had seen and known the Lord when He was in the world, and they testified that this was Him, they recognized His face. Finally some spirits from

another planet arrived, described as being from the planet Jupiter, "who said in the clearest terms that this was the one they had seen on their planet when the God of the universe had appeared to them."

This is an amazing passage for several reasons. The Heavenly Doctrines tell us not only that there are people on other planets in the universe, but that they worship the Lord, and see His face. And this is

apparently the same face everywhere, and it was recognized by people from our planet who had seen Him here. This hardly seems possible, and it may seem peculiar that such an emphasis would be put on something so physical in the spiritual world. But in that world everything appears the way that it really is, and everything is spiritual, so naturally people from everywhere would see the same face.

It is interesting that, according to what is said in *Other Planets*, most peoples in the universe do see the Lord's face, testifying to His close connection with them. Yet in this world, although He came to us in person, we do not even have a description of what He looked like. Evidently we don't need one.

*"For Jehovah or the Lord appears to everyone according to their true nature, so that He appears as love and the light of truth to those governed by good, but as an enemy and avenger to those ruled by evil."* (*Arcana Coelestia* 8819)

Every child knows what He looks like, and we all know to the extent that we become like children.

*"No one can see God's face except by virtue of having innocence."* (*Arcana Coelestia* 5608)

This is what we pray for at a child's baptism, as in the baptismal hymn that we are about to sing. That he or she will come to see that face more clearly.

At this time when we are all in isolation we can appreciate more than ever the value of seeing each other's faces. When we see the goodness in each other's faces, we also see the face of God.

*"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."* *Matthew 5 AMEN*



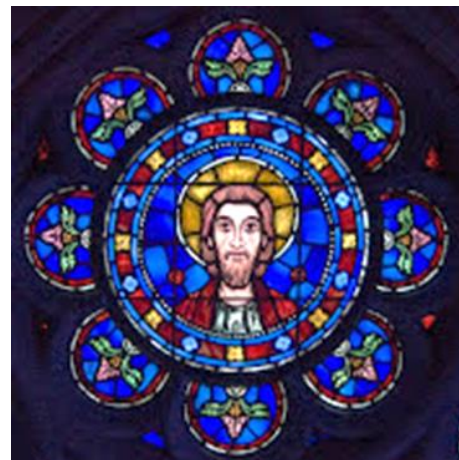
## Readings from the Word

### Exodus 33

**S**o the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.

<sup>18</sup> And Moses said, "Please, show me Your glory."

<sup>19</sup> Then He said, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." <sup>20</sup> But He said, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live." <sup>21</sup> And the Lord said, "Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. <sup>22</sup> So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. <sup>23</sup> Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen."



### Revelation 22

**A**nd he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. <sup>2</sup> In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, *was* the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each *tree* yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree *were* for the healing of the nations. <sup>3</sup> And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. <sup>4</sup> They shall see His face, and His name *shall be* on their foreheads.

### Apocalypse Revealed 938

**T**hey shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads." This symbolically means that they will turn to the Lord and the Lord to them, being conjoined by love.

To see the face of God and the Lamb, or the face of the Lord, does not mean to see His face, because no one can see the Lord's face such as He is in His Divine love and wisdom and live, for He is the sun of heaven and of the whole spiritual world. Indeed, to see His face as He is in Himself would be like entering the sun and being consumed in a moment by its fire. Nevertheless, the Lord sometimes presents Himself to be seen outside of the sun, but He veils Himself then and so presents Himself to those who see Him, which He does by means of an angel, as He did also in the world when He appeared to Abraham, Hagar, Lot, Gideon, Joshua, and others. That is why those angels are called angels and also Jehovah, for Jehovah was present in them from afar.

[2] Here, however, that His servants will see His face does not mean that they will see His face in this way, but that they will see the truths from Him contained in the Word and will know and acknowledge Him by means of them.

### Other Planets 40

**S**ome spirits were told by a heavenly source that spirits from the planet Mercury had at one time been promised that they would see the Lord. So the spirits around me asked the spirits from Mercury whether they remembered receiving this promise. They said they did remember receiving it, but they were not sure the promise had been so definite that there was no possibility of doubt about it. While this conversation was going on, the sun of heaven appeared to them. When the spirits from Mercury saw the sun, however, they said that it was not the Lord God, because they did not see a face. Then the spirits had a conversation with each other, but I did not hear what they were saying. Then, suddenly, the sun reappeared, but this time at its center was the Lord surrounded by a solar ring. When they saw this, the spirits from Mercury felt profoundly humbled and bowed themselves down. At that time, the Lord appeared in the sun to spirits from our planet as well, those who had seen Him in the flesh when He was on earth. One after another, a large number testified that this was the Lord, and they said this in front of everyone.

At the same time the Lord also appeared in the sun to spirits from the planet Jupiter, who said in the clearest terms that this was the one they had seen on their planet when the God of the universe had appeared to them.



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