

“We Shall Be Like Him” (1 John 2:28–3:3)

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Before I became a pastor, I was a professor for a few years at a small college. Between the various graduations ceremonies and convocations, I had a chance to hear the president of the college give many similar speeches. He wasn't a great speaker, but there was something he said often. He said, “There is no standing still. You are either moving forward or moving backward.” In the context of the college, he meant that the college either had to keep growing or improving or it would stagnate. But that statement is true of the spiritual life. There is no treading water. There is no neutral ground. All of us are on a spiritual journey to somewhere. Our lives are on certain trajectories. And the truth is that we're either becoming more like Jesus or not.

All of us, whether we're Christians or not, will come resemble the person or thing we most admire. We are imaging creatures, meant to reflect whatever we're looking at. We become like the thing we worship. If we truly worship God, we will become like him. If we're worshipping something or someone one else, we'll become like that idol. This is, in part, what it means to be made in the image of God. We will reflect God in some ways, whether we know him or not. But since we're also made to “image” whatever we're looking at, we'll end up reflecting God or a false god. There is no middle ground where we're not reflecting something.

So, the question for us today—and, really, for next week as well—is: Where are we going? What path are we on? Who or what are we reflecting in our lives?

This week, I want us to focus on two major ideas: Those who are God's children will now practice righteousness because Jesus is righteous; but we will not become fully righteous until we see Jesus face-to-face. We'll look at just five verses in 1 John to see this reality.

Let's first read the whole passage before looking at it more closely. Here is 1 John 2:28–3:3:

²⁸ And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. ²⁹ If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.

¹ See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² 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.³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.¹

In this passage, John, one of Jesus' initial followers, tells us that we don't see Jesus now, but we will see him. He will "appear," which is a reference to Jesus' second coming, when he comes to bring a final, ultimate salvation to his people, when he comes to judge the living and the dead, and when he comes to restore the world to be a new creation, a paradise. John wants his readers to be prepared for the day when Jesus will return. Until that time, they should strive to be righteous, and to live pure lives. But he tells them—and us—that we won't be the people God wants us to be until Jesus appears.

This passage might raise a question: Why can't we see God right now? The answer is that the sight of God would be too much for us to handle. If we saw the full radiance of God, it would be like a blinding light. It would be like staring directly at the sun at noon. God told Moses, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live" (Exod. 33:20). Throughout the Bible, when people saw a manifestation of God, it was partial and mediated through an angel, or the figure of a person, or through some other created thing like a burning bush, a pillar of fire, or a cloud. Even when Jesus walked the earth, he appeared as an ordinary man, though he is also fully divine. The closest that anyone got to seeing the full glory of God was perhaps when Peter, James, and John (the author of 1 John), three of Jesus' disciples, saw Jesus when he was transfigured (Matt. 17:1–8; Mark 9:2–8; Luke 9:28–36). We're told that at that time, "his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light" (Matt. 17:3). But even that must have been just a glimpse of God's true glory. If we were to see the full radiance of God in Christ, we would melt. It's too much for us, and that is because of our spiritual condition.

Jesus said, in his famous "Sermon on the Mount," "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8). We're not completely pure of heart now, not even the best Christian who walks this earth. Therefore, we don't see God now. God has his reasons for this. When Jesus returns, he will come to remove all sin, to purify this world. This will be a day of salvation for God's people, but it will also be a day of judgment for those who have rejected Jesus. And God is waiting to give more people time to repent (2 Pet. 3:9), to turn from living life on their terms, and to come to faith in Jesus, so that they can live life on God's terms. When Jesus returns, it will be too late for anyone to turn to him in faith and repentance. When he comes,

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

human history will be altered forever. There will be no more children born and no more marriages. There will be no more chances to turn to him. So, God is gracious to give us more time until that day.

For those of us who are Christians, how do we live in these in-between times? John tells us that we should seek to be righteous, even though we realize that we won't become fully righteous until Jesus returns.

Let's first look at 1 John 2:28–29.

²⁸ And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. ²⁹ If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.

John once again calls his readers “little children,” because he sees himself as their spiritual father, who teaches them and wants to protect them from harm. He tells them to abide in Christ, to remain in him, so that they have no reason to fear when he returns. Jesus' return is a motivation to live a life that is pleasing to God. There are several passages in the New Testament that talk about this motivation (Phil. 1:9–11; 1 Thess. 3:11–13; 5:23). Whether Jesus returns in our lifetime or whether we die first, there will be a day of judgment. All the thoughts, desires, words, and deeds of our lives will be laid bare before God. And these will either demonstrate that we have been born of God, through God's grace, or whether we are spiritually dead, rebels against God.

Salvation is a gift of God. It is not something that we earn. But salvation also includes transformation. Those who have been rescued from sin and death by God have also been given the Holy Spirit, who changes us from the inside out. Those who trust in Jesus and whose lives match what they say they believe have no reason to fear judgment. They can be sure that they are children of God.

To anticipate what we'll see in a few weeks, turn to 1 John 4:13–18:

¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶ So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. ¹⁷ By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world.

¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.

See what John says? Those who abide in Jesus have the Spirit. They testify that God has sent his Son, and that he is the Savior. They “abide in love.” And if we love, if we testify that Jesus is the Son of God who died for our sins, we have confidence on the day of judgment. If we love God and love others, because God first loved us by sending his Son, we have no reason to fear.

Going back to chapter 2, John says that Jesus is righteous, and those who practice righteousness have been born of God (v. 29). Jesus is the only one who lived a life that was “right,” that lined up with God’s design for mankind. We were made to image God, which means we were made to reflect him, to be like him. God is morally perfect, and we were made to be reflect God’s goodness. God is loving, and we are supposed to love him and others. God is giving, he is generous; we, too, should be giving and not selfish. We were made to worship God by living for him as obedient children. And Jesus is the only one who did that. Jesus is the only one who lived a perfect life.

Though we are not made children of God by how perfectly we resemble Jesus, we should become more like him. Again, we’re not acceptable to God because we follow Jesus well. We’re not graded by God on how much we’ve become like Jesus. God saves us because he loves us and draws us to his Son. He saves us through the power of the Holy Spirit, the third Person of God, who causes us to be born again, to see the kingdom of God and enter it, to confess that Jesus is Lord, and to follow Jesus. But once we’ve entered the kingdom of God, we should live like we’re subjects of the King. Put differently, Christians have been adopted by God. We’re part of God’s family. And if we’re part of God’s family, we should live like it. We should bear a resemblance to our Father.

That means that we become less selfish. We don’t try to live life on our terms, but rather on God’s terms. We become more generous. We become more loving. We tell people about Jesus. We become part of a local church, serving and being served in the church and coming under the leadership and authority of that church. We do simple things like read the Bible and pray. We do that to have communion with God, to hear from him and speak to him. People who live this way bear the marks of a person who has been born again, who has been adopted by God.

At the beginning of chapter 3, John tells us that God’s love is demonstrated by the fact that he has made us his children: “See what kind of love the Father has given us, that we should

be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.” The world doesn’t know God or his people. This recalls the beginning of John’s Gospel, when he writes, “He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him” (1 John 1:10–11). Even though the world doesn’t know God and doesn’t realize we are God’s children, we indeed are his children. That fact is that all who testify that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, their Lord and Savior, and whose lives demonstrate to some degree that they are indeed following Jesus, are indeed God’s children. And this is a gift given to us. This, too, recalls the beginning of John’s Gospel. Here are the two verses that follow the ones I just quoted: “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (1 John 1:12–13).

The fact that the world doesn’t know God and therefore doesn’t know that we’re God’s children means that things will not always be easy for Christians in this life. We face many obstacles. We deal with our inner enemies—though we’re given the Holy Spirit, we still wrestle with our old desires. We still fight against sin. And we deal with enemies around us, the people who are opposed to God and his people. There is a supernatural enemy, Satan, who wants to harm us. And that means that we don’t feel at home in this world. We’re left longing for something more. We know that things here and now are not the way they should be.

John tells us there’s a reason why we don’t feel quite at home and at ease: Life as it should be, life as it will be, hasn’t arrived yet. Look at verse 2: “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.” We are God’s children already, but our true selves haven’t emerged yet. We still struggle with impure thoughts and desires. We still end up doing the wrong things. We haven’t arrived yet. But when Jesus appears, we will be like him. Why? Because we shall see him as he is.

This is a tremendous verse and a very significant idea. Our true selves haven’t appeared. I think that’s true of anyone, whether Christian or not. Only in the light of Jesus, the great revealer of truth, will we know who we really are. Our true identities, good or bad, will be exposed in the light of Jesus’ glorious day. Those who have rejected Jesus will be exposed and judged on the basis of their failure to live according to God’s design (Rev. 20:11–15). But if you’re a Christian,

your true self hasn't appeared yet. You are not yet the person who you will be for eternity. That person will only appear when Jesus appears. Another letter in the Bible, Colossians, sheds some light on this issue. This is what the apostle Paul writes at the beginning of Colossians 3:

¹ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Col. 3:1–4).

Think about that: “You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ *who is your life* appears, then *you also* will appear with him in glory.”

How does this work? The true, eternal selves of Christians won't sin. However, right now, we do wrestle with sin. How will sin be removed from the new creation? It's not exactly clear. It seems that our character will be transformed. But part of the process of being changed is seeing Jesus in all his glory. When we see how great Jesus is, we will be changed. We won't want to sin, because we'll see that Jesus is better than anything that tempts us now.

Some of you may now know the name William Cowper (1731–1800). He was a poet, a hymn writer, who worked with John Newton, who also wrote a good number of hymns. This is one of Cowper's poems, called “Hatred of Sin”:

Holy Lord God! I love Thy truth,
Nor dare Thy least commandment slight;
Yet pierced by sin the serpent's tooth,
I mourn the anguish of the bite.

But though the poison lurks within,
Hope bids me still with patience wait;
Till death shall set me free from sin,
Free from the only thing I hate.

Had I a throne above the rest,
Where angels and archangels dwell,
One sin, unslain, within my breast,
Would make that heaven as dark as hell.

The prisoner sent to breathe fresh air,
And blest with liberty again,
Would mourn were he condemn'd to wear
One link of all his former chain.

But, oh! no foe invades the bliss,
When glory crowns the Christian's head;
One look at Jesus as He is
Will strike all sin forever dead.²

Cowper says that he loves Jesus, but he has been “pierced by sin the serpent’s tooth.” He’s referring back to original sin, traced back to when the serpent tempted Adam and Eve. In his current state, he says that even if he had a throne, one of his sins would be enough to make heaven a hell. But he holds out hope because he knows that when he says Jesus in eternity, he will be changed. Why? “One look at Jesus as He is/Will strike all sin forever dead.”

This poem gets to the heart of the tension we feel as Christians. We are already children of God and all our sin is paid for. But we are not yet who we are supposed to be. Until we see Jesus face-to-face, we must do what John writes in verse 3: “And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.” This is in the present tense. This purification is ongoing. According to Peter, those who have purified their souls do so by “obedience to the truth” (1 Pet. 1:22). We do our best to obey Jesus, not in order to earn salvation, but because we have been given salvation. We were made in God’s image, but that image was marred by our sin. Jesus, the true image of God came and perfectly imaged God. And yet he died for our sins. He willingly laid down his life to pay the penalty for our neglect of God, our rebellion against God. And Jesus is the true image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15). Those who have received the Holy Spirit, according to Paul, are “beholding the glory of the Lord” and “are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). The Holy Spirit transforms us from one degree of glory to another as become more and more like Jesus. But we need to look at Jesus now.

I’ll come back to that idea in a moment. But now that we’ve gone through this passage, I want us to think about how it applies to our lives. I want us to consider three questions.

First, what is the trajectory of your life right now? Earlier I said we are either making progress or we’re regressing. We’re either become more like Jesus or we’re moving further away from him. And this journey, wherever it leads, is taken one step at a time. Our path is shaped by countless small decisions, all kinds of daily, little habits that we often don’t think about. C. S. Lewis is so good in describing this kind of trajectory. In *Mere Christianity*, he writes:

² William Cowper, “Hatred of Sin,” <http://www.theotherpages.org/poems/olney03.html>.

[E]very time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with all other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.³

Which way are you going? What are all the habits in your life making you resemble? What does all the media that you consume do to you? Does it make you more or less like Jesus?

Here's a second question: Do we really understand that seeing Jesus is better than anything in this world? Do we understand that the Creator is more beautiful and more satisfying, than the whole creation, even the best things we can experience now? We tend to think that it's right to worship Jesus and obey him. Of course, it is. But we often don't think that worshipping Jesus and obeying him is better than doing anything else. And when we do that, we drift into idolatry, making someone or something else our functional god, the ultimate source of joy, satisfaction, security, identity, and meaning in our lives.

Augustine (354–430) is one of the more famous and influential theologians in all Christianity. Over sixteen hundred years ago, he wrote his famous *Confessions*, which is something like a prayer, a memoir, and a philosophical treatise all rolled into one. In one of the more beautiful and stirring passages in the book, he writes,

Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late I have loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all. You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.⁴

³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr. New York: HarperOne, 2001), 92.

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, X.xxvii, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 201.

Augustine says that he looked for God in created things, but God called to him and broke through his spiritual deafness and blindness. Only then could Augustine see that God was radiant, resplendent, and fragrant. That is why Augustine can say “late,” or recently, “have I loved you.” It was only when God broke through to him that he hungered and thirsted after God.

But notice that Augustine is “set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.” He hasn’t attained it yet at the time of his writing. In other words, Augustine hasn’t seen Jesus’ face yet. In the very next passage, he says that he knows God will fill his entire life. “But for the present, because I am not full of you, I am a burden to myself. There is a struggle between joys over which I should be weeping and regrets at matters over which I ought to be rejoicing, and which side has the victory I do not know. There is a struggle between my regrets at my evil past and my memories of good joys, and which side has the victory I do not know.”⁵ He then appeals to God for mercy.

Why do I quote at length people like William Cowper, C. S. Lewis, and Augustine? Because they understood the Christian life. They knew that the greatest joy is God, that all the things of this world will leave us empty. And we need to hear the voices of the past, the wise voices of the church. Why? Because I doubt that we have this hunger and thirst for God. I doubt that we long to see Jesus’ face the way the saints of old did.

But throughout the Bible, the greatest joy, the greatest reward was seeing “the king in his beauty” (Isa. 33:17). David certainly knew that. Consider three lines from his Psalms, all of which say that the greatest pleasure, the greatest joy, and the greatest reward is to be with the Lord for eternity:

Psalm 16:11: You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Psalm 17:15: As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;
when I awake [from death], I shall be satisfied with your likeness.

Psalm 27:4: One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD

⁵ Ibid., X.xxviii, p. 202.

and to inquire in his temple.

We ought to seek God's face in this way. And the great promise is that those who seek his face will one day see it.

Here is my third question: Even now, are we looking at Jesus? It is true that we don't see the physical body of Jesus now. We walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7). But we can still see Jesus in the pages of the Bible. Paul said his own preaching of the gospel demonstrated Jesus to his listeners. That's what he must have meant when he wrote to the Galatians, "It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified" (Gal. 3:1). Paul was writing to a church in modern-day Turkey. These people hadn't literally seen Jesus die on the cross. But Paul's preaching vividly portrayed Christ crucified. Through the eyes of faith, these people could see Jesus. And we can do that by reading the Bible with the eyes of faith.

We can also see Jesus in each other. After all, we are the body of Christ. No, we must not confuse the church with Jesus. But we can get a glimpse of Jesus through each other. That's why being a part of the church in a real way, serving others and being served, is so important.

As I prepared for this week's sermon, I read a book by an English philosopher named Roger Scruton called *The Face of God*. The book was very interesting though largely not very applicable to this message. But he did write this at the very end: "So what and where is the face of God for the one who believes in his real presence among us? The answer is that we encounter this presence everywhere, in all that suffers and renounces for another's sake. . . . In the moment of sacrifice people come face to face with God."⁶ He doesn't mean we literally see God when we encounter someone's sacrifice, and he surely doesn't mean a mere human can be sacrificed for your sin. But if Jesus is the clearest picture of God, "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature" (Heb. 1:3), and he came to die, to sacrifice his life for others, then sacrifice is at the core of who God is and what he has done. And when we lay down our lives for each other, we are reflecting the face of Jesus. We can't pay for each other's sins the way Jesus paid for ours, so our acts of love are pale shadows of his. Still, they are important reflections of his ultimate sacrifice for us.

However, Scruton offers us a warning. He writes, "We should not be surprised . . . if God is so rarely encountered now. The consumer culture is one without sacrifices; easy entertainment

⁶ Roger Scruton, *The Face of God* (London: Continuum, 2012), 177.

distracts us from our metaphysical loneliness [the feeling of being alone in the world, the aching of our soul]. The rearranging of the world as an object of appetite obscures its meaning of gift.”⁷ Our appetite to consume, our greed, and constant distraction from entertainments keep us from seeing God.

Do we love Jesus more than the world? Do we yearn to see his face? Are we doing what we can to see the dim shadows of it now? Are we moving in this direction or not? Today is the day to begin that journey, or to get back on track if we have lost our way. The author of Hebrews says, “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). Let’s strive together to be righteous as Jesus is righteous, to purify ourselves. For, as we have heard, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8).

⁷ Ibid.