

Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ

Lesson 1: *Introduction, Pursuit of Knowledge & Understanding, and Questions*

Introduction

The book of Hebrews opens with the profound proclamation that Jesus “ is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power!” (Hebrews 1:3) Let’s examine this beautiful truth together and grow in love for our Savior by seeking to know him more.

This line of study in theology is historically referred to as ‘*Christology*’. Christology is then often broken down into two areas...the ‘*Person of Christ*’ and the ‘*Work of Christ*’. Studying the ‘*Work of Christ*’ looks into what he accomplished in his life, death, and resurrection. In short, the *things he has done, does, and will do*. In this study, we’ll be focusing more on the ‘*Person of Christ*’ which looks at his unique nature as the pre-existent son of God, the last Adam, simultaneously true man and true God, the firstborn of all creation, and all the other mind-bending things that Scripture says about Christ Jesus. In short, *who He is* and what his unique nature shows us about God’s glory in his plan of salvation.

I hope that the above paragraph is the only time we’ll use the term ‘*Christology*’ to describe what we’re contemplating in this study. I was talking to Jenny, my wife, about preparing for the study and I dropped the word ‘*Christology*’...presumably to wow her with my cunning intellect and theological acumen. She almost visibly winced when I said the word and when I asked her what she thought, she said something like the following. “Using big, obscure words to describe the study of theology doesn’t bother me so much when we’re talking about things like the attributes of God or His covenants or the Trinity, but if we try to use terms like that when we talk about Jesus it doesn’t feel right. It feels detached. I don’t think about Jesus as some concept or idea that we get to analyze. He is a person that I know. I have a relationship with Him. Using weird, unfamiliar words to talk about that person and that relationship is awkward and doesn’t fit. *Jesus makes God personal.*” Exactly! I married a very insightful woman :)

This study is not meant to be a detached analysis of a theological concept. The hope is that it is a beholding, a contemplation, a meditation that soaks into our whole being and draws us closer relationally to God the Son.

Background

This aspect of theology and church doctrine has generated much controversy over the ages. The majority of the early church councils (Nicea, Chalcedon, etc.) were called together to clarify the doctrine of who Jesus Christ is or to respond to some heresy that had cropped up about Jesus. The fact is that Jesus Christ is so absolutely unique, glorious, mysterious and in many ways foreign to our natural minds that the natural mind cannot grasp it. This leads some people to attempt to over-rationalize the truths about Jesus while others will fall off the horse on the other side by over-spiritualizing who he is and denying the fact that He really walked this earth as a man. These errors can sneak into our own thinking if we do not approach Jesus with humility and an expectation that he is more than we could ever imagine on our own. We must be committed to holding to the truths about Jesus as presented in Scripture even when those do not easily fit within the constructs of our own thought.

Because the doctrine of the Person of Christ has caused so much controversy, instruction on this doctrine can tend to be very intellectual and 'polemic'. Polemic is described as *"the art or practice of engaging in controversial debate or dispute"* or *"a strong verbal or written attack on someone or something."* Most books on the topic focus more on proving heretical viewpoints wrong rather than laying out the glorious truth testified in Scripture about Jesus. While it's important to be aware of the historical heresies that have challenged truth and draw on the historic expressions of these truths in church confessions, our lessons will not be focused on these controversies or on church's historical responses to heresies. While we will dig into deep theological terminology and concepts, this study will trend more towards awe-inspired contemplation. Our goal is to seek out what Scripture says about the unique, glorious *nature and character of Jesus Christ* in order to know him and love him more.

As we look into deep and mysterious truths about Jesus, we will also be asking "How can this truth be applied to the care and comfort of souls?" The hope is that we would avoid the danger of just trying to get knowledge to feel good about ourselves or to somehow ascend to God. We are pursuing greater understanding of God's majesty so that our hearts are shaped by these truths and our actions are

guided by our desire to serve and glorify Him. We'll talk more about the function of understanding and knowledge below.

As we begin looking at the nature and character of Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God, the following quote expresses the crux of the issue very well.

“The testimony which, according to Scripture, Christ has given of Himself is developed and confirmed by the preaching of the apostles. The confession that a man, named Jesus, is the Christ, the Only-Begotten of the Father, is in such direct conflict with our experience and with all of our thinking, and especially with all the inclinations of our heart, that no one can honestly and with his whole soul appropriate it without the persuasive activity of the Holy Spirit. By nature everyone stands in enmity to this confession, for it is not a confession natural to man. No one can confess that Jesus is the Lord except through the Holy Spirit...”

Herman Bavinck, *The Wonderful Works of God*

The opening line of this quote emphasizes that the testimony about Jesus is clear and consistent when we look at Scripture...the Law, the Prophets, biblical poetry, wisdom literature, the Gospels, the apostolic letters, and the apocalyptic letter all line up beautifully in painting a robust portrait of the person and character of Jesus Christ. What's the problem then? We should all agree and there should be no one who objects, right?

As the quote above says, although that testimony is clear and consistent, our human nature alone cannot grasp it. These truths conflict with the unredeemed workings of our intellect and, even more, in an unregenerate state we hate these truths. Left to our own experience, thinking, and affections, we will stumble over this rock of offense that is the Messiah, Immanuel, God with us. We need so much more than a well-thought out Sunday School lesson to fully take in the glory of Jesus Christ. For us to know Him and love Him, the Holy Spirit must act. Praise God that He has done that in so many of our lives already and now we can approach together the radiance of the glory of God in Christ Jesus with the eyes of our hearts opened and ready to behold glory upon glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

At the same time, we also grieve that many we know and love here on this earth do not have new hearts and are still in the state of resisting the truth about God's Son. So studying Scripture and

considering ways to communicate these truths can be very beneficial for us in giving a reason for the hope that we have to the wondering, wandering world.

Another quote will help us understand the type of ground we are treading on as we approach a study of the person of Jesus Christ.

“The first thing that we confess as Christians is the mystery of the incarnation. We may not know the theological terms and concepts, but when we first profess our Christian faith, we profess that we are putting our trust in the One who is both fully God and fully man. In that way, we enter Christianity through the majestic gate of mystery; mystery is not something that is seen later on as we mature as Christians. It comes with our initial Christian profession. As we profess Christ, we also confess something that our minds are unable to understand. We profess as true that which we cannot grasp. We profess it happily and it moves us to worship. That is as it should be. But it is also the case that an exploration into the mystery of the incarnation will further ground and grow our own holiness and worship.”

K. Scott Oliphint, *The Majesty of Mystery*

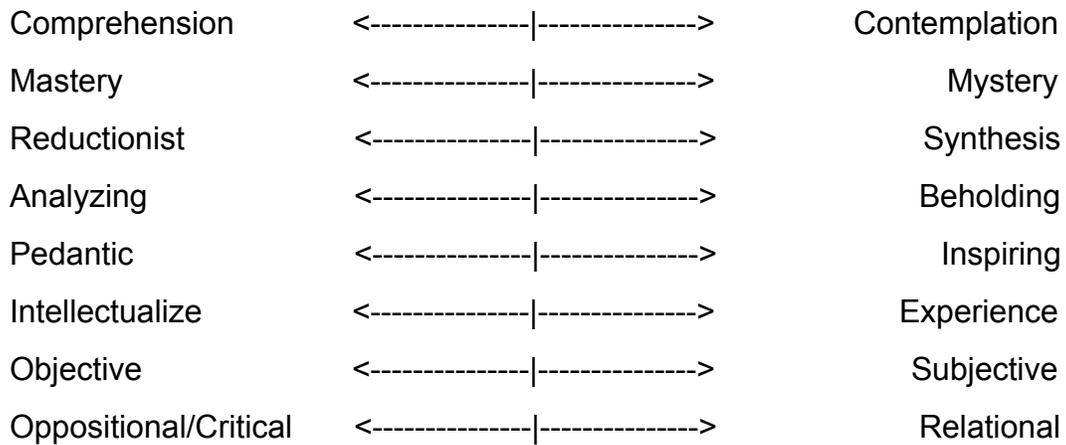
Praise God that He is higher, greater, broader, deeper, and more glorious than our own finite intellect could grasp. It is also delightful and humbling that he welcomes into the mystery of His being and purposes through rebirth and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Pursuit of Knowledge and Understanding

As we think about how to approach such a mysterious and foreign subject as the only begotten Son of God walking the earth with both a true human and divine nature, let's start by thinking broadly about knowledge, understanding and the affections. How do these different human faculties interplay with one another to form belief?

Understanding and believing are complex dynamics that have many underlying factors. There are different ways to come to a place where a proposition is affirmed in the mind and heart of an individual.

Consider the following spectrums on how to approach information:



The above couplets outline a few different tendencies in the ways that people tend to think about the world and process information. Where do you tend to lean in your own life when you consider why you believe what you believe? Is one approach better than the other? Are the ends of the spectrum mutually exclusive?

While the world wants to force us into irreconcilable dichotomies or try to reduced the human experience into smaller and smaller component parts, God has created the human mind, the human heart, the human body, and the human spirit to be dynamic processors and integrators of information using all the faculties given us by our Creator. As a popular philosopher says, "We are not just heads on a stick."

As a way of considering these approaches to obtaining knowledge, consider what happens when we capture and dissect a butterfly to analyze it in a biology lab. Well, the butterfly dies. That beautiful mysterious metamorphosis of a caterpillar ceases to be a live, fluttering, majestic mystery of God's creation. Is it wrong to occasionally harvest a butterfly to gain deeper scientific knowledge about it's physiology? No, but if all we do is go around pinning butterflies to a lab table we are missing something. Even the most committed biologist must, necessarily, spend time observing the specimen, watching it in its native habitat, and pondering the dynamics of the butterfly's lifespan. If a scientist can recite all the anatomical parts of a creature, but has never seen the animal running, swimming, flying in the natural world and does not seem captured by the beauty of its life, we would know that something is missing from their overall understanding. In wonder and delight is great insight. Awe and reflection which properly engage the emotions are not irrational, but contribute to a full, robust sense of understanding.

So, wonder and awe in beholding something leads to a more true and substantial understanding. You know what else helps really refine and clarify what we truly know deep in the core of our being? Adversity. It is relatively easy to expound on theoretical truths when life is smooth and easy. But the truth of what a person deeply knows and loves come through very clearly when that person faces trials. Where do we run for comfort when it hurts? What truths do we whisper to ourselves when it's dark and scary? What is the bedrock of belief that we land on when everything superficial crumbles away? The experience of adversity reveals those things that are foundational in a person's worldview. In the midst of comforts and ease, it is easy to be lulled to sleep and think that surface things are more substantial than they truly are, but the pains of suffering keep us awake. A person may be able to accurately discuss and debate the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. But when the world is struck by a global pandemic and everything seems chaotic and unruly, that person's emotions and actions in the midst of those events will most clearly reveal what they truly believe. Trials and adversity either prove the resolve and importance of that insight by making it real in the experience of life or difficult times can undercut lightly held beliefs. Adversity is a refining fire.

The Scriptures have a lot to say on this topic so let's look at some verses to better understand the reasons we believe and love the things we do. The Bible talks about knowledge and understanding frequently. The way the Bible presents knowledge is much more holistic and integrated than we tend to think about it. It represents a synchronization of various things including thought, emotion, action, affection, belief, and relationship. Scripture says very interesting things about the interplay between knowledge, understanding, and emotions (affections).

Proverbs 2:1-15 (This is too good not to quote at length...)

*My son, if you receive my words
and treasure up my commandments with you,
making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding;
yes, if you call out for insight
and raise your voice for understanding,
if you seek it like silver
and search for it as for hidden treasures,
then you will understand the fear of the LORD*

and find the knowledge of God.

For the LORD gives wisdom:

from his mouth come knowledge and understanding:

he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;

he is a shield to those who walk in integrity,
guarding the paths of justice

and watching over the way of his saints.

Then you will understand righteousness and justice

and equity, every good path;

for wisdom will come into your heart.

and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;

discretion will watch over you,

understanding will guard you,

delivering you from the way of evil,

from men of perverted speech,

who forsake the paths of uprightness

to walk in the ways of darkness,

who rejoice in doing evil

and delight in the perverseness of evil,

men whose paths are crooked,

and who are devious in their ways.”

Matthew 13:13-17

“This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.” For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.”

Matthew 13:23

“As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

Luke 18:31-34

“And taking the twelve, he said to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.” But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.”

Luke 24: 44-45

“Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures...”

Romans 3:9-12

“What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.’”

Phillipians 4:4-7

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

2 Corinthians 4:6

“For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

1 Corinthians 2:14–16

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all

things, but is himself to be judged by no one. “For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.”

1 John 5:20

“And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.”

Colossians 2:1-3

“For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

Ephesians 3:14-19

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

2 Timothy 2:25

“And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.”

There is so much to chew on in all of the above verses, but there are three things that really stand out and particularly relate to how we conceive of knowledge and understanding in the human experience.

First, knowledge is not just a result of a detached intellectual exercise of rationally processing objective information. It is integrated. It is holistic, as it involves all of our being. Knowledge and

understanding are transformative. Knowledge and understanding, according to the Bible, engage the whole person and have dramatic effects on the lived-out life of the person. Read Proverbs 2 again and marvel at all that God has done to create thinking, feeling, believing, acting, loving human beings.

Second, knowledge and understanding have a relational component. Propositions are more plausible to us when they come from a source with whom we have a relationship and trust. When we see that God's glory underscores all His actions and that His glory is to be merciful and loving, this leads us to be more open to what He has revealed about Himself. Even when it's hard to see how actions align with underlying facts, love plays a role in surpassing mere knowledge (Eph. 3). As we come to love the God of peace, He grants peace that surpasses understanding in all circumstances even when physical, sensory conditions of our lives may not be ones that we typically associate with peace.

Third, God is the one who grants knowledge and understanding. In some of the verses above, people had access to the same information but some understood and others didn't. Lack of understanding is equated with hardness of hearts, not inability to process objective data. In 2 Timothy 2, it is clear that repentance precedes knowledge of truth. God grants repentance and faith as means to restore a relationship with His people. An individual's affections must necessarily be integrated and united with right thinking about God for what is known to be effectual in redeeming a person.

John Wesley states, "*Orthodoxy, or right opinion, is, at best, a very slender part of religion. Thought right tempers (affections) cannot subsist without right opinions, yet right opinions may subsist without right tempers. There maybe a right opinions of God without either love or one right temper toward Him. Satan is proof of this.*" Orthodoxy is a beautiful thing. It must shape our affections to rightly behold God and we should all seek to line up our thinking with God's truths. But may God always forbid us to seek orthodoxy that is in any way detached from a deep love for God. Beholding the person of Jesus, as the perfect manifestation of the eternal God, is a primary way to nurture genuine, heartfelt love and respect in our relationship with God. Through God's grace and the activity of the Holy Spirit, as we pursue this relationship we share more and more in the mind of Christ and see God's will more clearly.

The title of the study includes the word 'beholding'...*Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ*. In an effort to make this study line up with the biblical goal of knowledge and understanding, we will conclude each lesson with a consistent question to help us in the goal of integrating

knowledge. The question will be something to the effect of *“What is the value of the truth we’ve been examining in the care and comfort of souls?”*. The question we will always end on in our lessons will move our hearts to ask God, “Having beheld your glory in the face of Jesus Christ, now shape us to be more like Him.” In other words, how can greater awe and wonderment at who Jesus is lead us to care for people the way He did?

If the Incarnation is characterised by any one thing, it is the mercy of God towards sinners. As we walk through this study together, we will hope and pray together that God will show His mercy through us more as we savor and admire who Jesus is. This outworking of knowledge in our lives will demonstrate that our hearts have been captivated by the glory and majesty of Jesus Christ.

Questions and Conclusion

As part of this first session, I would like to get feedback from you all on questions that you have on the doctrines which make up ‘*Christology*’ or scriptures that you want greater clarity on regarding the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and his nature so that those can be addressed during the class. Having read and thought about the content of this study, please send me any things regarding the nature and characteristics of Jesus that intrigue, trouble, or confuse you. If you let me know what those are, I will do my best to address those things in future sessions.

I was recently talking to my Dad about his relationship with God and he had one thing that he kept saying. He just wished that God’s intentions and direction for him was more clear. Have you ever wanted greater clarity on the eternal God’s nature and purposes? Colossians says that Jesus is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15). Do you want to understand more about the intent and end goal of all this? Hebrews says that God the Son upholds the universe by the word of his power (Heb. 1:3). Do you want to know more deeply what real love looks like and to believe that this love is for you? Ephesians says that by faith Christ dwells in our hearts and we can know a love that surpasses knowledge and be filled with all the fullness of the eternal God (Eph. 3:17-19). Do you long for vibrant spiritual life that overcomes the trappings and disappointments of this world? The Bible says that those who know Jesus are able to share in the power of the resurrection (Phillipians 3:10). I’d say those are some pretty good reasons to seek greater insight into Jesus’ nature and characteristics.

Prayer (from *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ* by John Piper)

Almighty God, we long to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord, especially in the knowledge of his glory. We want to see as clearly as we see the sun, and to savor it as deeply as our most desired pleasure. O merciful God, incline our hearts to your Word and the wonders of your glory. Wean us from obsession with trivial things. Open the eyes of our hearts to see each day what the created universe is telling about your glory. Enlighten our minds to see the glory of your Son in the Gospel. We believe that you are the All-glorious One and that there is none like you. Help our unbelief. Forgive the wandering of our affections and the undue attention we give to lesser things. Have mercy on us for Christ's sake, and fulfill in us your great design to display the glory of your grace. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Song of the Week

I Want to Know You by CityAlight: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AY3EGQvyl5M>