

Association of Hebrew Catholics Lecture Series
The Mystery of Israel and the Church

Fall 2014 – Series 14

Beatitude and the Last Things, Part 1

Talk #4

The Natural Desire to See God



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Note: *This document contains the unedited text of Dr. Feingold's talk. It will eventually undergo final editing for inclusion in the series of books being published by The Miriam Press under the series title: "The Mystery of Israel and the Church". If you find errors of any type, please send your observations to lfeingold@hebrewcatholic.org*

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The Natural Desire to See God

Natural Happiness Falls Short of Perfect Happiness

Last week we looked at natural happiness, and saw that it consists in a life of wisdom and the loving contemplation of God through the things He has made. Such a natural beatitude—even if it were without end in a society of friends enjoying resurrected bodies and in a creation restored like a new Eden—would not constitute perfect beatitude, however, because not all natural desire would come to rest.

Natural beatitude can be conceived as a restored Garden of Eden in which God would prevent all sin, suffering, death, and every other form of physical or moral evil, and in which the glory of God were reflected from all of the restored creation and resurrected human beings enjoyed a harmonious and virtuous communion, in which all would be united in contemplating God through creation and praising Him for it.

Many, I think, aspire to far less than this, for most conceive of heaven as a place in which happiness is essentially constituted by unending sensible pleasures rather than unending contemplation of God. Sensible pleasures would indeed be present in true natural beatitude (as in supernatural beatitude), but the happiness of such a state would not consist essentially in the sensible pleasures, which are by nature transient, nor even in intellectual or spiritual pleasures, which depend on the goods that cause them, but in contemplating God through the beauty of creation.

By the way, the picture I have painted of natural beatitude is more or less how the great scholastic theologians like St. Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, or Bl. Scotus understood the state of souls in Limbo. Those who never have the use of reason and die with original sin (for lack of Baptism) but without any personal sin, attain a natural beatitude after this life. These theologians saw limbo as a place where souls enjoy complete natural beatitude without any suffering at all, eternally glorifying and praising God, but without the supernatural beatitude of seeing Him face to face. Here I am not speaking about natural beatitude to shed light on the fate of unbaptized babies, who we are to entrust in hope to the mercy of God (CCC 1261, 1257). My purpose in mentioning this is to distinguish natural and supernatural beatitude, and to bring out the divine difference between them. Although natural beatitude is very good and desirable, supernatural beatitude is *divinely good* and desirable.

So would something be lacking in such a scenario as I have painted of natural happiness in a renewed Garden of Eden? Is this the beatitude to which we aspire?

St. Thomas Aquinas on the Natural Desire to See God

To show that something is still lacking in the natural beatitude of contemplating God through creation, St. Thomas Aquinas introduces a daring thesis. He demonstrates that the human mind and heart, and also the angelic mind, naturally desire to know God not only through creatures that point to Him as their source, but in His own essence—face to face.

He takes his point of departure from our natural desire to know. We see that it is natural for human beings to inquire into the causes and natures of things. This can be seen most clearly in children, whose natural desires have not yet been jaded. They constantly ask two questions: “Why?” and “What is it?” In these questions we see the natural desire to know the causes and natures of things, which is prompted by the experience of wonder before that which transcends our understanding.

It is the natural desire to know, prompted by wonder, that leads man to seek the very First Cause of all things, and to realize that there must be a First Cause, which all men call God. However, simply to know that there must be a God who created the world is a very imperfect understanding. For the *way* that He exists, *Who* and *What* He is, remains hidden from us. This is because He infinitely transcends the world that He has created, and yet the only way that we can naturally come to understand Him is *through what He has created* (see Rom 1:20).

Simply to know that God exists without knowing His essence—Who and What He is—is an imperfect knowledge, for the human mind naturally desires to know the full “whatness” of things—their full intelligibility. This lies in grasping their essence (from which their properties flow). And if we naturally desire to know the essence of things we encounter, it is especially true of the ultimate object of all intellectual inquiry and wonder: God Himself as the First Cause and Final End of all things. And here our wonder is immeasurably increased also by the fact that in this world we fall infinitely short of understanding His essence through the things that He has made. Therefore, knowledge only of the existence of God, without knowledge of His essence, does not yet satisfy the desire of our mind.¹

¹ St. Thomas demonstrates this in *Summa contra Gentiles* (SCG) III, ch. 50 and *Summa Theologiae* (ST) I-II, q. 3, a. 8: “I answer that final and perfect beatitude can consist in nothing else than the vision of the divine essence. To make this clear, two things must be considered. First, man is not perfectly happy so long as something remains for him to desire and seek. Secondly, the perfection of any power is determined by the nature of its object. The object of the intellect is ‘what a thing

In other words, due to the very dynamism of the human (or angelic) intellect, its search for meaning and intelligibility ought to naturally lead to wonder before the mystery of God, which in turn leads to a natural desire to see His face, to know Him as He is in Himself, and not merely as the hidden transcendent cause lying behind the marvels of creation.

In the *Summa contra gentiles*, after presenting six arguments to show that the natural desire to know, present in all intellectual creatures (human beings and angels), will not come fully to rest except in the vision of God's very essence, St. Thomas concludes:

No desire leads so high as the desire to understand the truth. For all our other desires, whether of delight or anything else that is desired by man, can come to rest in other things. However, the afore-mentioned desire does not come to rest until it reaches God, the supreme foundation and maker of all things. For this reason Wisdom aptly says: "I dwelt in high places, and my throne was in a pillar of cloud" (Sir 24:4). And in Prov 9:3 it is said that "She has sent out her maids to call from the highest places in the town." Let them therefore be ashamed who seek the beatitude of man, so highly situated, in base things.²

St. Thomas is saying here that of all man's natural desires, the natural desire to know is capable of leading the intellectual creature to transcend the limits of its nature and desire something that happens to be intrinsically supernatural, beyond the reach of any nature that could be created. I would add that our natural desire for beauty and loving communion also sets up a dynamism that can only fully rest in the vision of God. Seeing created beauty in all its forms, we naturally desire to contemplate a Beauty that is unlimited. Experiencing love in finite human forms,

is, i.e. the essence of a thing, as is stated in *De anima*, book 3 (ch. 6). It follows that the intellect attains perfection, insofar as it knows the essence of a thing. If therefore an intellect knows the essence of some effect, whereby it is not possible to know the essence of the cause, i.e. to know of the cause 'what it is'; that intellect cannot be said to reach that cause simply, although it may be able to gather from the effect the knowledge that the cause exists. Consequently, when man knows an effect, and knows that it has a cause, there naturally remains in the man the desire to know about the cause, 'what it is.' And this desire is one of wonder, and causes inquiry, as is stated in the beginning of the *Metaphysics* (1.2). For instance, if a man, knowing the eclipse of the sun, considers that it must be due to some cause, and yet not know what that cause is, he wonders about it, and from wondering proceeds to inquire. Nor does this inquiry cease until he arrives at knowledge of the essence of the cause. If therefore the human intellect, knowing the essence of some created effect, knows no more of God than 'that He is'; the perfection of his intellect has not yet directly [*simpliciter*] attained the First Cause, and so the natural desire to seek the cause still remains for him. On account of which he is not yet perfectly happy. Consequently, *for perfect happiness the intellect needs to attain to the very essence of the First Cause*. And thus it will have its perfection through union with God as with that object, in which alone man's happiness consists."

2 SCG III, ch. 50, n. 6

we naturally desire to experience and enter into a Love that is infinite.

The capacity, however, to see God exceeds not only the natural power of the human intellect, but of any intellect that could be created.³ Thus we have the paradox of the human spirit naturally desiring a fulfillment that his intellectual nature is incapable of supplying on its own.⁴ St. Thomas does not mean to prove the possibility of the vision of God, or the fact that God has destined us to it, for this we know only from Revelation. His concern here⁵ is to show that if *perfect* beatitude is ever to be attained by rational creatures, it must essentially lie in the vision of God.⁶

Aspiration to See God in the Great Philosophers and Fathers of the Church

It is interesting to see that St. Thomas's argument that we have a natural desire to see God was anticipated in some ways by the greatest philosophers, despite their lack of knowledge of God's Revelation which promises precisely that vision as our final end.

A beautiful expression of this aspiration of the human heart to see God is given by Plato in the *Symposium*, in which the priestess Diotima speaks to Socrates about the vision of *Beauty in itself*. She arouses the desire to see God, identified with the Idea of Beauty, by leading her listeners to ascend from physical to moral beauty, until they arrive at the very Idea of Beauty:

"And if, my dear Socrates," Diotima went on, "man's life is ever worth the living, it is when he has attained this vision of the very soul of beauty. And once you have seen it, you will never be seduced again by the charm of gold, of dress. . . . But if it were given to man to gaze on beauty's very self—unsullied, unalloyed, and freed from the mortal taint that haunts the frailer loveliness of flesh and blood—if, I say, it were given to man to see the heavenly beauty face to face, would you call his," she asked me, "an unenviable life, whose eyes had been opened to the vision, and who had gazed upon it in true contemplation until it had become his own forever?"⁷

3 See ST I, q. 12, a. 4.

4 This paradox was stressed by Henri de Lubac in *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Crossroad Pub. / Herder and Herder, 1998).

5 In SCG III, ch. 50 and ST I-II, q. 3, a. 8.

6 See the vigorous statement of this conclusion in SCG III, ch. 50, n. 2283: "No desire leads so high as the desire to understand the truth. For all our other desires, whether of delight or anything else that is desired by man, can come to rest in other things. However, the afore-mentioned desire does not come to rest until it reaches God, the supreme foundation and maker of all things. For this reason Wisdom aptly says: "I dwelt in high places, and my throne was in a pillar of cloud" (Sir 24:4). And in Proverbs 9:3 it is said that 'She has sent out her maids to call from the highest places in the town.' Let them therefore be ashamed who seek the beatitude of man, so highly situated, in base things."

7 *Symposium* 211d-e, translated by Michael Joyce, in *Plato: Collected Dialogues* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), 563.

Another allusion to the natural desire to see God in Plato is found in his famous allegory of the cave in book 7 of the *Republic*, where he speaks of God by analogy with the visible sun, whereas sensible things are like the shadows cast on the walls of a cave. We, who are like cave-dwellers, are exhorted to turn ourselves around and seek knowledge of the light of the sun directly, rather than content ourselves with shadows. In other words, we should seek direct vision of God in Himself, rather than finite participations of His Goodness reflected in the shadows of our cave. Plato even uses the expression “beatific vision” to describe the object of the contemplation of the wise: “You must not wonder that those who attain to this beatific vision are unwilling to descend to human affairs; for their souls are ever hastening into the upper world where they desire to dwell.”⁸ The greatness of Plato’s vision is the audacity of his desire. The weakness, perhaps, is an insufficient recognition of the impossibility of the power of philosophy to fulfill that desire.

Aristotle also, in the beginning of the first book of his *Metaphysics*, speaks of a natural desire to know God. Whereas Plato presents it as a desire to see Beauty and Goodness itself, Aristotle (and St. Thomas after him) presents it as a natural desire to know the First Cause of all things, who is God—the First Truth, from which all being, truth, and goodness derive. The formulations of Plato and Aristotle complement each other.

By way of introducing the science of metaphysics, Aristotle analyzes the highest wisdom that man can attain. He thus explores the natural desire of the mind to ascend to knowledge of the first causes and principles of things, and thus to knowledge of God. The natural desire to know causes in general naturally leads the mind to seek knowledge of the First Cause. This knowledge, which is the crowning of metaphysics or wisdom, is characterized as a divine science, centering on God, and ultimately proper to God alone.⁹ Aristotle does not explicitly draw the conclu-

8 *Republic* 7.517b-c: “In the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally either in public or private life must have his eye fixed. . . . You must not wonder that those who attain to this beatific vision are unwilling to descend to human affairs; for their souls are ever hastening into the upper world where they desire to dwell.” Translated by Benjamin Jowett, in *The Republic* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2000), 179-80.

9 *Metaphysics* 1.2.983a5-10. See St. Thomas’s *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, trans. John Rowan (Notre Dame IN: Dumb Ox Books, 1995), n. 64, p. 22: “Such a science which is about God and first causes, either God alone has or, if not He alone, at least He has it in the highest degree. Indeed, He alone has it in a perfectly comprehensive way. And He has it in the highest degree inasmuch as it is also had by men in their own way, although it is not had by them as a human possession, but as something borrowed from Him.”

sion that man naturally desires not only knowledge of God, but also knowledge of God’s *very essence*. That unstated desire is implicit in the force of Aristotle’s principles, but its audacious reach was blocked by the recognition, better seen by Aristotle than Plato, of its disproportionality and natural impossibility for man’s unaided powers. To understand God’s essence can only be naturally proportionate to God.

In the second century, St. Justin Martyr alludes to a natural desire to see God in the account of his conversion in his *Dialogue with Trypho*. He actually had a double conversion—first to natural or philosophical wisdom, and then to the supernatural wisdom of the Christian faith:

“In this troubled state of mind the thought occurred to me to consult the Platonists, whose reputation was great. Thus it happened that I spent as much time as possible in the company of a wise man who was highly esteemed by the Platonists and who had but recently arrived in our city. . . . The perception of incorporeal things quite overwhelmed me and the Platonic theory of ideas added wings to my mind, so that in a short time I imagined myself a wise man. So great was my folly that I fully expected immediately to gaze upon God, for this is the goal of Plato’s philosophy.”¹⁰

Among the Fathers, St. Augustine most powerfully develops the theme of the natural desire to see God. He expresses it in several passages of the *Confessions*. In book VII of the *Confessions*, he recounts how he himself also conceived this desire by reading Neo-platonic works, although at that moment his desire remained inefficacious.

From this it follows that the mind somehow knew the unchangeable, for, unless it had known it in some way, it never would have so certainly preferred the unchangeable to the changeable. And thus with the flash of a trembling glance, it arrived at *that which is*. I saw then your invisible attributes, understood through the things that are made. But I was not able to sustain my gaze. Thrown back in weakness, I returned to my accustomed ways, taking nothing with me except a loving memory, desiring that which I had caught the fragrance of, but was not yet able to eat.¹¹

After his Baptism, the desire was “converted,” as it were, and given new force and efficacy by grace, faith, hope, and charity.¹² This desire, perfected by grace and enlightened by Revelation, is masterfully developed in his conversation with St. Monica in Ostia before her death:

When the day on which she was to depart from this life was near at hand (Thou knewest the day; we did not), I believe it happened by Thy management, in Thy hidden ways,

10 St. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 2, trans. Thomas Falls (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1948), 150–151.

11 *Confessions* 7.17.

12 The theme of the natural desire to see God was carried into the Middle Ages in its Augustinian form. See, for example, Hugh of Saint Victor, *Commentary on the Celestial Hierarchy of St. Dionysius the Areopagite*, bk. 2 (PL 175, 955).

that she and I were standing alone, leaning on a window. . . . We were talking to each other alone, very sweetly, “forgetting what is behind, straining forward to what is before.”¹³ Between us, . . . we tried to find out what the eternal life of the saints would be, which “eye has not seen nor ear heard, nor hast it entered into the heart of man.”¹⁴ But, we also yearned with the mouth of our heart for the supernal flood from “Thy Fountain, the Fountain of Life which is with Thee,”¹⁵ so that, having been sprinkled from it as much as our capacity would permit, we might think in some way about such a great thing.

When our talk had reached the conclusion that the greatest delight of the bodily senses, in the brightest bodily light, was not capable of comparison with the joy of that life and, moreover, did not seem worthy of being mentioned, then, lifting ourselves up in the yet greater ardor of our feeling toward the Selfsame, we advanced step by step through all bodily things up to the sky itself, from which the sun, moon, and stars shine out over the earth, and we ascended still farther in our interior cogitation, conversation, and admiration of Thy works and came to our own minds.

Then, we transcended them, so that we might touch that realm of unfailing abundance in which Thou feedest Israel eternally on the food of truth. There, life is wisdom, through which all these things come into being, both those which have been and those which will be. Yet, it is not made, but is as it was, and thus it will be forever. Or, rather, to have been in the past, or to be in the future, do not pertain to it, but simply *to be*, for it is eternal. To be in the past, or to be in the future, is not to be eternal.

And, while we are so speaking and panting for it, we did touch it a little, with an all-out thrust of our hearts. We sighed and left behind “the first fruits of the spirit”¹⁶ which were bound there, and we came back to the clattering of our mouths, where the spoken word has its beginning and end. How is it like Thy Word, our Lord, “remaining ageless in Itself and renewing all things.”¹⁷

St. Augustine then goes on to try to describe what they were yearning after—to see God not through any created images, but in Himself, above all images and created things:

We were saying then: “Suppose, for any person, that the tumult of the flesh be silenced—silenced, the images of earth and water and air; silenced, the very heavens; silenced, his very soul unto himself, then, if he pass beyond himself, ceasing to think of himself by means of images—silenced, his dreams and imaginary apparitions, every tongue and every sign, and whatever comes to be by transition, if he be granted this complete silence (since, if one can hear, all these things are saying: “We did not make ourselves, but He Who endureth forever made us”¹⁸)—and if, having said this, they

become quiet, once they have lifted up his ear to Him who made them; then, if He alone speak, not through them, but through Himself, so that we might hear His Word, not through fleshly speech, or through the voice of an angel, or through the crash of thunder, or through the darkness of a similitude,¹⁹ but *Himself* whom we love in these things—and if we might hear Him, without these things, just as now we reached out and, with the speed of thought, touched the Eternal Wisdom abiding above all things—and if this could continue, and other visions of a much lower type were taken away, and this one vision were to enrapture, absorb, and enclose its beholder in inner joys, so that life might forever be like that instant of understanding, for which we had sighed, then surely, this is the meaning of: “Enter into the joy of Thy Master”²⁰²¹

A fortnight or so later, St. Monica passed on to her eternal reward, to see the vision she and her son so longed for.

Grace Transforms the Natural Desire to See God into a Supernatural Desire

St. Augustine’s *Confessions* beautifully demonstrates the transformation that the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity bring to the desire to see God. What St. Augustine only dimly glimpsed and inefficaciously wished before his conversion, he afterwards believed clearly, hoped firmly and eagerly, and ardently loved.

The conditional and inefficacious natural desire to see God that a philosopher might have is transformed by the acceptance of Revelation and the aid of actual grace into an *unconditional* desire:²² an act of the theological virtue of hope. When Revelation is received through the virtue of faith, the vision of God is conceived and desired in a new way. The object of the natural desire is simply “essential knowledge of the First Cause.” It does not know what it asks.²³ The object of the desire based on Revelation

19 See 1 Cor 13:12.

20 Mt 25:21–23.

21 Augustine, *Confessions* 9.10.25, p. 252–253.

22 This is beautifully stated by de Lubac in *Surnaturel*, 483: “The entire problem of the spiritual life is to liberate this desire, and then to transform it: a radical conversion, *metanoia* without which there is no entrance into the Kingdom.” Jacques Maritain also alludes to the supernatural transformation of the natural desire to see God, worked by faith and grace, in *An Introduction to the Basic Problem of Moral Philosophy*, trans. C. Borgerhoff (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1990), 114–117. This transformation of the natural desire to see God worked by Revelation, has been pointed out by Peter Pagan-Aguir, in “St. Thomas Aquinas and Human Finality: Paradox or *Mysterium Fidei*?” *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 398. See Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God*, 431–435, 443–447.

23 Jacques Maritain makes a profound comparison between the natural desire to see God and the request of the sons of Zebedee and their mother to have them sit on Jesus’s right and left. As they asked for something of which they had no proper understanding, so the natural desire to see God is directed to something that transcends what the intellect can naturally conceive. See Maritain, *Approaches to God* (New York: Harper, 1954), 97: “For to know the First Cause in its essence . . . is to know the First Cause otherwise than as First Cause.”

13 Phil 3:13.

14 1 Cor 2:9.

15 Ps 35:10.

16 Rom 8:23.

17 St. Augustine, *Confessions* 9.10.23–24, trans. V. J. Bourke (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1953), 250–252.

18 Ps 99:3–5.

is seeing the God who has revealed Himself as Father, Redeemer, spouse of the soul, ineffable communion of three divine Persons, and who has promised that we shall see Him face to face if we correspond to His grace. On the basis of this Revelation, through the aid of actual grace, we can make acts of hope and charity. These acts then lead us to seek Baptism, by which we receive an abiding inclination directly for the vision of God, through the gift of sanctifying grace. After we become sons of God in Baptism, our desire to see God is transformed from a philosophical quest into the desire of an adopted son to see the face of his Father in heaven.

St. Thomas In his commentary on 2 Corinthians 5:5, St. Thomas observes that God gives us both “natural and supernatural desires.” He gives us “natural desires when he gives a natural spirit belonging to human nature. . . . He gives us supernatural desires when He infuses in us a supernatural spirit, namely, the Holy Spirit.” The natural desire to see God is not sufficient to naturally incline or order us to our supernatural end. For that purpose we need the supernatural virtue of charity, which flows from sanctifying grace by which we are mysteriously made somehow proportionate to God, having become “partakers in the divine nature” (2 Pt 1:4).

The insufficiency of the natural desire to see God to order us to our supernatural end, however, does not mean that this desire is something useless or vain. On the contrary, it is tremendously important, because it leads us to recognize that only the promise given to us in the Gospel to see God face to face will fully and perfectly satisfy the dynamism of the human intellect and will. It thus serves, first, as a great argument of fittingness for the supernatural end promised to us by Christ. Secondly, it is a desire that is capable of being transformed, from inefficacious and conditional, to absolute and efficacious, through the work of grace and faith.

Aspiration to See God in Scripture

Although the promise of the vision of God properly belongs to the fullness of Revelation brought by the Messiah, the prophets of the Old Testament not infrequently express the desire for the full vision of the glory of God. In some sense we could say that this ardent longing lies at the heart of the aspirations of Israel. Through the gift of sanctifying grace, God implanted this supernatural desire in the hearts of the men and women of God of the Old Covenant.

A classic text expressing this desire is found in Exodus 33:18–23: “Moses said, ‘I pray thee, show me thy glory.’” The desire to see the glory of God is a supernatural desire aroused by Moses’s deeply intimate prayer on Mt. Sinai and in the Tent of Meeting, in which he conversed with God as with a friend. What was God’s response to Moses’s prayer? It was a gracious refusal, for the time of full redemption had not yet come:

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. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live.” And the Lord said, “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock; 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; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

In other words, Moses did not receive the full vision of God that we hope to receive in heaven, but rather some angelic vision—something intermediate between the hiddenness of God in this life and the fullness of vision in heaven. In that sense it was a vision of God’s back rather than of His face. The highest kind of knowledge of God in this life is knowledge of what God is *not*. He is not a body (idol); He is not divided or multiple (and thus He is one); He is not finite or limited, but infinite and omnipotent; He is not ignorant, unfaithful, or unforgiving, but omniscient, infinitely faithful and forgiving; etc. But we cannot yet see *how* He is these things and *who* He is in His inner life. This knowledge of God’s “back,” as it were, does not fully reveal God’s infinite glory. Therefore, the vision of God’s back does not satisfy completely the aspiration of the saints. Wisdom in the Old Testament says that “Those who eat me will hunger for more, and those who drink me will thirst for more” (Sirach 24:21).

This hunger and thirst for the face of God is beautifully manifested in the Psalms. Psalm 42 gives classic expression to this deepest aspiration of Israel:

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God. My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me continually, “Where is your God?”

The same aspiration is found in Psalm 63:

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where no water is. I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.

In these psalms we see that a foretaste of the vision of God was seen in the worship of Israel in the Temple. The glory of God was even made visible to human eyes in the cloud of glory that filled the Temple. Nevertheless, God’s presence in the Temple did not completely satisfy Israel’s aspiration, as we see in these psalms. On the contrary, the worship nourished and increased the desire for the face of God. Israel, especially in the later centuries, understood that full satisfaction of this desire could only come in the world to come (spoken of in Hebrew as the *olam haba*). The prayer of Israel is that God give the vision of His face to the righteous. Psalm 17 closes with the prayer: “As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when

I awake, I shall be satisfied with beholding your form” (Ps 17:15). Likewise, Psalm 27:8 says: “My heart says to thee, ‘Thy face, Lord, do I seek, ’” (Ps 27:8), and Psalm 11 closes with the words: “For the Lord is righteous, he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face” (Ps 11: 7).

What does it mean to behold the face of God or the form of God? This refers to what theology speaks of as the beatific vision.²⁴

Revelation Promises the Beatific Vision

What the prophets of the Old Testament express as an aspiration, is promised to us directly in the New Testament. In fact, this promise is the very substance of the Gospel, which means “good tidings.” The essential good tidings brought by the Messiah is the promise that we shall see God, and this vision will be the very substance of eternal life. In the beatitudes, Jesus promises: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall *see God*” (Mt 5:8). He is speaking not of a vision of the physical eye, but of a perfect understanding of the mind and heart. Jesus also speaks of the beatific vision when He says, in His priestly prayer (Jn 17:3): “And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.” Eternal life consists in knowing God perfectly, as He knows Himself.

John writes in his first letter: “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). To know God as He knows Himself is to be made like God. Thus John says that we shall be like God when we see Him as He is.

St. Paul speaks of this in 1 Corinthians 13:9-12:

For [now] our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. . . . For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.

In this life we can know God only through finite concepts, which fall infinitely short of the divine reality. This is true not only of philosophical ideas of God, but also of the higher knowledge given by faith, and even of the highest mystical illuminations received by the saints and prophets. Even when Moses spoke with God on Mt. Sinai, it was still as “in a mirror dimly,” as it was for mystics like St. Teresa of Avila and St. Ignatius in their ecstasies. For this reason, John says that “no one has ever seen God” (Jn 1:18).

In the beatific vision, on the other hand, all the dim veils of our limited concepts will be taken away, and we shall see God as He is through His own perfect Word. St. Paul

²⁴ In the New Testament, the Apostle Philip expresses the desire to see God when, after the Last Supper, he says to Jesus: “Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied” (Jn 14:8).

emphasizes that we shall know God *even as we have been known by Him*. In other words, we shall know God without the mediation of any creature.

This is expressed in a beautiful verse of Psalm 36:9: “They shall be inebriated with the plenty of thy house; and thou shalt make them drink of the torrent of thy pleasure. For with thee is the fountain of life; and in thy light we shall see light.”²⁵ We shall see and understand God’s intimate being and essence through the light of God’s own Word and the gift of glory.

Possibility of the Vision of God

Some theologians and philosophers have thought that the vision of God is impossible because it involves a contradiction in asserting that a finite mind can grasp the essence of the infinite God.²⁶ St. Thomas is concerned to offer arguments that the beatific vision is not impossible. He does so by demonstrating the existence of a natural desire to see God and using the principle that natural desire cannot be in vain.²⁷ If the rational creature *naturally* desires to see God, how can one assert that the omnipotence of God is incapable of realizing such a desire, of which He Himself is the ultimate cause? I hold that this argument is an excellent argument of fittingness. It is unreasonable to think that the human mind is intrinsically incapable of attaining that which is the ultimate focus and pinnacle of all its *natural* desires.

This argument is still more forceful with regard to supernatural desires that arise from faith and grace. In his youthful commentary on the *Sentences*, St. Thomas argues the possibility of the beatific vision not from a natural desire independent of grace and Revelation, but from the “desire of the saints.”²⁸ As seen above, several psalms and other Old Testament texts give expression to a desire to see the face of God. God’s grace is clearly the source of those supernatural desires. He would not excite them in us if He did not mean to satisfy them, provided that we cooperate with grace in attaining our end.

²⁵ Douay-Rheims version, in which it is numbered Ps 35:9–10.

²⁶ For a discussion of the Greek Fathers and Byzantine theologians who assert the impossibility for a created intellect to see the essence of God, see Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God*, trans. Asheleigh Moorhouse (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1983). For the 13th Latin century context, see Dondaine, “L’objet et le ‘medium’ de la vision béatifique chez les théologiens du XIII^e siècle,” *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 19 (1952): 60–99.

²⁷ St. Thomas, *ST I*, q. 12, a. 1 and *SCG III*, ch. 50.

²⁸ St. Thomas, *Supplementum*, q. 92, a.1, *sed contra*: “Further, The desire of the saints cannot be altogether frustrated. Now the common desire of the saints is to see God in His essence, according to Exod. 33:13, *Show me Thy glory*; Ps. 79:20, *Show Thy face and we shall be saved*; and Jo. 14:8, *Show us the Father and it is enough for us*. Therefore the saints will see God in His essence.”

The Beatific Vision Transcends Our Natural Desire: 1 Corinthians 2:9

While stressing that man has a natural desire to see God, St. Thomas surprisingly also emphasizes that the beatific vision infinitely transcends natural desire. He holds this to be a revealed truth, and in support of this he frequently cites 1 Corinthians 2:9: “Eye has not seen nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man, what things God has prepared for those who love him.”²⁹

That the beatific vision transcends natural desire is a consequence of God’s transcendence. The vision of God is an unfathomable good, and thus it exceeds the desire of any creature. Furthermore, the reach of human desire is increased by Revelation and grace. Thus the natural desire of the saints obviously surpasses the desire of human nature left to itself, and even the saints can always grow in their desire, and they never desire God as much as He is worthy of being desired.³⁰

This consideration sheds light on the gratuitousness of the beatific vision.³¹ Although supremely fitting in that it alone fully satisfies natural desire, it *immeasurably transcends the very desire that it fulfills*, as well as the proportionality of human nature altogether. Thus it is totally gratuitous with respect to the notion of what is “due” to human nature as such. The notion of nature’s “due” is linked with the connatural active powers of a creature, which can never attain to God in Himself.³²

In other words, the notion of “fitting” is not the same as “due” or “proportionate.” Everything due and proportionate to human nature is fitting to it, but there can be a disproportionate fulfillment that is not due, but supremely

fitting! All supernatural gifts, both in this life and in the next, are of this kind. It is in this way that St. Thomas and other theologians show the fittingness of the sacramental system. The sacraments are not due to human nature, but their institution is still fitting to our nature.³³ In a still more profound way, the vision of God is not due to human nature, since it infinitely surpasses it, but is yet supremely fitting to it, for it alone will put to rest all our highest natural desires.

29 See *ST I-II*, q. 5, a. 5, sed contra. For a discussion of these texts that cite 1 Cor 2:9, see Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God*, (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2010), xxix, 44–45, 89–92, 411–413.

30 For the distinction of these two kinds of desire, see St. Thomas’s commentary on 2 Corinthians 5:5 (Marietti #161): “God creates in us natural and supernatural desires. He gives us natural desires when He gives us a natural spirit belonging to human nature. . . . He gives us supernatural desires when He infuses in us a supernatural spirit, namely the Holy Spirit.”

31 For a good statement of the problem, see Peter Ryan, S.J., “Fulfillment as Human in the Beatific Vision? Problems of Fittingness and Gratuity,” *The American Journal of Jurisprudence* 46 (2001): 153–163, esp. 155: “Human nature can be fulfilled in the beatific vision only if that vision is truly fitting as its fulfillment. At the same time, the beatific vision must be regarded as absolutely gratuitous, a gift over and above the gift of our natural being. Theologians have yet to offer a satisfactory explanation of how the fulfillment of human nature in the beatific vision could be both truly fitting and utterly gratuitous. Inevitably, efforts to show that the beatific vision is a fitting fulfillment for human nature undermine efforts to show that the vision is gratuitous, and vice versa.”

32 See Feingold, *Natural Desire to See God*, 223–229.

33 See *ST III*, q. 65, a. 1: “For spiritual life has a certain conformity with the life of the body.”