

ARTICLE: WHETHER THE BEATIFIC VISION WILL BE EXPERIENCED
BODILY BY THE SAINTS?

By Matt Pitts¹

Objection 1: It seems that the beatific vision will not be experienced bodily by the saints because Scripture says, “You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live,” (Exod 33:20).²

Objection 2: Further, the beatific vision will be experienced incorporeally by the saints immediately after death. For the Scripture says, “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better,” (Phil 1:23b) and “We would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:8).

Objection 3: Further, Aquinas says, “It is impossible for God to be seen by the sense of sight, or by any other sense, or faculty of the sensitive power.”³

On the contrary, Scripture says, “And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another,” (Job 19:26–27).

I answer that, The beatific vision will be experienced by the saints after the resurrection and will thus be a bodily experience. Matthew Henry affirms this understanding of Job’s words when he says, “Job speaks of seeing [God] with eyes of flesh . . . the same body that died shall rise again, a glorified body.”⁴ In this way Henry connects Job’s words to both the beatific vision and the resurrection of the body. When the Apostle John says, “We know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is,” (1 John 3:2) he indicates we will see Christ upon his appearance which signifies his return.⁵ And we know that at his return the dead shall be raised imperishable as Paul teaches (1 Cor 15:22–23, 52). Likewise, the Apostle John says, “They will see his face, and his name will be

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²All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

³Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a. 12, 3.

⁴*Matthew Henry’s Commentary*, ed. Leslie Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 544.

⁵Note that Christ’s appearance and his coming (return) are used in parallel and thus synonymously earlier in the same letter: “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,” (1 John 2:28). It is also worth noting that in this article I am assuming rather than attempting to prove that Christ is God in the flesh and therefore to see Christ in this passage is to see God.

on their foreheads,” (Rev 22:4) after the resurrection has occurred (Rev 20:4–5, 11–13).

Augustine says, “I say that the saints will see God *in* the body; but whether they will see *through* the eyes of the body, in the same way as we now see the sun, moon, stars, sea and earth and all things on the earth – that is no easy question.”⁶ Yet he goes on to say, “It is possible, it is indeed most probable, that we shall then see the physical bodies of the new heaven and new earth in such a fashion as to observe God in utter clarity and distinctness, seeing him present everywhere. . . . In the future life, wherever we turn the spiritual eyes of our bodies we shall discern, *by means of our bodies*, the incorporeal God.”⁷

Reply to Objection 1: Scripture’s statement that “man shall not see me and live” does not draw a distinction between man seeing God in an incorporeal state as opposed to a corporeal state. Rather, it rules out man seeing God in his current sinful state. The remedy that makes the beatific vision in the flesh possible then is salvation from this sinful state and specifically that part of salvation we call glorification. Glorification includes the redemption of the body about which the Apostle Paul says, “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies,” (Rom 8:23). In this glorified state the saints are able to behold their God and Savior in the flesh.

Reply to Objection 2: Scripture does speak of the promise of God’s presence immediately after death for the saints (for example, in Luke 23:43 Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise,”) and yet this does not deny the truth that the saints will also see God after the resurrection as shown above.⁸ Aquinas argues that the absence of the body does not make beatitude impossible since “it is evident [from 2 Cor 5:6] that the souls of the saints, separated from their bodies, walk by sight, seeing the essence of God, wherein is true happiness [beatitude].”⁹ So the saints do enjoy the beatific vision immediately after death

⁶Augustine, *City of God*, XXII.29. Emphasis in original. This section was drawn to my attention by the final footnote of Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics* vol. 4.

⁷Augustine, *City of God*, XXII.29. Emphasis added.

⁸John T. McNeil says, “In attacking the doctrine of ‘the sleep of souls,’ [Calvin] refers to the heresy of Pope John XXII (1316–1334) that the souls of departed saints are not permitted to see the Beatific Vision until the resurrection.” Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 996n12.

⁹Aquinas, I-II, 4, 5. Emphasis removed. This passage and the following passage were brought to my attention by Hans Boersma, *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 421n92.

and yet Aquinas adds that “after the body has been resumed [in the resurrection], happiness increases not in intensity, but in extent.”¹⁰

Reply to Objection 3: Aquinas does not deny that the beatific vision will be experienced bodily but rather affirms this when he says, “Man in the flesh after the resurrection will see God.”¹¹ He clarifies this when he says, “The glorified eyes will see God, as now our eyes see the life of another. But life is not seen with the corporeal eye, as a thing in itself visible, but as the indirect object of the sense; which indeed is not known by sense, but at once, together with sense, by some other cognitive power. But that the divine presence is known by the intellect immediately on the sight of, and through, corporeal things, happens from two causes—viz. from the perspicuity of the intellect, and from the refulgence of the divine glory infused into the body after its renovation.”¹² This means that the beatific vision will be experienced in the body though this sight is ultimately received by the intellect and only indirectly through the glorified eye.

¹⁰Aquinas, I-II, 4, 5. Emphasis removed. I am grateful to Matthew Barrett for help clarifying this section.

¹¹Aquinas, Ia. 12, 3.

¹²Aquinas, Ia. 12, 3.