

# To Know and Not See

Christ and No More | Ch. 3

I wrote in the last chapter that hope, which is faith looking forward, is not the greatest force in the soul of mankind. Scripture agrees: “So now,” it states, “faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”<sup>1</sup> Paul does not offer his opinion unaccompanied by explanation—love is greater than faith and hope because although all three abide now, in a short time faith and hope will stop abiding, and only love will remain. “Love never ends.”<sup>2</sup>

Faith and hope are like the many minor happinesses promised to us in the future, such as painlessness and fearlessness, the death of death, and a new and perfect earth on which to live forever. All of these form the environment in which love can best live and breathe. Presently, faith too is an environment for love; it is the ground upon which love must walk because Christ is invisible. One day Christ will be visible and deeply known by us, and faith will at that time step aside, its duty done. Again hope, which is faith looking forward to eternity, will no longer be needed when we reach eternity; in heaven we will not find felicity from our longing to be with the Christ we love, but we will find our joy in the Christ we love himself, with no need for hope to bring him to us. In each instance love is the display and all else is the display case, the environment.

When I wrote the last chapter about the joy which comes from hope in Christ, I was pointing to only one part of love. To hope in Christ is to love Christ in such a way that you long to be with him. My goal in this chapter is to step back from the narrow view of *love as hope* and to consider the broader concept, *love in itself*. I intend to show that, as hope in Christ frees us from the need of any other hope, so love for Christ frees us from the need of anything else whatsoever. The satisfaction that comes from love for Christ is the satisfaction for which the human soul was crafted, and it alone can quench the existential thirst of mankind.

I find the same espoused in the passage we have already seen, from Peter’s first letter. In the middle of his discussion of hope, the apostle interjects: “Though you have not seen [Christ], you love him.” His readers rejoice with an inexpressible joy because they love Christ; they would not hope in Christ otherwise, since hope is just one way of loving. They love Christ, and therefore they find joy.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 13:13 (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> V. 8.

## Love for Christ

You may be surprised to hear “love for Christ” rather than “the love of Christ” touted as the missing ingredient in our joy. Is it not the love that comes *from* Christ which satisfies the soul? I must respond that were this the case, every Christian reading these words would be equally and completely satisfied, with no sense of discontent. The love of Christ belongs to his people in full measure, at least as far as we can measure it. Why then, if the love of Christ is all we need, do we go on hungry in our souls? I believe we go on hungry because, while we have perfect love from Christ, we do not reciprocate that love perfectly. We lack in our love for Christ.

Turn your eye again to Stephen from the last chapter, and let us contemplate his life. For some number of years he lived under the wrath of God, without an honest faith in Christ. At that time, did Christ love Stephen? “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”<sup>3</sup> Certainly Christ loved him. What joy did Stephen in his unconverted state receive from Christ’s love? None whatsoever. But then he entered a converted state and the love Christ bore for the man was made clear. What joy did Stephen then derive from his Savior’s love? Much—but not all that could be drawn from the well. Some days more, and some days less. If Stephen’s joy depended upon the love of Christ alone, his fluctuations would suggest a change in Christ’s love, which was not the case.

Finally Stephen was stoned and his spirit received by the Lord Jesus into glory. Will we assert that Jesus loved the martyr more now than ever before? I suppose it possible, but it does not well account for the perfect joy that every believer enters into when they die, whether they die in obedience or disobedience.<sup>4</sup> The point of all is this: Our joy in Christ waxes and wanes not on the basis of Christ’s love for us, but on the basis of our love for Christ. If you are a true Christian, you may this moment feel little joy from the love of Christ; yet if you love Christ strongly, I guarantee you feel a strong joy also. When you hope in Christ, it is your hope that affords joy; when you love Christ, it is your love that makes happy.

Lest anyone recoil at the thought of building their joy on the strength of their own love, let me add the passage that perfects the argument: “We love because he first loved us.”<sup>5</sup> Love happens when the will is inclined toward something; for we who believe, the love of Christ for us was set

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<sup>3</sup> Rom. 5:8.

<sup>4</sup> I am aware that Jonathan Edwards has written about the different degrees of love believers experience from Christ, even in heaven. I do not mean to contradict him; my point at present is that the love of Christ for believers does not automatically satisfy them. They must love Christ in return and even, in a sense, love his love.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Jn. 4:19.

before our view by faith, and when we saw the love of Christ for us among his other perfections God opened our heart to love Christ in return. Our wills, once set like stone against the wooings of the Savior, now softened and became alive. Our hearts became flesh and began to beat for Christ. When faith was granted to your soul you saw Christ for the first time, and you loved what you saw. The demons see in some sense—they believe—and yet they do not love what they see, so their faith means nothing, accomplishes nothing. You believed and loved the sight, and your love radiated joy into every chasm of your being. Now you carry on by faith—the more you see by faith of Christ's love for you, the more you love him, and the more you love Christ, the more joy you experience. Your love is not the most important love, do not get me wrong—in fact, yours is the weaker party in the dance. It is just that Christ's love is set and secure; yours changes. Therefore if you find yourself without the joy that comes from love, you know the lack of love must be on your end and not on his.

You may think of the situation in this way. Love made up the whole happiness of the Trinity from eternity past—the delight of every member in himself and in the others was all the happiness there ever could be—and our highest joy consists in nothing but entering into that Trinitarian love. Being loved is not the highest joy you can experience, not by itself; loving the matchless Christ is, for that perfects the circle. When perfect love from Christ meets perfect love to Christ, then we are within the eternal happiness of the Triune God and are perfectly satisfied there.

Why should we concern ourselves with hair-splitting points of doctrine like this? Because you may be tempted to feel within yourself, and to muse in your quieter and undefended moments, that compared to the glamor and the pleasures of the world, Christ really seems a stale competitor. Of course you would not say that! You are Christians, after all. But a little leaven leavens the whole lump, and the tiny, decomposing fly fouls up the entire bottle of perfume. The small and subtle thought festers underneath the surface and only shows itself in the most important moments of decision—when you choose athletics over fellowship on a Sunday morning, for example, or sell your integrity for an affair. You see your options—Christ or the world—and when the pressure of the moment appears you choose the world.

I contend that the choice is not an accident. It is that small and festering doubt finally showing itself and spoiling the soup. If I am to succeed at all in my desire of seeing you surrender all else for Christ, to live a satisfied life with Christ and no more, then the doubt must be identified and destroyed. And because it is a subtle doubt that masterfully justifies itself, we must consider our convictions more closely and carefully—we must, in other words, split hairs.

If you do not find Christ as satisfying as I present him to be, do not worry! The lack is not in Christ; he really is satisfying enough, and much more so. He really can sustain your happiness all by himself and always. If you do not feel your happiness sustained, the lack is in yourself. What wonderful news! His perfection is unalterable. But your love alters, falters, doubts, grows faint. If you want to find your all in Jesus Christ, therefore, you must address the coldness of your heart toward him. Love is the most powerful force among men and women; if your love for Christ, the greatest object, catches fire, you will find a joy inexpressible and full of glory.

## The unseen Christ

So then, let us return to Peter's readers and consider their satisfaction with the Savior. Notice that their love for Christ is of a peculiar sort, which will be instructive for us. "Though you have not seen him," Peter writes, "you love him." The first step we shall take in stirring up our affections is to consider what it means to love an invisible friend, "though you have not seen him."

If my memory does not fail me, I have heard in conversation more than once a notion like this: "Christ is of course all we need; but God has made us for human relationships, and there is something important about having a human friend or friends with you in the body." If the person is speaking about romance, they might point to that passage in Genesis, "It is not good for man to be alone." I do not deny the point, and I even agree with that part of this attitude which longs for fellowship with the people of God. We were created for such fellowship.

But there is another part to the attitude which is simply false. Sometimes these statements are made from a heart that believes, though may not say, "It is good to know Christ, but in this world it is better to know someone I can see and touch." That is the suggestion, and I do not think it a preposterous one—but I do think it false. Some of modern psychology has its version of the same idea, best captured in a 1943 paper by Abraham Maslow called "A Theory of Human Motivation." Maslow posited that no person can live up to his or her full potential, can in his words "self-actualize," unless several conditions are met. For example, a person must have basic needs and comforts, must have safety, must have respect. And among these "needs" is the need for human love and friendship. Without this, you cannot really live.<sup>6</sup>

That is not the teaching of Scripture. Paul stands in stark contrast to pop psychology when he dares to say,

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<sup>6</sup> William Kremer and Claudia Hammond, "Abraham Maslow and the pyramid that beguiled business," *BBC.com*, The British Broadcasting Corporation (accessed June 7, 2018; Sept. 1, 2013).

Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.<sup>7</sup>

Our interest just now is in the question, “How does Christ strengthen us to be content, or satisfied, in absolutely every circumstance? How can we be joyful without any of our other hopes or desires being fulfilled?” And the answer begins, “He satisfies us with himself,” and it continues, “We are satisfied with himself when we love him.” I cannot help but conclude from Scripture that knowing Christ, even an unseen Christ, is so much better than knowing anyone else that, were it necessary for you to know no one else at all, you could still be perfectly happy with Christ alone, Christ and no more.

I think you will agree; but the underlying doubt lies in that one word, “unseen.” God is not unaware of our infirmities, that it is hard for us to imagine full satisfaction from a friendship with an invisible friend. God knows we will object; so he objects to our objection with the words of Peter that we have been returning to again and again: “Though you have not seen him, you love him.” But surely this love for the unseen Christ is not enough to satisfy us by itself, right? The apostle continues, “Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.” If you lost every other joy from every other friendship, and were left with only this one, this inexpressible and glorious joy, you would not be disappointed.

The mind that thirsts for Christ may now say: “Very well, I am convinced I can be satisfied in Christ alone, and that knowing him is better than knowing any other. But how does this practically play itself out tomorrow, when I am lying on my bed alone and lonely? If I see a roommate or a spouse enter the room, I sense an immediate joy; but I never see Christ enter the room. He is invisible. If I talk to him, he does not reply in a way I can hear. How do I love him and know him in a practical way?” The question is fair and Scripture answers it: “Though you do not now see him,” there is the difficulty, “you believe in him,” there is the answer to the difficulty. If love for Christ satisfies, how can you love Christ when he is invisible? The answer is, “By faith.”

But the hungry mind wants more than an abstract answer—it wants to know what faith looks like tomorrow, when it is lonely. And my aim is to provide a concrete vision for the hungry mind, to show what it means to love the invisible Christ in deed, and not in word only. Therefore I wish to make two points—the first will comprise the rest of this chapter, and the second will comprise the whole of the next two chapters. I hope

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<sup>7</sup> Phil. 4:11-13.

that together they will provide you an appealing picture of what your life might look like if it were bursting with real, daily, practical love for Christ.

## The faith of friendships

The first point I wish to make is aimed at that subtle doubt about the difference between a friendship with Christ and a friendship with a “real,” visible friend. Is it really better to have a friend in the flesh than to have Christ as your friend? Let me answer like this: the difference between a visible and an invisible friend is not nearly so great as you imagine.

Consider for a moment the closest mortal friend you have—perhaps your spouse, or someone else. The benefit this friend appears to have compared to Christ is that this friend can be seen and heard and touched. For this friendship to flourish you only need eyes and ears and hands; you do not need faith. Or do you? Allow me a question that may seem silly: how do you know your best friend is not a spy of the Cuban government, who has only befriended you to learn your secrets and relay them to Cuba? You may answer, “I know he’s not a Cuban spy because he isn’t Cuban.” But wouldn’t it make the most sense for Cuba to recruit spies who are not Cuban, to throw you off? “But,” you say, “if she were a spy, why have I never seen her correspond with that government?” Because a good spy never would let you see that. “Why would he spend so much time with me and act so kind toward me?” To deceive you into divulging your secrets!

The example is extreme, but it illustrates my first point—namely, that every meaningful relationship requires faith in something invisible. In the case of Christ, you must believe without seeing his body; in the case of every other friend, you must believe without seeing their intentions. You cannot ever see or hear or touch the intentions of your closest human friends; for all you know, they may be spies. But if you believed them to be spies, you could not have a meaningful friendship with them founded upon trust. So the only way you have a meaningful friendship is by a leap of faith—you believe their intentions are good. You cannot prove that under a microscope or beyond the shadow of a doubt, but you believe it and therefore you find joy in that friendship.

The only difference then in your relationship with Christ is that, rather than just believing in Christ’s friendly intentions, you must also believe in his existence. This may seem a large difference, but it is not—it requires only one more step of faith. Every day you exercise your faith in a thousand invisible thoughts in the heads of your friends; to love Christ deeply, you need exercise faith in only one more thing, in his existence.

And to believe in his existence requires no more a leap of you than to believe in the thoughts and intentions of other friends. In fact, you will

use precisely the same criteria. If I were to continue my interrogation of you concerning the spy-status of your best friend on earth, you would eventually concede, “Ok, I cannot irrefutably prove he is not a spy. But I do have some reason to believe he is not. First, I believe in the existence of his invisible, friendly intentions because of the words he speaks. Over a long course of time I have found them to be consistently in favor of friendly intentions; if he were a spy, I would expect some mistaken contradictions by now, but the even tenor of his words have betrayed a kindly heart toward me. Secondly, I believe in these unseen intentions because of the actions of his body. They too have consistently demonstrated a sincere mind that desires my good.”

Now consider your relationship with the unseen Christ. There is only one small difference—while your friend speaks mainly from the mouth located on his body, and acts by using the different parts of his body, Christ’s body is not physically present. Christ speaks through the pages of Scripture, and you apply to them the test you give to your visible friends: “Do his words show a consistency over time that suggests not only his kind intentions, but his existence?” Christ acts in your life not by the movement of his physical body, but by the movement of everything else. He is sovereignly in control of not only his own body, but of every body. He manipulates matter not with physical hands, but by his mere will. And I trust his activity for some of the same reasons that I might trust yours: “He has guided all of the events in my life in such a way that I cannot call them chance—so he exists—and in such a way that I cannot call him unkind—so his motives are friendly.”

## Conclusion

This first point begins to open up the practical side of what it means to love Christ in a real, day-to-day kind of way. I want to poison that small and subtle notion in your heart that suggests a relationship with Christ is somehow less satisfying than a relationship with someone else. Yes, faith is necessary for you to love Christ—but not much more faith is necessary than what you exercise in your other human relationships. There, you must believe in thoughts you cannot see; here, you must believe in that plus an invisible body.

The next two chapters are my second point, and they are really an extension of the first. We have seen that faith is a component of any meaningful relationship, and I mentioned in passing that our faith in Christ, like our faith in others, is built upon words and deeds. Now we ask, “What does it mean to observe the sovereign deeds of Christ in your life? And what does it mean to hear his words?” I hope I may address these questions in the next two chapters in such a way that you not only think possible, but can begin to see what a loving, satisfying relationship with Christ by faith looks like. I hope you see the reality of Christ in such a way that you love him, and that you love him in such a way that you are satisfied with Christ, and no more.