

## THE GODNESS OF GOD, PART 1: LIFE CHANGE

Hebrews 1, 2:1, 6:1-2, 12:1-4, 7-12 (NASB)

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C. S. Lewis, in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, presents us with a character named Edmund with whom we do not relate. He and his three siblings find themselves bundled off to live in a large country house during World War II to protect them from German aerial bombings in the city. It belongs to an indulgent uncle who gives them the run of the place.

As they play, Lucy, Edmund's little sister, accidentally goes through the back of an old wardrobe into a magical land called Narnia. When she comes back and rejoins the others after her great adventure, Edmund is quick to ridicule her, tease her for her story, and brand her a silly girl.

Then, while chasing Lucy, he accidentally goes through the same wardrobe into Narnia and is shocked to discover that her story is true. Edmund immediately meets the Queen of Narnia, the White Witch. In short order she exploits his selfishness and entices him with enchanted candy and stories of how she would like to make him the king of Narnia—if he would just return with all of the children! We hate him for being so gullible, for stuffing his face until the box of candy is empty, and for being willing to sacrifice his siblings for his own interests.

And then we hate him more when he returns with Lucy to the normal world and lies about what he has seen, claiming that Lucy is still being a silly girl. But soon, as the children seek to escape the house maid, they all go through the wardrobe together. Edmund's lie is revealed. Instead of apologizing he sulks and sets himself to take vengeance on the other children.

In Narnia the children meet talking beavers who begin to explain everything that is going on there. Unlike the others, Edmund is horrified to learn of Aslan, the lion, the true king of Narnia. The other children find themselves struck with the beauty of such a beast king, but Edmund is repulsed.

In this attitude of mind Edmund sneaks away from the others to seek out the White Witch, gain his promised reward for betraying his siblings, and seek his vengeance against them. He goes to her castle and meets her as she had commanded him to do. His horrible attitudes and self-deception continue unabated until his encounter with the Witch reveals that she is evil beyond imagining. He finds that he is in total bondage to her and that her plan is to cut his throat on the Great Stone Table.

What hope could there ever be for someone like Edmund? There is only one. When he is bound with ropes and the Witch's evil servant is stretching his neck so she could cut his throat, when he is totally helpless, the army of Aslan arrives to rescue him. One would think that would be enough to change Edmund, but we all know that is not true for us in the real world. Often we are happy to be rescued so we can go right back to our selfish, destructive way of life.

And then Lewis shows us the only thing which will bring life change to Edmund or to us: a personal encounter with the real King--Aslan, the great Lion. Aslan draws Edmund off to himself for a time to talk, and Edmund returns chastened, repentant, forgiving of others, and eager for reconciliation.

A. W. Tozer wrote: "...The gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the church. ...Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, 'What comes into your mind when you think about God?' we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man" (*The Knowledge of the Holy*, New York: Harper & Row, 1961, p. 9).

If Tozer and Lewis are right—that we shall only experience life change when we encounter God himself in the glory of his godness—then how shall we have that encounter?

## ENCOUNTER CHRIST TO ENCOUNTER GOD

This question is one of the main burdens of the writer to the Hebrews, who began his letter with these words: **"God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son... And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature..."** (Hebrews 1:1-2a, :3a-b).

A tree, a flower, or a mountain may tell us some things about the glory of God, but only his word tells us of Christ and his supremacy. God began this revelation as the inscripturated word until the sending of his Son to earth in the form of a baby. Then the inscripturated word and the incarnate word became fused together for all time and eternity. We encounter the fullness of the godness of God only when we encounter Christ, and that only through his word.

The writer to the Hebrews expresses a multitude of the greatest theological truths in the first chapter of his letter. He puts these two at the head of all: Christ is the radiance of God's glory, and the exact representation of his nature.

The glory of God is the shining out of who he truly is. It is his very nature in all of its manifold perfections. For example, his goodness is perfectly good, his love is perfect love, and so on with his essence and every attribute. Taken together, these things comprise his godness. When the Bible says that Christ is the exact representation or the express image of God, it does not mean that he is like a good photograph or sculpture. Christ represents the godness of God for us to encounter because he is, in fact, God.

## THE GODNESS OF THE SON

After making this radical claim, the writer to the Hebrews proves his point by expressing many ways in which the godness of the Son has been revealed. Of what does his godness consist? The following list is not exhaustive, but more than sufficient to leave us speechless:

1. Christ is the heir and owner of all things: **"...In these last days [He] has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things..."** (Hebrews 1:2b);
2. Christ is the unspeakably brilliant maker of all things: **"...Through whom also He [Christ] made**

**the world”** (Hebrews 1:2c);

3. Christ is the indispensable sustainer of all things: **“And He....upholds all things by the word of His power”** (Hebrews 1:3c);

4. Christ is the necessary and sufficient purifier: **“When He had made purification of sins...”** (Hebrews 1:3d);

5. Christ is ruler of all, already seated on his redemptive throne: **“...He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high....”** (Hebrews 1:3e);

6. Christ is preeminent in his perfect and utterly holy nature: **“...Having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they”** (Hebrews 1:4);

7. He is also the eternally-generated, coequal, consubstantial Son of God: **“For to which of the angels did He ever say, ‘YOU ARE MY SON, TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU’? And again, ‘I WILL BE A FATHER TO HIM AND HE SHALL BE A SON TO ME?’”** (Hebrews 1:5);

8. Christ is the uniquely worthy object of worship for the angels and for all created beings: **“And when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says, ‘AND LET ALL THE ANGELS OF GOD WORSHIP HIM’”** (Hebrews 1:6);

9. He is also the utterly righteous One above all others: **“But of the Son He says, ‘YOUR THRONE, O GOD, IS FOREVER AND EVER, AND THE RIGHTEOUS SCEPTER IS THE SCEPTER OF HIS KINGDOM. YOU HAVE LOVED RIGHTEOUSNESS AND HATED LAWLESSNESS...”** (Hebrews 1:8-9a);

10. He is also the happy Son of God who does all of his good pleasure: **““THEREFORE GOD, YOUR GOD, HAS ANOINTED YOU WITH THE OIL OF GLADNESS ABOVE YOUR COMPANIONS”** (Hebrews 1:9b);

11. Christ is the pre-existent Eternal One: **“And, ‘YOU, LORD, IN THE BEGINNING LAID THE FOUNDATION OF THE EARTH, AND THE HEAVENS ARE THE WORKS OF YOUR HANDS; THEY WILL PERISH, BUT YOU REMAIN; AND THEY ALL WILL BECOME OLD LIKE A GARMENT...”** (Hebrews 1:10-11);

12. Finally, Christ is the self-existent Immutable One: **““AND LIKE A MANTLE YOU WILL ROLL THEM UP; LIKE A GARMENT THEY WILL ALSO BE CHANGED. BUT YOU ARE THE SAME, AND YOUR YEARS WILL NOT COME TO AN END”** (Hebrews 1:12).

I do not know why the author to the Hebrews stops with these surpassing characteristics of our Lord Jesus Christ. Surely he has shut our mouths and the mouths of anyone who might wish to argue about the identity of Christ. But there is another reason.

## THE WAY OF THE CHANGED

God, better than any of us, knows that we need the overwhelming power of the true knowledge of Christ to bring real change into our lives. Anything less than full-strength truth will not work because the temptation to sin is so great. In the balance of the book of Hebrews the writer is careful to explain what the way of people changed by Christ looks like:

First, they pay careful attention to the truth of Christ: **“For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it”** (Hebrews 2:1). The changed heed the truth, which means that they learn it and choose behavior which matches it. And the first thing is to come to saving faith, as the writer expressed it: **“...How will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?”** (Hebrews 2:3).

You see, the audience for this Bible book was a group of people who were distracted by several competing visions. First, there was the competing vision of legalistic Judaism. It consisted of outward observances and not true heart faith. But even true Judaism, as defined by the first covenant, had been fulfilled by the coming of Messiah Jesus. From the moment of his coming, true Israelite faith has been defined as faith in Messiah. So the writer insists: Pay careful attention to the superiority of Christ over your competing Jewish vision.

But Judaism is not the only competing vision to which people pay more attention than Christ. Virtually any form of human focus can compete with our simple reliance on the crucified and resurrected Lord. There is an uncountable number of secular things to draw us away from the Lord. And dare I say that even evangelical church life can compete with Christ by supplying a false version of the highest good: effective missionality, engaging worship, social acceptance, intellectual understanding, cultural contextualization, or—you name it! Humans have an immense capacity to wander.

Ask God if you have a competing vision drawing you away from this surpassing vision of Christ. Then repent, because it must, by definition, be inferior to a true vision of Christ. Edmund wanted to be a prince and a king, and that false vision had to be slain in his life.

Secondly, the changed press on to maturity in Christ: **“Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of instruction about washings and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment”** (Hebrews 6:1-2).

It may be hard for us today to understand, but it was possible for a first century Jewish person to be looking forward to Messiah’s coming, to be repentant in heart, to accept the truth of the Old Testament Scriptures, and still not have moved into the salvation provided by the cross. The basics mentioned here were the necessary precursors to the revelation of Christ but do not represent walking in the gospel. So the writer spoke into that confusion by saying: Press on! Don’t stop here!

Paul wrote the following exhortation to the Ephesians about the goal of our equipping: **“...Until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ”** (Ephesians 4:13). The term for mature also means complete, perfect, and consummated. The true knowledge of the fullness of Christ

will take a lifetime of our best focus and effort. Let us seek a collision with the revelation of Christ daily, and let us keep pushing on to be fully formed by it.

Sometimes people ask me how to keep from stagnating in their personal faith or ministry. This is it! Press on, brothers and sisters, because you can pursue the true knowledge of Christ for a lifetime and never exhaust it.

Thirdly, the changed go all in. Hebrews 12:1 says: **“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...”** Every shred of false religion and false desire must be eradicated in the holy pursuit of Christ.

In 12:4 the writer gets tough: **“You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin...”** (Heb. 12:4). In other words, stake your whole life on the real Christ and hold nothing back. That entails a battle with sin which will require your all. A half-hearted response to the Lord will not work.

And going all in requires that we embrace his loving discipline: **“It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?”** (Hebrews 12:7). For God to deal with us as sons is not so much about biology as it is about equipping us to be full heirs. The inheritance entailed ownership and rule. We are, in fact, destined for the throne with Christ in his kingdom!

And so God goes to work shaping us into proper heirs. Our ruin by sin is great, and so our reshaping will require that we go all in with God’s transforming discipline.

Edmund wanted to be a king in a selfish way. He is easy to dislike. As readers we still hate him even after things start going very badly for him. We are thankful that we are like the three good kids and not at all like him. And unless we do some further reflection, we will have utterly missed the author’s point, which is this:

We are Edmund.

We have not honored God the way he deserves. We have not loved our people the way we should. We have done wrong things. We have failed to do the things we should have done.

What shall we do?

The way of the changed is the way of encounter with Christ as he truly is: incomparable, all-surpassing, and supreme. It is the way of redemptive transformation, since the true Christ is Redeemer. Life change comes to us as a grace gift from our King. It only comes when we realize that, in light of who he is, the only sensible thing is for us to go all in.

Do you need change in your life? I do. Don’t hold back, my friends.