



**“Face to Face: Our Eternal Joy”**

**Revelation 22:1-5**

November 15, 2009

**Dr. Robert Petterson**

**Covenant Presbyterian Church**

6926 Trail Boulevard, Naples, Florida 34108

(239) 597-3464 [www.covenantnaples.com](http://www.covenantnaples.com)

John exhausted himself in a frantic frenzy to feed the insatiable cravings that tormented his body and soul.

This son of poor Irish immigrants grew up in the hardscrabble poverty of the Brooklyn slums. When he was a child, his alcoholic father abandoned the family. His mother barely eked out a living in a subway toll booth. She dragged herself home dog tired, with little money and even less passion to spend on her neglected children. John later said, "I went to bed almost every night with hunger in the pit of my stomach and an even deeper hunger in my heart." Maybe that's why he grew up with legendary appetites for food, booze, women, money, and applause.

When his mother died, John dropped out of high school lured by the lights of Broadway. When he failed to make it on the stage, he headed to Hollywood where he landed bit parts in mostly-forgettable movies. Along the way, he discovered a knack for slapstick comedy, a flair for music, and an ability to dance with uncommon grace. He parlayed those skills into a night club act. But he was better known for the drunken parties he threw in his hotel suite. Like his father before him, John was drowning in a sea of booze. His Hollywood friends shook their heads and whispered to each other, "Our funny fat friend will never make it!"

But John did make it. His first big break came in 1949 when he got the lead role in one of television's first sitcoms: *The Life of Riley*. In 1950 he was hosting a variety show that would become television's highest rated program. Every week, millions tuned in to watch this funny fat man glide across the stage with the most beautiful dancers in America. On that hit show, he created a variety of comedic characters that would shoot him to the top of the entertainment world.

You know John by his nickname: *Jackie*—Jackie Gleason. And you remember his most beloved character, bus driver Ralph Kramden of one of the most popular shows in television history, *The Honeymooners*. Later this funny fat man, whose Hollywood friends said would never make it, won Broadway's *Tony Award*, starred in 27 movies, was nominated for an *Academy Award*, appeared on 91 different television shows, recorded 65 hit records of the music he composed or conducted, received the prestigious *Peabody Award* for excellence in radio and television, and was inducted into the *Academy of Television Arts and Sciences Hall of Fame*.

Jackie Gleason made the world laugh. But his private life was no laughing matter. He made millions of dollars, and then spent them on whiskey, women, and extravagant living, tormented by an insatiable hunger that riches and fame never satisfied. In an interview with a Hollywood reporter, this lapsed Irish Catholic said, "I think that there must be something better out there beyond this present world."

In his final years, John "Jackie" Gleason became obsessed with the paranormal. He read everything he could on parapsychology, UFOs,

and extraterrestrial beings, accumulating the world's largest private library on the paranormal. He even built one of his luxury homes in the shape of a UFO which he named *The Mothership*. Gleason was desperate to find something out there, beyond this present world.

Before he died, he was a guest of Mort Sahl on WRC radio. Sahl asked Gleason, "Jackie, as a man who has seen and done it all, is there anything left that you still want to do?" The great entertainer replied, "I want to see the face of God." Sahl chuckled uneasily, "You mean you want to go to heaven." "I suppose so," replied Gleason. "But mostly, I want to see God." Then he quietly said, "But I don't know how to get to heaven."

Down deep, everyone wants to see God. St. Augustine said, "God has created us for himself, and we will be restless until we find our rest in him." Like Jackie Gleason, we all have an insatiable hunger that will never be satisfied by the stuff of this world. French philosopher Pascal declared that there is a "god-shaped vacuum" in every human. He wrote, "Nothing less than heaven will ever satisfy earthlings." Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God has woven eternity into our very DNA.

Having consumed almost everything the world had to offer, a starving Jackie Gleason said, "I want to see the face of God." But, after declaring the greatest hope of humanity, he declared its profoundest tragedy: "But I don't know how to get to heaven." Most of our neighbors and friends would probably say the same thing. That's why it's so critical that we grasp the fourth principle in our series on heaven:

**Heaven is about a person, not a place;  
not about what we see, but *who* we see.**

Imagine Jackie Gleason's excitement if someone had shared the promise of the new heaven and earth in Revelation 22:3&4, "The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. *They will see his face* and his name will be on their foreheads." History marches relentlessly toward a day when everyone will see the face of God. Yet it might not be quite what Jackie Gleason expected. Revelation 6:16&17 says that, for most people, seeing God's face will be terrifying:

"Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come and who can stand?'"

Hebrews 10:31 says, "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of a living God." Imagine the terror of looking into God's face and seeing only wrath. It's enough to make you shudder. There is a terrible finality in the words of Revelation 20:12&15: "And I saw the dead,

great and small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened...If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." When we comprehend the terror of Judgment Day we suddenly realize that it is an act of unspeakable cruelty for us to neglect telling others how to get to heaven.

But for those of us who have put our trust in Jesus Christ, and serve him as our Lord, seeing the face of God is the greatest joy of the new heaven and earth to come. Let's allow the Scriptures to tell us why.

### **1. The ultimate joy of heaven is to behold Him.**

Last week we took a sneak preview of the new earth in Revelation 21. We saw the magnificent city we will inhabit, and the paradise we will enjoy. We imagined the activities that will fill our eternity with excitement and joy. We speculated on the things we will invent, the works of art we will create, and the exotic adventures we will experience in this new cosmos. We talked about nations, kings, animals, rewards, and splendors in a new world where there are no more tears, pain, or death. We were reminded of the promise of 1 Corinthians 2:9: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."

But after showing us the glories of the place, St. John brings his vision to a climax by talking about the *Person* who sits on the throne. Jonathan Edwards wrote, "To fully enjoy God in heaven is infinitely better than the pleasant accommodations in heaven." John saves the best for last in Revelation 22:5: "They will see *his* face, and his name will be on their forehead." Why is it so great to see God's face? Look at what happens in the presence of his face:

#### **1) In *his* presence there is life.**

Revelation 22:1&2 say, "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God, and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city." The river is called "the water of life." Without water, there is no life—not even in the new earth. St. John reminds us that all life flows from God. Before the first universe was created, there was only dead emptiness. It wasn't until God spoke that a life came into being. God is the source of all life, and apart from him there is no life—not in this world, nor in the world to come. Why was Eden a paradise? I believe that it was because God walked with Adam and Eve in that Garden. As long as they were in fellowship with him, they had life. But, when they turned their back on him, went their own way and hid from his face, death entered the world.

In Revelation 20:14 we read of hell, "The lake of fire is the second death." To be in hell is to be cast into a bottomless pit, infinitely far

from the face of God. To be shut off from his life is to experience a living death. To be shut off from his light is to be consigned to outer darkness. The greatest benefit in heaven is to see God's face forever.

## **2) In his presence there is healing.**

Revelation 21:2 continues, "On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." When I see the tree, I am immediately reminded of the most significant tree of all: the cross on which Jesus was crucified. Isaiah 53:5 says of his crucifixion, "By his wounds we are healed." The cross became our healing tree. Revelation 22:3 says, "No longer will there be any curse..." When Jesus hung on the cross he took on himself the curse of sin. He experienced its unspeakable pain, sorrow, and rejection. He was unimaginably thirsty, and then he endured a cursed death. But because he endured hell in our place, Revelation 21 says that we will inherit a new earth without pain, sorrow, thirst, tears, sickness, or death. When it sees the face of God, sickness must fly away. Only in a hell where the face of God is never seen will there be perpetual pain, unending suffering, and everlasting sickness. Because they did not embrace the Cross, those consigned to hell are left to suffer the curse Christ suffered on the cross. Do you understand why it is so critical that you live your eternity before the face of God?

## **3) In his presence there is purpose.**

Revelation 22:3 goes on to say, "...The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him." Sociologist Thomas Wolfe says, "The greatest crisis in our age is a sense of utter aimlessness. In a culture that has lost its moral compass, we are desperate for meaningful purpose." But in the new earth God will set our compass, and serving him will give our lives supreme purpose. There will be no aimlessness there. In his literary masterpiece, *Paradise Found*, the Puritan writer John Milton wrote, "It is better to serve in heaven than to reign in hell." Sadly, no one will reign in hell. Instead it will be a place of unrelenting regrets. There the damned will curse opportunities wasted on the old earth, tossing and turning on beds of fire while incessantly tormenting themselves with the same question: "How could I have exchanged the face of God for the brief pleasures of the old earth?"

## **4) In his presence there is glory.**

Revelation 22:6 says, "There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever." How can darkness exist in the presence of God's face. Genesis 1:2 says that before he created the first cosmos, darkness was over the deep

nothingness. Do you remember the first words of God recorded in the Bible? "And God said, 'Let there be light...'" 1 John 3:19 says, "...but men loved the darkness rather than the light." Yet, no one has yet seen utter darkness. In Matthew 5:45 Jesus says that God "causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good..." As dark as this depraved world gets, and as darkened as the hearts of wicked people become, the face of God still shines on this old earth. The light of heaven filters into the darkest of times and the worst of people. But Jesus said that hell will be "outer darkness." Not even a single particle of light will reach into that bottomless pit. Jesus says that such *outer* darkness will be so unbearable that the damned will "gnaw on their tongues." It is most urgent that you know how to get to heaven. There is no greater cruelty than for you to neglect to tell your friends how to avoid hell and gain heaven.

## **2. Everything will change when we see God's face.**

Again, Revelation 22:5 says, "They will see his face..." In I John 4:12 we read, "No man has ever seen God..." Before Moses led the Israelites out across the Sinai wilderness, he demanded to see the glory of God. That bold request put his life in mortal danger. God made him hide deep in the cleft of a rock. Then God passed by quickly, so Moses could only get a fleeting glimpse. And even then, God only showed Moses his backside. Had Moses looked squarely at the face of God, he would have been instantly vaporized by the glory. Isaiah 6:2 says that even the fire angels who fly before the face of God cover their faces with their wings. So what danger and excitement await us when we finally behold him face-to-face in all his glory?

### **1) We will instantly become what we were always meant to be.**

Revelation 22:5 says, "They will see his face and *his name will be on their foreheads.*" I believe that St. John is literally saying that, when we see the glory that is on the face of God, his glory will be all over our faces. In other words, we will instantly be transformed into his image. The Genesis creation story says that we were created in God's image. Sin twisted and disfigured that image. But that will all be changed when we see him face to face.

I think of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 3:18: "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory." If we could gaze on the full glory of God right now, we would experience instant transformation. But St. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13:12, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." Paul is saying that right now God sees *my* face fully. He knows everything there is to know about me. Yet I see *his* face dimly, and know very little about him. But when I stand before his throne, and

behold him face to face, I will be instantly transformed into my full stature as God's image bearer. I can hardly wait to see him!

## **2) We will see ourselves through God's eyes.**

I am struck by St. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13:12: "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror...now I know in part, but then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." Do you like what you see when you look into a mirror? St. Paul says that mirrors give a "poor reflection" of who we really are. A mirror only gives a "partial" image. Have you ever stood before the fun house mirrors at an amusement park like Coney Island? These optically-flawed mirrors make you look eight-feet tall and two inches-wide or two-feet tall and six-feet wide. You and your friends laugh uproariously at the clearly-distorted image projected by the fun house mirror.

But not all mirrors make us laugh. When you were born you had no self-image. You didn't know what species, race, or gender you were. You didn't know whether you were pretty or ugly, smart or stupid. Your first mirror was your mother. The way your parents looked, spoke, and responded to you began to tell you who you were. Later there were other mirrors: playmates, schoolmates, teachers, coaches, and a host of people who crossed your path. In a million ways they let you know who *they* thought you were. Over the years, these human mirrors indelibly set your self-image. Jackie Gleason could never shake the insecurities of a father who abandoned him and a mother who never showed affection.

But here's the problem. All the mirrors that defined us were flawed by sin. In the words of St. Paul, they gave us a "poor reflection." From the time we were babies, we have been seeing ourselves in fun house mirrors. Tragically, we believed the reflections from those fun house mirrors until we too become a fun house mirror. No one is capable of telling us exactly who we are. Nor are we capable of knowing accurately who we are. St. Paul says it: "...now I know in part." As someone who was emotionally crippled in eight foster homes, I now know that I was a victim of the fun house. Decades later, I'm still recovering from "knowing only in part."

Maybe that's why one of my favorite Scriptures is 1 John 3:1: "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him." We can hardly believe that God has lavished love on us, or that we are his children. The world told us in a million ways that we were worthless. Why did these fun house mirrors lie about us? St. John says that they didn't know who we were because they didn't know who God is. If they knew God, they would know that he loved us in eternity past, chose us to belong to him, sent his Son to die for us, redeemed us from the

junk pile, and is conforming us to his glorious image! The only one who “fully knows” us is God. We have been so deceived by the fun house mirrors that we still struggle to see ourselves through God’s eyes. But I John 1:2 says, “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known, but we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” When we behold his face, we will realize that his name is on our foreheads. We will finally look into the only mirror that will ever reflect the truth about us. It will be like that poster of the little kitty looking into a mirror, and staring back at it is a majestic lion!

But there is the other side of the fun house mirror. If we can deceive ourselves into thinking we are less than we are, we can also deceive ourselves into thinking we are more than we are. In Matthew 7:21-23. Jesus tells about those on Judgment Day who have fooled themselves into thinking that, because they cast out demons, performed miracles, and preached sermons, they are right with God. Jesus says in verse 23, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evil doers!” Looking into the face of God will bring terror if that perfectly holy mirror reveals us to be a person we never thought we were. If you wait until you stand before the face of God to discover your life was a deception, it will be too late. Now is the time for self-discovery. Socrates said, “An unexamined life is not worth living.” Be open to criticism. Don’t be defensive when others challenge you. Don’t dread the truth, even when it wounds you deeply. Ask God to reveal who you *really* are now while there is still time to conform to his image.

### **3. Not only should we want to see the one who loves us most, but the ones we love the most.**

Like Jackie Gleason, I want to go to heaven so that I can gaze on the face of God. But there are other faces I want to see: the heroes of Scripture, apostles and prophets, and people I have admired in the pages of history. I can hardly wait to see Arnold and Mary Petterson who adopted me and loved me out of my childhood wounds. I want to see Dr. Rayburn who taught me how to preach. I look forward to seeing Dick Painter and Jim Frost, two of the finest elders I ever knew. I know I will be surprised about who’s in heaven and who isn’t. But there are a lot of people I know now who won’t be in heaven. Like Jackie Gleason, they don’t know the way. I have a lot of family and friends with whom I have shared the way of salvation. Many of them have steadfastly refused to give their lives to Christ. But I don’t want to get to heaven and find anyone missing because I didn’t share the gospel with them. As long as there is a “Jackie Gleason” in your network of relationships, you can’t rest until he or she knows the way to heaven.