

## CHAPTER 2

# "I SAW THE LORD"

"You cannot see My face, for no one can look on Me and live." (Exodus 33:20)



**B**efore exploring the simple, life-changing message of *The Derakim*, this chapter will introduce a key to interpreting it. These pages may strain the brain a bit, and the chapter is a little long, but please soldier on. Read it prayerfully, carefully. Ruminant on what is being said here until you really get it. Because if you don't get it, the glorious self-revelation that God spoke on Sinai may elude you completely.

It's no exaggeration to say that the larger implications of this chapter are colossal, not just for understanding *The Derakim*, but for understanding and experiencing a lot of other important spiritual truths. Like what? Consider, for

instance, why so many Christians today find it so hard to pray. This may seem tangential to the subject of this book, but in fact it gets to the very heart of things. (Nothing reveals more about what a person thinks about God than how they pray.)

## 2.2 WHO KILLED THE PRAYER MEETING?

How unlike the New Testament church we are today. They were praying all the time. **“All of them with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer”** (Acts 1:14). The first disciples would set aside certain hours for private prayer (Acts 10:9). They would also regularly pray together for extended periods (Acts 2:42; 4:23-31). When a difficult situation arose, they would call for an entire night of prayer (Acts 12:5-17). In all this, they were simply following the example of Jesus (Matthew 14:23; Mark 1:35, 6:46; Luke 5:16, 6:12, 11:1; et al.). In one of the most shocking accounts in the Gospels, Jesus drives everyone out of the temple because they were failing to make God's house **“a house of prayer”** (Matthew 21:13). In another well-known account, He rebukes His groggy disciples, **“Couldn’t you keep watching with Me for one hour?”** (Matthew 26:40). It’s as if He were saying, “Guys, are you so spiritually weak that you can't continue in prayer for a single hour?”

This all made perfect sense to Christians in the not-so-distant past. A New Testament-like commitment to prayer inspired great classics on the subject by authors like George Mueller (1805-1898), Andrew Murray (1828-1917), E. M. Bounds (1835-1913), and R. A. Torrey (1856-1928). (A lot more on them in Chapter 7.) If you haven't read these

authors, they could change your life.<sup>1</sup> A New Testament-like commitment to prayer also inspired the songs of a previous generation, like "Sweet Hour of Prayer."

Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer, that  
calls me from a world of care, and bids me at  
my Father's throne, make all my wants and  
wishes known. In seasons of distress and grief,  
my soul has often found relief, and oft escaped  
the tempter's snare by thy return, sweet hour  
of prayer.<sup>2</sup>

But something has gone tragically awry in the house of God. Most Christians today know nothing about a daily sweet hour of prayer, and in the majority of churches the corporate prayer meeting is a relic of the past. Go on the internet sometime and you will find prophetic voices crying out and asking, "Who killed the church prayer meeting?" and "Why are Christians today, even pastors, so weak in prayer?"<sup>3</sup> The solution isn't simply a matter of guiltling people into trying harder or praying more. The problem lies in our very definition of prayer. The great intercessors in the Bible (and the greats in Christian history) were doing something completely different than the majority of Christians today. What most of us need is a complete overhaul of our thinking on the subject.

For today's seminary-trained pastor, the audacious prayers of the prophets and apostles don't even make theological sense. Countless books and sermons are devoted to "helping" us interpret the outrageous prayer language in Scripture.

Most of this modern instruction can be summed up this way—"Uh ... what it looks like God is doing there isn't really what He is doing."<sup>4</sup> When the Bible says that God changes His mind (e.g., Exodus 32:14; Numbers 14:11-20; 2 Kings 20:1-7; Amos 7:1-6; etc.), theological "experts" take pains to let us know that "God didn't actually change His mind."<sup>5</sup> When Jesus tells us that if we stick with it we can move God to action (e.g., Luke 11:5-8, 18:1-8), the theological "experts" tell us that this is not technically true because God's will is set in stone.<sup>6</sup>

But here's the rub. As illogical as the prayers of the prophets and apostles may seem to us, time and time again God gives those presumptuous pray-ers in the Bible exactly what they ask for. We may be offended by such audacious praying, but God clearly isn't. "**... Then the LORD changed His mind**" (Exodus 32:14). "**... Then the fire of the LORD fell**" (1 Kings 18:38). "**... Then the place where they had gathered was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit**" (Acts 4:31).

And all this brings us to our lost interpretive key. It's something other generations had a much better handle on, and that is why they could pray so much more effectively than most of us do today. Getting ahold of this key will not only help you to experience a more powerful prayer life, it can also unlock hundreds of other spiritual blessings, as well. For our purposes, it's vital for those who want to mine *The Derakim* for all its riches. I wasn't taught this key at any of the celebrated theological institutions I attended during undergraduate, masters, or PhD studies. I discovered it for myself while scouring through the centuries-old writings of

one of the greatest Christian thinkers in history. (I'll give you his name in a moment.)

### 2.3 GOD (*REALLY*) TAKES HUMAN FORM

The lost interpretive key that will send your spiritual life into hyperdrive is fairly simple. Here it is—God regularly borrows a human form (an actual, literal human form) when He interacts with us. This will take a little explaining. God is ultimately too much for our puny little human minds to process. Trying to understand infinite God, who is beyond all time and space, is a bit like asking a two-year-old child to explain Einstein's theory of relativity. No, it's more extreme than that. It's more like asking an orangutan to explain the finer points of quantum physics (a subject that even Einstein had trouble with). God doesn't want us to fry our inner circuitry, so we could say He shows up on planet Earth in a human suit. But it's not just an external suit. He also borrows a human-like operating system complete with emotion, intellect, and will.

This may hit you as a strange idea at first, but just check your Bible. This divine strategy begins in the Garden of Eden, when God walks and talks with Adam in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8). It reaches its pinnacle in the God-Man Jesus Christ, who told His apostles, “**He who has seen Me has seen the Father**” (John 14:9). As a rule, He comes to us in a human form. Why? Because our brains can't process infinite data.

One of our biggest hang-ups as human beings is that we can't accept the fact that there are things out there that our puny little brains just can't master. We truly believe that

if we try hard enough, we can crack any cypher, break any code, or solve any equation. But the Bible says that when it comes to God, we hit a dead end. As the psalmist says, "**Such knowledge is too awesome for me. It is too lofty. I am not able to attain to it**" (Psalm 139:6). The little computers God gave us, our brains, can only process data inside the system we live in. We can only compute things that have limitations and parameters—finite things. God, on the other hand, has no borders, boundaries, or limitations of any kind. He is infinite.

God is not a part of the created order at all. Among other things, this means He isn't even subject to time as we know it. (If you remember, Einstein showed us that time and space are bound up together.) This means that in all probability, God doesn't do things in a temporal sequence like we do—*this, then that*. Huh? Thankfully, we don't have to worry about any of this. God is vividly aware of our limitations, and this is why He stoops to our weakness and borrows a human form. In this form He deliberates, does things in a temporal sequence, and at times will even change His plans. But our restless little human minds will inevitably ask, "But what about God's infinite side? What's going on over there?" My response is simply this, "What is it about 'cannot compute' that you don't understand?"

And this, my friends, is precisely where so many of us are completely missing the boat. Theologians and pastors have been telling us for centuries to ignore the human-like descriptions of God, and instead obsess over His infinite mode—how it works, how it fits together, and how it interfaces with our finite existence.

This is the crux of our current prayer crisis. We are finite beings with finite minds, trying to engage a Being who is wholly beyond our comprehension. Based upon this preposterous premise, we wrongly conclude that our highest religious duty is to submit to some set-in-stone script we refer to as "God's will." The upshot of this is that millions of us end up praying in a way that looks absolutely nothing like the biblical apostles and prophets. This is precisely why so many of us pray, "If it be Thy will this ... If it be Thy will that." "God, if it be Thy will, heal this child." If the child lives, or if the child dies, we conclude that the immutable will of an immutable God has (inevitably) been done. If you really break it down, "If it be Thy will" in such cases means, "Prayer doesn't really change anything at all." The prophets and apostles, on the other hand, believed the exact opposite. They believed that prayer could change virtually anything. It could even change God's mind. (I know all this will be hard for a lot of people to read, but please don't throw the book across the room. Just keep reading.)

Here are the cold, hard facts. When Moses, David, Elijah, Peter, and Paul pray, they never mention some grand set-in-stone script they must submit to. (Some people point to Eli in 1 Samuel 3:18, but trust me, you really don't want to use this one.<sup>7</sup>) Check this out for yourself. Moses doesn't say, "O God, if it be Thy will, save these people." Elijah doesn't pray, "O God, if it be Thy will, send fire from heaven." The apostles don't pray, "O God, if it be Thy will, perform signs and wonders in the name of Your holy servant Jesus." And it is worth mentioning that this was NOT what Jesus was doing in the Garden of Gethsemane, either. When He said, "Not My will but Yours be done," He wasn't tipping His hat

to some set-in-stone, unalterable plan. He was saying "My human preferences, comfort, safety be damned. I choose to do what the Father wants me to do." (For further discussion of this passage, see Chapter 6, section 8.)

The faithful in Scripture are always engaging God as if He is a responsive, interactive, emotional Person. They never attempt to interface with the infinite, limitless, meticulously sovereign, etc. Why? Because they can't do it ... and neither can you or I. Pushing down this track can actually be very dangerous, and has led many to psychological/spiritual breakdown (see section 2.8 below). God knows all this, and it is precisely why He scales Himself way, way down, and comes to us in a human form.

This explains a very perplexing issue seen in the Scriptures, which used to bother me. Have you ever noticed that the Bible is continually saying that "God can't be seen," and then turns right around and says, "He can be seen." Some people complain that this is a blatant contradiction,<sup>8</sup> but it's not really a problem at all. The resolution is simple. In the Bible we find a double-sided presentation of God. On one hand we have the side of Him that cannot be seen—the infinite, eternal, outside of space and time. On the other side we have the finite human form He borrows. Let's look a little closer at the biblical evidence.

## 2.4 DOUBLE-SIDED PRESENTATION OF GOD<sup>9</sup>

There is no doubt that the Bible repeatedly says that God can be seen. In the very earliest books of the Bible, God defends Moses's authority and one of the strong points He makes is that, "**He (Moses) is allowed to see the form of the**



**LORD**” (Numbers 12:8). Patriarchs like Abraham get to see God with their eyes. “**Now the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre**” (Genesis 18:1-2). The elders of Israel “**saw the God of Israel, and under His feet there appeared to be a pavement of sapphire**” (Exodus 24:10). The prophet Isaiah says, “**I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple**” (Isaiah 6:1). We could go on and on. God also regularly shows up in human form in dreams and visions (e.g., 2 Chronicles 18:18-22; Daniel 7:9-14; Amos 9:1). The poetry of ancient Israel is also filled with the idea that God can be seen.

**I have asked for one thing from the LORD,  
and I will seek after this—that I may dwell  
in the house of the LORD all the days of my  
life and look upon the beauty of the LORD.  
(Psalm 27:4)**

Yet the Bible also clearly says that God cannot be seen. This idea can be found in the very earliest Old Testament writings (the five books of Moses), and it continues through the last letters of the New Testament. In about 1500 B.C., God tells Moses, “**No one can see Me and live**” (Exodus 33:20). A millennium-and-a-half later, the apostle Paul reiterates this point in a letter to his protégé Timothy. “**The King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see**” (1 Timothy 6:15-16). The apostle John also repeatedly makes the exact same point. “**No one has seen God at any time**” (John 1:18; 1 John 4:12).

Either the Bible is guilty of an outright contradiction, or something else is happening. Can God be seen, or can't He? It seems pretty clear to me that the answer is both "yes" and "no." The Bible speaks about Him functioning in two different modes (for lack of a better term).<sup>10</sup> Mode one is His infinite, incorporeal, invisible, incomprehensible form. In this mode He is completely outside of the created order and is not subject to any of its laws and rules. He is so radically different from us that we can't even begin to make sense of Him. (Sorry to break it to you, theologians).<sup>11</sup> We can't do those physics, we can't calculate those equations, and we can't unscramble that code. There is definitely something on that other side, but the Bible tells us precious little about it. (Most of the "details" we find in our fat theology books were actually borrowed from pagan philosophy.<sup>12</sup>) What we are referring to can be called the "divine incomprehensibility factor." How do we overcome it?

## **2.5 OVERCOMING "INCOMPREHENSIBILITY"**

Because our finite minds cannot even begin to process the infinite God data, He takes on mode two. As our mystery theologian liked to say, "He clothes Himself with a human nature." Mode two is so simple, so intuitive, that even a small child can "get it." In this borrowed mode, God does things a lot like we do. He experiences the whole range of human emotions, He enters into real give-and-take relationships, and He regularly changes His mind (not just figuratively, but actually). How does this second mode, the human form, relate to mode one? We don't know. Does God, in His infinite state, experience human-like emotions, change His mind, etc.? These sorts of questions may drive the cottage industry

known as "Christian theology," but the fact is that we have no idea what God is doing over on the infinite side of things. He invites us to vigorously engage Him in mode two, not mode one. The unbiased reader of the Bible (without a theological axe to grind) will clearly see God engaging His people in mode two. Always. What this means is that when He visits us, He does have real emotions, ponders and chooses a lot like we do, and will even change His plans.

**If at one time I declare that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down, and destroyed, and the nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will turn and will not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at some other time I declare that some nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and it does evil in my sight and does not obey Me, then I will turn from the good I had intended to do for it. (Jeremiah 18:7-10)**

Why is God always engaging people in mode two? As was said already, mode one will inevitably tie our brains in knots and fry our inner circuitry. We can't see it, process it, or understand it—and it's extremely dangerous to try. Our mystery theologian referred to this human attempt to understand the infinite as "entering the labyrinth." (Perhaps you've been there.) Another analogy he used was that it's sort of like trying to stare directly at the Sun. What you will actually end up doing is destroying your ability to see anything. God doesn't want you to ruin your operating system wrestling with things the Bible says are too awesome for us (Psalm

131:1, 139:6; Job 42:3). God wants us to walk and talk with Him like the people in the Bible do. I know this may be unsettling for some, but let's just keep turning the screws here. God is so committed to mode two that He often (literally, actually) takes on a bodily form—head and shoulders, knees and toes ... and a beard, always a beard.

One of the basic affirmations of Christian theology is that God is *ultimately* incorporeal (which He is). This means He is not confined to a body. **"Heaven and highest heaven cannot contain You"** (1 Kings 8:27). Would someone then please explain how He strolls through Adam and Eve's neighborhood in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8)? How tall do you think God was (six-foot something)? What color was His skin (bronzish)? How about His hair (I would guess white like wool)? Most theologians also believe that God is above and beyond time as we know it. How then does He chat with Adam and Eve using logic and reason just like we do? Throughout the whole narrative, He engages people in an authentic give-and-take exchange of information. **"Adam, where are you?"** (Genesis 3:8-10). God also seems to have the full range of human emotions—not figurative (anthropomorphic) emotions, but real emotions.

God in this human form is not found only once or twice in the Bible. It's the rule. He pops by Abram's place for a BBQ in Genesis 18. "Delicious meal, Sarai. Could I trouble you for seconds?" He has a literal wrestling match with the patriarch Jacob in Genesis 32. This is also how He shows up in dreams and visions. The prophet Daniel says, **"And the Ancient of Days took His seat; His garment was white as snow, and the hair of His head like pure wool"** (Daniel 7:9). There is

no denying it. This is God's normal way of interfacing with human beings.

A recurring (humorous) problem that God seems to have is that, since He appears so human-like, people often don't realize who He is (Genesis 18:1-3, 32:30; Joshua 5:13-15; Judges 7:22-23, 13:22). Because of this, He sometimes leaves a little calling card so people understand who they are dealing with. Do you remember, for instance, the story of that strongman Samson from the book of Judges? His parents are a little slow on the uptake, so God has to help them out. They offer up a sacrifice, not knowing that it was actually God standing right in front of them. Then they get the surprise of their lives. **"When the flame went up from the altar toward heaven ... (He) ascended on the flame of the altar"** (Judges 13:20). This causes them to fall on their faces in sheer terror and say, **"We are going to die, we have just seen God!"** (Judges 13:22-23; see also Genesis 32:30).<sup>13</sup>

## 2.6 BUT WHAT ABOUT PRAYER?

This double-sided presentation of God in the Bible (both "seen" and "unseen") has profound implications for the doctrine of prayer. Even when God doesn't appear in bodily form, we still find people engaging Him (praying) as if He is very human-like. Because of this, prayer in the Bible can be compared to talking with someone on the phone. We can't see the person on the other end of the line, but we still know how they function. This clearly seems to be what is going on in the Bible. The implications for us should be obvious. Most of us will never see God with our eyes on this side of eternity, but He still wants us to think about Him in ways that makes

sense. So don't try to be profound when you pray, and act as if you have infinity all sorted out, as if you can "see" what the Bible says "cannot be seen." Talk to God like the people in the Bible do.

When the apostles and prophets pray, they are not attempting to interface with the infinite, invisible side of God—"O God who knows everything, whose plan is set in stone, if it be Thy will ..." No! They are always talking to God as if He has real emotions, can be reasoned with, and compelled to action. They engage Him as if the future is completely open and can be changed, because for them (and us) it is open, and it can be changed. How does this relate to God's infinite mode? Moses, Elijah, and Paul don't mess with these sorts of questions, and neither should we. **"Such knowledge is too awesome for me."**

Examine Jesus's in-depth teachings on how prayer works (Matthew 7:1-11; Luke 11:5-8, 18:1-8). Jesus never points us to some abstruse, impersonal force controlling every detail of the universe. His testimony is consistent with the rest of the Bible. What we find again and again and again are prophets, apostles, priests, and kings arguing with God, appealing to His emotions, and pleading like trial lawyers trying to win a case.<sup>14</sup>

**In those days Hezekiah became mortally ill. And the prophet Isaiah ... came and said to him, "This is what the LORD says: 'Get your affairs in order, you are going to die and not live.'" But Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, saying,**

“Please LORD, remember how I have walked before You faithfully and with all my heart, and I have done what is good in Your sight.” And Hezekiah wept greatly. Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah, saying, “Go and say to Hezekiah, ‘This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says: “I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will add fifteen years to your life.”’” (Isaiah 38:1-5)

God isn't impressed one bit by all our complex musings about His infinite being. (He is probably either laughing ... or crying.) He tells us to come like a child, and a child can't even say "atemporality" or "anthropomorphism." So don't bother trying to reconcile your requests to the fact that He knows the future, or explain to Him that He exists in the eternal now, or let Him know that you are submitting to the immutable decrees that issue forth from His immutable nature. People in the Bible never do that. They deal with God as He manifests Himself to them. God's relation to time, His knowledge of the future, and His control of all things is part of His infinite (incomprehensible) mode. We are too small and limited, and fussing with it plunges us into a dark abyss.

God offers Himself to you and me in a human form, ultimately the human form we see in Jesus Christ. With regard to prayer, this means that we should expect Him to do what any truly "compassionate and gracious" person would do. **“So the LORD changed His mind”** (Exodus 32:14). (This is definitely not how my theological professors and pastors taught me to pray.)

## 2.7 IT'S NOT FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

In Bible college and seminary, I was taught again and again that all human-like talk about God in the Bible is simply figurative language. The twenty-five cent word they bandied about was “anthropomorphism.” To be blunt, this means that the human-like talk about God (like **"compassionate and gracious, slow to anger ..."**) is not literally, actually true of Him. It's merely human characteristics applied in a non-literal way, a lot like when someone says, “the clouds are angry” or “the sun was smiling down on me.” Throughout Christian history, this has been the majority view among theologians. The clear implication they give is that mature Christians need to move beyond all this sort of “figurative” language and get on to the more serious stuff, like talking about infinite God. Oh, really? Let's push that idea a bit.

Was it an anthropomorphism eating leg of lamb at Abram's place in Genesis 18? When the patriarch Jacob had a wrestling match with God in Genesis 32, is this an example of anthropomorphic language? Captain Obvious would remind us all that, “You can't put a headlock on an anthropomorphism.” Was Isaiah talking to an anthropomorphism in the temple in Isaiah 6? Perhaps we should go back and edit the Bible: “I saw an anthropomorphism, seated on a throne high and exalted, and the anthropomorphic train of His anthropomorphic robe filled the temple.” Clearly something other than anthropomorphic language is happening in Isaiah 6, Genesis 18 and 32, and everywhere else God shows up. When prophets like Daniel or Elijah pray, they never give the slightest indication that they are just being poetic. Moses doesn't write a little footnote telling us that “technically



speaking, God didn't really change His mind" in Exodus 32. Moses wrestled with God in prayer and he prevailed. No one in the Bible ever says, "I was just using non-literal human descriptions of God to point to loftier theological concepts."

But having said all this, I need to keep making this point—there is definitely another side of the coin. The same biblical authors who argue with God, appeal to His emotions, and change His mind, are also perfectly clear that He exists in another mode, beyond their ability to understand or relate to. In biblical terms, "**He can't be seen.**" The biblical authors know that God isn't *just* that six-foot tall, bearded guy strolling through Adam and Eve's neighborhood, or stopping by Abram's place for a BBQ. Moses is vividly aware of the fact that God is ultimately much more than the human-like Person on the other end of the prayer line. They know that He is over, above, and outside of creation. "**Heaven and highest heaven cannot contain You**" (1 Kings 8:27). He has no parameters, no body, no spatial limitations. They are also clear on the fact that He knows everything (past, present, and future), and holds every molecule of this vast universe together by the word of His power. But again, nobody in the Bible ever tries to relate to God in that mode. As I said before, human beings can't do that math, speak that language, do those physics. That is why God borrows a form we are all familiar with, a form that makes sense to us, a form that looks, acts, thinks, and feels like we do. (A form ultimately revealed in Jesus Christ.)

Little children understand this without any trouble at all. They don't have to go through all the mental gymnastics we are covering in this chapter. It's only the highly intelligent religious folks (or those who have sat under them) who have

such a hard time with a human-like presentation of God. But isn't this exactly how Jesus said things would work—the babies get it, while the “wise and intelligent” fly right over it? (Matthew 11:25). Unfortunately, it's “the wise and intelligent” who are running all our religious institutions, training our future pastors, and telling them to obsess over God's infinite nature. Pastors then convince the rest of us that we can have infinite God all sorted out, sliced and diced up like a frog in high school science class. Then when we attempt to cultivate a relationship with the Invisible Infinite ... our spiritual life turns to hash. This misguided quest—attempting to see what the Bible says cannot be seen—is what leads so many of us fervent religious folks (like me back in 1992) into darkness and confusion. We would have more luck trying to cultivate a friendship with time, or gravity, or a subatomic quark.

Now let's shift gears a bit. Attempting to engage God in His infinite mode will not only tank our prayer lives, it will also tangle us up into existential knots when tragedies hit. As a pastor, I see this all the time. Misguided souls sincerely believe they can see what Scripture says cannot be seen—infinite God. From this misguided launch point, they attempt to find their way through some tragedy. “Why did my baby die if God ...?” or “Why was I sexually abused if God ... ?” This inevitably pulls them into a black hole of confusion and frustration. Again, our mystery theologian called this “entering the labyrinth.” God inevitably comes out looking very unlike the gentle Jesus. This destructive line of thought is seen frequently down through Christian history. (This is also one of the main reasons so many conservative Christians are deconstructing right now.<sup>15</sup>)

## 2.8 LOSING YOUR FAITH ... AND YOUR MIND

One of my all-time favorite authors is Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896). She had a towering intellect and amazing insight into theology and human nature.<sup>16</sup> Stowe is best known for her history-making novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852),<sup>17</sup> which contributed significantly to ending slavery in the U.S. She also wrote numerous other best sellers that dealt with the great questions of human existence. In one of these novels, titled *The Ministers Wooing* (1859),<sup>18</sup> she takes on a question that has crippled countless Christians down through the centuries: Why does infinite God allow human tragedies, like the death of a child?

In this lesser known novel, a character named Mrs. Marvyn struggles to make sense of the drowning death of her beautiful, bright-eyed son James. The harder she tries to reconcile her tragedy with her theology, the deeper she descends into darkness. All her orthodox beliefs about infinite God don't bring any comfort, but only seem to crush and suffocate her. Friends and family stand by helplessly as she careens toward the abyss.

I cannot, will not, be resigned!—it is all hard, unjust, cruel!—to all eternity I will say so! To me there is no goodness, no justice, no mercy in anything! Life seems to me the most tremendous doom that can be inflicted on a helpless being! What had we done, that it should be sent upon us? Why were we made to love so, to hope so,—our hearts so full of feeling ... Why,

we can suffer so in this life that we had better never have been born!<sup>19</sup>

Although *The Minister's Wooing* is fictional, this particular section of the book gives us a window into Harriet Beecher Stowe's own soul and the inner turmoil she went through in 1857. That was the year her own son, Henry, died in a drowning accident while studying at Dartmouth College. Stowe struggled mightily to make sense of this tragedy in light of the theology she was raised on (a theology very similar to what many of us learn in Bible college and seminary).<sup>20</sup> Like Mrs. Marvyn, Stowe was trapped in an abyss of darkness and confusion. She found all her complex musings about infinity worse than useless. We could say that her perfectly orthodox theology had a head-on collision with her personal experience.

What was Harriet Beecher Stowe's solution to this issue that has shipwrecked so many souls down through the ages? Why does the all-powerful, all-knowing, infinite God allow heart-rending tragedies into our lives? In Stowe's book, deliverance comes from an unlikely character. It's not the highly educated pastor ("The Doctor") who saves the day, but rather a slave by the name of Candace. This uneducated woman on the lowest rung of society rushes into the room and pulls Mrs. Marvyn back from the abyss. Candace's remedy is simple. She turns Mrs. Marvyn away from trying to see what cannot be seen, from trying to figure out infinite God, and turns her toward the simple, human-like vision of God in Christ. "Do talk gospel to her," Candace says. "If you can't, I will."<sup>21</sup> She then gives Mrs. Marvyn the key.

I knows our Doctor's a mighty good man, and learned,—and in fair weather I have no objection to your hearin' all about these great an' mighty things he's got to say. But honey, they won't do for you now ... there just ain't but one thing to come to, and that's Jesus.<sup>22</sup>

The point is clear. Infinity is a language that you and I simply cannot speak. When we try, especially in the crucible of suffering, we only get ourselves into trouble. Like a spider's web, the harder we struggle to free ourselves, the more ensnared we become. This is precisely what our mystery theologian (the big reveal is coming) was attempting to warn us about centuries before Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote her book. How do we successfully get through the storms of life? God gives us a simple way to know Him, to walk with Him, to talk with Him. He comes to us in a form we can make sense of. He clothes Himself in human form. **"For in Him all the fulness of deity dwells in bodily form"** (Colossians 2:9).

## 2.9 HELP FROM OUR MYSTERY THEOLOGIAN

The Bible clearly says God can't be seen, and then turns around and says that He can be seen. This apparent contradiction confused me for years, until I found a key in the writings of one of the most influential Christian thinkers in history. In an attempt to understand him better, I took an entire year to marinate my brain in his primary writings. I not only scribbled on and dog-eared my way through his four-volume work (about 1000 very dense pages), I also trekked through

the 20,000 pages of his biblical commentaries. This is where I found an idea that completely transformed my theological outlook. It took me a while to really get what he was driving at. When I finally did, I thought, *This is one of the most brilliant, helpful theological insights I have ever come across.*

Over and over again, our mystery theologian kept saying that human beings are just too small and limited (sometimes he would even use the word “stupid”) to understand infinite God. Because of this, God literally borrows a human nature. Only in this borrowed form can human beings make sense of God, talk to Him, interact with Him, and influence Him. I had never heard a pastor or scholar say this before, but it was the best explanation I have ever found for what we see in the Bible. It solved the mystery of how and why the biblical writers regularly affirm that God is unseen and seen, unknowable and knowable. It was a "Eureka!" moment when I finally grasped the fact that God doesn't have to be either/or. God can be both/and.

It may be a surprise for many to learn that our mystery theologian is none other than John Calvin (1509-64), the theologian par excellence of the Protestant tradition.<sup>23</sup> I didn't drop his name previously because that would have thrown so many readers off my point, a point that has absolutely nothing to do with the things Calvin has become famous for—predestination, meticulous sovereignty, TULIP, etc. It's so sad that an overly simplistic caricature of Calvin dominates almost all discussion surrounding him. Of course, it's easier to embrace an overly simplistic caricature of a great thinker than to plow through thousands of pages of his actual thought. (Unfortunately, we can't run down that

rabbit trail here.) But for those who are willing to do the work, whether you are a Calvinist or not, you will probably find some overlooked insights that will amaze you ... like the fact that God is spoken of throughout Scripture in two very different modes.<sup>24</sup>

It was Calvin who taught me that it is okay to stop trying to map out God's infinite mode, and simply walk and talk with Him as a child does. This was completely unexpected, because all the "Calvinists" I studied under seemed to say the exact opposite—"Go ahead, plunge into the abyss, slice up and dice up infinite God, unravel the mystery, plumb the infinite sea, unscrew the inscrutable." Calvin, on the other hand, said over and over and over again that human beings do not have the capacity to understand infinite God or fit all the pieces together. He repeatedly said that trying to do so will lead us into a dark labyrinth (or abyss) from which we may never escape.<sup>25</sup>

Let it be remembered that men's minds, when they indulge their curiosity, enter into a labyrinth. And so let them yield themselves to be ruled by the heavenly oracles, even though they may fail to capture the height of the mystery.<sup>26</sup>

Calvin was the one who taught me how to avoid the labyrinth, the "things too awesome for me." We do not deny that God is much more than the human form He assumes, but we acknowledge that this is largely off-limits to human inquiry.

We must engage God in the form He takes on for our benefit, the form eventually revealed in the man Jesus Christ.

The sum is this—that God in Himself, that is in His naked majesty, is invisible, and not to the eyes of the body merely, but also to the understandings of men ... for everything that would set itself off as a representation of God, apart from Christ, will be an idol.<sup>27</sup>

## 2.10 IT'S ALL ABOUT ONTOLOGY (*Huh?*)

What we are talking about is known in philosophy as "ontology." It's a discussion that distinguishes one sort of "being" from another. We don't need to get lost in the philosophical sauce here. All that needs to be pointed out is that a human sort of a being is radically different from a God sort of a being. As we already noted, human beings are part of creation. God is not. Human beings are stuck in the time-space continuum. God is not. Human beings are bound by the laws of physics, and they do things in a temporal sequence. Not so with God. His infinite ontology is unknowable, invisible to the eyes, and invisible to the mind. But Christians down through history just can't seem to accept this. Like moths drawn to a flame, we all yearn for that forbidden knowledge. We want to "crack the God code."

This obsession to "crack the God code" goes way, way back, and it isn't just a Christian problem. Jews, Muslims, and pagans also seem to find this forbidden fruit irresistible. In fact,



the ancient Greeks took musings about the ultimate reality way further than the biblical authors ever dreamed of. What most people are wholly unaware of is that Christian theologians (long after the apostles died) borrowed a lot of ideas about God's infinite ontology from Greek philosophy, and incorporated them into Christian theology.<sup>28</sup> They blended them together and then said to God's people, "Behold! Your God!" This hybrid of Bible and philosophy has come to be known as Classical Theism,<sup>29</sup> and this is (more or less) what most of us were taught at seminary. This may be troubling to the uninitiated, but the facts of the case are hard to deny. It is precisely why the writings of B.C. philosophers look so much like the theology books we read at seminary.<sup>30</sup>

For the sake of argument, let's just suppose that Classical Theism hits the nail right on the head. (Some scholars and pastors reading this believe that it does.)<sup>31</sup> Perhaps those early Christian theologians did the right thing when they baptized the ideas of Plato, Aristotle, and company, and incorporated them into Christian theology.<sup>32</sup> Even if this is the case, it is completely irrelevant to the point I am trying to make here. Regardless of what God's infinite ontology may or may not be, what I am saying (and what Calvin clearly seemed to be saying) is that God doesn't invite us to get to know Him in that form, because we can't. God comes to us as if He is much like us, ultimately in the man Jesus Christ, and He invites us to get to know Him in that form.

But it's so hard for us human beings to stay out of the labyrinth. Like Eve, that forbidden fruit calls to us, so we end up crippling ourselves by asking all those impossible, unanswerable questions. "How do we have free will if infinite God ...?" "Why do we pray if infinite God ...?" "What is the

point of evangelism if infinite God ...?” The biblical authors never ask these sorts of questions. But we have been taught to think that it’s our God-given duty to plow right in, despite the fact that the Bible tells us again and again that the chasm between us and infinite God is too great for our human minds to cross. **“No one can look on Me and live”** (Exodus 33:20). I’m sorry to say, my fellow finite beings, we just don’t have the smarts for it.

## 2.11 GOD PHYSICS (?)

To drive home the point of how limited our minds are, let’s think about God’s ontology in terms of physics. The subject of physics has to do with the laws and rules that govern the universe we live in. You do remember physics, right (Isaac Newton, the falling apple, what goes up must come down, every action has an equal and opposite reaction, etc.)? The question is, what sort of laws and rules might govern God’s infinite existence, completely outside of the created order we live in, beyond time and space as we know it? We don’t have the faintest clue. (Again, my apologies to all the theologians.) For anyone who questions this, perhaps recent mind-blowing discoveries in actual physics will help change your mind.

In the last century or so, a previously unknown realm of physics was discovered—quantum physics.<sup>33</sup> It has to do with the laws and rules that govern the very smallest things that human beings have been able to detect. If you want to upset your view of reality sometime, go watch some videos or read some articles about it.<sup>34</sup> In the quantum realm, reality is truly stranger than fiction. At every turn it seems

to violate your God-given common sense. It's so bizarre that even the great Einstein couldn't accept some of the findings. Particles seem to exist in multiple locations at the same time. The exact same particle. Particles also disappear and reappear—pop! Oh yeah, and one of the weirder things is that an experiment will have an entirely different outcome depending on whether or not a person watches it. It's as if the experiment itself knows when you are paying attention. Look away, and it goes one way. Turn back, and it does something totally different. Quantum physics is what inspires a huge percentage of the most outrageous science fiction movies today. Movies about parallel universes and time travel are springboarding off the mind-bending discussions that quantum physicists are having at our most prestigious universities.

Now let's talk about a subject that has to be at least 10,000 times more mind-bending than quantum physics, because the quantum realm is still a part of God's created universe. I am, of course, talking about the realm of infinite God, completely detached from the created order. Seriously, people! If quantum physics is so bizarre that it left the great Einstein's brain in fits, is it possible that ancient philosophers (who didn't even believe in a heliocentric solar system, or know what a virus is) had infinite God all sorted out? The idea that human speculation, largely rooted in ancient Greek philosophy, has somehow cracked the God code is about as absurd as believing a garden slug can do ... uh, quantum physics. After sifting through the evidence, here is my conclusion. The idea that a finite being like you or I can even begin to figure out an infinite being is beyond laughable.

After thirty-plus years of study, I have concluded that “infinite God data” is not just difficult for our little human brains to process—it’s impossible. Furthermore, history shows again and again that when people try (like Mrs. Marvyn), they get themselves into massive trouble. (Again, maybe you’ve been there.) This is why God has chosen to come to us in a form we can handle, a simple human form that even a child can engage. Of course there is way more to Him, but you and I are not smart enough to make any kind of sense out of it. The simple human form, the form ultimately revealed in Jesus, is what we are supposed to be interacting with. That’s how we know Him, walk with Him, talk with Him, and grow in relationship with Him. What about God’s other form, or mode, or whatever you want to call it? Here is my advice—leave those questions for eternity. (Even then we may not be able to make much sense of it.)

## **2.12 BUT ... HOW DOES IT WORK?**

How does the human form God borrows relate to or connect with His infinite mode? This might be a good place to insert Alexander Pope’s famous line, “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” The whole point of this chapter is to argue that we can’t understand God’s infinite mode, and that is precisely why He has to condescend to us. If we could understand God’s infinite ontology, there would be no need for Him to reveal Himself in human form. Furthermore, if the greatest minds on the planet can’t figure out how, for example, to unite quantum physics with general relativity, it shouldn’t trouble us too much that we can’t figure out the connection between infinite God and the finite human

form He takes on. But having said all this, Calvin does have a compelling suggestion.

How does Calvin explain the link between the infinite and the finite? I wouldn't go to the wall for his view, but it's pretty ingenious. It closely parallels his understanding of sacrament,<sup>35</sup> which is fascinating and worth studying out (even if you don't agree with him on every point). For Calvin, a sacrament is something God borrows from the physical world, a created thing, to use sort of like a package (for lack of a better term).<sup>36</sup> What does God put inside the package? A spiritual blessing that is incomprehensible to us.

Consider the most well-known of all sacraments—The Lord's Table. God borrows the package of a physical meal—bread and wine—to give people the incomprehensible spiritual blessing of union with Christ. They can't wrap their minds around the mystery, so God “boxes it up” for them in a physical object they *can* wrap their minds around. Calvin explains,

Since we are creatures who always crawl on the ground, cling to the flesh, and do not even think about or conceive of anything spiritual, He stoops down to lead us to Himself even by these earthly things, and to set before us in the flesh a mirror of spiritual blessings. For if we were without bodies ... He would give us these very things naked and without bodies. Now, because we have souls engrafted in bodies, He imparts spiritual things under things we can see.<sup>37</sup>

According to Calvin, down through history God has used this strategy again and again and again—incomprehensible things packaged up in something borrowed from creation.

Hopefully, you see where all this is going. Calvin uses virtually the exact same logic to explain why God borrows a human form.<sup>38</sup> God, who is incomprehensible in His infinite form, packages Himself up in something borrowed from creation—a human form. Why? Because human beings are unable to wrap their brains around the spiritual reality without the package.

There is one more thing worth mentioning that Calvin says in his discussion of sacraments. We should not try to lay hold of spiritual blessings apart from the sacrament. In other words, we cannot jump over the physical thing (the package) and experience the incomprehensible thing. The spiritual reality is bound to the package.

In the sacraments the reality is given to us along with the sign; for when the Lord holds out a sacrament, He does not feed our eyes with an empty and unmeaning figure, but joins the truth with it.<sup>39</sup>

In virtually the exact same way, Calvin says we cannot jump over the human form God borrows when He presents Himself to us. According to him, this is what theologians are doing when they attempt to probe into the mysteries of infinite God. The point is that God is only known through the human form He takes on in Christ.

When, however, Christ is called the image of the invisible God, this ... has a reference to us, because He represents the Father to us. The Father Himself is represented as invisible, because He is in Himself not apprehended by the human understanding. He exhibits Himself, however, to us by His Son, and makes Himself in a manner visible.<sup>40</sup>

### 2.13 BACK AT THE PRAYER MEETING

Now let's return to the subject we began the chapter with—prayer. Study closely the great pray-ers down through Christian history—George Mueller, John Hyde, Andrew Murray, Hudson Taylor, Amy Carmichael, etc. These movers and shakers in God's kingdom all prayed aggressively, a lot like Moses and Elijah did. They wrestled and pleaded with God as if He truly could be moved to action. You will never find them praying like so many of us today do, "If it be Thy will ... this," "If it be Thy will ... that." This sort of praying is not aggressive and active. It is resignation to whatever happens. It's virtually identical to the Muslim's prayer of resignation, "Inshallah." "If it be Thy will" does not inspire confident, active prayer. It does not fuel fervent all-night prayer meetings like we see in the New Testament. It's hard not to feel like this sort of prayer is just a frustrating formality, as if God is playing a game with us. "Let's pretend you are asking for things, and I am really answering you."

Inevitably someone reading this will say, "Didn't Jesus pray this sort of 'If it be Thy will' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane?" Not at all. In upcoming chapters, we will study this event in greater detail. All that needs to be noted here is that Jesus isn't submitting to some mysterious, inevitable, hidden plan of God. Jesus is showing us how to overcome temptation and obey even when it is hard. Read the passage very carefully. He isn't saying, "I will accept whatever comes down the pike." He is saying, "Father, I see clearly what You are asking of Me ... and it looks excruciating. But I choose to obey."

Others would argue that something akin to the prayer of submission ("If it be Thy will ...") seems to be found in The Lord's Prayer, "**Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven**" (Matthew 6:10). We will also tackle this later. Suffice it to say that this passage is not talking about submission to some grand, inevitable script, either. As Calvin notes, "We are not here treating that secret will by which He governs all things, and destines them to their end."<sup>41</sup> What is Jesus actually teaching us? Very much the same thing we see in the Garden of Gethsemane. We need to use our wills and choose to obey God's commands, rather than the dictates and desires of our human hearts. (It's ironic how often Calvin's teaching on prayer chastens the sort of "prayer" taught by so many "Calvinists" today.<sup>42</sup>)

Whatever God may or may not be in His infinite, incomprehensible mode is not for you and me to mess with. And it is certainly not for us to pray to. He presents Himself to us in a way we can understand, as a kind, compassionate ally, who is yearning to break in and save the day. Prayer is supposed to be exciting, aggressive, hopeful, and life-giving. Why?



Because it's sort of like ... no, it is exactly like, talking to Jesus.

Contrary to what we hear from pulpits and lecterns across the land, God never asked us to try and figure out His infinite, timeless, limitless ontology. Nor does He ask us to try to reconcile our prayers with some all-controlling script that corresponds to this infinite, immutable ontology. Our problem is that we have been trained to jump over the form God has chosen to clothe Himself with. Simply put, we believe we can see what cannot be seen. All the great pray-ers in Scripture and history simply engage God as if He has real emotion, real preferences, real responsiveness. (See Chapter 7.)

## 2.14 ECLIPSING *THE DERAKIM*

Most of us understood all this intuitively when we first came to God. "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." We only got confused after we started listening to sermons and reading books about God's infinite nature, foreknowledge, timelessness, and His immutable will, etc. Isn't that ironic? Christian theology is actually the thing that takes so many of us right off the rails. (Could this be why seminary is often referred to as "cemetery"?) We are told to probe the depths of the infinite sea, and see what the Bible says cannot be seen. In the process, we miss God as He has chosen to come to us.

The sad fact is that if we follow the path laid out for us by Christian theology, we will miss the glorious self-description He gives us in *The Derakim*—"compassionate and

gracious, slow to anger, and great in lovingkindness and faithfulness." We will also miss what God was telling us about Himself in the Person of Jesus. "He who has seen Me has seen the Father." The words of *The Derakim* only work if you apply them to someone with a human ontology. This is why they fit so perfectly as a description of Jesus Christ. If we aren't willing to engage God in a human form, we won't hear the message. Let's see how this works in real time.

Consider the first attribute of *The Derakim*—"compassionate." In the Hebrew language, this word (*raham*) is brimming with emotion. Interpreted in a straightforward way, it says, "You know the way a nursing mother feels and responds to her child? That is the way I feel about you."<sup>43</sup> This works perfectly if indeed God has revealed Himself in human form. It doesn't work at all from the perspective of traditional Christian theology—Classical Theism. According to this latter view, God doesn't have human-like emotions at all. He is impassible. He is wholly unaffected by the death of a child, or a soul dropping into a Christless eternity. You, reader, may find this offensive and cry, "Say it isn't so," but your seminary-trained pastor knows what I am talking about. Here is how one of the most influential theologians of the last century put it: "God surveys with uninterrupted bliss what transpires in the veil of tears which is our world."<sup>44</sup> From this perspective, we can take out a big red marker and cross out the first attribute of *The Derakim*.

Now let's move on to attributes two and three. Number two is "gracious." In Hebrew this word is *hanun*, and it often has to do with seeing a need, or hearing a prayer, and responding. Once again, this works beautifully if God borrows a human form, but traditional theology argues that God can't respond

to anything—He is immutable. So the word gracious has nothing to do with Him actually responding.<sup>45</sup> Get out that big red marker again and scratch it out.

Move on to attribute number three—"slow to anger." We already noted that traditional theology says that God doesn't have human-like emotions. Furthermore, He can't be "slow" to anything, because He is atemporal (outside of time). Let's mark out that attribute, too ... and so on, and so on. Traditional theology teaches that none of this (God's own words from God's own mouth) is literally/technically true of Him.

All this explains why *The Derakim* has not been heard by so many of us who grew up in the church. The heart of the problem is that we are failing to make the distinction that Calvin points out between God who can't be seen and God revealed in a human form. It is largely because of this oversight that the most foundational description of God in the Bible has, for all intents and purposes, been relegated to the theological dumpster.

## 2.15 IF YOU WANT TO SEE IT

Yes or no? Didn't Jesus say that we had to become like little children if we wanted to get into His kingdom (Matthew 18:3)? Didn't Jesus say that the super smart guys were going to miss the true revelation of God, while the babies would get it (Matthew 11:25-30)? There is not a snowball's chance in Death Valley that Jesus was talking about some abstruse philosophical conception of God that I didn't even really understand until I went into PhD studies (and most pastors today still don't understand). The highest and most glori-

ous revelation God ever gave to humanity is not found in a systematic theology book. It is seen in a human being. Jesus Christ.

**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 ... He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature.**  
(Hebrews 1:1-3)

Let us say it one more time—of course there is ultimately a whole lot more to God. The Bible gives us a handful of facts about His infinite mode. He fills all and transcends all, He knows all, He has all power, and holds everything together. But beyond just stating these bald facts, it doesn't try to explain them. And nowhere does the Bible invite us to probe God's infinite nature, speculate about it, dissect it, etc., because we can't. The Bible tells us to do the opposite, to back away and K.I.S.S.

**LORD, my heart is not proud and my eyes are not haughty; And I do not get involved in lofty things or in things that are too awesome for me. Truly I have settled and quieted my soul. Like a weaned child rests against his mother, my soul is like a weaned child within me. O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forever. (Psalm 131)**

God invites us to know Him in the form that makes sense to us—a human form. This is the divinely ordained channel for a relationship between God and man. This means we interact with Him in very much the same way we do with all the other people we know. We appeal to His emotions, plead with Him, even (respectfully) argue with Him, and expect Him to move on our behalf. End of discussion. This human form is not all that there is to God, but it's exactly what we need to make it through this life successfully. As that old hymn, *In The Garden*, says,

He walks with me, and He talks with me, and  
He tells me I am His own, and the joy we  
share, as we tarry there, none other has ever  
known<sup>46</sup>

So in conclusion, if all this resonates with you and the yearning of your heart is to know Him simply like a child does, join me as we go up the mountain with Moses to meet the God of *The Derakim*.

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1. See, e.g., Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (1885), and its sequel, *The Ministry of Intercession* (1897). Other notable works would be R. A. Torrey, *How to Pray* (1900), and E. M. Bounds's seven classics, most notably *Preacher and Prayer* (1907), and *Power through Prayer* (1910).

2. This well-known hymn was written by William W. Walford (1772-1850). Its history is a bit obscure, but it first appears in the Baptist hymnal *Church Melodies* (1859), edited by Thomas Hastings and Robert Turnbull.
3. See Paul Miller's article, "Who Killed the Prayer Meeting?" (<https://www.crossway.org/articles/who-killed-the-prayer-meeting/>). For a powerful sermon on this topic, see Jim Cymbala's "My House Shall be Called a House of Prayer" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U79YOKje2zU&t=6s>).
4. James Dolezal, for instance, states, "Classical theists understand such passages to be speaking about God anthropomorphically and do not take such descriptions literally ..." (<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/does-god-change-his-mind>)
5. Some believe that passages like 1 Samuel 15:29 support the notion that God cannot change His mind. But if you read the context, and the verse itself, what is being said is simply that God does not lie. **"Also the Eternal One of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind."**
6. Some like to point to a passage like Malachi 3:6 to argue that God is basically static in His being and will. **"For I, the LORD, do not change. It is because of this, O sons of Jacob, that you are not consumed."** However, this verse is simply a reminder that God remains consistent in the way He deals with people. In the context, it is actually a call to repentance based on God's mercy.

7. Eli was a failed religious leader, being rebuked for refusing to correct his rebellious sons (who, among other things, were stealing temple sacrifices and sleeping with women in the house of God). Eli's "submission" to the "will of God" here shows how out of step he is with God's ways. He should have repented and sought forgiveness and restoration, like virtually all godly people in Scripture do when they are rebuked.
8. In Sinclair Lewis's brutal parody of conservative Christianity, *Elmer Gantry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Company, 1927), the author highlights this apparent contradiction. It leads an aspiring minister to question the validity of Scripture. He tells his professor, "Honestly ... I'm not trying to raise doubts, but there does seem to be an inconsistency there, and I wish I could find the proper explanation." (p.120)
9. This phraseology comes very close to Calvin, who speaks of a "a twofold view of God." Calvin Translation Society, *Minor Prophets* 3:116.
10. Just for the sake of clarity, this has nothing to do with the historical error known as "modalism" or "Sabellianism." I am a thoroughgoing orthodox Trinitarian, believing that there is only one God, who exists in three distinct and separate Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

11. From the standpoint of traditional Christian theology, there are no points of similarity between an infinite being and a finite being. This conundrum is seen in the puzzle of the two natures of Jesus (the hypostatic union). How can Jesus be both human and divine at the same time? As one theologian/philosopher says, "Is it not logically impossible for such an unchangeable and impassible deity to achieve an identity with a creaturely condition so that it could be said that God is someone that suffered, died, and that sufferingly knew the evils of our world? Must a classical theist not acknowledge that acceptance of the reality of such an ontological empathy requires a leap of faith *contra rationem*?" Charles Kelly, "The God of Classical Theism and the Doctrine of the Incarnation" in *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 35 (1994), 1.
12. See section 2.10 below. The borrowing of philosophical ideas by early Christian theologians (after the death of the apostles) has been well established. This subject is also touched on in Chapters 8, 10, and the Epilogue.



13. In many of these accounts, the divine figure is referred to as "the angel of the LORD." Throughout Christian history, this figure has been understood to be a manifestation of God Himself. When the LORD speaks to Moses from the burning bush, for instance, Scripture actually says that, "The angel of the LORD appeared to him" (Exodus 3:2). Calvin states, "I willingly receive what ancient writers teach on this subject— that when Christ anciently appeared in human form, it was a prelude to the mystery which was afterward exhibited when God was manifested in the flesh." Calvin Translation Society, *Joshua*, 88.
14. There are so many examples of this throughout the Old Testament, e.g. Daniel 9:18-19. **"We aren't presenting our supplications before You because we deserve anything from You, but because of Your great compassion. O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen to me and move! My God, for Your own sake don't delay because Your city and Your people are called by Your name."**
15. A recent example of this is former Moody Bible Institute professor Paul Maxwell, who walked away from the Christian faith completely. He attempted to reconcile his personal trauma and his theology in his PhD dissertation, but ultimately found his own thesis unbelievable. See Paul Maxwell, *The Trauma of Doctrine* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Academic, 2022).

16. Stowe grew up surrounded by intellectual and spiritual rigor. Her father, Lyman Beecher (1775-1863), was one of the most respected religious voices of his time, and was said to be "father of more brains than any man in America." One of her brothers, Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887), gained the distinction of being the most famous pastor in America. Three siblings opened up a seminary for girls which taught, among other things, Latin, rhetoric, logic, moral and natural philosophy. Harriet joined the staff, and being dissatisfied with many of the textbooks, she wrote her own. Harriet's husband Calvin Stowe (1802-1886) greatly encouraged her career. He was a linguistics scholar and theologian who taught at Lane Seminary, and later at Andover Theological Seminary.
17. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) was an international sensation and contributed significantly to the anti-slavery sentiment that fueled America's Civil War. When Abraham Lincoln met her, he purportedly said, "So, you are the little lady who started this war." When the Emancipation Proclamation was announced in 1863, the throng of anti-slavery activists with Stowe spontaneously began chanting, "Harriet Beecher Stowe! Harriet Beecher Stowe!"
18. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing*, 27th ed. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1886).
19. *Ibid*, 343.

20. Very specifically, a type of Calvinism that came to fruition in New England in the eighteenth century. In short, it was the belief that God's infinite nature and all the mysteries of the universe could be uncovered by the human mind. Stowe explains: "(T)hey turned the same bold inquiries towards the Eternal Throne, and threw down their glove ... as authorized defenders of every mystery in the Eternal Government. The task they proposed to themselves was that of reconciling the most tremendous facts of sin and evil, present and eternal, with those conceptions of Infinite Power and Benevolence ..." Ibid, 333.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid, 348. (I took the liberty to change the wording slightly, to make this readable to a contemporary audience.)
23. Throughout this book, I appeal quite a bit to the writings of John Calvin. This may lead readers to assume that I myself am a Calvinist. In terms of "Calvinism" as it is commonly defined, my answer is (tongue in cheek) that I am agnostic. I have no idea if the Reformer was right about all the lofty things he talks about (God's essence, sovereignty, predestination, etc.). To me, it seems ironic (even incoherent) that he takes hard stands on things that he himself says are incomprehensible.

24. Martin Luther seems to say something very similar, but in his writings this theme is not as pronounced as in Calvin. Luther states, "Now, God in His own nature and majesty is to be left alone; in this regard, we have nothing to do with Him, nor does He wish us to deal with Him. We have to do with Him as clothed and displayed in His Word, by which He presents Himself to us." Martin Luther, "Bondage of The Will" in *Selections from His Writings*, edited by John Dillenberger (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 191.
25. One of the most well-known of these warnings can be found in *Institutes* 3.24.4. "In this way he plunges headlong into an immense abyss, involves himself in numberless inextricable snares, and buries himself in the thickest darkness. For it is right that the stupidity of the human mind should be punished with fearful destruction, whenever it attempts to rise in its own strength to the height of divine wisdom." (Battles translation [London: Westminster Press, 1960].)
26. *Institutes* 1.13.21. (Battles Translation)
27. Calvin Translation Society, *Colossians*, 150.

28. Harry Wolfson writes extensively on Christian, Muslim, and Jewish dependence on Greek philosophy, and notes that the entire discussion in the medieval period can be reduced down to a sort of synthetic single philosopher: "The endless discussion to be found in the voluminous literature of the various languages ... are only elaborations upon these principles—explanations of these principles in their manifold implications, discussions of various difficulties arising from these principles, homilies on various scriptural proof-texts advanced to support them, and discourses on various philosophical passages which appear to be either in agreement with or disagreement with them." Harry Wolfson, *From Philo to Spinoza* (New York: Behrman House, 1977), 33-34.
29. See note 13 in Chapter 10.
30. It's beyond the scope of this study to delve into this, but inquiring minds cannot help but ask, "Why do the writings of ancient pagans read like Christian systematic theology textbooks?" Did God inspire the pagans? Some church fathers thought so. (Personally, I don't buy it.) The following reads like something out of a Theology 101 course at Bible college, although it was written by a B.C. Greek philosopher. "We say therefore that God is a living being, eternal ... It has been shown also that this substance cannot have any magnitude, but is without parts and indivisible ... But it has also been shown that it is impassive and unalterable; for all the other changes are posterior to change of place." (Aristotle, *Metaphysic* 12.7).

31. Calvin himself was a Classical Theist in his ultimate views of God. He believed it was true, but also believed it was incomprehensible. It points to God's infinite nature. For Calvin, Classical Theism was the incomprehensible mode God must step down from when He relates to us.
32. One of the reasons I don't trust the Greek philosophers on this matter is because they were wrong about so much. Like what? Just for starters, Aristotle promoted the idea of a geocentric universe, some preposterous ideas in physics (heavy objects fall faster than light objects), the inferiority of women, the spontaneous generation of certain animals, etc. But perhaps (hear my sarcasm) he did nail down the most exalted subject in the universe—the ontology of God.
33. December 14, 1900, is considered to be the birthday of quantum physics, when Berliner Max Planck (age 42) showed some bizarre new findings to colleagues.
34. For the uninitiated, you can cut your teeth on the following article introducing some of the basics. <https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/the-many-worlds-theory/>
35. For his discussion of sacraments in the *Institutes*, see 4.4.1. For the most protracted discussion of the broader idea of sacrament in his commentaries, see his discussion of Isaiah 6.
36. The actual word Calvin likes to use for this sort of "package" is "sign" (*signa*).
37. *Institutes* 4.14.3.

38. Although God in human form does parallel Calvin's logic of sacrament in many ways, it goes well beyond it. This is probably why he avoids the actual word sacrament in his discussions about God in human form (even though the logic is so similar). In Jesus Christ, God does not merely borrow, He forever binds Himself to the human form. The implications and details of all this go beyond the scope of our discussion here.
39. Calvin Translation Society, *Isaiah* 1:211.
40. Calvin Translation Society, *The Corinthians* 1:196-197.
41. *Institutes* 3.20.43. (Battles translation)
42. Elsewhere Calvin says, "It is very absurd, therefore, to dissuade men from prayer, by pretending that Divine Providence, which is always watching over the government of the universe, is in vain importuned by our supplications, when, on the contrary, the Lord Himself declares, that He is 'nigh unto all that call upon Him, to all that call upon Him in truth' (Ps. 145:18)." *Institutes* 3.20.3. (Battles translation)
43. It was noted in the previous chapter that the Hebrew word here (*raham*) comes from the word *rehem*, which means "a mother's womb." The most primitive meaning of *raham* relates to the way a mother feels for her child. Of course, words are flexible things and it doesn't always carry that precise meaning, but God repeatedly makes it clear that His affections for us are actually greater than a mother's (Isaiah 49:15).

44. Wolterstorff actually abandoned this view after the death of his son, because after the tragedy he found the logical implications of this view to be repulsive. "Does God Suffer: Interview with Nicholas Wolterstorff," in *Modern Reformation* (Sept/Oct 1999), 45.
45. One of the most famous statements along these lines is found in *Proslogion* (Chapter 8), by Anselm of Canterbury (1093-1109). "How are You both merciful and impassible at the same time? For if You are impassible You do not have any compassion ... You are merciful according to our way of seeing things but not according to Your way. ... So You are both merciful because You save the sorrowful and pardon those who sin against You; but You are not merciful because You do not experience any feeling of compassion for misery."
46. From the hymn, "I Come to the Garden Alone," written in 1912 by Charles Austin Miles (1868-1946).