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REFLECTIONS ON CHRIST THAT CHANGE US

KRIS LUNDGAARD


P U B L I S H I N G
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*To Karen,
my princess*

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About This Book

This book is about Christ.

It's for reflecting on Christ through the looking glass of the Scriptures, relishing everything about him we can know, all his loveliness and wonder.

It's for anyone who is in awe of Christ and who loves nothing more than to revel in his greatness and wallow in his beauty. It's for lovers of Christ who are so taken with him that they want to lose themselves in thoughts of nothing but the Lamb of God.

It's for people like me who for a long time have had this feeling deep inside that Christ should be everything to them, their highest joy and crown—yet they've never been able to keep him in the center of their thoughts.

It's for people who want to be like Christ and try their hardest, but fail.

It's for newborn babes in Christ, just tasting the wonder of Christ, learning to take their first steps in adoring him.

It's for lukewarm believers who have lost their first love for Christ—people whose affection for him is a flickering flame that threatens to die.

It's for skeptics who wonder why all the fuss about Christ.
This book is about Christ.

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,
Christ when I arise . . .

(from St. Patrick's Breastplate)

Author's Note

This book bears a striking resemblance to one by a seventeenth-century Puritan named John Owen. The similarities are purely intentional—his stuff was so good I borrowed it and bent it till it looked like my own. Still, his beats mine hands down. If you have the patience to learn to read his language (it's English, but not like we speak), I recommend that you put this book down and grab his *The Glory of Christ*. But if you haven't the leisure to learn a new language, I hope this book will do.

Owen isn't the only one who deserves my gratitude. I owe Maria denBoer and Thom Notaro thanks for their editorial nit-picking. Barbara Lerch's unquenchable good cheer makes the task pleasant.

I still have the notes from a class on the English Puritans taught by J. I. Packer at Reformed Theological Seminary in 1988. That's where he planted the seeds of my love for John Owen. And I offer Dr. Packer special thanks for his kind words and for smoothing over a few rough spots in this manuscript.

Paula, my bride, is my favorite reader of all.

And Christ, my Lord Jesus Christ, is the glory of it all—I thank you, precious Jesus.

For now we see through a glass, darkly.

(1 Corinthians 13:12 KJV)

We all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory.

(2 Corinthians 3:18 KJV)

Our faith, therefore, at present beholds God as absent. How so? Because it sees not his face, but rests satisfied with the image in the mirror; but when we shall have left the world, and gone to him, it will behold him as near and before its eyes.

(John Calvin on 1 Corinthians 13:12)

Lord, Thou art fulness, I am emptiness:
Yet hear my heart speak in its speechlessness
Extolling Thine unuttered loveliness.

(Christina Rossetti)

*We start our journey by
discovering two unexpected truths:
There's a glorious Being who longs
for our company, and by seeing him
we will become like him.*

[|]

To See His Glory



*A lotta cats copy the Mona Lisa,
but people still line up to see the original.*

—Louis Armstrong

THE COOL GUY

When he was still a freshman, Lex returned a kickoff ninety yards for a touchdown against our high school football team. But our fortunes changed at the beginning of his junior year when he transferred to our school. All the guys knew before Lex arrived that he was fast. And all the girls knew after Lex arrived that he was cute.

But Lex wasn't just fast and cute. He was warm and sincere and humble and respectful and kind and gracious—and he was all this without being a square. Not only would you want to be Lex's friend, but your parents would want

you to be his friend. He wasn't your ordinary teenager, nor was he your typical superstar.

In the first five games of the football season, Lex showed that he was destined to be all-state at halfback. But in the sixth game his season ended with the snap of his collarbone.

That's how I got to know the cool guy.

While his bone was healing, Lex went to the gym every day after school to watch basketball practice. I was also in the gym every day, tossing around a lead-filled plastic ball on the upper deck.¹ When I finished I would go down to the court and sit on a bleacher near Lex to watch the team. Being a mere sophomore and about as socially gifted as a piece of decaying bark, I never said a word to this being who seemed to belong on Mount Olympus. Happily, he wasn't too cool to talk to me.

In the next several weeks Lex and I became friends. He invited me to his home, which I in my adolescence imagined to be a boon bestowed by this god only on his elect. Eventually I was honored with the highest recognition, when Lex invited me to come along to a Doobie Brothers concert in Albuquerque!

As this friendship ripened, I noticed that something was happening to me. My laugh changed. My smile started to draw up slightly to one side, rather (I thought) the way Lex's smile drew to one side. I started using words I heard him use. Even the way I sat changed—it was as if I was auditioning to be Lex's stunt-double. I was no Dana Carvey, but without the least conscious effort I was doing my best impression of Lex. You could say that I was being molded into his image.

DESIGNER IMITATIONS

When you admire someone—especially with affection—your heart is *warm*, or even *soft*, toward him or her. A warm and soft heart is like wax that is warm and soft—ready to take the imprint or image of something that is pressed into it, as a seal is pressed into wax. I’m sure you’ve noticed that when you find a friend who you think is the coolest thing on two legs, you start to adopt his or her expressions, accent, and hand gestures. You might even begin to walk or laugh the way your newfound friend does.

This happens because God designed us that way—to become like the people and things we love, whether good or evil. From our earliest days we are natural imitators, always being shaped by the things we hold dear—whether our parents, our friends, or rock stars. The psalmist is talking about much more than mere idols of wood and stone when he says in Psalm 115 that

. . . their idols are silver and gold,
made by the hands of men.
They have mouths, but cannot speak,
eyes, but they cannot see;
they have ears, but cannot hear,
noses, but they cannot smell;
they have hands, but cannot feel,
feet, but they cannot walk;
nor can they utter a sound with their throats.
Those who make them will be like them,
and so will all who trust in them.
(Psalm 115:4–8)

Simply put: You become what you worship.

So it was only natural that I would start becoming more and more like Lex.

U L T I M A T E I M I T A T I O N S

In the end, the Scriptures tell us, we who belong to Christ will be like him:

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. (1 John 3:2)

We who have lived our lives here in frustration and weakness will one day become like the Lord Jesus himself. This is a miracle of God's loving grace: He made us in his image in the beginning, and we through sin disfigured that image until it was all but unrecognizable. But God, who is rich in mercy, will through Christ undo our undoing and recreate us in the image of his Son.

Think about it. We'll be with him. We'll be like him. Is there anyone cooler to be with? Is there anyone you'd rather be like? Is there anything better you could dream of?

But did you notice how it is that we'll become like Christ? Read the end of 1 John 3:2 again:

... we shall be like him, *for we shall see him as he is.*

In that day God will remove the blinders of weakness and sin from our eyes so that we can see Christ in all his loveliness

and majesty.² Because we'll see him clearly, we'll love him completely, for there's nothing unlovely in him. To the limit of our recreated capacity,³ we'll see the fullness of his nobility, excellence, holiness, righteousness, kindness, mercy, goodness—every beauty that could make us cherish him. And that fundamental principle in us, that we imitate what we admire and become what we worship, will be fulfilled. Adoring him with all our hearts, with nothing to hinder us, we will be like him.

OUR DYING LORD'S LONGING

In just a few hours you will die in agony. What's worse, you already know it, and you know that no governor in heaven or on earth will stay your execution. Your friends are gathered around you for a meal, which you know will be your last together before you're torn from them. What's more, you know that when the end comes, all of them will turn tail and run as deserters.

That is what Christ faced, and, of course, none of us could ever fill his shoes. But if I were in his shoes, I would have been filled with self-pity. I couldn't have held back the tide of resentment that would have swept over me as I looked into the eyes of those who would soon betray, deny, and desert me.

But listen to our Lord's words at the table:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go

and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. (John 14:1–3)

No chiding and resentment here, no self-pity or self-absorption—only concern for his friends and a decidedly tender longing to be with them. John 14:3 should make every believer fall on his or her face incredulous. This is the Lord of glory talking, the matchless King of the universe who could have anything his heart desires—and he’s talking about going home to fix up some rooms in his palace so that his friends can come and stay with him. Jesus has shown love to his people in countless ways, but none seems more human than this expression of affection and delight. I weep to think of it.

Wanting to have his friends with him forever, Jesus turns to the Father and offers up his fragrant longings, as the high priest offered incense in the temple. In his love he makes this startling request of the Father:

Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. (John 17:24)

Someone who didn’t know anything about Jesus might read this verse and think him arrogant and awfully taken with himself. But those who know Jesus rejoice at his request. They know that to be with him and to see his glory is all that can satisfy them, all that can bring them peace. Without this no soul can truly rest forever. As a needle that has

been rubbed against a magnet and placed on a floating cork will twist and bob until it finds north, the heart of the believer, having tasted the love of Christ, will not rest until it lands in the arms of Christ.

You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless till it finds its rest in you.⁴

When I found myself turning into little Lex, something more was going on than my affection for him—something else accelerated my transformation. The one I admired returned my affection. Because he spoke to me and took me into his home and invited me to the Doobies concert, I was drawn to him like a ten-penny nail to an electron magnet. When his affection for me met mine for him, nothing in me could resist the impulse to become like him.

In the same way, Christ's tenderness for us draws us to him in amazement and compels our hearts to be like him.

TWO WAYS OF SEEING

Jesus asks the Father to let us see his glory. This request wells up from his love, because he knows that to see him is our greatest joy and gift—not just in the world to come, but now. It's the life and reward of our souls. When we see him, we see the Father (John 14:9). In the face of Christ we see “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God” (2 Corinthians 4:6). And as we reflect on him, we are transformed into his image:

We all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror⁵ the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into

the same image from glory to glory. (2 Corinthians 3:18 NASB)

The Scriptures distinguish two ways or degrees of seeing the glory of Christ. Paul makes this distinction when he says in 2 Corinthians 5:7, “We live by faith, not by sight.” He is contrasting our lives “at home in the body” and “away from the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:6) with our lives in the world to come. In both, our joy is to contemplate the beauty of Christ. In this world we see “but a poor reflection” of him, because we see him only by faith; but in the world to come we’ll see him “face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

When Jesus prays in John 17, his ultimate longing is for his people to be with him and to see his glory. Although he prays that their vision of his glory will be perfected in heaven, he doesn’t ignore the sight of his glory that we can have by faith here and now. Seeing the wonder and majesty of Christ by faith here in this world should be our concern, because *only those who gaze on Christ by faith while in this world will ever see his glory by sight in the world to come.*

As I write these words, it is August, and the heart’s desire of my 5-year-old son, Kristian, is to go to school. He wants to get on a bus and go to a big building with lots of other kids. He believes it would be wonderful. But he is only in love with something in his imagination; he has no real idea of what it means to go to school.

Many people are the same way with Christ. They claim to love him and long to be with him, but they couldn’t tell you the first thing about Christ. They do know, of course, that to die and be with him would be better than going to

the other place. But those who say they long for Christ, yet never gaze on his beauty by faith in this life, are only kidding themselves.

WHAT GLORY CAN THE EYES OF
FAITH SEE?

When Jesus walked with his disciples on earth, they saw “his glory, the glory of the One and Only [Son], who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). But what glory of his did they see, and how did they see it? It wasn’t the splendor of an earthly kingdom, for Christ “made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant” (Philippians 2:7). They would more likely have mistaken him for a slave than for a mover and shaker in Palestinian politics. He had no place to lay his head⁶—much less a palace. And the disciples didn’t see his glory reflected in a handsome face, despite all the movies and paintings we’ve ever seen. According to the Scriptures, the Savior didn’t save anyone with his good looks.

. . . there were many who were appalled at him—
his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of
any man
and his form marred beyond human likeness. . . .
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire
him.
He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.
Like one from whom men hide their faces

he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

(Isaiah 52:14; 53:2–3)

And the disciples couldn't have seen the eternal glory of his deity, because no one can see that in this world.

How, then, did they see his glory? They saw it as he was “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). That is, they saw him as the Promised One who would come to bring the grace and truth of God to his people. And they only saw this by faith, because the only ones who saw this glory were those who “received him” and “believed in his name” (John 1:12). They saw the glory of the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). This is the same glory we can see by faith today.

When we look on Christ by faith and see him as he is revealed in the Word, we can only love him more. Each view of him draws us deeper into the charm of love and delight. As John Owen puts it,

Herein would I live; herein would I die; hereon would I dwell in my thoughts and affections, to the withering and consumption of all the painted beauties of this world, unto the crucifying all things here below, until they become unto me a dead and deformed thing, no way meet for affectionate embraces.⁷

THE TREASURES BEFORE US

Anything that Christ would pray for has to be good. When he prays for us to see his glory, we know there's some-

thing extraordinary in store for us. As we begin to reflect on that beauty by faith, we'll find the tip of the iceberg of treasures before us.

1. *Gazing on Christ will give rest, satisfaction, and peace to our souls.* Our minds tend to be full of countless perplexed thoughts—fears, cares, dangers, distresses, passions, and lusts throw us into disorder, darkness, and confusion. But when our best thoughts are fixed on Jesus,⁸ our hearts will be kept holy, serene, and spiritual. For “to be spiritually minded is life and peace” (Romans 8:6 NKJV). Reflecting on Christ takes our minds off things below—things that aren't worth comparing to the great worth, beauty, and glory of what we see in Christ (compare Philippians 3:7–11). When we take our eyes off Christ, we become strangers to heavenly life, and live without the spiritual refreshment and satisfaction that God offers in his gospel.

2. *Adoring Christ will whet our appetites for heaven.* We know that in heaven we'll be filled with joy forever. But what will be the fountain of that joy? Nothing but seeing the glory of our Lord Jesus! The Scriptures repeatedly lay this before us as our promised treasure:

. . . we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:17–18)

I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far. . . . (Philippians 1:23)

To be with him is better by far because we'll see his glory (John 17:24), and by seeing him as he is, "we shall be like him" (1 John 3:2), which is the goal of our salvation and our joy forever.

Seeing God in heaven is called the *beatific vision* and is the eternal fountain of the life of souls in heaven. But we know that the essence of God—immense and infinite—is invisible to the eyes of our flesh. In fact, we'll never be able to see the essence of God, because we are and will always be finite creatures. So the sight that we'll have of God will always be "in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). In Christ alone we'll see the glory of God in his infinite perfection, and this vision will fill us with peace, rest, and joy.

We can admire these things here, but we can't comprehend them. When we talk about seeing the perfection of God in Christ, we're high in the Himalayas of thought, walking a knife-edge. We have to choose our words as carefully as we would our steps on that precipice, lest we stumble. Still, there is in believers a foresight and foretaste of this ultimate vision of God in Christ. We sometimes hold in our hearts, by the Word and Spirit, a sense of the unaltered glory of God shining out from Christ, which moves and saturates our souls with unspeakable joy. From this comes the "peace of God, which transcends all understanding" (Philippians 4:7). Christ, our "hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27), gives us a taste of the firstfruits of his heaven. Sometimes he even lets us bathe our souls in the fountain of his light and drink of the rivers of pleasure that are at his right hand (Psalm 16:11).⁹

Such heavenly pleasures are both rare and brief in this

life. But it's only our own laziness and darkness that keeps us from enjoying more visits of this grace. My hope is that through the following chapters Christ himself will seduce us with his beauty, and we'll surrender to him, feasting on him as often as we can.

*3. Admiring Christ will make us like him.*¹⁰ If I couldn't help becoming like Lex when I was taken with his charm, how could I by faith take a real look at the wonder of Christ without being changed into his likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18)? If we have been touched by God's grace and truly know him, we can't escape the transforming power of a sight of our beloved Lord. Our view of him by faith is often weak and certainly never as clear as it will be in heaven.

The wonders of Christ lie before us. Even though we see but a poor reflection of him (1 Corinthians 13:12), what we can see and know of him will calm our souls, stir our hunger for him, and certainly make us like him. With so much to be gained, let's get on with it and start reflecting by faith on the glory of Christ, through the looking glass.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Christ is the Bridegroom of the church, his beautiful bride. As his bride, answer the question posed of the beloved in Song of Songs 5:9: "How is your beloved better than others, most beautiful of women?" (In other words, what is it that you love about Christ? Be as specific as you can.)
2. Have you ever felt that you were bathed in Christ and in some sense given a foretaste of heaven as you gazed

on him by faith? If so, describe one or two things about Christ that you were taken with.

3. What are your expectations as you begin this journey? Make a list of at least three things you'd like God to do in, to, or for you. Now ask him to do them—for the glory of Christ.

That Where I Am, There Ye May Be Also

How know I that it looms lovely that land I have
never seen,
With morning-glories and heartsease and unexam-
pled green,
With neither heat nor cold in the balm-redolent air?
Some of this, not all, I know; but this is so;
Christ is there.

How know I that this blessedness befalls who dwell
in Paradise,
The outwearied hearts refreshing, rekindling the
worn-out eyes,
All souls singing, seeing, rejoicing everywhere?
Nay, much more than this I know; for this is so;
Christ is there.

O Lord Christ, Whom having not seen I love and
desire to love,
O Lord Christ, Who lookest on me uncomely yet
still Thy dove,
Take me to Thee in Paradise, Thine own made fair;
For whatever else I know, this thing is so;
Thou art there.

(Christina Rossetti)

Chapters 2–10 are like a long stretch of breathtaking vistas on our journey. Each chapter is a scenic overlook where we'll stop and gaze at yet another beautiful side of Christ.