

Face to Face (Fr. Stephen Freeman)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)

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Nothing about the human body is as intimate as the face. We generally think of other aspects of our bodies when we say “intimate,” but it is our face that reveals the most about us. It is the face we seek to watch in order to see what others are thinking, or even who they are. The importance of the face is emphasized repeatedly in the Scriptures. In the Old Testament, it is the common expression for how we rightly meet one another - and rarely - God Himself - “face to face.”

In the New Testament, St. Paul uses the language of the face to describe our transformation into the image of Christ.



The holy icons are doubtless the most abundant expression of the “theology of the face,” and perhaps among the most profound contributions of Orthodoxy to the world and the proclamation of what it truly means to be human. Every saint, from the least to the greatest, shares the same attribute as Christ in their icons. We see all of them, face to face. In the icons, no person is ever depicted in profile - with

two exceptions – Judas Iscariot and the demons. For it is in the vision of the face that we encounter someone as *person*. It is our sin that turns us away from the face of another – our effort to make ourselves somehow other than or less than personal. It is a manifestation of our turning away from God.

In human behavior, the emotion most associated with hiding the face is shame. The feeling of shame brings an immediate and deep instinct to hide or cover the face. Even infants, confronted by embarrassment or mild shame, will cover their faces with their hands or quickly tuck their face into the chest of the one holding them. It is part of the *unbearable* quality of shame.

Hiding is the instinctive response of Adam and Eve. “We were naked and we hid...” is their explanation. Readers have always assumed that it is the nakedness of their intimate parts that drive the first couple to hide. I think it more likely that it was their faces they most wanted to cover.

In an extended use of the story of Moses’ encounter with God after which he veiled his face, St. Paul presents the gospel of Christ as a transforming, face-to-face relationship with Christ.

Therefore, since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech—unlike Moses,*who* put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away. But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the *veil* is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord *is*, there *is* liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus’ sake. For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to *give* the light of the

knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2Co 3:12-6 NKJ)

The veil of Moses is an image of the blindness of the heart and spiritual bondage. Turning to Christ removes this blindness and hardness of heart. With unveiled faces we behold the knowledge of the glory of God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ and are transformed into the very same image which is Christ.

In Russian, the word *lik* (лик) can mean *face* and *person*. Sergius Bulgakov plays with various forms of the word in his book *Icons and the Name of God*. It is an essential Orthodox insight. The Greek word for person (πρόσωπον) also carries this double meaning. The unveiled or unhidden face is a face without shame – or a face that no longer hides from its shame. This is perhaps the most fundamental aspect of our transformation in Christ. The self in whom shame has been healed is the self that is able to live as person.

We are restored to our essential and authentic humanity – our personhood. We behold Christ face to face, as a person would who looks into a mirror. And, as St. John says, “We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (1Jo 3:2 NKJ).

The sacrament of penance boldly walks directly into the world of shame. Archimandrite Zacharias says:

... if we know to whom we present ourselves, we shall have the courage to take some shame upon ourselves. I remember that when I became a spiritual father at the monastery, Fr. Sophrony said to me, “Encourage the young people that come to you to confess just those things about which they are ashamed, because that shame will be converted into spiritual energy that can overcome the passions and sin.” In confession, the energy of shame becomes energy against the passions. As for a definition of shame, I would say it is the lack of courage to see ourselves as God sees us. (from *The Enlargement of the Heart*).

This is not an invitation to toxic shame – nor an invitation to take on yet more shame – it is a description of the healing from shame that is given in Christ. That healing is “the courage to see ourselves as God sees us.” It is the courage to answer like the prophet Samuel, “Here I am!” when God calls. God called to Adam who spoke from his shameful and faceless hiding.

Some of the mystical sermons of the fathers speak of Christ seeking Adam out a second time – but this time, in Hades, when Christ descended to the dead. There, Adam, hid no longer, turned to face the risen Lord. And so the traditional icon of the resurrection shows Christ taking Adam and Eve out of the smashed gates of

Hades.

The gates of Hades are written in our faces – as are the gates of paradise. It is the mystery of our true self – the one that is being re-created in the image of Christ – precisely as we behold Him face to face and discover that no shame need remain. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. Sweet liberty!

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