

## NUMINOUS 1

**AUGUST 6, 2017**

I'm sure you have seen these stories before, and I always think they are interesting. They come out about every few months when someone sees Jesus in their food. Have you seen these? National news usually picks up these stories and pictures usually circulate on social media. Here are a few:

(Cheetos Jesus)

[https://pbs.twimg.com/profile\\_images/743623450590347264/79fmxADF.jpg](https://pbs.twimg.com/profile_images/743623450590347264/79fmxADF.jpg)

(Fish stick Jesus)

[https://i.cbc.ca/1.2633563.1494628404!/fileImage/httpImage/image.jpg\\_gen/derivatives/16x9\\_620/jesus-fish-stick.jpg](https://i.cbc.ca/1.2633563.1494628404!/fileImage/httpImage/image.jpg_gen/derivatives/16x9_620/jesus-fish-stick.jpg)

(Grilled Cheesus)

<https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/77/13/b6/7713b6d02d775725a0e4eea19969329c.jpg>

When these stories circulate, Christians usually have a couple responses, interest and awe or a collective eye roll. In our modern scientific, post-enlightenment era, and especially in Silicon Valley with high education rates and analytical minds, we can look at these and roll our eyes. The prevalence of these stories and the laughter/disdain that accompanies them among unbelievers usually leads modern thoughtful Christians to see such things and roll their eyes and instantly dismiss them. We say that God doesn't reveal himself like that. You just have an uneven Panini press that scorched your toast. God doesn't reveal himself like that, there was just a random event at the Cheetos factory and enough Cheetos are made that eventually one will come out looking like a cross or a face.

The University of Toronto did a study, and they said it's perfectly normal for people to see Jesus in their toast. They came up with the idea of face pareidolia, which is essentially that humans are wired to see faces where there are none. They did a study and showed people random images. They told some they would see a face and others they would not. About 35% of people saw a face where there was none. They figured out that the human brain is

uniquely wired to see and recognize faces, so that even when there is only a slight suggestion of a face, people see a face.

When you add all of that up, people are skeptical and roll their eyes at grilled “Cheesus” and maybe rightfully so. I think it has created a whole generation in western Christianity that discounts almost any experiences of God outside of a few understood paths. Because grilled “Cheesus” is so ridiculous and science and good sense has explained it away and because we are so rational and thoughtful Christians, we allow you to experience or hear from God in a few preferred ways. You can experience and see God in Scripture. You can hear from God in prayer. You can hear from God in a sermon or song, and that is about it. Some people might allow hearing from God in nature, but it starts to get really thin. We don’t want to be perceived as grilled “Cheesus” Christians who are cheesy uneducated people, so we are hesitant to see God beyond anything normative. We definitely don’t see God in food. That’s ridiculous.

I have started to wonder if we haven’t closed ourselves off from God speaking to us from divine experiences around us everyday. Because we don’t want to be cheesy Christians, because we don’t want to appear to be uneducated or silly, we close ourselves off to the divine all around us. God must be proveable and reasonable. God speaks through words only, words or prayers, sermons or scriptures and that’s it. Experiences of God have to be limited. Facts about God are preferred. I think that might be why a lot of Christianity is dry and dusty for Christians and rather unappealing to outsiders. It’s a fact-based, apolgetics-obsessed religion rather than a wild mysterious encounter with an all-powerful living God who is present and speaking all the time.

I’m afraid we have lost something. If you don’t believe me, let me ask you a question. For those of you who are happily married, when you consider your marriage and speak of it to others, which are you more likely to do? Show someone your marriage certificate or show them a picture of your wedding day? Or when you recall your marriage, do you think about the excel spreadsheets of your bank account, or do you instead think of a moment on the beach as you watched the sunset together. I’m assuming most of us think and remember in

moments and experiences rather than facts and words. Yet for some reason, when it comes to God, many of us are guilty of limiting God and distilling God and making God small.

For the next several weeks, we will be in a series called *Numinous*. Numinous simply means something that evokes a spiritual emotion or experience. It means seeing something divinely mysterious or inspiring. For the next few weeks, I want to inspire you to look for God in unexpected places. Ironically enough, I want to use scripture to show you that God is out there. God is out there waiting to be seen and experienced. You can stay dry and small because you don't want to be cheesy or you can open yourself up. Maybe you know the feeling and you'd love to see and hear more from God. I think you can. Over 150 years ago, I think a couple of female poets were feeling this same urge. In the aftermath of the Age of Enlightenment with all of its reason and facts and enlightenments, these two women pushed back against the reasonable methods alone of hearing God.

Emily Dickinson wrote, "*Not revelation tis that waits, but our unfurnished eyes.*"

Emily Barrett Browning wrote, "*Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; And only he who sees takes off his shoes; The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*"

For the next five weeks, I want to help all of us see God in unexpected places. I want to risk being cheesy Christians so that we may become alive Christians. I want our eyes to be furnished to see God moving in every facet of our world and to do that we need to look in unexpected places. Today we will start with one of the stranger stories in the Bible.

*Genesis 14: 17-20*

There are several strange and unexpected things to understand in this passage. At this point, for all we know, outside of Adam and Eve, Noah and Abraham, God hasn't really revealed himself to someone else. God speaks to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God saves Noah and his family with the ark. Then God says he will start a nation with Abraham, then along comes Melchizedek. A king and a priest of God Most High, El Elyon. Not only is he connected to God Most High, El Elyon is a priest. I'm sure you know this, but no priestly

tribe has been established yet, that doesn't happen until several generations later after Egypt with Aaron and the Levites. Not until several hundred years later are people set apart as priests and given priestly direction, duties and rules. Yet here we find Melchizedek, the King of Salem, who is also a priest of God Most High. How is that possible? You want to talk about finding God in unexpected places, how about with a foreign king with no backstory in the middle of the desert?

This is where some people will stop you. Some scholars note that Melchizedek doesn't call God, Yahweh. He calls him El Elyon, God Most High, and that local Canaanites called God El, so he could be a pagan priest. Yet Abraham uses this same name and phrase moments later in verse 22. He seems to be saying, we are talking about the same God. Furthermore, Melchizedek is mentioned later in the Psalms and again extensively in Hebrews as a reference to Jesus. So it seems clear there is something orthodox and divine about this king in the desert.

Before we go any further, let me tell you a bit about everything that has led up to this moment. God calls Abram in Genesis 12 and tells him that he will make him the father of a great nation. He says he will bless Abram so he can be a blessing to all people. He tells Abram to move to a foreign land and all of this will transpire. You know the story. Abram is confused because he has no children and is advanced in age and moving across the country was not something you just did 4,000 years ago. But Abram has faith and agrees to go, and what follows can be best described as a roller coaster adventure of life and death.

Besides the first difficulty of leaving the only home he has ever known to go to a place he has never been, Abram finds several problems. Abram arrives in Canaan but finds it occupied. Then not long after there is a famine in the land, so he leaves for Egypt. While he is in Egypt, he does the bone-headed move of trying to protect his own hide by telling people his wife is actually his sister so that people don't kill him to take his wife. Pharaoh likes what he sees and takes Sarah and eventually gives her back. After that, Abram and Lot have a family feud and go their separate ways. Lot goes to the verdant fields of the Jordan Valley towards Sodom and Gomorrah and Abram goes back to Canaan.

To recap, a man in his golden years leaves everything he has known, suffers through a famine and moves again, does the bonehead move of allowing his wife to be taken into Pharaoh's house and then has a family feud with his nephew and they split apart. It hasn't been an easy road so far. Then we get into chapter 14, in which a *Game of Thrones* type moment explodes in the region between several warring factions vying for control. In this process, the Kings of Sodom and Gomorrah get conquered and Lot gets taken captive in the process. God promises Abram a new life as the father of a great nation, and he gets famine, displacement, marital strife, family feud and now war. Abram goes and defeats these foreign kings and rescues Lot.

That brings us back to our moment today. Abram meets God in a strange place. He meets a Priest of God Most High who offers him bread and wine. A man who blesses him. Now let me ask you, after this roller coaster of events and trauma, do you think Abram was expecting to meet God in the desert that day? You can imagine that Abram is tired and angry and a bit burned out. Do you think he was expecting to meet a priest who would feed him bread and wine and call him blessed?

Let me tell you today, a part of having eyes furnished to see God is being willing to see God, of feeling needy and ready to see him.

Pastor Arvin told me the story of being on the swim team growing up in Santa Barbara and the elite swim coach he had. The swim coach endeavored to teach them the proper way to do the butterfly stroke. If you don't know, the butterfly is the hardest stroke in swimming. I've tried it a couple times in the pool and quickly gave up. It's something to be learned and practiced because it is so difficult. At any rate, Arvin said the coach told them he would teach them the butterfly stroke and then proceeded to spend the whole practice wearing them out with anything but the butterfly stroke. He made them swim until they were exhausted, and when they were all good and tired at the end of practice, he said, "Now it's time to learn the butterfly stroke." Like I said, the butterfly stroke is extremely hard and demands a lot of strength, so why did he wear them out and wait until the end? His coach said if they were fresh, they would have attempted to muscle their way through, but if they

were exhausted they would find the stroke was the easiest way to move through the water. In that moment, fatigue was a teachable moment.

In a similar moment, I wonder if Abram would have been willing to meet a priest of God Most High without some fatigue in his wake? If he was a bit spry and a little bit more sure of himself, I wonder if he might have had the audacity to question seeing God in the desert? He might have said, "God spoke to me and said he was starting a nation with me, and he made no mention of you, so how is it you can claim to be a priest when for all I know he only spoke to me? You are a foreigner, an outsider, I don't think your credentials are orthodox." But he doesn't do that. He comes to the desert hungry, tired and worn out and this man offers him bread and wine and a blessing.

I'm afraid today we have become so obsessed with theology and orthodoxy and checking people's credentials that we miss out on seeing God. We only plan to see God in expected places. We close our eyes in unexpected places. In the coming weeks, we will see outsiders and foreign kings used to speak to, bless, inspire and rebuke God's people. We will see God speak through nature and art. We will see God speak through experiences and moments.

I have to tell you, it can go either way. You can continue on with unfurnished eyes. You can refuse to see. You can continue on picking blackberries while others take off their sandals. It's a choice. If you refuse to budge and only want to stay in expected places, then you will only see expected things. When you open your eyes to the stories of the Bible, you see that God often shows up in unexpected places. That he speaks through dreams and visions. That he speaks through nature and events. That Jesus was the Rabbi who used stories not scripture to speak of God. Before Jesus' words became scriptures, they were just stories about lost sons and lost coins. They were stories about seeds and farmers. He talked about God in unexpected ways so people could see unexpected things.

Melchizedek means King of Righteousness. Melek-King, Zedek-righteousness. On top of that, he is the King of Salem. Salem means peace. You can dismiss this. You really can. Abram met the King of Peace and King of Righteousness in the desert. When he was hungry, tired and lowly, this king gave him bread and wine. You can dismiss it, but why would you?

What if you began to open yourself up? I'm not suggesting we become cheesy Christians who find God in a fish stick. What if you walked around with eyes to see? Instead of your first reaction of something being a coincidence or something that can be explained away, what if you started with awe and mystery? What if you looked for the numinous in the world around you?

Let me tell you who numinous events are not for. 1) Numinous events are not for people who have it all figured out. 2) Numinous events are not for people who have limits on the way they can see God. 3) Numinous events are not for those whose theology is airtight. 4) Numinous events are not for those who completely understand God. To have eyes to see, we need humility. We need willingness. We need awe and mystery. I have told you this many times before when it comes to the topic of mystery and God, if you have God completely figured out, then he isn't divine. If the totality of who God is, what he says and what he is doing can fit in the confines of your created finite mind, then he is not divine.

In the beginning, we kind of laughed at divine fish sticks and holy Cheetos. But I want you to take a step back for a moment. How many stories of the divine include food in the Bible? Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit. The Hebrews and the Passover meal. The Israelites in the desert and manna from heaven. God's law is built around feasts. Esther and her dinners. The Psalms saying taste and see that the Lord is good. Jesus feeding 5,000. Jesus on the last night of his life, like Melchizedek, giving wine and bread to his friends and saying this is my body and my blood. With unfurnished eyes, the disciples could have said, "No, Jesus that is bread and that is wine. I actually made that bread or paid for it in the market." But Jesus builds a numinous moment. Look for me in the bread. Look for me in the wine. Feel how the bread fills your stomach. Notice how the wine warms your throat and your belly as it does down. Allow these created things to point you to the Creator. Jesus is training them to have eyes to see numinous events and to see God in unexpected places. He is doing that for three years because they are about to see God in the most unexpected place, hanging on a tree, dying at the hands of his creation. When you see God in unexpected places, he will reveal to you new and unexpected things. Look for him this week.