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IS IT POSSIBLE FOR HUMANS TO SEE GOD?

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Is it possible for humans to see God? At first glance, the Bible seems to give conflicting answers to this question. Skeptics and Muslims draw attention to the apparent contradiction to call into question the divine inspiration and authority of the Bible.

On the one hand, the Old Testament informs us that God appeared in the past to certain individuals. God appeared to Abraham (Gen. 12:7; 17:1; 18:1), Isaac (Gen. 26:2, 24), Jacob (Gen. 35:1, 9; 48:3), and Moses (Exod. 3:16; 4:5). God Himself said to Moses, "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty" (Exod. 6:3).¹ Hagar said she saw God (Gen. 16:13). After Jacob wrestled with God, he said, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered" (Gen. 32:30). Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel are said to have seen God on Mount Sinai (Exod. 24:9–11). Isaiah saw a vision of God, although it nearly ruined him (Isa. 6:5).

The Invisible God. On the other hand, the New Testament teaches that God is invisible and cannot be seen by mortals. The apostle Paul ascribes the attribute of invisibility to God when he uses the phrase "the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). He also speaks of "the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God" (1 Tim. 1:17). He goes further and says God "dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see" (1 Tim. 6:16). The apostle John solemnly affirms that "no one has ever seen God" (John 1:18; cf. 5:37; 6:46; 1 John 4:12).

The Old Testament says God was seen by humans in the past. The New Testament says no one has ever seen God or can see God. We therefore might be

tempted to draw the conclusion that the Old Testament and the New Testament are simply at odds with each other.

But the Old Testament also contains teaching about God that would require us to add some serious qualifications to the bald statement that God was seen by humans in the past. The very first verse of the Old Testament draws an absolute distinction between God the Creator and the creation that He made: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). In starting off with this majestic statement, the Bible establishes the most fundamental truth about God—He is not a creature but the Creator. God’s not being a creature has profound implications. If He is not part of the created order, then He is a most pure spiritual being utterly uncreated and nonphysical. Ergo, He must be invisible, that is, not able to be seen with created eyes.

Moses made this clear later in his instructions to the Israelites. He warned them against making any visible depictions of God, such as the carved images and idols that the surrounding nations made of their gods. Why? Because God has no physical form. Moses reminded the Israelites that when God appeared on Mount Sinai to enter into a national covenant with them, “Then the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form” (Deut. 4:12). He goes on to say, “Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure” (Deut. 4:15–16). This prohibition against making a carved image of God and bowing down and worshiping it is enshrined in the second commandment (Exod. 20:4–6; Deut. 5:8–10) and is given added solemnity with a fierce curse attached: “For I the LORD your God am a jealous God.” Since God, being the Creator and not a creature, has no physical form, God doesn’t want to be misrepresented as if He were a creature with a physical body. This is a central and oft-repeated (and oft-broken!) commandment of the law given to Israel.

The Uncreated God. When God appeared to Moses, He revealed His identity as “I AM WHO I AM” (Exod. 3:14). Theologians through the ages have taken this key statement of the divine identity to mean that God is pure, absolute, and perfect being. No creature can define its own being this way. Only God can say that He Himself determines who He is. In another passage in the Prophets, He says, “I the LORD do not change” (Mal. 3:6). This means God is immutable. All created things, by contrast, are subject to change. These two verses are different ways of getting at the same truth—God is a nonphysical being who utterly transcends the created realm. If God’s being is self-determined and immutable, then God’s being or essence is not created and physical, and therefore no creature can see God, at least not in the ordinary meaning of “see.”

Early Judaism, following the teaching of the Torah, held the same exalted conception of God as a purely spiritual being. The Jews believed that God created all the visible things from the invisible things, “being himself invisible” (2 Enoch 48:5). Philo thought that God’s essence was invisible and perceivable only by a spiritual or intellectual vision of the soul (*Special Laws* 1.41–46; *Cherubim* 97; *Names* 1–10). The Jews regularly engaged in strident polemic against the idolatry of the pagans, arguing that “there is one God, sole ruler, ineffable, who lives in heaven, self-begotten, invisible” (*Sibylline Oracles* 3:11–12). Josephus believed God to be so spiritual that “we can neither see nor think of anything like him” (*Against Apion* 2.191). So it’s not just a Christian idea to say that God is essentially spiritual, nonphysical, and invisible.

God Revealing Himself. What, then, are we to make of the verses quoted at the outset, which say that God appeared to humans or that humans saw God? If one examines the context of many of those statements, it is not actually God Himself in His spiritual, invisible essence that appeared or was seen, but a physical self-manifestation of God. Sometimes the text explicitly states that God appeared in the form of an angel, usually called “the angel of the LORD.” On other occasions, it is some other physical medium that God used to reveal His presence, such as the glory-cloud that led the people of Israel in the wilderness (Exod. 13:21–22) or the Shekinah glory that filled the tabernacle and the temple (Exod. 40:34–38; 1 Kings 8:10–11). In rare cases, certain prophets were granted access to heaven where they saw visions of God (1 Kings 22:19; Isa. 6:1; Ezek. 1:1; Dan. 7:9). The key point is that it was not actually God Himself in His essence that people saw but God appearing to humans through created media. That is why they are called theophanies, from the Greek words *theos* (God) and *phainesthai* (to appear, to be manifest).

Even the theophanies, however, were too overwhelming for sinful humans to endure in their full force. When Moses asked God to show Him His glory, God replied that he would be allowed to see God’s back, “but you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live” (Exod. 33:20). Isaiah was terrified when he saw his vision of God and cried out, “Woe is me! For I am lost...for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isa. 6:5). When the angel of the Lord appeared to Samson’s parents, they said, “We shall surely die, for we have seen God” (Judges 13:22). All humans after Adam are unclean and sinful. To behold a perfectly holy God would only bring about our instant death. There is not only a metaphysical gulf separating us from seeing God but also a moral gulf.

But that gulf has been bridged in Jesus Christ. The ultimate self-revelation of God is the Incarnation. As the apostle John put it so majestically in the prologue to his Gospel: “The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us, and we have seen his

glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father....No one has ever seen God; the only begotten God, who is in the Father's bosom, he has made him known" (John 1:14, 18, translation mine). John is not saying that no one has ever seen a theophany but that no one has ever seen God as He is in His essence. But the incarnate Son, who is begotten of God's essence, has made Him known. Jesus said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Thus there is a sense in which humans can see God and a sense in which we cannot. We cannot see God's invisible spiritual essence, but some people were able to see Him when He revealed Himself by appearing to them in various physical forms adapted to created eyes. In the times before the coming of Jesus the Messiah, God revealed Himself in the form of the angel of the Lord or in various created media like the glory-cloud. But now in these last days, God has revealed Himself definitively in the incarnation of His Son.

A surface reading of the Bible presents what appears to be a contradiction between the Old Testament and the New. On further reflection, however, even the Old Testament testifies to God's spiritual, invisible nature. And when it speaks of God being seen, it is only insofar as He appeared or manifested Himself to humans through physical phenomena not to be identified with God's essential being. The New Testament emphasizes that no one has ever seen God. This is not to deny the theophanies and visions of the Old Testament. It is to put them in their proper place as partial and inferior revelations in comparison with what is now the ultimate self revelation of God in the person of His incarnate Son, "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). —*Charles Lee Irons*

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NOTES

- 1 All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) except where otherwise noted.