

The Invisible God

Edit 07/28/17

Understanding who God is requires an understanding of how He has revealed Himself in scripture. We are able to come to know Him by the example and teaching of Jesus (John 12:44-45) but the record of God is woven throughout the entirety of the Old and the New Testaments (Luke 24:44-45; Hebrews 1:1). We have the promise of one day being like Him and seeing Him as He is (1 John 3:2) but we do not have to wait for that day to understand what He has revealed. He has both spoken and appeared to His servants throughout history and He has left us a record of that in the scriptures.

In studying scripture, there are some things we do need to understand. When dozens or even hundreds of scriptures are in general agreement and then there are a few that seem to be different, we need to ask what the conflict might be with those that are different rather than discount those that are the same. We also need to be able to accept the way the scriptures are written without redefining the terms. When the Bible states that the one God is the Father (John 17:3; 1 Corinthians 8:6; 1 Timothy 2:5) and then also states that Jesus Christ is God (John 1:1), we need to accept that both are true. One does not modify the other. Together they point to the Father as supreme.

There are various scriptures showing God, at times, speaking to men and yet a few can appear to differ. In John 5, Jesus was in a confrontation with a crowd of Jews who rejected Him and wanted to kill Him. He declared in regard to His Father **“You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form”** (verse 37). He wasn't speaking to all Jews everywhere or to all of Israel over all time. He was just speaking to them. They did not know God or His ways. Consistent with the fact that God did sometimes speak to men is Peter's account of what is called the transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36). He states **“For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain”** (2 Peter 1:16-18). Clearly, God has spoken to men.

Of greater issue though is when and how God has appeared to men. The strongest argument against it is probably **“No one has seen God at any time”** (John 1:18; 1 John 4:12; also 1 Timothy 6:13-16). In contrast, the strongest argument for it is probably **“Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, make Myself known to him in a vision, And I speak with him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses; He is faithful in all My house. I speak with him face to face, Even plainly, and not in dark sayings; And he sees the form of the LORD”** (Numbers 12:6-8). The account is a rebuke of Aaron and Miriam and when the LORD strikes Miriam with leprosy, **“Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, Please heal her, O God, I pray!”** (verse 13). The God that no one has seen and the God who is the LORD, is the same Being. The statements are not in disagreement and are true. We just need to understand their context and meaning.

Moses is a powerful example of faith in that **“he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible”** (Hebrews 11:27). The word “seeing” here is the most commonly used word in the Greek text for seeing or to see. It can mean visually, or to realize, or to perceive. Moses came to know God in a very personal way. In the account of the burning bush in

Exodus 3, both “**the Angel of the LORD**” and “**the LORD**” are present. They are not the same. The Messenger of the LORD is the Word, the One who became Jesus Christ, but the LORD is God. The account states that the “**Angel of the LORD appeared to him**” (verse 2) but then “**when the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him**” (verse 4). Jesus confirmed this in Mark 12 when He stated “**have you not read in the book of Moses, in the burning bush passage, how God spoke to him, saying, I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? He is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living**” (verses 26-27). Jesus confirmed that it was “**God**” who spoke to Moses from the midst of the burning bush and then referred to that God as “**He**”.

The God who called to Moses from the midst of the bush in Exodus 3 proclaimed, just as Jesus said, “**I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob**” (verse 6). This is the same God of whom it is recorded “**The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus**” (Acts 3:13). So, there has to be an answer to “**No one has seen God at any time**” on the one hand and “**he sees the form of the LORD**” on the other; the LORD being God, and indeed there is. The answer, in part, comes from considering the exchanges between the LORD and Moses that were recorded in Exodus 33 and Numbers 14.

First the account in Numbers. When Israel believed the bad report of the ten spies and refused to go up and occupy the land of Canaan, the LORD told Moses He would disinherit them and make a nation from him that would be greater and mightier than they. Moses responded with “**Then the Egyptians will hear it, for by Your might You brought these people up from among them, and they will tell it to the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that You, LORD, are among these people; and that You, LORD, are seen face to face, and that Your cloud stands above them; and You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night**” (14:13-14). The Israelites could see the pillar of cloud and of fire but only Moses saw the LORD face to face. The word translated “**seen**” is used over 1300 times in the Hebrew text and can mean to see in either a physical or visionary way, or even to perceive mentally.

When the LORD met with Moses face to face, He was directly in his presence. It did not mean He manifested Himself as a person in a clear visual form, or that He even always appeared. Clearly, God the Father never appeared in the flesh as a man as Jesus Christ sometimes did. An account in Numbers 7 though does show, in part, how God did speak to Moses when He was present there with him. “**Now when Moses went into the tabernacle of meeting to meet with Him, he heard the voice of One speaking to him from above the mercy seat that was on the ark of the Testimony, from between the two cherubim; thus He spoke to him**” (verse 89). The ark of the Testimony was the ark of God and the One who dwelt between the cherubim and who spoke to Moses was not the Word. It was God (1 Samuel 4:4; 2 Samuel 6:2; 1 Kings 8:9).

Now the account in Exodus 33. Here the distinction is made between the LORD being present with Moses, speaking with him “**face to face**”, which could include even allowing him to see some type of form as is stated in Numbers 12:8, and seeing the face of the LORD which means to see Him in His glory. The setting is the preparation to move out from Mount Sinai based on God’s intention to give them the land He had promised. They needed to build and furnish the tabernacle and then be ready to move. “**Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp, and called it the tabernacle of meeting...So it was, whenever Moses went out to the tabernacle, that all the people rose, and each man stood at his tent door and watched Moses until he had gone into the**

tabernacle. And it came to pass, when Moses entered the tabernacle, that the pillar of cloud descended and stood at the door of the tabernacle, and the LORD talked with Moses. All the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the tabernacle door, and all the people rose and worshipped, each man in his tent door. So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (Exodus 33:7-11).

A few verses later in the same account, Moses makes a very specific request. “**Please, show me Your glory**” (Exodus 33:18). And the LORD responded “**I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you...But He said, You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me and live. And the LORD said, Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen**” (verses 19-23).

There is a clear difference between the LORD speaking to Moses “**face to face**” where “**he sees the form of the LORD**” (Exodus 33:11; Numbers 12:8), and the LORD telling Moses “**You cannot see My face, for no man shall see Me, and live**” (Exodus 33:20). The first means to be directly in God’s presence, though only seeing an indistinct representation rather than a clear image, and the latter is to see God fully in His glory. We could not even see Christ in His glory and live. Just to look too directly at the sun would cause any of us damage.

There are various ways in which God has spoken and revealed Himself to His servants (Hebrews 1:1-2). In Genesis 15:1 the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision and in Genesis 28:10-13 the LORD, “**the Lord GOD of Abraham**” appeared to Jacob in a dream. God never appeared to men in a form such as one man who clearly sees another. With Moses, speaking to the LORD face to face, and seeing His face, was not the same. “**No one has seen God at any time**” cannot mean that Moses did not see God in any way because the fact that he did is clearly portrayed. What no one has ever seen is the Father, either fully in appearance as a man, or in His glory.