

A Brief Study on Seeing God

Can one see God and live? Good question. The answer most often given is that of God to Moses when He told the prophet that no man could look on His face and live. However, a number of Bible characters testified that they had seen God. How does one resolve this apparent contradiction? By means of a careful examination of the scriptures and reasoning together from them. Please read on.

--Gen. 16:13 - "And she called the name of the LORD that spake unto her, Thou God seest me: for she said, Have I also here looked after him that seeth me?"

--Gen. 18:1-2 - "And the LORD appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day; And he lift up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him: and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself toward the ground."

--Gen. 32:30 - "And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved."

--Ex. 24:9-11 - "Then went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel: And they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand: also they saw God, and did eat and drink."

--Ex. 33:20-23 - "And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live. And the LORD said, Behold, there is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock: And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen."

--Judges 6:21-23 - "Then the angel of the LORD put forth the end of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the flesh and the unleavened cakes; and there rose up fire out of the rock, and consumed the flesh and the unleavened cakes. Then the angel of the LORD departed out of his sight. And when Gideon perceived that he was an angel of the LORD, Gideon said, Alas, O Lord GOD! for because I have seen an angel of the LORD face to face. And the LORD said unto him, Peace be unto thee; fear not: thou shalt not die."

--Judges 13:20-23 - "For it came to pass, when the flame went up toward heaven from off the altar, that the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar. And Manoah and his wife looked on it, and fell on their faces to the ground. But the angel of the LORD did no more appear to Manoah and to his wife. Then Manoah knew that he was an angel of the LORD. And Manoah said unto his wife, We shall surely die, because we have seen God. But his wife said unto him, If the LORD were pleased to kill us, he would not have received a burnt offering and a meat offering at our hands, neither would he have showed us all these things, nor would as at this time have told us such things as these."

--Isa. 6:1-5 - "In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the LORD sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphim: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke. Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."

When God manifests Himself in visions, the prophet does not die. John looked upon the One on the Throne in Revelation 4:3 and survived. Isaiah saw the Lord sitting on the throne in the temple, and he did not die. A vision is not the same thing as truly looking on His Divine Being. God manifests Himself in great wonders, and the witnesses do not die. Moses saw the wonder of the burning bush in the desert region and lived. The children of Israel witnessed the presence of God manifested on Sinai in lightning, thunder, quaking, and smoke, and the text tells us that Moses took the people there to meet God (Ex. 19:17). They did not die from it. A great wonder is not the same as the Glory of His Presence.

A number of people saw messenger angels of God and afterward said they had seen God. God was seen by them through the means of His work performed by His messenger angels. I believe this is what Jacob did in Genesis 32:30 when he wrestled with the "man" who turned out to be an angel of God (Hosea 12:3-4). By striving with God's proxy, the angel, Jacob was declared to have power with God. He saw God's involvement in the matter and acknowledged His presence.

When the scriptures declare that one cannot look on God's face and live, it does not appear to cover the circumstances under discussion. That is, a Bible prophet could see God in a vision, he could see a manifestation of God in a wonder of nature, and he could look upon God's heavenly emissaries and still live. But in order for man to see the actual face of God as He truly is ("God is Spirit" - John 4:24), the man would have to die and enter the spiritual realm. Even in the Exodus 24 text, the men of Israel are permitted to live and eat and drink because God withheld His hand from them. He did not kill them for seeing Him. Instead they saw a wondrous aspect of God represented in metaphors of sapphire and clearness of the sky. In none of the above texts does one find the actual aspect of God referred to except that of Moses having his eyes covered until God passed by. Moses only witnessed the trailing aspect of God and the end result was his face shone with God's glory (2Cor. 3:7). God's glory on the mountain was seen by the children of Israel as a consuming fire (Ex. 24:17). No living man has seen the true glory of God's face.

Is it possible that God permitted some to see His true glory and face without death falling on them? It would seem from the Exodus 24 and Genesis 32 texts that this might be the case. However this is not true for two reasons. First, God told Moses that "Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live." This means that Jacob could not have seen God's face; God had stated a universal principle without an exception clause. So what Jacob saw had to be something other than the true Divine visage. Secondly, is it in God's character to be capricious by forbidding Moses His lawgiver to see His face, yet permit Jacob and an assembly of Jewish elders to see Him? Obviously what both saw was something other than the true face of God.

Is it possible that those who said they saw God were actually mistaken? Unlikely. It seems that the witnesses knew that they had seen God by means of angels, visions, and wonders, but acknowledged His hand and presence through them. Parallels to this are in Romans 1:20 in which God's invisible attributes are "clearly" seen through His creation; and, in John 14:9-10, Jesus says that when they see Him, the works He does, and the words He speaks, they are seeing the Father. It was scripturally consistent for a Bible character to speak of seeing God when they encountered God's proxy (vision, angel, wonder). If one wants to see God and know Him as He is, the only happy means is by a faithful life that is rewarded with an eternity in God's presence.

A Moments Wisdom

--Think about what others should be, and then start being that yourself.

--Criticism, like rain, should be gentle enough to nourish a man's growth without destroying his roots.

--Letting things go in one ear and out the other is bad enough, but it's worse when things go in one ear, get all mixed up, and come out the mouth.

--The Christian revelation pictures God as sovereign and majestic and holy. When he unveils Himself, "The Lord lays bare His holy arm." To suggest that He is a sort of folksy dodderer sitting in a rocker upstairs is the height of blasphemy. (Martin E. Marty, *The New Shape of American Religion*, 1958)

--One must read the Bible continually to prevent the image of truth being obscured in us. (Julian Green, *Journal*, 1961)

--The love of money has been in all ages, one of the passions that have given great disturbances to the tranquility of the world. (Samuel Johnson, *rambler*, October 6, 1750)

--We can never call one another "brother" until we have learned to call God "Father." (Fulton J. Sheen, *Religion Without God*, 1928)

--It was not for punishment that He formed us, but to share His goodness, inasmuch as --He is a good God. But inasmuch as He is a just God, His will is that sinners should suffer punishment. (John Damascene; 700?-754? *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*)

--The Bible has a lot to say about our mouths, our lips, our tongues, for our speech betrays us. What is down in the well will come up in the bucket. (Vance Havner, 1901-1986)