

Experiencing Thanksgiving ✦ John 1:18

The New York Times Magazine ran an interesting ad, paid for by a children's clothing company, asking children to send in drawings of what they think God looks like. Over 1700 drawings were submitted. If you, as an adult, were to enter such a contest, what do you think you would draw? Would God be old or young, male or female, friendly or mean? We recite the Apostle's Creed, saying, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. . . ." But, what does he look like? Haven't we at least once wondered what it would be like to see God, to catch a glimpse, to take a picture, even to stare at God?

Perhaps the desire to see God is strongest when our problems are the greatest. When life is crumbling down on us, when pain is piercing and when we have deep questions that no one else can answer we may wish we could look God in the eye to get a straight answer or to experience his presence in order to make it through. That may have been in the mind of the Old Testament character Job when he said in Job 23:3, "*If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling!*" But it's not a simple thing for us to see the invisible God.

The Bible is our primary source about God, so it is obviously the first place to look for those who want to see him. However, there are some frustrations as we read through the Bible. Especially as we check out those sections that talk about seeing God, there appear to be seeming contradictions. Here are some examples.

Exodus 24 reports one of the great high points of the spiritual history of ancient Israel. They had just entered into a covenant relationship with God to be his special nation. They offered sacrifices and sealed the deal. Then 74 of their leaders went to meet God. Here's what they experienced ac-

ording to Exodus 24:9-11:

Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.

To me this is both amazing and disappointing. It's amazing that they actually saw God and disappointing that they didn't sketch a picture or write a description of what God looked like. Strangely, the only thing specifically described is the floor on which his feet stood . . . although at least we know God had feet!

There is one other little glimpse in verse 17 where Moses went alone to the top of Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. While he was there he was conversing with God and all the people of Israel down below (perhaps as many as three million of them) saw something that for them

was most memorable. Exodus 24:17 says, "*To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain.*" But they didn't really see God; they just saw fire that represented where God was, unlike the 74 that the record clearly says saw God.

Nine chapters deeper into the book of Exodus this same Moses had an encounter with

God in which he said to God, "I'd like to see your face." And God said, "Well, you may be able to see my goodness. You may be able to get a glimpse of my glory," but in Exodus 33:20 God said, "*you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.*"

Doesn't that seem strange? We just read that Moses and 73 others had already seen God, and Moses was still alive. So, what's the deal that no

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one can see God and live? We have a record that 74 men saw God and lived.

Well, whatever it means, we do read here that God has a face. So, we have added to his composite picture that he has feet and a face.

But the seeming contradictions roll on and come to a climax in the New Testament book of John. This book was written by Jesus' closest friend. John was an informed Jew who knew the Old Testament well. In fact, in John 1:17 he refers to Moses receiving the law from God on top of Mount Sinai. Here John is writing an introduction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He is carefully explaining who God is and who Jesus is. With meticulous selection of words he writes, "*No one has ever seen God.*"

Now wait a minute. Didn't this same Bible say that 74 Hebrew leaders saw God? Again, what's the deal? Did they see God or did they not see God? Is God there or not? And, if you see God, do you live or die? Has seeing God happened or hasn't it?

Believing that the Bible is God's word and is therefore accurate, we seek to synthesize these seeming contradictions. Perhaps the key is found in John 4 where Jesus engages in a conversation with a woman from Samaria that he met at the town well. What started out as a conversation about a drink of water quickly became a serious discussion about God and her multiple marriages. In the course of this conversation Jesus explained to her that "*God is spirit*" in verse 24. That is the key to understanding and synthesizing these seeming contradictions. Spirits are real but invisible. You can't see a spirit.

Compare that to the radon gas we so often hear about these days. We are challenged to check and see if we have certain levels of radon gas in our homes. But the experts explain that radon gas is invisible, odorless and tasteless. We can't see it, smell it or taste it. But it is real and powerful and present. To ignore it may be a matter of life and death.

We might compare this to God. He cannot be seen, smelled or tasted, but he is very real and powerful. God is still a person just as we are persons with intellect, emotion and will, but he is a

person we cannot see because he is spirit. He is invisible.

Some people struggle with the idea that God does not have a body. Early in my pastoral experience an elderly man in the church decided such teaching was heresy. He concluded that I was a heretic and even wrote a book about me, had it published and gave away free copies on car windshields during worship services. He figured that an invisible god wasn't a real God and that his pastor therefore must be an atheist!

But spirits are no less real because they can't be seen. God is spirit. Jesus clearly stated that. That's who and that's what God is.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, a popular early 20th century preacher in New York City, had a helpful way of explaining this. He compared God to his own childhood experience. He said that when he was a boy he saw the leaves and branches of the trees move and felt the wind. From his childish perspective he concluded that the movement of the trees made the wind blow. But when he grew older he realized that the wind which he could not see actually moved the trees that he could see. In the same way, Fosdick explained, it is the God we cannot see who moves the world which we can see.

God is indeed real. But God is invisible because God is spirit.

Spirits are invisible; but it is possible for God to make temporary appearances. God has appeared to humans on infrequent occasions throughout history . . . in a pillar of fire to lead the Hebrew people at night or as a cloud during the daytime or sometimes in angelic or human form. There is a technical name for these temporary physical appearances or manifestations of God. They are called theophanies. A theophany is a temporary physical appearance of the God who is otherwise spirit and invisible. It is God's way of accommodating us. It is a specific appearance for a specific purpose. But, such appearances are not actually God.

Compare this to an oscilloscope, an electrocardiogram or an electroencephalogram. All of these are ways of taking invisible waves in the engine of a car, an electric appliance at home or

in a heart or a brain—things that can't be seen—and making them appear on a screen, a CRT or on a strip of paper so that, at least temporarily, it is possible to see what is really invisible. It is giving an appearance for the benefit of a mechanic or physician.

What we must be careful not to do is mistakenly think that what is on the strip of paper or CRT screen is the real thing. It is not. The real thing is invisible. What is seen in the garage shop on the oscilloscope is not really the engine. Nor are the squiggly lines on the tape really the heart or brain. Those aren't reality. Reality is what is invisible. These are merely temporary ways of seeing what cannot normally be seen.

So, let's not think that what those 74 leaders of Israel saw on Mount Sinai or the Hebrews saw in a cloud was really God. It was not. God is spirit. God is invisible. Therefore, Jesus accurately says, *"No one has ever seen God."*

What I say next may seem contradictory, but it isn't: the invisible God can be seen. Let me give some examples. Romans 1:20 is a bit of a brain twister, but read it carefully: *"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made."*

The principle is simple: you can see much of the artist in the art. I have seen Michelangelo. I don't know what he looked like, but I've seen his art. I have studied his David, his Moses, his Pieta and I have seen him in his sculptures. I have looked long at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and seen him in his painting. I have walked around St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome, read about it and photographed it . . . and I have seen him in his architecture. There are ways in which it would be legitimate to say that I know him better and have seen him more than some whom I can now see face to face.

So it is with the invisible God. We may see him in his stars, his oceans, his mountains, his

animals, in his creation. As Romans 1:20 says, *"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities . . . have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made."* So, we may see the invisible God in creation.

There's a second way the Bible explains that we may see the invisible God and that is through his image in us. In Genesis 1:27 we read, *"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."* We can see the invisible God in ourselves because we humans were created in God's image.

That reminds me of the young woman who was trying to tell a friend how to identify her mother at the airport when she picked her up. She finally just said, "She looks like . . . me!" In other words, if you have seen me, you have an idea what my mother looks like.

It also reminds me of the middle aged man who was walking into a store with glass doors and suddenly saw his father walking out of the store straight at him. What he really saw was his own reflection in the glass.

Mothers and daughters, fathers and sons often look a lot alike. Not exactly alike, but enough alike to sense that you have seen someone you've never really seen before because the image of the one can be seen in the other.

And it is the same with God; the image of God is in us. So, there is a sense in which we can say, "Do you want to know what

God looks like? God looks like us!"

But, be careful to remember that we are not in God's physical image because God does not have a physical image. God is not black or white, male or female, tall or short in a physical sense. After all, God is spirit and spirits don't have bodies. Rather, we are created in God's moral image. Our ability to love and be loved, to think, to choose are all the image of God in us.

Again, it's not an exact image. The image of God has been marred in us because of sin. But,

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you can still see a lot even in a marred image.

The famous statue of Venus de Milo has no arms. They were missing when it was discovered and there is no record of what she looked like originally. But we can still get a pretty good picture of what she originally looked like. Huge sections are missing from the Coliseum in Rome, but we can imagine the way it once was. Old photos of family members may be faded and stained but the people are still recognizable.

So it is that there is enough of the image of God left in us humans to see what God is like. He's like us, only without sin. He's like us, minus our weaknesses. He's like us, only perfect.

We may see God through creation, through the image of God in humans and, best and most important of all, we may see the invisible God in Jesus. In John 1:14 we are told, "*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*" In many ways, this is the most important Christmas verse of all. While it is interesting that Jesus was born of a virgin named Mary, placed in a manger, announced by angels and visited by shepherds and Magi, the really big news is that God became flesh. That is called the "incarnation"—Latin for "in flesh". Until the moment of conception in Mary's uterus, God was always spirit—Father Spirit, Son Spirit, Holy Spirit.

After billions of years of eternity past, God the Son became human. In an absolutely unique and unexplainable way deity and humanity were united in the person of Jesus. It was and is the greatest miracle ever.

On that first Christmas Mary became much more than the mother of a new baby. She became the first person to ever truly see God. That tiny infant with unfocused eyes and unscrubbed skin was God. She saw and touched God in a way that Moses on Mt. Sinai never dreamed of doing!

And Mary was not alone. Joseph saw God. The shepherds saw God. The Magi saw God. The people of Bethlehem and Nazareth and thousands and thousands more saw God in human flesh.

Yet no one drew a picture of him or wrote a single word describing his physical appearance. They worshipped at his feet. They committed their

lives to him. They were willing to die for him. They said he spoke like no one else. They attested to his sinless character and reported his powerful miracles . . . but not a single word of what he looked like!

Isn't there a powerful truth here for us? It really doesn't matter what he looked like. Who he is and what he did overshadows any physical characteristic.

It is true that we cannot physically see him as they did, but we can know him personally. We can know Jesus through faith as surely as they knew him by sight. And thereby, we see God. We can see him the same way they saw him, soul to soul, not with eyes, but with faith. And those who come to him now in faith will actually someday see him face to face in heaven.

How does all this work? Let me explain. God became human not so much for sight as for salvation. He came to save us from sin and sin's awful consequences. In fact, the grown up Jesus died on the cross to take away our sin. We must believe that. But beyond believing the facts, we must commit our souls to Jesus as our Savior and Lord. Any one of us can do that any time in a simple prayer of belief. When we do, we begin to see God, experience God and we are promised that we will someday live in heaven and then we will see him face to face.

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