

END-TIMES ISSUES

#34 God's physical presence in the world.

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1

GOD'S PRESENCE IN ISRAEL.

✓ One of the unique characteristics of living under the Mosaic Covenant was that *God was present* – and at times, even *physically present*.

- **Most of the time:** It was a manifestation of his radiant glory (often surrounded by fire or a dense cloud).

To the Israelites **the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire** on top of the mountain.

Exodus 24:17 (NIV)
- **Not often:** It was physical, in the sense of having a *body*.

There **they saw the God of Israel**. Under **his feet** there seemed to be a surface of brilliant blue lapis lazuli, as clear as the sky itself.

Exodus 24:10 (NLT)
- **Not often:** In some cases, God *spoke* and could be *heard*.

2

TODAY, WE WILL FOCUS ON AN OVERVIEW OF WHAT SCRIPTURE SAYS ABOUT "SEEING GOD."

SOME "DEFINITION" ISSUES:

1. The "fullness" of God – his complete entirety – **CANNOT** be seen. The created universe cannot even "contain" it!

But will God indeed dwell upon the earth? **Even heaven, the highest heaven, cannot contain You**, much less this temple I have built.

1 Kings 8:27 (BSB)

⇒ This means: Any display of God's presence will be **limited** to what creation can contain.

 - Since even that much might be fatal to humans, God may limit the expression of his presence even further.

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2. We are NOT focusing on:
 - **God's revelation through nature**, which is *everywhere* (Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:20; etc.).
 - **Dreams and visions**. God often communicated to the prophets in this manner; but we cannot say that God was *physically present* when it was happening.
3. What happens today, under the New Covenant, isn't the same as what happened in the past, under other covenants. (We will come back to this issue later.)
 - Here is a passage that shows us that God doesn't always do things the same way at all times:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but **in these last days** he has spoken to us by his Son ...

Hebrews 1:1-2a (NIV)

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4. Some passages describe God as being present with a *body*. John describes one such instance, and says it was *Jesus* who was seen. (Most likely, all the other instances were the same.)
 - This would probably be Jesus in a *temporary* body, prior to taking a *permanent* body, when he was born in Bethlehem.

WHO DID ISAIAH SEE?

In the year that King Uzziah died, **I saw the Lord** seated on a throne, high and exalted; and the train of His robe filled the temple. ...

[Further description here.]

Then I said: "Woe is me, for I am ruined, because I am a man of unclean lips dwelling among a people of unclean lips; for **my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Hosts.**"

Isaiah 6:1, 5 (BSB)

 - After this, God commissions Isaiah to speak to the people, and he tells Isaiah what to say. →

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→ The apostle John quotes what Isaiah was told to say, and then tells us *why* he said it:

WHO DID ISAIAH SEE?

Isaiah said these things because **he saw Jesus' glory** and spoke about Him.

John 12:41 (BSB)

5. "The angel of the Lord" – this phrase is another Old Testament term used to describe God as being present with a body. It is always introduced as *the* angel (not *an* angel). It was a visible "messenger" (= the meaning of the word "angel"); but it was not just any "messenger" ... *it was God himself*.

Some passages describe this "angel" as *being* God; some as *distinct* from God (as though two individuals were there); and sometimes *both* of these features are present in the same passage! →

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DEFINITION: "The Angel of the Lord" (or "The Angel of God").

This refers to a specific individual, usually introduced as "the" angel (of the Lord). This term is found three ways in various passages:

1. **There may be a distinction between this "angel" and God.**
Genesis 21:17 ... The angel of God tells Hagar that God has listened to the boy's voice.
2. **The two terms may be used interchangeably** – the "angel" and "God" are the same.
Genesis 31:11+ ... The angel of God claims to be the God of Bethel.
3. **Both of the above situations** may be found in the *same* passage.
Genesis 16:7+ ... **DIFFERENT:** The angel of Jehovah tells her that Jehovah has heard her affliction. **IDENTICAL:** In v. 13, the Scriptures say that it was Jehovah who had been speaking to her. **[This is similar to what we see in John 1:1, which tells us that Jesus was with God AND was God.]**

7

On certain occasions...
God revealed himself to people.

✓ **Typical characteristics of such events:**

- God took the initiative. *He* chose to do it. It was *not* initiated by the people.
- It was for specific situations. It was *not* a normal happening.
- It was of limited duration. It was *not* an ongoing event.
- It required specific attitudes and responses by the people – such as humility, fear of God, obedience, etc. Having sinful attitudes and conduct could be fatal.
- Often, the people were *amazed that they didn't die*.

✓ **Here are some examples of how God revealed himself.**

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BEFORE THE TIME OF THE FLOOD (GENESIS 7): MAYBE...

- ✓ **In the garden (Adam and Eve).** They apparently walked with God *before* they sinned. *After* they sinned, they hid from him.

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of **the LORD God walking in the garden** at the time of the evening breeze, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

Genesis 3:8 (CSB)

- ✓ **Cain and Abel?** Both interacted with God, in some manner. Cain had an argument with God (Genesis 4:6-7, 9-16). If this was face-to-face, it would probably have been at the edge of the garden.
- ✓ **Enoch and Noah?** Both are said to have "walked with God" (Genesis 5:22, 24; 6:9) – a phrase that occurs nowhere else in the Bible. Does this mean "intimate fellowship", or were they actually *walking* with God (which would include this fellowship)? If they actually walked with God, it would probably have been at the edge of the Garden, before it was destroyed by the Flood.

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AFTER THE FLOOD, TO THE BIRTH OF JESUS:
A FEW TIMES, IN DIFFERENT WAYS (AS GOD CHOSE TO DO IT).

Over the space of more than 2000 years, God would reveal himself in various ways (even *physically*, as a *human*) *only a relatively few times*. Most of these instances occurred during the days of the patriarchs (Abraham/Isaac/Joseph) and early years of Israel's existence; a few occurred in later times.

EXAMPLES:

- ✓ **Hagar "sees God" (the angel of the Lord/God)** – Genesis 16:7-13; but the text does not specify where the "angel" was (standing in front of her? showing himself from heaven?). At a later time, he calls her from heaven – Genesis 21:9-19; and she recognizes who it is.
- ✓ **God appears to Abraham and Sarah in the form of a human** – Genesis 18:1-33. Three visitors arrive; they eat a meal together. After that, Abraham and Sarah learn that the visitors included God and two angels.

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- ✓ **God, as a human, wrestled with Jacob** – Genesis 32:24-32. This was the time God changed Jacob's name to "Israel."
- ✓ **God appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush** – Exodus 3:2-4:17. God's voice could be heard. But was a body physically present in the fire? Moses was afraid to look and see.
- Moses recognized his unworthiness to be in the presence of God. He also quickly learned that even the *ground* near God was holy, *because of God's presence*. This concept of "sacred space" would be very important in Israel's later years.
- ✓ **God is seen by the leaders of Israel, during a meal on Mount Sinai** – Exodus 24:9-11. The text mentions seeing God's feet; but the rest of him was apparently hidden by the cloud.
- ✓ **God reveals himself (except for his face) to Moses** – Exodus 34:4-9. This revelation of God included not only a *body*, but also much of his *radiant glory* – which caused Moses' face to glow (vs. 29-35).

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- ✓ **God reveals himself to Joshua, as an army officer** – Joshua 5:13-6:5. Once Joshua realizes who the officer is, God gives him instructions for destroying Jericho. As with Moses, Joshua is told that the ground was holy.
- ✓ **Gideon starts talking to a stranger, who he soon discovers is the angel of the Lord** – Judges 6:11-24; and he is given instructions for rescuing Israel from the Midianite oppressors. Gideon is surprised that he didn't die in God's presence.
- ✓ **The angel of God appears to Samson's parents** – Judges 6:11-24; and gives them instructions about how their future son (Samson) is to live. For a moment, his father expected to die.
- ✓ **Isaiah saw God and expected to be destroyed** – Isaiah 6:1-10. (As we have already seen, the apostle John tells us that it was *Jesus* who he saw – John 12:41.)

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✓ Other situations...

- There are instances in which God spoke with an **audible voice**, even though a "person" was not present. Example: In Genesis 22:11-14, when God calls out to Abraham, it appears to have been just a voice, calling down from heaven.
- When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into the fiery furnace, and God kept them alive, **a fourth individual** was seen in the fire. The king's reaction was to say that this fourth individual had the appearance of a "son of the gods"; but the text does not *specifically* identify who he was. (Some interpreters suggest that it was God or Jesus; others that it was an angel; etc.)
- There are numerous instances in which God communicated to the prophets through **dreams and visions**; but we can't necessarily call these actual physical manifestations of God.

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WHAT ABOUT THE NEW TESTAMENT ERA?

Over the span of Israel's Old Testament history, we saw less than a dozen instances in which God physically revealed himself. Even if we missed some examples, this shows us that almost *nobody* ever had the opportunity to actually *see* God in a physical form ... *not even most of the prophets.*

- ✓ **IN THE NEW TESTAMENT: God reveals himself in physical form for over 30 years, and interacts with people daily** – as the "Word" of God, also known as Jesus the Messiah (Christ).

In the beginning was the Word, and the **Word was with God**, and **the Word was God.**

The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. **We have seen His glory**, the glory of the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

No one has ever seen God, but **the one and only Son, who is Himself God** and is at the Father's side, has made Him known.

John 1:1, 14, 18 (BSB)

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↪ **In the Old Testament era:** In the space of over 2000 years, only a *few* people had the opportunity to actually see God – or even to hear him speaking.

- It almost always involved people who were *loyal* to God. (Perhaps there were 1 or 2 exceptions, such as, some of the leaders who saw God on Mount Sinai.)

↪ **In the New Testament era:** In the space of just over 30 years, *thousands of people* in Israel had the opportunity to actually see God – and hear him, and even at times touch him.

We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have **heard** and **seen**. We saw him with our own eyes and **touched** him with our own hands. He is **the Word** of life.

1 John 1:1 (NLT)

- Yet even with such a great opportunity – never before experienced by the human race – most of the nation *rejected* him as their King.

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↪ **Because the nation rejected him...** He said he would leave *and not return* until they were ready to receive him.

ISRAEL WAS TOLD: Jesus said, "I am with you for only a short time, and then **I am going to the one who sent me.**"

John 7:33 (NIV)

"For I tell you that **you will not see Me again until you say**, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.'" "

Mat 23:39 (BSB)

For **he must remain in heaven until the time** for the final restoration of all things, as God promised long ago through his holy prophets.

Acts 3:21 (NLT)

THE APOSTLES WERE TOLD:

"Jesus, who was taken from you to heaven, **will come back** in the same way that you saw him go to heaven."

Acts 1:11b (BSB)

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↪ **Since that time ...** All the New Testament Scriptures say he will not be returning until the "end times" prophecies about his return are fulfilled. No passage suggests a physical return before that time.

The only exception might be found in Revelation 1 – and some people believe it was actually a *vision*, instead of an actual *physical* appearance. (It depends on one's understanding of the phrase "in the Spirit" – verse 10.) Either way, what John saw was *terrifying*.

It was the Lord's Day, and I was worshiping in the Spirit. Suddenly, I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet blast.

When I **turned to see who was speaking** to me, I saw ... someone like the Son of Man.* [Described in vs. 13-16.]

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as if I were dead.

Revelation 1:10, 12a, 13b, 17a (NLT)

* (The term "Son of Man" is from Daniel 7:13.)

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↪ **When he does return, Scripture tells us ...**

- **All people will see him.**

"Look, he is coming with the clouds,"* and "**every eye will see him**, even those who pierced him"; * and all peoples on earth "will mourn because of him."*

So shall it be! Amen.

Revelation 1:7 (NIV)

* (These quoted passages are prophetic, from Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:10-14.)

- **God's people will rule with him forever.** When this happens, everything that God planned for the garden in Eden will be accomplished... *and more!*

His servants will worship him, and they will see his face, ... and **they will reign forever and ever.**

Revelation 22:3b-4a, 5b (NET)

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QUESTION #1:

Until he returns, Jesus is gone. Does that mean God is *not* currently present in the world?

✓ **Actually, God had something *better* for us!** Jesus' *absence* is *good* for us, because it means he will send the Holy Spirit in his place.

But I tell you the truth, **it is to your advantage that I am going away.** For if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you.
John 16:7 (NET)

Then I will ask the Father, and **he will give you another Advocate* to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth,** ...
John 14:16-17a (NET)

- If Jesus were *physically* present, he would be located in *one* place (most likely in Jerusalem). He could *not* be with us all. In contrast, the Spirit *is* with *every* follower of God!

* ("Another" advocate? Jesus is also an advocate – 1 John 2:1.)

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QUESTION #2:

Under the Old Covenant, the Spirit *wasn't* with everyone, the way he is with us today. So how were they any better than the saved who lived *before* them?

✓ **Actually, God had something *special* for them – though not *better* than what we experience today.**

- God *was* constantly present among the people, to a much greater degree than possible for a mere *physical* appearance in a human body.
- God's radiant glory *was* *visibly* present to such an extent, that it would have resulted in instant death for anyone who saw it.

"... no one can see Me and live."
Exodus 33:20b (BSB)

- Because of this, God had to be enveloped by a cloud or fire, or hidden in the most sacred part in the tabernacle/temple.

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QUESTION #3:

If we're talking about the Mosaic (Old) Covenant, why all this other information?

✓ **To understand the context, and to undo misperceptions about how (and when) God revealed himself.**

TIMELINE

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GOD HAS REVEALED HIMSELF IN MANY WAYS
down through history.

- His eternal power and divine nature* are clearly visible in creation (Romans 1:18-23+). Even *our own bodies* reflect something about the nature of God (Genesis 1:26-27).
- We have *his Word* (perhaps verbally communicated before the days of Abraham, but now in written form).
- God has ***no* obligation to reveal himself in *any* way at all.** Yet he has chosen to reveal himself in *even more* ways than mentioned above!

- God chose to make himself **physically present on a few occasions**, and during the 30+ years that Jesus was on the earth.
- God has been present in a **special way, for two extended periods of time**: (1) his special radiant glory (in Israel), and (2) the Holy Spirit (in all saved people today).

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OUR MISSION:

**REJOICE in God,
and in what he has done!**

GOD has no obligations toward us,
for it is WE who have rebelled and rejected him.
But based on what he has *graciously* done, *in spite of our sin*, we can rejoice and *confidently* say:

➔

NO other god
NO demon or spiritual force of darkness
NO idol or human invention

➔

Has *ever* done the things that *our* God has done!

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Credits

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