

# Have Mortal Humans Physically Seen God?

by Raymond C. Faircloth

## God Is Physically Unapproachable to Mortals

There are many individuals who claim to have literally physically seen God. However, as with many claims to have experienced certain things these can be seen as simply subjective i.e. the way the mind decides to interpret such experiences. The only way to interpret the experience objectively is to understand what God says about Himself in relation to humans through the pages of the Holy Scriptures. So the following are some of those expressions:

- ❖ “No one has seen God at any time” (*John 1:18 NKJ*).
- ❖ “But you may not look directly at my face, for *no one may see me and live*” (*Ex.: 33:20 NLT*).
- ❖ “...that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which He [*God*] will bring about at the proper time ... He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and **dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see**” (*1Tim. 6:14-16 NASB*).

So simply put if any mortal human did actually physically see God they would be instantly dead and unable to recount the experience. But what about occurrences recorded in the biblical accounts concerning certain individuals who were stated to have seen God? How do we account for those experiences?

## Abraham Did Not Physically See God

- ❖ “When Abram was ninety-nine years old **the LORD [Heb. *YHWH*]** appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me...” (*Gen. 17:1*).
- ❖ “And **the LORD [YHWH]** appeared to him [*Abraham*] by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, **three men** were standing in front of him” (*Gen. 18:1, 2*).
- ❖ “Then **the LORD [YHWH]** said, ‘Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know.’ So **the men turned from there** and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before **the LORD [YHWH]**. Then Abraham drew near and said, ‘Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?’” (*Gen. 18:20-22*)
- ❖ “**The two angels** came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed himself with his face to the earth and said, ‘My lords, please turn aside to your servant’s house and spend the night and wash your feet’” (*Gen. 19:1, 2*).
- ❖ “Then **the LORD [YHWH]** rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulphur and fire from **the LORD [YHWH]** out of heaven” (*Gen. 19:24*).

In view of the fact that Moses was later told by God that “*man shall not see me and live*” (*Ex. 33:20*) it is clear that the leading one of these three men could not literally be God. This is further proved by the fact that God is specifically stated to be not a man (*Hos. 11:9; Num. 23:19; 1 Sam: 15:29*). However, angels are often likened to men in the Scriptures; so it is stated in these passages that the two men who went off to rescue Lot are angels. So who is the third one who is called *YHWH*? Because this one cannot literally be God and yet he bears God’s name he must be “the angel of the Lord” about whom it was stated “I send my angel ... for **my name [YHWH] is in him**” (*Ex. 23:20, 21*). So Abraham did not literally see God but saw His representative angel who carries God’s name and speaks for Him.

NOTE: **The LORD [YHWH]** in 18:20 and 19:24b (marked in black) is actually God Himself.

## Jacob Did Not Physically See God

“Jacob went on his way, and **the angels of God** met him ... 24And Jacob was left alone. And **a man** wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, ‘Let me go, for the

day has broken.’ But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’ And he said to him, ‘What is your name?’ And he said, ‘Jacob.’ Then he said, ‘Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you *have striven with God and with men*, and have prevailed.’ Then Jacob asked him, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have **seen God face to face**, and yet my life has been delivered”

(*Gen. 32:1, 24-30*).

Similar to Abraham’s experience, this is simply an instance of Jacob seeing “the angel of the Lord” who functioned as God and as His representative in relation to Jacob. So Jacob did not literally see God but had struggled with His angel.

## Moses Did Not Physically See God

❖ “Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses **face to face**, as a man speaks to his friend” (*Ex. 33:11*).

The Hebrew word ‘face’ is used in the OT in different senses—sometimes literal and sometimes in a variety of figurative ways. In the case of Moses’ speaking “**face to face**” with God (Exodus 33:11) this implies his intimate communication with God and his close relationship with God. It does not mean that Moses literally saw God.

### GOD DESCRIBED IN HUMAN TERMS

The fact that God is sometimes described in human terms does not mean that he has a human-shaped body or human-like body parts i.e. he does not literally have a face, eyes, nose, arms, or legs in the same way a human has. Such a describing of God in human terms is for our benefit because of the limitations of human thinking and is called anthropomorphism. Some of these terms are used in Exodus 33:20-23 when Moses asked to see God’s glory. This has led some to imagine that God literally has human features and that Moses literally saw Him. However, *The New International Bible Commentary* p. 184 explains that these are anthropomorphic descriptions:

**18. show me your glory:** cf. 16: 10; 24: 16. The request is for a theophany; the revelation of divine glory would assure Moses that his prayers had been answered.

**19. all my goodness:** the gracious attributes and acts of God by which His character (my name) may be known. **on whom I will have mercy:** with the declaration of the attributes of grace comes the reminder that the exercise of them is God’s prerogative entirely. **20. My face:** by this **anthropomorphism** the full disclosure of God is signified. But such a vision is *beyond the capacity of mortal men to behold*, cf. Gen.16:13; 32:30; Jn1:18. 21f. there are noteworthy comparisons between these verses and Elijah’s experience as recorded in 1 Kg.19:9-18. **23. My back** stands for a partial revelation of the divine glory. The section is strongly anthropomorphic without at all compromising the truth of the incorporeity of God.

So the seeing of **God’s face**, *in this instance*, would mean the seeing of His full glory. Yet at Exodus 33:20 God says: “...you [*Moses*] cannot see my face, for **man shall not see me and live.**”

So, far from any mortal human literally seeing God they could not even see His full glory. Yet, Moses had the special privilege of seeing **His back** which would mean the **partial seeing of His glory**. Furthermore, it was actually the angels at Mount Sinai that gave Moses the Law (Gal. 3:19). So God’s partial glory [*His back*] may have been manifested by the presence of a glorious angel—most probably “the angel of the Lord” who carries God’s name as noted in Exodus 23:20, 21: “I send my angel ... for my name is in him.”

## Job Did Not Physically See God

The patriarch Job went through a very terrible time of testing at the hand of Satan. But finally God spoke to him so that Job learned some very major lessons in life and about God. This led him to make the following expression:

❖ ‘I had heard of you by the *hearing* of the ear, but **now my eye sees you...**’ (*Job 42:5*).

So this simply refers to Job as having now had the personal experience of God in his life. Such experience transcended all his recent suffering. This contrasted with his mere “hearing” about God in a theoretical way. So the seeing is not a reference to any literal seeing of God.

## Did Jesus Physically See God?

There are a number of Jesus' statements about his seeing God, but what does the context indicate about these. For instance in the Gospel of John Jesus is recorded as saying:

- ❖ "...not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he [*Jesus*] has seen the Father" *(John 6:46).*

CONTEXT: *The previous verse 45 quotes Isaiah 54:13*

- ❖ "It is written in the Prophets, 'And they will all be **taught by** God.' Everyone who has heard and **learned from** the Father comes to me—"

In Greek **knowing** and **seeing** are near synonyms according to *Kittel and Friedrich's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* The Greek word used here is *eoraken* which is from *horao* = to perceive or to become acquainted with by experience e. g: John 14:9: "He who has **seen me** has seen the Father."

- ❖ "He who **sees me** sees the One who sent me" *(John 12:45).*

These verses cannot mean simply **caught sight of Jesus**, but those who come to know Jesus will get to know the Father. Just as Job did not physically see God, yet, as noted above, after his experience he knew God far better than before. So when Jesus later says: "What things I have **seen** with my Father I speak" (John 8:38) he is speaking figuratively of the things that he has learned from His Father. Also Jesus made it plain that no-one had fully come to know God; and so requiring that the Son should reveal Him:

- ❖ "No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him." *(John 1:18, NKJ)* ("explained Him" NASB or "made him known" ESV, NRSV, NIV).

## Conclusion

Evidently there is nothing in the Bible record to indicate that Jesus or any other mortal human had at any time literally physically seen God. The Bible is very clear when it says that: "...no one may see (God) and live" (Ex. 33:20), "no one has seen God at any time" (John 1:18), and that God "dwells in unapproachable light, *whom no man has seen or can see*" (1Tim. 6:16). On the basis of the above Scriptures and earlier evidence it is most unlikely that Adam literally saw God in the garden of Eden, but rather that God was represented by His agent the angel of Yahweh. So whenever someone claims to have seen God, we must analyse their experience in the light of all of the Bible statements as well as seeing certain biblically recorded events in their full context.

[www.biblicaltruthseekers.co.uk](http://www.biblicaltruthseekers.co.uk)