



Tour Guide Notes: Gazing on the Face of God

Lesson 1 – Veritology: What is Truth?

Every once in a while one of my seminary students will raise the question: "Can we actually 'gaze' upon the face of God?" After all, don't we remember the Scripture saying somewhere that no man has seen God? And isn't God a Spirit? So how can anyone actually "see" Him?

Good questions. Let's attempt to answer them.

But first, let me give the short answer. When we are talking about gazing upon the face of God, we are not talking about physically "seeing" Him. We are talking about looking at the glory of His attributes, His character, His nature. These are the primary "jewels" that we will gaze upon during our tours. In our first tour, for example, we explore the idea that He is Truth and the ultimate source of all Truth. In our second tour, we will ponder His very nature and character as the basis of all ethics. Later, we will look at His goodness and kindness, His sovereignty and His providence. Every tour will bring us face to face with the reality of who He really is. "Gazing upon the face of God," then, is a call for us to "look" at Who He is. It is the essential part of "knowing Him" that should be our number one objective in life. In other words, it is important to remember that when we speak of "gazing" upon His face, we are only speaking figuratively.

With that in mind, let's proceed to take a closer look at what *might* seem to be a contradiction in Scripture and try to clear away any remaining confusion.

Scripture does in fact say that no one can "see" God and live. This assertion is initially found in Exodus 33:20. Let me quote the passage from my Hebrew Interlinear:

¹⁸And he [Moses] said, I pray, let me see Your glory.

¹⁹And He said, I will cause all My goodness to pass before your face, and I will proclaim by the name of Jehovah before you; and I will show favor to whom I will show favor, will have mercy on whom I will have mercy. ²⁰And He said, You are not able to see My face; for no man can see Me and live.

So, Moses asked to see God's glory and God told him that he was "unable" to see his face – that, as a matter of fact, no one could see Him and live.

However, in Genesis 32, Jacob states, after having wrestled with God, that he "saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." Jacob even named the place "Peniel" which means "face of God."

In John Chapter 1, John says:

¹⁸*No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. [ESV]*

Jesus Himself speaks of this idea of not "seeing" God, but qualifies His meaning by restricting the concept specifically to the Father:

⁴⁶*No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father. [NIV]*

Both of these passages use the Greek word "horao." When Paul gives an intervening benediction in 1 Timothy 1:17, he says:

To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. [ESV]

Here, Paul uses the same word, 'horao' but negates it with the prefix "a," just as we do in English when we speak of an "a-theist." Paul is saying that God is "not-seeable." We translate that as *invisible*.

And yet we still have the powerful passage in Isaiah, where the prophet states that his eyes have "seen" the King, the Lord of hosts (Isaiah 6:5).

How do we resolve this? God tells Moses that he is unable to see his face, but Jacob says that he saw God face to face. God tells Moses that no one can see him and live and Jesus says that no one has ever seen the Father, yet Isaiah claims that his eyes have seen the King. Do we have an irreconcilable problem here? After all, Philip was told that if he had seen Jesus, he had "seen" the Father. Moses spoke with God "face to face" (Exodus 33:11). In Exodus 24:9-10, we read that Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and seventy elders of Israel "went up and they saw the God of Israel ... they beheld God, and ate and drank." Similarly, Job, in the midst of his suffering, consoles himself with the thought that one day he will "see God" in the flesh (Job 19:26). And this is only a sampling of the many scriptural passages that describe men and women as actually *beholding* the One who truly does reveal himself to man – a theme which may be said to culminate in the awe-inspiring declaration of Christ: "Blessed are the pure in heart, *for they shall see God*" (Matthew 5:8).

So the answer is *no*. There is no contradiction here.

In one case, we are being told that it is impossible for us to "see" the "unseeable" God in the fullness of His glory, and that even if we were able to, that sight would be too much for mortal man to bear. Yet God has graciously given us glimpses of Himself, as He did with Moses, and as He has done with Isaiah and others. Through the incarnation, He has allowed man to see the glory of God revealed in the flesh – indeed, it is possible to argue that it is only through Jesus Christ that man can behold the Father and live. In the midst of this, we must contend with the glorious mystery of the Trinity: one God, single in essence, yet existing in three persons.

Obviously, a more lengthy discussion is required; one in which we could dissect the relevant words and speak of the various "theophanies" narrated in the Bible. Hopefully, some day, we will post that discourse in the Library of Worldview Thought.

But, for our purpose here, it is vital to understand that our call to "gaze upon the face of God" does not amount to some wild claim that we are physically going to "see" the "eternal, invisible" God of all creation. Again, we are only using this phrase in a *figurative* sense.