

## HAVE PEOPLE SEEN GOD OR NOT?

John 1:18

By Raymond White

John opens his gospel with an astonishing claim, that nobody has ever seen God. And the reason he says that is to establish Christ as the only visible revelation of God. John probably got the idea from Jesus words five chapter later.

***John 1:18** No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.*

***John 6:46** Not that any man hath seen the Father, save he which is of God, he hath seen the Father.*

But does Jesus and John really mean it? Do they really mean that no one has ever, ever seen God? Or ought we to allow them the poetic license to sometimes speak in hyperbole as we do frequently? There are good reasons to allow them some slack. The first is that John (as other Bible authors) elsewhere uses hyperbole. For instance —

***John 3:32** And what he hath seen and heard, that he testifieth; and no man receiveth his testimony. :33 He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true.*

When John writes, “no man receiveth his testimony,” does he really mean literally “no man”? How could he mean that when John is one of the many people who did receive his testimony? And further, in the next verse John immediately contradicts himself, “He that hath received his testimony...” So clearly, “no man” is hyperbole, a linguistically allowed exaggeration.

If you threw a party and expected a hundred guests, but only three showed up, the next day, if someone asked you “how was the party,” you might reasonably complain, “It was a flop. No one came.” And you’d be right, within the allowed meaning of “no one.”

Of course someone might challenge you and say, “No one? But Susan said she was there and she had a ball playing Risk.” Such a picky demand for precision would first annoy you, and then you would reluctantly acquiesce to it: “Well, I didn’t mean *no* one, I meant...” and then you’d more accurately describe last’s night’s happening.

That’s what’s going on when John write, “No man hath seen God.” He means, “People don’t see God.”

Another reason to believe that John was using hyperbole is the many instances in the Bible where someone really did seen God.

## PEOPLE WHO SAW GOD

And now, for your reading pleasure, or annoyance, here are the Bible stories of people really did meet and see God.

*Genesis 12:7 And the LORD appeared unto Abram... 18:1 And the LORD appeared unto him...*

“Appeared” means seen. Not heard, felt, or smelt. Abraham saw God, at least twice.

*Genesis 32:30 I have seen God face to face and my life is preserved.*

There can be no denying that Jacob saw God. One may argue, “Yes, but he didn’t see the *real* God, not his full glory but only his theophony.” Firstly, that’s a contrivance that doesn’t even make sense. But secondly, if so, so what? In *Exodus 33:20*, Moses saw God’s back but not his face. It would be a silly argument to say that Moses therefore didn’t *really* see God because he only saw God’s back. To see God’s back is to see God. But Jacob, on the other hand, actually saw God’s face, and whatever else that might mean, it means he saw God.

*Exodus 24:9 Then went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. :10 And they saw the God of Israel... :11 And upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand: also they saw God...*

That’s a crowd: Moses, three priests, the seventy, and nobles. They all met God and saw him.

*Exodus 33:20 Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me and live.*

This reads like an absolute, like a law: if you see God (any of God, not just his face), you die, that’s the rule.

But that can’t be its meaning because God immediately contrives a plan where Moses can see some of him anyway.

*Exodus 33:22 while my glory passeth by, 33:23 thou shalt see my backparts, but my face shall not be seen.*

God’s point is, if you see all of what I am, you couldn’t take it, it would overwhelm you, it would kill you. It’s not a cosmic law, it’s a reality about man’s situation.

*Hebrews 11:27 By faith he [Moses] forsook Egypt...seeing him who is invisible.*

Moses saw God.

*Leviticus 9:4 The LORD will appear unto you. 9:6 The glory of the LORD shall appear unto you. 9:23 The glory of the LORD appeared unto all the people.*

At first, God says he will appear, than quickly changes to his glory will appear. I have to believe that they are synonymous as Jesus at the Mount of Transfiguration: when they saw his glory, his flesh set aside, they saw the real him.

Here, once the priests and the congregation were ceremonially sanctified, they did indeed see God, apparently his glory in its entirety. So when God says, “no man can see me,” he means in their sinful nature. If the sin is somehow discharged, man can indeed see God.

***Deuteronomy 5:26** For who is there of all flesh, that hath heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived?*

Clearly this cannot be taken literally or they'd all be dead. The statement is an exaggeration as is Jesus' “No man hath seen God.” We just have to allow the Bible to use such language as we do all the time. If we literalize every word of the Bible, then it makes no sense.

Consider our exaggeration: “Nothing is certain but death and taxes.” Is that literally true? Almost, but not quite. Enoch did not die, so death is not quite certain. But death is so virtually certain that we say it is certain and anyone who wants to haggle over Enoch is being way too picky. Death is certain, let's not haggle over Enoch.

***1 Kings 3:5** In Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night...*

***1 Kings 11:9** And the LORD was angry with Solomon...which had appeared unto him twice.*

Solomon saw God, twice. Some will complain, “Well, not really. He only dreamed he saw God.” Not true. It was God that Solomon saw whether in a dream or otherwise, contradicting John's assertion: “no man hath seen God.”

***1 Kings 22:19** And he [Micaiah] said, Hear thou therefore the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by him on his right hand and on his left.*

***2 Chronicles 18:18** Again he [Micaiah] said, Therefore hear the word of the LORD; I saw the LORD sitting upon his throne, and all the host of heaven standing on his right hand and on his left.*

This is a stunning open vision, to see God on his throne in heaven.

***Job 19:26** And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God. :27 Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold...*

True, this is future. But if we don't see God because we can't see God, which is John's assertion, then a future seeing of God makes the point as well. But we find better than that in Job —

**Job 42:5** *I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee.*

When Jobs said, “mine eye seeth thee,” could that be figurative? No, it must be literal because it follows, “I have heard of thee.” In other words, I used to believe because I heard of you. But now I know because I saw you. If the seeing were not literal, the verse would be meaningless.

**Isaiah 6:1** *In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the LORD sitting upon his throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.:5 Then said I, Woe is me! ... for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.*

Isaiah saw God. Further, Isaiah intentionally makes it clear that he saw God with his eyes. Not spiritual eyes (whatever that is) but actual eyes.

**Ezekiel 1:1** *...the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God.*

One might argue that Ezekiel didn't actually “see” God, he only had a “vision” of God. What on earth do you think a vision is, but to “see”? Some might argue, “But not with his natural eyes! Only his mind's eye.” Oh, for heaven's sake. John made no such quibble when he said, “no man can see God at any time.” He doesn't say natural eyes, mind's eyes, or any other kind of eyes. He just said, “see,” plain and simple. And Ezekiel saw God, I don't care how.

**Ezekiel 1:27** *And I saw... :28 ...the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face...*

**Ezekiel 3:23** *Then I arose, and went forth into the plain: and, behold, the glory of the LORD stood there, as the glory which I saw by the river of Chebar: and I fell on my face. :24 Then the spirit entered into me...*

I underscore the word “then” for the benefit of those who would make the argument, “Well, you can see God but only when the spirit is in you.” Not here. Ezekiel saw God first, *then* the spirit entered him.

**Ezekiel 8:4** *And, behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there, according to the vision that I saw in the plain.*

Ezekiel is saying, I knew it was God because I've seen him before. It like they are old friends.

**Matthew 5:8** *Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.*

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus promises to the pure in heart that they will see God. This is not a parable, but an actual promise.

**John 16:25** *These things have I spoken unto you in proverbs: but the time cometh, when I shall no more speak unto you in proverbs, but I shall shew you plainly of the Father.*

**Acts 7:55** *Be he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, :56 And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.*

Stephen saw God. And for a dying man, seeing God takes the sting out of dying, when you knew where you're going.

**Revelation 22:3** *And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of his lamb shall be in it... :4 And they shall see his face...*

## REVIEW

**John 1:18** *No man hath seen God at any time...*

This introductory verse in John's gospel contradicts all the verses above from the Hebrew scriptures. People bend and twist this to try to reconcile it, but there is no reconciliation — they contradict, *if* you take John's words literally.

Some argue, "Well, the Hebrew prophets didn't *really* see God, they only had *visions* of him." What's that supposed to mean? **1 Kings 22:19** ... *I saw the LORD sitting on his throne...* What part of "I saw" don't you understand?

Some point to **Exodus 33** and notice that Moses couldn't see God's face but only his "backparts" as God was receding. Fine. But Moses *saw God*.

Some have said, "Ah! But you can't see God in his *full glory!*" So what? What does that have to do with anything? Seeing God is seeing God, with or without his glory.

Some flip that argument and say that the prophets saw *only* the "glory" of God and not really God. Sigh! If you see God's glory, you see God!

Some argue "but they saw God only with their 'spiritual' eyes" whatever that means. And it doesn't matter anyway because John said "no man hath seen God" — he doesn't qualify "except with his spiritual eyes." Spiritual, physical, it doesn't matter what kind of eyes, John is adamant, no one has ever seen God, period, and that is not true.

Finally, a Mormon might argue, "The God of the Old Testament is Jehovah who is Christ. And all those prophets saw Jehovah/Christ, not his father, the real God of everything. So John is correct in the sense that no one has ever seen the father." The problem with that is that the Old Testament doesn't distinguish between God the Father and God the Son. Those texts just say they saw God, and splitting hairs over *which* God does not change the fact that John said "No man hath seen God." He doesn't say which.

So, what's my solution? I think John is exaggerating. It's simply not possible that he meant his words so literally, that no one has ever seen God. I think if he had realized how overly literal people would one day take his words, he would have been a bit more careful and written something more fluid like perhaps: "People don't see God, do they?" Such words would have been less controversial.