

John 1:18 — No Man Hath Seen God at Any Time

The Invisible God, the Only Begotten Son in the Bosom, and What We Shall See in Glory

Scripture Reading: John 1:18; 1 Timothy 6:16; John 14:9; Revelation 22:3–4

“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 1:18)

“Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see.” (1 Timothy 6:16)

“He that hath seen me hath seen the Father.” (John 14:9)

“And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads.” (Revelation 22:4)

God Is Not Apprehendable by the Eye

John 1:18, written long after the Lord Jesus had been here and returned to the glory, makes a plain and absolute statement: no man has seen God at any time. John had walked with the Lord Jesus for years. He had seen him. Yet by the Spirit he writes: no man has seen God at any time. This must be held firmly, because a great deal depends upon it.

First Timothy 6:16 confirms it from another angle: God alone has immortality — underived and not dependent, in contrast to man’s immortality which is dependent on God’s sustaining — and he dwells in light which no man can approach, whom no man has seen nor can see. God as God is not apprehendable

by any organ of sight. He is spirit. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in their essence dwell in unapproachable light. To approach that light so as to see would be to reduce God to something other than he is.

When Moses asked to see God's glory, the answer was: I will make all my goodness pass before thee, but thou canst not see my face, for there shall no man see me and live. Sinful flesh is unsuited for any such approach. But more than that — John was a saved man, an apostle, one who had dwelt close to the Lord. And he still says: no man has seen God at any time. It is not merely a question of the condition of the person. God as God is invisible.

The Angels Did Not See God When Christ Was Born

It has sometimes been said in preaching that when the Lord Jesus was born, the angels saw God for the first time. This cannot be correct — it contradicts the plain statement of verse 18. What the angels saw was the man Christ Jesus, who is God and man in one person. To look upon Jesus of Nazareth is not to penetrate by the eye to the divine being so as to see God in the sense in which John or Paul uses that language. Seeing God has a different sense from seeing Christ in his manhood. God is spirit; the Father is not more seeable than the Son as God; the Spirit is not seen. The Son came forth to manifest the Father's heart by the power of the Spirit, but that is not the same as God becoming visible.

He Hath Declared Him: The Son in the Bosom

The key to the verse is in its closing words: the only begotten Son, who dwells in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him — he hath told him out. The question of John 1:18 is not whether anyone has seen God, but who has the competency to declare what God is. Only one has that competency: God himself in the person of the Son, who dwells in the bosom of the Father.

The Son dwells in the bosom of the Father. This is a present tense, an unalterable and eternal divine relationship — always has been, always will be. The Son dwelt in the bosom of the Father during the three hours of darkness on the cross. The incarnation and the cross do not alter this eternal relationship. And the Son has come here to tell us what was in that bosom. He has told out what no created being — angel or man — could tell, because none has been in the bosom of the Father. Only the Son has. And so only the Son can declare it.

When Philip said, Show us the Father, the Lord answered: “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father” (John 14:9). They did not literally see the Father; what they saw was Christ. This is moral identity — a moral apprehension by the power of the Spirit working in us that we see Christ for who he is, and in his life recognize the perfect display of the Father. Colossians 2:9 gives the ground for it: in him dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. Everything the Father willed, the Son did; he did it in the power of the Spirit. The three divine persons were always acting in unity in him. So to see him was to see the Father’s will, heart, and character — but not to see God in his essence.

What We Shall See in Glory

The scriptures that speak of what we will see in glory are consistent in centering everything upon Christ. First John 3:2 says: “When he shall appear, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” Revelation 22:4 says of the servants of the Lamb: “They shall see his face.” These are not speaking of seeing God in his essence. They are speaking of seeing Christ in his glory, and that will be an unspeakable privilege.

John 17:5 gives us one of the specific glories we shall behold: “Now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was.” The Son of God from eternity was in glory with the Father before the world was. When he took manhood, he did not leave that eternal glory

any more than by coming here he left the Father's bosom. But now he will take that manhood up into Godhead glory — the very glory the Son had with the Father before the world was. This is personal glory that he cannot share, because it belongs to who he uniquely is as both God and man in one person. And this is what we shall behold.

Revelation 4 and 5 are consistent with this. When John was caught up and saw the throne of God, what is described is not the face of God but the symbolic representations around the throne — lightnings, rainbows, the living creatures, the elders. And then in chapter 5 the Lamb appears in the midst of the throne, and the entire company of heaven worships him. The eye of heaven is fixed on the Lamb. That is the pattern of what eternity will be: God's purpose is to glorify himself in Christ, and the eyes of all will be centered on the person of Christ as the Lamb who has prevailed.

First John 3:3 adds that this hope has a present moral effect: "Every man that hath this hope upon him purifieth himself, even as he is pure." The standard of purity held out is as he is pure. God does not lower the standard. We tremble before it in ourselves — and yet it is held out as the objective, to answer even now, down here, to what he is up there and what we shall be when we see him as he is.

Have we lost any blessing by not physically seeing God? No. God has withheld nothing that is for our blessing. If it were a spiritual blessing to see God in his essence, we would have that, for we are blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies. What we are given instead — the sight of Christ, being like him, sharing his glory, the Father's house of many abodes, fellowship with the Father and the Son — cannot be bettered.

He hath declared him. They shall see his face. And his name shall be in their foreheads.