

## Accessing The Invisible God

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As a child I remember being fascinated with the concept of invisibility. I counted all the things that I could get away with if people could not see me. People would actually forget about me and I could live like a free spirit. I did not know that term at the time; it came along later, but that is the way I was thinking. I would not have to go to bed when told, and more importantly, I could get up at 1 o'clock in the morning, go into the kitchen and raid the cookie jar. All undetected!

Then my grandmother burst my bubble. One time she was talking to me on the subject and she reminded me that I would find invisibility quite uncomfortable. People, not seeing me, would step all over me. They would forget to set a place at the dinner table for me; they would sit on me. They would turn off the lights in the room because they thought that there was no one there. And most importantly, they would close the refrigerator door on my invisible hand as I was grabbing for some food.

The problems of invisibility were just too much for me. I could not address all of those issues. So, I developed an answer: a concept of porosity. I thought that if I could just pass through people, they would not step all over me, and they would not sit on me. They could close the refrigerator door or the car door and not catch my fingers. So, I wanted to be invisible, and I wanted to be porous.

Then I got to thinking about how I would control my porosity. If I could pass through the chair in which I was sitting, I would land on the floor. Then I realized that if I was lying on a bed, I would fall on the floor. But why would the floor stop me? I would just continue to fall through the floor, down through the earth, and end up on the other side of the planet upside down I reasoned. I remember asking my grandmother one time if people on the other end of the earth walked on their heads and whether they walked upside down or on their hands.

Well, my grandmother finally reminded me that, if I were invisible, I would become very lonely. All my friends would not be able to see me and forget all about me. It would be like I didn't exist. I could not deal with all of these problems with invisibility and porosity, and I finally just forsook the whole idea and decided that I had to live with the reality that people would have to see me, whether I wanted them to or not.

My somewhat richardsque introduction serves to preface my comments today, entitled

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“Accessing the Invisible and the Remote.” Let us focus for a few minutes on the invisibility of God as well as His remoteness. How accessible is God to us? And, considering His invisibility and His remoteness, how accessible is He to the people in the world? Please, turn to Colossians 1:15-16 as we begin by discussing God’s invisibility. His invisibility is real. It is as substantial as it gets. It is not the figment of a boy’s imagination. In his fabulously rich introductory comments in his letter to the Colossian church, the Apostle Paul firmly establishes the *fact* of the invisibility of God. The subject is Christ. Paul writes:

**Colossians 1:15-16** He is the image of the invisible God [the Father], the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him.

Now, the word *invisible* is not really a difficult one at all. It is *Strong’s* number G517. In the Greek, the root means “gazed at” or “capable of being seen.” The prefix “in” (as we all know) is a negative. And the English suffix “ible” is really just the word “able.” So *invisible* means: not able to be seen, or incapable of being seen.

Colossians 1:2 points out the audience to which Paul was writing. He was writing to the saints. That means he is writing to people. He is not addressing himself to angels or animals or anything like that. Hence, looking at this verse in terms of its intended audience, we rightfully conclude that God is invisible to *people*. This does not mean He is invisible to angels. Here, Paul is silent on that matter. But, what Paul does say is that people, even the saints, cannot see God at the present time and in a physical sense. Why do I add this phrase “in a physical sense?” Because in Colossians 1 as a whole, Paul is making a distinction between the physical and the spiritual; he is saying that Christ bridges the two.

Now, drop down to a few verses.

**Colossians 1:19-20** For it pleased the Father that in Him [Christ] all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.

The Incarnate Christ was physical. Christ had blood. Christ died on a cross. You could

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see Christ and you could see His cross. The Apostle John provides a second witness to the fact that Christ was visible when He was on the earth. Hold your finger there in Colossians and turn for a minute to I John 1:1.

**I John 1:1** That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life... .

The apostles (or I should say the Disciples at the time) could see and hear Christ. He was not invisible to them at all. He was certainly not porous to them; they could touch Him. And indeed, the same apostle, John, indicates in Revelation 1:7 that, "every eye will see Christ." As the context shows, John is saying everyone will see Him once He returns, as we all understand.

Now, please go back to your thumb, to Colossians 1:20.

**Colossians 1:20-22** ...and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross. And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His [the Father's] sight... .

Christ, when He walked the earth, was not invisible, but Paul goes out of his way (in verse 15) to make it clear that the Father, at least to humans and at least for now, is very much invisible.

Please, turn to Acts 7:55 for more about this invisibility. Notice what Stephen, just prior to his death, saw and what he apparently did *not* see.

**Acts 7:55** But he [Stephen], being full of the holy spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God... .

Luke seems careful to say that Stephen saw the *glory* of the Father rather than His visage. Perhaps he saw the light emanating from the Father. However, Luke is just as explicit regarding Christ. Stephen saw Him, not just His glory.

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There are a number of other references to the invisibility of God which I want to review briefly. I am not mentioning these in any special order. We will begin in I Timothy 1:17. Paul, at the end of his comments to Timothy, thanks God for His mercy and then concludes with these words:

**I Timothy 1:17** Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Now, turn please to a second example in the same book. Notice that this passage is really quite close to Paul's comments in I Timothy 1:17. In I Timothy 6:16, Paul again presents the Father in terms of His invisibility. Here too, Paul seems to be just overawed by God's power as he gives Him honor and glory. Referring to the Father, the Apostle writes:

**I Timothy 6:16** ...who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power. Amen.

As a third example, notice John 1:18. Christ explicitly speaks of the Father's invisibility:

**John 1:18** No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.

Yet another example appears in the faith chapter, in Hebrews 11:27. The specific subject is Moses. Moses acted as if he saw the invisible God. Though he did not see Him physically, of course, we understand that he saw Him with eyes of faith.

**Hebrews 11:27** By faith he [Moses] forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible.

As a final example, please turn to Romans 1:20. Paul is writing of the Father here. He avers that the Father manifests His *attributes*, which Paul calls invisible, through His creation. This is a little more subtle approach to God's invisibility.

**Romans 1:20** For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal

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power and godhead, so that they are without excuse.

Please, turn over to Matthew 26. Before I go on, I want to mention that the Father's invisibility is not permanent. The context is Christ's trial. Here, He obliquely touches on the fact that the time will come when people will be able to see the Father.

**Matthew 26:64** Jesus said to him, "It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right had of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven."

Christ is telling His accusers that they will eventually see Him seated next to the "Power." Other translations render that noun *Power* as the "the Almighty" or "the Mighty One." So, this is clearly a reference to the Father. There is here the certain implication that they will see *both* the Father and the Son. The timeframe of this statement cannot be Christ's return to earth at the start of the Millennium. For, Christ's accusers, alive and kicking in 31 AAD, are now long dead. In saying what He did, I think Christ is looking well beyond His second coming; He is looking far into the future to the end of the White Throne Period, perhaps a little bit after that, when these individuals will themselves be god beings. Then they will be able to see the "Power" and, next to him, Christ.

In my introductory remakes, I mentioned two attributes I sought as a child: invisibility and porosity. They are not the same, of course; in fact, you can have either one without the other. But, their consequences are much the same. They share common ground in their impact. Accordingly, I want to shift gears at this point, about midway through my comments, turning from a discussion of invisibility and focusing on remoteness. Like porosity and invisibility, remoteness and invisibility are not the same, but their consequences are similar.

Please, turn over to Isaiah 14:13. In this passage, the Logos is speaking to Satan.

**Isaiah 14:13** For you have said in your heart: "I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north... .

We understand from this that God lives somewhere in the north. We need to pursue for a minute exactly what that word *sides* means. It is *Strong's* number H3411, and in Hebrew it means "flank; rear; recess." Saying that does not say a lot, does it? To get a

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better idea of the word's meaning, we need to look at some other passages where it occurs. I am going to string a number of verses together, starting with Jeremiah 6:22, reading first from the *King James Version*. Then, we will look at some other translations.

**Jeremiah 6:22 (*King James Version*)** Thus saith the Lord, Behold, a people cometh from the north country, and a great nation shall be raised from the sides of the earth.

The noun *sides* here is *Strong's* number H3411. Notice how two modern translations render Jeremiah 6:22.

- ***Amplified Bible, Classic Edition***: Behold a people is coming from the north country and a great nation is arousing itself from the ends of the earth.
- ***Holman Christian Standard Bible***: Look, an army is coming from a northern land; a great nation will be awakened from the remote regions of the earth.

So, the noun *sides* carries with it the idea of remoteness, separation, or isolation. Now, as a second example, please turn to Jeremiah 25:32.

**Jeremiah 25:32 (*Amplified Bible, Classic Edition*)** Thus says the Lord of hosts, Behold, evil will go forth from nation to nation, and a great whirling tempest will raise from the uttermost parts of the earth.

The *Holman Christian Standard Bible* renders the last part of this passage this way: "A great storm is stirred up from the ends of the earth."

As a third example, let us go back to Isaiah 37:24. This is part of God's reply to the Assyrian King, Sennacherib, who was attacking Jerusalem at the time. What the *King James Version* renders as "the sides of Lebanon," the *Holman Christian Standard Bible* renders as "the far recesses of Lebanon" and the *Amplified Bible* renders "the remotest parts of Lebanon."

And finally, consider Isaiah 14. In verse 15, God, speaking to Satan, says,

**Isaiah 14:15 (*King James Version*)** Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit.

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The *Amplified Bible, Classic Edition* renders it “the innermost recesses of the pit.” The *New International Version* puts it, “the depths of the pit,” and the *Holman Christian Standard Bible* refers to “the deepest regions of the pit.”

Considering all these examples, the meaning of *Strong* H3411 is pretty clear. It strongly carries the notion of inaccessibility due to isolation—something far away, somewhere hard to reach. Interestingly, this meaning has come down to us in English. We say that a person is “sidelined,” a term related to game theory. The verb *sideline* draws its meaning from games, where, as we know, a field has definite boundaries. Many games place extremely strict limits on the area of play. For example, in football or basketball, if a ball goes out of these limits, it becomes out of play. When a player goes outside these boundaries, he is “out of bounds.” Metaphorically, a sidelined player is “marginalized;” he is someone who is out of the game; he is tangential to the action at least for that moment.

Well, in some ways, God has purposely “sidelined” Himself. We understand of course that He has maintained His unquestioned sovereignty, yet we also know that He currently exercises His power through His Logos—through Jesus Christ, His Spokesman.

There are any number of Scriptures that talk about this. We are not going to go through them all. Paul says in Colossians that it is Christ who made “all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible ....” The Father God has hidden Himself, as it were, in some remote area of the heavens. We know that it is in the north and that is about all. It is almost as if a voice on your cellphone told you to look for your buddy in the bleachers on the north side of a large stadium. That information does help a bit; you at least do not need to look to the east, west or south. Yet, if there are a whole lot of people on the north side of the stadium, you still have a lot of looking to do.

Okay, a number of related questions therefore arise:

- Does the fact that God dwells remotely from us and is invisible to us mean that He is inaccessible to us?
- Do the facts of His invisibility and His remoteness limit His accessibility to us?
- How far removed is God from us?

I am not just speaking in terms of people in the Church of God. No, I am asking these questions as well in relation to those in the world. Do they have access to God or is He inaccessible to them? Is He remote to them? As we begin to look for answers to these questions, please turn to Acts 17:25-29. The Apostle Paul is speaking to the Athenians.

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As he stands in the famous Areopagus, he makes an amazing comment to these people gathered about him:

**Acts 17:25-26** Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings... .

Why does God so closely control history, migrations, and the sifting of the people over the continents from one generation to the next? In verses 27-29, Paul begins to provide some answers. The sovereign God does all this so that people

... should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.' Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising.

Remember, Paul is speaking to Gentiles living there in Athens, there in that idolatrous city. He avers that the true God is not far from any of them. How can this be? Were they called individuals, were they part of God's elect? Was Paul saying that they collectively made up the "pearl of great price?" Or that they were part of the special treasure of God? No, I do not think the Apostle is saying any of that at all. These Gentiles were not the apple of God's eye. After all, we understand that these people at that time were not new creations; they were not regenerated, that is, they were not yet born again as we understand the term. But God was saying, still, that He was close to them. I think there are two reasons for this affinity.

The first reason is that these people were hearing the gospel preached to them by Paul at that very moment—the gospel of the Kingdom of God. God was speaking to them through Paul. God was close to them.

The gospel is not a message that only a relatively few people have heard. Paul makes a really interesting statement in Colossians 1:23. Speaking to members of God's church, he refers to "the gospel that you have heard." The people of the church have heard the gospel. Yet, notice how the Apostle continues: "It is the gospel that has been proclaimed

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in all creation under heaven” (*Christian Standard Bible*).

Personally, I don't think that statement is hyperbole—rhetorical overstatement. It appears that the Apostles were like Mr. Armstrong. They were really, really dynamic individuals. They did not live out their lives in Cappadocia or Damascus or Ionia preaching to a handful of shepherds. Christ did not spend three and a half years training them for a ministry so limited as that. These men had apparently done as Christ had commanded them in Matthew 28:19, “they had gone to all nations.” Further, the verb tense in Colossians 1:23 seems to indicate that they had preached the gospel around the world by the time Paul wrote to the Colossians. That's amazing!

I do not think we can say that every single person in the earth had heard the gospel at that time, but we can say that the Apostles had preached that message far more broadly than any of us generally appreciate. So, in the sense that God uses His Apostles (and others) to proclaim the gospel, He was close to—not remote from—the people around the world.

I said that there were two ways that God was close to everyone—even those not regenerated through God's Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5). As I begin to discuss that second way, please turn to Colossians 1:16-17. Verse 16 mentions one element of God's creative efforts. I will call it initiation. Verse 17 talks about the second element, one we often do not appreciate fully. We will call that element maintenance. (Another popular term is sustainability.) So, how does God sustain—how does He maintain—His creation?

**Colossians 1:16-17** For by Him all things were created [this refers to the initial effort of God to create] that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him.

Now, verse 17, which mentions Christ's work of sustaining His creation: “And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.” Other translations use the term “cohere”: All things cohere or “stick together” because of Christ's ongoing work of maintaining the creation. It is this work of sustaining creation that Paul refers to when he tells the Athenians that “we live, move, and exist in Him.” He holds everything together. He not only holds us together as members in His Father's Church. He also holds all life—and all the living—together.

For a slightly different approach to this biblical understanding of sustainability, please

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turn to Act 14. Here Paul and Barnabas, speaking to some folk in Lystra who were as superstitious as they were zealous, talk further about God's sustaining work in creation and how that work meshes with history. Here, Paul is saying that through God's creation, which he mentions when he speaks of rain and the seasonal cycles, the Creator makes plain His on-going presence to people.

**Acts 14:14-17** But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them, who in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness."

Please, note that Paul says this to uncalled, unregenerated people, people outside the Church of God. He makes it plain that, because of God's sustaining efforts, people around the world have no excuse for their failure to recognize and to acknowledge God. We read about this earlier in Romans 1:20.

Now as a sidebar, I want to mention passingly Psalm 19:1-4. We will not turn there. John Ritenbaugh mentioned this in a Berean this past week—that David, the psalmist, tells how he perceived God through His creation, not through the sense of sight, but through the sense of hearing. And, he was (if I can keep the metaphor going) attuned to God through hearing the creation.

Well, as I wind down, let us look at this idea that God is really close to us from yet another angle. As we read Deuteronomy 4:7, remember what Paul calls those of us in His Church in I Peter 2:9; we will not turn there. He calls us "a Holy Nation."

**Deuteronomy 4:7** For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the Lord our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him?

Moses is referring to Israel, and very properly. We also understand that he is referring to the Israel of God, to the Church, to this Holy nation which we are. God is near to us. Notice how Moses approaches this matter though. He speaks *comparatively*. He does not say that God has no relationships at all with the pagan nations, but rather, Moses

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states that Israel's relationship with Him is *closer* than what other nations enjoy. He asks rhetorically, "What nation has a god so near unto it as our God is to us?" In this regard, you might want to notice Jeremiah 23:23; we will not have time to turn there.

What did the psalmist have to say about God's closeness to him? Well, plenty. We will take a look at Psalm 139:1-10.

**Psalm 139:1-10** O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O Lord, You know it altogether. You have hedged me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is high, I cannot attain it.

Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me.

The psalmist profoundly understood that God is not really far away from us at all. Though God dwells as a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29) in a venue that is unknown to us and is remote from us, He is nevertheless closer to us than breathing. He is as close to us as the breath of life that He has given to us and that He sustains in us. He is not inaccessible to us at all, and when it comes right down to it, He is not really inaccessible to those in the world.

But, we in His Church especially remain the apple of His eye, that is, the pupil of His eye. David talks about that in Psalms 17:8. When we, and by "we" I mean the people in His Church, call out to God, we do so standing before the coals of fire in His northern home, in His holiest-of-all sanctuaries. For the time being God has ordained a certain invisibility, a remoteness, in order that we might exercise our faith, to make it stronger. But, spiritually, we are there all the same, if we have the eyes of faith to see.

I will close in Hebrews 10. Though invisible now, though dwelling remotely, God is not inaccessible to us at all, and in that fact we can remain confident and encouraged.

**Hebrews 10:19-22** Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest

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by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.