

Exodus 33:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.

Analysis

And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live—God establishes a crucial limitation: seeing the divine 'face' (פָּנַי, panai—God's essence, full unveiled glory) would annihilate mortal humanity. This explains the apparent contradiction with v.11's 'face to face'—that phrase meant relational intimacy, not visual perception of divine essence. The principle holds throughout Scripture until glorification enables believers to 'see his face' (Revelation 22:4). This verse reveals both human limitation (we cannot bear unmediated holiness) and divine protection (God shields us from what would destroy us). Only the incarnate Christ makes seeing God possible (John 1:18, 14:9).

Historical Context

This theological principle explains why Old Testament theophanies involved mediated forms (cloud, fire, angel of the Lord). Even Isaiah's temple vision left him undone (Isaiah 6:5), and Manoah feared death after seeing the angel of the Lord (Judges 13:22).

Related Passages

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Study Questions

1. How does this limitation increase your appreciation for Christ's incarnation, which made 'seeing' God possible?
2. What does God's protective limitation teach about His care for our weakness even while drawing us near?

Interlinear Text

וַיֹּאמֶר	ל א	תוּכֶּל	יִרְאֶה נִי	אֶת	פָּנַי	כִּי	לֹא	יִרְאֶה נִי
And he said	H3808	Thou canst	not see	H853	my face	H3588	H3808	not see
H559		H3201	H7200		H6440			H7200
וְהָיָה	וְהָיָה	וְהָיָה	וְהָיָה	וְהָיָה	וְהָיָה	וְהָיָה	וְהָיָה	וְהָיָה
for there shall no man		me and live						
H120		H2425						

Additional Cross-References

Genesis 32:30 (Parallel theme): And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.

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

1 Timothy 6:16 (Parallel theme): Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen.

Isaiah 6:5 (Parallel theme): Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.

Exodus 24:10 (Parallel theme): And they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness.

Deuteronomy 5:24 (Parallel theme): And ye said, Behold, the LORD our God hath shewed us his glory and his greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire: we have seen this day that God doth talk with man, and he liveth.

Judges 6:22 (Parallel theme): And when Gideon perceived that he was an angel of the LORD, Gideon said, Alas, O Lord GOD! for because I have seen an angel of the LORD face to face.

Judges 13:22 (Parallel theme): And Manoah said unto his wife, We shall surely die, because we have seen God.

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