



God is ... A Person and Spirit (Exodus 3:1-14; John 4:19-26)

Exodus 3:1-14

¹ Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² And the angel (messenger) of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. ³ And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." ⁴ When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵ Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷ Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, ⁸ and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹ And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰ Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt." ¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" ¹² He said, "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."

¹³ Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you', and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" ¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." (Yahweh) And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM (Yahweh) has sent me to you.'"

John 4:19-26

¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." ²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." ²⁵ The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." ²⁶ Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."

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INTRODUCTION

Wow – as we listen to songs like that one, we come away with a picture of the greatness of God and how different he is to us, don't we?

Immortal, Invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible, hid from our sight,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.

It is as if the composer just kept piling on descriptions to try to do justice to God. And, of course, no one can do him justice.

It is very hard to describe God in his basic essence or being because it is so different to ourselves or anything we know. The other difficulty we experience is that the Bible is not like an encyclopedia entry about God or a 'Frequently Asked Questions' Guide. It is more like a love story, an account of a relationship. The story of God's relationship with humanity – with all its ups and downs, its heartaches and joys. And from this story we begin to gain an understanding of God from what He has done and said, what He has chosen to reveal to us.

This is frustrating if you come to the Bible to gain information about God. But wonderful if you are seeking to get to know God better – to enter the on-going relationship between God and humanity.

This morning, we are going to start our exploration of God by looking at two aspects of His being which need to be taken together to get the full picture. First, we will look at the reality that God is a **person** who seeks a personal relationship with us. In this way we are like Him. Then we will explore what it means that God is **spirit**. This is one area where we are very different to God in our physical mortality. But as we join the two together, we can see some important implications for our relationship with Him.

GOD IS ...

A PERSON (Exodus 3)

First, we want to look at the interaction between Moses and God as we find it in Exodus 3. Moses has fled Egypt after killing a man while trying to protect an Israelite slave from mistreatment. He is now living in the wilderness tending sheep. His former life among Egyptian royalty must have felt very far away. But it is in that wilderness where God meets him and turns his life around. God gets his attention with a burning bush that doesn't burn up. When Moses stops to see what is happening, God tells him he is on holy ground and he'd better act reverently. God is God and Moses needs to respect this.

But the God who Moses meets is no impersonal, distant god, but one who seeks a relationship with him and through him, with the Israelites. God reveals to Moses that He has seen what is happening to the Israelites, heard their cries and is emotionally moved by what He sees. He even shares His name – very important in ancient culture – to help people to know him. He desires them to know Him and He wants to save them. These are all very personal actions and reactions. They sound very human! That is because God is a person just like we are. The difference, of course, is that our personhood has been broken and affected by sin whereas God's has not.

The fact that God is a person means that He is not just an impersonal force or idea as some believe. Some people have an idea of God that is like the force in Star Wars. God is a force that is in and around everything and we can tap into it if we know how to do so. This force can be used for good or evil. Others believe that this God-force is more like an ideal like Love or Beauty

But the God we meet in the Bible is not a force; He is a person. God is not an impersonal force we need to learn how to manipulate to further our own plans. God is a person who reveals himself to us and involves himself with us because He loves us – person to person. God was the original person and when he made humanity, he made us as persons like Himself so that we could have a relationship with Him. In the passage we read today we see the beginnings of a real person-to-person relationship between God and Moses that grew and developed just like the relationships we know. God is a person.

SPIRIT (John 4)

But this does not mean that we are just like Him. The passage we read in John reveals something about God which is quite different to what we are like. Jesus says, "God is spirit". This isn't talking about the Holy Spirit here – one of the members of the Trinity - but about God's eternal essence. God does not have mortal flesh like we have. He does not have a body like ours which came into being at a particular time and in a particular place. A body which has limitations, and which is constantly decaying. A body which will cease to live at a particular time and in a particular place.

The song we listened to just before the sermon tells us about this and is based on a couple of passages in I Timothy which say:

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. (1:17)

He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen. (6:15.16)

Because God is Spirit, He lives for ever with no beginning or ending. He is invisible because he has no physical form. This also means that God is not limited to one place at a time as we are. God can be everywhere at once. Because God has no body, He is also without gender – he is not male or female in his eternal state. He is fundamentally different to us.

However, in order to help us to relate to Him, God chooses to accommodate Himself to our physical existence in order to reveal Himself to us and have a relationship with us. Firstly, God talks about himself in metaphors – although He has no eyes, He talks about seeing; although He has no ears, He talks about hearing; although He has no legs or feet, He talks about walking; although he has no gender, we talk about “he” not “it”. Actually, God uses both masculine and feminine metaphors in Scripture – for instance, while he is primarily known as our “father”, there are also “mother” metaphors for God. These expressions help us to relate to Him but never explain him fully.

Also, He sometimes chooses to appear to us in human form. In our Exodus passage, in verse 2, it says “the angel (or messenger) of the Lord appeared”. Most commentators agree that this is an appearance of God in human form. This happens quite a few times in the Old Testament – for instance, to Abraham before the destruction of Sodom, to Joshua before the battle of Jericho, to Daniel in the lions’ den and Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace.

And of course, the supreme instance of God accommodating Himself to us so that we can know Him is the incarnation where Jesus became a man and lived among us. However, these are temporary appearances for a purpose. God’s essence is not physical but spirit.

Some people believe that God is just some kind of superhuman – like Superman. He is like us but with special powers that makes him more powerful than us. This is not much different to the “gods” of Paul’s day. They had physical forms which were represented by idols. They lived in the temple which the people had made for them and they ate the food which people brought to the temple. People served physical beings who needed something from them in order to survive.

However, the God of the Bible is different to this. Paul, in the passage from Acts that we looked at last week, talks about the implications of God being Spirit. He says:

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything ... We ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. (Acts 17:24,25,29)

This description of God went radically against the religions of Paul’s day. He is spirit and as such he needs nothing from us – instead, we need life from Him. He deserves our worship for e has done for us.

THEREFORE ...

So what? What difference does it make that God is a Person (which is similar to us) and Spirit (which is fundamentally different to us)? Well, it means firstly that being both a person and spirit he is not either a life force – which would be possible if he were just spirit - or a super-human – which would be possible if he was just a person. Both of these views are quite prevalent in the society around us and we need to be sure we don’t drift into thinking and acting like this is what God is. But there are two other implications of this – **worship** and **friendship**.

WORSHIP

The passage from John focuses on this. Jesus said: “*God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.*” While it is true that we are not spirit, God did make us with a spiritual dimension, the ability to relate to Him on a spiritual level. We are physical beings and God has provided us with physical ways to worship him such as the sacrifices and feasts in the Old Testament and baptism and communion in the New Testament. However, these are meant to be merely external expressions of an internal reality. Our hearts must be turned towards God if we are to worship Him in spirit and in truth. The woman at the well had a question about the best place to worship God and Jesus replied that place is secondary. This is because God is everywhere and anywhere He is is holy ground – even in the middle of the wilderness as Moses discovered!

With our heart turned towards God and our attitudes aligned to His truth, then the physical activities become worship. David expresses this in Psalm 51, a psalm of confession. He says:

*For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
... Then will you delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.*

Worship must start with the heart or spirit. Then the rest is appropriate and worthwhile.

FRIENDSHIP

The other important area is our relationship with God – our friendship with Him. We can relate to Him – person to person. That is something you can't do if God is a force! As a person, God loves and cares for us. But there is more. As spirit, God's love and presence is unlimited.

I love my son, Ian, very much. As an only child he is very precious to Scott and I. But at the moment he is on the other side of the world and in a different time zone. We are extremely grateful for the connection that is available via the internet. When I was living on the other side of the world from my parents, it took 6 weeks to get a response to a letter and phone calls were beyond my financial resources except in emergencies. Now I can send a text message and get an immediate response as long as he is not asleep which is the case for a big part of our daytime. And we can have video calls anytime we want. However, even with all these advancements, digital communication does not take the place of an in-person chat and a real hug! And I can't always sense how he is doing even when we can see each other. It just isn't the same as being physically present.

But space and time are no barrier to God who is spirit. He is everywhere, all the time and knows everything. Because God is a person and spirit, our relationship with Him can be closer than any other relationship possible.

Once again, David captures this reality of our relationship with God. Psalm 139 says:

*O LORD, you have searched me and known me!
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.
You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.*

*Even before a word is on my tongue,
 behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.
You hem me in, behind and before,
 and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
 it is high; I cannot attain it.
Where shall I go from your Spirit?
 Or where shall I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
 If I make my bed in Sheol, 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.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
 and the light about me be night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
 the night is bright as the day,
 for darkness is as light with you.
For you formed my inward parts;
 You knitted me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 Wonderful are your works;
 my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
 when I was being made in secret,
 intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
 in your book were written, every one of them,
 the days that were formed for me,
 when as yet there was none of them.*

We started this sermon with a hymn which spoke of the awesomeness, the greatness of God. We finish it with a hymn which reflects an equal truth – that God is a person with whom we can have a relationship like no other. "What a Friend we have in Jesus!"