

# God Can't Be Seen

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Now, let's turn together to 1 Timothy. So, we're in our evening series, 10 Things That God Can't Do. And the fourth of these is that God can't be seen. And we're going to think about why that's good news. Of course, for us as people, we can be seen. And also, sometimes we have problems because we cannot see. We have bodies, obviously. Boys and girls, this is what makes it so difficult for us to play hide-and-seek as successfully as we would like. Imagine how different things would be if we had an invisibility cloak like Frodo or Harry Potter. But we don't. We are physical people. We can be seen. We are fixed in one particular place because of that. But we also, as people, when we're thinking about the fact that God can't be seen, we have a problem in the physical realm with things that we can't see. How many of us have ever lost our key? Sometimes because we are distracted and we forget where we put them, or we're stressed out and so our brains can't think straight. Or even worse, have you had that experience where you have the sunglasses on your head? Where's my sunglasses?

We've all done it at least once, I'm sure. That can happen because we are too close. We don't have the right perspective or vantage point. And so we struggle to see. Or when it comes to the mess in our rooms, here's a time for honesty. How many times do we adopt the out-of-sight, out-of-mind philosophy and try and cram the dirty clothes under our beds or maybe push them into, I can see some embarrassed people over there, push them into the back of a cupboard. Out-of-sight, out-of-mind. And actually, one of the challenges that God's people have had when it comes to worship is the God that we can't see is often a God that we forget. But when it comes to God, of course, it's very different. God can't be seen. The first man up in space was the Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, and he was reported to have said, I don't see any God up here. That should be no surprise.

John chapter 4, Jesus said, God is spirit. John chapter 1, no one has ever seen God. Of course, the Bible uses body language, physical language to speak of God. We hear about the hand of God, the mouth, the eyes of God. But when the Bible speaks in that way, it is God speaking at a level that we can understand. It's imagery that we can identify. In the same way, when we think about the foot of the Andes, we don't go there looking to find some toes. Now, so God speaks at ways that we can understand that will be helpful for us. But God can't be seen. Why can't we see God?

It's nothing to do with distance. Nothing to do with vantage point. As Roddy was reading those texts from 1 Timothy, you will have noticed that Paul praises the God who is invisible. Invisible because of His greatness, we worship a God who has no limits. Perhaps we could go back to King Solomon, when he was opening and dedicating the temple. He acknowledged there is no temple, indeed there is no universe that can contain God. God is invisible because of His glory, His pure holiness. As God Himself said to Moses, no one may see me and live. So, Paul praises the God who is invisible, and yet we notice, too, that he praised God for making Himself visible in the Lord Jesus. And we're going to think about those two realities together. So, we're going to sort of consider this text, 1 Timothy. And the letter of 1 Timothy is really interesting for lots of different reasons.

[ 4 : 1 1 ] At least one of those reasons, we find in chapter 1, verse 2, the fact that Timothy has been sent to Ephesus to pastor the church there. And if Ephesus had one claim to fame in that day, is that it was the center of the worship of Diana or Artemis. And one of the seven wonders of the ancient world was there, the temple of Artemis, the temple of Diana. John Calvin spoke about our hearts as being idol-making factories when he talked about our capacity to worship the wrong things. Well, the whole city of Ephesus was built around a temple. It literally was an idol-making factory.

And so, Timothy is pastoring there, encouraging a church to stay true in their faith and in their worship, but they're surrounded by people who are worshiping visible idols. And that's a challenge,

to worship the God that can't be seen in that context. Isn't that what we see so often of the Old Testament people of God? They struggle because their God can't be seen, and so they grab after idols that can. For us in our day, it's both different and the same. Because human hearts don't change. Everybody is still worshiping. Most are not worshiping in a religious way, the folks around us.

But it's true to say that most people are choosing to worship created things rather than the Creator. That's the environment in which we live in. So, we too find ourselves drawn towards that kind of worship. So, whether that's human achievement or celebrity, whether that's pursuing stuff or just living for ourself, the good life looks like this, our challenge is the people of God is still the same, to have true worship that is directed towards a God who can't be seen.

We are made for worship. We are made for true worship. So, getting this right really matters. It mattered for Timothy back in first century Ephesus. It matters for us in 21st century Edinburgh. This letter to 1 Timothy is really interesting as well because of those key texts that we heard read. So, the whole letter is framed by these two texts. So, chapter 1, 12 to 17, 6, 12 to 16, where praise is given to the invisible God. And God is praised for the coming of Jesus, for the second coming of Jesus. And I want to suggest that those two texts create a framework for our lives if we want to be true worshipers. That we live in between these two appearances of Christ.

[7:12] Christ has come the first time, born as a baby, born to be our Savior, and we live anticipating His return in glory. And in between those times, we are called to worship our great but yet invisible God.

And so then it's so interesting that at the very center of Paul's letter to Timothy, the portrait in the frame, we read it at the beginning together, chapter 3, verse 16, is that in Jesus, the invisible God was made visible. The Son of God has come, and He's put the glory of God on display in a new way. And so we worship God in Him. So, that's what we're going to think about. We're going to think about the frame, we're going to think about the center, we're going to think about why it matters. So, the frame focuses our attention on the invisible God of greatness and glory. Perhaps you can turn to chapter 1, verses 12 to 17.

We've already said that Timothy here is in Ephesus, and again in verse 3, Timothy is told to fight against false teaching there. And then in verse 11, just before we get to our text, he is told to hold on to everything that conforms to the gospel. So, fight against what's false, hold on to the gospel that's true. And as Paul begins to think about the gospel, he gets excited and he gets personal. And that leads him to thanksgiving and praise to God for both saving him and sending him, for giving him this commission as an apostle. And he declares there is good news in the coming of Christ. Verse 13 and 14, he celebrates the fact that in his life, despite his past, his blasphemy, his violence, mercy and grace overflowed in his life. Imagine a stream that bursts its banks. Here is the mercy and grace of God overflowing to him. And from that, faith and love towards Jesus grow in his heart. There's good news for Paul in the mercy and grace of God.

And that leads him to this short gospel summary in verse 15. Here is a trustworthy saying, he said, my gospel is true. My gospel is true. And remember, Paul himself met the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus. He says it's a message that deserves full acceptance, which is another way of saying, this is a message for everyone. Why was Paul a missionary to the nations? Because he believed that Jesus was good news for everyone, for all nations. This gospel is all about Jesus. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Simple recognition of God's great rescue mission for sinful people like us in the sending of Jesus Christ. And that rescue mission is one that needs to be experienced, personally. That's why Paul says, of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason, I was shown mercy. And you see, Paul does this wonderful thing where he recognizes, here was my terrible past. He doesn't try and airbrush that out at all. But he uses that to say to his listeners, listen, if God would save me, he'd save anyone. And so this personal experience of faith that testifies, yes, I am a great sinner. But yes, Christ is a great Savior. And as he thinks about the gospel and the goodness of the gospel and about how that has come to him, he then instinctively turns to praise. So look at verse 17, and you'll see his praise. Five qualities about his great God that he celebrates. God is the king. He is the ruler. He is eternal. He has no beginning and he has no end. He is immortal. He will never decay.

He is the only God. He is utterly unique. And he's invisible. Now, I don't know about you, but that one really stands out to me. I wonder if we were making a list of those attributes and qualities of God to celebrate. Would his invisibility be one of those? Why does Paul include that? Well, one of

the things it does for us straight away is it reminds us, doesn't it, that God is not like us. We have a body.

[12:04] We are limited in time and space. God has no body, therefore he has no limits. That means God is perfectly present everywhere. God is not and will never be divided or distracted.

He is far greater than the idols. He is all-powerful. He is ever-present. He is with us. He is within us. He is worthy of praise. So, that's one frame. That's one bookend, as it were. Now, turn to chapter 6 with me, to the end of the letter, and we find here Paul's final charge to Timothy from verse 11 onwards.

He's really been asking and encouraging Timothy to guard himself as a man of God, to guard the church from false teaching, to guard the gospel. And as he comes to this final charge, notice the active language. There's things that he wants Timothy to do. The first piece of activity is he wants Timothy to run.

Verse 11, but you, man of God, flee from all this, or run from all this. What's he talking about? There, verse 10, run from the love of money, which is a root of all kinds of evil. Timothy, run from evil just as you would run from danger. But it's not just run away from evil. He also wants him to run towards goodness, pursue, run towards, chase after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. Here are the things, Timothy, to run for, like we run for a prize, run towards these things as you seek to live for God. The next active idea is fight. Verse 12, fight the good fight of the faith.

[14:18] Be ready to wrestle and to contend for gospel truth, so that true faith would be formed among the people of God.

Next piece of activity, take hold. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called. What does he mean there? Of course, Timothy already enjoys eternal life. He is already a believer in the Lord Jesus. To take hold means to really and truly enjoy and treasure what is yours in Christ Jesus.

And he calls him to do this. He calls him to live this way. Verse 13, in the sight of God.

He's going to charge him to keep these commands, and he reminds him, Timothy, you live every moment before God's faith. Well, it's true for Timothy. It's true for us. We live every moment before the face of God. And he also calls him to pursue that obedience, to keep these commands, verse 14, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ. So there, he's going to praise God for the fact that Christ will return. Here's a reason to persevere. Live that godly life in the hope of final salvation, in the sure knowledge that Jesus will come back again one day, and you'll fully and finally enter into salvation and eternal life. Therefore, keep the faith. And as he thinks about this great reality that Jesus is going to come back, he turns again to praise. Verse 15, this appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in his own time. He praises God for the certainty of the return of Christ.

And then look at how he praises God. God, the blessed and only ruler, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, who alone is immortal, and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see.

[16:33] He praises the God who can't be seen, who can't be seen because he dwells in unapproachable light. Let's think for a moment. What's the first rule when it comes to looking at the sun?

You don't. It would damage our eyes. Its brightness is too much for us. For us, trying to look at the glory of God is like trying to look at the sun. It's too much for us. We are spiritually unable to take in that much glory. God's infinite glory, his blazing purity and holiness, which is far greater than the sun, is too great for us to fully grasp or to see. And so again, here is Timothy, and he is surrounded in a city where people are worshipping the idols, where there is this cult of Diana, where there is this temptation to worship visible things, and where people are being tempted to walk away from the truth.

What is Paul doing? Paul is saying, remember how much greater and better our God is. You can't see him, and that's good news, because he's not limited like the idols. He says to him, honor and might forever belong to this God. So that's the frame there. There is God who is invisible because of his greatness and because of his glory. But then in the center, there is this wonderful truth that in Jesus, the invisible is made visible. Again, to think to what we know about life in Ephesus. You can go to Acts chapter 19, and you can read about a riot in Ephesus, because Paul casts out an evil spirit, and this girl was so important to the profit-making industry around the cult of Diana. And the city is an uproar, and we find a riot happening. And for two hours, defending an idol, we read of the

city crying out, great is Artemis of the Ephesians. Great is our false idol, Diana.

That's the context in which Timothy is doing ministry. Now think, chapter 3, verse 16, how different this message is. What's great, according to Paul, beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great. And what we have next is a public statement of faith, a confession of faith for the Christian church, a public declaration of trust and worship of the Savior who came to save sinners.

And so right at the center of our letter is this confession that Jesus, the invisible God who was made visible, He is great, and no one else. This is Paul's center. Of course, it's a truth that was revealed in the coming of Jesus. We can think about John 1. No one has ever seen God, but God's Son, Jesus, has made Him known. We have this wonderful truth that we see the greatness and the glory of God in Jesus.

[ 20 : 22 ] This is the glory of the gospel. Look with me at verse 16 to look at these statements of this confession of faith. It says first about Jesus, He appeared in the flesh and was vindicated by the Spirit. The Son of God appeared. The Creator entered into creation, revealed in a human body, vindicated by the Spirit as God made flesh. Why? Why did Jesus come? Well, didn't Paul already tell us that in chapter 1, verse 15?

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. The invisible God made Himself visible in His Son, the Lord Jesus, made Him visible as the Savior for sinners. He is a God to be praised and worshiped.

What do we have next in our statement of faith? This Lord Jesus was seen by angels, was preached among the nations. The angels directed attention to the coming of Jesus, to the identity of Jesus. The apostles and then the church would go around the world bearing witness to this wonderful mystery that Jesus is the invisible God made visible.

And what about the reception that Jesus receives? Look again at the last two lines of the statement of faith. He was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory. Jesus is worshiped on earth as the Son of God and the Savior, and He was welcomed, crowned enthroned as King in heaven. And when He ascended back to glory, Jesus the Son who made the invisible God visible. There is good news for us here.

There is good news as we live between His first and second appearance, as we worship the God who can't be seen, who is so great and so glorious that our faith and hope, it has a center. And His name is Jesus.

[ 23 : 04 ] Now, I want to think about three places where this truth touches our lives. Everybody loves acronyms, don't they? At least some people do. I like them sometimes.

This one, do you know when you're thinking about a biblical truth and you recognize, man, all I can do is scratch the surface. Even if we spent the rest of our lives, the truth is we're only scratching at the surface of how great our God is. There are mind-blowing elements to who God is. So you might find, you probably won't, but you might find the acronym PAL helpful. It's Sunday evening, let's just go with it. Okay, the P stands for presence. Because I think this is a profoundly comforting truth that God is perfectly present everywhere. See, as children know, and perhaps we all know this, there are times when children will call out, Mom, Dad, help.

You know, sometimes that's an emergency, sometimes it's quite mundane. But children know that sometimes the response is going to be, where are you? Especially if you're in a public space, sometimes it's hard to locate where the cry comes from. Or sometimes children will have the experience, and parents will know this, that we'll say, I can't right now. I'm busy doing something else.

You'll just have to wait for a little minute. We are limited as parents. When we pray help to God, it is altogether different. When we cry help to God in our sadness, in our suffering, when we experience injustice, we have the promise of God's close, personal, undivided attention.

Because our God is absolutely fully present everywhere. That means the goodness of God, the power of God, the love and salvation of God can be known, enjoyed, experienced anywhere and everywhere. God is with us right now. But God will be with us when we drive home in our car or on the bus. God will be with us at our desk when we go to the shops, when we're lying in bed. God is everywhere.

[ 25 : 39 ] It should encourage us as the people of God. It's also good news for global mission.

Thinking about the Dalfras, our friends who've just got word that in the autumn they'll be able to go back to Thailand. Thinking about the Pattersons doing ministry in Southeast Asia, cultures where

they are surrounded by idol. We have good news in a God who is perfectly present, present in his power, able to break through spiritual darkness, that we can confidently declare, whether we're in Peru or wherever we are, that Jesus is good news for all people. And it's good news that there are no hidden corners from our God.

We have ever-present help in our times of trouble. So, presence is good news. But I think this reality also touches our lives in a different way when we think about our obedience. So, like Paul said to Timothy, we live in the sight of God. Sometimes that can be quite unsettling, can't it? Now, we probably know when we reflect on ourselves that when we want to do wrong, when we find ourselves most tempted to do what is wrong, that's typically not in a public setting. Most of the time, our struggles are usually in private, in secret. Sometimes when we want to do wrong, we try to find the dark places, don't we?

What does this truth remind us of, that God is unlimited and he's present everywhere, that even in the dark places of our imagination, God is there? God is there. And of course, that could be a really painful thought, and that could be a really desperate thought, because we know our hearts, and then we know God knows our hearts even better than we do. So, we might think, well, there's no hope for us, except for the gospel, except for the truth that this God who truly knows us at our worst, sent Jesus to die for us, to save us, to extend love and forgiveness to us. So, when we remember as Christians that God is there and God sees me, that doesn't come with that crushing weight of condemnation that it could, rather, shouldn't it be for us a positive motivation to obey? That God sees me every moment means I have an opportunity to pursue His honor, even if nobody else is watching, to know that God always is, so we can respond to His love.

It's really a call to make every moment holy, to live our lives in the face of God and pursuing obedience for His honor.

The last, the W, is, of course, to do with worship. Paul has been stressing to Timothy that the invisible God is perfectly glorious, perfectly holy. What's the significance of that? It's significant when we think of who we are worshiping. He's reminding Timothy, and he's reminding us, the God that we worship is far greater than any idol, far greater than anything in creation, far greater than any image we construct, even any mental image that we make of our God. Perhaps it might be helpful to think of it this way.

[ 29 : 14 ] Think about a photograph that you take, perhaps of a holiday or a party or some kind of event. You know, a memory is captured of, you know, a second in time, but it's just a snapshot, and we know the reality was far more. A photo doesn't tell us about the emotions, doesn't tell us about the conversations, doesn't give us a context. It captures something, but the reality is far more.

With God, any attempt to capture Him in a single image, I think God is light.

Fill in the blank. Any attempt to capture Him will always limit Him, will always lessen Him, will always distort how wonderful He is. That's why it's really important to remember Jesus' teaching. God is Spirit. So, how should we worship? We should worship in Spirit and in truth.

Our worship is led by the Spirit and is in line with the truth of God's Word. Some practical wisdom from a theologian called Stephen Charnock, who lived a long time ago.

He said this. He said, Consider the highest ideas of God we can imagine. Some of us are theologically trained to a high level, and we like to read high-level theological books. We'll think of the highest ideas of God we can imagine, about His power, His love, His wisdom, perfection. What do we need to do as we're thinking those thoughts? Stephen Charnock said, say to yourself, this is not God.

[ 30 : 56 ] He is so much more. We will never fully comprehend our God, and that's good news. He is infinitely glorious, and He has no limits. But yet we have this wonderful truth that the God who can't be seen has graciously made Himself visible in Jesus, Jesus who acted to save sinners, to change our hearts so that we would want to and be enabled to worship the true, great, and glorious God.

Because that's what we were made for. Let's do that together now as we pray briefly. Let's pray. Lord, our God, we thank You that You are unlimited, and we thank You that You are infinitely glorious and holy. We thank You for Your mercy and Your grace that overflowed to us in the gospel and in the sending of Your Son, Jesus. And we thank You that He came to reveal the invisible God of glory to us, to reveal Your heart of love towards us in His dying on the cross to save sinful people like us.

And Lord, we pray that You would help us to live in light of this truth, conscious of Your presence at all times and at all places. And we find comfort and hope in that. Lord, that knowing we live in the sight of our God moment by moment would cause us to pursue obedience, because we want to love and honor the one who has loved us so much. And Lord, we pray that You'd keep our hearts focused on worship of You, the true and living God. Save us from the pool of idols and false worship, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Now, we'll close our time this evening singing the hymn, How Great Thou Art. So, let's again stand, and we can sing together.

Amen.