

The Essence of God – God is Spirit

John 4:1-24

The ancient Israelite had a dilemma. If a Philistine or an Assyrian, or a Babylonian, or a Canaanite, asked him, what does your God look like, he would have to say, I don't know. The foreigner would say, "What do you mean? My god is like a shark, or like a bull, or like a man. What is your god like?" And the Israelite would have to say, "My God cannot be seen." "Yes, but surely you can represent him with a stature of some kind, a man, or a woman, or a lion, or a snake or a dragon" And the Israelite would have to say, "We are forbidden to represent Him, because Yahweh is not like anything in this world" That idea would have been absolutely staggering to the polytheists. But that truth is at the heart of understanding what the essence of God is. God is Spirit.

We have already seen that the fundamental truth about God is that God alone is God. No one and nothing else should be sought as ultimate satisfaction. The essence of God begins with His status as one and only.

We move today onto the second important truth about God's essence, that He is Spirit. The clearest text we have on this is John 4.

Jesus is speaking to a Samaritan woman. This was unheard of for a few reasons. Firstly, men typically didn't speak to women, and not alone. Jews tried hard not to speak to Samaritans at all. Thirdly, the kind of woman she was, made her the kind that few Samaritans wanted to speak to. Probably the reason she came at the time she did was to avoid seeing people.

When Jesus starts speaking to her, she is shocked. Jesus masterfully swings the conversation towards spiritual things. He uses the natural and the everyday – the matter of drinking water, to move her on to speak about spiritual things. Once she is interested, Jesus tells her to go and get her husband. She tells a half-truth: she has no husband. Jesus, knowing all things, reveals his knowledge of her past. When she hears this, she knows that there is no way that He could have known that except God had revealed it to Him. So she says:

John 4:19 *The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet.*

Now, what would you expect her to say next? To fall down and beg forgiveness? To ask how she might change her immoral life? No. Look at her response:

John 4:20 *Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship."*

Where did that come from? What does that have to do with her immoral life? Nothing. She is doing what sinners do when confronted with their sin: dodging. She is changing the subject.

"Oh, you're a religious man, are you? OK, then the big question really is, where should we worship – at Jerusalem, or here at Mount Gerizim?"

Now that was the big dividing issue between Samaritans and Jews. The Samaritans were the descendants of the Survivors of the Assyrian invasion of Israel, where they intermarried with non-Jews, and decided to set up a new place of worship at Mount Gerizim. Jews despised them for their mixed race, and for their false worship.

But what's wrong with this picture? Here is a immoral woman who has had five husbands and is

presently living in sin with a man, and she is quibbling about worship forms. She is rotten within, and she wants to debate Jesus about the correct external place of worship.

So now when Jesus says these words about God being a Spirit, understand what He is responding to. He is responding to the woman's quibble about external forms of worship, and He is responding to her hypocrisy.

John 4:21-24 *Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father.*

So God is about to initiate something where worship will no longer be centralised in any geographical place.

²² *"You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews.*

Jesus says Samaritan worship is made-up and false. True salvation and therefore true religion comes through the Jews.

²³ *"But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. ²⁴ "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."*

The true worship which the Father seeks is done in spirit and in truth, because God Himself is Spirit.

I. God's Essence: He is Spirit

In this Scripture we find out something very important about God. We find out that God is Spirit. The way it is worded in the original is meant to show that Spirit has to do with the properties and qualities of God. It is not merely saying that the Holy Spirit is God, or that God is a spirit being the way we are. It is saying that God is Spirit. If you are trying to understand what God is, then the answer is, God is Spirit.

However, that by itself doesn't help us to understand what spirit is. In fact, most of our definitions of spirit have to be negative. Spirit is not matter. Spirit is not gas or steam or vapour. The Hebrew and Greek words mean wind or breath, but that is probably because those words convey the idea of spirit – it is invisible and yet its effects on the world are real.

Spirit is not some kind of matter which is spread over a very vast distance. Spirit is not material at all. There is no microscope or particle detector that could ever measure or detect spirit, because spirit is not matter. Therefore, you cannot think of God filling up space, even an infinite space. Space is filled with matter. God as spirit is not material so He does not have size. He is everywhere present, as we will study in the future, but He is not taking up material space. He does not have dimensions. You cannot think of God as round or oval or squarish. Spirit is not matter, and therefore it does not have size or dimensions.

This is why Jesus says this to the Samaritan woman. You do not go to Mount Gerizim to find God, and you do not go to Jerusalem to find God. God as Spirit is not located in one place and not in another. If you travel to Israel today, you will not be closer to the presence of God than another. Jesus wants her to understand that she has a wrong perception of God, as if He is more in one place

than in another.

A second negative way of explaining God's spirit would be to say it is not the same as angelic or human spirits. Now there may be similarities, but it is not a one-for-one relationship. Even though angels are spirit-beings, I believe they have spirit bodies. Even though we are spirit beings, we are not omnipresent or unchanging. So whatever God as spirit is, it is completely unlike a created matter, and not exactly like all created beings.

A third way of defining spirit negatively is to say that it is not nothing. When we say that spirit is not material and not visible that does not mean it is non-existent. It is a real substance. In fact, God as Spirit was the one who brought the universe into existence. What that means is that God as spirit is not less real but more real than the physical universe.

It is a fascinating thought – that God's existence as spirit is a superior and more excellent way of existing than physical matter. You could say that God is far more 'real' than the reality of physical matter. That doesn't mean physical matter is evil. It simply means that God has always existed, without beginning, as spirit.

Now before we return to Jesus' discussion with the woman, we might want to answer a few objections that come to mind. If God really is spirit, then what about people who saw God? Let's consider some Scriptures:

Exodus 24:9-11 *Then Moses went up, also Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, ¹⁰ and they saw the God of Israel. And there was under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and it was like the very heavens in its clarity. ¹¹ But on the nobles of the children of Israel He did not lay His hand. So they saw God, and they ate and drank.*

Exodus 33:19-23 *Then He said, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." ²⁰ But He said, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live." ²¹ And the LORD said, "Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. ²² "So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. ²³ "Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen."*

If God really is spirit, then how could people see Him? The answer is that God may choose to show Himself in a material form or to show His glory in visible form. When God appeared to Abraham before the destruction of Sodom, he appeared as a man who could eat and drink the things which Abraham prepared for Him. When God appeared to Ezekiel or to Isaiah, He showed His glory in visible form. The same thing is going on when the angel of Jehovah appears, and people afterwards say, 'We have seen God'. That is God manifesting Himself in a visible, material, local form. And in terms of that kind of event, it is true to say that the people saw God. We say, 'the sun rises' – and we don't mean the sun literally moved, we use those words to refer to what we know is actually the earth spinning on its axis. So when the Bible says men saw God, it is using those words to describe the experience of seeing God manifesting Himself.

However, no human being can see the essence of God as spirit. That is simply impossible. There is a kind of awe attached to that thought. Our God is beyond total apprehension. You will never be able to say of God, 'been there done that'. He is invisible. That doesn't mean He is unknowable. No, He is very knowable. But in His essence, he is invisible.

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.

In fact, I believe that every time a human has seen God in the Old Testament or the New, he or she has seen the Son of God, the eternal Word of the Father. The Son always reveals the Father, and manifestations of God for us to see are always the Son. Indeed, I believe that is who we will see and worship in eternity. There may be some manifestation of the Father's and the Spirit's glory, but it is the Son of God's face that we will see and worship. The eternal, omnipresent essence of God as spirit cannot be seen.

What about those Scriptures which speak of God's hands, eyes, ears, face, arms? The Bible is using anthropomorphic language. It is describing God using human terms to help us understand His actions. God does not have fingers, or eyebrows, or for that matter, wings. These are images – word pictures to help us understand God, not to describe His appearance. The fact that we are made in God's image does not mean that God looks like us. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints teaches that what we are God was, what God is, we will be. So they believe God has a body, and we were made as replicas of Him. That is not the case. To be made in God's image does not mean that we resemble Him visually. We resemble God in character and personality. That's why Paul says in **Colossians 3:10** *and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him,*

II. Our Response: Worship in Spirit and in Truth

Now the second thing we learn about God being Spirit has to do with how we relate to Him. If God cannot be seen or otherwise sensed, what should we expect when we worship Him? Should we expect to become aware of Him through our senses? Should we expect to see something or hear something, or feel something on our skin or inside our bodies? And if we don't feel this, should we be disappointed and say that we did not encounter God? No, Jesus is explaining to the Samaritan woman that worship of God as Spirit takes place within your spirit. Except if God grants it for specific purposes, we do not expect to see or hear or feel Him physically.

We must not expect an immediate sensory awareness of the presence of God, except if He grants it. Our worship of God is our spirit – that is, our beings, mind, affections desires apprehending the truth of God and responding to that truth. Worship is not trying to get our bodies to feel one way or another. It is seeking to understand the truth, and respond to it with mind, emotions and will. The fact that worship of God as spirit must take place in our spirits is exactly the reason why God forbade idolatry.

Deuteronomy 4:9-18 *"Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. And teach them to your children and your grandchildren, ¹⁰ "especially concerning the day you stood before the LORD your God in Horeb, when the LORD said to me, 'Gather the people to Me, and I will let them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children.' ¹¹ "Then you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the midst of heaven, with darkness, cloud, and thick darkness. ¹² "And the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of the words, but saw no form; you only heard a voice. ¹³ "So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone. ¹⁴ "And the LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments, that you might observe them in the land which you cross over to possess. ¹⁵ ¶ "Take careful heed to yourselves, for you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, ¹⁶ "lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure: the likeness of male or female, ¹⁷ "the likeness of any animal that is on the earth or the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the*

air, ¹⁸ *"the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground or the likeness of any fish that is in the water beneath the earth.*

Idols are forbidden because God as Spirit cannot be represented in a material way. You cannot physically represent one who is invisible. All you can do is give analogies from the created world, which enable us to understand the truth about God. God keeps telling us what He is like, so that we can better understand Him. The making of statues or pictures which depict God which we are to pray to or visualise comes out at idolatry. It is trying to worship God with the senses.

Aside: I don't think this means that all religious art depicting Jesus is idolatry. Jesus manifested Himself in human form. If someone had painted his likeness or made a sculpture of him, that would not have been idolatry per se. Now if someone paints a picture and claims it is what God looks like, that is idolatry. If people made statues or icons of Jesus or others and had people pray to those statues, that is idolatry. But a painting of Jesus isn't necessarily that. Medieval and Renaissance painters typically didn't paint Jesus in terms of saying, this is what He looked like. That kind of painting only came later, when people began to feel that the only reality that exists is the reality which is perceived by the eye, with the result that they decided to merely copy reality when they painted or made sculptures. But before that, the paintings were meant to be symbols. Someone would see it, know that the likeness was meant to stand for Jesus, and look at the message of the whole painting. It didn't mean 'this is what Jesus looked like so imagine this face when you pray.'

Now later on that changed, and became more about supposedly portraying Jesus. Of course, the modern Jesus movies are supposed to be plain depictions of Jesus. I don't think those things are *idolatry*, but I think we need to be aware of 2 Corinthians 5:16"

2 Corinthians 5:16 *Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer.*

In other words, our focus is not on the human appearance of Jesus, but on His Person and work. I think that religious movies can push us back towards thinking about Jesus according to his human appearance, when the Bible says so little about that, doesn't it? So, don't throw out 'the Last Supper', but be wary of too much exposure to religious films which claim to historically depict the appearance of Jesus.

The fact that God is Spirit and we must worship in spirit also speaks of utter sincerity. Really, here is a woman living a completely immoral life, supposedly concerned about the exact form that worship should take. No, before any attention is given to the external form, the internal heart must be right. Now Jesus wasn't saying that the external didn't matter at all, after all, He says that the Samaritans worship what they do not know. Their worship was wrong internally and externally. But the thrust of His point is, spiritual worship is firstly, and primarily an internal affair.

If the God you are worshipping is located at a certain place, then you can put on your best face and be on your best behaviour when you go to that place. Once you leave that place, you can live as you please, say for example, by having five husbands and living in sin. But if you realise that God is Spirit, then how you worship Him when you gather with God's people must be how you worship Him in your lifestyle, and how you worship Him privately. There is no point in hiding or living a double life if your God is Spirit. He is not limited by space, and everywhere you go, He is there.

The external should get some of our attention too. God spent 25 chapters of Exodus detailing how He wanted the external matter of the Tabernacle. The reason is this: externals like architecture, place, time, the use of music, silence do two things: they reflect what we believe the internal reality

actually is, and they affect our understanding of the internal reality. We're worshipping the invisible God, but we are material beings. Every church cannot help reflecting something of their beliefs about God in their externals. And when we come into a church, we are socialised, and we come to imagine God somewhat through those externals.

Now if all you have is externals, and no internal, it becomes complete hypocrisy. It is detestable to God. It can become a kind of spiritual camouflage, where we hide our unloving hearts behind stained-glass windows. It can be exactly what this Samaritan woman made it into – an excuse to hide behind. However, if in fact God Himself has become the ultimate satisfaction of our hearts, it is a good and natural thing to want to reflect that in the externals. We should try to help one another focus on the beauty of our God with a balanced approach to the externals.

To worship Him in spirit is to worship Him with your mind, affections and will, not so much with the physical. It is to seek to know Him internally, not by physical senses or by visual representations. Since it is internal, it must be wholly sincere.

Finally, Jesus teaches that because God is Spirit, He must not only be worshipped in spirit, but in truth.

What does that mean 'in truth'?

Well, a simple way of thinking about truth is with the word 'correspondence'. If someone tells the truth, then what they are saying corresponds to what is. Their words match what is actually the case. There is correspondence. Truth is correspondence with reality.

When it comes to God, there are two kinds of truth that have to do with worship. The first is what we might call propositional truth. This is what we say about God. What we say about God must correspond to who He actually is. God is not honoured if we say or sing or pray or preach things about Him which do not correspond to the reality of who He is. That tells us how careful we must be with our study of Scripture. It is here that God tells us who He is. Therefore, true worship of the invisible God must always begin with revealed Scripture. How else can we worship Him truly, unless we correctly understand what He has said about Himself.

The second kind of truth is what we can call affective truth. That is, once we understand the proposition of who God is, there is also a corresponding response. If we find out God is great, there is a corresponding response. If we find out He is generous, there is a corresponding response. To respond to God in a way which is different than what his nature demands is an untrue response. For example, it is fine to laugh at a clown. A clown intends to be silly and laughter at a clown is a corresponding reaction. However, to laugh at a Holocaust museum would be completely inappropriate. I think most of us would say it is wrong. In other words, we are saying, it is an untrue response. It is false, and therefore inappropriate. When it comes to God, we must keep asking the same question. What is a true response to His nature? Propositional truth corresponds to what God is. Affective truth corresponds to what God deserves.

Jesus was saying to the Samaritan woman – since God is a Spirit you must know Him as He is and respond truly to who He is.

Israel was scorned by the other nations because their God was invisible. But that is exactly what we rejoice in. Our God is far and above mere material being. He is beyond creation. His existence is more excellent than anything material. So we worship Him in our spirits, with total sincerity, without idolatry, trying to know Him and respond to Him as we understand Him in the Scriptures.