

The Hidden God

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Isaiah 45:15

Truly You are God, who hide Yourself, O God of Israel, the Savior!

Some atheists have boasted that they would gladly believe in God if He would give them an audience, if He would appear to them. One of their arguments against the existence of God is the obscurity of God. They argue if He exists why doesn't He make Himself more widely known.

But is the problem that God hides or something else? I suggest it is something else. For example, a well-known atheist stated publicly that he would not believe in God even if God appeared to him. Rather he would go check himself into a psychiatric hospital. That was his statement. He would doubt his eyes and his mind instead of believing that God appeared to him, he would believe he had experienced a hallucination.

Christians must admit that experience is not the final word because experiences can have multiple sources other than the Lord. The mind can hallucinate; demonic spirits can create experiences, and even Charles Dickens admitted through his character, Ebenezer Scrooge, that visions may have a more organic cause than heavenly when Scrooge said to the ghost of Marley, "You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!"

Yet, on the other hand, the atheist's honest confession tells us that the problem of believing God's existence is not an intellectual problem as much as it is a spiritual problem. It's more a problem of the heart than the mind. Men don't want to believe in God because if God does exist then they can't play God. The question of God's existence is a sovereignty question—whose in control? Me or God?

Having said that, we must not skirt the issue that God does not go out of His way to show Himself. I've often thought, "Lord, maybe we should hire You a marketing expert, a PR person to help You with Your image because You seem to hide." The Bible does proclaim that God hides. Our text is very clear. He is a God of hiddenness, as well as a God of revelation. Haven't you said, "If God would only show up, I could believe He is with me"? Or have you complained, "Why doesn't God speak to me more clearly? Why is He so silent?" Perhaps you have lamented that the Lord doesn't answer prayer more than He does, or that He is not very conversational, if conversational at all. All of these thoughts and questions are proof of the hiddenness of God.

The French mathematician and Christian philosopher of the 17th century, Blaise Pascal, wrote that “A religion which does not affirm that God is hidden is not true...and a religion which does not offer the reason [for this hiddenness] is not illuminating.” For that reason, I would like to present the biblical doctrine of God’s hiddenness. It’s very seldom talked about but I pray we will do so this morning while not denying the truth of His self-revelation but at the same time reaffirm the reality that He hides Himself.

I. The Reality of God’s Hiddenness

“Truly You are God, who hide Yourself . . .”

“Truly, You are a God who hides Himself . . .” (NASB)

A. In the Beginning God Was Not Hidden.

If we go back to the beginning of Scripture, we will discover that God did not hide Himself. In the first three chapters of Genesis, we see that God spoke to man and communicated His will for man personally.

For example, in Genesis 1:28, we read that God is speaking to man and we see this repeatedly.

“Then God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’” (Genesis 1:28)

It’s almost as if God was officiating that first marriage there, conducting that first wedding, if you please.

Then, in the second chapter God clearly warns Adam.

“And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’” (Genesis 2:16, 17)

God was not hidden. He made regular appearances and spoke with Adam and Eve. Because God was not hidden, there was no need for a special book called the Bible. None whatsoever. Had man maintained that fellowship with God, there would never have been need for the Scriptures, as there will be no need of it in heaven.

B. Man Rejected Friendship With God and His Guidance.

We know the pitiful story all too well, don’t we? Sin’s most devastating consequence is that it tore man away from God and a real relationship with Him. This is the most devastating consequence to

me. Certainly, sin has terrible and dire results. There are many things we can say are the result of sin—war, crime, racial tensions, poverty—all of these are the results of sin. Others include personal guilt, the burden of carrying that memory and that unforgotten act of sin and shame. All of these are terrible consequences but none compare to the very root of all the consequences and that is to be torn from union and fellowship with God. This is sin's most terrible punishment. This is sin's dreadful consequence; none outlive this one, to be ripped from the heart of God.

Man's choice to rebel was an outright rejection of God personally and His personal leadership.

“Then the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’” (Genesis 3:4-5)

What is the suggestion? The suggestion is you don't need God. You don't need relationship or communion with Him, you can do life on your own. Right now God is commanding you, He's got a grip on your life, He's giving you no freedom, He's withholding something from you, He wants to control and manipulate your life, telling you what's good for you instead of letting you decide that.

We hear the same today. With every temptation there is that lie nestled inside, cleverly covered so you don't catch it but it's there nonetheless. It's whispered, “You can't trust God. He wants to manipulate and have dominion over you so you can't express yourself. That's always the lie. And man bought it, hook, line, and sinker.

God responded to man's choice. He responded and gave man what he wanted: He withdrew from man. He went into hiding. God went into hiding. This is the ultimate judgment on sin, even today. We see this in the first chapter of Romans, verses 24, 26, and 28. Paul says this is the only way God responds and this is the ultimate judgment on sin.

“Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves,” (Romans 1:24)

“For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature.” (Romans 1:26)

“And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting;” (Romans 1:28)

To put it simply, Paul says God's response to man's sin is to let you do and not stop you. When God does that, there are natural consequences and repercussions, namely that you will depart further and further from Him and begin to do what you are not designed to do: live life without God. It's not just any particular sin Paul is referring to here, it's sin in general.

We seem to want to pick on one or two different kinds of sin in this first chapter but we forget there are verses 29-31 when he lists almost every kind of sin you can imagine. The result of sepa-

ration from God, to choose your own way and not trust that God really has your best interest at heart, is that you will go further and further from your ultimate design. Friends, when anything is not operating according to the manufacturer's code it's not good! Including human beings. God knows what's best. He knows how He designed you and made you to be, and He made you to have fellowship with Him.

“You will show me the path of life, in Your presence there is fullness of joy, at Your right hand there are pleasures forevermore.” (Psalm 16:11)

We often think of that verse and believe he's talking about heaven, but David was not thinking of heaven at that point, he was thinking about the present moment. As you've heard testified this morning it really all comes down to that point: can you take God at His word? Satan's lie is that you can't and that you can only trust one person and that's you, and only you know what's best for you. When you choose that option, which God allows, then the way to God is shut up. You can't find God. You don't want to in the first place, but if you wanted to you wouldn't be able to. He's shut up.

In Genesis 3, we see this played out.

“Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil.”

He knew good and evil, but he didn't know it God's way. What happened the moment Adam and Eve ate of the fruit? What was the first thing they recognized? They were naked and they were ashamed. God made them that way and He didn't see the need to give them a new wardrobe. In other words, it was permissible and quite fine. They were transparent and open because there was nothing to hide. Now they had something to hide. It wasn't their bodies; it was the shame of the guilt they had experienced in their rebellion against God. That's why they recognized they had no clothes.

“And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”— 23 therefore the LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. 24 So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.” (Genesis 3:22-24)

Why did God do that? Why did God barricade the way to the Garden and the Tree of Life. Well, it is because He knew it wouldn't take Adam and Eve very long to figure out they had it wonderful back in the Garden and their choice was not as good as they expected. Now they're sweating to eat their bread and there's so much pain and conflict, marital tension, and all of this chaos. He knew they would want to go back to the Garden. But God says, “No, you made your choice. You chose to live life apart from Me.” So God shut up the way to Him.

We live in a fallacy, in the evangelical realm of the western world, that says you can come to Jesus anytime you want to. We're taught you can sow your wild oats and when you're ready—maybe on

your death bed, if you're so daring—then you can “accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.” Oh no, my friend, you've forgotten a vital fact. You may even want to strive to enter the kingdom of God but the Bible says He's hidden Himself from you as a consequence of your own choice.

In Matthew 7 the complaint there is that the people say, “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?” In other words, “We knew You!” But the problem will be that God did not know them. Jesus' answer was, “Depart from Me, you workers of iniquity, for I never knew you.” He didn't have relationship with them.

Thankfully, that's not the end of the story. The Bible has a pretty bleak beginning, doesn't it? If I were writing a novel, I don't know that I would set up such a dismal, dire, and dark problem as God did in the first few chapters of His book. But He's got us sucked into the thread and theme of the plot. How does it finish? God comes out of hiding now and again.

C. God Selectively Chose to Reveal Himself to Certain Men Through the Ages.

Throughout the centuries and millennia, God chose to reveal Himself to certain men.

God respected Abel's sacrifice. He even warned Cain that sin was crouching at his door.

God and Enoch walked together. The Bible summarizes Enoch's life this way, “Enoch was not for God took him.”

The Lord came out of hiding and *warned Noah of judgment and delivered he and his family.*

A few years later, God once again comes out of hiding and *calls Abraham out of the city of Ur and blessed him.*

God revealed Himself to Abraham's decedents through Isaac.

D. The Revelation of God Progressively Increased.

By the time we get to the book of Exodus we see God revealing Himself more and more. He reveals Himself to a man named Moses and commissions him to start writing things down, to record the revelations of God. From this we have the beginnings of the Bible. Why, the very first chapters of Genesis from which we have cited came from the hand of Moses as God inspired Him to write the story.

By the time we move to the book of Malachi, God has revealed Himself more and more.

E. Finally, God Revealed Himself In and Through His Son.

“God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, 2 has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; 3 who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,” (Hebrews 1:1-3)

I love the 10 Commandments, although I haven't kept them as properly as I should have, but they tell me something of the character and nature of God. For that, I'm thankful. I'm thankful for the Psalms, I'm thankful for the book of Isaiah, I'm thankful for the sacred record of Genesis to Malachi, but think about what it would have been like if Jesus had not come. How would we have been able to know God?

We would know the law of God and its thunderings and threatenings, but we would never feel quite at home in the presence of God. We would be wondering, as many religions do today, is there eternal life? Will I be right with God when I die? Therefore, God revealed Himself through the person of Jesus Christ.

Do you want to know who God is and what He's like? Look at Jesus. Behold the Man in whom the fullness of God dwelled. There He is. He is revealed. He has spoken. He has come out of hiding. He has made Himself known.

F. Regardless of the Great Revelation of God in Christ Jesus, God is Not Often in Plain Sight.

Jesus told His disciples and us that He would go away and that they nor us would be able to see Him. And in spite of Jesus' promise to give the Holy Spirit, we can say the Holy Spirit is not the kind of conversationalist that carries on a continuous dialogue in words or statements.

I'm not a big conversationalist myself. If you sit me down and start small talk, you'll find out my small talk is really small. I assure you. God seems to be even less a conversationalist than I am.

Seldom does anyone claim to have heard God speak audibly and if they do, we are rightfully skeptical. And He is not giving as many inner impressions our thoughts as some on TV would have you believe. His voice is not thunderous, or boisterous, but is more still and small. He often seems, even to me, to be in hiding. Why does He hide? This isn't the most important question, but it's one that must be addressed nonetheless.

II. Why God Hides

Let me give you some reasons from the Scriptures.

A. Because of Man's Sin.

God hides because of our sin. Look at Isaiah 6 and see what happened to Isaiah when he had an encounter with this hidden God who came out of hiding. This is Isaiah's exclamation when God came out of hiding to meet him.

"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 my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts." (Isaiah 6:5)

This wasn't "Hallelujah, thank You, Jesus!" it's a proclamation of judgment, "Woe is me." You know the story. This was a good man, a prophet! Where is he? He's in the temple. He's in the church worshipping! And all of the sudden, the stale and stank air of the temple was invaded by a presence not of this world, but the presence of God. Isaiah sees seraphim, angels having six wings, and that doesn't seem to bother him half as much as seeing the flowing train of God's robe.

You know what a train is. We're not talking about something running on tracks, we're talking about a train like on a wedding dress, that long flowing tail of the dress. Isaiah didn't see God's face. He didn't see God's torso. All he saw was this flowing robe filling up the room. The sight of that was enough to make this man say, "I'm a sinner and I'm in trouble. I ought not to be here right now."

God hides Himself because we don't deserve to see Him. God says, "It's not because My hand is too short to save or My ears too dull to hear, but your sins have separated My face from you."

Israel in the wilderness saw a manifestation of God. He came down on the Mount of Sinai in thunder and lightning and fire and smoke and He actually spoke. The people actually heard God speak. What did He speak? He gave them the 10 Commandments before it was put down on stone. Forty days later, after Moses has been up on that mountain receiving the law of God, the people become restless and start thinking, "Oh, I know what happened to Moses. He got up there with God and God showed up and he couldn't handle it. It was too much for him and he's dead and gone. So, Aaron, will you make us a god out of our gold and we'll follow this god all the way back to Egypt?" And, amazingly, incredibly, Aaron complied.

Moses receives the law of God and comes down after 40 days and sees this sight. You know what happens. Judgment broke out on the people. The next day, Moses says to the people, "I'm going to go back up and intercede and pray and perhaps God might have mercy and forgive your sins." While he's up there praying for God's mercy so He doesn't wipe them all out as God first intended to do, the Lord says to Moses,

"Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people." (Exodus 33:3)

Do you hear what God said? "I've got to go into hiding because you're too wicked. When you do something again, I'm liable to do what I've threatened to do in the beginning—destroy you all." So God hides Himself from humanity because we don't deserve His presence and if it came, well, we'd be in trouble.

B. For Man's Protection.

If God appeared to man as He is, in all of His beauty, majesty, power, and intelligence, poor, pitiful, and perverted man could not endure it. The holiness of God is more than any man can endure. When God appeared to Isaiah in chapter six, Isaiah testified that his physical frame was coming apart. He said, "Woe is me, for I am undone!" Do you know what "undone" means? It means "I feel as though my physical frame is coming apart and I shall be ruined, or destroyed."

We shouldn't be surprised. Daniel didn't have God appear to him, just an angel and the Bible says,

"So he came near where I stood, and when he came I was afraid and fell on my face; but he said to me, "Understand, son of man, that the vision refers to the time of the end."" (Daniel 8:17)

What would that have been like, if God had showed up? Well, we know, don't we? In Revelation 1, John sees Jesus. They were best friends, John walked with Jesus on earth and in his first epistle, John says they touched the Word of Life. John is the one who laid his head on Jesus' chest at the Lord's Supper and, in fact, in John's gospel he never refers to himself as John but as "the beloved." This was his friend, Jesus, but in Revelation 1, it was different.

"And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last."" (Revelation 1:17)

This is his best friend, yet when Jesus comes to him in all of His might, power, and beauty, he falls down as a dead man. It wasn't that he just laid down, it was like all the energy and life was being sucked from his body.

Even Moses, on that Mount of Sinai experience knew about this.

"And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.'" (Hebrews 12:21)

The Bible has made it clear:

"But He said, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live."" (Exodus 33:20)

Why? Because we're not physically able. How will we be able to handle it in heaven? We'll be given a body that can absorb the glory of God and radiate it. Like the moon radiates the beams of the sun, you will be nothing more than vessels of illumination shining forth His glory.

It is good for us that God hides some of His glory from us.

There's one more reason and it may seem the strangest reason but I believe it's the most important.

C. Because of Love.

God hid from men, that is mankind in general, so that man can exert his damnable resistance to God. In other words, God allows man certain freedoms. You know that, don't you? Just because we believe in sovereign grace doesn't mean that we are robots or puppets or have no ability to choose. I know that's what people think we believe but that's a total caricature. You cannot read the Bible and not realize that God has given man a precious gift, the gift to choose. Do we have absolute freedom? No, only God has that. But we do have a wide perimeter in which to choose and choose even against God. Because God has allowed man these certain freedoms He does not coerce anyone to serve Him. He does not force love because if it is forced it isn't love.

I want to show you this. When man sinned in the Garden, man's response when he heard God walking in the midst of the Garden was to hide. It's an incredible word picture to imagine God walking since He is spirit, but just because He is spirit doesn't mean he can't manifest himself in a way that man can understand. Adam heard God walking in the Garden, he and his wife. Here's my question—could Adam have successfully hidden from the Lord? No. It's hilarious.

But in order for man to choose to hide from God, God has to hide Himself. And He does that because of love. He respects your choices. He respects even a deviant will that would reject Him. And in the name of love He steps back into a cosmic corner, if you please, into the shadows He goes and He will not force Himself upon you.

The only way He can have relationship with you and it be vital and real is that you choose to love Him because you want to love Him.

III. The Lord Reveals Himself to Those Who Want Him For His Own Sake.

Because of love He has done this. He comes out of the shadows and into our lives when we want Him. This is incredible. Because we are a people who believe in the sovereignty of God, it is often misconstrued that God forces Himself upon a man or a woman and makes them, against their own will and desires, serve Him. That is not true. You see this in the Garden. God has to hide so man can hide, otherwise, there is no hiding from God. What about the Apostle Paul, do you think he wanted to serve Jesus? He did once he saw Him.

It is true God is the Great Initiator. No one initiates a relationship with God. God always initiates that relationship. He comes out of hiding to reveal to you His love and mercy in Jesus Christ. But while He may be the Great Initiator He is not the Great Intruder. He may initiate but He is not intrusive. He will not go where He is not welcome. But if you want Him, you can find Him.

“Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. 13 And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.” (Jeremiah 29:12, 13)

“Pastor, come now. We know this verse is given to a specific people at a specific time. This has nothing to do with us. God said to Judah if they sought Him with all of their hearts He would not only let them find Him but restore them to their homeland. This has nothing to do with us.”

Yes, but the Apostle Paul says in the New Testament that these things happened to them, that is Old Covenant Israel, for our example. There are applications here. God has given us signposts in the Old Testament Scriptures to tell us how He operates. This is how He operates. If you want Him, and you seek after Him with all your heart, you will find Him. This is not a needle in the haystack kind of situation. He’s not playing hide and seek. This is not a game. God is in hiding because you chose to live your life apart from God. You made that choice and He has honored and respected that. What’s to reverse that? You must choose to seek Him.

We have a signpost in Jeremiah 29, but there is also a verse in Hebrews, the book that gives us the New Covenant from beginning to end that says,

“But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” (Hebrews 11:6)

That’s kind of a strange statement. If you’re going to come to God, you must first believe that He is. I mean, who seeks God if they don’t believe He is? See how ridiculous that sounds? Those who do believe God exists will always find Him when they diligently seek Him. Diligently seeking Him does not mean x-amount of time, it means with fullness of heart, with great desire. When you seek after God with great desire, wanting to have fellowship with Him, you will always find Him where you left Him.

Did not James say this?

“Draw near to God and He will draw near to you...” (James 4:8)

I often wondered why James put it in that order. I felt like it should have been reversed. Isn’t it funny that sometimes you think you know better than God? I thought, “Lord, shouldn’t You have said, ‘God will draw near to you and then you can draw near to God.’” Because we know He is the Great Initiator. Nobody has ever had relationship with God apart from God making the first move. He’s the suitor, if you please, pursuing His lover. But, unsurprisingly, James has this correct.

James is writing to a church, to the Christian, he says, “You’ve gone into hiding and so has God, but if you draw near to God, God will draw near to you.” He does every single time. I’m a witness. I’m coming up on walking with God for 30 years and there has never been a time when I have hungered and thirst after Him that I didn’t find Him.

I’ve learned in these 30 years that when I’m not hungering and thirsting I know how to pray. I need to pray, “Make me hungry, make me thirsty, because You’ve given me a promise, if I draw near to You, You will draw near to me.”

Toward the end of World War II, during the liberation of Europe, Allied troops found a crudely written inscription on the walls of a basement in Cologne (Köln), Germany, by someone who was hiding from the Nazi Gestapo. Here's what it said:

I believe in the sun even when it is not shining.
I believe in love even when feeling it not.
I believe in God even when God is silent.

If you're His child, it may seem like He's hiding, but He's not. As we've heard again today, even in van accidents, in storms, in adversities, God is still active. God is active. Because I believe in the sovereignty of God, I am a firm believer that not one circumstance enters my life that is coincidental. I believe that everything is in the hands of the Lord and that He has ordered the steps of my life.

"The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord." (Psalm 37:23)

"I will instruct you and lead you in the way you should go. I will guide you with My eye." (Psalm 32:8)

That's God's promise. Therefore, nothing happens by accident in the life of the child of God, therefore never is difficulty an accident. Rather it is the activity of God leading you to a new experience of Himself.

Did you think I was going to say, "He will lead you to a raise" or "to answered prayer" or "heal your marriage." If that's all you see in God's activity, you've missed the most important point. The point is God Himself. All of these troubles are for us to see Jesus better than before. And there is nothing better than our God.

How does a man fall 20-feet out of the air and not be paralyzed but walk away from it? We could attribute the accident to many causes, I'm sure, including human ones, but the promise, "I will never leave you nor forsake you," was just as real when Lance was falling through the air as it was with both feet planted firmly on the ground. If God can take a leaf in the autumn and cause it to follow the path He ordained before the foundation of the world, He can order your life. In your life, even when you disobey God, nothing shall happen that takes Him by surprise. How could He be? All He expects out of you and me, if left to us, is failure.

I pray today with all my heart that my brothers and sisters at Oak Grove Baptist Church will once again stir and shake themselves and come out of our hiding and say, "Oh God, we miss You! We've been pursuing this world, we've been pursuing jobs and success and this and that, and we've missed You all along. How we have been so foolish and doubtful and faithless! But I'm drawing near to You now. I'm coming, Jesus! Come find me. I'm the one that's been hiding in the shadows, not You!"

Friends, God will draw near to us. My question is this: are you hiding from God? Amen.