

All of my classmates in the ninth grade and I had a teacher that we all loved. His name was Harvey Dunlap, but we were all careful to call him "Mr. D," as there was a legendary story about what happened to a young man who once called him "Harvey." Most everyone loved Mr. Dunlap, who happened to be my homeroom teacher, although he was the industrial arts teacher. One thing that set Mr. Dunlap apart, beside his unique and larger than life personality, was the fact that he was a black teacher in a school that was at least 98% white. In fact, our homeroom all had T-shirts made that dubbed us "Mr. D's black shadows."

Although everyone in the school knew Mr. D and knew the many great stories about him, very few kids really "knew" him. One day, though, Mr. D asked a couple of us to help him with a project to load some materials into his truck and accompany him around the corner to his house and help him unload the stuff. Afterwards, we actually were invited into Mr. D's house and got to just chat with him. Suddenly he seemed like a real person. We had been in his home, in his presence, and had gotten to know him in a way that most others never did.

There are many different ways that one person can communicate with others. This is true of God as well as any human being. In fact, throughout the Old Testament there are many different avenues through which God chose to communicate with people, whether it was through creation, angels, prophets, His law, etc. Those were all legitimate and incredible forms of communication when we consider that we are talking about the creator of the universe, YHWH, communicating with His creation. Yet, God on occasion, communicated with people by either coming into their presence, or allowing them into His. Just as we felt like we knew Mr. D in a special way because we had been allowed into his home and his presence, so did those that came into the presence of the Almighty come to know God in a unique and powerful way.

As we examine the topic of God communicating through His presence, we will split it into two different categories, which have already been alluded to. The first aspect of God's presence to be considered will be the times when God allowed human beings to glimpse into His realm and be in His presence. The second aspect will be the times when God apparently broke into the human realm and came into man's presence.

Entering God's Realm

To fully understand God's method of communicating through allowing people to occasionally glimpse into His realm, we must first gain an understanding of the Jewish perspective of what we now refer to as heaven. It is popular in our current society to think of heaven as a part of the physical realm, as though it were some grand floating city that is merely located in a different part of the universe. In this view, God occasionally makes His way down from heaven into our realm or, on even more rare occasions transports someone into heaven for a brief tour. In the ancient Jewish view, however, heaven and earth weren't two different locations but more like two different realms of creation.

In Genesis 1:1, we are told that God created the earthly realm and the heavenly realms, a creation order that God consider "very good" (Gen. 1:31). Throughout the first two chapters of Genesis, we are presented a picture where God's will is done perfectly. He speaks and it happens. We know that God's will is done in heaven (Matt. 6:10), so we see a picture of a creation where heaven and earth are united and two conjoined halves of the same creation. As the Genesis account continues, we even discover that God apparently made a practice of walking around amongst His creation (Gen. 3:8), which further identifies it as a place without sin, a place where heaven and earth overlapped completely. After Adam and Eve rebelled against God's will, they were banned from God's garden and no longer able to stand in His presence. Thus, we see a ripping apart of heaven and earth. No longer were they joined together, they were now two realms of the same creation separated by the act of sin.

As the Old Testament account continues on, we are presented a world in which man can no longer come into God's space as a regular rule, but there are times when God allows human beings to catch a glimpse of His reality, the heavenly dimension. In Genesis 28, we find an account in which Jacob is allowed, apparently through a dream, to catch a brief look at God's dimension. As he awakens, he realizes that he has somehow been allowed to see into God's reality in a unique way, saying, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." What Jacob realized was that God's presence is transcendent. God was always there, but Jacob had not known it.

The biblical view of heaven and earth, then, was that earth was a different realm in God's creation, one into which heaven would occasionally break into. We see a belief that there were certain times and places where heaven and earth would overlap. When Moses is told, in Exodus 3, to take off his sandals because he is one holy ground, he was literally standing in a place where the heavenly dimension of God had broken into the physical realm (the aspect of the

burning bush will be discussed later). Moses was, in fact, standing in a place on earth where God had pulled back the veil, so to speak, and he was allowed to enter in for a brief moment.

We see other examples of this in Exodus such as God's presence coming near the Israelites through the pillar of fire and cloud (Ex. 13, etc.) and times when God's presence would literally fill the tabernacle (Ex. 40:35). In fact, the ancient Jews saw the Temple, more specifically the Holy of Holies, as the place where heaven and earth overlapped. It was the place where God's presence literally dwelled.

There are also several accounts recorded in the rest of the Old Testament where the veil is pulled back and someone is allowed to see into God's realm. 2 Kings 6:17 describes a scene in which Elisha desires that his servant be able to see, if ever so briefly, into the heavenly dimension, so he prays "O LORD, open his eyes so he may see." Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha."

Both Isaiah and Ezekiel were allowed to get a look into God's realm. Isaiah 6 says, "I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.' At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." Ezekiel 1 describes a similar snapshot of God's heaven as Ezekiel is allowed to have a vision. Clearly, none of these men were physically transported to a different location. They were able to look into God's dimension for just a moment as the creator of the universe communicated to them in a way that very few people ever get to experience. (see also Mark 1:10 7:34; Acts 7:55-56, and Rev. 4 for similar New Testament accounts of the veil between heaven and earth being pulled back).

What we see consistently throughout the Bible is a God who wants to come close with His creation and takes the initiative in communicating with humans. Allowing humans to experience God's reality is not the only way that He communicated through His presence. We also see many examples in the Old Testament of God's presence fully entering into limited areas of the physical realm rather than simply allowing specific individuals to enter into His realm.

The Consuming Fire

Just as we were pretty impressed at coming into the realm of Mr. D's home, I was equally impacted when, one evening, my parents invited Mr. D and his wife to our house for supper. Suddenly, he had come into my realm and it was a pretty awesome thing for me as I got to know him in yet another way and felt special in that he knew something of my family, my house, and my realm. Of course, it is not my intention to equate Mr. D's presence with God's, but the analogy is somewhat instructive.

Most people would agree that when people came directly into the presence of God, they had a difficult time finding the exact words to communicate what exactly they saw and what God was communicating to them. This is certainly the case when God broke into the physical realm of man and made His presence known. In fact, the best word that the ancient Israelites seemed to be able to come up with was "fire." In Deuteronomy 4:24, the author notes that, "The Lord your God [YHWH your Elohiym] is a consuming fire." Similarly, Psalm 97:3 says that when YHWH, who reigns on the earth comes into the physical realm, "Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side." Whether the ancient writers were referring to a fire that was of the same substance and chemistry as a fire that we might start on a cold night is open to speculation, but the fact remains that whatever the ancients saw, it was close enough to fire for them to feel no need to find another word for what they were experiencing.

What becomes clear as we read through the Old Testament witness is that when God broke into the physical realm, it was most often described as being accompanied by fire, a fact that would have sent a very clear message to those experiencing it that this was a holy God who should be treated with awe and reverence. There is another aspect of this, though, that should not go unnoticed. When we look at the Old Testament descriptions of God's fiery presence, we see a pattern emerge in that when God's presence breaks in on things that could be considered unholy, profane, or unrighteous, those things are destroyed and consumed by the fire of the holy God. When the holy, the righteous, or the sanctified, on the other hand, suddenly find themselves in the presence of God, those things, rather than being destroyed, are preserved, protected, or purified.

As we survey the Old Testament, we see several examples of the unholy feeling the brunt of the fire of God. The first example comes from one of the more famous passages in the Bible, Genesis 19. In that passage, the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah have been judged worthy of coming under God's immediate judgment. The text of verse 24 tells us, "The LORD rained down

burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the LORD out of the heavens.” The point being that the fire that destroyed these cities came directly from the realm and presence of YHWH.

In another account from the Torah, Exodus 19 says “Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire” (v. 18). God allows Moses, His appointed leader to experience the presence of God, while at the same time warning him that the Israelites (including the priests), who were not so ordained to be in God’s immediate presence, were to stay back or the “Lord will break out against them” (v. 22).

In Leviticus 10:1-2, we find an account of Aaron’s disobedient sons, Nadab and Abihu, who had disobeyed God. The text records that “Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.” Clearly, the text is trying to communicate that when God comes into the presence of unworthy human beings, the results are quite unfortunate for them.

We find two good examples of this phenomenon in Numbers. The first comes from chapter 11, which says, “Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the LORD, and when he heard them his anger was aroused. Then fire from the LORD burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp. When the people cried out to Moses, he prayed to the LORD and the fire died down. So that place was called Taberah, because fire from the LORD had burned among them” (vv. 1-3). The second comes from chapter 26, which describes the fate of the rebellious Korah and his followers. We are told that, “The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them along with Korah, whose followers died when the fire devoured the 250 men. And they served as a warning sign” (vv. 9-10). Although the text does not explicitly state that these men were surrounded by the immediate presence of God, it is implied by the term “*the fire*” as though it were a specific and understood topic being discussed.

There are several other representative examples of the profane being destroyed by the presence of the living God that we could consider. In both Deuteronomy 4:33 and 5:26, for instance, the author states that no one before Israel had faced the fire of the presence of the living God and lived. Although Israel was in constant danger of coming into that presence in an unworthy state, God consistently showed patience and mercy with Israel by allowing them near the presence of God. In Deuteronomy 9:3, Israel is promised that they did not need to fear the people that inhabited the Promised Land because they could “be assured today that the LORD your God is the one who goes across ahead of you like a devouring fire. He will destroy them; he will subdue

them before you. And you will drive them out and annihilate them quickly, as the LORD has promised you.”

Two final examples worth considering, although there are many more, come from the book of Kings. In 1 Kings 18, we have the infamous account of Elijah facing up against the prophets of Ba'al at Mt. Carmel. After much inactivity on the part of Ba'al's prophets, we are told, "At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD -he is God! The LORD -he is God!" (1 Kings 18:36-39). The message that God was communicating there through His presence coming into the physical realm and in the proximity of the unrighteous seems rather clear. In 2 Kings 1:10-15 we find a similar fate faced by men who opposed Elijah, as they are burned up by fire that comes directly from God's presence as He breaks into the physical universe

A clear and definite pattern develops as we look at what happens when unworthy objects suddenly find themselves in the presence of the holy God. Yet, as we continue to survey the Old Testament landscape, we find that a different pattern emerges when God makes His presence tangible in the physical universe in the company of objects and people that He has deemed set apart for His purposes. Rather than being destroyed, these objects are preserved, protected, and even purified.

In Exodus 3, Moses is told to take off his shoes for he is about to enter holy ground, a place where heaven and earth are overlapping. On that ground, he sees a bush that is on fire without being consumed (3:2). As we have already seen a clear pattern of God being described in terms of a fire, we can safely conclude that the fire that filled up this bush was none other than a sign of the very presence of God breaking into the physical realm.

Exodus brings us two other examples of God's presence bursting into the physical realm that we will briefly consider. The first is described in Exodus 13:21, as the pillar of fire and cloud (probably more accurately, smoke) led the Israelites during their wanderings in the wilderness (cf. Ex. 14:19-20; Ps. 78:14). We are also told of a scene in Exodus 24, where the presence of God pulls back the veil that usually keeps heaven hidden, and He allows Moses to enter in.

"When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from within the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights." In both instances, people that God had set apart were allowed to be in the presence of God, with Moses going directly into God's glory cloud and the consuming fire without being burned up.

Numbers 9 describes a scene in which the people of God, rather than being destroyed by the fire of God as He manifested in the physical realm, were instead protected and led by His presence, "On the day the tabernacle, the Tent of the Testimony, was set up, the cloud covered it. From evening till morning the cloud above the tabernacle looked like fire. That is how it continued to be; the cloud covered it, and at night it looked like fire" (vv. 15-16).

Perhaps the most classic example of this in the entire Old Testament comes in Daniel 3, when three young Hebrew boys are about to be thrown into an earthly furnace for failure to participate in the religious rituals of the Babylonians. The three young men are thrown into a fire so hot that it kills the guards who were putting them into the fire, when suddenly heaven and earth overlap and the very presence of God bursts into the physical realm in a spectacular way. "Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, 'Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?' They replied, 'Certainly, O king.' He said, 'Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.'" God's consuming fire had entered into the physical fire and kept the young men preserved and protected.

If we quickly scan the rest of the Old Testament, we can see several other examples of God's realm being apparently accompanied by fire. In 2 Kings 2:11, chariots and horses of fire take Elijah directly into God's realm (what exactly that consisted of is a topic outside the scope of this paper). In Isaiah 6:6, as Isaiah is allowed to peer into God's realm, an angel touches his lips with the purifying coals of heaven. In Daniel 7:9-11, Daniel has a vision of God's realm in which God is seated on a throne of fire. Although it is not in the Old Testament, the day of Pentecost serves as another interesting example, in which the presence of God breaks into the physical realm and looks like tongues of fire resting over the heads of the Christians. (One other possible connection with this comes in Exodus 35:3, in which the Israelites are told specifically not to light a fire on the Sabbath. We know that part of the purpose of the Sabbath was to teach the people of God things about Him and the Messiah. It is speculative, but is it possible that the specific ban

on fire was intended to remind them that they did not have the presence of God with them everywhere now, but pointed to a time when they would?)

It seems that as God continued to reveal Himself to His people, the instances of God physically breaking into the universe reduced in frequency. Throughout the writings of the Minor Prophets, there is a switch from actual encounters with God breaking into our realm of the natural universe, to the prophets beginning to describe a time when the consuming presence of God would fill the entire universe. The Jews understood that this would be the time of the promised age to come when God would restore His good creation and inhabit it once again with humans, the apex of His creation. The fiery presence of God, we are told would destroy that which was not fit for the presence of God, but it would purify the things that God had set apart for Himself.

Isaiah 4:4-5 promises that God will cleanse and protect His people with the judgment fire of the Messiah, the one who would open up access to the age to come in the present age. Later on, Isaiah asks who can possibly withstand the consuming fire of God's presence? Finally, near the end of Isaiah, he describes the coming fire of God's presence filling the entire universe and heaven and earth are brought together again (66:15-18; 22-24).

Similarly, Zechariah spoke of a time when God's presence would surround the New Jerusalem (2:3-5), and looks forward to a time when the people of God's Kingdom will be refined by the fiery presence of God. Malachi also saw a Day when the presence of the Lord will burn up that which is not fit for God's presence but refine the people that He has set apart (Mal. 3:2-4). Interestingly, Jeremiah 23:29 likens God's word to fire, indicating perhaps that in our epoch of the present age, the presence of God is realized through His word.

Conclusion

God chose many different ways to communicate with people throughout the Old Testament. Some of those methods, like creation and beauty, could be called general revelations, as they were available to all people. Others, like the appearance of angels, could be considered special revelations, as they happened only to specific people at specific times. None, however, could be considered more impressionable or awesome as actually having the veil between heaven and earth being pulled back and either having God come directly into our physical presence or being allowed into His.