

A DEEPER LOOK 2

“AT THE PRESENCE OF GOD”

“I can never escape from your Spirit! I can never get away from your presence!”
Psalm 139:7

One day after Sunday School a young boy and his mother were having a serious discussion over lunch. “Where is God?” the 6-year-old asks innocently. “He’s in heaven,” his mother replies. “Does He live there?” “Yes”. “Where’s Jesus?” “He’s in your heart.” “But I thought Jesus and God were the same Person?” “They are.” “How can He be in heaven and in my heart at the same time?” “Sweetheart, it’s hard to explain said the becoming flustered mother. A short pause. “Where does the Holy Spirit live?” Another short pause...”I think it’s time to take a nap.”

Thus we are introduced to one of the more difficult doctrines of the Bible and the Christian faith – the doctrine of God’s omnipresence. “Where is God?” is a very important question. The sincere seeker wants to know where he/she might find God after spending too much time looking elsewhere for anything that might take away their emptiness, meaninglessness, and fear. The conscious skeptic also wants to know where God is...so that God might be ignored or avoided. The guilty sinner wants to know where God is...so they can run the other way. Every hurting human who feels abandoned by the Almighty demands to know...”Where is God when I need Him the most?” Where is God, is an important question.

There are 3 attributes of God that should always be kept together in our minds. They naturally go together since each begins with the four-letter prefix “omni”, (which literally means “All”). Omniscience / Omnipotence / Omni presence. The first means that God is All – **Knowing**, the second that God is All – **Powerful**, and the third that God is **Present – Everywhere!** Tony Evans, a great preacher of Promise Keeper fame demonstrates how these three attributes work in unison:

1. God KNOWS what needs to be done – that’s omniscience.
2. God has the POWER to do what needs to be done – that’s omnipotence.
3. God is ALWAYS WHEREVER he needs to be, doing whatever needs to be done - that’s omnipresence.

These three concepts are all difficult for us to understand, but Omnipresence is the hardest. Is God all powerful? Yes, and we can slightly grasp that concept because we have some power and strength. Is God all wise? Yes, and we can conceive of that on some level because we have some limited wisdom and knowledge. Is God everywhere present at the same time? Yes, but we have no conceptional or contextual idea what that is like! We have no human capability to compare with that character of God. We can only be at one place at one time. Though you soccer moms are not so easily convinced! There is no sense in which we can be present everywhere, at the same time. Oh, we can in thought or memory, or imagination, but not physically, and certainly not spiritually. It’s one in a long line of mysteries about God, we can’t fully know. But we are not alone. Apparently the Psalmist didn’t quite get it either, listen”

“I can never escape from your Spirit! I can never get away from your presence! If I go up to heaven, you are there; if I go down to the grave, you are there. If I ride the wings of the morning, if I dwell by the farthest oceans, even there your hand will guide me; and your strength will support me. I could ask the darkness to hide me and the light around me to become night – but even in darkness I cannot hide from you. To you the night shines as bright as day. Darkness and light are the same to you.” Psalm 139: 7-12

God is always present whether we believe it or not. In the early days of space travel, one of the Atheist Russian cosmonauts returned from orbiting the earth to announce that he had looked out his space capsule into the farthest stretches of the universe and had not seen God anywhere. He had looked all over the earth as it passed beneath his capsule, and nowhere was God to be found. Dr. W. A. Criswell of the First

Baptist Church in Dallas replied to these comments: “Let him take off his space suit for just one second and he’ll see God quick enough.”

This morning I want to visit with you about taking a Deeper Look at the presence of God by exploring the difference between the Omnipresence of God, and the Manifest Presence of God.

1. THE ‘OMNIPRESENCE’ OF GOD IS BEST UNDERSTOOD BY EXPLORING SOME OLD TESTAMENT EXPERIENCES OF GOD.

Last week as we took a Deeper Look at the Face of God, we discussed the Israelite nation facing a decision on the base of Mt. Sinai. God had invited them to come into His intimate presence and see Him face to face, but because of their fear of the thunder, lightning, smoke and mountain shaking, the fear of the unknown, the fear of unadulterated intimacy; they choose to stand at a distance. That choice has determined their history.

Throughout the OT God appeared in forms and symbols, using analogies and metaphors, to reveal himself to His people. God appeared in the clouds and often in smoke. God appeared as a flaming torch and a burning fire pot to Abraham during the cutting of the very first covenant. God appeared as a ‘cloud by day and a fire by night’ for the Israelites wandering 40 years in the wilderness. God appeared in a burning bush to Moses, and often as an angelic heavenly being. God appeared to Balaam through the mouth of a donkey, to Ezekiel as a wheel within a wheel, to Jacob as an Olympic wrestler, and to Jeremiah at the bottom of a well. God used unusual means to communicate with his children, but only once, did God appear face to face, only once in the OT did God manifest Himself fully with a human being.

There on Mt. Sinai God met Moses face to face. Don’t you ever wonder how human history might have been different had the whole nation of Israel ascended the mountain that day instead of choosing to stand at a distance? It was Moses, and he

alone; throughout 4000 years of OT history to whom was ascribed on the head of his tombstone: "Here lies Moses...whom God knew face to face."

There is another old story about another little boy who came home from Sunday School all excited about the lesson and told his dad all about Moses crossing the Red Sea. With great excitement the little boy said. "Moses and his people got behind enemy lines and he had his engineers build a pontoon bridge across the Red Sea. Then all of Moses people crossed over. When his spies reported that a whole division of Egyptian tanks was about to cross the bridge, Moses got on his walkie-talkie and ordered his air force to blow up the bridge with some smart bombs. The air force took out the bridge and all the Israelites were saved." Dad frowned a bit and asked, "are you sure that's the story the Sunday School teacher told you?" "No," said the boy, "but you wouldn't believe the way the teacher told it!"

There has never been any doubt that God was active in Israel and in the world during the OT times. In fact, that's primarily what the OT is, a record of God's omnipresent activity in the lives of Israel's people and world. God's presence is experienced in thousands of ways, by hundreds of thousands of people; but he manifested himself directly and personally (best as I can discover) only once, to Moses. Even Enoch who "walked with God", probably did so 'side by side, not face to face, and as we know, he was taken directly to heaven, skipping death altogether!

Now here is the point...It may have been enough for the Israelites to know that God was everywhere all at the same time...but it is not enough for me! Is it enough for you? In this day when cultural and athletic 'icons' continually refer to the "big man in the sky", or the "big fella up there", or the "director of the universe", we have settled for an omnipresent God...and that is second best!

The landscape of our world is littered with buildings called churches, now devoid of the Spirit of God, who have settled for some vague, familiar, powerless and lifeless

experience of God. They are filled with a remnant of people who have chosen to be satisfied with the omnipresence of God.

Don't get me wrong...there is nothing wrong with recognizing, understanding, and believing in the doctrine of the omnipresence of God, but there is something more... there is a manifest presence, there is another intimacy face to face', invitation always awaiting our RSVP. Let us consider that now;

2. THE 'MANIFEST PRESENCE' OF GOD IS BEST UNDERSTOOD BY EXPLORING SOME NEW TESTAMENT EXPERIENCES OF GOD.

The Apostle John describes it this way:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. So the Word became flesh to dwell among us, and we saw His glory, such glory as befits the Father's only Son, full of Grace and Truth." John 1: 1-3, 14 NLT

The Apostle Paul describes it this way:

"Jesus had equal status with God, but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death, and the worst kind of death at that: crucifixion." Phil. 2: 6-8 The Message

And I want you to listen very closely to one more verse from the heart of Paul the Apostle:

"It all started when God said, 'light up the darkness!' and our lives filled up with light as we saw and understood God, in the face of Jesus Christ, all bright and beautiful." 2 Cor. 4:6 The Message

In spite of the omnipresence of God, the transition from the OT to the NT is described as one of moving out of the darkness into the light, and it all hinges on one event, one moment in time, one spectacularly unspectacular pregnancy, one everyday birth, one child...whose name was Jesus Christ! The difference between the omnipresence of God and the Manifest Presence of God is simply this: The Face of Jesus Christ.

In that one divine moment, everything about God became fully known to human beings in the person of Jesus Christ. God wants all people to know and be known 'face to face' as Children of God, through faith in Jesus Christ. The reason the Israelites continue to await the coming Messiah, is partly because of a choice they made at Mt. Sinai. The reason our country and world suffer the ravages of godlessness and wickedness is because we have chosen to settle for being satisfied with our omnipresent theology of God and have rejected the offer to know God face to face! God patiently waited and worked, interceded and intervened in human history for 4000 years until finally he'd had enough, and said, "they'll never get it...I must do something more drastic, something more profound, something more simple...I know...I'll send them my only Son...surely when they see Him, ...they'll want to know me?"

Jesus didn't come to promote some 'church program'; he came to reveal the face of the Father. *"He who has seen me, has seen the Father."* Jesus didn't come to teach us some updated versions of the OT law; he came to reveal the face and heart of the FATHER!! Jesus didn't come to give us 'warm and fuzzy' feelings of love and holiday cheer, he came to reveal the face and heart and the passion of the father who loves his lost children. Jesus came to show us God, ...and so often we prefer the smoke and cloud, the fire...and the distance. We'll keep him at arms length thank you very much. We'll keep him safe in our sanctuaries, but hidden from our lives.

How can we live as such a distance? How can we choose, intentionally choose not to love the face? How can we be satisfied with a vague theological concept, when intimate face to face love is the alternative? I don't get it, and I don't want it!

A few years ago I was in an airport somewhere and observed a wonderful reunion. There next to the baggage claim was gathered a rather large family, and by

their signs, I could tell they were anxious to welcome home their young soldier; son, husband, father, brother, uncle, and grandson.

Near as I could tell this young soldier's immediate family included 3 small children; the youngest less than two years old. When dad finally emerged from the tunnel he was mobbed by this crew. There was laughter and many tears, but from out of the chaos came a voice, an insistent voice, a child's crying voice, it was the baby and she wanted her daddy. With big brother and sister clinging to his legs, wife and parents hugging him; the baby safely in his arms kept doing something I found fascinating. As he conversed with his parents and wife, as he talked to the older children and others who gathered; this little baby girl kept reaching with her tiny hands to her daddy's cheeks, and pulling his chin down so she could look directly in her father's face.

That's what God wants from each of us. We know even when he seems far away that He is always there for us; always interceding for us. But sometimes we just need to see His face! Sometimes we just need to keep pulling on His chin so we can get the full effect! No more clouds, no more smoke, no more fire, it's Face time with the Father, and guess what....HE WANTS IT TOO! MORE THAN WE DO!

Please close your eyes and try to focus your mind on your favorite picture of Jesus. Maybe it's him standing at the big wooden door knocking to get in. Maybe the one with him shepherding all the little sheep, even the black one. Maybe your favorite is the one with Jesus laughing, or the one with compassionate filled eyes. Which ever picture comes to mind; focus for a second on the face...Now hear God's voice: "This is my beloved Son, listen to him." Come to him, all you who are weak and burdened, bound by sin and the distance that has separated us for too long!" Come and be filled with my joy, my peace, my love, because I love you." Don't stay away any longer, give up the game, let down your defenses, give me your heart, I'll lead you to my Face!"

Amen, Prayer.

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