

## THE PRESENCE OF GOD

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The Bible describes four ways to think about God's presence that will help us answer those questions.

### ACKNOWLEDGE GOD'S OMNIPRESENCE

Scripture tells us that God is present everywhere.

Where shall I go from your Spirit?  
Or where shall I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!  
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me. (Ps. 139:7-10)

There's no place we can be where God isn't. He knows all and sees all. "And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Heb. 4:13). God's omnipresence is one of the most mind-boggling assumptions of Scripture. There are plenty of times I wish I could be two places at once. God is not only two places at once; he's everywhere at once.

God can make his presence known anywhere and at any time, because he's already there.

### EXPECT GOD'S PROMISED PRESENCE

God has also promised to be with us in a unique way on different occasions. His presence is especially promised to the church, which is "a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph. 2:22). God is with us to speak in power when his Word

is preached (1 Cor. 2:4). As we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we're celebrating more than a reminder or a mere symbol. The risen Savior is present with us through faith as we remember his work of reconciliation. In a profound way we're being freshly strengthened in our union with him and with each other (1 Cor. 11:27–32).

Sometimes we're aware of God's promised presence, sometimes not. But trusting he's with us will produce specific results. We'll be comforted by his nearness. We'll be sobered by his awareness of all we're doing. We'll gain confidence in the midst of trying circumstances.

There are times, of course, when we become unexpectedly aware of the Lord's presence in an intense way. A sudden wave of peace comes over us. An irrepressible joy rises up from the depths of our soul. We experience the sweet sting of the Holy Spirit's conviction. In those moments, has God's presence come down to us? Have we been led into God's presence? No. God was present from the beginning. We've just become more aware of it.

D. A. Carson observes how “we often *feel* encouraged and edified” as we engage in corporate worship activities. The result is that “we are renewed in our awareness of God's love and God's truth, and we are encouraged to respond with adoration and action.” Carson reminds us of this important truth: “Objectively, what brings us into the presence of God is the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.” He warns that if we start thinking it's our worship activities that bring God's presence near, “it will not be long before we think of such worship as being meritorious, or efficacious, or the like.”<sup>4</sup>

Carson is expressing concern for a mysticism that has always been a temptation for Christians. We reference drawing near to God with no mention of Christ or his finished work. It's an unmediated presence, something we can experience without an awareness of what Jesus did to make it possible. That kind of understanding leads us to start looking for the right combination, the right password, the right "secret" to experience God's presence again.

*Maybe it was the way I lifted my hands.*

*It's always when we get to the chorus of that anointed song.*

*It happens every time Amanda sings.*

*Candles seem to help.*

Let's be clear. No worship leader, pastor, or musician can bring us into the presence of God. It's not a certain prayer, a particular liturgy, a sacred object, the right bodily posture, or a certain mind-set. Only Jesus can lead us into God's presence, and he accomplished that through his substitutionary death, which forever removed the curtain of God's judgment that separated us from his presence (Heb. 10:19–22). It's only by putting our faith fully in Jesus's finished work of redemption that we can encounter the living God. Only Christ has truly brought us near to the Father.

We might become more aware of God's presence as we're singing to him, but he doesn't need music to make himself known to us. Harold Best describes the problem well: "Christian musicians . . . can create the impression that God is more present when music is being made than when it is not; that worship is more possible with music than without it; and that God might possibly depend on its presence before appearing."<sup>5</sup>



We can help our leaders in this area by not thanking them for “leading us into God’s presence.” Instead, we can thank them for their skillful leading, their musical ability, their planning, their enthusiasm, and their commitment to proclaiming God’s Word and the gospel. Those are all means God uses to make us freshly aware of what Jesus has already done to bring us into God’s presence.

So how do we tell the difference between actually experiencing and engaging with God’s promised presence and simply being moved by a creative arrangement, a stunning vocal performance, a massive choir, or a beautiful melody? By examining what we’re focusing on and its fruit. If all we can remember about an experience is how creative the instrumentation was or how awesome the lights were, we’ve most likely been emotionally moved but not spiritually changed. Encountering God generally bears the fruit of things like a greater hunger for his Word, a deeper love for the Savior, and a greater passion for a holy life. God can use music to affect us emotionally, but music will never mediate his presence. Only Jesus can do that.

The fact remains, however, that God has promised to dwell in the midst of his people. And that’s a reality he wants us to benefit from *fully*.

### **PURSUE GOD’S EXPERIENCED PRESENCE**

If God reveals his presence as he wills, does that leave any place for pursuing a greater manifestation of his presence? Should we hope to encounter God beyond taking it on faith that he’s with us?

Absolutely. Consider these words from British pastor Graham Harrison:

There can be no substitute for that manifested presence of God which is always a biblical possibility for the people of God. When it is not being experienced they should humbly seek him for it, not neglecting their ongoing duties, nor denying their present blessings, but recognizing that there is always infinitely more with their God and Father who desires fellowship with those redeemed by the blood of his Son and regenerated by the work of his Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

Even though God is everywhere at once, he sometimes chooses to make his presence known. He appears to Moses in a burning bush (Ex. 3:2). He dwells with Israel in the tabernacle as they traverse through the wilderness (Ex. 29:42–45). He shakes the room in which the disciples are praying and displays his healing power through Peter's shadow (Acts 4:31; 5:15).

This side of heaven true worshippers will always long for a greater apprehension of and encounter with God and his character. We can be grateful for God's blessings and our present experiences of him, but still pray and long for greater manifestations of his power, glory, and beauty. And while we can't orchestrate the activity of God's Spirit, we can yearn for it, expect it, and be ready for it.

The example of the early church shows us that trusting in God's sovereignty doesn't preclude asking God to reveal his presence and power to us in demonstrable ways. At the end of Acts 4, the disciples expressed absolute confidence that God had been directing everything that had taken place up to that point. Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles, and the Jews all had done "whatever [God's] hand and [his] plan had predestined to take place" (4:28). But that in no way diminished the disciples' ex-

pectation that God would do wondrous things through them. "Stretch out your hand to heal," they prayed, so that more people would glorify Jesus (4:30). God's sovereignty is the foundation for expecting his active and experienced presence.

Genuine revivals are filled with countless examples of the living God visiting his people in presence and power. His normal activities increase in their intensity and scope. People are overcome by conviction of their sin, break down into tears, shake uncontrollably in the fear of God, and experience inexplicable peace and joy. Lukewarm Christians repent, sinners are converted, and ordinary activities are accompanied by extraordinary power. God reveals his presence for his glory. Why wouldn't we want to pursue similar works of God among us today?

Three attitudes that will help us in this pursuit are desperate dependence, eager expectation, and humble responsiveness.

### **Desperate Dependence**

The first line of the hymn "Jesus Paid It All" reminds me of my constant state before God: "I hear the Savior say, 'Thy strength indeed is small.'"

Indeed it is. Sinful desires wage war against my heart (1 Pet. 2:11). The world constantly calls me to enjoy immoral pleasures, adopt ungodly attitudes, and live for passing rewards (1 John 2:15-17). The Devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour through deceit and condemnation (1 Pet. 5:8).

I am desperately dependent. And so are you.

God has sent his Spirit to help us. And the first thing the Spirit has done is given us God's Word. There we find



“his precious and very great promises” (2 Pet. 1:4) and learn what God has done for us in the gospel, as well as how he has set us free to live. Dependence doesn’t imply inactivity or simply waiting around. It’s expressed in actively pursuing a deeper knowledge of God’s ways and an impartation of his power through Scripture. It’s the Word of God that revives our souls, makes us wise, fills our hearts with joy, and enlightens our eyes (Ps. 19:7–8). Ignoring the Bible not only is the opposite of being Spirit-led, but also shows that we trust ourselves more than God.

We also show our dependence on God by asking him to empower us by his Spirit. That’s why we’re taught to pray in and by the Spirit, and to pray for the Spirit’s working (Rom. 8:26; Eph. 6:18; Jude 20). He helps us in our weakness. Jesus himself modeled a life of prayer when he was on earth. Paul told us that we are to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). It’s the height of presumption to think we can neglect prayer and still expect to experience God’s presence and power. The root cause of our prayerlessness is often not laziness, but pride.

So, here’s the question: How much do you pray for your church? For your times together? Do you pray specifically, asking the Spirit to reveal Christ to everyone gathered, to aid your leaders, to help the congregation sing with understanding, and to bring forth fruit in people’s lives? Or do you unthinkingly toss up generic prayers like, “Bless everyone today, God”? Do you pray at all? What do you place more trust in: God’s power, or the plans, performance, and personalities of people?

Consistently confessing our dependence on the Holy Spirit will produce a deep sense of gratitude, humility, and peace in

our hearts. We'll see God answer our prayers. We'll remember that apart from Jesus we can do nothing. We'll be less tempted to think it's up to us. We'll realize God is actually in control, and we can't improve upon the job he's doing.

It's not our self-sufficiency that displays God's power, but our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). And confessing that weakness is a sign that we desire to know more of God's presence.

### **Eager Expectation**

At Thanksgiving some of my kids will drive nine hours with their families to spend the holiday with us. As the time approaches for their arrival, everyone's counting down the minutes, listening intently for the sound of a car turning into our cul-de-sac, watching carefully and eagerly for headlights moving across our front windows. We're anticipating they'll show up any minute.

Some of us say we want to encounter God, but we aren't expecting him to show up. We don't really think he'll do or say anything. We're like a parent opening a closet door to check whether the monster our child heard is really there. We appear to be expecting something, but we'd faint or scream if we found anything.

The Bible doesn't just tell us things we should believe about the Holy Spirit. It teaches us to have a posture of expectancy. And one of the things we should expect is that the Spirit will make God's presence known through various spiritual gifts. "Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts," Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 14:1.

As we discussed previously, when we meet together the Spirit gives gifts, the Lord enables service, and God empowers



a variety of activities. To each one a manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good (1 Cor. 12:1–7). An aspect of that common good is giving evidence of God’s presence in our midst. Do we expect God to be working in any and every spiritual gift?

When someone’s running a sound board, they’re exercising the gift of helps. As the offering plate is being passed, people are demonstrating the gift of giving. As the pastor preaches, the Spirit is moving upon our hearts through gifts of leadership and teaching. As someone prays for a friend battling cancer, they’re functioning in the gift of mercy and possibly healing. Do we expect to encounter God in those moments?

Or do we keep our expectations low so we won’t be disappointed? Do we tick through the different parts of our meetings like check boxes on a “to do” list?

Call to Worship? *Check.*

Songs? *Check.*

Prayer? *Check.*

Offering? *Check.*

Sermon? *Check.*

Communion? *Check.*

Benediction? *Gone.*

What if God was present to do great things in our hearts in every one of those moments? If we don’t expect him to be active, we’ll most likely miss what he’s doing. We can expect great things from a great God who is dwelling in us and among us.

### **Humble Responsiveness**

God’s Spirit is always working to conform us to the image of Christ. It’s an immense privilege to be his tool to accomplish

that end in the lives of others as we exercise our spiritual gifts. But if we don't respond, we may miss out on the ways he wants to use us. As a result, we'll miss opportunities to build others up and experience the presence of the living God.

Often the work of the Spirit is despised because people follow the lead of the Corinthians and respond to it proudly. They view their own spiritual gifts as superior to others. They act as though their subjective experiences have objective authority. "The Lord told me" is an unwise way to begin any sentence, unless you're quoting Scripture. Subjective experiences don't have objective authority. But that doesn't mean we have to dismiss thoughts that come into our minds as bogus. We don't have to deny them or fear them.

Humble responsiveness means speaking up or acting whenever I think God might want to work through me. You might get the sudden urge to pray for someone as they mention they're probably going to lose their job. You notice someone you haven't seen in weeks and a Scripture "pops" into your mind. Humble responsiveness is making a point of sharing it with them right then or maybe giving them a call that afternoon.

In Sovereign Grace churches we typically provide a congregational microphone up front during the meetings. We anticipate the Spirit will lead members of the church to contribute a Scripture, prayer, or prophetic impression during our time together. A pastor screens what will be shared for its content and appropriateness. I've been in literally hundreds of meetings where God has used spontaneous contributions from people in the congregation to build up, stir up, and cheer up the saints (1 Cor. 14:3). And we experience God's presence as a result.



While we should expect to encounter God's presence when we gather, we can expect to encounter him at other times as well. Our faithful Shepherd at different times and in different ways confirms that he's lovingly and wisely watching over the details of our lives.

One time Julie and I were considering a potential move that no one else in the church knew about. Right before we finalized the decision, a friend stopped by our house with a written paragraph she thought might be an encouragement from the Lord for us. It had to do with making a major decision that involved some sadness but would result in much fruitfulness. My eyes welled up with tears of gratefulness.

Coincidence? Maybe. But something similar has happened many times. And each time it does, I experience God's particular care as individuals share specific and encouraging thoughts about things they have no knowledge of. Each time I become freshly aware of God's nearness and his kindness to us in Christ.

The Spirit's promptings don't always come in paragraph form. In fact, they rarely do. But for many of us, it can be difficult to believe that the Spirit would prompt us at all. Yet the New Testament contains numerous examples of God's intervention in daily life. Paul decides not to minister in Asia because the Holy Spirit forbids him (Acts 16:6). Philip has four unmarried daughters who prophesy (Acts 21:9). Agabus predicts that Paul will be bound and handed over to the Gentiles (Acts 21:11). The Thessalonians and Corinthians seem to experience the gift of spontaneous prophecy in their weekly gatherings (1 Cor. 14:29–32; 1 Thess. 5:19–21).

Sometimes we don't act on a thought for fear we might be wrong. But if what you do or share truly encourages some-



one, Jesus will be glorified and you'll both have a fresh awareness of God's presence. If it turns out your impression was irrelevant or wrong, you might be humbled. But the humble receive more grace (1 Pet. 5:5), so it's a win-win situation.

Nothing of what I'm describing here should lessen our commitment to the authority and sufficiency of God's Word. Experiences of God's presence, while important, aren't at the heart of our relationship with God. Theologian Andreas Köstenberger reminds us, "Biblical spirituality does not consist primarily of mystical, emotional experience, inward impressions and feelings, introspective meditation, or a monastic withdrawal from the world. The primary spiritual disciplines advocated by Scripture are prayer and the obedient study of God's Word."<sup>7</sup>

The right balance is captured in the words of D. A. Carson, who writes:

We must desire to know more of God's presence in our lives, and pray for a display of unleashed, reforming, revivifying power among us, dreading all steps that aim to domesticate God. But such prayer and hunger must always be tempered with joyful submission to the constraints of biblical discipline.<sup>8</sup>

As you gladly submit to Scripture, who knows how God might minister to others through your humble response to what you believe to be the Spirit's promptings?

### **LONG FOR GOD'S UNVEILED PRESENCE**

There's one more way we're to think about God's presence. Heaven. In heaven, there will be no temple to worship God

in, no structure or locality that represents his presence more than another, because God and the Lamb will be the temple (Rev. 21:22).

In one sense, we can say we're experiencing God's presence in heaven right now. God has raised us up with Christ "and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6). The writer of Hebrews says that when we gather as the church, we're coming to

the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb. 12:22–24)

Quite the church service! We join with the saints who have gone before us, rejoicing with them that death is not the final word for the Christian.

But the trials, deferred hopes, disappointments, losses, and tragedies of this life are an ever-present reminder: we're not home yet. The best is still to come. And what's still to come is what we'll consider in the final chapter.

#### Question 6.

**In one sentence, summarise what Kauffman says about God's *promised presence*. How do we encourage people's hunger for God's presence in worship meetings without elevating subjective experience?**

**What is your personal response to the section on God's *experienced presence*?**