*God’s Inescapable Presence*

Psalm 139:7-12

7/9/23

Last week we began to study Ps. 139. This psalm contains 4 sections. The first three focus on different aspects of God’s character, describing Him as an ***inescapable, all-searching being.*** The last stanza calls us to respond to Him appropriately. Last week, we focused on God’s omniscience, or the fact that He has all knowledge. Although that means God knows unknowable facts like how many grains of sand there are on the seashore, the psalmists concern is for God’s personal knowledge. He is intimately acquainted with all our ways, scrutinizing our actions by the standard of His holiness. Knowing that nothing escapes His soul-piercing gaze should humble us.

Our text today (vs. 7-12) focuses on God’s *omnipresence*. Again, *omni* means all. When attached to the word presence, it means that God is all present. Like omniscience, there is an element of this we can understand; yet when we contemplate the implications of it, it becomes an overwhelming reality beyond our comprehension.

The Bible teaches two parallel truths that, when placed together, can be hard to understand. First, it teaches that God’s presence manifests itself in specific places. In the OT, God’s *shekinah* glory resided within the Holy of Holies. In the NT, Jesus says His Father is *in heaven.* Presently, Jesus is seated at the right hand of God. And the Spirit indwells God’s people. In each of these circumstances, God’s presence is uniquely manifested in a specific location.

Yet the Bible also teaches as an equal and non-contradicting truth that God is everywhere all the time. By that we do not mean that the divine is contained within us, or within nature; we simply mean that God is relationally, experientially, and knowledgably present everywhere. There is no place we can be where God is not, and there is no circumstance we can create that veils His sight. Not only does God know everything, but He is an eyewitness to everything that transpires.

David turns our attention to this attribute of God by asking *where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I hide from Your presence?* Notice the nature of the question. David is asking *where can I go to get away from God?* Think about this in the broader sphere of God’s revelation. God created humans in His image so we can enjoy relationship with Him. Originally. Adam and Eve had a perfect relationship with God. Yet sin changed that. Adam and Eve tried to compensate for the shame their sin created, but their efforts failed. When they heard God enter the garden, they fled, trying to hide themselves from His presence. Sin turned what used to be a joyful event into a terrorizing event because God’s holiness and man’s sinfulness are incompatible. Sin alienates us from God, which is why they fled from Him. This is why, when God descended on Sinai, the Israelites feared for their lives and told Moses to talk to God for them, lest they die. The presence of God is a terrorizing, awe-inspiring thing. Sinful man’s natural response is to run from it. Thus, David asks, where can I go to escape the presence of this holy God?

In vs. 8-9, David surveys his options. If he ascended to heaven, God is there. Here is a helpful hint as you read the OT. When you see *heavens* (plural), it refers to the sky and regions beyond it, which we call outer space. *Heaven* (singular) refers to the place where God dwells. So, David says if I ascend to heaven, the realm of God, obviously He is there.

But what if I make my bed in Sheol? Sheol is used several ways in the OT. Sometimes it describes the inner regions of the earth. Sometimes it refers to the holding place of the dead. At other times, it is the OT equivalent of hell, or the place of eternal torment for God’s enemies. Context determines which use is in view. Here, Sheol is the opposite of heaven. If David were to descend to the realm of the dead, or even enter hell itself, behold, God’s presence would still be there. The realms of the spirit beings, heaven and hell, are both filled with God’s presence.

In vs. 9 David considers the realm of men. If he were to take the wings of the dawn… meaning if he were to travel indefinitely towards the east; or if he were to dwell in the remotes part of the sea, God would still be there. The western boarder of Israel is the Mediterranean. From their perspective, the other side of the Mediterranean was the end of the world. David is saying if I go west to the remotest place imaginable, God would still be there. There is not place mankind can go…heaven or hell, east or west, the highest mountain or the deepest sea…where they can escape God’s presence. Just as Adam and Eve discovered, His presence is inescapable. God knows exactly where we are and what we do.

Furthermore, there is no circumstance that can veil God’s sight. We see this in vs. 11-12. Here David meditates on the ideas of light and darkness. Darkness clouds our vision and shrouds our actions. Sin loves darkness. There is a reason businesses that market sin turn the lights down. Several years ago, I interacted with a man who was exploring Christianity. It was refreshing talking to him because he was brutally honest about his feelings and beliefs. I had just preached on the part of John 3 that talks about people fleeing the light of the gospel lest their evil deeds be exposed. He said he understood exactly what that meant. He and his friends only partied at night. The moment light began to dawn on the horizon, he said they would all slink away dreading the consequences of their revelry. He said that darkness gave them a boldness to do things that they would never do in the daylight. Yet David says that darkness may veil other people’s view of our actions, but it does not veil God’s presence. *Even the darkness is not dark to You, and the night is as bright as day. Darkness and light are alike to You.*

So there is no place we can go or circumstance we can create to escape the presence of God. Not only does He know all, but He sees all. Just as was the case with His omniscience, God’s omnipresence is not an abstract truth. It is a personal reality with concrete effects on our lives. In vs. 10, we see two practical implications concerning God’s presence.

First, His presence ensures His providential guidance of our lives. In vs. 8-9, David reflected on how there was no place he could go to get away from God. His presence in every place ensures that His hand will lead me. In the same way God’s knowledge serves the purpose of relationship, God’s presence ensures His involvement in our lives. Providence isn’t a concept many modern-day Christians talk about, yet it is an important concept. Providence refers to God’s superintendence of and secret working through life’s circumstances to accomplish His purposes. His purposes include both His overarching plan for His creation and His personal concern for all people. God is simultaneously at work every moment in every place for every circumstance of every person in the world, guiding all things to their proper end. This is true even for those who try to flee His presence. God is always at work everywhere because He is everywhere all the time. If you meditate on this for long, you realize that His omnipresence is incomprehensible.

Second, God’s presence is for the purpose of relationship. Not only did David say God’s presence led him, but God’s hand laid hold of him. David recognizes himself to be a possession of God. God had plans and purposes for his life. Therefore, God ordered the affairs of his life to accomplish them. What was true of David is true of us. God created us to have a relationship with Him, that we might see and savor His greatness, and glorify Him in all that we do. Sin not only messed our ability to do that up, but it also causes us to flee His presence. Yet God overcame our sinfulness through the sinless life, sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection of His Son, Jesus. His omnipresence enables Him to lay ahold of a sinner no matter how hard they try to escape Him. Without violating our personhood, God providentially works His purposes in us and around us for the advance of His glory. *God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.* This is a comforting truth when we walk with God, and an uncomfortable truth when we are living unfaithfully. But of this we can be sure: when God lays His hand on someone, His purposes will be accomplished.

Jonah learned that lesson. God told him to go to Nineveh and warn them of His coming judgment. Jonah did not want to, so he went *down to Joppa*, found a boat sailing *to the remotest part of the sea,* Tarshish, and *went down into it.* Once onboard, he sunk *down into a deep sleep.* When God providentially sent a storm to stop his flight, Jonah chose death over repentance. So he was thrown into the sea. But God appointed a great fish to swallow him, so that Jonah went down into the belly of the fish and sunk down into the heart of the sea. Yet even in the belly of the fish, Jonah could not escape God’s presence. God worked to bring repentance in Jonah’s heart. When Jonah finally yielded to God, the whale spit him onto the beach, giving him a second chance. Now, Jonah didn’t do so well at making the most of that second chance. But his flight from God and God’s refusal to let him go illustrates well what we see in this psalm.

Fellow believers, we can be like Jonah: in a right relationship with God, even serving Him on our terms. Yet there may be areas of your life you refuse to turn over to God. Pet sins you cultivate rather than kill; lordship you refuse to yield; or efforts you do not want to make. God did not redeem us so that when we get to heaven, He could have all of us. He purchased us with Christ’s blood so that we might enjoy the abundance of life with Him now. Christ calls us to abide in Him as He abides in us. He has not left us as orphans. He has come to us by His Spirit, who indwells His people. The secret to an abundant life in Christ is not to run from God’s presence, but to yield to it. When we yield our lives to Him, we begin to understand why Moses was willing to risk death for a greater experience of God’s glory. He had tasted and seen that the Lord is good. Once he experienced that, there was no going back.

David can tell you both the joy of yielding to God and the pain of trying to hide from Him. Early in life, David was a model follower of God and enjoyed a closeness with God that few experience. Yet when he grew older and was established in wealth and power, he sinned against God, then sought to cover it up with more sin. Yet he could not pull the wool over God’s eyes. All his vain attempts to flee from God accomplished was to make his life a painful mess. He would tell us that yielding to God is far better than fleeing from Him. Hang on to that principle, for we will return to it when we get to vs. 23-24 in a couple of weeks.

And if you who are not a follower of Christ, listen to how Jesus applies this principle to you. Read John 3:19-21. Like Adam and Eve, you are trying to flee the presence of God so that your sin might not be exposed. You cannot hide your sin from God any more than they could. He already knows all about it, yet He still loves you. Just as God responded to Adam and Eve’s sin by covering their shame with the sacrifice of an animal, He has dealt with the shame of your sin through a better sacrifice. Your sin has made a separation between you and God. Yet Christ overcame that separation by living a sinless life, dying on the cross to pay the penalty for sin, and then rising from the dead three days later. What is God’s promise (read vs. 14-17)? God has providentially moved in your life to bring you here today to hear the message of salvation. He is willing to forgive you because He is a loving and gracious God. No matter how hard you try, you cannot escape His presence. One day you will stand before Him for judgment. The bible exhorts us to flee the coming wrath of God by believing in Jesus. Either you will have to account for the evil you have done, or you allow Christ to deal with it so that you can be reconciled to God, restored to the purpose for which He created you. But be sure of this, none of us will ever escape His presence. He knows all and He sees all.