

## **Beholding Our God – Omnipresence, Immensity**

The first human to travel in outer space and orbit the Earth was Yuri Gagarin in 1961. After he returned to Earth, the atheistic Soviets used his orbit for their propaganda. One propaganda poster had a painting of the cosmonaut floating in space, while down below on the Earth were some churches with steeples leaning to the side. In bold letters were the words “Bogo Nyet” - “There is no God”. Even though Gagarin himself seems to have secretly had religious beliefs, the dictator of the time, Krushchev, was eager to use this opportunity to promote the atheism of communism, and reportedly said, “Gagarin went into space and looked, and he didn't see any God.”

Those atheists were making a basic and childish error when it comes to thinking about God. They expected God to occupy space as other material bodies do. To communists, who believe only in physical matter, God must be material in some way, too. He must occupy space, have dimensions, and so be visible and measurable. But as C.S. Lewis would say, “If there was a controlling power outside the universe, it could not show itself to us as one of the facts inside the universe – no more than the architect of a house could actually be a wall or staircase or fireplace in that house.” No, God is not visible and localised, because one of God's attributes is His omnipresence.

To behold our God, is to learn that God is present in all His being everywhere simultaneously. The being that is God has no limits to His presence. The old writers said that God is a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose radius is nowhere.

But when we approach this attribute of omnipresence, we run into several difficulties. First, we think of presence in terms of space, and space has dimensions, so we end up trying to imagine God having this massive bulk that is diffused everywhere. We try to imagine what it means for someone to be everywhere, but we keep thinking God must have a center, a mid-point where He is, and then, He must kind of spread out, like light that spreads, or air. And all this is not what the Bible means by omnipresence.

The second problem we have with understanding this attribute of God is that there seem to be other statements in Scripture which make His presence localised. For example, if God is everywhere, why do we pray, Our Father, who art in Heaven? If God is everywhere, what does it mean that the Holy Spirit indwells believers? What does it mean that in Christ, “the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily”? Furthermore, what does it mean for people in Scripture to have departed from the presence of the Lord, like Cain did, or for God to have departed from the Temple, as we read in Ezekiel 11? If God is everywhere, how can He draw near? How can Moses beg Him to go with them into the Promised Land, if He is already everywhere?

Once again, the best place to understand the attributes of God is as we see them play out with biblical characters in the biblical narratives. For a remarkable account of God's omnipresence confronting a human being, we turn to the book of Jonah. A few years ago, we studied Jonah and saw the attribute of God's mercy contrasted with Jonah's cruelty. Today, our focus will be on God's omnipresence as seen in this account.

Let's set the scene.

We actually meet Jonah in the Bible before the book of Jonah. We meet him in passing in 2 Kings, where we find out that he got to deliver a popular and well-received message. He lived around 760 B.C., and he got to tell the northern kingdom of Israel that they would win back some of their territory. Even though the king of the time, Jeroboam II, was an evil king, God graciously allowed

Israel to recover some land that had been conquered by its enemies. Jonah got a great first assignment, deliver a popular, pleasant, patriotic message.

But his second assignment was not so enjoyable.

**Jonah 1:1** Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup> "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me." (Jon. 1:1-2)

Jonah was commissioned to the capital city of the Assyrian empire, Nineveh. The Assyrians were the kind of evil culture that took inhumanity to the extreme. If there had been a war crimes court in the ancient world, the Assyrians would have been hauled before it repeatedly. From recovered Assyrian artifacts, we have found depictions of them skinning their enemies alive, forcing parents to watch their children being burned alive before killing the parents, burying people alive up to their necks, till they died of hunger or thirst or wild animals. Some cities under siege by the Assyrians had chosen mass suicide rather than capture by the Assyrians. The Assyrian empire continued to grow, with taxes and tribute and trade flowing into Nineveh, where its nobles lived in lavish luxury, dwelling securely behind walls that were 15 metres wide and 10 stories high.

The Assyrians had already begun encroaching in Israel's territory, and just 30 years after Jonah's preaching, they would invade, and deport the Israelites from the northern kingdom. You can tell why Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh. This would be like an orthodox Jew sent to show kindness to Nazis. This is an African sent to white supremacists, a Tutsi sent to the Hutus. He wanted nothing to do with them.

So what did he do? Jonah's response introduces this attribute of God.

## **I. God's Being is Fully Present In All Places**

*But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. (Jon. 1:3)*

Nineveh was east of Israel, so Jonah heads west – as far west as he could go in Israel, which happened to be the coastal city of Joppa. But that wasn't far enough away from Nineveh. Jonah found a boat, manned by Gentile sailors headed to Tarshish, which is thought to be in Spain. That is as far west as was known in the ancient world, the edge of the world. What is Jonah doing? Our text tells us twice: he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord.

He wanted to find a geographical place where God was not, or at least a place where God's power was diminished, or where he might feel that he could forget God. Perhaps Jonah thought that if he got as far away from where God wanted to use him, that God's hands would be tied. For ancient people, the sea represented the ultimate unknown, the place of chaos, untamed wilderness and extreme danger.

But what did Jonah discover?

*But the LORD sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up. <sup>5</sup> Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god, and threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten the load. But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep. <sup>6</sup> So the captain came to him, and said to him, "What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish." <sup>7</sup> And they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this*

trouble *has come* upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. <sup>8</sup> Then they said to him, "Please tell us! For whose cause *is* this trouble upon us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?"

<sup>9</sup> So he said to them, "I *am* a Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry *land*." <sup>10</sup> Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, "Why have you done this?" For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. (Jon. 1:4-10)

God was present in Israel, but God was present beyond the coasts of Israel. God was just as present on the wide open ocean as He was on land. And as the sailors cast lots to find out which god has been offended, the lot lands on Jonah. Now Jonah had already told them that he was fleeing from the commandment of a god, his God. But these sailors had probably never heard of a God with dominion over land and sea. And now they are terrified, because Yahweh is angry at this Hebrew, and they've got him on board.

<sup>11</sup> Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you that the sea may be calm for us?"-- for the sea was growing more tempestuous. <sup>12</sup> And he said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me."

<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless the men rowed hard to return to land, but they could not, for the sea continued to grow more tempestuous against them. <sup>14</sup> Therefore they cried out to the LORD and said, "We pray, O LORD, please do not let us perish for this man's life, and do not charge us with innocent blood; for You, O LORD, have done as it pleased You." (Jon. 1:11-14)

They ask him what to do, and Jonah suggests throwing him overboard. Now I don't think this was noble self-sacrifice. I think Jonah didn't have the guts to jump into the ocean himself, because it was certain suicide. But if they threw him in, and he drowned, then he could say that he didn't take his own life, and of course, he would then have escaped having to go to Nineveh.

<sup>15</sup> So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. <sup>16</sup> Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the LORD and took vows. <sup>17</sup> Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. (Jon. 1:15-17)

Jonah wasn't going to get off so easily. God was determined to use Jonah, and sent Jonah the equivalent of a rubber dinghy. Except this rubber dinghy was alive, a massive sea-animal capable of swallowing Jonah whole, and having enough air in its stomach for Jonah to live in there for a miserable three days. While that stomach acid bleached his skin, and while the lurching of the animal almost certainly made him sick, he lay there in pitch darkness. But in that apparent bottom of the world, had he finally escaped from God?

No. Jonah realises that more than ever, He is a captive of the presence of the Lord. Deep in the ocean, further away from any other living human being, Jonah has not moved an inch away from the presence of God. So when Jonah finally yields to this truth, he prays.

*Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the fish's belly. <sup>2</sup> And he said: "I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction, And He answered me. "Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, And You heard my voice. (Jon. 2:1-2)*

Jonah prayed and repented of his disobedience. <sup>10</sup> So the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. (Jon. 2:10)

God was present in Israel, where Jonah received the call. When Jonah went down to Joppa, God was present in Joppa. When Jonah got on board the ship, God was on the ship. God was not only in the ship, but in the wind, and the clouds, and the sea currents, because He sent the storm. And once Jonah was in the ocean, God was present in the ocean, and providentially controlled the sea-creature to be there at that exact moment. And when it swallowed him, God was there. When it dived down

to the sea-floor, God was there, and could hear and receive Jonah's prayer.

Had Jonah reached Tarsus, we can say without hesitation, God would have been there too. Jonah is a living illustration of Psalm 139:

*<sup>7</sup> Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? <sup>8</sup> If I ascend into heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. <sup>9</sup> If I take the wings of the morning, And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, <sup>10</sup> Even there Your hand shall lead me, And Your right hand shall hold me. <sup>11</sup> If I say, "Surely the darkness shall fall on me," Even the night shall be light about me; <sup>12</sup> Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You, But the night shines as the day; The darkness and the light are both alike to You. (Ps. 139:7-12)*

How much of God was in Joppa, or in the sea, or in the fish? All of God. God is not spread out, and concentrated in some places. All that God is was fully in Joppa, and fully in the ocean, and fully under the ocean, and fully in Nineveh. It is not simply that His being fills creation and then stops. His being has no limit. God is present at all points in the universe with all of Himself.

That doesn't mean creation is God and God is creation, as the pantheists say. No, God is distinct from what He has made. Without becoming part of creation, He nevertheless pervades all of it. Transcendence and immanence meet in omnipresence, God is separate from His creation, and yet with: in Him, we live and move and have our being.

How is this possible? God's presence is not a material, physical presence. He is not made of some substance which then is diffused through the universe. God does not have size or shape. He has no spatial dimensions. God cannot be contained in a country, or localised to a region. He does not inhabit temples or rivers or clouds as the pagans thought of their gods. It is one of the many reasons why you cannot reduce Him to an image.

God's presence is the presence of His essence, as a personal, triune Spirit being. Understanding something that is not physical but yet is everywhere takes some work. Think for moment of things you cannot see, and yet you know they surround you. Gravity is affecting everything in this room, but yet it is invisible. Physicists still don't know what carries the gravitational force. Now imagine if gravity was not a force, but a mind, a personal, living, loving Being, so that whether you were on the Moon, or at the bottom of the sea, or in a plane, or anywhere on Earth, this Mind was around you, with you, in you.

But even that illustration breaks down because gravity has a boundary: were you to reach the edge of the universe, where space and time cease, there gravity ceases. But with God there is no limit, no boundary. All the cosmos is contained in Him, not as one circle within a larger one, but as one circle on a piece of paper that has no edges. There is no place beyond God, no limit where His being finishes.

How we need to free ourselves from the material view of the universe, that it is all a bunch of atoms and energies. Reality, on the deepest level is not a substance. Reality, at its deepest level is personal, and moral. Matter did not create minds. A mind created, and sustains matter. In fact, best we can tell, the absolute simplest building block of reality is God's Word: His Word spoke the cosmos into existence, and Hebrews 1:3 tells us He upholds or sustains it continually by the word of His power. Deeper, and more real than substances is consciousness, the great and self-existent consciousness of God. And it is everywhere.

This is the true and living God.

*Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, Measured heaven with a span And calculated the dust of the earth in a measure? Weighed the mountains in scales And the hills in a balance? (Isa. 40:12)*

Nothing like the pagan gods, who had to be relocated: *They lavish gold out of the bag, And weigh silver on the scales; They hire a goldsmith, and he makes it a god; They prostrate themselves, yes, they worship.<sup>7</sup> They bear it on the shoulder, they carry it And set it in its place, and it stands; From its place it shall not move. (Isa. 46:6-7)*

What about the Lord Jesus? If God is omnipresent, and Jesus is the God-Man, then how did that work? What happened to the Son of God in the Trinity when He was born in Bethlehem? And the answer is: His divine nature did not change at all. The Son was still fully God, and indwelling the Father and the Spirit. And as fully God, He remained in all places. In fact, Jesus alludes to this in John 3, where He says, "No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven." (Jn. 3:13)

But now that the person of God the Son was united to a human nature, then according to his human nature, He was localised, and found in one place at a time, with a spacial limit. The same person was now omnipresent according to His divine nature, and local according to His human nature. What His experience and consciousness of that was, we don't know – except that He had fully yielded up the independent use of His divine prerogatives to the Holy Spirit. Even now, in the place that is Heaven, there is now a Man, a glorified Man present in His glorified body, present among the angels and the redeemed spirits. But that Person, local as He is in His human nature, and He will always be, is simultaneously present at all points everywhere in fullness, according to His divine nature.

It is crazy to think of fleeing from this presence. Didn't Jonah know Psalm 139? I have a feeling that what Jonah was doing was what many of us do. He did not stop denying the omnipresence of God. He practically treated it like we do – if I don't think about it, it's not true. If I treat God's presence like something impersonal, like the air, then God isn't really here.

This is when you close the door and make sure no one can see what you're looking at on your laptop or phone or TV – hiding it from man, though God sees. This is when the man takes his wedding ring off and goes to that seedy place or immoral liaison – hiding truth from others and from himself, but God sees. This is the teenager telling her parents she is going to be at one place, but then sneaking off to another with her friends – parents don't see, but God does. But, like Adam, like Jonah, like Elijah, we run from God, thinking that if we can avoid thinking about God, then we can hide from God. But avoiding acknowledging Him is not evading Him. William Secker put it "A man may hide God from himself, and yet he cannot hide himself from God." You can ignore Him, but you cannot avoid Him.

*The eyes of the LORD are in every place, Keeping watch on the evil and the good. (Prov. 15:3)*

What would change in your walk this week, if you mediated on this profound truth: God is, and God is here? Here as I sit behind this computer screen. Here as I speak to my spouse, as I talk to my child, or my brother or sister, as I do my schoolwork, as I sit in traffic and deal with other cars, as I deal with workers and colleagues.

Spurgeon said, "I heard the story of a man, a blasphemer, profane, an atheist, who was converted singularly by a sinful action of his. He had written on a piece of paper, "God is nowhere," and ordered his child to read it, for he would make him an atheist too. The child spelled it, "God is n-o-w h-e-r-e—God is now here." It was a truth instead of a lie, and the arrow pierced the man's own heart."

He is not, as the silly song suggested, watching us from a distance. He is here, in all the fullness that He is in heaven.

That thought should lead us to answer our other difficulty with omnipresence – why Scripture seems to speak of God leaving and approaching, and being here, and indwelling some places and not others. We see it as we look at Jonah a little deeper.

In chapter 3, we read this,

**Jonah 3:1** Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, <sup>2</sup> "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you." <sup>3</sup> So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent. <sup>4</sup> And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jon. 3:1-4)

Amazingly, the city repents, from top to bottom. So verse 10 gives the result:

<sup>10</sup> Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it. (Jon. 3:10)

Chapter 4 has Jonah very displeased with this state of affairs, and hoping against hope that God will still destroy the Ninevites. God gives Jonah an object lesson by allowing a shady plant to grow up over Jonah, and then destroying it. Jonah's deep displeasure over the plant's death is contrasted with his callousness towards the Ninevites. Jonah is angry over a plant he did not nurture, but thinks God is wrong for showing mercy to people He had created.

In all of this, we can learn the answer to why God's presence is spoken of differently in Scripture.

## **II. God Manifests His Omnipresent Being Differently**

Though God is fully present in all places, God does not manifest that appearance to men or angels to the same degree in all places. He acts differently in different places, by allowing the immediacy of the encounter with Himself to be greater or less.

For example, when this book opens, how much of God's presence is manifest to the Ninevites? Very little, as they are a wicked people. By contrast, several hundred kilometres away, God's presence is manifest in the Temple in Jerusalem, because there atonement is made by His covenant people according to His law.

God is actually going to manifest His presence in judgement upon Nineveh, unless they repent. But when they do repent, we see a revival breaking out in the city, and anyone would say that God omnipresence was now especially manifesting in mercy in Nineveh.

We might contrast that with Jonah. Perhaps when Jonah was declaring good news of victories to Israel, he enjoyed closeness with God, and experienced the manifest presence of God as one of delighting in God's will.

But when he received the Nineveh assignment, and began running from God, what do you think that did to Jonah's experience of the presence of God? Certainly, he found out that God is actually present everywhere. But in his disobedience he lost a sense of the spiritual presence of God, he lost the sense of the manifest pleasure of God.

God's presence can be manifest to greater or lesser degrees in pleasure or in pain, depending on the people's relationship to Him. There is no more of God in Heaven than in any other place. But Heaven seems to be the place or dimension where the redeemed and the angels experience the greatest manifestation of God.

There is no more of God inside the atoms of my body than inside the atoms of an unbeliever's body. But when someone is born again, the Holy Spirit indwells a Christian, meaning His manifest presence is now specially manifest in a Christian's body in ways it is not manifest in an unbeliever's.

We can take it further. A believer walking in the Spirit has no more of God's presence than a believer walking according to the flesh. But Paul tells us in Ephesians 3:17 that if we live as strengthened by the Spirit, then Christ will dwell in our hearts by faith, and we will come to know the width and length and depth and height and to know the love of Christ. An obedient, submitted believer will have a greater experience of the manifestation of the indwelling Christ. A believer displeasing God experiences the absence of that manifestation.

This is because the manifestation of His pleasurable presence is contingent on a relationship of faith between God and a person.

But there is a manifest presence of God which no man should want, and that is God manifesting in judgement. As God pours out wrath upon unbelievers, His presence is now all too real to them, so that they will cry out, save us from the wrath of the Lamb.

And here is a point of theology where I was wrong in years past, and the Scripture has corrected me. I used to say and think that God was not present in Hell, that it was the place where God was not. And it is true that Hell is a place forsaken of grace and mercy. But it is not true that God is not there. He is there. He is there in judgement and justice, in wrath and jealousy. He is there, though all manifestations of spiritual relationship are gone, and what remains is God manifest in wrath and consuming fire.

God is here. How you experience that presence is entirely a result of how you are acknowledging that presence. If you like the scoffers in Psalm 94:7 say, "*Yet they say, 'The LORD does not see, Nor does the God of Jacob understand.'*" then you will not experience God's presence. The world will seem quiet, dead and lonely. But you will one day experience the presence of God in shocking reality, but it will be too late, for you will experience it as the presence of a God offended.

If you respond to God's presence with faith, saying as Jacob did, God is in this place, and I knew it not, and you believe His Word, and trust Him, and respond in obedience, the manifestation of that presence will grow. Not a vision, but the sense of His abiding love, His peace, His joy, His illumination. And if you keep pursuing Him, it will grow and deepen. And one day, when He cuts the silver cord, you will experience a manifestation of His presence far greater than you have ever known, for it will be face-to-face with Christ your Saviour.