

The Presence of God: Evading or Embracing

When people talk about haunted houses, they mean that within a house where there shouldn't be something or someone, there is some invisible presence in the house. People are not frightened by visible family living in the house, or visible guests visiting the house. But people are frightened by the idea of a living, personal presence invisible but nevertheless present in the house. It is terrifying because no one wants to have some invisible and yet living entity in a house, if you do not know its intentions.

But in some ways, the experience of a house being haunted is actually the experience of everyone, as they go about life, in a different way, perhaps not in a fearful way. Everyone senses at some moment in their lives, that this world has a presence in it, that even in the solitude of an open field, looking up into a night sky, or sometimes just alone with your thoughts, that there is a something, and more than that, a Someone who is here.

It was C. S. Lewis who said, "We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade the presence of God. The world is crowded with Him. He walks everywhere incognito."

When we read the Scriptures, we find out that the presence of God is not just one thing. In fact, the Bible reveals at least three forms of God's presence. The first is God's universal presence as the omnipresent Creator, where He is in all places at all times, and nothing that exists is outside the presence of God.

The second is God's special manifest presence, where He makes Himself known in a more concentrated, glorious fashion, such as Heaven itself, or special moments in human history when He revealed Himself in some visible or audible form. This second form includes the Person of Jesus Christ, where the whole fulness of the Godhead dwells bodily, and wherever the God-Man is, there the presence of God is known.

The third form of God's presence is when He dwells within His people, consecrating them as holy temples.

So there is a way that everyone lives in God's presence, right now, by virtue of simply existing, and being in the created cosmos which is kept and sustained by the word of His power.

There is a second way in which everyone will one day, see the manifest presence of God, in the day of judgement, some going on to enjoy God's manifest presence in Heaven, others being cast out. But whether you experience that third presence, God coming to dwell within, has to do with what you do with God's presence. And how you experience that inner presence has to do with what you do with God's presence.

We may either follow it or flee from it. We may evade it or embrace it. We can run from it, or return to it. And how you are responding to the presence of God determines what will happen to you for the rest of your life.

Psalm 139 is one of the most beloved of psalms, for good reason. It is all about the presence of the Lord. It is stirring in its beauty, filling us with awe and comfort about the presence of the Lord. But it also subtly confronts us with our tendency to want to avoid the presence of the Lord, and whether it makes sense to do so. It also guides us by example, of how to rightly respond to the presence of God.

David's song has three stanzas. He begins by showing us how intensely personal God's presence is. He goes on to sing of how inevitable God's presence is, how unavoidable it is. And then he draws us

even deeper, displaying his own invitation to God's presence.

I. The Intensity of God's Personal Presence

¹ O LORD, You have searched me and known *me*. ² You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. ³ You comprehend my path and my lying down, And are acquainted with all my ways. ⁴ For *there is* not a word on my tongue, *But* behold, O LORD, You know it altogether. ⁵ You have hedged me behind and before, And laid Your hand upon me. (Psalm 139:1–5)

David begins with the same words he will end with – God's searching and knowing of him. God's presence is not a static, impersonal thing, like the air filling a space, like light filling a room. God's presence is not like dark matter, invisible, but impersonal.

God's presence is intensely personal. This presence is not a person confined to a space, like we know persons occupying bodies. This is a person filling every space. What do persons do that oxygen and light does not do? Persons know and perceive and understand.

Look at the actions of these first six verses. Verse 1 – **searched** and **known**. Verse 2 – you **know**, you **understand**. Verse 3 – you **comprehend** (scrutinise, observe), you are **acquainted**. Verse 4 – you **know** it. These are the actions of a person. The person of God.

David describes how deep, and how intimate God's personal presence is. God knows him in all his actions: sitting down, rising up, my path, my lying down, my ways. Whatever I do, God, you see it, know it, watch it. The word for comprehend in verse 3 actually refers to the winnowing that Hebrew farmers would do, taking the grain, throwing it up, and sifting out the edible from the chaff. God sifts a man's life.

But God's presence is not stopped at the door of David's body.

A. W Tozer once spoke about the difference between matter and spirit. “One power of spirit, of any spirit ... is its ability to penetrate. Matter bumps against other matter and stops; it cannot penetrate. Spirit can penetrate everything. For instance, your body is made of matter, and yet your spirit has penetrated your body completely. Spirit can penetrate spirit. It can penetrate personality—oh, if God's people could only learn that spirit can penetrate personality, that your personality is not an impenetrable substance, but can be penetrated. A mind can be penetrated by thought, and the air can be penetrated by light, and material things and mental things, and even spiritual things, can be penetrated by spirit.”

The presence of God penetrates and sees into David's mind. “You understand my thoughts from afar”. It's as if God's presence is like super-vision, able to see a tiny bird from 10 000 metres up, so God's eyes can spot the tiniest thought in David. When I am still formulating my words, David says, when I'm still thinking what to say, Your presence has already seen what I am going to say. Some people are in the habit of finishing other people's sentences for them. “I know what you're going to say.” But sometimes they get it horribly wrong. It wasn't what we were going to say. But God never has that problem. While I am still deciding on what I will say, while the words are forming in my heart, God knows what you will say. No one will ever get to say to God, “I never said that!” Every word, including every idle word, is known by Him.

Which of us has not feared the idea of having our thoughts read by another, or having them displayed on a large screen? If people knew our thoughts, we fear they would not want to associate

with us. But God has seen every one.

² All the ways of a man *are* pure in his own eyes, But the LORD weighs the spirits. (Proverbs 16:2)

Sometimes we complain that people have misjudged us or been wrong about us because they don't know our good thoughts. We say, "He doesn't understand what I meant to do!" or "She's criticising me, but she doesn't know what's in my heart!" Well, there's one who will never make the slightest error in judging you. He knows every motive, every desire, every longing, every ambition, every plan. He knows perfectly why you did what you did, and he can perfectly judge what was good and what was bad in your thoughts.

So intense is this personal presence, that David says in verse 5: You have hedged me behind and before, And laid Your hand upon me. God has encircled David like an army of bodyguards. God has put His hand on David's head, like a Hebrew father blessing his son.

What does this amount to? The personal presence of God has completely and absolutely enveloped David and known him from top to bottom, inside out, past, present, future, external and internal. The thought is overwhelming for David to consider.

Psalms 139:6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is high, I cannot attain it. (Psa 139:6)

To try to imagine someone who knows you this intimately, this exhaustively, this minutely, this unerringly, this continuously is staggering. It is staggeringly good, or staggeringly bad.

This personal presence is either something we welcome, or something we flee from. It is either something we surrender to, and something we fight.

And to the sinner whose conscience is not fleeing to Christ, it is downright frightening. And so, haunted by the truth that God sees us, and knows our thoughts, and our words, and our actions, we begin to run. We try to hide. We might not be able to screen ourselves from His penetrating gaze, but maybe we can get somewhere where His gaze doesn't reach. If we are so naked and revealed in His presence, then maybe we can escape from His presence?

That's the next part of David's song. David imagines trying to get away from God's presence. He ends us singing about

II. The Inevitability of God's Presence

⁷ Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? ⁸ If I ascend into heaven, You *are* there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You *are there*. ⁹ If I take the wings of the morning, *And* dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, ¹⁰ Even there Your hand shall lead me, And Your right hand shall hold me. ¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall fall on me," Even the night shall be light about me; ¹² 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*. ¹ (Psalm 139:7–12)

Where could I go to escape God's scrutiny?, David asks. In verse 8, whether I go through the first heaven of the clouds, or the second heaven of the cosmos, or the third heaven of God's throne, God is there at every step. Travel to the known edges of our universe, 14 billion light years away, find the place where even light has barely reached, and you have not moved an inch away from God. Or change direction. Go down to the depths, go to the centre of the Earth, go metaphorically deeper than that to the place of the dead - Sheol, to the suffering pit of Hades, and you have not escaped God. Is God in Hell? Of course He is. Not His blessings, or His sweetness, but His presence. Those

who think they will escape God in Hell will be terrified to realise that Hell will be a manifestation of God's holy presence, God's presence in justice.

Well, if you can't escape God vertically, what about horizontally? Maybe you can move so quickly that you outrun God.

9 If I take the wings of the morning, And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, 10 Even there Your hand shall lead me, And Your right hand shall hold me.

The wings of the morning is an image which pictures the sunrise from the east, with dawn breaking, and the light of the sun in a moment come flying over the land, and reaches the furthest reaches of the sea, which from Israel was west.

The idea seems to be, if I could catch a ride on the beams of light, if I could travel at lightspeed, from the origin of the east to the endpoint of the west would I then outpace God? Could you move so quickly He could not keep up? Verse 10 tells us – even there, it would be God's hand leading, God's right hand holding. He made the light, sustains it.

Well, if we cannot find a *place* that eludes God's presence, or move at a *pace* that escapes God's presence, perhaps we can simply avoid being seen by Him. Perhaps we can skulk away, disguise ourselves, hide and be invisible.

Psalm 139:11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall fall on me," Even the night shall be light about me; 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. (Psa 139:12)

God does not need night-vision goggles, or infra-red sensors to spot you in the dark. God does not need physical light to bounce off an object and stimulate a physical retina in order to see us. But God's presence and knowledge of us doesn't even need light to see us perfectly. Your darkest deed in your darkest hour done in the darkest place, was as clear to God as if it were done at midday in plain sight.

Have you noticed? What time of day do people prefer to commit acts of wickedness? Even in an age of all kinds of electric lights, people still prefer the cover of darkness for sin. Darkness has an age-old attraction to the human conscience, as if somehow my sin is less visible, less noticeable.

David is showing us how futile it is to run from, and hide from the God who knows you. And yet people still try. There is Adam, trying to find a spot in the Garden where God won't find him. There is Jonah, heading as far west from Nineveh as possible, thinking that perhaps the ocean will put distance between himself and God.

"Am I a God who is near," declares the LORD, "And not a God far off? "Can a man hide himself in hiding places, So I do not see him?" declares the LORD. "Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?" declares the LORD. (**Jer 23:23**)

In the ancient world, there was one place which seemed the most hidden of all, the place of complete darkness. That was the human womb. Before the era of ultrasound, it was a human in secret, in pitch darkness, nine months in the making, unknown by anyone, not even if it was he or she, one or two.

But no, David says, this is not the one place where you escape God. In fact, here it gets even more personal.

13 For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb.

In this dark, unseen place, God was not excluded, or inactive. No, God, you formed, you shaped me from the inside out. The word for *covered* in verse 13 is the word knit, or weave. There in the womb, God was weaving you. I was listening to a doctor lecture on this, and he pointed out that in fact the collagen fibres that make up our skin are really a weave of interlocking fibres. And because they are weaved one way, our skin has elasticity. The eyeball is also a weave, but because the fibres are weaved differently, it is firm. Before you knew your name, before you had the idea of “me”, God was weaving you.

David does the right thing. He acknowledges that what God does in the womb is a work of art

Psalm 139:14 I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, And that my soul knows very well. (Psa 139:14)

The fact that we can now see inside the womb has not removed the mystery, it has only increased it. We now know of the amazing processes that allow one egg to be fertilised, carried, implanted, and then through the genius super-organ called the placenta, receive food and nutrients from the mother, without ever having the blood cells mix. The process by which the DNA dictates what will take shape, so that after 7 to 8 weeks, the basic architecture of the baby has already been formed, the limbs, organs, bones.

David says in verse 15 and 16, this was not hidden from you. You were guiding and shaping the process.

My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed.

God was shaping you. Before any human looked on you, God watched you and superintended you. Like a sculptor shaping his creation, He was there. Before even your mother or your father knew you, God was shaping you according to his purpose. He was deciding on your physical shape, your face.

In fact, He was determining the very length of your life. And in Your book they all were written, The days fashioned for me, When as yet there were none of them. (Psa 139:16)

Wouldn't it be scary if you were given the exact amount of days you're going to live, along with how many of them you have lived? But God knows those numbers. This all-seeing, all-present God knows you.

Now if you cannot avoid God's personal presence by heading to the height of heavens or the depths of hell, by travelling at light speed east or west, by hiding in thick darkness, or even in your unconscious, unformed state in the womb, why try avoiding God?

But yet we try. People spend years avoiding conviction. Many times when people tell you how much they dislike church, and how church is full of hypocrites, what they are really disguising is how much they hate drawing near to God, having the light of God reveal their sin. They are actually proving the truth of Jesus' words “¹⁹ And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. ²¹ But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.” (John 3:19–21)

What about believers? For many Christians, their Christian life feels like a lot of hiding from God. Yes, they read the Word, they come to church, but a lot of time and effort is expended in distracting themselves from thoughts about God, procrastinating so as to avoid an appointment with God,

finding other things to do instead of meeting with God, and trying to avoid that sense that God is calling us to talk with Him.

When we avoid our appointments with God be it on the Lord's Day, or be it in private prayer? Or when we keep swatting away the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and keep on running. We add more work to our plate, or more to-do's onto our to-do list, or we turn the music up louder, or we surf another website, check our email or social media feeds again, find something else to watch. It's still running. It's still imagining we can find a place, or a speed, or a time when God won't be there, and He won't see, and He won't know us.

But it is futile. Nothing is hidden from Him, because His presence is inevitable. And it is an intensely personal presence. It demands a personal response. So how did David respond?

III. The Invitation to the Presence

¹⁷ How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How great is the sum of them! ¹⁸ If I should count them, they would be more in number than the sand; When I awake, I am still with You.

David made a choice here, and his choice is to not evade the presence of God, but to embrace it.

First, David, adores God's presence. David does not squirm or squeal under the gaze of God. He sees that God's thoughts about him are from a heart of love. David embraces God's thoughts, and says to himself, how precious, how great is the amount of ways God thinks about and knows me. The very idea that God should observe me and know me and think of me continuously is precious. God's thoughts of David continue even when he is asleep.

You rejoice in the scrutiny of God. You take refuge in the forgiveness of Jesus Christ, hide yourself in the covering and cleansing merits of His Son, and then bask in the sunshine of God's continual love for you. This is something we do when we have embraced the good news of acceptance in and through Christ. No one can welcome the presence of God without forgiveness. ³ If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? (Psalm 130:3)

We don't know when this was written, but oh, if David had only had this attitude when he was tempted by the beauty of Bathsheba. But on that day he chose to run. Evade, avoid conviction. Had David remembered the gracious acceptance of God, the overwhelming love of God as He does here in Psalm 139, he could never have gone further.

The presence of God should not make us feel jumpy, nervous, and self-conscious. As Tozer put it, God is easy to live with. "Fellowship with God is delightful beyond all telling. He communes with His redeemed ones in an easy, uninhibited fellowship that is restful and healing to the soul. He is not sensitive nor selfish nor temperamental. What He is today we shall find Him tomorrow and the next day and the next year. He is not hard to please, though He may be hard to satisfy. He expects of us only what He has Himself first supplied. He is quick to mark every simple effort to please Him, and just as quick to overlook imperfections when He knows we meant to do His will. He loves us for ourselves and values our love more than galaxies of newly created worlds."

Second, David adopts God's perspective.

¹⁹ Oh, that You would slay the wicked, O God! Depart from me, therefore, you bloodthirsty men. ²⁰ For they speak against You wickedly; Your enemies take *Your name* in vain. ²¹ Do I not hate them, O LORD, who hate You? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You? ²² I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.

At first, this might seem harsh and even extreme. But there's a few things to remember. David was not living in a calm, placid time. He was the one who brought law and order after the chaos and violence of the time of the judges. He was the one responsible for claiming Israel back from the pagan Ammonites and Philistines and Edomites and Syrians. David knows that the wicked in his time murder and destroy, while blaspheming God.

David knew how to be merciful to enemies, but he also knew how to hate sin. He knew how to love mercy and how to love justice.

So instead of adopting a kind of cowardly, neutral position where he doesn't place himself in the firing line of opposition or criticism, David jumps in, and adopts God's perspective. He is firmly on God's side. He loves what God loves, and hates what God hates. God is here, and God is righteous, and I agree with God's law, God's Word, God's standards. I side with God. I don't side with those who mock righteousness, or flout God's Word. This personal presence of God is not some impersonal energy of the universe condoning all that everyone does. No, it is a holy, holy, holy presence, so David adopts God's perspective. Psalm 15 asks,

¹ LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill? ² He who walks uprightly, And works righteousness, And speaks the truth in his heart; (Psalm 15:1–2)

God's presence is personal, therefore we have to take sides. We have to choose.

Third, David admits the penetrating conviction of God.

In verse 1, David began by saying, LORD, you have searched me and known me. Now he says, search me, and know me. What is going on? David knows that God already knows him. But this is what love does. Love opens itself up to be known. Love unveils itself. Love deliberately reveals itself. Yes, David has been known passively by God. But now he actively throws open his life to God. Since God already knows me perfectly, no sense in pretending, faking, concealing. Since I cannot hide from Him, no sense in running, distracting, avoiding. Since He shaped Me, no sense in pretending He isn't interested in me personally. Instead, yes God, you are here. You see Me. You know Me. Here I am. Just as I am. Show my my sins that I might confess them. Show the right way, the way everlasting, so that I might do it.

In our study of John 13 through 17, the presence of God has been a major theme. The whole thing revolves around the absence of Jesus; how the disciples should live once Jesus is risen and ascended. Jesus taught the way He would now be present until the day He returns to take His people to the Father's house. That would be through the indwelling Spirit, illuminating the Word. Jesus taught that believers must then abide in Him, which is to live in practical union with Him through faithful obedience and faithful prayer. Really the same thing is happening here. David is abiding. He communes the presence of God, He conforms his heart to God's Word and God's ways, He allows the conviction of the Spirit.

He is going from passively experiencing the presence of God, to actively experiencing it. The one difference is that as an O.T believer David did not yet know the indwelling of the Spirit, a high privilege of N.T. believers. All the more reason for us to adore God's presence, adopt God's perspective, accept God's searching. To commune, conform, accept conviction.

This world is haunted by the Holy Presence of the eternally good God. So what are you doing with the intensely personal and inevitable presence of God? Ignoring or inviting? Evading or embracing? Running or receiving? David says, don't fight a battle you cannot win. Recognise Him. Receive

Him. Rejoice in Him.