

Living in Light of God's Omnipresence – Psalm 139:7-12

7 *Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?*
 8 *If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.*
 9 *If I take the wings of the dawn, If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,*
 10 *Even there Your hand will lead me, And Your right hand will lay hold of me.*
 11 *If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me, And the light around me will be night,"*
 12 *Even the darkness is not dark to You, And the night is as bright as the day. Darkness and light are alike to You. (NASB)*

The story is told of Donald Grey Barnhouse, early in his well-known ministry in the mid-20th century at the historic Tenth Presbyterian Church in downtown Philadelphia. [Below as told by Lawson, *Made in Our Image*, 75-76]

'An alumnus of Princeton Theological Seminary, early in his ministry he was invited back to campus to preach in Miller Chapel. As Barnhouse stood to preach, Dr. Robert Dick Wilson, one of the renowned professors at Princeton and a brilliant scholar, took his seat in the front row, which the young preacher found somewhat intimidating. Understandably, Barnhouse felt fear and trepidation about teaching the Scriptures to those who had taught him.

At the close of the message, Dr. Wilson approached Barnhouse and announced, "If you come back again, I will *not* come to hear you preach."

Barnhouse collapsed on the inside. How had he failed? Was his theology wrong? Was his use of the original languages improper? With all the courage he could muster, the young preacher asked the aged professor, "Where did I fail?"

"Fail?" Wilson replied. "Oh, you didn't fail. I only come to hear a former student once. I only want to know if he is a big-Godder or a little-Godder, and then I know how his ministry will be."

When his former student asked for an explanation, Wilson answered, "Some men have a little God, and they are always in trouble with Him ... He doesn't intervene on behalf of His people. They have a little God and I call them little-Godders."

"There are others who have a great God," Wilson continued. "He speaks, and it is done. He commands, and it stands fast. He knows how to show Himself strong on behalf of them that fear Him. You are a big-Godder, and He will bless your ministry." He paused a moment, smiled, and walked out.

What a lesson for Barnhouse! What a lesson for us!

As we've seen in our series, Isaiah had a big God, Jeremiah had a big God, Job had a big God, Paul had a big God, and King David had a big God. And the Lord blessed their life and ministry because of it, and we want the same view of God and His attributes that David wrote about in Psalm 139 to dominate our lives as well.

Ps 139:7 Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?

The answer is nowhere. There is nowhere we can be where God's presence and Spirit is not. Omnipresent means all-present, God is everywhere in the universe at the same time, although he is not limited by space or time, there is no space or time where God is absent.

It's not just a part of God that's everywhere; God Himself is everywhere – God is spirit, John 4 says, and we must worship Him in spirit and truth. *This* verse says we can't go from His spirit.

This is Hebrew parallelism – where the first line says basically the same as the second or expands. In other words, spirit = presence.

Omnipresence is different than pantheism, which says God is the trees and the forest, etc. The Bible doesn't say God *is* the world, it says He made the world, and He is in it without being of it; there is always a distinction between creation and Creator.

David says in Psalm 139 that no one can hide or flee from God. But there are some that tried (Jonah, Adam & Eve after sinning). Their son Cain didn't do much better, when he tried to hide his murdered brother and when God asked him where he was and what he had done.

Herman Bavinck has well summarized the implications of this verse:

'When you wish to do something evil, you retire from the public into your house where no enemy can see you; from those places of your house which are open and visible to the eyes of men you remove yourself into the room; even in your room you fear some witness from another quarter; you retire into your hearts, there you meditate: he is more inward than your heart. Wherever, therefore, you shall have fled, there he is. From yourself, whither will you flee? Will you not follow yourself wherever you shall flee? But since there is One more inward even than yourself, there is no place where you may flee from God angry but to God reconciled. There is no place at all whither you may flee. Will you flee from him? Flee unto him.' (*Doctrine of God*, 164)

Verse 7 is kind of a summary statement of this whole section, you cannot run and you cannot hide from God. You cannot escape from Him, so you might as well embrace Him. Nothing can separate us from God, and in verses 8-12 David gives us 3 different circumstances that cannot separate us from God, *so that* we will live more in light of God's presence.

I. DEATH WILL NOT SEPARATE US FROM GOD

Ps 139:8 If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.

The afterlife will not separate us from God's presence. God is not only in heaven, but is not limited by the heavens, or universe even.

TURN TO 1 Kings 8:27 "The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you"

If God is everywhere and cannot be contained by the heavens, why pray "our Father who is in heaven" and why does the OT say God's presence was in the temple in the Holy of Holies?

READ 1 Kings 8:30

Biblical writers saw no contradiction, God is purely present in heaven apart from sin, but we also recognize that He is present throughout the universe, in fact His immensity and presence is greater than the universe which cannot contain His fullness (v. 27)

It's true that God's *Shekinah* glory and presence did manifest itself between the wings of the cherubim at the top of the mercy seat, but we know from verse 27 that Solomon understood that was only a symbol of His presence, not the full essence of it. The temple was to be a nearby and constant reminder of God's presence and holiness, but we don't have to pray facing Mecca or Jerusalem or the Wailing Wall, because God is omnipresent

Paul explained it this way on Mars Hill to the philosophers: "*The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands ... [he goes on to say we should seek God] though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being* " (Acts 17:24, 27-28)

God is near to us and even unbelievers in and through God are living, moving, and existing in His presence whether they admit or recognize it or not. The theologian Bette Midler once sang "God is watching us ... from a distance" but the Bible says that God is watching us closely, even our movements and thoughts.

Sometimes I hear well-meaning Christians talk about how all of America's problems are because we have "taken God out of schools" – but the point of Psalm 139 is that you can't take God out of anything, He is and always will be in schools, He's still there whether or not we pledge allegiance to Him, He's in the courtroom even if the Ten Commandments monument is taken down, He is at every atheist meeting, and Romans 1 says that deep down inside, even the most ardent skeptic knows of the God of the Bible and His attributes, and no matter how hard he tries, man cannot fully suppress the truth or the presence of God – revelation and also our conscience bears witness of God's presence

We need to be careful not to think of church as "God's house" for worship.

- God is not *more* present at GCBC than at your home.
- The N.T. never calls the church a sanctuary, and it does not make the church the equivalent of the Old Testament temple, it says that *believers* are now the temple of the Holy Spirit.
- The emphasis is not so much on a "house of worship" but on a lifestyle of worship wherever you are.
- It is certainly a great privilege and responsibility to gather with other believers to sing praises, fellowship, and hear God's Word. But don't elevate this building like some Catholics or high churches do, and don't think that when you're outside these walls you can be a different person, because God is everywhere equally.
- The Bible never uses the word "church" to refer to a building, it is always speaks of believers, usually a local born again community.
- Your body is God's house of worship – think about that next time you are tempted to do something you would never do with other Christians around!

Being a part of a "church" time with the tribal Indians in the jungle of Ecuador made me realize how much I think so much only in modern 21st century western traditional concepts of what church should look like and be like. We can worship in a beautiful stain-glassed building with perfect order of service, and are not necessarily more worshipful than those Waodani Indians.

The woman at the well said to Jesus in John 4: “*Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.*”

Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father ... an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers.” (John 4:20-23)

When Jesus died, the veil in the temple was torn by God from top to bottom, and we are now all priests with access to God anywhere. This is the Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, which did away with the Catholic concept of clergy mediators for the laity. All believers have the privilege of going straight to God; the question is, do you do this?

What about you? Is your communion with God restricted to a certain place and time? Or do you enjoy fellowship with Him as a way of life? (MacArthur, *Awesome God*, 67)

If God is everywhere, is He in unbelievers?

The Bible does say the Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin, not just believers. But there is a different sense of personal relationship only for believers where God’s Spirit indwells and fills in a special way. But even with believers it a matter of degree and different than the fulness of God in Christ when He walked this earth. Colossians 2:9 says it was only “in Christ [where] all the fulness of the Godhead dwells bodily”

If God is everywhere, is God present in hell?

NKJV says “hell” here in 139:8b, the Hebrew *Sheol* can refer to grave but here v. 8a parallels w\ “heaven” – it’s not that David thought he was going to hell, but even if one did, he would not ultimately escape God’s presence.

1. God is present as judge
2. Contrary to many jokes or comics, Satan is not the ruler of hell, God is and He created it especially to punish Satan and his angels and all who reject God’s grace
3. God’s *relational* presence is not there, but the presence of His wrath is there

For believers, it is the special manifest presence of God that we can look forward to when we die that like the thief on the cross that day we can be with Jesus in paradise, in an eternal communion and close personal relationship – “absent with body, present w/ Lord”

Types of God’s presence:

1. Universal or general (Ps 139, *turn back here*)
2. Special manifest presence

Matt 18:20 “where two or three come together in my name, **there am I with them**”

God’s manifest presence is not the same as his general omnipresence. Don’t confuse the location of God (everywhere) with His relation to his people

3. Relational presence (ex: indwelling of believers)

Grudem: ‘God ... is present at every point of space with his whole being, yet God acts differently in different places’ (*Systematic Theology*, 173). He points out that the usual mention of God’s presence means “present to bless” – biblical statements about God being far from sinners means He is not present to bless, or we could say He is not present in a relational sense.

If you’re living in sin, this truth should shake you up:

Amos 9:1-4: *"I saw the Lord standing beside the altar, and He said, "Smite the capitals so that the thresholds will shake, And break them on the heads of them all! Then I will slay the rest of them with the sword; They will not have a fugitive who will flee, Or a refugee who will escape. "Though they dig into Sheol, From there will My hand take them; And though they ascend to heaven, From there will I bring them down. "Though they hide on the summit of Carmel, I will search them out and take them from there; And though they conceal themselves from My sight on the floor of the sea, From there I will command the serpent and it will bite them. "And though they go into captivity before their enemies, From there I will command the sword that it slay them, And I will set My eyes against them for evil and not for good." "*

II. DISTANCE WILL NOT SEPARATE US FROM GOD

Ps 139:9 If I take the wings of the dawn, If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,

John Franklin was an Englishman in the Navy in the 19th century who survived a number of battles including the New Orleans attack defended by General Andrew Jackson. He has been credited with discovering the Northwest passage and his Arctic explorations led to many honors from Oxford and Westminster Abbey. He was also a devout Christian who made his last trip in 1845 searching for the Arctic passage. Two cheering letters came from him, then news ceased. Years passed, and the fate of John Franklin was unknown to family or country. His wife spent a fortune searching for him. Finally a boat was found frozen in the north. In it were two skeletons and Sir John Franklin’s Bible. Psalm 139:9,10 was underlined: *If I ... dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me* (KJV). – [Taken from *On This Day*, April 16]

Jonah was swallowed by a whale deep in the ocean, but God was with him and heard his prayer. God was also with Paul when he was caught up to the third heaven.

God is with the boat lost in the arctic or the submarine that can go miles below sea level, and he is also with the astronaut who can go into outer space (like Christian Jeff Williams)

Taking the wings of the dawn in v. 9 probably means if he could fly like the sunlight – or in our language if I could travel with the speed of light, I could not get away from you.

At the end of verse 9, David says if I dwell in the remotest part of the sea – you cannot plumb deeper than God.

Ps 139:10 Even there Your hand will lead me, And Your right hand will lay hold of me.

As a believer David is finding great comfort in the fact that God’s hand will lead and hold onto him.

- David knew that God was present back when He was a shepherd boy, he would write “The Lord is my shepherd ... he leads me, restores me, makes me lie down.”
- He knew that God was with him when he faced Goliath and later the Philistine armies. “One plus God is always a majority.”
- He knew God was with him when he had to flee for his life, he knew God was with him when his family and kingdom later unraveled in a coup attempt, he knew and lived God’s presence as a man after God’s own heart.

The idea of speed, height, and depth not separating us from God reminds me of Romans 8:38
“For I am convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

When verse 10 speaks of God’s hand, I’m reminded of the times I held Ella’s hand; regardless of whether she holds my hand, I will hold hers. How much more will our Father in Heaven guide and protect us, and no one can snatch us from His hand and care.

Some of the most memorable verses in scripture have to do with the attribute of our Heavenly Father’s omnipresence – notice as I read these verses how the stability and lack of fear has to do with God’s presence

In Ps 23, David said *“yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me”*

David also said in Ps 16 *“I have set the Lord continually before me. Because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken, therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices, my body also will rest secure”*

In Ps 46:1 we read *“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear ...”*

Psalm 118:6 *“The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”*

David’s son Solomon caught the importance from his dad of setting the Lord continually before him, practicing the conscious presence of God: *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, lean not on your own understanding _____ and He will direct*

In Exodus 4, Moses was afraid about appearing before Pharaoh, but God comforted Him with the promise that God will be with him to help his mouth speak

Joshua on brink of promised land was exhorted: “Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged, *for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go*” (1:9)

The last words Jesus gave to His disciples “*Go, make disciples... lo I am with you*”

Hebrews 13:5 “*I will never leave you nor forsake you*”

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God ... [v. 9 says] The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you." (Philippians 4:4-6, 9)

The peace of God and God of peace is only promised for those who rejoice in Him always and pray in everything to Him – the only way you can do this is by remembering “The Lord is near” as v. 5 says, and practicing conscious presence of God. This may be one of the most helpful passages in how to apply God’s presence and receive His peace. The old saints used to speak of “practicing the presence of God” and I think we can really learn through some of those older writers and from biographies of great saints in the past

SO DEATH WILL NOT SEPARATE US FROM GOD, DISTANCE WILL NOT SEPARATE US FROM GOD, BUT NOTICE ALSO IN V. 11 THAT

III. DARKNESS WILL NOT SEPARATE US FROM GOD

Ps 139:11-12 If I say, “Surely the darkness will overwhelm me, And the light around me will be night,” Even the darkness is not dark to You, And the night is as bright as the day. Darkness and light are alike *to You*.

Ruth Bell Graham wrote a poem based on these verses in light of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15

Fleeing from You, nothing he sees
of Your [presence] as he flees.

Choosing his own path how could he know
Your hand directs where he shall go.

Thinking he’s free, “free at last,”
unaware that Your hand holds him fast.

Poor prodigal! seeking a “where” from “whence,”
how does one escape Omnipotence?

Waiting for darkness to hide in night,
not knowing, with You dark is as light.

Prodigals and Those Who Love Them, 1991, Focus on the Family Publishing, p. 38

The Puritan writer John Flavel gave some inferences or applications in light of this truth:

1. *Inference*, If this be so. then time, place, and opportunity, how much soever they seem to promise secrecy and concealment, should never further a temptation to sin.

4. *Inference*. Doth the eye of God see all the evil and wickedness that is committed in all the secret corners of the world ! How admirable then is the patience of God towards the world ! Who can imagine how much wickedness is secretly practised in a town or city every day ? Or if all the villainies that are perpetrated in a small circumference in one day were known to us, we should admire that God doth not make us like Sodom, for judgment and desolation before the next day.

5. *Inference*. If God sees all the secret wickedness that is committed in every corner of the world; how clear is it that there is a judgment to come, and that this judgment will be exact? (*Works of John Flavel*, 5:378-85)

Hebrews 4:13 says: "*And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.*" (Hebrews 4:13)

We have a couple guys with law enforcement training in our group here, and I'm sure it's not a secret limited to policemen that a lot of crime and sin happens in the dark. Why is that? (John 3:19 "men love the darkness, because their deeds are evil")

The "darkness" in Psalm 139:11-12 could go beyond the idea that God can see in the dark (like my brother-in-law's night army vision goggles), verses 11-12 may refer to dark *times* – the language and principle could apply to trials in your life, God is always with you.

Those verses I read earlier have always been some of the greatest comforts to Christians, to know like Psalm 107 says that in any distress, whether in the wilderness or lost at sea, God is there to help, whether we're in prison (like Paul in Philippians 4), or in a lion's den like Daniel 4, or like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace where they saw a fourth one "like a son of man" walking with them, or when having a difficult conversation like Nehemiah chapter 2, or even when walking through the valley of the shadow of death, or when in temptation when no one else is around like Joseph in Gen 39

Remember when Potiphar's wife was trying to seduce Joseph when they were all alone in the house – what did he say? "*How could I do this great evil and sin against God?*" (39:9)

God was with Joseph in this temptation, he was with him when he was in the pit and left for dead, He was with Joseph when he was sold into slavery, when he was earning his way to favor in the eyes of Potiphar, when he was falsely accused and sent to prison, when he was forgotten in prison by those who he helped get out, he was with him when Joseph was elevated to stature in Egypt, when he needed to forgive his brothers, when he was able to preserve the children of Israel. God was always with him and is with you!

APPLICATION – How should these truths affect us?

I suspect we do not often live in light of God’s omnipresence.

ILLUSTRATION: We live and speak differently when we know someone else is watching. Maybe you and your spouse are in your car and you’re arguing about something and pulling up next to you at the stoplight is someone from church. You smile and pretend you are happy and say, “Oh hey, Tim, how’s it going?”

You might drive down the freeway and whenever you see a cop, you slow down, but not even thinking twice about God Himself

You might watch different TV shows or change the channel quicker if certain people from church are in the living room, but the Holy Spirit Himself is always on the couch

We were at Disneyland a couple years ago watching the parade and I look to my left and I see John MacArthur with his wife and grandkids. That was pretty neat to be able to be next to one of my heroes and chat – how much more thrilled should we be to spend a day with the Lord. Imagine what that would be like to have the literal presence of Jesus next to you, to be able to talk to Him, ask Him questions, and just know He’s next to you to help you. *As believers, we do have that privilege!* If we really believe God’s omnipresence it will (not can) affect how we live.

When our kids see us looking right at them, and go ahead and disobey, that is defiance! But everytime we disobey God, knowing what His word says, sometimes even having the conviction kick in and there is that opportunity to stop and turn, and we all know God is looking right at us – to continue and sin is rebellion and defiance of high degree.

If you knew your sins and thoughts would be shown on the overhead tonight at Bible study, no one would be in this room. When we sin, the fundamental problem is that we do not take God seriously enough – we are not really living in light of what we know about His omnipresence, and are presumptuously sinning. To a Jew you did not really believe something until you lived like it, applied it in your life. May God help us to truly believe and then to live in light of God’s omnipresence.

PRAYER:

Dear Lord, help me to live in light of your presence, setting you continually before me, constantly conscious of your all-seeing, all-knowing intimate presence. When I sin “in secret” I am more foolish than Jonah trying to hide in a boat, or Adam trying to hide behind a bush. When I harbor sinful thoughts, I am not really believing in your omnipresence. I need your grace to believe what I know. I don’t need more information, Lord, I need more application. Help me to apply this message, that it would be the thought that comes to my mind next time I am tempted to sin. As David prayed in Psalm 19, “keep back your servant from presumptuous sins, let them not have dominion over me.” Forgive me for times I have not taken your attributes seriously, and help me to live more in light of your presence.