

The Presence of God. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 22 June 2016.

This morning we have reached the third of our talks about the character of God.

My subject for today is that of 'the presence of God', and my Bible reading comes from one of David's psalms – from Psalm 139. I quote:

Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend into heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in *Sheol*, behold, 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 ... even 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

Both of the questions which David posed were rhetorical questions. That is, he wanted, not to obtain an answer, but to make a point. David wasn't asking to know where he might 'flee' that he might escape from God's presence – as on numerous occasions in his early life we are told in the Bible that he had 'fled' from the envy and rage of the then King Saul.²

Indeed, to evade God's presence was the very last thing David wanted to do.³ In another of his many psalms, he had once pleaded with God, 'Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your Holy Spirit from me'.⁴ So, when he asks 'Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?', he isn't seeking advice and guidance – he knows that the only possible answer to both his questions is 'nowhere' – that it is impossible for any person to hide from God and His all-seeing eye.

Indeed, for his own part, David would far rather hide 'under' God's protection than he ever would hide 'from' Him. As he prayed in yet another of his psalms, 'Hide me under the shadow of your wings ... from my deadly enemies who surround me'.⁵

David asks his questions simply as a poetic way of stressing that God's presence is everywhere – that there is nowhere – absolutely nowhere – to which somebody may run to escape from Him.

And perhaps I should explain that the Bible speaks of God's presence in two very different senses. At times it speaks of some special localized manifestation of His presence – from which it certainly is possible to flee. As, for very different reasons, two Bible characters – Cain and the prophet Jonah – did in their days.⁶

But here David refers to something very different; to God's general, universal presence. Men and women may choose to *ignore* it – or even deny that there is such a thing – but David's point is that they cannot *escape* it.

And David drives home his point by considering various possible hiding-places, exploring the extremities of height and depth, of east and west and of light and darkness – only to reject each in turn.

First, vertically ... 'If I ascend into heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol (the abode of the dead), behold, you are there (literally, 'behold, you!')'. With these words, David ponders two places altogether inaccessible to man – heaven and the place of the dead.⁷

'Ascend into heaven'. Certainly the expanse of the *physical* heavens is simply staggering. I understand that astronomers currently estimate the diameter of the *observable* universe to be in the region of 93 billion light years – that is, about 550 thousand, million, million, million miles across – give or take a few feet.⁸ But I know that if, by some miracle of space travel, I could journey, not just to the Moon (where man has already been) or to Mars (which men dream of reaching within 15 years from now⁹), but to the farthest reaches of the universe, God would be there.¹⁰ How much more if I ascended into heaven itself – to what David's son Solomon spoke of repeatedly in prayer as 'heaven your dwelling place' – where God's presence is manifested uniquely and supremely.¹¹

And then David explores what for him were the extremities, not vertically, but horizontally. 'If I take the wings of the morning ('the wings of the dawn', that is), and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me', he says.

The expression 'wings of the morning' refers to the daybreak, to the very first beams of morning light in the east. If, David says in effect, I could fly at the speed of light (now known to be 186,000 miles per second), and so, in a fraction of a second, could shoot to the far side of (what was to him) the great sea to the west (the Mediterranean – which is the world's largest inland sea, stretching for some 2,400 miles from east to west) ... if I could speed to the far side of that sea, I would, David says, still find myself held by the same hand which is upon me now, ruling and overruling all affairs of my life.

And then David considers one final possible hiding place from God's universal presence – not that of *distance* – whether in terms of height and depth or of east and west – but that of *darkness*. Might then the darkness provide man with a refuge from God's presence? Indeed not! For the curtains of the night will no more cover us from the light of God's presence than the wings of the morning will transport us beyond its reach. For 'even', David says, 'the darkness shall not hide from you ... the darkness and the light are both alike to you'.

As many of you know, Linda and I have two grandsons – twins, now ten-years old – who normally live in Australia. I say 'normally', because in nine days' time they will be here in Cardiff for a short holiday. But I can still remember the times when, five perhaps six years ago, thanks to the wonders of modern technology, Linda and I were able to sit in my study, and, with the aid of my computer, were able to watch Ieuan and Gwilym while they both ate and played in their home a few miles north of Sydney. They were then at the stage when they enjoyed playing a simple game of hide and seek with us – and I can still picture them, putting both their hands in front of their cheeky faces – believing that if they couldn't see Nan and Gramps then Nan and Gramps couldn't see them.

And, frankly, the efforts of men and women to hide themselves and their sins from God are no more successful than Ieuan and Gwilym's hands were to hide them and their faces from their Nan and Gramps. And, like it or not, the God to whom we must all one day give account says to each of us, 'I can still see you!' For as the Bible says, 'The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good'.¹²

But, speaking of young children, I was reading recently a story told in Westminster Abbey many years ago by the then Dean of Westminster.¹³ Dean Stanley told of – and I quote – 'a little girl living with her grandfather ... one day, when she came back from school, he had put in writing over her bed, "God is nowhere", for he did not believe in ... God, and he tried to make the little girl believe the same as he ... The girl ... was very small. She could only read words of one syllable at a time ... and she read the words, not "God is nowhere", but "God is now here"'.¹⁴ 'God is now, at this moment', Dean Stanley added, 'watching over ... us. God is here in this very Abbey'.

And not, I might add, in Westminster Abbey only ... but here this morning in the lesser hall at Bethesda! For, as David made clear in our Bible passage for today, we can go as far *up* as we like ... we can go as far *down* as we like ... we can go as far *east* as we like ... we can go as far *west* as we like ... and we can hide behind the thickest curtains of darkness and secrecy, but we can never hide from God's universal presence and all-seeing eye.

I will leave the last word with another Old Testament writer – the prophet Jeremiah: 'Am I only a God at hand, says the Lord, and not also a God afar off? Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? Do not I fill heaven and earth? says the Lord'.¹⁵

Footnotes

¹ Psa. 139. 7-12.

² Six times: 1 Sam. 19. 10, 12, 18; 20. 1; 21. 10; 27. 4.

³ David found great delight in God's presence, Psa. 16. 11.

⁴ Psa. 51. 11.

⁵ Psa. 17. 8-9. Compare Psa. 27. 5; 31. 20; 143. 9.

⁶ Gen. 4. 16; Jonah 1. 3, 10. In Jonah's case, he undoubtedly fled from God's special and localised presence among His people and His land. God could be said to dwell in the land of Israel; 'do not defile the land which you inhabit, in the midst of which I dwell; for *I the Lord dwell among the children of Israel*', Num. 35. 34. See Jer. 23. 39 and (especially) 2 Kings 13. 23 – written concerning the time when Jonah lived. Compare also what is said of Adam and Eve, Gen. 3. 8.

⁷ When illustrating the inability of His foes to evade His judgement, God cited the same two places: 'Though they dig into hell (*Sheol*), from there my hand shall take them; though they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down', Amos 9. 2. Through the prophet, the Lord proceeded to give the assurance that such men would find no refuge either in the height of the mountain (Carmel) or the depth of the sea, Amos 9. 3.

⁸ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Observable_universe.

⁹ See

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_mission_to_Mars#NASA.27s_Journey_to_Mars:_Pioneering_Next_Steps_in_Space_Exploration_.282015.29.

¹⁰ The vast expanse of the heavens cannot provide one sinning angel with shelter from God's gaze; 'the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day', Jude 6.

¹¹ 2 Chron. 6. 21, 30, 33, 39. Compare 'Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into *heaven itself*, now to appear in *the presence of God* for us', Heb. 9. 24. Solomon shared his father's conception of the majesty and universal presence of God. To Hiram, king of Tyre (from whom Solomon had requisitioned cedar and pine wood from Lebanon, and skilled craftsmen), he testified, 'The house which I build is great: for great is our God above all gods. But who is able to build him a house, seeing the heaven and the heaven of heavens (i.e. the highest heavens) cannot contain him?', 2 Chron. 2. 6. Solomon recognized that he was to build a temple not for God's residence but for God's worship. The purpose of the temple was only that men might 'burn sacrifice (lit. incense) before him' there. Later, in his prayer at the dedication of the Temple, Solomon asked, 'Will God indeed dwell with men on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain you. How much less this house which I have built!', 2 Chron. 6. 18.

¹² Prov. 15. 3.

¹³ See <http://www.pef.org.uk/profiles/stanley>. According to William Archer, Dean Stanley was "incapable of distinguishing one tune from another" and "took off his hat when the band played 'Rule, Britannia,' under the impression that it was 'God Save the Queen.'" Archer, William (1905). *Real Conversations*. London: W. Heinemann. p. 127.

¹⁴ See 'Dean Stanley with the Children', pages 183-184 (downloadable from ...

<https://ia801409.us.archive.org/4/items/deanstanleywith00humpgoog/deanstanleywith00humpgoog.pdf>). Also see ... http://biblehub.com/library/chidley/fifty-two_story_talks_to_boys_and_girls/god_is_now_here.htm.

¹⁵ Jer. 23. 23-24. The Bible speaks of the earth being filled, not only with God's goodness, Psa. 33. 5, with His riches, Psa. 104. 24, with His steadfast love, Psa. 119. 64, with His glory, Isa. 6. 3, and with His praise, Hab. 3. 3, but, here in Jeremiah 23, with His presence.