

'Where shall I go from your Spirit?', Psa. 139. 7. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 10 September 2008.

We are currently looking at a series of important questions asked in the Old Testament. My Bible text for this morning contains two such questions; 'Where shall I go from your Spirit?' and 'Where shall I flee from your presence?'

These questions were posed by King David in one of his psalms. The whole passage, which is found in Psalm 139, reads, '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 David's questions 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 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 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 'in' God than hide 'from' Him. As he prayed in 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, did both Cain and the prophet Jonah 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!')'. 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 the *estimated* diameter of the *known* universe is anything up to 40 billion light years – that is, up to 240,000 million, million, million miles across – give or take a few feet. But if, by some miracle of space voyage, I travelled, not just to the Moon or to Mars, but to the farthest reaches of the universe, God would be there.⁸ 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.⁹

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 moment, 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, speaking this morning as someone who will on Friday, God willing and courtesy of British Airways, be flying westward for over 4,300 miles to the other side of the Atlantic ocean, believe me, David's words 'even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me' are no small comfort and encouragement

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 the darkness provide man with a refuge from God's presence? Indeed not! 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 three-year old grandsons in Australia. And, thanks to the wonders of modern technology, we are able to sit in my study, and, with the aid of a web-cam, are able to watch the twins while they both eat and play. They are now at the stage when they enjoy playing a simple game of hide and seek with us – and I can picture them now, putting both their hands in front of their cheeky faces – believing that if they can't see Nan and Gramps then Nan and Gramps can't see them.

And, frankly, the efforts of men and women to hide themselves and their sins from God are no more successful than leuan and Gwilym's hands are to hide them from Nan and Gramps. And, like it or not, the God to whom we must all one day give account says, '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'.¹⁰

Speaking of young children, I remember reading of an atheist who once told his child – a daughter as I recall – to write out several times the statement that 'God is nowhere'. But that, without realising its significance, his little girl inserted an extra space – leaving her father to consider a very different claim – that 'God is now here'.

I cannot vouch for the truth of the story but I can vouch for the truth of the point being made ... that God is indeed 'now here' – and that, as David made clear in our 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 the Old Testament 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'.¹¹

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 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.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Prov. 15. 3.

¹¹ 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.