

Your God is Too Distant

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Your God is Too...
Genesis 2

Let me begin by telling you a little parable. Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. And in this jungle clearing there were lots of flowers and beautiful plants. But there were also many weeds. One explorer said, "There must be a gardener who is taking care of this plot." The other explorer was more skeptical and disagreed. He said, "There is no gardener."

So, they pitched their tents and set watch, but no gardener was ever seen. The first explorer said, "Well, maybe he is an invisible gardener." So they set up a barbed wire fence around the plot and electrified it. They got some bloodhounds because they remembered from HG Wells' Invisible Man that the Invisible Man could still be smelled and touched, even though he couldn't be seen. But the wires never moved and they never heard a shriek from the gardener touching the electrified wire. And the bloodhounds never caught the scent of anyone coming.

However, the one explorer was not convinced. He said, "Maybe there is a gardener, who is not only invisible, but also intangible; and he is insensible to electric shocks. Maybe he is a gardener, who has no scent and makes no sounds. Maybe he is a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden he loves."

At last, his skeptical friend threw up his hands and said, "What remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener, or even from no gardener at all?"

This parable was told by one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century, a British atheist named Antony Flew in one of his books. One thing that Antony Flew argued with this parable was that the God that believers talk about is often so far away, so distant, so elusive, and too remote that there really is no difference between this distant, elusive, remote God and no God at all.

So let me ask you a question as I begin this message today. Is that the God you believe in – a God who is so distant from you, so distant and remote from your family and friends, so far from your concerns and from this world that it makes no difference whether your God exists or not?

Back in 1952 another Englishman named JB Phillips, who was a Christian, wrote a spiritual classic titled Your God is Too Small.

Cover Photo of Your God is Too Small by JB Phillips

It is a very brief book, but in it Phillips wrote about a lot of the destructive ideas that we have about God. For example, Phillips wrote about:

God, the Resident Policeman

He talks about how so many people do not distinguish between God and God's opinions and their own conscience. So we have this nagging inner voice and we say to ourselves, "That must be God constantly nagging me." As a result, I'm not led to love this nagging person; I'm not inclined to worship this nagging person. I'm not inclined to give my life to this nagging person, or believe that this nagging person really wants my good. God is a resident policeman, whose only role in my life is to tell me what I'm doing wrong. Compare that with who loves me and who loves this world, who wants to bless my life and wants to bless others through my life.

Or, Phillips talks about:

God-In-A-Box

What he's talking about is the view that exists in many churches and that is God only works in and through the church's machinery. If you work outside the church machinery or if some other church has a different label on their machinery, well, God couldn't possibly work in that place, or under those circumstances. We put God in a box versus a God who is free to move and to work as he chooses in unlikely ways, in unlikely places, and with unlikely people.

One of the most common ways that we reduce God down today is what I would call:

God the Cosmic Shock Absorber

Or you could substitute:

God the Giant Air Bag

God the Giant Pillow

That God's main function in life is not to rule over us as Lord, to be our King, the one to whom we owe worship and obedience, indeed, our very existence. God is there not to direct our lives. God is to provide a bit of shock absorption, a bit of comfort, a little help to smooth out the bumps of life. We direct ourselves; we determine who we're going to do everything and then when our plans don't quite work out, then at least I have God as a gigantic airbag so that when I crash, my plans don't work out, well I won't get hurt too badly.

Borrowing from JB Phillips, I'm going to do a series this fall titled Your God is Too... I'm going to talk about some of the false views of God that we have that keep us from really knowing and experiencing and enjoying and loving the God we read about in the Bible, the God who revealed

himself in and through Jesus Christ, our Lord. I've called today's first talk in this series, "Your God is Too Distant." Let's pray.

AW Tozer, who was a pastor in Chicago, wrote another one of those great little spiritual classics about 50 years ago. It was titled The Knowledge of the Holy.

Cover Photo of The Knowledge of the Holy by AW Tozer

We have copies of Tozer's wonderful little book at our Vineyard Bookstore on Cooper Road. I want to read to you from the beginning of Tozer's book, Chapter 1 which is titled, "Why We Must Think Rightly About God." I love this introduction. You will need to forgive the lack of gender inclusiveness in his language. Folks were a lot less sensitive to issues of gender back in 1961. But here is what Tozer writes:

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.

The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man's spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God. Worship is pure or base as the worshipper entertains high or low thoughts of God.

For this reason, the gravest question before the Church is always God himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but the company of Christians that composes the Church. Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God, just as her most significant message is what she says about him or leaves unsaid, for her silence is often more eloquent than her speech. She can never escape the self-disclosure of her witness concerning God.

Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question "what comes into your mind when you think about God?" we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man. Were we able to know exactly what our most influential religious leaders think of God today, we might be able with some precision to foretell where the Church will stand tomorrow.

What Tozer is saying is that there is nothing more important or more practical than our thoughts about God. In the deepest part of your soul, what do you really believe about God?

Knowing God is practical

The way that you think about God is incredibly practical. How you live, how you pray, how you feel, what you say, what you do, what to think, whether you believe in God or not, really everything about you and everything about me is going to be shaped by our conception of God. Now, in America the vast majority of people say that they believe in God. Well over 95% of Americans report that they believe in some kind of God. Even among the so-called NONES

NONES

...that you are hearing so much about in the paper - there is a growing percentage of folk in the United States who report no religious affiliation – but even among NONES:

Most “NONES” are not atheists.

75% of “NONES” believe in God.

50% of “NONES” say they pray occasionally.

10% of “NONES” attend religious services at least monthly

So, the vast, vast majority of Americans say they believe in God, even the vast majority of those who say they don’t have a particular connection to any religious institution.

What we believe about God is incredibly practical. For example, we might ask ourselves “do I know God well enough to give me peace when I’m in crisis?” Do I know God well enough to enable me to forgive someone even when I’m offended? Do I know God well enough to trust him even when I don’t understand or know what he’s up to? Do I know God well enough to have joy not only when my life is going well, but when my life is really hard? Knowing God truly and intimately is incredibly practical.

I read a story about a man who was asked, “What do you feel is the deepest need in your life?” The man, without hesitation replied, “I need a new God.”

“What do you mean you need a new God?” he was asked.

He went on to explain, “During the past few weeks I’ve heard from you that God loves me, that God is for me, that God has the power to help me in my struggles. That’s been difficult for me to hear because of what I’ve known about God from friends, my family background, from my old church. I’ve thought a lot about what you said. I’ve read Bible verses about who God is.”

“The other day it hit me. The reason I have so many struggles, the reason why I have so many unmet needs, is because I have the wrong idea about God. I thought of God as being a heavenly policeman who is just waiting for me to mess up. I thought of God as being really far away, very uninterested in my struggles or me. My God has been some conglomerate of my upbringing and my own father and my own church background.”

“My God has not been a God of love or a God who will work on my behalf. I need a new God.”

Some people say, “I don’t believe in God,” or “I have trouble believing in God. I have trouble relating to God. I have trouble feeling close to God.” I always want to ask those folks, “Which God don’t you believe in? Which God do you have trouble relating to? Which God do you have trouble feeling close to?”

People ask all the time, “Do you believe in God?” My answer is really simple. It depends upon what you mean by God. Mohammed Ali rejected Christianity and converted to Islam because he claimed, “I can’t believe in a blonde, blue-eyed God.” Well, I don’t believe in a blonde, blue-eyed God either. I don’t believe in a God who enjoys watching children suffer, or refugee babies washing up on a beach. I don’t believe in a God who loves sending people to hell. I don’t believe in that God either. I don’t believe in a conservative Republican God, or a liberal Democratic God, or a rightwing or leftwing God, or a God who fits into any of the humanly created political options that are presented to us as the total truth every day in the news. I don’t believe in a distant, remote God who remains uninvolved in our lives. I don’t believe in a God who doesn’t answer prayer. I don’t believe in a God who is anti-woman, or anti-poor, or anti-immigrant. I don’t believe in a lot of the gods that people claim are their God. What kind of God do I believe in?

I believe in a God who chooses to be present with his people.

God is present with his people

One of the questions philosophers regularly ask is why is there something rather than nothing. If there is a God, then why did God create anything in the first place? For Christians this is particularly challenging because the Triune God that we believe in – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – was perfectly happy before creation. The Triune God was not lonely. The Father loved the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Son loved the Father and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit loved the Father and the Son. God had no relational needs. He had no emotional needs. He had no physical needs.

So why did God create in the first place? Why is there something rather than nothing?

One of the best answers that I’ve heard is because God, in love, chose to share himself with other beings who could enjoy his presence. God created the world to inhabit the world and to dwell with people who could enjoy him forever.

I want to work this idea out for you – that God created the world, and especially created people, in order to share himself in love with other beings who could enjoy him. He created the world and the universe in order to inhabit the world and to share his presence.

Let me unpack this idea for you. The Bible is a big book and one of the ways to understand this big book is to lay hold of some of the major themes of the Bible. What are the big connecting themes that tie together the 66 books that make up the Old and New Testaments? What are the

major themes, the large connecting threads that bring this library of books that we call the Bible together?

One mega-theme that ties this whole big book together is the presence of God. We are supposed to be as God's people, people of the presence. The presence of God and God's desire to dwell with and be experienced by his people pulls together not only the library of books that make up the Bible, but God's desire to dwell and be present to his people ties all of history together.

God is present in Creation

If we go back to Genesis 2, right at the beginning of the Bible, the first Temple, the first sanctuary, the first dwelling place of God that we read about in the Bible was in the Garden of Eden. What I'm about to share with you, I'm heavily relying on the writings of a professor named Gregory Beale, who is a great New Testament scholar from Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. I want to give credit where credit is due. Gregory Beale offers 14 parallels between the Garden of Eden and the later Temple in Jerusalem where God dwelt with the Jewish people. There are these parallels, connections, both in language as well as theme that tell us that the writer of Genesis was thinking about the Temple. Or God, who inspired the writing of Genesis, was thinking about the Temple when he inspired Genesis 2.

So let me tick these off for you real quickly:

- The Garden of Eden was the place of God's presence

Eden was the place where God walked back and forth with our first parents, Adam and Eve. Here is what we read in Genesis 3:8:

Genesis 3:8 (NIV)

8 Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

We read almost the exact same words in the later tabernacle where God set his presence in the middle of Israel in places like Leviticus 26:12.

Leviticus 26:12 (NIV)

12 I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people.

- The Garden of Eden was the place of the first priest.

We read in Genesis 2:15 that Adam was placed in the Garden to work it and take care of it.

Genesis 2:15 (NIV)

15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

Now, it is really interesting that these exact same words in Hebrew were used several times to describe the work of the priests in the tabernacle and later in the Temple.

Numbers 3:7–8 (NIV)

7 They are to perform duties for him and for the whole community at the tent of meeting by doing the work of the tabernacle. 8 They are to take care of all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, fulfilling the obligations of the Israelites by doing the work of the tabernacle.

As in the Garden of Eden God is present in the tabernacle and Temple.

- The Garden of Eden was the place of the first guarding cherubim

I don't know what your picture of a cherubim is, but lots of people think of cherubim looking like this:

Picture of a Fat Baby Angel

Actually, the cherubim actually look more like this:

Picture of a cherubim that looks more like a lion

After sin came into the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden, the Lord placed the cherubim at the entrance to guard the way to the Tree of Life. And we also find statues of the cherubim guarding the Holy of Holies in Solomon's Temple.

1 Kings 8:6–7 (NIV)

6 The priests then brought the ark of the LORD's covenant to its place in the inner sanctuary of the temple, the Most Holy Place, and put it beneath the wings of the cherubim. 7 The cherubim spread their wings over the place of the ark and overshadowed the ark and its carrying poles.

As in the Garden of Eden, so in the later Temple,

- The Garden of Eden was the place of the first tree-like lampstand

It is very likely that the Tree of Life provided the model for the lampstand that was placed directly outside of the Holy of Holies.

Exodus 25:31 (NIV)

31 “Make a lampstand of pure gold. Hammer out its base and shaft, and make its flowerlike cups, buds and blossoms of one piece with them.

Picture of the Lampstand

- The Garden of Eden was the place for the garden imagery in Solomon’s Temple

There are many, many references to all of these plants and garden-like features in the carvings in Solomon’s Temple. So we read in 1 Kings 6.18:

1 Kings 6:18 (NIV)

18 The inside of the temple was cedar, carved with gourds and open flowers. Everything was cedar; no stone was to be seen.

1 Kings 6:29 (NIV)

29 On the walls all around the temple, in both the inner and outer rooms, he carved cherubim, palm trees and open flowers.

As in the Garden of Eden, so in the Temple.

- The Garden of Eden was the place of the first mountain

Eden was situated on a mountain. We read about that in the Book of Ezekiel. It was like Mt. Zion.

- The Garden of Eden was the place with an eastern facing entrance

Like the future tabernacle and Temple, Eden was entered from the east.

Genesis 3:24 (NIV)

24 After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

Ezekiel 40:6 (NIV)

6 Then he went to the east gate.

I could go on in describing these parallels, but the point is God’s purpose in creating the Garden of Eden was to be present with his people in the Garden, to build a sanctuary for his presence so that people could enjoy God, could experience God, could fellowship with God, could know God intimately, they could love God and feel his love for them. God was not distant from people in the Garden. He shared his presence with them.

But after our first parents sinned, they were kicked out of the Garden and separated from the presence of the Lord. They were no longer people of the presence. God became more and more of a distant idea to people. And distorted ideas about God began to grow as people lost touch with the presence of God. But it was always God's desire for people to experience his presence. So he instructed Moses to build him a tabernacle which would be like a moving sanctuary for God. And then later on, he instructed King David's son, Solomon, to build a Temple and reestablish the Garden of Eden on earth.

God is present in the temple

Again, the temple was a little model of the Garden of Eden. When we built the church building on Cooper Road, the architects put together a little model for us which we put in our old church lobby and people could walk around the little model and see what the future church building was going to look like. The Temple was designed to be a little model of the Garden of Eden. The tasks given to Israel was the same tasks given to Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve were told to multiply and fill the earth.

Genesis 1:28 (NIV)

28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

And by multiplying and filling the earth, they would be spreading the presence of God everywhere.

God gave the same commission to Israel – to multiply, spread out. So we read this commission in Genesis 22:17-18:

Genesis 22:17–18 (NIV)

17 I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, 18 and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

Not only the entire land of Israel, but the entire earth will be filled with the presence of the Lord.

But just as Adam and Eve disobeyed God, so did the nation of Israel disobey God. And they didn't carry out this great mandate to spread the presence of God over all the earth. God wanted the nation of Israel to be a light to all nations. We see this in Isaiah 42:6-7:

Isaiah 42:6–7 (NIV)

6 "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.

I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles,
7 to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. (NIV)

But instead of assuming their role as the intermediary, the ones who would take the presence of God and bring it to the nations, the nation of Israel believed that the Temple was their own private possession, and the presence of God was their own private possession that they were to hoard up. So God judged the nation of Israel and sent them into exile. And so they are no longer people of the presence.

But, God's plans can never be defeated. God created this world with the intention of sharing his presence with beings who could enjoy God, who could walk with God, who could have intimacy with God. He created the earth to be the dwelling place of the presence of God – first in the Garden of Eden, then in the Temple. When the Temple is destroyed, how did God bring his presence to this world?

God is present in Jesus Christ

In the gospel of John we read this in John 1:14:

John 1:14 (NIV)

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

God stepped into the Garden. Going back to that first parable I told, God set off the alarms. The bloodhounds howled. The electrified fence shook. God showed up in Jesus Christ.

Where do we find the presence of God? John says The Word, the expression of God, became flesh and made his dwelling among us. Literally, The Word, the very expression of God became flesh and tabernacled among us. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. Another translation is, the Word became flesh and *pitched his tent in our midst*. The picture John is painting is drawn from the Old Testament. In the book of Exodus we read that there was a tent, a tabernacle in the middle of the Israelite camp in the wilderness. There was a tent. And it was in this tent that Moses used to go to meet with God. People would stand back and they would see a cloud, a pillar, literally descend on that tent. The cloud was God's glory visibly manifested. And as Moses went into the tent they would see God's glory come down to meet with him. If a person wanted to meet with God, they'd go to the tent. John is saying that the place where we meet with God today is Jesus. His flesh, his body, is the tent that contains the glory of God. The Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us. We have seen his glory. We see the cloud come down in Christ.

How do I experience the presence of God? I go to meet with God by turning to Jesus Christ. People say, “I find it difficult to connect with God.” Perhaps you find God in nature just by walking in the woods, or by hiking through some quiet ravine. We’ll talk about that next week. Perhaps you connect with God in music or in art by listening and observing, and taking in its beauty. Perhaps you would say about yourself, “I find God in loving, warm relationships with other people, through friendships, through holding my child, through holding my grandchild,” or I find God through A.A. or some other 12-step program.

There is something of God in nature. There is something of God in the arts. There is something of God in loving relationships. There is something of God as people get together and are honest with each other as they are going through recovery together. But if you want the fullness of God’s presence, what the Bible calls his glory, if you want something that goes beyond a vague feeling, a fleeting sense, to something that is deeper and more substantial, you’ve got to go to Jesus.

Jesus became God’s Temple, God’s dwelling place, God’s tabernacle in the world. He says this explicitly in John 2.18-21:

John 2:18–21 (NIV)

18 The Jews then responded to him, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”

19 Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”

20 They replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” 21 But the temple he had spoken of was his body.

Jesus took over all the functions that the Temple in earlier days performed. For example, the forgiveness of sins that the Temple in the past imperfectly pointed to is now offered by Jesus. The sacrificial system that the Temple employed is now taken over by the sacrifice of Christ. And the presence of God that was there in the Holy of Holies in the Temple, we now find in Jesus. The glory of God dwells in Jesus.

But it has never been the purpose of God to hold on to his presence for himself. God’s purpose from the beginning was to share himself, to share his presence, to be near to his people. And so

God is present in the church

Every human being who turns in faith to Jesus, every person who turns to Jesus and says, “Jesus, forgive me. Save me. I welcome you into my life,” every person who trusts in Jesus as Savior and follows him as Lord becomes part of the living Temple now. Here is what we read in 2 Corinthians 6.16:

2 Corinthians 6:16 (NIV)

16 What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said:

“I will live with them
and walk among them,
and I will be their God,
and they will be my people.”

Here is what we read in Ephesians 3.19-22:

Ephesians 3:19 (NIV)

19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.-22

What is it that makes the church unique among all of the other clubs and gatherings? What makes the church distinct from every other social group, or charitable organization or institution on the earth?

Church is not unique because it is better organized. It is not particularly special because we are better financed. I think that Walmart and Apple and Amazon, are a little better financed than we are. We are not even unique in our ability to teach. There are lots of educational institutions and TED Talks that educate people and teach better than the church does.

Well, what is it that sets the church apart? It is the presence of God. It is not what human beings do or how human beings relate. If you eliminate from your thinking the presence of *God*, then you misunderstand the church. That is why the secular analysis of the church is often so ludicrous. You listen to newscasters talking about the church. Whether it is cities preparing for the Pope Francis' visit; or the Southern Baptist church as they meet for a convention. The categories that are used don't capture what the church is all about. They are totally secular categories. So, the newscaster will examine the Church in political terms as a conflict between conservatives and liberals. They will examine the Church in terms of human traditions—the traditionalists versus the progressives. That's how the Pope's upcoming visit will be viewed in the church. But, they don't get at the big issue in the church—the presence of God.

You know, it is often said that the only thing about love that is really worth having is the part that you can't define. You can carve up love in a million ways, but the only part that is worth having is the part that you cannot define. Or to give you another picture, you know, a veterinarian can take a dog in veterinary school and dissect it. She can learn about the dog's digestive system. Examine the dog's liver and weigh it; the dog's kidneys. She can learn about the various interactions of enzymes in the dog's body and trace out all of the paths of its neurological system. A veterinary student can take cells from the dog and look at them under a microscope. But, what a veterinarian can't do is analyze and completely capture the very thing that makes the dog so

nice, so much fun to play with, the reason why you would want the dog around the house. She can't capture the *life*.

The only reason to have a church and to do church, at all, is if the life of God, the presence of God is there. When the church becomes more and more of a purely human organization that just runs systems and runs programs, hosts meetings – but there is no life, no presence of God, then it is like a dead dog that is being examined on the operating table.

Let me give you a bit of statistical support for what I'm saying about the church. Back in the year 1900, according to the best statistician of Christianity, a guy by the name of David Barrett, if you go back to 1900 there were about 40 people in the world, who you could have called Pentecostal, charismatic, or part of what I have labeled the empowered evangelical wing of the church that we're part of in the Vineyard.

1900 - 40

There were about 40 who believed in and practiced all of the gifts of the Holy Spirit that we find listed in places like 1 Corinthians 12 – gifts like prophesy or healing.

By 1945 that number had grown to

1945 - 16 million

By the year 2000,

2000 - 550 million

And David Barrett projects that by 2025 there will be

2025 - 740 million

740 million Pentecostals, charismatics, and empowered evangelicals. It is people who embrace the life of God, understand that what makes the church unique is the presence of God – those are the parts of the church that is growing not only here in the US, but all over the world.

So there is this mega-theme in the Bible, this theme of the presence of God. The reason why there is something rather than nothing is because God desired to share his very being, his presence with creatures who could enjoy him, know him, be intimate with him, and relate with him. God brought his presence in the Garden of Eden and then in the tabernacle and Temple, and then in Jesus Christ, and then in those who are attached to Jesus by faith. He makes us people of the presence.

And finally,

God is present in the new creation

The new heavens and the new earth that are spoken about at the very end of the Bible in the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation. In the very last chapters the new creation is described as a new Temple. The true Temple is going to come down as heaven mingles with earth and fill all of creation. Here is what we read in Revelation 21.3-4:

Revelation 21:3–4 (NIV)

3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

And then we read in Revelation 21.22:

Revelation 21:22 (NIV)

22 I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

God’s original purpose in sharing himself is fulfilled in the new creation. One day as the Prophet Habakkuk puts it in Habakkuk 2.14,

Habakkuk 2:14 (NIV)

14 For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

...the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. That’s where we’re headed. That’s where we’re going. That’s what life is about. It is about enjoying the presence of God, knowing God intimately, and welcoming his presence into your life.

Now, if God made the world to share his presence, if God’s will is to be present, if the presence of God is one of the mega-themes of the Bible, then why don’t we experience him more?

Why don’t we experience his presence more?

We’re supposed to be people of the presence. Next week I’m going to share some of the ways you and I can experience more of the presence of God. But I want to close with two reasons why I think we don’t experience God’s presence. The first is because

We flee from his presence

Psalm 139.7 says this:

Psalm 139:7 (NIV)

7 Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?

This flight from the presence of God is as old as our first parents, Adam and Eve. It says back in the book of Genesis that after Adam and Eve sinned against God, God came into the Garden seeking them, wanting to share his presence with them. But Adam and Eve tried to make themselves unfindable. They hid. Once they sinned, their guilt caused them to run from God's penetrating eye, from God's intimate knowledge. They ran and hid. They were saying, in effect, to God, "Stop looking at me. Stop drawing near to me. Stop bringing me the truth of your person. Stop showing me myself. Too much light. Too much truth. Too much reality. I want to bury myself in a lie. I want to cover myself with fantasies and illusions of my own making. I don't want to stand in the brightness of your presence. I want to hide in the dark."

Jonah also tried to flee from the presence of God. When the prophet Jonah didn't want to obey God's call, he ran. Here is what it says in Jonah 1.1-3:

Jonah 1:1-3 (NIV)

1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: 2 "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

3 But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.

Of course, there is no running from God. God is in the heights. God is in the depths. Here is what we read in Psalm 139.8:

Psalm 139:8 (NIV)

8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

Jonah, who ran to flee from God, found God in the depths of the sea. If you go to the east God is there, if you go to the west, God is there.

Psalm 139:9(NIV)

9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,

We all run. We all hide. We all weave together lies about life and what will give us happiness. The call to you is to repent which literally means to turn around, you've been running from God.

Turn around and start running towards God. Instead of spending your life doing the impossible, trying to hide from God, who is present everywhere, spend your life facing God, welcoming his presence. Jesus said, “Come to me and I will give you rest.” Why don’t we experience God’s presence more? Because we flee from his presence.

Second, and finally,

We don’t recognize his presence

Friends, God is with us whether we feel his presence in the moment or not, whether it seems like God is active, whether it feels like God has answered our prayers. I will pick up this theme a bit more next week. But let me share a recent experience to encourage you. I actually shared this on my Facebook account. By the way, if you ask to friend me on Facebook, I will friend you. I friend everyone. Sometimes people write and say, “Oh, Pastor Nathan, thank you for friending me.” But I have like over 7000 really close Facebook friends, so I will friend you. And if you write me something mean, I will delete you – not from existence, but just from my list of Facebook friends. But I shared this recent experience on Facebook.

I had the experience of doing a funeral for a longtime member of our church. This woman was part of our church from the beginning, going back to an original Bible study in the 70’s. This longtime church member lived a really hard life. Her mom died prematurely by her own hand when this church member was a young woman. So she became the surrogate mother to her two youngest twin sisters. She gave up her whole life to raise these two 5-year old sisters. She never married. She never had a career. She raised her sisters.

This church member struggled with depression for most of her life. She also struggled with health issues. But for 40 years she prayed that her family would come to know Jesus because this church member loved Jesus more than she loved anything else in the world. She loved Jesus and she wanted her family to know Jesus – to enter his presence and not keep running from him. She prayed. And then she died.

And while we were talking about preparations for this faithful woman’s funeral, I met with one of her sisters. I said, “Listen, you know your sister wanted more than anything in the world for you to know Jesus.” She said, “I know that.” I said, “You know she prayed for you for 40 years. Don’t you want to trust in Jesus? Don’t you want to know him as your Savior and your friend?” She said, “Yes.” I said, “Let’s pray.” And she received Jesus.

At the funeral I talked with this woman’s husband. I said, “You know, your wife surrendered her life to Jesus the other day in my office.” He said, “I know. She told me. She’s been reading her Bible and she wants me to go to church with her.” I said, “Don’t you want to do that also? You know you’ve been prayed for decades; more than anything, your family member wanted you to know Jesus. Would you like to receive him now?” He said, “Yes. That’s what I would like to do.” So we prayed.

Now, I don't know what this faithful woman's experience was with God when she prayed for 40 years and saw nothing. She may have thought to herself, "You know, God is not here. God is not listening. God has not heard. God is far away. God is distant." But not even our deaths can keep God from answering the prayers we pray during our lives. In the week of her funeral, God answered and two of her family members were carried by her prayers into the presence of Jesus. Jesus revealed himself to them and they were saved.

God isn't always distant, remote – like the invisible gardener that I spoke about in the opening story. God is near. God is present and he desires for you and me to be the people of the presence. Let's pray.

- I. **Knowing God is practical**
- II. **God is present with his people**
 - A. God is present in Creation
 - B. God is present in the Temple
 - C. God is present in Jesus Christ
 - D. God is present in the Church
 - E. God is present in the New Creation
- III. **Why don't we experience God's presence more?**
 - A. We flee from his presence
 - B. We don't recognize his presence