

Prayer of praise

For the glory of creation
streaming from your heart,
we praise you.

For the air of the eternal
seeping through the physical,
we praise you.

For the everlasting glory
dipping into time,
we praise you.

For the wonder of your presence
beckoning from each leaf,
we praise you.

For setting us,
like the stars in their courses,
within the orbit of your love,
we praise you.¹

Prayer of confession

**Jesus, you were driven to the sands
by the searching Spirit.
Strip from us what is not of you.
Forgive us for
our selfish deeds,
our empty speech,
and the words with which we have wounded.
Forgive us for
our false desires,
our vengeful attitudes,
and for what we have left untended.**²

Prayer of thanksgiving and assurance of forgiveness

For the Person you sent to restore us
when we fell away from the goodness of your creation,
we give you thanks, O God.

For harmony restored through your Spirit
moving upon the turbulent waters of our lives,
we give you thanks, O God.

For the honour you give us
of lives flowing in the rhythm of your tides,
we give you thanks, O God.

For setting each of us,
like the stars upon their courses,
within the orbit of your love,
we give you thanks, O God.³

[Exodus 33:12-23](#)

¹⁴ The Lord replied, 'My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.'

¹⁵ Then Moses said to him, 'If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here.'

I want to talk today about the presence of God. Because it's not a straightforward matter. Let's begin with this passage, but also allude to other parts of the Bible.

Moses is clearly concerned that the presence of God will not be with the Israelites. Yet we affirm that God is not limited to a nation or geographical boundaries but is present everywhere in his creation, unlike the religions among whom Israel lived, who believed that different gods ruled different places.

And that's similar in the rest of Scripture. God is present everywhere, but in the book of Revelation he talks about withdrawing his 'lampstand' from those churches which are not walking in his ways.

Or we have the image in Genesis chapter 1 where the Spirit of God is brooding over the waters of creation, yet the New Testament only talks of the Holy Spirit indwelling those who have faith in Christ.

In the Old Testament, the Spirit of God only comes upon select individuals for specific tasks or vocations, but in the New Testament the Holy Spirit is given to all who believe.

There are centuries of tradition of Christians praying, 'Come, Holy Spirit,' even though we believe the Holy Spirit is already here.

Do you feel the tensions? Do you see the problems?

So how should we understand the presence of God? And how should that make a difference to the way we live? Because this is not just a theoretical or technical question. This affects how we live.

Firstly, *God's general presence.*

Because God is the author of creation, and because the Son of God 'sustain[s] all things by his powerful word' (Hebrews 1:3) we can say that God is present throughout his creation, even though he is distinct from creation. Creation is not part of God, but God is present everywhere.

This truth brings both a challenge and also a comfort.

The challenge is that no-one can have an excuse not to respond to God. As Paul puts it in Romans 1:19-20,

¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

Or as Paul also put it when preaching to people in the town of Lystra,

¹⁷ Yet he has not left himself without testimony: he has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.' (Acts 14:17)

The fact that God leaves evidence of his presence throughout creation means that even if people don't specifically hear about Jesus Christ they still have no reason not to respond to the light they have received about him.

The comfort of God's presence everywhere is for the believer. We hear it in part of Psalm 139:

- ⁷ Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
- ⁸ If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
- ⁹ If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
- ¹⁰ even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.
- ¹¹ If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,'
- ¹² even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

None of us can shake God loose. The unbeliever still has to deal with God as what Francis Thompson memorably called 'The hound of heaven'. It's worth remembering when we pray for those who do not have faith in Christ.

And the believer who may be going through trouble can be reassured that God is present and still on their case. They are not forgotten by God.

Secondly, God's presence in people.

Time to upset some of the sentimental notions often abroad in our churches.

Some years ago, I read a copy of the magazine 'Roots' that is used in many churches for children's sessions or all-age services in which a prayer included the words, 'God, thank you that you live within all people of goodwill.'

Similarly, I hear people saying that the Spirit of God must live in all people on the grounds of what Jesus said in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, where the King of heaven says to the sheep, 'Inasmuch as you did this to these people you did it to me,' and similarly he says to the goats, 'Inasmuch as you did not do this to these people you did not do it to me.' Thus they conclude God must be present in all people.

Unfortunately, this is nonsense. Jesus is speaking within the conventions of the Semitic people of the Middle East. He is using what some scholars call a 'Heightened Semitism'. It's an extreme metaphor.

To get a sense in English of what he means, we would be better off adding a few words that perhaps make for more of a paraphrase. For example, 'Inasmuch as you did it to these people *it is as if* you did it to me.'

The Bible distinguishes between the Holy Spirit and the human spirit. The trouble is, it uses the same word for both spirits – *ruach* in the Hebrew of the Old Testament, for example.

Thus, God only *indwells* those who repent, put their faith in Christ, and seek to be his disciple. These are the people to whom God grants the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Can God use non-Christians in his purposes? Because God is sovereign, yes. Can God speak to them and do things in their lives? Yes again.

But he does it from the outside, if I can put it that way. God only indwells his people. He lives within those who have invited him into their lives. He does not break in like a burglar to those who have not welcomed him in.

If we want to know God taking up residence in our lives, then the thing to do is to respond to the grace and love he has shown us in Jesus by turning away from our selfishness, trusting ourselves to Jesus, and committing ourselves to following him.

Thirdly, *can we lose God's presence?*

At the outset of this point I need to make clear that I stand within the Arminian tradition with which John Wesley identified, rather than the Calvinist tradition.

I say that because it makes a difference to how we approach this question. With Wesley and the Arminians, I believe it is possible to lose your salvation and hence the indwelling presence of God. This is in contrast to our Calvinist friends, who believe that the elect can never lose their salvation. They talk about 'The perseverance of the saints' and 'Indelible grace.'

Yet even though I stand in that tradition, some of you know that I get rather wound up by the smug Christian car sticker or noticeboard poster containing the slogan, 'If you feel God is far away from you, guess who moved.'

The problem with the slogan is not only its smugness, but the fact that while it's true, it's only half-true.

So yes, we can sense God is far away or absent when we move away from him, when we choose sin instead of holiness. We may not want to face him. Like the

story of Adam and Eve in the garden after eating the forbidden fruit, we may want to cover up or even hide from God.

Actually, what God wants from us at such times is not to hide but to come back to him. He wants us to return in confession, and have our relationship restored by his forgiveness. Let's not move away from God, but return to him.

But I said the car sticker is only a half-truth. Why? Because while it's true that we sometimes hide from God, it's also true that sometimes God hides from us.

Why on earth would God hide from us? Because he needs to teach us that the Christian life is lived by faith, not sight. He may encourage us at times, especially when we are young in the faith, with all sorts of wonderful spiritual experiences. Some Christians refer to these special and dramatic episodes as revealing the manifest presence of God, as opposed to the general presence of God.

But we cannot rely on the experiences, only on God. So sometimes he hides, like the sun behind the clouds. He asks us to trust him even when we cannot see or feel him. He is still there, just hiding for our own good. In extreme versions, this is what the Christian mystics have called 'The dark night of the soul.'

What is our response to all this? Always draw near to God, even and especially if we have sinned, to find grace.

And if we do not feel God is near but have examined ourselves and do not believe we have put a distance between God and us by sin, then we learn to trust him more while he hides behind the clouds.

In **conclusion**, I'm aware that in this short time I can only sketch out some major points about God's presence. This talk may be more like a line drawing than an oil painting.

But I hope that if you are a believer in Jesus this encourages you to know he is always present, that we can draw near to him even if we have sinned, and that whether or not we feel he is present he still calls us to trust him.

If you are not yet at the stage of saying you follow Jesus, I hope the thought of God's presence will provoke you to seek him and put your life in his hands. Whether or not you have sensed his presence yet, I can assure you he longs to be found by you.

Prayers of intercession

Day by day, dear God,
teach us from your Word and your world;
lead us on our pilgrimage of life;
help us to live in your rhythms;
spur us to overcoming prayer;
strip from us all that clutters;
cherish through us your creation;
heal through us what is broken;
blow us to places beyond our comfort zones;
inspire us to foster unity;
reach out through us with your justice, truth, and love,
that we may flame and struggle for you for ever.⁴

When the ride is bumpy and the world passes us by,
you are God with us.

When we are edged aside and doors are shut in our faces,
you are God with us.

When others are out to get us
and our homes are not secure,
you are God with us.

When our lives are but a flicker in the encroaching dark,
you are God with us.

The God of life be our champion and leader.
We shall not be left in the hand of the wicked;
we shall not be bent in the court of the false;
we shall rise victorious above them
as rise victorious the crests of the waves.⁵

The Lord's Prayer

Blessing

Christ be within us,
Christ be beside us,

Christ in the stranger,
Christ in the friend,
Christ in our speaking,
Christ in our thinking,
Christ in our working,
Christ at our end.⁶

¹ Ray Simpson, *His Complete Celtic Prayers*, #1237

² *Op. cit.*, #1198

³ *Op. cit.*, #259 second half, echoing prayer of praise and a prayer of George McLeod

⁴ *Op. cit.*, #782.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, #760.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, #789.