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The Covenant Presence of God Retracted, Part 2

As we approach our passage today, it is important that we keep in mind that Ezekiel is addressing the question of the hour for all in exile: Why?

Following a description of his call, Ezekiel turned his focus first to this! He is giving us the bumper pads to keep us from going outside the lane. Ezekiel 5-7 frames our understanding of the primary revelation given in this section, Ezekiel 8-11. It is about the loss of the covenant presence of God from His people. It consists of four progressive, yet parallel revelations

pertaining to the judgment that was coming to the people of God in 586 BC. The first three visions are in a chiasmic pattern.

- The First Vision Speaks of the Moral Necessity of God's Coming Judgment, Ezekiel 5.
- The Third Vision Speaks of the Certainty of God's Coming Judgment, Ezekiel 7.
- The Second Vision Speaks of the Sobriety of God's Judgment (Ezekiel 6) where we saw THE REASON behind God's Covenant Judgment (which is a judgment of tempering, not condemnation)
 - God's Covenant Judgment (Ezekiel 8-11) is Issued from a Heart of Love, not Wrath, v. 9a.
 - God's Covenant Judgment (Ezekiel 8-11) has as its Aim the Well-being of the Child of God, v. 9b.
 - God's Covenant Judgment (Ezekiel 8-11) is Always Effectual, v. 10.

Ezekiel frames our thinking as we consider the substance of God's covenant judgment in Ezekiel 8-11 which took the form of God withdrawing from the nation and His people; the retreating presence of the Lord from His people.

First one must understand the presence of God. It doesn't take very long in reading the Bible before discovering the doctrine of God's omnipresence.

Genesis 1:1-2: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters."

In the first two verses of the Bible, we read of the Omnipresence of God, the fact that God is everywhere!

Psalms 139:7-10, "Where can I go from Thy Spirit? Or where can I flee from Thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, Thou art there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, Thou art there. If I take the wings of the dawn, if I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, even there Thy hand will lead me, and Thy right hand will lay hold of me."

It may sound like splitting hairs when I say that the doctrine of God's Omnipresence is NOT that God is always in our presence, BUT that we are always in His! Yet, the distinction is quite important. Scripture speaks of God as being so awesome, so great, that nothing can exist outside of His presence. That means at all times and in all places, man lives and moves *Coram Deo*... before the face of God!

Jeremiah 23:24b, "Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?" declares the Lord."

Proverbs 15:3, "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, watching the evil and the good."

Do you understand what this means? Everywhere we go, God is there! We always are in the

presence of God! Speaking of God, Paul said this:

Acts 17:27, "...He is not far from each one of us."

R. C. Sproul wrote:

Omnipresence... means that the fullness of God is present everywhere. Everything that God is is fully present at each point in a given room, at every point in the building outside the room, and at every point outside the building. 'More' of God is not found at point A than at point B. God and His attributes, including His holiness, wisdom, goodness, justice, knowledge, power, and so on, are fully present in His creation at every point. (Sproul, 2017, p. 62)

I have labelled this The Transcendancy of God's Presence! Man/creation/all things are in the immediate presence of God. Yet here is where it gets a little more complicated. For when it comes to salvation, Scripture speaks of a *UNIQUE* presence of God amongst His people.

Recall the Great Commission.

Matthew 28:18-20, "And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth...' How does it end? "...and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

You must see that the promise here is more than just, "*I'm omnipresent!/You are always in My presence!*" RATHER the promise is, "*I am with you in a way that I am NOT with the unbeliever. No matter where you go as my servant, I will be there beside you, before you, behind you, and within you!*" Truly in salvation, God is present with His people in a way He is NOT with the rest of creation!

Speaking of the blessing that comes when God saves an individual, Isaiah wrote:

Isaiah 41:9-10a, "You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called from its remotest parts, and said to you, 'You are My servant, I have chosen you and not rejected you. Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God...'"

This is such a glorious promise that accompanies salvation, the God of the Universe, the God of Ezekiel 1, ever and always accompanies us! Never will He leave us! Never can we nor are we bereft of His redeeming presence in our lives!

Hebrews 13:5b, "...He Himself has said, 'I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.'"

This is truly one of the most precious gifts that Christ has given to us.

Matthew 1:23, "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which translated means, 'God with us.'"

Salvation begins when God takes up residence in the life of the child of God (Ephesians 1:13-14). We become His temple (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). We abide in Him because He abides with us!

So while the doctrine of God's Omnipresence states that everything always is in the immediate presence of God, Redemption brings with it the glorious promise that God is always with us! I call this the Redemptive Presence of God.

Yet there is more when it comes to the Biblical teaching of God's presence amongst His people. There is a whole class of Scripture which speaks as if God's Presence amongst His people can be more or less. It is from these passages, I have coined the expression, "The Covenant Presence of God."

Psalm 16:11a, "Thou wilt make known to me the path of life; in Thy presence is fulness of joy..."

David here speaks of God's presence as something that is NOT always enjoyed by God's people. David learned in life that when he was in God's presence, he was filled with joy! We see it again in Psalm 4.

Psalm 4:6b, "Lift up the light of Thy countenance upon us, O Lord! Thou hast put gladness in my heart..."

Don't miss the clear implication of this verse... God's Redemptive Presence is NOT always enjoyed by God's people. Yet how can that be if in Christ He is always with us? We see it in James where he exhorts the body of Christ:

James 4:8a, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you..."

Because of salvation, Christ could NOT be more present in our lives. Yet here, James calls upon the child of God to "draw near to God." What possibly could this mean?

Psalm 73:28a, "But as for me, the nearness of God is my good [as such]; I have made the Lord God my refuge..."

If God is always with His people in Christ (He is Immanuel), why the statement? At the dedication of the Temple, Solomon thus prayed:

1 Kings 8:57, "May the Lord our God be with us, as He was with our fathers; may He not leave us or forsake us."

If God is always with us in Christ, why would we ever be concerned about God “leaving us for forsaking us”? Clearly, Solomon here is describing the presence of God in terms that are not universal to all God’s people. Recall the concern of Moses when it came to God’s redeemed people after God said that He would not go with His people to the Promised Land?

Exodus 33:15, “Then he (Moses) said to Him, ‘If Thy presence does not go *with us*, do not lead us up from here.’”

In Redemption, God joins Himself to the believer such that He is always with them. So how is it that God could say, “I am not going up with my people” (Exodus 33:3)?

These are but a few of the many passages which speak of God’s presence amongst His people as something that could be lost. Yet in Christ we know it cannot be lost. So, what do we do with these passages? How do we square them with God’s Redemptive Presence? Notice that there is a class of Scriptures which speak of the existential effect of God’s presence in the life of the child of God.

Joshua 1:5, “...just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you (Joshua)...”

And what would be the result? “No man will be able to stand before you all the days of your life...” (v. 5a)- the promise of this passage is tantamount to God saying to Joshua, “*I will walk with you, and as such will defend, uphold, and strengthen you!*” You must see that this is NOT something that is true of all God’s people in Christ. God promised here to be with Joshua in a way that is NOT universal to salvation! We see it in Samuel.

2 Samuel 7:8b-9, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be ruler over My people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you have gone and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make you a great name...’”

Here God’s covenantal presence resulted in God “walking” with David which again lead to tangible blessing which are NOT universal to everyone in Christ!

We read of the inhabitants of Nain in response to Christ’s raising of the dead:

Luke 7:16, “And fear gripped them all, and they *began* glorifying God, saying, ‘A great prophet has arisen among us!’ and, ‘God has visited His people!’”

In other words, God is present with us in a way that He has not been the last 400 years!

We could go on and on citing passage after passage which speaks of God’s presence amongst His people as something that can be “more or less than”... something that could be lost or gained- and hence the language of “being visited by God.”¹

So how do we understand the many passages of Scripture which speak as if the presence of God amongst His people is (1) the source of greatest blessing, (2) yet conditional, and so (3) something that ought to be the object of the believer's greatest desire?

My answer has been to posit a third type of presence of God in Scripture which again I have called, "The Covenant Presence of God." By this, I am referencing the tangible, existential effect of God's Redemptive Presence in the life of the believer. And so while God's Redemptive Presence will never leave the child of God, the sense of His presence as well as the many blessings that come from His presence most certainly can and does!

Now there is no question in Scripture that the lifting of God's Covenant Presence from the believer is an extension of God's disciplining grace. When the child of God gets sidetracked in his walk and so seeks after sin rather than God, God may withhold His benefits and so lift the sense of His presence such that the Christian will feel alone, bereft, abandoned, and powerless.^{2&3} D. Martin Lloyd Jones put it this way:

Another way in which God chastens us, and I must put it in a category on its own, is this. God undoubtedly at times seems to withdraw His presence and to hide His face from us for this precise purpose. You will find that that is the great theme of the Book of Job. You will find it again in the Book of Hosea in chapters 5 and 6. God even tells the people there: 'I will go and return to My place till they acknowledge their offence, and seek My face'. God withdrew Himself and withdrew His presence, withdrew His face and His blessing in order to bring them to the place of repentance; it is a part of sanctification. (Lloyd-Jones, 1965, p. 240)

It is with this that the section before us is concerned, the covenant presence of God is retracted. From Ezekiel 8:1-2 we know this is Sept. 17, 592 BC. God is giving Ezekiel another vision which began when the Preincarnate Christ whisked Ezekiel in a vision to Jerusalem. Speaking of Christ, Ezekiel wrote:

Ezekiel 8:3-4, "And He stretched out the form of a hand and caught me by a lock of my head; and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and brought me in the visions of God to Jerusalem [it clear from this that Ezekiel was not physically transported to the city... again this is a vision], to the entrance of the north gate of the inner *court* [see the picture in the insert], where the seat of the idol of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy, was *located* [we'll talk about this later]. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel *was* there, like the appearance which I saw in the plain."

The vision before us begins with Ezekiel beholding the glory of the Lord's presence in Jerusalem, specifically in the temple (just like in Ezekiel 1).

Recall, the covenant presence of God descended upon the Temple at its dedication in 832 BC (1 Kings 8:10-11). This presence was the source of comfort and encouragement throughout the Kingdom years as God's people- as a result of God's presence- enjoyed these blessings:

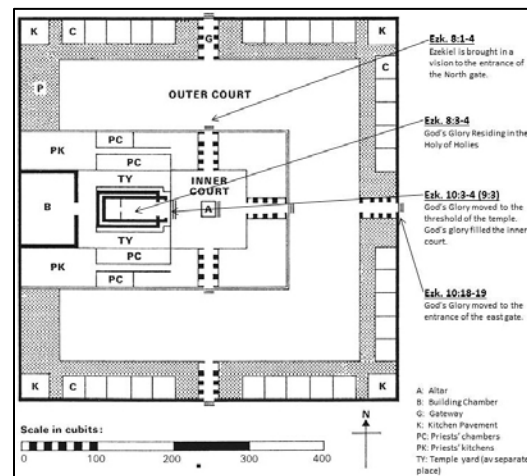
1. Great blessing, Psalm 128:5; 133:3; 134:3.
2. Shelter and protection, Psalm 27:5; 61:4; 68:5.
3. Free access to God by which he heard the prayers of His people, 1 Kings 8:29.
4. Fellowship, Psalm 15; 24:3–6; 118:20.
5. Delight (Psalm 27:4; cf. 42:1f; 63:1f; 84:1-4) by which God’s people “feasted upon His goodness” (Psalm 36:8f; 65:4).

That is why this vision would have come as a massive shock to the people of God! God was removing the presence of His glory from amongst His people? Indeed He was; notice what we read about here is also stated in Ezekiel 9:3, yet here we have it in more detail.

Ezekiel 10:3-4, “Now the cherubim were standing on the right side of the temple when the man [Christ] entered, and the cloud filled the inner court. Then the glory of the Lord went up from the cherub [the mercy seat] to the threshold of the temple, and the temple was filled with the cloud, and the court was filled with the brightness of the glory of the Lord.”

As the picture indicates, the glory of God’s presence moved from the inner court to the “threshold of the temple” such that now the holy place as well as the inner court “was filled with the brightness of the glory of the Lord.” Yet God’s glory did NOT remain here long. Skip down to...

Ezekiel 10:18-19, “Then the glory of the Lord departed from the threshold of the temple and stood over the cherubim [not of the temple, but Cherubim of the vision Ezekiel saw in chapter 1]. When the cherubim departed, they lifted their wings and rose up from the earth in my sight with the wheels beside them; and they stood still at the entrance of the east gate of the Lord’s house. And the glory of the God of Israel hovered over them.”



The glory of God’s presence now moved from the “threshold of the temple” to “the entrance of the east gate.” Here it remained as Ezekiel received further revelation from the Lord. Then suddenly and most shockingly, it departed from the temple altogether.

Ezekiel 11:22-23, “Then the cherubim lifted up their wings with the wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel hovered over them. And the glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city, and stood over the mountain which is east of the city [this would have been the Mount of Olives].”

With this, the covenant presence of God departed Jerusalem as well as the Southern Kingdom!⁴

Now again we must stress that this was NOT a forsaking of God's people, in Christ God would always be with them. Moses prophesying of the time when God's presence would be lifted from His people and they would be brought into exile, God said:

Leviticus 26:44-45, "Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, nor will I so abhor them as to destroy them, breaking My covenant with them; for I am the Lord their God. But I will remember for them the covenant with their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God. I am the Lord."

From this we conclude that the revoking of the presence of God's glory was not a loss of the Redemptive Presence of God amongst His people, BUT rather His Covenant Presence! God's people at this time did NOT lose their Lord, BUT many of the Redemptive privileges and so the existential blessings that come from salvation! As a result, the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Old Testament Theocracy was just a matter of time. No longer would *THE NATION* enjoy God's protection!

How ought we to think about the retracting glory of the Lord?

It is tempting to go all over the place in our thinking and so draw many faulty conclusions. I'm sure many in the exile did exactly that. That is why it is so important to keep in mind the framing of Ezekiel 5-7. Let us NOT forget, that this retracting of God's Covenant Presence was morally demanded (Ezekiel 5) and something that could not be averted (Ezekiel 7)! After Manasseh, there was nothing that any could do in order to hold it off or forestall it! Yet the lifting of God's Presence from His People was NOT because they were forsaken. It was just the opposite.

- The lifting of God's Covenant Presence was Issued from a heart of love, not wrath, Ezekiel 6:9a.
- Had as its Aim the Well-being of the Child of God, Ezekiel 6:9b.
- Was and will Continue to be Effectual, Ezekiel 6:10.

It is the second truth I want to meditate upon with you in closing. From this you must see that the lifting of the sense of God's presence from amongst His people is given to arouse in us our passion for the Lord! This is beautifully illustrated in a passage which celebrates the love relationship that is enjoyed between Christ and His bride! Solomon, speaking from the brides' perspective wrote:

Song of Solomon 5:2, "I was asleep, but my heart was awake. A voice! My beloved was knocking: 'Open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, my perfect one!...""

What a wonderful call that is issued every day of our lives... God says to us, "*Christian, come fellowship with Me!*" But we oft-times respond as did Solomon's bride.

Song of Solomon 5:3, "I have taken off my dress, how can I put it on *again*? I have washed my feet, how can I dirty them *again*?"

In other words, "*Lord, I'm too busy! Fellowshiping with you today is too much of an intrusion... too much of a burden! Maybe another time!*" What happened as a result? How did Solomon respond to this rejection? He left! The beauty, glory, and comfort of the presence of Solomon departed. Was he angry? Mad? No! He withdrew in love! To what end? Notice...

Song of Solomon 5:6, "I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned away *and* had gone! My heart went out *to him* as he spoke. I searched for him, but I did not find him; I called him, but he did not answer me."

If you read the rest of this chapter and into chapter 6, you will note that Solomon's bride eventually found her husband who did NOT respond to her in anger. RATHER he responded by repeating the words he spoke to His bride on their wedding night.

Song of Solomon 6:4, "You are as beautiful as Tirzah, my darling, as lovely as Jerusalem, as awesome as an army with banners."

The loss of God's Covenant Presence amongst His people is NOT the response of anger, BUT disciplining love!

This always is the aim when God's Covenant Presence is retracted. It is NOT to shame His people or rub their nose in their sin, BUT to arouse in them a hungering and thirsting for the Lord!

In light of this, how ought we to respond when we suspect that God's Covenant Presence has been lifted from our lives? Notice how the bride responded once she realized what had happened, she dropped everything and diligently went after her husband!

Song of Solomon 5:6b, "...My heart went out *to him* as he spoke. I searched for him, but I did not find him; I called him, but he did not answer me."

In proper ball room dancing, when the man moves away from the woman, the woman follows after. She does NOT fight, pull away, or try to lead. RATHER, when once she senses the movement of her partner, she quickly follows his direction. This is how we must respond when we sense that God's presence is moved from us! Rather than bemoan our situation or recoil in anger or disillusionment, we must diligently go after the Lord!

She took her eyes off of herself and directed them to the beauty and glory of her husband! In the stage play of this chapter, a narrator asked the bride:

Song of Solomon 5:9a, "What kind of beloved is your beloved?"

This prompted the woman to meditate on the beauty of her husband,

Song of Solomon 5:9b, "My beloved is dazzling and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand."-

This goes on through the end of the chapter. When your heart is dull and you find yourself spiritually depressed, take your eyes off yourself/your situation and place them on the beauty and glory of God! Bask in light of the wonder of His love, the glory of His character, and the fact of His sacrifice that you might live!

She reassures herself of her husband's assessment of her. The narrator asked her where her husband had gone, which prompted the bride to say this:

Song of Solomon 6:2-3, "My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of balsam, to pasture *his flock* in the gardens and gather lilies. [Then she repeated to herself as she went to him...] I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine, He who pastures *his flock* among the lilies."

Did you get that? As the woman continued her search for her husband, she reassured herself of his love! Translated to the life of the child of God, this is the gospel; this is what it means to preach the gospel to yourself! This reflects a meditation NOT on how we have failed our Lord, BUT on God's Covenant Faithfulness to and so His love for us!

Works Cited

Lloyd-Jones, D. M. (1965). *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Its Cure*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Sproul, R. C. (2017, January). Divine Omnipresence. *Tabletalk*, p. 62.

End Note(s)

¹ In fact, we have sung and so prayed about this through the years in our worship and you probably didn't even notice. Consider Red Trinity Hymnal #529, "Come, Almighty to deliver, let us all thy life receive; suddenly return, and never, never more thy temples leave..." (*Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*, 3rd Stanza) Or Red Trinity Hymnal #580, "Lead on, O King eternal: we follow, not with fears; for gladness breaks like morning wherever Thy face appears..." (*Lead On, O King, Eternal*, 3rd Stanza) It is from language like this which permeates our hymnody that I have described God's Covenant Presence amongst His people as the Lord walking in an orchard in the dead of winter. Everywhere He goes summer breaks out! Consider Red Trinity Hymnal #198, "Redeemer, come! I open wide my heart to thee; here, Lord abide! Let me thy inner presence feel; thy grace and love in me reveal." (*Lift Up Your Heads*, 5th Stanza)

² I referenced the first part of this at the beginning of our study. Listen to how R. C. Sproul continued his treatment of the Omnipresence of God, "Of course, God reserves the right to make us feel His presence more strongly at certain times and in particular places than at others (see, for example, Ex. 3:1-4:17). But even if God "feels" more present here than He does over there, He is equally present in both places." (*Tabletalk*, January 2017, p. 62)

³ Speaking of what has been called “The Dark Night of the Soul”- what I have termed the Loss of God’s Covenant Presence amongst His people- J. M. Boice wrote, “If you have been through such a dark night, you will know exactly what that phrase means and will readily identify with David as he gives expression to his feelings. In my counseling I have come across people who have been troubled by similar depressions and who could have said, as David does, ‘I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears (v. 6). The great English preacher D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was so aware of this problem among the people of his congregation after World War II that he preached a series of sermons on it.” (*Psalms 1-41*, p. 51)

⁴ Some say it went to the people of God in exile, but that is speculative; the next time we see it is in Ezekiel 43:1-4 where it returns to the city from the east.