



BETHEL
PRESBYTERIAN

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 16 Issue 21

May 28, 2017

The Covenant Presence of God Retracted, Part 3

I want to begin review some of the terminology we have discussed in the relation to our current study, "The Covenant Presence of God Retracted." The Scriptures which speak of God's presence fall into three categories:

1. There are those which speak of the Omnipresence of God. These passages indicate that in God's awesome greatness, everything in creation is in the direct presence of Him.
2. Then there are those which speak of God's Redemptive Presence (my nomenclature).

These indicate that when God redeems an individual, He unites Himself to them. Matthew 28:20b: "...and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." This presence is one that will never cease. There is nothing we can do to separate us from the Redemptive Presence of God! This we will enjoy from now unto eternity!

3. Then there are those passages which speak of the Covenant Presence of God (once again, my nomenclature). In its most essential form, a Covenant is a relationship. This class of Scripture describe the practical benefits of a love relationship with God... protection, blessing, joy, peace, and so much more.

Psalm 73:28a: "But as for me, the nearness of God is my good..."

Exodus 33:3, 15, "Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, because you are an obstinate people, lest I destroy you on the way. [Accordingly, Moses prayed...] If Thy presence does not go *with us*, do not lead us up from here."

This facet of the Presence of God is something that can be lost on account of the actions of the child of God or the disciplining grace of God.

Now, if the verbiage is confusing to you, perhaps it is easier to think of the Redemptive Presence of God as containing both a positional presence in our lives (which will never leave) and a practical presence (which ebbs and flows as we "work out our salvation with fear and trembling").

Now to further our understanding here a bit, consider that in the present age, sin is described as a "passing pleasure," Hebrews 11:25. Yet in the age to come, when the non-Christian is left to reap the wages of his sin in full, that state is a horrible place where, "...their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched," Mark 9:48. So what's the difference? What is it about this current age that makes sin pleasurable? The presence of God's grace! In the present age God's grace is a preservative. It keeps the world from being as bad as it possibly could be!¹ It keeps at bay "the wages of sin" in the life of the sinning individual. Romans 2:4, speaking of his fellow Israelite, Paul said, "Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience [all of these words indicate that God restrains the wages of sin in the present age], not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?" Paul is talking about the preserving grace of God which withholds the wages of sin in this life. By withholding the wages of sin from the sinning individual, the person is able to live and so able to turn from their sin to God!

From this we conclude that it is the grace of God² that keeps the sinning Christian and non-Christian alike from experiencing:

- The destructive forces of sin!
- The hell that sin one day will bring!
- The weeping and gnashing of teeth that someday will be expressed by the sinner!

In short, it is the presence of the grace of God that makes sin pleasurable! So in the case of the Christian, how ought God respond when one of His children holds a cavalier attitude toward sin? One who knows “the wages of sin” and yet thinks nothing of indulging in it? We would expect nothing less than God lifting His grace and allowing the sinning Christian to get a fuller taste of his sin! This is what God told His people in Judges.

Judges 10:13, “Yet you have forsaken Me and served other gods; therefore I will deliver you no more.”

If God’s people repeatedly choose sin over God, the Lord’s medication would be to allow these same people to reap a greater portion of the wages of their sin. This is what we mean by the loss of the Covenant Presence of God. In the Covenant, God promised to protect His people. If they chose their sin over God, then as a mercy the Lord would lift the presence of His grace!

2 Chronicles 24:20, “Thus God has said, ‘Why do you transgress the commandments of the Lord and do not prosper? Because you have forsaken the Lord, He has also forsaken you.’” (cf. also 2 Chronicles 15:2; 1 Samuel 8:7-18, 19-20)!

Speaking of His people in the wilderness, God said this:

Psalm 81:11-12, “But My people did not listen to My voice; and Israel did not obey Me. So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart, to walk in their own devices.”

Proverbs 5:22, “His own iniquities will capture the wicked, and he will be held with the cords of his sin.”

We are talking here about the loss NOT of God’s Redemptive Presence (which could never be forfeited for any in Christ), BUT the loss of the Covenant Presence of God amongst His people.³ Why does God at times withhold His Covenant Grace? To draw the sinning Christian back to Himself! Speaking of the time when God would remove His Covenant Presence from amongst His people, God explains:

Hosea 3:6-7, “Therefore, behold, I will hedge up her way with thorns, and I will build a wall against her so that she cannot find her paths [this is the Loss of God’s Covenant Presence]. And she will pursue her lovers, but she will not overtake them; and she will seek them, but will not find *them*. Then she will say, ‘I will go back to my first husband, for it was better for me then than now!’”

Jeremiah said this also:

Jeremiah 2:19, “Your own wickedness will correct you, and your apostasies will reprove you [this is the Loss of God’s Covenant Presence]; know therefore and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God...”

What makes this exhortation so significant is that James is quoting here from Old Testament

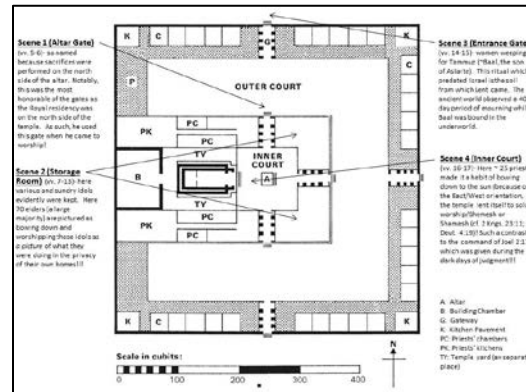
passages which teach about the loss of God’s Covenant Presence amongst His people (cf. 2 Chronicles 15:2; Zechariah 1:3; Malachi 3:7),

James 4:8-10, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. [How do we ‘draw near to God’?] Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.”

Generally speaking we could say that the cause of the loss of God’s Covenant Presence is sin, but I want to look at the specific sin!

The cause for the retraction of God’s glory is corrupt worship, (Ezekiel 8:1-16). We begin with the corrupt worship of the king and the people.

Ezekiel 8:5-6, “Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, raise your eyes, now, toward the north.’ So I raised my eyes toward the north, and behold, to the north of the altar gate was this idol of jealousy at the entrance [v. 3 says that the idol was one that ‘provoked to jealousy’ which is in reference to God. Jealousy for man is a sin, BUT for God it is a word used to describe His just response when He does NOT receive what is His due! // There is a strong likelihood that the idol was an Asherah Pole,⁴ yet there is debate here]. And He said to me, ‘Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations which the house of Israel are committing here, that I should be far from My sanctuary? But yet you will see still greater abominations.’”



I cannot think of a more sobering statement than to hear that one’s conduct as a Christian was “detestable” to the Lord! Yet brothers and sisters, that is the language used when God’s worship is compromised- “it is a great abomination!” In fact, so egregious was the people’s sin that God Himself was “alienated” from His own house! Notice those responsible for this “abomination” were the King and the people of God.

As to the King, notice that we are talking about “the Altar Gate” which derived its name because sacrifices were performed in this place on the north side of the altar (Leviticus 1:11). Because of this, the north entrance to the temple was the most honorable of all the gates which is why the Royal residence was built on the north side of the temple. As such, it would have been this gate that would first have been seen as the king entered each day/week to worship the Lord! Accordingly, that this “idol of jealousy” was allowed to stand lay directly at

the feet of the King!

But it wasn't just the king; the people of God are indicted here as well. We've talked much about Baalism and how at this time it was THE competing worship to the objective worship of God. Biblical worship revolves around the person and work of God! As such, it is objective, word driven, and so determined NOT by the feelings/pleasure of man, BUT by that which pleases God. In contrast, Baalism viewed God as a force to be manipulated/influenced via one's experience. The more emotional and ecstatic the service, the better the worship. The fatal flaw of Baalism is that life, service, and religion is all about the individual!

In this regard, the seemingly cold, objective worship of God could NOT compete with the deep, emotionally moving worship of Baal. So what happened? God's people *voted with their feet* for a worship that was directed to God and yet which used the elements of the worship of Baal! This same trend is happening in our current age. Timothy speaking of God in the last days wrote:

2 Timothy 4:3-4, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires [How will they do this? By attending only those services where their ears are tickled]; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths."

This essentially is what happened in Ezekiel's day. The worship which God's people would only frequent was that which involved the elements and liturgy of Baal! Accordingly, it was by popular demand that an Asherah pole was erected at this time and place! The first sin that will cost you the Covenant Presence in your Life is making Christianity to be about you and your good! So the King and People were directly responsible for this compromise; yet Ezekiel would behold "still greater abominations!"

There was also the abomination on the part of the Elders.

Ezekiel 8:7-10, "Then He brought me to the entrance of the court [we would presume that Ezekiel's perspective is still from the south (cf. v. 5), but we can't be definitive], and when I looked, behold, a hole in the wall [as the picture in your notes indicates, there were rooms (presumably used for storage, 1 Kings 6:5) on the northeast and southeast corners of the inner court]. And He said to me, 'Son of man, now dig through the wall.' So I dug through the wall, and behold, an entrance. And He said to me, 'Go in and see the wicked abominations that they are committing here.' So I entered and looked, and behold, every form of creeping things and beasts *and* detestable things, with all the idols of the house of Israel, were carved on the wall all around."

The gods of the Canaanites were both numerous and varied. As such, they were depicted using a variety of different images taken from nature, the animal world, and the insect world. In this room, Ezekiel was appalled to see images of these false gods carved into the walls of this

room. The language here is that of Deuteronomy 4:16–19 and Leviticus 11:40–42 which prohibit worshipping God with these images. The Implication is not only was there an Asherah pole on the north side of the inner court, BUT the compromise of God’s worship spread to the leaders who had access to these rooms. Who were they?

Ezekiel 8:11, “And standing in front of them were seventy elders of the house of Israel, with Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan standing among them, each man with his censer in his hand, and the fragrance of the cloud of incense rising.”

Once Ezekiel’s eyes had become accustomed to the darkness, he was able to count “seventy men” (which tells us that compromise amongst the elders at this time was rampant)! Ezekiel’s reference here was NOT to a formal governing body, BUT the lay leaders of the people of God. They would have been important men in the city, probably including the *śārîm* (“officials”), whose primary function was to offer counsel when it came to the King and the people (cf. Ezekiel 7:26).⁵

Now the chief elder in this group is identified as “Jaazaniah”- which is shocking. The text says that Jaazaniah was “the son of Shaphan.” Who was “Shaphan”? He was a man of God who supported Josiah in his reforms when Ezekiel was a child.⁶ He had three other sons, all of whom are significant Biblically at this time:

- Ahikam was an assistant to Jeremiah (Jeremiah 26:24),
- Elasa who bore Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles in Babylon (Jeremiah 29:3), and
- Gemariah who tried to prevent Jehoiakim from burning Jeremiah’s prophetic scroll (Jeremiah 36:25).

If this was the family from which Jaazaniah was from (which most likely is the case⁷) we conclude that Jaazaniah was from a godly house and so had a godly heritage. Yet even he at this time had compromised his faithfulness to the Lord!

Ezekiel 8:12-13, “Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, do you see what the elders of the house of Israel are committing in the dark, each man in the room of his carved images? For they say, “The Lord does not see us; the Lord has forsaken the land.”’ And He said to me, ‘Yet you will see still greater abominations which they are committing.’”- from this verse we understand that these men did NOT literally set up a worship spot in one of the storage rooms off the inner court. What they were doing was “in the dark, each man in the room of his carved images”

In others words, in the privacy of their homes or, more likely, their hearts! Recall the words of TozerL:

Let us beware lest we in our pride accept the erroneous notion that idolatry consists only in kneeling before visible objects of adoration, and that civilized peoples are therefore free from it. The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about

God that are unworthy of Him. It begins in the mind and may be present where no overt act of worship has taken place... [Tozer went on to say] Perverted notions about God soon rot the religion in which they appear. The long career of Israel demonstrates this clearly enough, and the history of the Church confirms it. So necessary to the Church is a lofty concept of God that when that concept in any measure declines, the Church with her worship and her moral standards declines along with it. The first step down for any church is taken when it surrenders its high opinion of God. (Tozer, 2009, pp. 11-12)

It is this I believe that happened in the lives of the leaders of God's people at this time! Were these elders physically bowing before these images in their homes? Possibly, but the text does NOT require it. What we do know is that they corporately arrived at the same WRONG NOTION about God, "The Lord does not see us; the Lord has forsaken the land."

That which will cost you the Presence of God in your life is holding and maintaining wrong views of God! The elders here held, professed, and taught that God no longer cared for His people and that He had abandoned His people which is nothing less than an abandonment of Himself (2 Timothy 2:13)!

Now we see why Ezekiel prefaced this prophecy with Ezekiel 5-7 in which he proclaimed the love and commitment of God to His people!! God hadn't abandoned His people; His people had abandoned their Lord and so suffered a bereaving in their sense of God's presence in their lives. With such leadership, we understand why the people and king compromised as they did; their advisors/elders were compromised! And yet there was more!

Note well that each description was intended to raise our shock to another level.

The third symptom of the abomination was the corruption of the women of Israel.

Ezekiel 8:14-15, "Then He brought me to the entrance of the gate of the Lord's house which *was* toward the north; and BEHOLD, women were sitting there weeping for Tammuz. And He said to me, 'Do you see *this*, son of man? Yet you will see still greater abominations than these.'"

Tammuz goes by a lot of names in the ancient world: Baal, Adonis, Nebros, Dumuzi, Osiris, and many more. His name in both Phoenician and Roman religion was Bacchus which literally means, "the lamented one." The identification here of "Tammuz" goes back to the Assyrian pantheon in which the son as well as the husband (he is both) of Semiramis/Astarte is killed by the god of the underworld and taken to hades (which corresponds to the winter months in the calendar). In order for Tammuz to be reborn (in order for spring to come back to the land), mortals were called upon to reenact the procreative act to influence Semiramis to descend into hades, procreate with Tammuz, and then give birth to Tammuz (which would bring spring to the earth). Accordingly, during the fall and the winter months, the worship of Tammuz involved detailed rituals of mourning which were to be performed by the women of the

community.

The significance therefore about this reference is that in the Bible women are to be the special object of protection, nurture, and care. Corresponding to the Christ/Church relationship, women are to be shepherded by a loving head. That means when in any culture women are defiled, compromised, or abused, the conclusion is that apostasy/sin has reached new heights. Consider Paul's words in Romans 1.

Romans 1:26, "For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural."

That is why Ezekiel's description of the worship of Tammuz by the women of Israel reflects a greater level of abomination than the compromise of the King, Elders, and People!

The Loss of God's Covenant Presence occurs as we make women out to be men- culturally, relationally, sexually. And yet sadly, there still was more, the corruption of the priests.

Ezekiel 8:16, "Then He brought me into the inner court of the Lord's house. And behold, at the entrance to the temple of the Lord [the holy place], between the porch and the altar [of burnt offering], were about twenty-five men with their backs to the temple of the Lord and their faces toward the east [these could only have been priests as they alone were allowed to stand in this location]; and they were prostrating themselves eastward toward the sun. And He said to me, 'Do you see *this*, son of man? Is it too light a thing for the house of Judah to commit the abominations which they have committed here, that they have filled the land with violence and provoked Me repeatedly? For behold, they are putting the twig to their nose.'"

In terms of the latter expression, "putting the twig to their nose" there is great debate all of which is speculative. In all honesty the meaning is lost to us. So look with me at the bigger picture. One of the duties of a priest was to protect the worship of God from compromise/defilement. Yet rather than cleanse the temple and its courts at this time, the priests themselves *participated* in the compromise of God's worship! They went to one of the most holy places on the temple mount, literally turned their back to God (an act filled with nuance), and then bowed down to worship the sun god, Shemash!⁸ While this compromise did NOT originate with them (their father's introduced this to the land during Manasseh's reign, 2 Kings 21:5), these watch-guards of the worship of God no doubt took their father's sin to new heights!

The Covenant Presence of God is lost when we corrupt the worship of God- changing the liturgy once again to accommodate man.

From all of this we see that the nation was in an advance state of rebellion against God; no one was exempt! Truly, The Retracting of God's Covenant Presence from His people here was a moral necessity! God would NOT be a loving Father if He allowed His people to sin like this

unopposed.

Now in all of these examples, God's people, like their forefathers did with the golden calf, no doubt thought they were worshipping God. Yet their fatal flaw is that they fashioned a world view where the bottom line was, *"Is man pleased? Am I happy? Do I like my life?"*

Christian, you want to enter upon a Dark Night of the Soul, transform the religion of Yahweh into a self-help formula where the bottom line is, *"Does this make me happy? Am I pleased?"* Let us forever understand: Worship/Service/Christ's Kingdom is NOT about us! When it becomes "about us" it becomes- to use the language here of Ezekiel- "an abomination" no matter how faithful our external forms may be to Scripture!

Notice a second, more egregious, reason for the loss of God's Covenant Presence is the abandoned mercy.

Ezekiel 8:17, "And He said to me, "Do you see *this*, son of man? Is it too light a thing for the house of Judah to commit the abominations which they have committed here [the irony is that throughout chap. 8, God has given a graded description of the atrocities of God's people with the language '...yet you will see greater atrocities...' Here he says that everything that God's people had done in vv. 5-16 was minimal in comparison to this final abomination...], that they have filled the land with violence and provoked Me repeatedly? For behold, they are putting the twig to their nose."

In terms of the latter expression, "putting the twig to their nose" there is great debate all of which is speculative. In all honesty the meaning is lost to us. So look with me at the bigger picture.

One of THE most important covenant words found in the Bible is **חֶסֶד** (*chesed*)... lovingkindness/covenant loyalty! The word speaks first NOT merely of the love of God for His people, BUT of His condescending grace by which He relates with gentleness and kindness toward the people of God! It is an understanding love which takes into account the weakness, fear, and so stature of the sinner. As such, this is THE word used to express the kind of love that God has for His people!

In this regard it is important to see that **חֶסֶד** (*chesed*) transformed the people of God from being strangers and aliens to His children and so members of His household. And because of this, God expects us to view each other and so give each other the same grace that the Lord has given us!

Exodus 22:21-21, "And you shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Leviticus 19:33-34, "When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him

wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

This is why we have frequently seen that when God’s people compromise in realm of lovingkindness/mercy, they have taken the first step toward apostasy even though they may be vigilant and steadfast in their doctrine/worship! Such had the people of God in Ezekiel’s day compromised! Rather than care for the weak and needy as God had cared for them, they took advantage of them. Accordingly, God removed His Covenant Presence from amongst His people!

These are two of THE most fundamental reasons why the Covenant Presence of God amongst His people is lost. How it behooves us therefore to evaluate our approach toward God and His body...

- Have we twisted Christianity to be a religion of self-help and fulfillment?
- Has such an approach reared its ugly head in our worship, service, and living?
- Do we live as if God’s purpose in life is to make us happy?
- When it comes to the body of Christ, does it exist for me or do I exist for it?

These are important questions when it comes to the health of our walk with Christ.

Now assuming that you come up lacking in these or other areas... ought we to fear the loss of God’s Covenant Presence? Absolutely not! As referenced last time, the retracting of God’s Covenant Presence is NOT an enemy, BUT a friend! Think of it... who would want God to remain silent/passive in the face of compromise in our walk with God? Accordingly, don’t recoil at the possibility of the loss of God’s covenant Presence. Rather, we must view any sense of a lifting of the Covenant Presence of God in our life as an invitation NOT for you to engage in morbid introspection where you seek to uncover the sin responsible for your loss BUT to arouse in you’re a hungering and a thirsting after Christ!

Bibliography

Tozer, A. W. (2009). *The Knowledge of the Holy*. New York: Harper One.

End Note(s)

¹ It is God’s grace which (1) enables us to conduct ourselves in “holiness and godly sincerity,” 2 Cor. 1:12, (2) enables us to exercise the spiritual gifts we have received, Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 1:4ff; 1 Pet. 4:10, (3) Gives “joy” in the midst of trials, 2 Cor. 8:1-2, (4) Enables us to have all of our needs “sufficiently met,” 2 Cor. 9:8, (5) Enables us to glorify Christ, 2 Thes. 1:12, (6) Gives us “eternal comfort” and “good hope,” 2 Thes. 2:16-17, (7) Gives “help in time of need,” Hebrews 4:16, (8) “Strengthens and establishes” us even in the midst of incredible suffering, 1 Pet. 5:9-10.

² Mark 9:48; 1 Cor. 15:8-9; 2 Thes. 2:6-7; Rom. 2:5-6

³ Or if you will, we are not talking here about the positional benefit of God’s Redemptive Presence, BUT the practical/personal benefits.

⁴ L. E. Cooper wrote, “This conclusion is not mere speculation but was suggested by the use of the same word (*sēmel*) for Manasseh’s idol in 2 Chr. 33:7, 15. These are the only occurrences of the term except in the prohibition against idol worship in Deuteronomy 4:16–18. After Manasseh, Josiah had purged Judah and Jerusalem of such things (2 Chr. 34), but his work was reversed after his death (2 Chr. 36:5, 9; Jeremiah 3:10).” (*Ezekiel*, TOTC, p. 120)

⁵ The number seventy is reminiscent of the group that assisted Moses in governing the nation during their wilderness wanderings (Exodus 24:1, 9; Num. 11:16, 24, 25).

⁶ cf. 2 Kgs. 22:8–14; 2 Chr. 34:15–21; Jeremiah 26:24; 29:3; 36:10; 40:5, 9, 11; 41:2; 43:6.

⁷ D. I. Block wrote, “By identifying Jaazaniah as the son of Shaphan, Ezekiel distinguishes him from the Jaazaniah ben Azzur named in 11:1 and more importantly recognizes this man as a member of one of Jerusalem’s leading families, who for some reason had been left behind in the deportation of 597. His involvement in these abominable cultic activities distinguishes him spiritually from his brothers, who were sympathetic toward Jeremiah, the recognized prophet of Yahweh. If this interpretation is correct, the revelation of his name with the patronymic offers concrete evidence of the extent of spiritual rot in Jerusalem: it had reached the upper echelons of civil government.” (*The Book of Ezekiel*, Chapters 1–24, NICOT, p. 291)

⁸ cf. 2 Kings 23:11; Deuteronomy 4:19.