

Introduction

Antony Flew is a well-known British philosopher who lived from 1923-2010. For most of his life he was an advocate of atheism. One of his most well-known contributions to the discussion of the existence of God was a parable in which he set forth of a couple of explorers. One represents the believer in God and the other represents the skeptic. While traversing an area of jungle far from civilization, they come across a clearing in the midst of which is a spectacular cultivated garden.

The parable goes as follows:

One explorer says, "Some gardener must tend this plot." The other disagrees, "There is no gardener." So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. "But," says the first explorer, "perhaps he is an invisible gardener." So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. "But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves." At last the Skeptic despairs, "But 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?"

Flew presented this parable to argue that if you claim God is invisible and immaterial, then you might as well not believe in God at all. But the problem with Flew's argument stares him and us in the face. The problem for his point is the garden. You would not have a garden that is maintained without a gardener to maintain it. The existence of the garden evidences the presence of a gardener. They may not see him, but that does not mean he is not there. Even though they do not see him, what they do see is a garden that would not exist without him.

The Bible in fact testifies to us that by his nature God is invisible. But at the same time it assures us of his presence everywhere. We do not have to see him to know that he is present. In fact, we should not let his invisibility cause us to discount his presence. Psalm 139 is captivated with the transcendent character of God—his knowledge, his presence, and his power. Last time we got our minds boggled by considering the knowledge of God, that he is omniscient. This morning we move to the next section of the Psalm, which teaches us about the omnipresence of God.

[Read Scripture and Pray]

This morning we focus on the wonder of God's presence. He is omnipresent. The word omnipresent is not found in the Bible, but it is a word which captures what we do find in the Bible as we seek to know about where God is present. As we are going to see, God is present everywhere in the universe. He is omnipresent. Here is a big word, but I want you to know it because it says a whole lot about who God is. I hope you remember from last week that omni means "all" or "without limits." And present refers to being somewhere.

Do they still take roll in school? When I was in school, the teachers would begin the class by calling the roll. And when your name was called you were to respond. Some kids would answer "here" and some would say, "present." I remember one kid who always said, "yo." I even remember his name, Joey Barr. But the point was to let the teacher know that you were at school and where you were supposed to be.

The idea of one's presence answers the question, "where? Where are you?" We will ask the question, "where is God?" And the answer Psalm 139 gives is that God is everywhere. He is present without limits. He is present in all places. That is the meaning of omnipresent. God is present everywhere. It is more than saying God can be anywhere he wants to be. It is saying that he is everywhere all at the same time. This fact is hard to wrap one's mind around as a whole. But when one thinks on what the omniscience of God means on a personal level—what it means for oneself—then it becomes more tangible. That is what David does here. And yet he is not speaking to other human beings. David is speaking to God. These are words of praise into which we are privileged to join. And here are five aspects of God's Presence for which David extols the greatness of our God.

I. God's Presence is Invisible yet Inescapable.

A. David acknowledges the invisibility of God in verse 7 when he asks, "Where shall I go from your Spirit?" and then "Where shall I flee from your presence?" Wherever the Spirit of God is, he is present; he is there. And the fact of the matter is that God is Spirit. He is immaterial. You cannot see God because you cannot see what does not consist of matter. Jesus told the woman at the well; "God is spirit." Paul extols the Lord as "the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God." He says that he is "the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see."

God is invisible. But that certainly does not mean he is not present. We cannot see the wind, but we know it is there because it has effects. Likewise, we may not see God, but we know he is present because he brings effects. He is creator. He has done great things. He actively upholds creation. The fact that he is creator distinguishes God from everything he has made. God is not his creation. He is not material. He is invisible, yet he indeed exists.

B. God exists and he is located. He has a locational relationship to his creation. And David proceeds to state where he is located by presenting the question, "where can I go or where can I flee from the presence of God?" The way in which he asks the questions indicates that he anticipates an obvious answer. He presents the question as though he were one who would attempt to evade the Lord. Where can I go FROM your Spirit? Or where could I FLEE from your presence? IF I were seeking to somehow get away from God, where would I possibly go? And the unstated reply is "NOWHERE." There is nowhere that I could escape because anywhere I would go, God is already there. It is not like he would be able to come find me. No, it is that he is already at this moment anywhere I would go to try to get away from him. God is invisible and yet he is inescapable. I cannot see him but I cannot avoid him because the answer to the question, "God, where are you?" is "I am everywhere; you cannot escape from me even if you wanted to."

Adam and Eve tried to escape from the Lord. They hid in the garden, but it was fruitless. The prophet Jonah did not like the assignment he received from the Lord to go to Nineveh. So he rose to flee to Tarshish away from the presence of the Lord. But he could not escape. The Lord hurled a great storm on the sea threatening ship and crew until they threw Jonah into the sea.

All people are born running from God. The nature with which we come alive is one that seeks to escape from God. We worship and serve the creature rather than the creator. We fear what we can see not the One we cannot. We live for ourselves. Multitudes try so hard to escape that they embrace the lie that there is no God. They live in the midst of his creation as his creations, and they look upon what he has done and yet like Antony Flew did for so many years, they say uh-uh. If I cannot see him, he cannot be there. That's you and it is me by nature. But denying God's existence does not make him go away. It does not eliminate God. And trying to escape will never work. God is invisible, but he is inescapable because anywhere you would run to get away from him is a place he

already is. Eventually though he will bring you to his judgment seat and there will be no denying him then. But it will be too late.

Do not wait until that day. The God who is everywhere loves the world he has made and the people he has put in it to such an extent that he sent his only Son to become present in flesh and blood and die for those whose desire is to escape him and defy him. If anyone will believe in that Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who suffered on the cross for sinners, he will be saved from that judgment and be made an adopted son of God as well and brought into his family.

But you may be a child of God who is following in the steps of Jonah; you are running from God. I am going to try and save you some trouble this morning. There is no escape. You cannot outrun God. And you can't fake him out and even if you could, he is already where you are as well as wherever it is you are going. Just stop. Don't run. Don't flee. Just get on your knees before this glorious and majestic and infinite God.

II. God's Presence Is in Heaven and Hades.

Look at verse 8. "If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!" From the heights to the depths, God is there.

A. Certainly, if you were to ascend to heaven God is there. I could cite several texts here, but Isaiah 57:15 is explicit. "Thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place." God is he who is enthroned in the heavens. How could you ascend to heaven and not find God there? But this does make an important point about God's presence. We see in scripture that while God is present everywhere in all creation, yet there is another sense in which the Bible speaks of God's presence. It is a special manifestation of God's presence. Heaven is such a place where God's glory is made manifest, where he dwells. So though God is present everywhere, he does not DWELL everywhere. He does not manifest his personal glory everywhere in the same sense. If we could ascend this moment into heaven, there is a sense in which we would be no more in the presence of God than we are right now, but there would be another sense in which we would be in the midst of God's manifested glorious presence more than we are now. By drawing our attention to heaven, David makes this point.

B. David then adds that if he were to die and go to the abode of the dead, God is present there. For David as an Old Testament saint, that would be the state of death and awaiting being set free. Up high or down low, God is there. And lest there be any question, God is not absent in the eternal hell. Revelation 14:10 says that in the depths of hell where God's wrath and anger and torment are applied to the wicked, it takes place in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. This place of condemnation is certainly away from the glorious and merciful presence of God but not away from the omnipresence of God. What sinners most want to do—to escape from God, to escape from his holy gaze, to elude his undoing presence—will be impossible. The idea of finally getting to a place where evil and sin are celebrated and God is absent is a myth.

III. God's Presence is in the East and the West.

Verse 9 is beautiful poetry with beautiful imagery. If you place yourself in Jerusalem, you are bounded by land to the east and sea to the west. In the morning the sun rises on the side of Jerusalem bound by land and proceeds on its daily journey across the sky to the west, setting in the far reaches of the Mediterranean Sea. If I fly on the wings of the morning from the far east and travel all the way to where the sun sets in the far reaches of the west, you are there. We are also realizing the beauty of the psalm that David is looking up and down from heaven to Hades and now right and left and saying, "God, go as far as I could in any direction, and you are already there." It is a comfort

to know that as far as the east is from the west, so far does God remove the transgressions of his people from them, but it is also a comfort to know that as far as east is from west God is there.

IV. God's Presence is Made Known.

Still in verse 9, it strikes me how in verse 8, David says, if I go to heaven "you are there;" if I go to Sheol, "you are there," and then in verse 9 he does NOT say, if I cross the sky from one end of the horizon to the other, "you are there." Rather he says, "even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me." Rather than merely reiterating the presence of the Lord, David stresses the manifestation of his presence to his people—not just that the Lord is there but what makes it precious to him that he is there.

People can be in the same place without it meaning very much. Perhaps you live in a neighborhood where the people are there but they pretty much keep to themselves. They don't interact and they don't seem to want to. Compare that with a good marriage in which husband and wife look forward to coming home from being apart during the day and they are excited to see one another and talk about what happened while they are away and they enjoy the time they can now spend together in each other's presence.

But now David brings the idea of being in the presence of God to this wonderful intimate level. It is not simply that God is there. The thing is that even though God may be invisible, he knows he is there because he leads him and he holds him with his right hand. This is sweet fellowship between God and his child between the Lord and his servant. It is expressed in the old hymn, "and he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own." And herein we have a mix of the ordinary presence of God and the special presence of God.

It is the presence experienced by Moses when he would meet with the Lord face-to-face. It is the presence expressed in Isaiah when the Lord says he dwells in a high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite." It is the presence of the Lord expressed by David in Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are (present) with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

This is the presence of God made known and experienced by the man after his own heart who wrote in Psalm 16:11: "You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." This is the presence with which Christ assures his church, "Where 2 or 3 have gathered in my name, there I am among them." This is the presence which Jesus promises to the church who will open itself up to him. "Behold I stand at the door and knock, if anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in and will dine with him."

This is the special presence of which Jesus assures his disciples, I am with you even to the end of the age. And this is the presence of which Christ's followers are assured in Hebrews 13. "God has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" Yes even as Psalm 46 declares, "God is our refuge and strength, a VERY PRESENT help in trouble."

God is invisible but he is omnipresent. And in a gloriously amazing way he makes his presence known to his people by guiding them and keeping them in the palm of his hand.

V. God's Presence Is Unhindered.

We finish with verses 11-12. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you." God's perfect apprehension of his creation is undiminished whether it is day or night.

Have you ever been in one of those underground caverns where they turned the lights off and let you see what real darkness is like. You wave your hand in front of your face but you can't see anything. Not anything. And yet even then from God's perspective, nothing has changed. He sees as clearly in the dark as he does in the light. What a glorious combination here of his knowledge and his presence. His undiminished knowledge and his undiminished presence assure us in the darkest of times.

It is good to be with him. Even when everything is dark to me, it is never dark to him. I cannot see the invisible God, but he always sees me. And he guides me and he leads me and he holds me. He keeps me in his special presence if I am his and he is precious to me. He is the one who has said, "You shall seek me and you shall find me if you seek for me with all your heart."

Conclusion

Antony Flew spent most of his life arguing that an invisible, immaterial God is no better than no God. Finally, in 2004 at the age of 81, he changed and came to affirm a belief in an intelligent creator of the universe. But he never came any further than deism. He continued to reject Christ or any other specific God. Flew died in 2010 at the age of 87. He has now met the God whom he denied existed at all for all those years and his Son Christ Jesus. Sadly experiencing his unhappy but very real presence.

Please don't anyone here make the same mistake this morning. If you are resisting his call and wooing upon your heart through his word, please give yourself up to him. And if you as a follower of Christ are not experiencing the joyful presence of the Lord in your life, please quit trying to hide, just come out and confess your sin and entrust yourself to the guidance and grip of his right hand. I think of Jacob when he was fleeing from Esau. Remember how during the night he put a rock under his head while he slept. And he dreamed and in his dream a ladder went from the place he was into heaven and the angels were going up and down on the ladder. God reiterated to Jacob the promise he had made to Abraham. And he said to Jacob, "I am with you and will keep you wherever you go." Jacob woke up from his sleep and said, "Surely, the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it."

Do not let God's invisibility keep you from knowing his presence. Do not sleep through your life without experiencing his glory. Do not think for a moment that your path and your life have somehow gone somewhere or through some set of circumstances where he is not or where he does not care. If you are his child, you will never be out of his care or out of his leading, just make sure you are enjoying the peace of his care and the joy of his leading.