

C. Some Will Experience God's Relational Presence

DEUTERONOMY 10:14–15: To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. ¹⁵ Yet the Lord set his affection on your ancestors and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations—as it is today.

2 CHRONICLES 16:9: For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.

ISAIAH 57:15: For this is what the high and exalted One says— he who lives forever, whose name is holy: “I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.

JOHN 14:19-21, 23: Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.

²¹ Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.”

²³ Jesus replied, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.

1. How would you describe God's relational presence?
2. According to these passages, who will experience God's relational presence?
3. What are the benefits of God's relational presence?
4. Where will we experience God's relational presence most intensely?
5. Can we be in a relationship with God without experiencing the benefits of his presence?
6. What keeps us from experiencing God's relational presence?
7. How do we resolve a breach in our relationship with God?
8. Why should we desire God's relational presence above all else?



David can speak of God's presence in two dramatically different ways. In Psalm 139, he laments the fact that he cannot escape God's presence.

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

In Psalm 51, he desperately pleads with God not to banish him from his presence.

“Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me (vv. 11-12).

These two very different Psalms introduce us to the tension we will inevitably experience when we reflect on God's presence. On the one hand, God is fully present in all places at all times. For better or for worse, we cannot escape his presence. On the other hand, we experience God's presence in different ways at different times in different places. While we cannot escape God's presence, we can forfeit the benefits of living in his presence and lose the joy of our salvation, which was David's overwhelming concern and should be ours as well.

THE GOD WHO IS FULLY PRESENT

God is fully present at all times in all places.

PSALM 139:1–12: You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. ² You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. ³ You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. ⁴ Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely. ⁵ You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. ⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

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.

JEREMIAH 23:23–24: “Am I only a God nearby,” declares the Lord, “and not a God far away? ²⁴ Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?” declares the Lord. “Do not I fill heaven and earth?” declares the Lord.

1. How do the Biblical writers describe God’s presence?
2. Why is it comforting to know we cannot escape God’s presence?
3. Why is it disconcerting to know we cannot escape God’s presence?

OUR EXPERIENCE OF GOD’S PRESENCE

We experience God’s presence in different ways at different times in different places.

A. Everyone Will Experience God’s Sustaining Presence

ACTS 17:26-28: From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’

HEBREWS 1:1-3: In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. ³ The Son is the radiance of

God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

COLOSSIANS 1:15-17: The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

MATTHEW 5:43-45: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor ² and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

ROMANS 2:4 Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?

1. God’s sustaining presence is also known as God’s providential care or common grace. How would you describe God’s sustaining presence?
2. What are the benefits of God’s sustaining presence?
3. What is the overarching purpose of God’s sustaining presence?

B. Some Will Experience God’s Judicial Presence

AMOS 9:2–4: Though they dig down to the depths below, from there my hand will take them. Though they climb up to the heavens above, from there I will bring them down. ³ Though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel, there I will hunt them down and seize them. Though they hide from my eyes at the bottom of the sea, there I will command the serpent to bite them. ⁴ Though they are driven into exile by their enemies, there I will command the sword to slay them. “I will keep my eye on them for harm and not for good.”

1. God’s judicial presence is an expression of his righteous hatred for everything that blemishes and scars his good creation. God is never indifferent to sin. He hates all sin with a white-hot hatred and actively judges those who choose to continue in their sin. Why is God’s judicial presence an essential extension of his character?
2. Who will experience God’s judicial presence?
3. Where will God’s judicial presence be experienced most intensely?
4. What is the remedy to God’s judicial presence?