

INTRODUCTION

GOD'S "PRESENCE"

God is: "In the beginning, God . . ." (Gen. 1:1). As God, He is perfect: "Lord, there is no one like you among the gods, and there are no works like yours . . . you alone are God" (Ps. 86:8, 10b; CSB). All that it means to be God is perfectly above and beyond our comprehension: "my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways" (Isa. 55:8; CSB). This is what makes God, God, and not an idol of our imagination or making. As Anselm (1033–1109) prayed, "We believe that You are something than which nothing greater can be thought."²

The God who is, is one: "the Lord is one" (Deut. 6:4), meaning, "there is one God" (1 Cor. 8:6). He is one

“what,” meaning, being or essence. He is also three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three “whos” or persons exist as one “what.” All that it is to be God, the Father is, the Son is, and the Holy Spirit is. Yet they are one God. “We worship one God in Trinity and the Trinity in unity . . . the unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in unity, is to be worshipped.”³ Before we were created, came to believe, or ever worshipped Him, God existed as Unity in Trinity and Trinity in Unity. From all of eternity (if we can even speak that way), God enjoyed perfection of communion and love within the divine being as among the three persons. As perfect God, He needs nothing beyond Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; nothing can add to who He is. The Father shared life and love with the Son and Holy Spirit; the Son with the Father and Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son.

Yet, this self-sufficiently perfect God decided to share life and thus created all things. Most especially, He created us, human beings, in the beginning in His image (Gen. 1:26-27) to share His life and love as much as creatures can share in Him. Astonishingly, the story of Scripture reveals that even after our first parents sinned and rebelled against God as their “true life” and love,⁴ He continues to give life to the world and desires that we, His fallen creatures, share not only in this earthly life, but in eternal life: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16; NASB 1995).

The way He relates to us and makes this life and love known to us is the subject of this book: *the presence* of God.

Before I seek to describe God's presence, it's important to know how many Christians have learned to speak about his "presence." We do so like we speak about weather—"it was really there tonight," or "it felt dry today," or "I didn't sense Him at all." Someone leaves a Sunday service encouraged and says, "God really *showed up*." Someone else leaves the same service heavy and quietly wonders, "*What's wrong with me?*" Our assumption is that presence must mean a certain kind of experience. If I feel warmed, steadied, lifted—God is near. If I feel numb, distracted, depressed—He must be far. This can turn our prayer life into a search for a sensation, our worship into a test of atmosphere, and our suffering into a verdict: "*If God loved me, I wouldn't feel this alone.*" God's "presence" becomes a product to pursue or a panic to manage. Some chase it. Some fake it. Some give up.

This book argues for something sturdier and better: *God's presence is not a feeling to measure, but a reality to receive—God Himself, given to us in Jesus Christ, and made known by His Word and Spirit.* If we can learn to speak about His presence the way Scripture does, then the Christian life stops being a scavenger hunt for emotional proof and becomes what it truly is: fellowship with the living God—sometimes bright, sometimes dark, *always real.*

VOCABULARY OF GOD'S PRESENCE

The Old Testament Scriptures speak of God's "presence." The common Hebrew term is often translated as "face." When God reveals His "face," He brings someone into a close, personal encounter with Himself.⁵

In speaking of the *presence* of God, we have to think and speak first of *God*. We're speaking not of a mere idea or thing. This is true whether we speak of the love of God, the grace of God, the mercy of God, or anything about God. Like a child at Christmas, we so often want to get to the gifts quickly, but we forget their giver. So too with God. It's so helpful for us to slow down, meditate, and ponder the God whose presence we seek to know. As the English Puritan pastor, Stephen Charnock (1628–80), said, "We are indeed to seek the Perfections of God, that glitter in his works, but to the end that they should direct us to the seeking of God himself in his own Nature and Essence."⁶ In all the grammar and theology to follow, do not forget: it is all a means to seek God.

DISTINCTIONS OF GOD'S PRESENCE

Gregory the Great (540–604) distinguished ways we speak of God's presence: "God by a common mode is in all things by His presence, power and substance; still He is said to be present more familiarly in some by grace."⁷ God is omnipresent with all things as God, but He's particularly present with His people in grace. The medieval theologian, Peter Lombard (1096–1160) also distinguished

two senses in which we can speak of God's presence: "He does not dwell everywhere that he is; but where he dwells, he is."⁸ God *is* everywhere; He *is* omnipresent generally. He also *dwells* in a particular way with His people. Thus, there's a *general* and a *special* way in which God is present. As we'll see below, Charnock followed this simple distinction in terms of God's essential and gracious presence.

God is infinite in relation to space and eternal in relation to time



Generally or essentially, the presence of God is omnipresent. Unlike us, He's present in all places at all times. Another word for this is immensity; He fills all things with His "repletive [full] essence." The Lord asked through Jeremiah: "Am I a God who is only near . . . and not a God who is far away? Can a person hide in secret places where I cannot see him? . . . Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?" (Jer. 23:23-24; CSB). Paul quoted a Greek philosopher approvingly: "In him we live and move and *have our being*" (Acts 17:28) or "exist" (NASB). He said this to show God's closeness to us.

Negatively, He's not limited by space or time. This means He is infinite. He is not bounded by space. He is eternal. He is not bounded by time. In other words, he is immense. He transcends and fills space and time. He's in all things, but not contained by anything; He's in, but above, all things. No place exists without Him, but no place contains Him. He's as much here where I'm typing today as He is where you're reading at a later time.

In the words of Stephen Charnock, “He compasseth all, is encompass’d by none; he fills all, comprehended by none. The Creator contains the World, the World contains not the Creator.”⁹ David speaks of this omnipresence in Psalm 139:

Where shall I go from your Spirit?
 Or where shall I flee from your *presence* [*paneħ*]?
 If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
 If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!
 If I take the wings of the morning
 and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
 even there your hand shall lead me,
 and your right hand shall hold me. (vv. 7-10)

In this moment in time and in this place, God is present with us just as He was before and will be after, and was and will be everywhere else!

He’s present in the created realms of “the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). He dwells or is present in the created realm of heaven. He is “enthroned in heaven” (Ps. 2:4; CSB). He “is exalted high above all nations, his glory above the heavens.” He is “seated on high” and “looks far down on the heavens and the earth” (Ps. 113:4, 5, 6). There, He sits enthroned in glory. Heaven is a place filled with God’s presence. Angels like Gabriel stand in His presence, and from there act as He directs them (Luke 1:19). Satan came “before the LORD” (Job 1:6, 12) when he sought permission to attack Job and Satan “went out from the presence of the LORD” (Job 1:12; 2:7). The heavenly host rejoice before God when one sinner

repents (Luke 15:10). Christ completed His earthly ministry by entering “heaven itself, so that he might now appear in the presence of God for us” (Heb. 9:24; CSB). Heaven is the highest, most exalted place of all; it is fitting that God displays His presence there. The Psalm says, “in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps. 16:11). Heaven is where Jesus asks to be glorified with the glory which He’s had from all eternity (John 17:5); it’s where Jesus sits, awaiting the day He’ll return (Acts 3:20). At the end of this age, those who do not know God or obey the gospel will “suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thess. 1:9). He’s present in the created realm of earth. We call this His “providence,” which the Heidelberg Catechism defines as “the almighty and *ever present* power of God by which God upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that . . . all things . . . come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand.”¹⁰

God’s presence is also manifested in special ways, in special places, and to particular people in grace throughout Scripture’s story. In other words, God is *special* or *graciously* present in making *Himself* known to His people in ways He doesn’t to all people. He is present not only everywhere on earth, but was particularly present in the temple as God’s throne room on earth, to which worshippers were called to “come into his presence” with thanksgiving and singing (Ps. 95:2; 100:2).

Distinguishing the senses of God’s presence is an instructive methodology because we naturally think of

presence as a place and, therefore, a constraint. God isn't constrained. We think of being "in the presence of" someone, which in human terms is a creaturely thing. We don't want to bring God down, but be led up to Him. In fact, we cannot even contain Him, as King Solomon prayed: "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27; NKJV). Thus, God's presence is His intimacy with things He made (essential presence) and especially with those He saves (special presence).

Method

"All Scripture is *breathed out* by God" (2 Tim. 3:16), therefore we will survey what all of Scripture has to say about the theme of God's gracious presence with His people throughout redemptive history. We'll move from Old to New Testament; from creation to consummation. Old Testament scholar, John Walton, writes:

. . . the primary theme that progresses throughout the Old Testament, and indeed throughout the entire Bible, is the establishment of God's presence among his people . . . From the opening chapters of Genesis to the closing chapters of Revelation, God's presence and relationship are the Bible's plot line and theological focus.¹¹

Because all Scripture is breathed out or spoken by God, all the individual parts are a unity. Augustine gave a

memorable dictum for this: "In the Old [Testament] the New [Testament] is concealed, and in the New [Testament] the Old [Testament] is revealed."¹² It is essential for us to look to the New Testament as the basis of our interpretation because the Old Testament is incomplete; it is volume one of two volumes. In the Old, God spoke "at many times and in many ways" (Heb. 1:1), but now God has spoken in His Son, bringing that old revelation to its intended completion (Heb. 1:2). Paul tells us that if we read the Old Testament apart from Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, we will read it like there is a "veil . . . over [our] hearts" (2 Cor. 3:15). Only Christ, through the Holy Spirit, can take it away:

. . . whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. We all, with unveiled faces, are looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory; this is from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:16-18; CSB)

Outside of Jesus Christ, the presence of God is a dangerous, consuming fire to sinners like you and me.



Purpose

The "end" or goal of this unified story is Jesus Christ. He said, ". . . the Scriptures . . . bear witness about me" (John 5:39). The study of Scripture finds its purpose in Him. Jesus is the key to unlocking the door of understanding the Scriptures. We can talk all we want