

Worship Basics – Two Kinds of God’s Presence

Turn to Psalm 139. Imagine this: What if God showed up when we gather together in a way he did not show up anywhere else? What if our being together was the only time we were face to face before God?

What if the only time God could say anything important to you was when you were gathered with his people, because that’s the only time God was present to speak?

What if, when God had something powerful to do in your life, he would do it only when you were together with his people?

Imagine that the only time you could say important things to God was when you were together with other disciples at a Sunday morning church service, or some other gathering where Christ’s people were together because of Christ.

Imagine that the rest of the time God was with you, and his Spirit helped you and encouraged you and protected you.

But the important communication between God and you happened only when you were with his people as you are now. That’s when he would meet with us all, face to face.

If you needed to thank God, this gathering was the place to thank him; and if you needed to confess that you were a sinner and needed his forgiveness and kindness, this was the place to confess and to receive those things from him, because he was here for that.

What if our coming together was when God really showed up to give us his gifts, and our coming together was when God really showed up to receive our gifts?

I don’t believe this picture is entirely true. But I do believe it is partly true. Maybe you think it is partly true as well.

But if you listen to how God’s people talk, you would have to listen for a while before you heard of people meeting with God’s people because they wanted to meet with God, because they wanted to approach God, come near to God.

Meeting God only in the group: this notion can offend us in two ways. One, we might think it is bad theology; it is plain and simple wrong. We might believe we can meet with God anytime and anywhere, and teaching otherwise is wrong.

Most of today’s teaching will be to show that it is not as wrong as we think.

The other way it could offend us is that we don’t want to be tied to any group that way.

In church we have to sing songs *other* people like, and go through a service that *others* have planned, and listen to a sermon that someone *else* thinks is important.

No one pays attention to what *I* want or what *I* think or what *I* feel. How can God be face to face with *me*, to listen to *me* and to speak to *me* when I am in a place like that?

The answer to that would be something like this: God *is* present, and he is putting his arms around the whole group, warmly drawing the whole group to himself, which means that we are also getting closer to each other. God knows exactly what you want and think and feel, but he has a *different* plan. Is he allowed to have a different plan?

Anyway, I have given a picture of God being present when we are together in a way he is not present at other times. I do suspect that some of us don't really want it to be true. That's alright. Let's leave room for that. Just don't walk out right away, please.

My Story: Something happened to me about five years ago, middle of 2006 to be exact; I looked up it up in my old sermons file, which has dates on it. I preached a basic sermon here about God being present in a special way *when his people met together*.

At the time I spoke it, it was not that big a deal to me. But I couldn't get rid of it. I spoke it once to you, and after that God spoke it back to me again and again.

Here's how it happens: on Saturday night or Sunday morning I have a shower. That's not the only time I shower, but the Saturday evening or Sunday morning shower is different. I am getting clean because I am going to meet with God. I will stand before God.

I did not decide to start thinking this way. It just happened in my mind. Even on Sundays when I teach, and I am preoccupied with preparing and how it will go, I'm also thinking, "what is it that I want to say to God during the service?"

I will be there in front of him – what do I need to say? What is it that I need to ask for?"

After our Sunday morning adult Sunday School in our house, when we pray together, I leave our house and walk to the church, and if I walk alone I'm talking to myself, getting ready to be in front of God.

It has changed how I sing, it has changed what I expect to happen, and other things.

I am *not* saying that I can feel God's presence. I don't. But I know that he's here. The question is: what I am doing about it, and what are we doing about it?

When we all come in Sunday morning, there is chaos and happy talking and visiting. It is relaxed and good. God is here, because we gathered to meet before him. I don't think our happy talking is irreverent. God is here and enjoys it. But I do wonder if *we* know that he's here. I wonder if *we'd* act differently if we could see what was invisible.

I have really just one point to make this morning: when we gather together, we are in front of God in a special way. God is present when his people gather in some way that goes past his presence the rest of the time.

God’s Helping Presence

Now, Psalm 139. The title of the sermon is: Two kinds of God’s presence. The OT and the NT both speak of God’s presence in two different ways. God has a *helping* presence, and he has a *worship* presence.

The Bible often speaks about God being with his people. Sometimes this is for the whole group. In Deuteronomy 31 (v6) Moses tells all Israel, *Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of your enemies, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.*

When the Bible talks like that, about God being with us, the point is almost never just that he’s with us, close to us so we won’t feel alone, or because he likes our company. Those are probably true, but there is almost always more: God is with us to help us, protect us, watch over us, guard us.

Hebrews 13:5-6 quotes those very words from Deuteronomy 31, and applies them to that church, because they also had enemies.

Psalm 139:7-12 says it as well as any Scripture, and I will read it. God invites every single child of God to say this back to God.

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.

I love the picture of God’s hand in v10. Some translations change that, but it really says “hand” in Hebrew and it is a powerful picture: *even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.*

God’s hand guides us and holds us fast. This presence of God is God’s helping presence. The helping presence of God is for every child of God, and it is true every day, all the time, any place. Every child of God has it all the time, every day, every place.

God’s Worship Presence in the OT

Turn to Deuteronomy 12. Even though God was with each one of his people, in the OT, he still wanted the tabernacle to be built, which was a small elaborate tent. That tent was God’s home while Israel was in the wilderness.

God’s helping presence was with all Israel, and according to Ps 139 also with each Israelite. But they were not his home. The tabernacle, the tent of Meeting, was his home.

And that tabernacle was where worship happened. Eventually King David wanted to replace the tabernacle with a permanent building, a temple. David did not like it that he lived in a building but God lived in a tent. But God said that David’s son Solomon should built the temple, and so Solomon built the temple.

Moses predicted this back in Deuteronomy 12. In fact he commanded it. We will read some verses from Deuteronomy 12. This is about God’s worship presence.

Remember that God’s helping presence was with all Israel, and with each Israelite. But God’s helping presence was not his worship presence.

Deuteronomy 12:5-7 - *You are to seek the place the LORD your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling. To that place you must go; ⁶ there bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, what you have vowed to give and your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. ⁷ There, in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the LORD your God has blessed you.*

“There, in the presence of the LORD your God” – but did we not just read in Ps 139 that God was with each one of his people wherever they went? Yes, we did.

I do not understand the difference between God’s helping presence and his worship presence. But they are different.

More from Deuteronomy 12, where Moses speaks ahead of time about the Temple that Solomon will build. Israelites brought their gifts and offerings to God’s worship presence, and they rejoiced in front of God at his worship presence.

Deuteronomy 12:11-12 - *Then to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name—there you are to bring everything I command you: your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, and all the choice possessions you have vowed to the LORD. ¹² And there rejoice before the LORD your God—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites from your towns who have no allotment or inheritance of their own.*

Deuteronomy 12:17-18 - *You must not eat in your own towns the tithe of your grain and new wine and olive oil, or the firstborn of your herds and flocks, or whatever you have vowed to give, or your freewill offerings or special gifts. ¹⁸ Instead, you are to eat them in the presence of the LORD your God at the place the LORD your God will choose—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites from your towns—and you are to rejoice before the LORD your God in everything you put your hand to.*

God's Worship Presence in the NT

The OT has two clear kinds of God's presence, God's helping presence and God's worship presence. The NT has the same. God's helping presence and worship presence both occur in the NT as well. I will focus on the worship presence.

In the OT, God's worship presence focused on a physical place, an actual building. It was first the tabernacle that Moses built, and then it was the Temple that Solomon built.

In the NT, God's worship presence is the people themselves. There is no physical place or actual building. The gathering of God's people, the group, is the temple. We'll start with a few places that use the temple image.

1 Corinthians 3:16 - *Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.*

God's Spirit dwells in your midst. You together are that temple.

2 Corinthians 6:16 - *What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them."*

Ephesians 2:21-22 - *In Christ the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

Here Paul used the picture of a building, a holy temple. "You also are being joined together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

When I was growing up I heard lots of sermons about my own body being the temple of the Holy Spirit, which the NT states once, but I never heard about the body of believers, the group, being the temple of the Spirit. And the NT says a lot more about that.

Peter uses the image of each believer being a stone, a living stone, being built into a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5).

Under God's covenant with Israel it was wrong to bring sacrifices and offerings to any other place than the temple. Moses warned them against that, and later on when people disobeyed that the Scripture speaks about it.

Under the new covenant there is not such warning. It is not wrong to do these things alone. But the NT does assume that God is present in gathering in a way he's not when we are alone. It is that simple.

Matthew 18:20 – *Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.* What exactly happens when two or three come together that does not happen when one person prays alone? I do not know. But Jesus’ words mean *something*.

The Lord himself is present when two or three are together because of him in a way he’s not present even when one person is in prayer. He certainly hears the prayer of one, and his helping presence is there.

But something else happens when people gather together because of him.

There is a similar line in 1 Corinthians 5:4 – *When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of the Lord Jesus is present.*

When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus, and the power of the Lord Jesus is present. Those to go together in some way, being assembled and the power of the Lord Jesus being present.

So you will say to me, “so is the power of the Lord not present when I’m by myself?” I do not know how to answer that. I cannot tell you the difference between our Lord’s helping presence, his being with each individual believer, and his worship presence, which happens only when believers are gathered together.

But I know that there is a difference. It is very clear in the OT. It is not emphasized the same way in the NT, but it certainly exists in the NT as well.

In the NT, the people, the group gathered because of the Lord, gathered to worship him and hear from him, that group is the temple, the group is God’s dwelling.

We come together to meet God. We don’t come to sing, we come to sing to God who is here, we pray to the God who is here, to hear through the Scriptures from the God who is here. We come together to meet God.

I get nervous about songs that invite God to come, or invite the Spirit to come. When we gather because of him, we are his house, and he’s here. The question is not if God will show up. The question is if we will show up, if we will speak to him and listen to him.

What if things don’t seem right? Bad sermon, or someone gets off track. Is God still present? Yes. In the OT, temple worship got very bad sometimes, people were idolaters and corrupt, even the priests. BUT, God was still present at the temple. He did not leave.

- *Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person; for God’s temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.*

- *Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.*

- *When you assemble in the name of the Lord Jesus, the power of the Lord Jesus is present.* Amen.