

The Presence of God



David Wilkerson February 29, 1988

David committed adultery with Bathsheba, "...and the thing that David had done displeased the Lord" (2 Samuel 11:27). Bathsheba became queen, and David went about his kingly duties. One day, perhaps while in a high government session with foreign ambassadors, someone approached the king and whispered, "Sir, the prophet Nathan is here. He's impatient and insists on seeing you right now. He says it's a matter of life and death!"

I can see David turning ashen white, the blood draining quickly from his face, unable to move, paralyzed with fear. His thoughts raced, "Oh, no! He knows! He must know! He's a prophet! God must have told him about my secret affair with Bathsheba! He knows Uriah didn't die accidentally; he knows I had him killed! It's all over! I'm done! Finished! He'll expose me!" David dismissed everyone quickly. Taking slow, deep breaths, he instructed his servant, "Bring Nathan into my private chamber." And suddenly, there is the prophet with those deep, piercing eyes, that holy man of God, Nathan. David slumps in his chair, ghostly white. "God bless you, Nathan. What can I do for you? Just name it!"

Nathan turns away and begins to tell David about the horrible sin of a rich man who stole somebody's little lamb. David is relieved! "He doesn't know! He's not here to expose me! He's upset about someone else's sin!" David is all ears now. He replies to Nathan's story, "Nathan, do you mean this horrible, selfish rich man had many flocks and herds, but when company came and he needed meat he stole the only lamb from a poor neighbor? And that lamb was the household pet, living in the house, playing with the children, sleeping with them? And this selfish, greedy rich man stole that lamb? So help me, Nathan, as surely as the Lord lives, I'll kill him. How terrible! I'll make him restore the lamb fourfold. Don't worry, Nathan. I'll tell my captain to bring this man in right away. What's his name, Nathan? Tell me. Who is he?"

Nathan swings around abruptly, looks David in the eye, points a finger, and says, "You, David! You are the man! You stole Bathsheba! You are the selfish killer!" David is speechless. Terror grips his heart as Nathan cries out, "Wherefore have you despised the commandment of the Lord, to do evil in His sight?" (2 Samuel 12:9). Then came these awful words, "I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house, and I will take thy wives before thine eyes, and give them unto them unto thy neighbor..." (2 Samuel 12:11). David cries out, "I've sinned against the Lord..." (2 Samuel 12:13).

David is terrified, not because of Nathan's prophecy that he will lose his wives. No, David is remembering what happened to Saul because of sin and rebellion. David had seen this great man of God fall apart; he had seen him fall into madness when the presence of God departed. He had wept at the sight of a once powerful man of God cursing, living in fear, without hope. David knew what the end was like for a man who loses the presence of God. He had seen the evil spirit that possessed Saul. So David cried out, "Oh, God, I acknowledge my sin, it is ever before me! Create in me a clean heart; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Thy presence; and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me" (Psalm 51:3, 10, 11).

What Happens to a Child of God When His Presence Departs?

If Christians would take Saul's experience to heart, they would cry out like David to the Lord, "Give me a clean

heart! Don't take Your presence from me!" Saul is a tragic picture of the Christian who has lost God's holy presence.

There are three terrible evidences. The first evidence is a melancholy, depressed spirit. God's Spirit left Saul because he refused to obey the Lord's command. Saul was commanded to do nothing until Samuel came to Gilgal to seek God and make sacrifices, but Saul got impatient and took matters into his own hands. So God left him "...because thou hast not obeyed that which the Lord commanded thee" (1 Samuel 13:14). He was not serious about God's Word.

A spirit of envy and jealousy then fell upon him, and he became insecure. The crowds were singing, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands.... And Saul envied David from that day forward. And it came to pass on the morrow, that the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, and he prophesied in the midst of the house..." (1 Samuel 18:7-10). The original Hebrew reads, "The melancholy spirit sent by God came upon Saul, and he feigned to prophesy within the house...." The word is actually "Rave!" Saul stormed about the house breaking things in a violent fit of madness. He raved like a madman! Saul cast his javelin at David, trying to kill him. "And Saul was afraid of David, because the Lord was with him, and was departed from Saul" (1 Samuel 18:12)

Nothing worse can be said of a child of God but that "the presence of the Lord departed." In His place comes a spirit of hopelessness and emptiness, and it causes sudden irritation, temper tantrums, jealousies, envy and fear. This melancholy spirit on Saul made him believe that others were out to get him, that everyone was conspiring against him, that no one loved him and that no one pitied him. "All of you have conspired against me, and there is none that sheweth me that my son hath made a league with the son of Jesse, and there is none of you that is sorry for me..." (1 Samuel 22:8). He now distrusted his own son. And on one black day of infamy, Saul ordered the execution of 85 priests. He then had the city of Nob, a priest's city, completely wiped out, including women, mothers and children. Saul became a schemer, a manipulator of people. His home was divided and in turmoil. He was unable to sleep at night, always restless.

There is a depression caused by a lack of certain substances in the brain, and it is a strictly medical problem. But much of the depression among God's people is due to the departure of the Spirit of God because of their disobedience. Like Saul, they refuse to take God seriously. And like Saul, they become irritable, jealous, envious, manipulative and hateful.

A second evidence of the loss of God's presence is frequent confessions and occasional powerful movings of the Spirit with no accompanying change of heart. Saul was always confessing, always saying, "I have sinned! I'm sorry!" He said it at Gilgal when he disobeyed God, spared the best cattle and saved the wicked king Achish. He said it to David, after David refused to kill him in the cave, "You have done me good and I have rewarded you with evil" (1 Samuel 24:17). Saul repented again in the hill of Hachilah after David crept into the camp while Saul's bodyguard slept and stole Saul's spear and water bottle. Saul then called out, "I have sinned: return, my son David; for I will no more do thee harm..." (1 Samuel 26:21). But through all this his heart never really changed; it actually grew harder with every confession.

When David escaped to Ramah to be with Samuel and the prophets, Saul came up to kill David. But instead the Spirit came upon Saul, "...And the Spirit of God was upon him also, and he went on, and prophesied, until he came to Naioth in Ramah. And he stripped off his clothes also (the upper garment) and prophesied before Samuel in like manner, and lay down naked all that day and all that night..." (1 Samuel 19:23-24). When he got near the fire of God, among holy people, God's Spirit hit him like lightning. It was awesome! All day, all night, ecstatic utterances, praising God, prophesying. But when he got up he went right back to his stubborn ways.

How many Christians are like this! God occasionally moves on them; then they weep and promise God that things will change. God gives them seasons of refreshing to draw them to Himself, to reverse sin. But they're never changed. They do not come out to a life of devotion. They do not study their Bibles. They do not pray. The presence of God does not stay with them. Only on occasion do they experience the real moving of God's Spirit upon them.

The third evidence of the lack of God's presence is a life of confusion, containing no guidance, no personal word from God. One of the saddest portions of Scripture recounts how Saul sought counsel from the witch of Endor because God refused to answer him (see 1 Samuel 28:5-20). Hear Saul's somber words, "...God is departed from me, and answereth me no more..." (verse 15). This is the sad sign of a Christian who has lost God's presence. He walks in confusion and distress, going about begging for a Word from God, even seeking out horoscopes and

astrologers, anything or anyone claiming to be prophetic.

How Is God's Presence Lost?

Christians today lose God's presence in the same way that Israel did. After Israel was saved out of the Red Sea and all her enemies were conquered, lying dead in the Sea, "...the people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord, and his servant Moses" (Exodus 14:31). After they got saved, they promised to provide God a habitation, a place in their hearts to contain His presence. The whole nation promised, "...He is become my salvation. He is my God and I will prepare Him an habitation..." (Exodus 15:2).

God's presence is lost because no place is provided to maintain it! Israel promised God they would never forget their hour of deliverance, that their hearts would be His tent, His place to abide, that they would forever remember. This is daily communion. Isn't that what you promised God when He saved you? You would give Him all your heart! Your body would be His temple! His Word would be your delight! You would always be thankful and prayerful!

But Israel ignored God's presence and forgot His Word. And so it is today. God's people have so little regard for His presence that they make no time or place for His Spirit. They seldom visit the secret closet of prayer, which is His habitation, His tent. Many quote the verse, "For He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Hebrews 13:5); but read on — verse 7 carries with it a command to heed God's Word.

Secondly, God's presence is lost when the golden calf is erected. God called the Israelites gathered around the golden calf a "stiff-necked people." These Israelites represent a people who are not shut in with God, who provide no time or place for sweet communion with Him. A people from whom the Spirit and presence of God departs is a people who will soon become consumed by idolatry. The Israelites dancing around the golden calf are not to be ridiculed. The Christian is not to ask condescendingly, "How could they stoop so low?" — for the golden calf is still with us.

What is the golden calf? It is a symbol. It represents a deep inner heart problem. It symbolizes a casual indifference to God's commandments. By their actions the Israelites said, "God can't mean what He says!" They simply did not take His warnings seriously. Why did Israel become so nonchalant, so casual, so light-hearted and unafraid of God's Word? Because the prophetic voice was gone. The thundering prophet was nowhere in sight. There was no holy man of God there at the moment to reprove them. Only Aaron, the soft-on-sin priest. Moses was up on the mountain with God.

So it is today. For the last 30 years there has come a permissive gospel. Prophets have just recently come forth. This lack of godly reproof has produced a casual indifference which allows the Christian to drink in filth without being convicted, to be indifferent to the study of God's Word, to be nonchalant about prayer. Yes, the golden calf is a spirit in the child of God, a spirit of indifference.

How Do You Recover and Keep God's Presence?

Since so many Christians ignore prayer, the real question is, "Do you really want God's presence to go with you?" Because, believe it or not, Israel could have gone on to possess all that God promised — without His presence! Israel could have done it, and many Christians do so today.

God told Moses to take His people and lead them into the Promised Land; He also said that an angel would lead them, not He Himself "...for I will not go up in the midst of thee; for thou art a stiff-necked people: lest I consume thee in the way" (Exodus 33:3). Think of it! All God's blessings; all His promised rights and full inheritance, but without His presence! The presence of angels, a land flowing with milk and honey, but no presence of God!

Saul lost God's presence, yet God let him defeat the Amalakitites. Saul won over the Philistines. He was still king. But how terrible the consequences of being left out of the Lord's presence! In this situation sin thrives, idols move in and flesh takes the throne. David had seen that, so he cried out, "Cast me not away from Thy presence, take not Thy Holy Spirit from me." Moses knew these consequences, so he refused to go on without God's presence. He said to God, "If Thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence. For wherein shall it be known here that I and Thy people have found grace in Thy sight? Is it not in that Thou goest with us? So shall we be separated, I and Thy people, from all the people that are upon the face of the earth" (Exodus 33:15-16).

Three things happened before the cloudy pillar of God's presence returned: "When the people heard these evil tidings [that God would not go with them], they mourned: and no man did put on him his ornaments. And Moses took the tent, and pitched it without the camp, afar off from the camp. And it came to pass, that every one which sought the Lord went out unto the tent, which was without the camp. And as Moses entered into the tent, the cloudy pillar descended..." (Exodus 33:4, 7, 9).

First, they mourned, wept, sorrowed and repented at the sad news of God's departure. They learned that God will not dwell with a stubborn people who lightly esteem His Word. They discovered that God means what He says. Although they were chosen, God said He would leave them. Listen to His Word: "Turn ye even to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: and rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth Him of the evil. Who knoweth If He will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind Him..." (Joel 2:12-14). That blessing is the presence of the Lord. Where are those Christians who will get serious about His Word, who will weep, fast, seek Him, until there is a promise of His presence?

Secondly, they put aside all their ornaments. The Lord said, "Now put off thy ornaments from thee, that I may know what to do unto thee" (Exodus 33:5). This means they took practical steps to put away every worldly distraction. Their ornaments were gold and silver replicas of the evil Egyptian gods — mice, goats, and calves dangling on chains. Their excuse was, "I don't worship this thing on my neck. It's just a piece of gold. It's meaningless; it's just a sentimental reminder from Egypt!" But God knew it was more than that. The Prophet Zephaniah warned that God would judge those Israelites: "I will cut off...them that worship and that swear by the Lord, and that swear by Malcham" (Zephaniah 1:4-5). God's people had made little ornaments, images of the Moabite and Amonite god Malcham (Molech), the god of human sacrifice. Up to this time God had patiently endured this flirtation, but now the issue was life and death. Their little charms had caused them to build a golden calf. So God said, "Enough! The least you can do is put away whatever charms you! Whatever you sacrifice your time to!"

Christians say they want God's presence, but they won't even put away those things that obviously distract them from Him. Joshua commanded the people, "Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve Him in sincerity and in truth: and put away your gods..." (Joshua 24:14). "Put away" in Hebrew means "Turn off your gods." God is not joking when He commands, "Thou shalt bring no abomination into your house" (Deuteronomy 7:26); "Touch not the unclean thing;" "Set no wicked thing before your eyes;" "Walk before Me blameless." Therefore, they stripped themselves of everything that offended God.

Thirdly, Moses erected a tent outside the camp. The tabernacle had not yet been built. This was a special tent, a habitation for God's presence, located outside every distraction, far from the camp. Only those who truly sought the Lord went out to the tent. Moses went out daily, and Joshua never left. That tent represents the Christian's secret closet of prayer. The child of God must leave his family and his busy schedule behind. He must go outside of it all to meet the Lord, to seek His face, for God laments that "...there is none to stretch forth My tent any more, and to set up My curtains" (Jeremiah 10:20).

Only then was the issue settled, "When Moses entered into the tent, the cloudy pillar descended, and stood at the door of the tent, and the Lord talked with Moses...And He said, My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest" (Exodus 33:8-9,14). If you really want God's presence, where is your tent? Why don't you seek Him? Why don't you pray? Why don't you study His Word? Why is church your only contact with Him? *Do you not know, or even care, about His presence in you?*

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