



If Thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence. (Exodus 33:15)

THERE is a word in the text that heads this page which demands the attention of all English Christians in this day. That word is “presence.” There is a religious subject bound up with that word, on which it is most important to have clear, distinct, and scriptural views. That subject is the “presence of God,” and specially the “presence of our Lord Jesus Christ” with Christian people. What is that presence? Where is that presence? What is the nature of that presence? To these questions I propose to supply answers.

- I. I shall consider, firstly, *the general doctrine of God’s presence in the world.*
- II. I shall consider, secondly, *the special doctrine of Christ’s real spiritual presence.*
- III. I shall consider, thirdly, *the special doctrine of Christ’s real bodily presence.*

The whole subject deserves serious thoughts. If we suppose that this is a mere question of controversy, which only concerns theological partisans, we have yet much to learn. It is a subject which lies at the very roots of saving religion. It is a subject which is inseparably tied up with one of the most precious articles of the Christian faith. It is a subject about which it is most dangerous to be wrong. An error here may first lead a man to the Church of Rome, and then land him finally in the gulf of infidelity. Surely it is worth while to examine carefully the doctrine of the “presence” of God and of His Christ.

Today we will undertake to study Part I of Bishop’s Ryle’s treatise on the Real Presence:

PART I. THE GENERAL DOCTRINE OF GOD’S PRESENCE IN THE WORLD

The teaching of the Bible on this point is clear, plain, and unmistakable. God is everywhere. There is no place in heaven or earth where He is not. There is no place in air or land or sea, no place above ground or underground, no place in town or country, no place in Europe, Asia, Africa, or America, where God is not always present. Enter into your closet and lock the door: God is there. Climb to the top of the highest mountain,

where not even an insect moves God is there. Sail to the most remote island in the Pacific Ocean, where the foot of man never trod God is there. He is always near us,—seeing, hearing, observing, knowing every action, and deed, and word, and whisper, and look, and thought, and motive, and secret of every one of us, and everywhere.

What saith the Scripture? It is written in Job, *“His eyes are upon the ways of man, and He seeth all his goings. There is no darkness, nor shadow of death where the workers of iniquity may hide themselves”* (Job xxxiv. 21, 22). It is written in Proverbs, *“The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good”* (Prov.. xv. 3). It is written in Jeremiah, *“Thine eyes are open upon all the ways of the sons of men: to give every one according . . . to the fruit of his doings”* (Jer. xxxii. 19). It is written in the Psalms, *“Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, Thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compasses my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, Thou knowest it altogether. . . . Whither shall I go from Thy Spirit? or whither shall I flee from Thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall Thy hand lead me, and Thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from Thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to Thee”* (Psalm cxxxix. 2-12).

Such language as this confounds and overwhelms us. The doctrine before us is one which we cannot fully understand. Precisely so. David said the same thing about it almost three thousand years ago. *“Such knowledge is too wonderful for me: it is high, I cannot attain unto it”* (Psalm cxxxix. 6). But it does not follow that the doctrine is not true, because we cannot understand it. It is the weakness of our poor minds and intellects that we must blame, and not the doctrine.

There are scores of things in the world around us, which few can understand or explain, yet no sensible man refuses to believe. How this earth is ever rolling round the sun with enormous swiftness, while we feel no motion,—how the moon affects the tides, and makes them rise and fall twice every twenty-four hours, how millions of perfectly organised living creatures exist in every pint of pond-water, which our naked eye cannot see,—all these are things well known to men of science, while most of us could not explain them for our lives. And shall we, in the face of such facts, presume to doubt that God is everywhere present, for no better reason than this, that we cannot understand it? Let us never dare to say so again.

How many things there are about God Himself which we cannot possibly understand, and yet we must believe them, unless so senseless as to be atheists! Who can explain the eternity of God, the infinite power and wisdom of God, or the works of God in creation and providence? Who can comprehend a Being who is a Spirit, without body, parts, or passions? How can a material creature, who can only be in one place at one time, take in the idea of an immaterial Being, who existed before creation, who formed this world by His word out of nothing, and who can be everywhere and see everything at one and the same time? Where, in a word, is there a single attribute of God that mortal man can thoroughly comprehend? Where, then, is the common sense or wisdom of refusing to believe the doctrine of God being present everywhere, merely because our minds cannot take it in? Well says the Book of Job, *“Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know?”* (Job xi. 7, 8).

Let us have high and honourable thoughts of the God with whom we have to do while we live, and before whose bar we must stand when we die. Let us seek to have just notions of His power, His wisdom, His eternity, His holiness, His perfect knowledge, His "presence" everywhere. One half the sin committed by mankind arises from wrong views of their Maker and Judge. Men are reckless and wicked, because they do not think that God sees them. They do things they would never do if they really believed they were under the eyes of the Almighty. It is written, *"Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself"* (Psalm i. 21). It is written again, *"They say, The Lord shall not see, neither shall the God of Jacob regard it. Understand, ye brutish among the people and, ye fools, when will ye be wise? He that planted the ear, shall He not hear? He that formed the eye, shall He not see?"* (Psalm xciv. 7-9). No wonder that holy Job said in his best moments, *"When I consider, I am afraid of Him"* (Job xxiii. 15).

"What is your God like?" said a sneering infidel one day to a poor Christian. "What is this God of yours like: this God about whom you make such ado? Is He great or is He small?" "My God," was the wise reply, "is a great and a small God at the same time—so great that the heaven of heavens cannot contain Him, and yet so small that He can dwell in the heart of a poor sinner like me." "Where is your God, my boy?" said another infidel to a child whom he saw coming out of a school where the Bible was taught. "Where is your God about whom you have been reading? Show Him to me, and I will give you an orange." "Show me where He is not," was the answer, and I will give you two. My God is everywhere." Well is it said in a certain place, *"God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty."* *"Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings Thou hast perfected praise"* (1 Cor. i. 27; Matt. xxi. 16).

However hard to understand this doctrine may be, it is one which is most useful and wholesome for our souls. To keep continually in mind that God is always present with us, to live always as in God's sight, to act and speak and think as under His eye,—all this is eminently calculated to have a good effect upon our souls. Wide, and deep, and searching, and piercing is the influence of that one thought, *"Thou God seest me."*

(a) The thought of God's presence is a loud call to humility. How much that is evil and defective must the all-seeing eye see in every one of us! How small a part of our character is really known by man! *"Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart"* (1 Sam. xvi. 7). Man does not always see us, but the Lord is always looking at us, morning, noon, and night. Who has not need to say, "God be merciful to me a sinner?"

(b) The thought of God's presence is a crushing proof of our need of Jesus Christ. What hope of salvation could we have if there was not a Mediator between God and man? Before the eye of an ever-present God, our best righteousness is filthy rags, and our best doings are full of imperfection. Where should we be if there was not a fountain open for all sin, even the blood of Christ? Without Christ, the prospect of death, judgment, and eternity would drive us to despair.

(c) The thought of God's presence teaches the folly of hypocrisy in religion. What can be more silly and childish than to wear a mere cloak of Christianity while we inwardly cleave to sin, when God is ever looking at us and sees us through and through? It is easy to deceive ministers and fellow-Christians, because they often see us only upon Sundays. But God sees us morning, noon, and night, and cannot be deceived. Oh, whatever we are in religion, let us be real and true!

(d) The thought of God's presence is a check and curb on the inclination to sin. The recollection that there is One always near us and observing us, who will one day have a

reckoning with all mankind, may well keep us back from evil. Happy are those sons and daughters who, when they leave the family home, and launch forth into the world, carry with them the abiding remembrance of God's eye. "My father and mother do not see me, but God does." This was the feeling that preserved Joseph when tempted in a foreign land: "*How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?*" (Gen. xxxix. 9).

(e) The thought of God's presence is a spur to the pursuit of true holiness. The highest standard of sanctification is to "walk with God" as Enoch did, and to "walk before God" as Abraham did. Where is the man who would not strive to live so as to please God, if he realized that God was always standing at his right hand? To get away from God is the secret aim of the sinner; to get nearer to God is the longing desire of the saint. The real servants of the Lord are "*a people near unto Him*" (Psalm cxlviii. 14).

(f) The thought of God's presence is a comfort in time of public trouble. When war and famine and pestilence break in upon a land, when the nations are rent and torn by inward divisions, and all order seems in peril, it is cheering to reflect that God sees and knows and is close at hand,—that the King of kings is near and not asleep. He that saw the Spanish Armada sail to invade England, and scattered it with the breath of His mouth,—He that looked on when the schemers of the Gunpowder Plot were planning the destruction of Parliament,—this God is not changed.

(g) The thought of God's presence is a strong consolation in private trial. We may be driven from home and native land, and placed at the other side of the world; we may be bereaved of wife and children and friends, and left alone in our family, like the last tree in a forest: but we can never go to any place where God is not, and under no circumstances can we be left entirely alone.

Such thoughts as these are useful and profitable for us all. That man must be in a poor state of soul who does not feel them to be so. Let it be a settled principle in our religion never to forget that in every condition and place we are under the eye of God. It need not frighten us if we are true believers. The sins of all believers are cast behind God's back, and even the all-seeing God sees no spot in them.. It ought to cheer us, if our Christianity is genuine and sincere. We can then appeal to God with confidence, like David, and say, "*Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting*" (Psalm cxxxix. 23, 24). Great is the mystery of God's presence everywhere; but the true man of God can look at it without fear.