

Isaiah 57:15

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[0 : 00] We shall turn again to the chapter read, Isaiah chapter 57, and I want to look at verse 15.

For thus the high and lofty one that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is holy, I dwell in the high and holy place with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit to revive the spirit of the humble and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

Now as we are aware, the Lord taught his people as they were able to bear, according to the principle of line upon line and precept upon precept.

We express that by saying that God's revelation is a progressive or accumulative revelation in which the succession of prophets build on the work of predecessors so that in every age God carries his church further forward in their understanding of his own glory and his own grace.

That means, for example, that when we come to Isaiah, we have more light than we have in Genesis. It also means that in the Old Testament we have more light than we have, we have more than we have in the Old Testament because the new builds on the foundation of the earlier revelation.

[2 : 09] And so you have this terrific momentum within revelation itself. We have the progressive unfolding of the glory of God, the gradual unveiling of his redemptive purpose.

Now because of that, there are many things in the New Testament which are revealed to us only very dimly in the Old. I might mention, for example, the glory of the person of Jesus Christ.

We don't have in the Old Testament with any measure of fullness teaching with regard to the Lord's two natures, divine and human, in the one personality.

Again, we don't have very much light in the Old Testament with regard to the final destiny of the Lord's people or indeed the destiny ultimately of the reprobate.

Only in the New Testament is that light given to us with any measure of fullness. And yet, in a curious way, we find that there are certain doctrines which are revealed more fully in the Old than they are in the New.

[3 : 34] That applies, for example, to the emotional side of our own experience as Christians. We have nothing in the New Testament corresponding to the book of Psalms in its great analysis of the religious emotions.

That's why it is such a superb book of Christian praise, because it shows to us all the varied moods of the people of God.

And so it's in the Old Testament that we find the supreme revelation of the experiential side of religion.

And it's in the Old Testament also that we find the supreme revelation of the attributes of God. I have said that we find the supreme revelation of God.

I have said that we find in the Old Testament very little on the person of Christ. The time for that had not come.

[4 : 45] Because God in the Old Testament is laying the foundation of faith in revealing with unsurpassable clarity the glorious qualities and attributes of his own nature.

And if we want to ask what is God, to ask what like is God, then the answer is given to us monumentally and almost fully in the Old Testament.

Now to give us that background, I want to focus on the text which we have this morning. Because it's one of the great Old Testament affirmations of the attributes and the glory of God himself.

It shows us the great qualities that constitute the glory of God. For example, we are told of the supremacy of God.

He is the high and lofty one. He is God most high. We are told also that he is the eternal God. He is the one who inhabits eternity.

[6 : 06] We are told also that he is the holy God. That is, he is God to separate from all that is not God.

So we have in this list of divine qualities, we have this teaching that God is supreme. We have the teaching that God is eternal.

We have the teaching that God is holy. But I have a particular interest for the moment in the fourth quality. And that is this.

The affirmation of the presence of God. I dwell in the high and holy place. I dwell also with him that is of a contrite and humble spirit.

And what then do we have? We have a God who is supreme. We have a God who is eternal. We have a God who is holy.

[7 : 11] And we have a God who is present. Now my concern is this. That we so often speak of the presence of God.

And yet that a great deal of our language with regard to God's presence has lost its rooting in biblical teaching.

We do not use the concept of God's presence in a way that is controlled by the Bible itself.

Now that is true, for example, of the most academic theology. Because theologians have spoken of the omnipresence of God.

And their whole concept of God's omnipresence has been quite different from what God's practicing people mean by presence.

[8 : 19] In other words, if I were to announce this morning a discourse on the omnipresence of God, you would sigh and say, here comes an academic lecture.

on the omnipresence of God. If I announce as my subject the presence of God, then possibly there is some expectation of an inspirational and a devotional address.

In other words, in our thinking, the idea of omnipresence belongs to scholastic and academic theology.

Whereas the idea of the presence of God belongs to our own intimate and pleasurable experience as Christians.

We have a terrible distinction between the theology of omnipresence and the experience and the experience of the presence.

[9 : 32] And at the most fundamental level this morning, I want to protest against that kind of dichotomy. I want to protest that we have no right to reflect on omnipresence as if it were divorced from the comfort of God's presence.

And I want to protest that we have no right to think of the presence of God as if it meant only a complex of feelings our emotions in our own souls.

Because the presence of God, if I may dare to say so, is an objective reality. It isn't my feelings.

I may have certain feelings as a result of the presence of God. But my feelings are not the presence of God.

The presence of God is a presence near me, with me, in me of a person who is not myself, who is distinct from my feelings and who is often present with me even when to my consciousness he may be very, very remote indeed.

[10 : 59] And so I'm taking the risk for a moment of trying to explore with you what biblically we mean by the presence of God.

Now to get some clarity I want to suggest that the Bible teaches us a three-fold presence of God.

There are three different forms of God's presence that we have to reckon with. and it may be helpful to see those distinctions.

There is first of all what I may call the general presence of God that is the omnipresence of God. By this we mean that God is in all places.

God is absolutely everywhere. God's presence is inescapable. That is what we sung in Psalm 139.

[12 : 11] From thy presence whither shall I go? Where can I go? From the face of God. Ascend I heaven Lord I were there there if in hell I lie.

it fills the psalmist with a feeling which is very close to claustrophobia. He feels so hemmed in.

He feels that God is inescapable. He feels that there is no privacy. God's face God's personality God's intimidating shadow that is everywhere.

in one of the most splendid pieces of biblical poetry we have him saying to us take I the morning wings and fly to the utmost parts of the sea even there thou there thou and in other words he says if

I should fly with the speed of light from this temple in Jerusalem in my desperate effort to escape from God and finally simply spotted in a moment to the utmost parts of the sea then the first thing I find is thou there the ineluctible the inescapable presence of almighty God God everywhere in his sovereignty God everywhere in his power

God everywhere upholding all things God everywhere see God everywhere carry now this presence is utterly and totally indiscriminate it is in heaven and in hell it is as real for the reprobate as it is for the righteous it is an inescapable fact of human life that God is the constant context of our existence that we have to learn to coexist with this God from whom we cannot flee we find biblically the tremendous combination of the omnipresence and the omniscience of God God's eye is always upon us there is no way that we can flee from scrutiny so that is the first form of

[15 : 03] God's presence this omnipresence this general presence of God in terms of which we can say he is not far from any one of us in him we live and move and have our being now I do think that that ought to weigh very heavily upon our consciences because all that we perpetrate all that we do is done in the face of God and sometimes it is the most salutary dissuasive against sin to remember that there may be no human eye no human observer yet we are perpetrating this enormity in the very face of God himself but I move on to the second form of the presence of

God and that is this the presence of God in glory are the glorious presence of God now there is a very distinct reference to that in the words of Erteschik-Shir I dwell in the high and holy place now this is not the omnipresence of God this is the specific glorious presence of God if I may express it in Christian terms I mean this there is a place this morning where there is the humanity of Christ a place where the risen saviour is a place where his soul is a place where his body is his own description of it is that it is the glory which he had with the Father before the world was his humanity is today situated in the glory in which his deity had been from eternity if I'm asked where is glory the only answer I have is it is where Christ is it is where the human Christ is he has gone to me with the Father and when we ourselves think of our own final experience of the presence of God then it is to that that our hearts have to turn because for us the final form of the glory of God is in Paul's language to be with Christ which is far better that place where we shall see him clearly that place where we shall see him not through a glass enigmatically but where we shall see him face to face where we shall see him not even through the tears through which very often we have to see him in this life God will have wiped away all the tears and not even the tears themselves will blur the vision blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God you remember in Psalm 27 the psalmist's great longing is that he may dwell in the temple that he may behold the beauty of the Lord well that is the presence of God that surely at last is the supreme object of Christian longing let me remind you of one of the most searching passages to be found anywhere in the New Testament really searching and it's all to do with this whole subject of the glorious presence of God and our own attitude to it it's a passage where Paul tells the Philippian church

I'm in a strait betwixt two I'm on the horse of a dilemma he says I don't know whether I should pray to God to take me away to be with himself or whether I should pray to God to spare my life and he goes on to say with marvellous frankness my desire he says is to depart and to be with Christ which is far better in other words if it were a matter of my personal longing a matter merely of my own wishes and my own ambition then all I want is to be with Christ that's far better but my dilemma he says is you because I know that for me to abide in the flesh is needful for you

I know that you need me and that's my dilemma that's why I can't pray to God to take me because you need me and I said it's terrible it's terrible because our own attitude to the whole question is so different we cling to life with what I can only regard often as the most astonishing tenacity and I really wonder often whether we whether I have anything of this mind this mood of the apostle Paul whether we have this longing to see the Lord this longing for eyeball to eyeball confrontation with the Savior the longing to see the king in his beauty now there are moments sometimes terrible moments of world weariness in the lives of Christians when the whole thing gets them down when life with all its pressures and all its frustrations and all its disappointments when all these things are very close to putting the Lord's people under and it's very easy in those moments to say that we wish we were away but it wasn't that aversion to the world that led Paul to express those sentiments it wasn't negative it wasn't frustration it was this overwhelming love for Christ this overwhelming longing to see once more it was even more closely the Christ he had seen on the Damascus road that vision burned indelibly in Paul's memory that terrific objective parousia that presence of God that he had known in all the glory of that encounter and Paul

[23 : 14] Paul starts with saying with Christ far better and my great question is that whatever we have in life the best days the great days the days when we live not only in the marvel of loving but in the marvel of being loved the days when we are humbled by the consciousness of the goodness and glory of God to ourselves in that moment to say with Christ far better not far better than the valley of the shadow not far better than distress not far better than weariness but far better absolutely far better than everything and it was towards that that Paul's heart went out you go right back to Abraham as seen through the eyes of Hebrews chapter 11 they declared that they sought a country they looked for a city which hath foundations whose builder and maker is God

I'm sure I've often referred to Augustine's great longing in his confessions let me see thee even though I die lest I die from longing to see thee that is the longing for the glorious presence of God so there is the general presence of God the omnipresence then there is the glorious presence of God and then thirdly there is the gracious presence of God the presence of God in his grace there is a presence that is known only by his own people a presence which is not only judgmental and which is not only intimidating and which is not destructive but the presence of grace of compassion of concern of God's involvement of God's commitment in our own daily lives now all the Lord's people have the benefit of the omnipresence of God with all other human beings but here there is something else there is the presence of God's grace or the presence shall I say of a caring God of a concerned and uninvolved God now time and again we find the Bible referring to this particular idea we have it in the words of our text I dwell with him that is of a contrite and humble spirit I am with you always even to the end of the world the emphasis again in the gospels where the Lord says where two or three gather together in my name I am there I am in the midst I am with my people now one of the glories of it is that the Bible uses virtually every possible preposition to express this idea God is with us God is in us God is near us God is around us God is even underneath us

God is before us God is behind us God encircles us God garances us God walks beside us in every possible way all the resources of biblical language are used to announce the reality of this fact of God's nearness God's presence with his own people and we might ask ourselves what are the consequences of such a presence how is this presence manifested house presence evident in the lives of the people of God if you go for example to the 23rd Psalm what we find is this when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I fear no evil before thou art with me in other words the whole basis of the fearlessness of God's church is that

God is with them God is with them in the valley of the shadow of death come again to the whole evangelistic mandate you shall be witnesses to me that is what the Lord says but he also says this I am with you always even to the end of the world it is again this let not your heart be troubled I shall not leave you orphans I shall come again but again the comfort is that the Lord himself is with his own people in other words it's not a feeling it's a great objective reality God is near us God near us in his own grace let me put it this way let me remind you of the question what different forms has this gracious presence of

[29 : 26] God taken we have seen there is the omnipresence there is the glorious presence there is the gracious presence let me take the gracious presence let me analyze it further and suggest again that the church of God has known historically three forms of the gracious presence of God it has known for example this the presence of God in the Shekinah now let me say at once there is a technical word the Shekinah that is the tabernacling the dwelling of God with his Old Testament people it was symbolized in the desert in the pillar of cloud by day the pillar of fire by night those were the symbols of the residential glory of God it was symbolized later on in the tabernacle it was symbolized even later in the glory of God that dwelt between the cherubim in the most holy place now that

Shekinah that pillar of cloud that glory between the cherubim that tabernacle those weren't feelings they weren't emotions they were symbols of the great reality of which Psalm 46 spoke God in the midst of her death dwell there were days when the church was elated and days when the church was despondent but it wasn't in her elation that God was present it wasn't in her despondency that God was absent God was present objectively he was in the pillar of cloud in the pillar of fire he was in the tabernacle he was between the cherubim he was there quite independently of God's people's feelings in other words the whole procedure should be this that rather than conclude that God is present from her own feelings we should bring your feelings into correspondence with this fact that God is present let me put it more narrowly we may or may not go from the service this morning and

say God was present we may go sometimes and say there was a something there there was an atmosphere atmosphere and we would equate that atmosphere with the presence of God then I take you to this there is an absolutely unqualified divine promise that where two or three gather God is there and one of the implications of that for me is this that the very moment I rise to announce the opening sound I do so in the consciousness and belief that God is present I am not trying to work up God's presence I am not trying to create God's presence I am not trying to raise the temperature to a level at which the church can precipitate the presence of God I am starting from the objective reality that God is here why he is here because he is promised now let me say the church may feel as cold as an ice box some churches do the church may feel actually desolate it may lack atmosphere it may lack ornament it may lack tension it may lack psychological electricity it may lack all of these things but that is not to say that God is not here you can't slouch you can't sleep you can't let your mind wander you cannot be irreverent because from beginning to end we are in the presence of God just as for the Old

Testament church the Shekinah was a reality the good days the bad days the bright days the dark days it was quite independent of our feelings God was there and similarly in our own gatherings we have the same objective reality the presence of God is never the result of our worship the presence of God is the presupposition of our worship well that's the first form of the gracious presence of God the Shekinah in the Old Testament the second form I want to mention is this it was the form of God's presence given to us in the incarnation of Jesus Christ in Jesus we had Emmanuel God with us in other words we had all the fullness of God dwelling bodily in the Lord Jesus Christ with his people I see again it had nothing to do with the people's feelings when Christ was with them the disciples experienced a wide variety of emotions joy and sorrow expectancy and despair sometimes frustration sometimes annoyance sometimes blanking comprehension sometimes bafflement and bewilderment and none of the variations in the feelings altered the fact Christ was present with them there objectively was Emmanuel suffering with them teaching them caring for them protecting them guiding inspiring rebuking exalting them as the one who was present in and within their situation and for those 30 years we had this marvelous reality of God's presence where was he where was

[36 : 44] God what was the presence of God it was objectified externalized made visible in the person of the son our savior the most glorious point of all of course was when the presence of God at last was found on the cross of Calvary between two thieves some some of you who have dealt a little into the technical questions and terminology will know that our word for the second coming in the new testament is the word parousia which may mean arrival or it may mean presence that we had a parousia of Christ in the incarnation and part of the glory of it is that there was this moment this day in the world's history when the parousia was on the cross where God was present in the most unexpected place crucified between two thieves but you see there it's all it's objective the disciples that day they were never more desolate than when

God was in Calvary God had forsaken the world yet God was never more involved in it God was never more present God was never more active than he was in the presence which was the form of us being crucified between two thieves we have the presence in the Shekinah we have the presence in the incarnation we have the presence today thirdly in the Holy Spirit's ministry now I'm keeping it objective again the pillar of cloud wasn't a feeling the incarnation wasn't a feeling the Spirit's ministry is not a feeling and the presence of God today for us takes the supreme form the distinctive form of the Holy

Spirit's ministry in our own lives God is present with us in his own spirit I will come again said Christ I will send another comforter he has sent that spirit into our hearts now when we speak therefore of the presence of God with ourselves today it is to that presence that we are referring the presence of God's spirit in our own lives not to a feeling that we have but to the Spirit's ministry at one time God was present in the pillar of fire at another time God was present in the incarnation today he is present in the person and agency and activity of his own spirit now what I'm asking is this when you speak of a sense of

God's presence when you speak of being deserted by God when you speak of being near to God is this what you mean do you realize that we have become temples of the Spirit of God he is in us he fills us and the presence of God's grace is the gracious ministry fulfilled in us and around us by the Spirit of God now yes and we say it always means comfort and I would say well yes it often means comfort it means that the Spirit who is present assures us of our own sonship it means that he

strengthens us and helps us for every task it means that he leads us it means all these things but it also means that he convicts us that he comes in all his own devastating authority and exposes us to ourselves for what we are let me change the whole perspective completely we speak often of the loss of the presence of God we lose his face we are forsaken wisdom and so often you find the Bible referring to that experience why sayest thou Israel my ways hid from the Lord thou art a God that hidest thyself all that I knew where I might find all these ways we express this terrible desolating sense of the loss of God's presence love but what do we mean by it what is the loss of God's presence whether our times in our lives when we lose all assurance of God's love God's Holy Spirit ceases to witness to our sonship love the voice that speaks to us of God's love is silent no doubt about that we have lost the presence it doesn't mean that we have lost a feeling it means we have lost a ministry the Spirit's ministry has ceased at other times the loss of God's presence means that help that we used to get is withheld it's no longer given to us the classic example of that of course is

[43 : 26] Samson so confident when the Philistines come Delilah's associates so confident in God's presence he goes out to meet them and of course all the strength is gone there are times in our lives when the strength we are accustomed to and the strength we presumed on when that strength is completely gone what we have lost is not a feeling it is a ministry the presence is not in the feelings the loss is not in the feelings the presence is the spirit's ministry sometimes a disturbing ministry and the most terrible possibility in our lives as believers is that we can lose that ministry what do we lose we lose the witness to our sonship we lose the helper in whom all our strength lies we lose our courage we lose our peace we lose our contentment we lose our garrison we lose our sentry we lose our shepherd we have grieved not a feeling we have grieved the holy spirit the present objective spirit we have grieved him away and we have lost his ministry we are left to ourselves defenseless and incompetent so what I'm saying is our greatest privilege is the gracious presence of God that privilege is not a subjective emotion or feeling it is the holy spirit's ministry in our lives and I'm saying also that we stand in constant peril of losing that ministry and I'm going to ask as I close very briefly

I'm going to ask why do we lose it and I'm going to say this that we lose it because we violate the condition of his presence that condition indicated within this verse in those words God dwells with him that is of a contrite and humble spirit and if we are not contrite and we are not humble then the presence goes the moment we have ceased to be distressed by our own sin the moment the contrition is gone the dwelling goes the shekinah goes the spirit goes the moment we have ceased to be humble the spirit goes what do I mean by that the moment we come to be self-reliant the moment we say to God

Lord I can handle this Lord I can handle the preaching I can handle the congregation I can handle the class I can handle the illness I can handle my calling I can handle the world I can handle temptation I can handle my family the moment says Lord what would we say Lord I can handle it the moment we say that then the shekinah goes the comforter goes the spirit goes and all his ministry goes because it can't live in the context of our own self-confidence our own self-reliance we find we have lost everything the assurance of his love his strength to help in time in time of need that is gone we are left desolate what is the symptom of his absence well the symptom of the spirit's absence the symptom of the forfeiture of God's presence is the languidness of our own souls the believer is listless languid dragging one foot after another spiritually enervated debilitated depressed exhausted there is no zest there is no zeal there is no enthusiasm don't think we do justice to the fact that joy is the great thermometer of the soul the joy never goes from a Christian life without a reason now what am I talking about I'm talking about this word revive in verse 15 the spirit has fled and the soul has no vivacity it has no verve it is not alive and if we find today that that's what it is well that all lives have become ordinary listless if you had to make an effort to come to church this morning if you are to make an effort to go to the prayer meeting an effort to read the word an effort to attend to the work that God has given to you if all that is monumentally difficult you feel like as if you had lead in boots it's because we have lost the presence the shekinah the epiphany the

Emmanuel the presence of the comforter what do we need we need to be revived and that reviving will only come in the return to our hearts and lives of the spirit of God not your house is left done to you desolate we have God's only presence we retain some hope that someday we will have

[50 : 50] God's glorious presence but we have lost his gracious presence lost it long long ago and we're dragging ourselves wearily through this valley of the shadow of death and saying Lord bless and pity us and that's all and I want us to fasten on to this great promise I dwell with him that is of a confident and humble spirit we have to get God's presence back and in that way to get the vastity and vitality and strength into our own lives let me turn the whole thing into one of his highest great prayers if today we feel that we are wearily dragging one foot after another through a tormenting desert if that's the way we feel then let us cry to God

Lord that thou wouldst rend the heavens that thou wouldst come down because we need to be revived and that can only come in the return of God's spirit into our own lives and I would hope that every morning as you enter this building in days and months and years to come you will say to yourselves there are two or three of God's people here I am walking into the presence even from the atmosphere might suggest the contrary and I am hoping that we will no longer be content to live without the vibrancy that the spirit's presence and God's presence in him alone can give let us pray O Lord we ask thee to give us light upon thy word and to give us light through thy word and to help us conduct ourselves always as those who live in the presence of God hear us for our saviour's sake

Amen of God Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen I am Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen