

God's Special Presence Distinguishes His Own People.

by Edward Payson

God's special presence is what distinguishes his own people from others, producing a wide difference and separation between them and the unbelieving world.

Scripture: Exodus 33:15, Psalm 51:10, 2 Corinthians 6:17, James 4:8, 1 John 2:15

Topics: "Gods Presence", "Christian Sanctification"

Description

Edward Payson preaches about the importance of God's presence in the lives of His people, using the example of the Israelites in the wilderness and Moses' plea for God's presence. He emphasizes that the manifested and gracious presence of God separates His people from the world, transforming their views, feelings, and character. Payson highlights the necessity for Christians to experience a deep, transformative relationship with God, leading to a moral difference and separation from unbelievers. He warns against losing God's presence, urging repentance and seeking God's face to restore His favor and separation from the world.

Transcript

"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

doubtless recollect, my hearers, that the Israelites, while encamped in the wilderness at the foot of Mount Sinai, made and worshipped a golden calf. This sin would have been punished by their immediate and total destruction, had not the earnest intercession of Moses prevailed to obtain a pardon. But though, at his request, God forebore to destroy the offenders, he saw it necessary to manifest his displeasure, by withdrawing from them his sensible and gracious presence, and by commanding the tabernacle, which was its symbol, to be removed and pitched without the camp.

At the same time, he intimated that he should no longer continue to go with them, as he had done; but should commit them to the guidance and protection of an angel. This intimation was not, however, expressed in such a manner, as to forbid all hope that it might be reversed; and therefore Moses felt

encouraged to plead, that God would graciously condescend to accompany them as he had done. If thy presence, said he, go not with us, 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 from all people that are upon the face of the earth. That we may perceive the pertinency and force of this plea, we must recollect, that God had expressed a determination to make the Israelites a peculiar people unto himself, and, as such, to separate them and keep them separate from all other nations. Now this, Moses pleads, could not be effected, unless they continued to be favored with the manifested and gracious presence of their God.

So long as they were favored with this blessing, it would separate them effectually from all other people; but should it be withdrawn, there would be nothing left to mark them out as the peculiar people of God; they would soon become like the other nations of the earth, and cease to be separated from them. My hearers, the truth taught in this passage is one, in which we are all deeply interested, and with which it is highly important that we should all be acquainted. The Scriptures inform us, that the design, with which Christ gave himself for us, was, to purify unto himself a peculiar people; a people who should be different, and separate from, all other men.

They teach us, that he requires all, who would be his disciples, to come out from among unbelievers and be separate, and that all who are his real disciples comply with this requisition. They inform us, that his disciples are not of the world, even as he is not of the world; and that, if any man be in Christ, in other words, if he be a real Christian, he is a new creature. He has new dispositions, new views, new feelings, new desires, and new objects of pursuit; in one word, a new character; --a character essentially different from that which he originally possessed, and from that of all other men.

Thus a broad and well defined line of distinction is drawn between the true disciples of Christ, and the rest of mankind, analogous to that line which separated the Israelites from the heathen nations around them. Christ has redeemed them from their spiritual enemies, as God delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage, and he is leading them through this world to heaven, as God led the Israelites through the wilderness to the promised land, which was a type of the rest that remains for his people.

And as he gave a promise to his ancient people, that his presence should go with them, so he has given his church many promises, that his manifested and gracious presence shall attend all the real disciples of Christ during their pilgrimage through this world. One of these promises, out of many which might be quoted, it may be proper to notice more particularly. He that hath my commandments and keepeth them, says our Saviour, he it is that loveth me; and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him.

Judas saith unto him, not Iscariot, Lord, how is it that thou wilt manifest thyself unto us, and not unto the world? Jesus answered, If a man love me, he will keep my words, and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him. Hence it appears, that the Father and the Son come to every man who loves Christ and keeps his words; that is, to every real Christian, and dwell with him, and manifest themselves to him, as they do not to the world. Now the great truth to which we wish to lead your attention is this; nothing but this promised presence of God with his people can effectually separate them from other men; or, in other words, nothing else can preserve that broad line of distinction which separates real Christians from the unbelieving world.

With a view to illustrate and establish this truth I shall attempt to show, I. That the promised presence of God with his people, will, so long as they are favored with it, produce a wide difference and separation between them and all other men; and, II. That in proportion as his presence is withdrawn from them, this difference and separation will diminish. I. The promised presence of God with his people will, so long as they are favored with it, produce a wide difference and separation between them and all other men.

The remarks which I shall first make to prove the truth of this assertion may perhaps appear to some improper, and out of place; for they will relate, not so much to the peculiar presence of God with his people, as to the effects which a real belief of his universal presence must produce upon the mind of every one who entertains such a belief. That we may clearly perceive what these effects would be, let us take two persons as nearly alike in all respects, as is possible, who, in consequence of the similarity which exists between them, have become intimate and almost inseparable.

Let us suppose that they both entertain that general, speculative, inoperative belief of the existence and universal presence of God, which is entertained probably by all who live in Christian lands. Now let us farther suppose, that to the mind of one of these persons, the constant presence of God, begins to appear like a reality. Suppose that he begins to believe it with that kind of faith which the Scriptures describe, --a faith which is the evidence of things not seen, and which causes its possessors to feel and act as if they saw him who is invisible.

It is evident that a great change would immediately take place in this person's views and feelings. As soon as the existence and constant presence of such a being as Jehovah began to appear like realities, he could not fail to regard them as the most interesting and important of all realities. The objects which had previously engrossed his attention would sink into insignificance, when compared with the great and glorious object thus presented to his mind. The beings whose enmity he had feared, and whose friendship he had courted, would seem unworthy of regard compared with the infinite Being of beings, to whom they are indebted for their existence.

In a word, all created objects would lose their value when the great Creator appeared, as stars disappear when the sun arises; and the mind would turn from them to contemplate him, as a child turns from its toys and amusements, when some more interesting object is presented to its view. This contemplation of God, as an ever present reality, would excite new reflections, feelings, and inquiries. Of these inquiries one of the first would be this, What have I to hope, or to fear, from this omnipotent, omnipresent Being, whose all-seeing eye constantly watches my conduct, and reads my heart?

Does he regard me with approbation or with displeasure? The answers which the Scriptures give to these inquiries would soon convince him that God regards his character and conduct with decided disapprobation, and displeasure. Then the man's inquiry would be, How shall I avert the displeasure and secure the favor of this Almighty Being, who is ever with me, and on whom my happiness depends? Now, let us farther suppose that, while the mind of one of these persons was occupied and engrossed by these new reflections, feelings, and inquiries, the other should remain as he was, without God in the world. without any realizing apprehension of his existence and presence.

Would these two persons continue to be, as they had been, intimate and inseparable? Evidently not. Their views and feelings would no longer correspond. One would be thinking of the Creator, the other of creatures; one of this world, the other of the next; one of acquiring temporal objects, the other of averting the displeasure and securing the favor of God. And, as out of the abundance of the heart the mouth will

speak, each of them would wish to converse respecting the objects which occupied his mind.

The man who entertained new views of God's constant presence, regarding these views as highly important, would naturally feel a strong desire to impart them to his friend. His friend, on the other hand, would regard these views as unnecessary, perhaps as the effect of weakness, and wish to divert his attention from them. Thus, with respect to each other, they would be placed as it were in two different worlds. The society of each would gradually become less pleasing to the other; each would seek society more agreeable to his taste; and, though they might still regard each other with esteem and even with affection, a separation would be effected between them.

It is evident, then, unless I am greatly deceived, that a realizing apprehension of the existence and constant presence of God, must produce a wide difference, and ultimately a separation, not always local indeed, but moral, between those who entertain such an apprehension, and those who do not. But it may be easily made to appear still more evident, that such a difference and separation must be effected, when the Father and the Son come, agreeably to our Saviour's promise, to reside in a man's heart, and favor him with the manifestations of their gracious presence.

The occurrence of such an event, the entrance of such guests, into the heart must, it is obvious, be attended or followed by a great change in a man's views, feelings, and character. He then becomes, to use the expressive language of Scripture, a temple of the living God. Of those who are thus favored God himself says, I will dwell in them and walk with them, and they shall be my people and I will be their God. Now let but a man of taste come to occupy a house and garden, which had been long forsaken and neglected, and an alteration for the better will soon be perceived in them.

Much more may we expect that a similar alteration will be effected in the soul, where the wonder-working God comes to reside in it, attended by all his enlightening and purifying and transforming energies. He is the Father of lights, the Sun of righteousness, and wherever he comes to dwell, he brings with him, and diffuses around him, a portion of his own celestial radiance. He causes the soul which he inhabits to see the light of the knowledge of his own glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

The view, which is thus given to the soul, of God's ineffable glory and beauty, enables it to perceive the justice of his claims to the supreme love and undivided homage of all his intelligent creatures, and the infinite criminality of disregarding these claims. To withhold love, to disobey, to sin against, such a Being, now appears an exceedingly great evil. Thus, in the light of God's holiness and glory, the blackness and unspeakable malignity of sin are clearly seen, and the soul begins to perceive that it well deserves the terrible punishment which is denounced upon sinners in the word of God.

At the same time, this divine light shines upon the man's past life, and enables him to see that it has been one continued course of sin and rebellion against God; it shines upon all the external, moral and religious duties, which he has ever attempted to perform, and shows him their insincerity, pollution, and worthlessness it shines into all the hidden recesses of his heart, and discloses to him ten thousand lurking abominations, the existence of which he had never even suspected.

In this respect the effects, produced by the entrance of God into the soul, resemble those which would result from admitting the light of the sun into a dark room, filled with every kind of filth and pollution. In fine, to every man in whom God takes up his residence he imparts, in a greater or less degree, his own views. Now God's views of almost every object differ widely, as I need not inform you, from those of men. He himself says, My thoughts are not your thoughts; you judge according to the outward appearance, but my

judgment is according to truth; the things which are highly esteemed among men are, in my sight, an abomination.

Now if the views of God differ thus widely from those of men, and if he imparts his own views to every person whom he favors with his gracious presence, then it follows that the new views, with which such a person is favored must differ widely from those of all other men. And so far as he is influenced by these views, he will pursue a path different from that in which other men walk, and will of course be separated from them, for how can two walk together unless they be agreed?

He will look at things unseen and eternal; but they look at things seen and temporal. He will wish and aim to walk with God; but they live without God in the world. He will seek and follow the narrow way to life; but they are following the broad road to destruction; and as these paths lead in opposite directions, those who follow one, must be separated from those who walk in the other. Nor is this all. When God comes to dwell in the soul, he imparts to it a portion, not only of his own views, but of his own feelings.

He not only illuminates the understanding with his own light, but, as an apostle expresses it, sheds abroad his love in the heart. Now consider a moment, my hearers, what a change must be produced in a selfish, sinful, polluted heart, a heart which inspiration declares to be full of evil and madness, deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, when that God, who is an infinitely pure, holy, and benevolent Spirit, and who hates sin with intense abhorrence, comes to reside in it.

Can you suppose that he will dwell there in peace with those idols which he forbids us to worship, those sins which he abhors, --with his worst enemies? As well may we suppose that he would have allowed all the idols of the heathen to be set up and worshipped in his temple at Jerusalem. As well may we suppose that our Saviour did not scourge out the buyers and sellers from the same temple when he entered it. As well may we suppose that Dagon did not fall before the ark of God, the symbol of Jehovah's presence, when it was brought into his temple.

The Lord, we are assured, is a jealous God. He will not endure a rival. Behold, says a prophet, the Lord shall come into Egypt, and the idols of Egypt shall be moved at his presence. Much more may we suppose that, when he comes into the human heart, and makes it his temple, its former idols, its beloved sins, its domineering lusts, will be moved and overthrown, and a great moral purification be effected. Agreeably, an apostle informs us that, when God visited the Gentiles to take out from among them a people to his name, he purified the hearts of those who were thus taken; and, in passages too numerous to mention, he is represented as sanctifying all in whom he dwells, as teaching and disposing them to hate, repent of and mortify their sinful propensities, to love and cultivate holiness, to be spiritually and heavenly minded, to be no longer conformed to this world, but to feel and live as pilgrims and strangers on earth, and to produce the fruits of the Spirit, which are love, joy, peace, long-suffering, goodness, meekness, temperance, and faith.

In fine, he renews the soul after his own image in knowledge and true holiness; and thus, to use the language of inspiration, makes the man a new creature, a partaker of the divine nature. And must not this mighty change, produce a great difference, a wide moral separation between those who are the subjects of it, and all other men? Most evidently it must. And this difference and separation will be in exact proportion to the degree in which God manifests his gracious presence to the soul, and exerts upon it his sanctifying energies.

Witness, for instance, the effects which a clear manifestation of God's presence produced upon Job: I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee; wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes. I now proceed to show, as was proposed, II. That, in proportion as God withdraws the manifestations of his presence from his people, this difference and separation between them and other men will diminish. Before exhibiting proofs of this truth, it may be proper to remark, that God never entirely withdraws his gracious presence from those who have once been favored with it.

The promises which he has given them, the covenant which he has made with them, forbid this. His language to each of them is, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. And respecting all his people he says, I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will never turn away from them. But though these and many other similar promises render it certain that God's presence shall never be wholly withdrawn from his people; yet it is equally certain that he often suspends its sensible manifestations and effects, and, in the language of Scripture, hides himself from them.

This is evident from the complaints of his people, recorded in the Scriptures. Job, David, and many others, complain that God had forsaken them, and hid himself from them; that he stood afar off, and that they could not find him; and they earnestly beseech him to return, to lift upon them the light of his countenance, and make them glad with his presence. This language all real Christians understand; but it cannot easily be rendered intelligible to those who have never enjoyed God's presence, and who cannot therefore conceive how it is manifested.

The following supposition may, perhaps, enable them to form some conception of its meaning. Let us suppose, for a moment, that the sun was an intelligent being, and that by an act of his will he could withhold his enlightening and warming beams from one man, while he continued to shine upon others. It is evident that the man who was thus deprived of light and warmth, would soon complain of darkness and cold, and that he would earnestly desire to be again favored with those enlivening, cheering beams, which were so necessary to his happiness.

And when the sun began once more to shine upon such a man, it might be said, figuratively speaking, to lift upon him the light of its countenance. Now God is the Sun of the soul. And he can shine into it, and render it luminous and happy. When he favors it with his presence and exerts upon it his influence, it is enlivened, and enlightened, and made to glow with love, and hope, and joy, and gratitude. But when he withdraws and suspends his influences, spiritual darkness and coldness are the consequence.

Then it is night, it is winter with the soul. In proportion as he thus withdraws from his people, they cease to view him as a present reality. And in proportion as they cease to regard him as a present reality, they cease to have those views, and to exercise those affections, which constitute the grand essential difference between them and other men. Nor is this all. As holy affections decline, sinful affections revive. As the Creator sinks out of sight, creatures begin again to be regarded with an idolatrous attachment, just as the stars which are invisible, during the day, appear and sparkle when the sun is set.

Hence the Christian becomes more and more worldly-minded, more and more conformed to the world, and, of course, the difference and separation, which existed between him and other men while he was favored with the presence of God, is less and less apparent, until at length he becomes, like Sampson after the Spirit of God had withdrawn from him, weak as any other man; nor will any thing raise him from this wretched state until he is again favored with the presence of God. It is then the peculiar presence of God with his people, and nothing else, which produces and maintains a difference and separation

between them and other men.

This truth St. Paul felt when he said, I can do all things through Christ strengthening me. I labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me, and the life which I live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God. It remains only to make a suitable improvement of the subject. With this view, permit me, in the first place, to say to each individual in this assembly, Do you know experimentally the difference between the presence and the absence of God?

If not, it is most certain that you never enjoyed his peculiar presence; and, of course, that you are not one of his people; for to be insensible of the difference between day and night, is not a more certain proof of physical or natural blindness, than it is of spiritual blindness, to be ignorant of the difference between the presence and the absence of God, the Sun of righteousness. If any one replies, I am not ignorant of this difference, for I trust that I have enjoyed the peculiar presence of God, I trust that the Father and the Son have taken up their residence in my heart;--let me ask that person farther, Has such a change been effected in your views and feelings as the entrance of such guests into your heart, might be expected to produce?

Have you been led to see that the description, which inspiration gives of the human heart, is literally just and true with respect to your own heart? and have you, in consequence, been led, as was Job, to abhor yourself, and repent in dust and ashes? If not, be assured that your heart has never been God's residence. Again. Have your views of God and of Jesus Christ been transforming? An apostle, speaking of himself and other Christians, says, We all, beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image, from glory to glory.

Are you thus transformed more and more into the image of the Lord? If not, he has never dwelt in your heart; for if any man have not the Spirit of Christ; if any man does not resemble Christ he is none of his. Once more. Has what you call the presence of God led you to walk with God? Has it thus produced a moral difference and separation between you and the unbelieving world? Has it constrained you to obey the call which says, Come ye out from among them and be ye separate and touch not the unclean thing, and I will receive you, and will be a Father to you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters?

If it has not, in some degree at least, produced these effects, be assured that what you call the presence of God is nothing but a delusion. It is an insult to the Father of lights, the High and Holy One, to pretend that you are his temple, that he dwells within you, unless you prove the justice of your pretensions by a corresponding temper and life. What! shall a man pretend to be the temple of the living God, the thrice Holy One of Israel, while his conduct evidently proves that his heart is filled with idols, and resembles a cage of unclean and hateful birds? 2.

Let me improve this subject, by inquiring whether this church now enjoys the peculiar presence of God, as it once appeared to do? And yet why should I ask? It is, alas, but too evident that whatever exceptions we may make in favor of some individuals, this church, considered as a body, does not enjoy the peculiar presence of God, as it once apparently did. He seems to have withdrawn from us, at least for a time; and, if I may so express it, to have committed us, as he threatened to do his ancient people, to the care of an angel.

Do any ask for proofs of this assertion? Where, I ask in reply, is the broad line of distinction which once separated between this church and an unbelieving world? Is it not become like a mere mathematical line?

Nay, is it not, in many parts of it, become imperceptible? Should any of you come as strangers into the town could you determine, simply by observing men's daily conduct, who do, and who do not profess to belong to the church of Christ? In some, in a very considerable number of cases, you might doubtless see a real difference between professors and other men, but in too many cases, no such difference could be discovered.

And yet if God's people are a peculiar people, a people chosen out of the world, a people in whom he dwells, a wide difference ought ever to be seen between them and others. An apostle, writing to Christians, says, Ye are our epistle, known and read of all men. God himself says of his people, They shall be known among the nations; all that see them shall acknowledge them, that they are the seed which the Lord hath blessed. In fine, the children of God ought to carry, and while they enjoy his presence, they will carry, their Father's name written as it were in their foreheads, where all may read it.

Now if this is not the case with us, if we are become like the world around us, it is certain that God has, in a degree at least, if not entirely, withdrawn his peculiar and gracious presence from this church. And if he has withdrawn it, it is on account of our sins; for on no other account does he ever withdraw himself from a church. His own language is, I will go and return to my place, until they acknowledge their offence and seek my face. And this language, while it states the reasons of his absence informs us how long it will continue, and what we must do to procure his return.

We must acknowledge, with unfeigned contrition, the sins which provoked him to forsake us, and with sincerity, earnestness, and perseverance seek his presence. As yet we have not done this. We have not been suitably affected by the loss of God's presence. We have been less affected by it than were the idolatrous Israelites them-selves. We are informed in the context that, when they heard of God's determination to withdraw from them, and commit them to the guidance of an angel, they mourned, and none of them put on their usual ornaments.

And shall we, who call ourselves Christians, be less affected by the loss of God's presence, than were these perverse, stiff-necked idolaters? Rather let us imitate Moses who pleaded importunately for this blessing and would take no denial. Let us all, as one man, cry with him, Lord let thy presence go with us; so shall it be known that we have found favor in thy sight; so shall thy church be separated as a people from the surrounding world, and adorn the doctrine of God her Saviour in all things.

My brethren, unless we do this, unless we once more obtain God's gracious presence in the midst of us, our state will become worse and worse; we shall become more and more conformed to a sinful world; iniquities, offences, and divisions will abound, till God shall come in anger to scourge us, and perhaps remove our candlestick out of its place. Our all, yes our all is at stake. O then, be persuaded to know in this your day the things which belong to the peace of this church, before they are hidden from your eyes.

And let those of its members who are still favored with the presence of God, beware lest they lose it. Let them prize it above all other blessings, and walk circumspectly and humbly with their God; remembering that he is a jealous God, who will not hear a rival; and a holy God, who will not tolerate sin even in his own people. To conclude. It is possible there may be some individuals in this assembly who, in consequence of not attending to the subject, have never been aware that such a blessing as the sensible, gracious presence of God may be enjoyed on earth.

Let me beseech such persons, if any such there are present, to examine the Scriptures carefully, with special reference to this subject. Let them consider impartially the promises which have been quoted in

this discourse, and the many inspired passages in which God's people are represented as either rejoicing in his presence, or mourning its loss. Let them remember that the High and Holy One, who inhabits eternity, has said, I dwell in the hearts of the humble and contrite. Should they be convinced after a careful examination, that such a blessing is attainable, that it is enjoyed by all real Christians, and that no man can dwell with God hereafter, unless God dwells in him here, they will surely need no additional inducement to seek it; for what can be so desirable, so honorable, as to enjoy the indwelling presence of the King of kings; as to be the temples of the living God; as to have our minds enlightened by the Father of lights, and our hearts filled with holy love by the God of holiness and love!

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