

# Manifest Presence - Part 1

by Richard Owen Roberts

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*The church's failure to cultivate God's presence and manifest it to the congregation is the primary reason for the nation's moral and spiritual decline.*

**Duration:** 28:10

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:33, Matthew 28:20, Hebrews 13:5, James 4:1-2, James 4:4

**Topics:** "Divine Presence", "Spiritual Growth"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the concept of drawing near to God and the different forms of divine presence. He emphasizes that the distance between God and ourselves is not always equal, as stated in James 4:8. The preacher highlights that there are various reasons why God may not be as present among individuals or churches, such as quarrels, conflicts, and wrong motives in prayer. He also mentions the importance of cultivating the presence of God, which can have a greater impact than any organization. The sermon concludes by discussing the three forms of divine presence: essential presence, cultivated presence, and manifest presence.

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## Transcript

The subject that I want to share with you is the subject of the manifest presence of God. Now, hardly the most popular subject, in fact, in all candor I do not recollect ever having heard anyone speak upon the subject. It would appear to me that it is the kind of a subject that would be spoken upon with great frequency because it is of extraordinary consequence.

But somehow or other we have really become rather presumptuous in our day and there is the general feeling that God is always with us no matter what. And that because he is with us, he is always with us to the same degree, that there are no variations in the degree of his presence. I have had, when I have spoken on this subject elsewhere, people object and say, don't you know the Bible says, lo, I am with you always, and I will never leave you nor forsake you.

And those two quotations are supposed to lay at rest any concern that a person might have on the subject of God's manifest presence. Now, let me read you a passage of Scripture which certainly does not use the word manifest. In fact, I don't believe that any passage of Scripture would use that particular word, but this passage lays the issue out.

And let me share it with you. It's out of James chapter 5. Or 4 rather, James chapter 4. This particular setting is one that describes a variety of reasons why God might not be as present among a people or with an individual or even with a church as on other occasions. James 4 verse 1, what is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have, so you commit murder.

And you are envious and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.

You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose? He jealously desires the spirit which he has made to dwell in us, but he gives a greater grace. Therefore, it says God is opposed to the proud, but he gives grace to the humble.

Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.

Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom.

Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord and he will exalt you. Now, let us focus on these words out of verse 8. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Now, in the passage, in the greater context, a variety of reasons are given why God is not near.

While it would be fruitful in many respects to explore those various reasons, it would not be in keeping with my intent this morning. If you want to know what to do to drive God farther away, you can reread this and then violate what is called for. Now, let me give you, to begin with, a series of questions just to try and help you get your minds in gear, I hope, on this subject of the manifest presence of God.

Here is the first question I would put to you. Is the presence of God uniformly experienced in your life? Do you have as much of God's presence today as you ever had at any time? Or have there been times when God's presence was much more real and precious than it is at the moment? Well, I can't answer for you. But if you know no variations in the presence of God, I'm rather concerned about you.

I'm dubious that you've ever gone very far or very deep. If you read the writings of the great Puritans, the mystics, the reformers, those that have gone deep into the heart of God, you will find that they frequently speak of the variations that they experience in the presence of God. Those that move on surface levels know little variety, but those that go to great depth discover that God is sometimes very near and sometimes not so near at all.

Here's a second question. Do you ever have times when you feel that God is so far off that maybe he has abandoned you? Well, if you say no to that, then it's crystal clear you're unlike the psalmist. You will find many of the psalms are laments.

Lord, how long will you be gone? Will you forget me forever? When will you return? When will you open your face toward me? When will you cause your face to shine? Here's a third question. Are God's comings and goings always linked with our conduct? Well, in this passage, draw near to God and he will draw near to you. There is an obvious link between what I do or don't do and what God does or does not do.

But my question now is, are the comings and goings of God in the life always linked with our conduct? I don't know how you would respond to that, but may I say to you, no, definitely not. God is sovereign and he does just what he pleases. And sometimes he pleases to draw near, and sometimes he pleases to draw away.

And while our conduct on occasion affects his nearness or his distance, it does not always or invariably do so. Here's another question to which the answer I should suppose is obvious. Is it possible for one believer to regularly experience more of God's presence than another? Could we safely say that everyone in the room has an equal sense of God's presence, and they have that equal sense because God is equally near to each one? Well, if he is, it will be an astonishment to me to discover it.

In fact, frankly, I don't believe it. I don't believe for a moment that God is equally near to all. Here is another question.

What indisputable evidence is there that God is near? If someone were to come this morning or someone here were to stand and say, God is always very near to me, and we were not the kind of people that simply accepted testimonies at face value, but always desired some kind of verification as to the accuracy of the testimony, what verification would we look for when a person claims that God is always extraordinarily near to them? Well, would we look for them to be full of praise? Would we look for them to be full of joy? Could we turn Pentecostal and say the proof of God's nearness is noise and manifestations of power gifts? Well, those of you who've been thinking in these realms are aware that the devil is capable of noise and power gifts and a lot of other manifestations, but there is one manifestation of the nearness of God that the devil cannot counterfeit or in any way duplicate, and that is holiness. There is no way he can make himself holy or make anyone else holy. If I say that God is very near to me, the evidence as to whether I speak with accuracy or erroneously is whether or not there are manifestations of divine holiness.

In scripture, whenever God drew near either to an individual or in any given situation to a people, the verification of his nearness was always the same. What did Isaiah say when God drew near? What did Moses say when God drew near? What did John say on the Isle of Patmos when God drew near? Well, every one of them and others as well in some fashion gave vent to the fact that they were unworthy, that they were men of unclean lips and impure hearts, that God himself was holy, that there was this great distinction between them, that it was irregular, almost peculiar, out of place for God to be near a wicked person like this. This is how the people felt.

Now, have you ever really thought about the matter of God's presence? Let me read again these words out of James. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. There are not less than six facts which can be safely inferred from this text.

Fact number one, that the distance between God and ourselves is not always equal. It would be preposterous for James to have been led by the Spirit to say, draw near to God and he will draw near to you if the distance between God and myself was always equal. It would be without any sense whatsoever to talk of drawing near to one who was already so near he could never be any nearer.

Now, here's a second fact. It is possible for a believer to be farther away from God than is necessary. In fact, it is not only possible, but the sad truth is that the vast majority of believers are farther from God than is necessary.

You may yourself be much farther from God than you need to be. And in consequence, God may be much farther from you than is necessary. And let me add as a third fact that if you are farther from God than you need to be, God will be farther from you than is desirable.

And if God is farther from you than is desirable, then your conduct will be affected accordingly. And here's a fourth fact that I would draw out of James' words. We can affect the difference, the distance, between ourselves and God by drawing near or failing to do so.

Now, that's the heart of what he says. Draw near to me and I will draw near to you. But a fifth fact that I deduce is that while I can affect the distance to some extent, I can't, as I already indicated, affect it in entirety.

Now, with those preliminary words, let me draw to your mind something that our fathers were well acquainted with and often spoke of, but which seems to have been lost sight of in our day. It is necessary for those who would understand their Bibles and walk with God in the fullest way possible to differentiate between the three forms of divine presence. When I speak of the presence of God, I must distinguish between the essential presence of God, the cultivated presence of God, and the manifest presence of God.

Now, in the words of James, which of those three presences is under discussion? Let me repeat again the three distinctions I'm making, and these are not mine. These happen to be what the fathers used to speak about with frequency. I'm distinguishing between the essential presence of God, the cultivated presence of God, and the manifest presence of God.

And I ask you, to which of these three does the James passage particularly make reference? Well, certainly it makes reference to the cultivated presence of God. Now, maybe you've never thought of these things. How many of you find this all old material that you're completely familiar with? Just raise your hand so I'll know.

That's not unusual. I never heard a sermon on the subject. You never did either, probably.

It isn't that we've forgotten everything that we knew. The sad thing is we never really knew anything on this subject. Most of us haven't even investigated it.

Let me try and assist you in this whole matter. Without any question, the choir of a church can have a profound effect upon the most strategic thing that ought to happen in a service. People ought to come to church not just to hear something out of the Bible they didn't know.

There's nothing wrong with that. There's some merit in truth in getting something out of the Bible you don't know, but that is not the essence of coming to church. That's not what the heart of it is all about.

We ought to come here to freshly meet God. Maybe occasionally we do, but certainly it is possible to come to church with regularity and never meet God in any fresh or significant way. If indeed people coming are to meet God in a vital, in a fresh, in a significant, in a moving, in an affecting manner, then the role of the choir is of utmost consequence in this.

What if a choir comes and sings but the choir members themselves know virtually nothing of the manifest presence of God? What is the potential of bringing to the congregation the manifest presence of God? Well, it's very slight. A preacher who does not know the manifest presence of God can't force that

presence in the midst of the congregation, but the man who has an awesome sense of God's presence will bring that presence into the congregation. A choir that has been cultivating the presence of God, a choir that has chosen to manifest himself to, is a choir that will be used of God in bringing the congregation into the realities of God's presence.

Now, I want to say before I clarify what I mean by those three categories of God's presence, that there is a fact that we need to come to grips with, a fact of utmost consequence. All of us, I'm sure, groan over the condition of our nation, over the spiritual and the moral decline, over the wickedness that has been mounting up on every hand, over the terrible things that are going on. But may I say to you that the reason the nation is in the moral and spiritual decline it is in, is because the church does not know the manifest presence of God.

I already indicated to you that there is a means by which you can test the veracity of the person who says, God is always very near to me. I minister a lot among Pentecostals, and they, of course, regularly make this claim that God is near to them. And I regularly say to them, in all of America there are no religiously inclined people more dishonest than Charismatics.

That's a fact. Businessmen will tell you, businessmen who deal with Christian organizations and churches and so on, look out if you're dealing with the Charismatics, they can't be trusted. They'll take you financially if they can.

Now, that's a tragedy, but it's a fact. Now, a Charismatic comes and says, oh, you ought to come to our fellowship. God is wonderfully present with us.

Well, if God is wonderfully present, then holiness will just be seen on every hand. But it isn't. In fact, nowhere in the church is holiness seen on every hand.

There is a lot of wickedness that has first occurred in the church. All across America, things are going on in the church that are simply deplorable, things that could not have gone on years ago. I remember, as a young man, the first time I heard of a minister who was caught in adultery.

It was a terrible shock to me. It took me weeks to get over staggering over that. I just simply couldn't relate to it, couldn't understand how it could be true.

It was years, literally years, before I heard of another such instance. But now, there's rarely a day when I'm out among people ministering here and there that I don't learn of prominent evangelical leaders caught in adultery. There is a horrendous difference between what used to be and what is.

And I would ask you, what makes that difference? Why is there such an increase of iniquity in the world and in the church? And I submit to you, when God is near, there is holiness. And when God is distant, there is unrighteousness. And there is nothing the church needs more than for God to draw near.

And I'm saying to you, the role of the choir in God drawing near is of utmost consequence. Now, let me delineate what I mean by these three classifications of God's presence. His essential, His cultivated, His manifest presence.

God says, I fill heaven and earth. Now, that is a reference to His essential presence. There is nowhere you could go where God is not.

You could leave here today and go to the worst dump, the most vile and reprobate tavern in the county. And you would find that God, in His essential presence, is as much in that tavern as in this church. Now, that may be shocking to think about, but God is everywhere present.

You can't go anywhere where God is not. He, I repeat, fills heaven and earth. If we could put one of our young people on board a rocket ship tomorrow morning and shoot them out into space, if they were to travel outward for 50,000 years, in all that time, they would never pass a place where God is not.

For He fills heaven and earth. He is here. He is everywhere.

But there is a huge difference between His essential presence and His cultivated presence. Did you ever know a person who, when they came into a room like this? Let us think of this room at five minutes after ten, when you had refreshments on the table and you were busy visiting. Did you ever know a person who, walking into a room like this, suddenly everybody would fall silent? There are some persons who have such an awesome sense of God about them, who have in fact cultivated the presence of God to such an extent that when you encounter them, you literally feel God is with them.

There are people, when you meet them, you just know that God is there. Now, every Christian ought to be that way, but certainly not every Christian, yes. You can go into a conversation, perhaps, into a situation where there is a conversation, maybe where dirty jokes are being told, and they'll say, hey, you'll like this one.

There are other people who, entering that kind of a situation, immediately everybody falls silent. But I'm wanting to ask you now, do you really cultivate the presence of God as an individual? There's a choir. The essential presence, oh, God is always present, yes, everywhere.

But the cultivated presence, when a person draws near to God, and God draws near to them. The third distinction that I've made is that of the manifest presence. An individual cultivates the presence of God, and God draws near.

But when a body, let us say when the choir of the Wheaton Bible Church gives themselves tooth and nail to the cultivation of the presence of God, does absolutely everything to eliminate all causes of God's drawing away, creates all the circumstances in which it is desirable for God to draw near, when all of the choir, ministering together to one another, working, praying, seeking the face of God, are successful, and God draws near to the choir as a choir, you have the manifest presence of God. Now that, obviously, is something that not only the choir needs, but every church of Jesus Christ across the world needs to so cultivate the presence of God that God manifest himself in the midst of his people. I'll say to you without any hesitation, let God draw near to the churches of America, and the great plunge into iniquity that the nation is engaged in will suddenly be turned around just like that.

A thousand organizations like the moral majority aren't going to affect anything permanently. But the cultivation of the presence of God to the degree that he chooses to manifest himself in the midst of his people will do what no organization could possibly do. Well, that is the introduction to the subject I would like to pursue with you in the next times that I meet with you.

May I ask that, as time permits, you give some serious consideration to this issue. If you would like a passage to look up and to review and to contemplate, I would recommend to you the passage in Exodus 32, 33, 34, 35, and following, the passage that talks about the golden calf. Lord, I pray for this choir.

I thank you for the musical excellence, for the degree of eagerness and commitment that the members are making. But I would pray that an added dimension will occur, that indeed, through what happens here in the lives of these individuals, you will choose to draw near and to manifest yourself to the glory of your great name. Amen.

We started on

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