

# Manifest Presence - Part 2

by Richard Owen Roberts

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*The manifest presence of God is a crucial subject in the Bible that refers to the visible and tangible experience of God's presence in our lives and in the world around us.*

**Duration:** 32:16

**Scripture:** 1 Kings 11:1-2, 1 Kings 11:9, 2 Chronicles 15:1, James 4:8

**Topics:** "Drawing Near", "Intimacy With God"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the concept of drawing near to God. He emphasizes that the distance between God and ourselves is not always equal and that God may be farther away from us than desired. The speaker highlights that we have the ability to affect the distance between ourselves and God by either drawing near to Him or failing to do so. He also mentions that the distance between us and God can be significant without Him forsaking us. The sermon is based on the text from James 4:8, which encourages believers to draw near to God, with the promise that He will draw near to them. The speaker notes that this topic is often overlooked and that many people have never heard a sermon on it.

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## Transcript

We started on the subject of the manifest presence of God, not a subject that most people have given any consideration to, and certainly for those who have given some consideration, probably not anywhere near adequate consideration for a subject of such consequence. There are themes in the Bible, matters that are treated with tremendous energy and concern that are mentioned only once. Other matters that may appear two or three times, and they are treated as if they were the largest of all doctrines.

For instance, the new birth is hardly the most frequently mentioned matter in the Bible. Now, I don't say this to depreciate it, but it is given very considerable consideration. On the other hand, the manifest presence of God is treated dozens, well over in fact, a hundred times in Scripture, and most people have never thought about it.

And certainly the number of those here who have heard a sermon on the subject or been in a Bible class where that was the concern, as I asked the last time, was few indeed. My recollection of our last session was when I asked how many had ever heard a sermon on the subject, the response was zero. Now, maybe I'm mistaken, but that's my recollection of it.

Now, just for a moment, let me review what I said last time, because a whole month has passed, and also because perhaps some of you who are here this morning were not present at that time. I took a text out of James, the fourth chapter, the eighth verse. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

End of side one, fast forward to the end, then flip to side two. From that text, I made six inferences which I shared with you and which I will hurriedly repeat. Number one, that the distance between God and ourselves is not always equal.

Number two, that it is possible for a believer to be farther away from God than is necessary. Number three, that God himself may be farther away from us than is desirable. Number four, that we can affect the distance between ourselves and God by drawing near to him or by failing to draw near to him.

Number five, that the distance between ourselves and God can be very great indeed without his having forsaken us. And number six, that God in his sovereignty is at perfect liberty to be as near or as distant from us as he pleases. Now, the text of James 4, 8 is couched in very positive language.

Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Let me give you now two texts that are couched in negative language. If you have your Bible, I would suggest you join me as we look at these two texts.

The first is in 1 Kings 11, and the second is in 2 Chronicles 15. Now, if you're familiar with this section of Scripture, you realize that in the beginning of this 11th chapter of 1 Kings, God is dealing with Solomon. Solomon, that brilliant and that able leader who knew so much of God's manifest presence and blessing, but fouled everything up and made a ridiculous fool of himself.

Married almost more wives than you could count. In fact, certainly it would be impossible for any man to keep up with the number of wives he married, and then he added all those others beside. God gave him severe warnings concerning his conduct and said to him, Solomon, don't ever, don't ever cease to pursue me and follow me with all your heart.

If ever you turn aside to the gods of your many wives, you are in great difficulty with me. And like stupid men everywhere, Solomon turned aside to the gods of his wives and abandoned the God of his father, David. This matter is dealt with in the early verses of chapter 11.

But let us plunge in now at chapter 26. If you were to go back to the beginning and pursue the matter, you would see that the series of attacks are leveled against Solomon. Here is the final one in the series.

Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, and Ephraimite of Zerida, Solomon's servant, whose mother's name was Zerua, a widow, also rebelled against the king. Now this was the reason why he rebelled against the king. Solomon built the Milo and closed up the breach of the city of his father, David.

Now the man Jeroboam was a valiant warrior, and when Solomon saw that the young man was industrious, he appointed him over all the forced labor of the house of Joseph. And it came about at that time when Jeroboam went out of Jerusalem that the prophet Ahijah, the Shilonite, found him on the road. Now Ahijah had clothed himself with a new cloak, and both of them were alone in the field.

Then Ahijah took hold of the new cloak, which was on him, and he tore it in twelve pieces. And he said to Jeroboam, take for yourself ten pieces. For thus says the Lord God of Israel, behold, I will tear the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon and give you ten tribes.

But he will have one tribe, and here, my dear friends, is a very crucial statement. He will have one tribe for the sake of my servant David. Let me just interrupt the reading to say that many people are coasting in their religious experience.

They think God is pleased that all is well because God hasn't smashed them down and completely destroyed them. And the truth of the matter in many instances is, it is for the sake of someone else that grace is extended. Now Solomon deserved an utter smashing, but for the sake of his father David, God did not give him what he deserved.

The prophet makes that crystal clear. Verse 32, he will have one tribe for the sake of my servant David, for the sake of Jerusalem, the city which I have chosen for the tribes of Israel, because they have forsaken me and have worshipped Astaroth, the goddess of the Sidonians, Chemosh, the goddess of Moab, and Milcom, the god of the sons of Ammon. And they have not walked in my ways, doing what is right in my sight, and observing my statutes and my ordinances as his father David did.

Nevertheless, I will not take the whole kingdom out of his hand, but I will make him ruler over the days, all the days of his life, for the sake of my servant David, whom I choose, who observed my commandments and my statutes. But I will take the kingdom from his son's hand and give it to you, even ten tribes. But to his son I will give one tribe, that my servant David may have a lamp always before me in Jerusalem, the city where I have chosen for myself to put my name.

And I will take you, and I shall reign over whatever you desire, and you shall be king over Israel. Then it will be," now here we come to the heart of the issue, then it will be, if you will listen to all that I command you, and walk in my ways, and do what is right in my sight by observing my statutes and my commandments as my servant David did, then I will be with you and build you an enduring house as I built for David, and I will give Israel to you. Thus will I afflict the descendants of David for this, but not always.

Solomon sought to put Jeroboam to death, but Jeroboam arose and fled to Egypt. Keep these words in mind, please. Then it will be that if you will listen to me, to all that I commanded, and walk in my ways, and do what is right in my sight by observing my statutes and my commandments as my servant David did, then I will be with you.

Without losing track of that, note please the second passage, which I've indicated to you is in 2 Chronicles 15. This is a most intriguing account, and the most helpful account. This pertains to King Asa.

May I just quickly summarize what precedes. A series of declensions and revivals are accounted for from the reign of Solomon, which is covered in chapters 6 and 7 of 2 Chronicles. Then Asa comes to the throne, and there are certain respects in which Asa is a good man, almost a godly man in certain respects.

But now a prophet appears to Asa, chapter 15, verse 1. The Spirit of God came upon Azariah, the son of Oded. And he went out to meet Asa, and he said to him, Listen to me, Asa, and all Judah, and Benjamin, the Lord is with you when you are with him. Those words would do well to sink deeply into the heart of each of us.

The Lord is with you when you are with him. And if you seek him, he will let you find him. But if you forsake him, he will forsake you.

There isn't time in this brief class to go into the details of either of these passages. Were you to read on through the rest of the account of Asa, you would discover that at one point when Asa is confronted with a

giant army and faced with certain human defeat, he gets down on his face before God and seeks him with all his heart. He then calls upon the people to do likewise.

God gives a glorious victory, and they even appoint a solemn assembly, and they seek God as men and women who love the Lord are always required to seek him, and God does keep his word. They seek God, and God permits them to find him. But a little later, another army marches against Asa, and this time instead of seeking God, he enters into a treaty with an alien king, hires the services of this army.

They win the battle, but the messenger of the Lord comes to Asa and tells him that God is grieved, because he did not seek him, and he had been warned. Now this was not for a week or a month. The warning here in chapter 15 given to Asa was a lifetime warning, just as it is a lifetime warning to us.

When you seek me, I will permit you to find me. But you ever quit seeking, and you will find that I have forsaken you. The account of Asa closes.

Asa has a very severe disease in his feet. He is in intense pain, and what does he do? He consults the physician. Now some charismatic people get quite excited about the passage, because they think it teaches how erroneous it is to consult physicians.

But that has nothing to do with the matter. Asa was told, go on seeking me. But now the man is dying.

He's in terrible pain, and he doesn't seek God. He seeks the aid of physician. Now these two men constitute splendid illustrations of the principles that I'm setting before you.

There is, as I told you when we met a month ago, a vast distinction that must be made between the essential presence of God, the cultivated presence of God, and the manifest presence of God. Now we live in an age of biblical illiteracy. I don't believe there was ever a time when evangelicals were so absurdly ignorant of the Bible than today.

Oh, we are specialists in certain things. We know vast amounts about prophecy. In fact, we know more about prophecy than really exist.

We have knowledge and information that goes vastly beyond Scripture and reason. But on many great biblical issues, we are almost totally without information. We live with a spirit of arrogancy and presumption.

The general feeling among evangelicals is God would never leave me. I have commonly had people come to me with pity to inform me of my base ignorance in supposing God would ever do such a thing as to leave anybody. Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age, they tell me.

But they have never learned to distinguish between that which I described to you a month ago as the essential presence of God. God is everywhere. God himself speaking, saying, I fill heaven and earth.

But there is, as I have told you, a phenomenal difference between God's essential presence and God's manifest presence. I told you then how it is that we distinguish between God's essential presence and the absence of his manifest presence. When there is a lack of holiness, there is evidence that God is not present in a manifest way.

If you think Wheaton is a holy community, I'd like to know where you get your thoughts from. They have no basis in fact. There is sin in Wheaton so deep and foul that it goes beyond imagination.

And it is not outside the church. It's within the church. You would be hard-pressed to prove any real difference between the rate of immorality among professed believers and unbelievers.

The divorce rate in the evangelical church is simply a phenomena. I'm old enough to remember when it was otherwise. I am saying to you that there is overwhelming evidence that God is not present in a manifest way.

And that evidence is in the immorality and in the various forms of manifestations of sin that are all around us and within us. It is very much like a city where the police force is on strike. When there is no visible or manifest presence of law and order, there is increase of iniquity.

I recall reading some years ago, I think it was in the city of Montreal, but at least a Canadian city in one of the eastern provinces, where the police force went on strike. And the report that I read was that people out of the better parts of town who were thought to be moral and well-disciplined people went downtown, smashed the shop windows, helped themselves to anything of any value, etc. It's a very common when there is no visible or manifest presence of law and order to have a tremendous increase of evil.

Now, where there is a felt sense of God in a society, evil is arrested. Now, I don't mean to imply by this that evil doesn't exist. But now, my dear lady, I'm sure you are more or less in my age bracket, if you won't mind my singling you out.

You remember, don't you, when most of the wicked things that were done were done at night, under the cover of darkness? But it isn't that way now. Men have no fear whatsoever of doing the most vile things right in public places. A couple of my friends were engaged a year or so ago in what is called the Joshua Walk, a walk around the city of Chicago, praying as they walked.

They intended to walk three times around the city. I don't know whether they ever completed the third walk or not. But I remember distinctly one day when they came back from this Joshua Walk and said, we have seen things that are simply unbelievable.

Right out on the streets, people fornicating and masturbating and conduct that we just we would not be able to speak about in any kind of mixed company. Things have changed. And I'm saying to you, when there is no manifest presence of God in a society, there is a tremendous increase in wickedness and an openness in wickedness.

Now let me carry this matter a little further and say it is precisely like the passages we have read. While we are seeking God, God is with us. While we are walking in all of God's ways, while we are doing what is right in God's sight, while we are observing all of his statutes and all of his ordinances, then God is with us.

But when we cease in those matters, God ceases to be with us as he was with our fathers. Now you may think otherwise, but I am convinced that in America, in the evangelical church, in Wheaton, in the evangelical churches, we are not paying any attention whatsoever to much of what God says. Take just the matter of church discipline.

The Bible is crystal clear that discipline is demanded. But there's no discipline that goes on in most of the churches in Wheaton. People can be involved in the most awful sins.

They won't be disciplined. Maybe somebody privately will give them a little counsel and tell them they ought to see a psychiatrist. But in terms of church discipline according to the biblical pattern, no.

We don't even rebuke one another. We don't love one another by and large to courageously speak to one another when we know that we are straying and abandoning the summit least of what has laid upon us as ordinance and statute. So what I am suggesting to you is that there is a very considerable absence of the manifest presence of God in the evangelical movement in America.

And Wheaton is no exception. Over the last several years I have itinerated very widely preached in a considerable number of places and circumstances, and I have not found Wheaton to be one speck better than anywhere else. In fact, to be perfectly candid, I have found it worse for a reason.

And that is we know more here. And with increased knowledge, there is also increased responsibility. And we are not living up to what we know biblically and spiritually.

Now then, I bring this subject before the choir deliberately, purposely, because I am convinced of the significance of the role of a choir. I want to say what I said a month ago. What if this choir were to become so greatly concerned about the manifest presence of God that you did all that God requires you to do to assure that his presence was indeed manifest in you individually and manifest in you corporately? What if when the choir came out on the platform on Sundays, God came with the choir? What if when you opened your mouth to sing, it was crystal clear to all that God was indeed present? Well, you say he is.

Well, yes, he is in the essential way. But don't kid yourself, he is not in the manifest way. About two years ago, a friend had arranged a series of meetings for me in New England, in three of the New England states, about 18 nights of meetings, a different church every single night.

And they were just quick emphases upon the concern for revival that I feel. On a Sunday night during this series, I arrived in a city on the extreme east coast, walked into the sanctuary, and to my utter astonishment, I found that there was somebody seated in every pew of the sanctuary. But everybody was as far removed from everybody else as they could possibly get.

It was in fact as if everybody was truly angry with everyone else. For they were as widely scattered as a congregation could possibly be. It was a relatively small church, seated perhaps 500 people.

There may have been 40 or 45 persons present. I asked them, what are you mad about? They looked with astonishment. But immediately after the meeting, the elders of the church approached me and asked if it would be possible for me to come back for a series in the very near future.

Well, I looked at the calendar and I said, there's only one possibility this year. That is, I have a Friday night, a Saturday night, and all day Sunday, and a Monday night. It's a very strange combination of days for special emphasis, but that's available.

Well, quickly they arranged for me to come. Well, this was about six weeks later. When I went back, I was simply flabbergasted to see about two to three times as many people in attendance, but all crammed into the center portion of the church, as if everybody loved everybody else.

I'm still not sure whether deeply had already happened or whether they said to themselves, we're going to prove to this guy he was wrong. But anyway, I started this brief series, and boy am I forced into hurrying now. I'm over time already, but let me conclude this.

I started the series by saying, I don't want anyone to feel any necessity whatsoever to come and tell me what's wrong in the church. I don't want to hear anything about what's wrong in the church. I want to, using

the symbol that John the Baptist named, I want to take the axe to the root of the tree.

I know where the roots are. I don't want you to come around telling me about the fruits. I'm not interested in fruits.

I'm going for roots. Well, not a soul approached me until Sunday night, when the choir director came to me and said, it's very urgent, Mr. Roberts, that I speak with you. And I said, I'm staying in a hotel.

I named it. I'm not in the habit of meeting women, save in public places. If you wish to meet me in the dining room of the hotel tomorrow morning at 8 o'clock, I will be glad to see you.

So she was there. And immediately, when we sat down, she said, now I'm so grieved that nobody has told you about the problems in our church. And I just feel I need to do so.

Now I said, wait a minute, you were there Saturday night when I announced I didn't wish anyone to come to me about the problems. I have aimed this weekend at roots. Well, she said, I know, I heard you, but you must know.

Now I've got to tell you about the man that leads the congregational singing. And she began to vent herself. Now she said, I've got to tell you about the organist.

Oh, what a problem she is. So I said, wait a minute, wait. I want to talk about you.

I said, you are one phenomenal choir director, aren't you? Well, she said, I don't think that's fair. I didn't come here to be mocked. I said, my dear lady, if you knew me, you would know this is not mockery.

Well, she said, I didn't come to be flattered either. I said, it is neither mockery or flattery. You are one phenomenal choir director.

I watched you. You are electrifying. You have that choir in the palm of your hand.

She said, you do mean it, don't you? I said, absolutely. She said, thank you. Now I said, I want you to realize that little you, she's just a tiny lady, little you, has the capacity all by yourself to blow this church to smithereens.

She was astonished. How could you say such a thing? I said, I said it because it's true. You have the power all by yourself to blow this church to smithereens.

And she said, I don't understand what you mean. And I said to her, and I say this to you now, and I say it with all my heart. I said to her, you serve God with your gifts, but you don't serve God with your grace.

She said, I don't think I know what you mean. No, I said, I'm sure you don't know what I mean. You are an immensely gifted person, and your gifts are very obvious, and you are utilizing these gifts, but your gifts have never been overwhelmed by grace, and therefore it is you and not God.

Now I think that's an appropriate place to stop this morning, because there is a direct link between serving God with gifts and serving God with grace, and gifted musicians are a very, very dangerous part of any church. And those who serve God with gifts not only fail in drawing the manifest presence of God into the congregation, but they likewise introduce the danger of creating problems of immense consequence in the fellowship. May I ask you this week to weigh from time to time throughout the week the question, am I

serving God with gifts or with grace?

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