

# Manifest Presence - Part 3

by Richard Owen Roberts

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*Richard Owen Roberts discusses the reasons for God's withdrawal from His people and the importance of serving Him with grace rather than mere gifts.*

**Duration:** 26:24

**Scripture:** Psalm 32:3

**Topics:** "Spiritual Devotion", "Divine Grace"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the importance of serving God with genuine spiritual devotion rather than relying solely on talents and abilities. He uses examples from the Bible, such as David, to illustrate how someone can appear successful and effective in their service to God outwardly, but be spiritually distant from Him internally. The speaker emphasizes the need for individuals and the choir as a whole to address any issues that grieve God and to seek a deeper connection with Him through divine grace. He urges the choir to take these matters seriously and to strive for a new dimension of ministry that combines their musical gifts with a genuine spiritual devotion to God.

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## Transcript

Now, we've been talking about the manifest presence of God, and I want to read to you just a little piece. Some of you may suppose that I deal with novelties, because you may not know anything about this subject, and you may not have heard anything on it before, and you may suppose I'm making all this up. But I just want you to realize that this, that I'm saying to you, used to be standard.

Part of what's wrong with us in America today is what our fathers considered standard, we don't know anything about. And what we considered standard, they considered peripheral. Now I'm going to read just a very little piece from a treatise on various subjects by John Bryan, a Baptist pastor in London in 1750.

This particular chapter is entitled, The Causes of Declension in the Power of Religion. Now I don't see how anyone here could deny that there has been a very radical decline in the power of religion. In fact, it could be said of us, we have a form of godliness, but we deny the power thereof.

This could be said of America as a whole. Religion is not gripping, it is not powerful, it is not affecting. A real believer, says John Bryan, will never sink into a state of unregeneracy, or a grace in his heart will never vanish and become extinct.

Yet he may greatly decline with respect to the liveliness, the vigor, and the exercise of grace through various causes. Cause number one, the Christian may suffer a suspension of the divine influences. There is always such an influx of divine power and grace as maintain the being of the spiritual principle in the hearts of the saints, but they do not at all times enjoy the enlightening operations of the blessed spirit on that principle.

Thus its actings are interrupted for a season, their joy and their consolations abate, and they become less conversant about spiritual objects. The flesh takes this advantage and often acts its part with great violence, and the consequence is of a very sorrowful nature to the Christian, for he declines in the new man, and the old man gains wonderfully in degrees of strength. Now the nature of many of these old writers was they made a statement and then they asked a question, and then they propounded the answers, and so his first query or question is, why does God thus withdraw from his people, or suspend his comforting influences, which are so necessary in their close walk with him? Answer number one, he may do this in a sovereign way, or without any cause in the manner of their behavior toward himself.

Answer number two, it may be with a view to teach them more fully the knowledge of themselves relating to the strength of corruption and the weakness of grace in itself, and blessed fruits follow upon it under his direction and guidance, though for the present it is distressing to the saints. Answer number three, sometimes it is in a way of awful rebukes for their miscarriage. When this is the case, they cannot well be insensible of it, for the cause is near to their view.

He will make them know that though he loves their persons, he hates their sins, that though he will not frown them into hell, he is an angry judge, he will correct them as an offended father, and it may be long before he admits them to former freedom and familiarity. This is an awful, but a holy and a righteous dispensation of God towards his disobedient children. Let us, if we are in this sorrowful condition freely and heartily, own the justice of the rebuke we lie under, and adore the favor, that God draws not his sword against us, but in kindness and mercy uses his rod upon us, for our great good is the end.

Question number two, can this withdrawal consist with divine faithfulness and God's care of the new creature? Answer, yes, for it is neither total nor final. He preserves the being of grace, and he will revive it again, which two things comprise the whole of what is intended in those promises that relate to our perseverance in faith and holiness to the end. Now anyone who was able to follow that antiquarian language could readily tell the man was a Calvinist.

He believes in the final perseverance of the saints. He's not talking about falling away from grace as if he were a Methodist. You understand I'm not talking about falling away from grace as if I were a Methodist.

What he's talking about, what I'm talking about these weeks, is God being grieved, or for other reasons of his own, deliberately withdrawing his manifest presence from his people. John Bryan suggests three possible reasons why God does indeed withdraw. His first, God is sovereign.

Doesn't the king have a right to do anything he pleases? Do we have the right to question the king and say to the king, on what grounds have you withdrawn from us? What right do you have to leave us without these manifestations of your presence? Well, we have no right to speak thus to God. If God chooses to withdraw from us in any measure whatsoever, he is at total liberty to do so, and we have no right whatsoever to command or to forbid. The second reason that he suggests is a possible reason for the withdrawal of the manifest presence of God from an individual, or a choir, or an entire church, is that sometimes God finds it necessary to teach us how strong the flesh is, and how weak natural grace is.

When God withdraws and our flesh rises up and begins to take control, and we begin to do wicked and deceitful things, then we get a fresh sense of the significance of the glory and the mercy and the grace of God found in Jesus Christ. We begin to appreciate, in other words, at a higher and a better level, otherwise we may become presumptuous. We may take for granted grace.

We may fail to adequately appreciate the mercies that are ours. So God may have the sovereign reason of teaching us more and more, by his withdrawal from us, the significance of his presence with us. The third reason he suggests, which is the appropriate reason for the hour, the reason that does indeed apply in terms of the present situation, is God withdraws when he is grieved over the conduct of his people, when they have sinned and have not repented.

Evangelicalism in America is a sinful religion. It is a religion of arrogancy and pride. You have only to attend major evangelical conventions and listen to the boasting that goes on.

Listen to the way men are introduced. I mean, go to a typical church service, even, where a guest is preaching, and listen to the things that are said about the guest preacher, and you see how great the problem of pride is. I was in a church where the pastor spoke so highly of me, I was sure he was speaking about somebody else.

It was in a staff meeting of a church of some size, the staff, I think, numbered forty-five to fifty persons, and I felt, well, if I let the pastor do this in the staff meeting, who knows what he'll do next. And in front of the staff, I said, Pastor, I hope you recognize that in this flowery introduction you have given me, in these exaggerated statements you have made, what you have really done is to exalt this church, to think that this church could have the honor of such a significant and important person as myself. Now, there's no facts in what you've said.

I'm not the man you've described, and you have no reason to exercise such pride, for this church is not all that significant and great in the eyes of God. Well, those may be considered hard words, but the truth of the matter is, when a people become arrogant, God is grieved. Last week, I shared with you at the end an incident, and then left it hanging, principally because I had run over time, but also sometimes I think there's merit in following Jesus, not only in the way we live, but in the way we teach.

One of the standard procedures Christ utilized as a teacher was to leave people dangling. He often asked more questions than he answered. I shared with you the account of a choir director who came to me complaining in a situation where I had urged that no one bring tales to me of what the inner nature of the church was, in a situation where I had said, I am here not to fuss around with the fruits of the problems of this church, but to go straight to the roots, and I don't want anyone to come reporting the fruits of the problem, for I already know what the roots are, and I'm not going to pay a speck of attention to the fruits.

I'll take the acts of the gospel to the root, so don't trouble me with your complaints about one another. But the choir director felt it imperative to inform me, as I told you last week, of the problem of the organist and of the problem of the man who led the congregational singing. And I said to her, my dear woman, you have the capacity to blow this church to smithereens.

Those who were here will remember the incident. She was appalled at, I would say, such a gross thing concerning her. But I said to her, your problem is you serve God with your gifts, and you are a very gifted woman, but you do not serve God with grace.

And whenever a person serves God with their gifts and not with divine graces, they end up serving themselves and damaging the work of God. Now the woman heard me. She burst into tears.

She said, I've never seen the problem before, but it is perfectly clear now that you speak the truth. I don't know what to say except, will you pray for me that I will learn to serve God with grace and not merely with fruits? Well, of course, that's the response one always hopes for. Some months later I was back in the church, and she rushed up to me, and she said, I don't think I'm doing all that well.

I'm afraid I'm still serving more with gifts than graces, but I want you to know I have not forgotten the lesson. Well, I ask you, have you learned the lesson? What I need to say to you is that a person who is gifted can be in a terribly backslidden condition a long, long ways from God, and they can serve God, say, in preaching or in teaching or playing a harp or the piano or the organ or singing, and for the most part nobody will know anything is wrong except God. The person may not know it themselves, but there is a vast difference between service rendered unto God where the Spirit of God flows freely and where the presence of God is manifested in the life of the individual or the corporate body, a vast difference, I say, between that kind of service and service where God has deliberately chosen to absent himself because he doesn't like what goes on.

This choir could be the most magnificent choir in the state of Illinois, could win all the awards there are to win, and could impress everybody with its talents and its excellence musically and yet not serve God at all and never render any genuine spiritual good, or you could render considerable spiritual good and still not be serving God. And Paul himself said that there are those that preach the gospel whose hearts are far from God, and there is benefit that comes because they preach the Word and not because of who they are. Now I'm not making an accusation here, my dear, but I am speaking in terms of what can happen, and I want to give you now a specific biblical illustration of what I'm sharing with you.

We all know something of the details of the life of David. We are aware of the fact that David was an adulterer and a murderer, and we also know that while he was an adulterer and a murderer, he was also king, and an effective king, and a beloved king. There is not one hint anywhere in Scripture that during the months in which David lived in that sin, he was ineffectual.

There isn't anything to lead anyone to believe that as soon as he sinned, he retired from the kingdom and stayed outside all his normal religious and civil labor. Every indication is he went right on in his ministry while he was living in sin. And in case it has escaped you, I don't suppose it has, but in case it has escaped you, the sin of adultery and murder was not something that David simply committed and then repented of, it was something that he did not repent of for a very long time.

You know that, don't you? The child who was conceived illicitly was already born by the time Nathan the prophet confronted him. Now then, I have spoken already of the difference between roots and fruit. Think now in terms of the situation of David in his sin with Bathsheba and in his murder of her husband.

Would you describe those dual sins of adultery and murder as root sins or as fruit sins? Well, if you have your Bible, I would invite you to turn with me now to the passage where this matter is made ever so plain, 2 Samuel chapter 12. The preceding chapter describes in adequate detail something of the sin itself, and then in the beginning of chapter 12, 2 Samuel chapter 12, Nathan the prophet confronts David, and you remember that he confronts him with a little story, the story of a wealthy man who has a guest come to him, and the wealthy man goes to a poor neighbor, steals the ewe, lamb, from the poor neighbor, and slaughters the lamb and serves this to his guest, the only lamb the poor neighbor has. When Nathan gives

this story to David, David is aroused to great indignation, he denounces this awful man who would do such a thing, and he says, the man must restore and he deserves to die, and Nathan says, you happen to be the man.

But that's not the end of the account. You may need to read this later to verify these matters, but just let me ask you now to look at verse 9 of this chapter. After the accusation, the pointing of the finger, after the acknowledgment in part of what he has done, then Nathan really probes by saying, why have you despised the word of the Lord by doing this evil in his sight? Then look at verse 10, he says, the sword will never depart from your house, and then he gives a reason, because you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.

And then in verse 12, he levels a third accusation against David, indeed, you did it secretly. But I'm going to do this thing before Israel and under the sun. And then in verse 14, there's a fourth accusation, however, because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme.

Now I ask you the question, was the adultery, was the murder a root sin or a fruit sin? Well David goes for the roots, or rather, excuse me, Nathan goes for the roots. He says, David, I want you to realize what the root of your adultery and murder is. The root has to do with your view of God.

He makes here, as I have just noted, four very powerful accusations against David. He accuses David of despising the word of God. He accuses David of despising the person of God.

He accuses David of despising the attributes of God. And he accuses David of despising the name or the reputation of God. Now the root of David's sin was his low view of God.

The fruit of the low view of God was a high view of himself, which resulted in adultery and murder. Had David repented only of the fruits and allowed the roots to remain, he would have been into another sin very quickly. Now the reason I bring this account to you is because this account reveals so clearly the matter that I'm talking about this month of the withdrawal of God's presence when he's grieved over sin.

All of you who love Scripture and have made a habit of relating Scripture to Scripture are aware that Psalm 32, Psalm 38, and Psalm 51 all bear on this matter. You may want to note those and study them out later. Psalm 32, 38, 51 all dealing with David's sin.

But let me just quickly now share extracts from these passages. Psalm 32, when I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me, my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer.

Some of you on this cold day can remember last summer and its heat and how every bit of vitality seemed to have been drained away. And David said, the result of my sin was my vitality was drained away. I was parched.

It was as if I lived in a wilderness. Or Psalm 38, where he clarifies further these matters. O Lord, rebuke me not in thy wrath.

Chasten me not in thy burning anger. Thine arrows have sunk deep into me. Thy hand has pressed me down.

There is no soundness in my flesh because of thine indignation. There's no health in my bones because of my sin. You study those passages out and you find that God didn't let David get away with that sin.

What I'm saying to you, dear friends, is it was months before Nathan confronted David about the sin. But it was only moments after the sin that God confronted David. God dealt with David immediately.

David didn't deal with himself because David did not deal with himself. Because he did not repent immediately of his sin, God did deal with him. And God dealt with him in what we call a remedial judgment or a corrective judgment.

Or a gracious judgment. When God is grieved with a person's sin or a people's sin, he has options. God could destroy a people.

God could destroy America. And who would have any right to complain? If God destroyed us, it would be an act of justice. We're a wicked nation and we deserve to die.

But God has not destroyed us as a nation. But one would have to be a very foolish person to think God hasn't judged us. For he has.

He has judged us by withdrawing. He judged David by withdrawing. Oh, we still have church.

We still function religiously. Most people don't know the difference. All the months that God had withdrawn from David, David was still an effectual king appearing good in public.

But inwardly, he was living in a desert as if his bones were broken and his flesh was withered. One can go on serving God with gifts, but how much better to serve God with grace? Men and women who serve God with grace have profound and powerful impact. I say to you, this choir, this choir could have the most powerful effect upon this church.

If this choir, each individual privately, and this choir corporately dealt with all the problems that grieve God, you could enter into a new dimension of ministry using all the gifts you already have musically. But adding to those gifts the dimensions of divine grace, now at least somewhat wanting, and God could do some beautiful things. And I plead with you to get serious about these matters, to recognize the righteous remedial judgment of God, the cause of the judgment, the root, in other words, and to make things right.

Now, Lord, there may be individuals here who ought indeed to immediately right things with others. There may be corporate matters that require immediate attention. Whatever is needed, I pray that through the power of thy Spirit and the revelation of truth in thy word, this choir will enter increasingly into a state of grace whereby it serves thee in dimensions of power, to the glory of thy great name.

Amen.

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