

THE PRESENCE OF THE LIVING GOD

By

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“If a man love me, he will keep my word: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him” (John 3:23)

This is an amazing promise, repeated in the gospels and in the New Testament letters, and yet generally either neglected or never fully believed by a great number of Christians. It is a fact that greatly needs to be realized by every believer today.

It would be hard to exaggerate the seriousness of problems bedeviling the world right now. Global terrorism, corrupt leaders, international conspirators, corporate criminals, and a media controlled by anti-Christian powers all add to the prevailing fog of multiculturalism and general unbelief. The result is a depressing weight of despair and apathy that has seeped into the lives of many Christians, eroding their joy and confidence.

What is needed is the childlike faith in Christ’s promise, that God is with us and that His spirit is in us to give us the strength to stand against all the evils of the day, and not only to stand but to do so with joy and peace in our hearts.

This is no more than we should expect, given the character of God and His desire and purpose. First, He created man in His own image, and up until Adam and Eve rebelled God not only provided all their needs but also was in fellowship with them in the Garden of Eden, showing His desire to be close to His highest creation. Second, He gave His only begotten Son to lift man from the shameful and destructive state of sin. Jesus demonstrated what it is to live in perfect harmony with God, saying “I am not alone, because the Father is with me” (John 16:32). He revealed God’s intense love for people, with loving concern for the lowliest, with mercy on the worst, and healing all that sought His help. Then He died to atone for sin that we might escape righteous judgment and have life and immortality in fellowship with God forever.

All of this is generally recognized and believed by the church. But what is not so well recognized and believed is the promise that God even now abides with each believer, as promised by Jesus: “If a man love me, he will keep my word: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him” (John 14:23). God was no longer to be seen as an external all-powerful sovereign. It is not uncommon for people, even unbelievers, to recognize that God is all-powerful. Christians sing and talk about God’s great power. But what is not so readily believed is that He actually operates in their own lives, not as an external authority but as the one who lives (abides) in them, supplying moral strength, and transforming their minds. What Jesus revealed is that God works within us, empowering us to be what He wants us to be. Paul put it this way: “[It is God who works in you both to will and to work, for his good pleasure” (Phil.2:13).

This is the mystery which Paul said had been hid for ages and generations, but now has been manifested to God's saints, "to whom God was pleased to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory: whom we proclaim, admonishing every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ; whereunto I labor also, striving according to his working, which works in me mightily" (Col. 1:27-29).

This is the revolutionary truth that Paul sought to reveal throughout his ministry, the amazing fact that God is not only an external power who sets the rules, but one who lives in His people, renewing their minds, strengthening their wills, and transforming them into His own image after the likeness of Christ.

Unfortunately many of us think of this great power as something available only to specially gifted people. But God has always used common people for special tasks by faith, and He abides with each believer on the same basis. Paul wrote that God chooses the weak and base things of the world to confound those that the world considers wise (1 Cor. 1:27-28). There are plenty of examples. Gideon was a farmer. David was a shepherd boy. Peter was a fisherman. Each one was able to perform a great task in spite of great obstacles, because each one believed that God was with him. There is no claim to deserve such an honor. No one is worthy of His presence. It is a matter of God's generosity and grace. Jesus said, "Abide in me and I in you... He that abides in me, and I in him, the same brings forth much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:4-5). Jesus emphasized the fact that he abides in us, and that this is the only way His work is to be done.

The wars, and social upheavals may bewilder us, but they do not bewilder God. He knows how each action will all turn out, and we have only to abide in Him and accept responsibility for what part we can carry. God is not at all frustrated or dumbfounded by the sins and follies of men. His eternal purpose will be carried out in spite of all the efforts of evil people to abolish the truth and destroy man's faith in Him. With God all things are possible. He can change your life to conform to His purpose, but it can only be done through faith. God does not use force to bring men into subjection.

When you were baptized you were buried with Christ into death. "That like as Christ was raised from the dead, through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). You became a new creature, the very temple of God in which His spirit dwells (1 Cor 3:16). No longer can you be a slave of sin; no longer are you led by the spirit of the times and dictates of the world's fashion, because the sons of God are "led by the spirit of God" (Rom. 8:14).

Being transformed to the likeness of Christ is such a big order that it isn't even considered a possibility by most. We have become accustomed to seeing ourselves as products of the besmirched world about us, and easily excuse ourselves by comparing ourselves with each other. Nobody's perfect, we boast. Some take a morbid pleasure in emphasizing their sinfulness, but heaven takes delight in the fact of one being saved from

sin. John says that one who is begotten of God is able not to sin, because “God’s seed abides in him.” Never again can the Christian think of himself as worthless and a failure when God himself dwells with him.

To help us cope with our failures we have modern psychology and a myriad of methods to motivate us to self-improvement. The church is enamored with psychology as a means of overcoming imperfections and transforming lives. Religious book stores offer hundreds of “How To” books, all supposed to give the saints the keys to coping with sins and failures and the opposition of the world about us. Instead of relying on these inferior tools to fulfill God’s purpose, we can rely on God Himself.

How can we be sure that God abides with us and fills us with His spirit? Must we hear a voice, or see a vision, or have some other physical sign such as speaking in “tongues”? None of this is any proof of God’s presence. Many pagan religionists speak in tongues, see visions, and have strange emotional experiences.

God promises nothing on the basis of how our emotions are stirred. Rather the promise is to those who believe and obey. “Everyone that hears these words of mine and doeth them...” (Matt.7:24). How does one know he is saved? Did he experience a physical change? Did he hear a voice from heaven, or witness some other material sign? No, we are assured of salvation in only one way: by faith. Jesus promised, “He that believes and is baptized shall be saved” (Mk.16:14). Peter announced, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 2:38). These are solemn promises, and it is only by faith that we know God keeps them. When we come under these terms, we believe, without any proof, without any sign from heaven, that God has kept the promise, that our sins are forgiven, and we bank our eternal salvation on that promise.

In the same faith we believe Christ’s promise, ‘Lo, I am with you always.’ There is no need to try to arouse emotions to “feel” God’s presence. We simply put our faith in His promise. A letter from a reader tells of his struggle with temptation: “I have fears about the future that I won’t be able to finish my course in the Christian race.” Such fears are common. There is a world of evil confronting each believer. But the infinite God Almighty is alive and powerful and present within every Christian.

Whatever your circumstances, you have cause to rejoice, because: (1) you are God’s temple. He is with you; (2) when you cooperate with Him you are being transformed to the very likeness of Christ; (3) you are on the road, however narrow, that leads to the glory of eternal life and immortality.

“We are more than conquerors through him that loved us.” (Rom. 8:37; also Gal. 3:27, 4:7; Col. 1:11; Rom.15:13)

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