



The Omni- present Spirit

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

(PSALM 139:7)

This psalm, ascribed to David, is remarkable because it describes the ultimate relationship between God and his covenant children, between the LORD and us. It is striking that the Lord is fully acknowledged in his glory and power, which are evident in his omnipresence, and at the same he is embraced in his love and grace, and experienced in his constant nearness. This almighty God is our Father.

There is another element here to which we must pay attention. In the text the Holy Spirit is mentioned specifically: where can I go from your Spirit? As we annually consider the meaning of Christ's ascension and the subsequent outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost, we must remember that the Holy Spirit always functioned on earth, dwelt and worked among God's people, and was recognized as God.

Pentecost does not mean that the Holy Spirit comes to earth for the first time, but that he comes in a special manner because of the redeeming work of Christ. Yet the Spirit has from the very beginning of time cared for this earth and also dwelt among God's people. Pentecost does not come falling out of the blue sky, but builds on the presence of the Spirit under the Old Testament. The work of the Spirit becomes richer all the time, but new work always flows forth from work done since the beginning of time. This is the order which the Bible emphasizes.

Omnipresence and Omniscience

In this Psalm we are taught to praise the LORD our God who knows our lives and guides them. David first tells us that the LORD is with him every step of each day. The LORD can do this because he is omnipresent

and omniscient (is everywhere and knows all things). Hence there is no escape from God. Instead there is an acknowledgement that the LORD knew his child even from the time he was still in the womb of his mother. God sets the day of our birth and our death: (verse 16): all the days ordained for me were written in your book.

Because all this is so, David ends the psalm by *inviting* the LORD to come and know his heart, to search his (anxious) thoughts, to see if there is an offensive way in him, and to lead him in the way everlasting. Do not shut God out; invite him in. Search me O God! You can say: he is already in, but nevertheless we are called to open our heart and mind to the LORD. God wants to be a part of our lives with our love, cooperation, and recognition.

In that light we can better understand the passage about going from the Spirit and fleeing from God's presence. It is impossible to escape and foolish even to try. It is unnecessary for obedient children of the LORD to try to escape. The presence of the Holy Spirit should be to us not a matter of fear but a matter of great joy.

This psalm teaches us that the loving care of the LORD is expressed in the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit. We focus on two aspects: the Spirit's infinite omnipresence and his intimate omniscience.

Written for everyone

It says above this psalm: for the director of music. When we read about a director, we think of a choir. When we hear about a choir in the Old Testament, we think of the Levites. They were taught by the director, and in turn they taught the people to sing. This is a psalm, therefore, not just for personal use or family devotion, but one written for all God's people.

I mention this because of the very personal character of this psalm. Sometimes people see a big gap between personal worship and corporate (or congregational) worship, but the gap should not be there. The one flows into the other. What we may sing about ourselves, we may sing also about the LORD's covenant people.

This means also that the passage about going from God's Spirit or fleeing God's presence is true for all Israelites. At this point Pentecost has not yet occurred and the indwelling of the Spirit in each heart is not yet a reality, but David recognizes that the Spirit does function and work in Israel.

Please notice also one other important aspect. In the first line of this text, David speaks about the Spirit. Then he adds in the same breath: your (i.e. Yahweh's) presence. Omnipresence is ascribed both to the Spirit and

to the LORD. The LORD is the Spirit. We see here again clear proof that also under the Old Testament the Holy Spirit was considered to be God.

Two questions in one

Now David is actually asking two questions here, or possibly, we can say, one question. Let us examine the first one, “Where can I go from your Spirit?” The second question has the element of “fleeing” from God, which is probably, in the line of parallelism, the sense also of the first question. Where can I go from your Spirit, namely, to get away?

We wonder why an Israelite, or any one of us, would ever want to get away from the Spirit or flee from God. Is life with the LORD not much more pleasant than without him? Why run away? What reason could there possibly be?

There may sometimes be important though invalid reasons to run, but where can we go to hide from the LORD? The question is, of course, rhetorical. The answer is nowhere. We cannot get away from the Holy Spirit. David is not speaking about the desirability of getting away, but about the comforting impossibility. No matter where he goes or whatever overcomes him, the Holy Spirit is right there, all around him, protecting, guiding, and leading. Therefore I wrote about the infinite omnipresence of the Spirit.

Now one might say: that is saying the same with two words. We call that a pleonasm or a redundancy. Does omnipresence (being everywhere) not mean also infinite (without boundaries)? This is true. But David wants to stress very strongly that no matter where we go we cannot hide from the Holy Spirit. He mentions places which we might not immediately think of to stress that this omnipresence is indeed infinite, without any limit whatsoever.

Sometimes we confess the Spirit’s omnipresence, but then in our mind immediately restrict it. The Spirit is everywhere, but....we haven’t noticed it lately. We do not see him. There were times and places when we did not feel the presence of the Spirit. Or we think that we somehow can do something that will escape the Holy Spirit’s attention, something which he will not see. After all, he is too busy with the grander scheme of things than to worry about us.

The heart of the psalm?

Perhaps here we come to the heart of this very Psalm. David expresses his wonder that God through his Holy Spirit pays personal attention to each detail of his life. This is part of the omnipresence: God oversees his entire people in one glance, but he also notices each person in the specific details of his life.

Where can I go from your Spirit? Notice how David speaks about height (heaven) and depth (Sheol), and the most faraway places (“the far side of the sea”). That means all the way at the other end of the Mediterranean in uncharted waters where no one has gone before. David also mentions the *darkness*, the cover of the night, when people cannot see and many crimes are committed. Sometimes in a situation of warfare, when an enemy attack is expected at night, defending troops send up flares to light up the surrounding area. But all you can see is shadows moving. Nowadays there are night vision binoculars, special infrared scopes that pick up the advancing enemy. We have found ways to break through the dark, at least partially. But of the Spirit it is said: the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. The Spirit does not need flares or scopes. There is no barrier for him, not even pitch black darkness.

Everywhere in full measure

There is no place of escape. We can take that even in a more positive sense: there is no need ever to fear that the Holy Spirit is not present with us, because for the Holy Spirit there are no obstacles, no borders, no situations, and no created entities that can hinder him from being with us. There is truly here infinite omnipresence, the presence of the Holy Spirit everywhere in full measure, a presence that knows of no bounds.

Go up to heaven, there is the Spirit. Go to the realm of the dead, to Sheol, from which there is no return, but the Spirit can enter and leave there freely at will. Do you think that when you die, you are beyond the reach and power of the Holy Spirit? You cannot go so far away that the Spirit even momentarily loses track of you. God never has to say: where is so-and-so? I don't see him at the moment.

Why the Spirit?

Why is the Spirit mentioned specifically in this connection? David could have written simply: where can I go *from you*, Yahweh, where can I flee from your presence? The Spirit is specified here, because he is the one who

lives among God's people, watches over them, cares for them, keeps them together, brings back those who stray, and causes Israel to be a spiritual people. This was so already under the old dispensation, and it became only richer in the new dispensation.

Here we see already the contours of what happens through and after Pentecost. The disciples, enabled by the Spirit, go everywhere in the whole world, and there are no boundaries for the Holy Spirit. Distance means nothing to him. All obstacles are overcome by the Holy Spirit. While we work in faith, the Spirit manifests his infinite omnipresence.

There was a time when the Spirit withdrew from a place or person. That was at the cross of Golgotha, and he removed himself from our Lord Jesus Christ. David may confess: You have laid your hand on me, in a protecting and a guiding sense, but Jesus Christ must say: You have taken your hand from me and instead of protecting me, You have crushed me, This is stated in Psalm 22 which contains the complaint: my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? That is the price for our sins. The Spirit is holy, and where he now goes he purifies and sanctifies with the blood of the cross shed by our Lord. Jesus Christ.

Remember Jonah?

We must understand that we now speak about the Spirit sent by our Lord Jesus Christ. We have received the Spirit of sonship, by which we cry Abba, Father! He is the same Spirit as from eternity, but one who now hands out to us what Christ has earned for us on the cross. For the Lord Jesus said: he will take from me, and give it to you.

You cannot get away from the Spirit. Remember how the prophet Jonah tried to do so. He boarded a boat that was going to Spain or beyond, farther than civilization itself. But he ran into the wall of God's omnipresence. We ask sometimes how Jonah could ever survive for three days and nights in the belly of a fish, but the real question is: how did he ever think he could hide from the LORD? There are people today on the run, some literally trying to block out the Spirit by breaking with the church, but they find no rest, even if they plunge themselves into this world to hide there.

No secret places

I want to look yet at the expression, "Where can I flee from your presence?" The answer to this question is, of course, clear: nowhere. In Jeremiah 23:23, 24 we read, "Am I only a God nearby, declares the LORD, and not a

God far away? Can anyone hide in secret places, so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD?” Even the great exile will not pose a problem for the LORD to find and to bring back his people whom he has chosen.

There are no secret places before God. No secrets can be kept from the LORD. We should remember this constantly. Instead, it says, where can I flee from your presence? Please note carefully the word presence. God is present, not far away, but near. Literally it says: where can I flee from your face.

We live and work before the face of the LORD. He is present wherever we are, whatever we do, and he looks upon us. If the first part of the verse indicated infinite omnipresence, the second part is not a mere repetition, but deepens the original thought: your Spirit...your presence... is everywhere.

The Spirit: God's Presence

I find it remarkable that often when the Spirit is mentioned in the Old Testament the word “presence” is used, as in this passage and also elsewhere. I think of Psalm 51:11, “Do not cast me from your presence, or take your Holy Spirit from me.” Or consider Ezekiel 39:29, “I will no longer hide my face (presence) from them, for I will pour out my Spirit on the house of Israel, declares the Sovereign LORD.”

God's face or God's presence are experienced in the nearness of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the presence of God among his people. When God turns his face toward us, his Holy Spirit comes among us, and we live in his presence. The outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost deepened this presence. The Holy Spirit then came to dwell within our hearts. The new dispensation is richer and deeper, because it is based on one perfect sacrifice of Christ, made once for all.

Sometimes, when we were children and we learned something new, like being able to swim with our head under water, we'd say: look dad, look, mom, and then we wait till they actually look at us, and under we go. As we rub the water from our eyes, we first look in the direction of mom and dad to determine if they have indeed watched us. When they have seen, and acknowledged our achievement, we feel so happy. Mom and dad do love me, for they have watched me, and turned their face towards me. I am important to them, and I live in their presence, before their face. So it is in a much deeper sense with the Holy Spirit and God's children.

From infinite to intimate

What is infinite has now become intimate. When you are in the presence of others, you are very close to them. They can speak with you and you can respond. There is an exchange of love. God's eyes rest on us and our eyes look to him. We pray and we know he is listening. We cry and we know he hears. We laugh and we know he shares our joy.

God's presence has always been experienced in the nearness of the Holy Spirit. He was set among Israel. Look at Isaiah 63:11b, "Where is he who set his Holy Spirit among them?" We will look closer at this passage in a next chapter. The Spirit then restricted his close presence to certain office bearers, for example, to Moses and the seventy elders. But God did live among Israel, and they were all in his presence.

He knew all things about each one of them. This is what omniscience means. No matter what they did, when or where, he knew of it. He knew it in its depth: intimate omniscience. Israel had to recognize this time and again. This was brought home very clearly and strongly to the Israelites when they entered the promised land in the example with Achan who took from the spoils of Jericho. He did it in the presence of God, before the face of God, who watched him all the time and knew of his deepest motive (cf. Joshua 7). We find a similar example in the New Testament in the case of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5).

Greater intimacy now

Now the Spirit has been poured out, and dwells in our hearts. There is today even a greater reality of intimate omniscience. Let us say that David can speak about himself still as an exception. Most Israelites did not have such a close bond with the Holy Spirit as we do. He now dwells within our hearts. Intimate omniscience means that he knows the deepest secrets of our heart. Our life is to him an open book.

When someone looks at you all the time, knows all about you, and sees deep into your heart, there is one of two things you can do. One reaction is that you can become quite nervous and try to live a life of constant, futile cover-up and denial. We often try to cover up and deny what we did. We try to get the focus on the sins of others by pointing to their errors. It is senseless, because God sees anyway, also how we try to hide and run, bob and weave. Do you live in denial and excuses? Then how does the Spirit, the presence of God, function in your life?

When someone looks at us all the time, is constantly watching us, we can become very uneasy. We say: stop staring at me. Quit looking at me all the time. We try to get out of the line of vision. As a matter of fact, we say: staring is rude.

But God does not stare with accusing eyes. He looks at us in love. Sometimes he looks in anger and grief, when we do not obey his will. It is not without reason that the Bible tells us already in the Old Testament that Israel rebelled “and grieved his Holy Spirit” (Isaiah 63:10). This matter resurfaces in the New Testament, but it happened also before Pentecost. The great sin of Israel was grieving the Spirit of God, rejecting his word, and breaking his covenant.

Invite God in

There is the other way shown by David in this Psalm. If my life is open to God from my conception on, from birth to death and beyond, what else shall I do but open it also myself? I will not try to keep God out, but I will invite him in. Look at the last verses of the psalm, 23 and 24. “Search me O God and know my heart, test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

The psalm started with the words: O LORD, you have searched me. We cannot keep God out. David sees this as a great comfort. God is with him all the way, every step of the way, by the omnipresence and omniscience of the Holy Spirit. There is no running away nor is there any need to run. We do not play hide and seek games with the LORD. Come in. Continue to search me, O God, and know my heart. Keep me on the right path, the one that is everlasting.

Difficult decisions

This does mean that we must sometimes make very difficult decisions. There's also in this Psalm the section about the wicked (verses 19-21). It sounds like a sudden, angry outburst that does not really fit. But it fits perfectly. “Do I not hate those who hate you?” In the presence of God, before his face, with his Spirit in your heart, you cannot love God's enemies. His enemies are my enemies. I hate those who hate him. All they try to do is ruin the relationship with the LORD and one another.

What this means very simply is that we have to be consistent. We do not associate with those who hate God. How could we? We live in God's

presence, do we not? But then it is also true for us: we love those who love God and we exercise with them the communion of saints.

The apostle Paul wrote in this vein to the Corinthians (1 Cor 5:9 ff). We cannot altogether avoid going about with unbelievers. Then we'd best leave the world completely. There are business dealings and social obligations, whatever, that we must be involved in. But we do this only as far as we must. We do not engage in fellowship or communion with the ungodly, for we have no common basis with them. Either we live together as God's children, or we do not live together.

God is watching us closely

Do we have a very keen awareness of the fact that we are always living in the presence of God, not just in church on Sundays but every day, every night, and all week long? The Holy Spirit watches us, not as an uninterested spectator, but as an intimate counselor. Our life is his concern, at home or at work, at school or at play.

God is watching us in the love that he manifested in Jesus Christ on the cross like a Father watches his children, or a mother, to keep them from danger and harm.

The Spirit regards us with intimate omniscience. This is true even more now since Pentecost. We were bought by the blood of Christ and our life is now a workplace of the Holy Spirit. God's eyes are upon us in Christ. He misses nothing. He sees our good works and our transgressions.

We thank him for the good works because he worked them in us. We confess our sins believing that he takes them away. He renews my life. He knows me through and through. From the day I was conceived, he watched over me, and now he dwells in me. I open my life to him, seek him in the beauty of the Holy Scriptures and in the intimacy of prayer. In the love of Jesus Christ, I find the Father and the Spirit, the one True eternal God, who has laid his hand upon me and leads me in the way everlasting.

All this is too wonderful for me, I cannot comprehend it. But I believe it and seek to live it every day again.