

On The Omnipresence Of God

Sermon (111) by John Wesley

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"Do not I fill heaven and earth saith the Lord." Jer. 23:24.

1. How strongly and beautifully do these words express the omnipresence of God! And can there be in the whole compass of nature a more sublime subject Can there be any more worthy the consideration of every rational creature Is there any more necessary to be considered, and to be understood, so far as our poor faculties will admit How many excellent purposes may it answer! What deep instruction may it convey to all the children of men! And more directly to the children of God.

2. How is it then that so little has been wrote on so sublime and useful a subject It is true that some of our most eminent writers have occasionally touched upon it, and have several strong and beautiful reflections which were naturally suggested by it. But which of them has published a regular treatise, or so much as a sermon, upon the head Perhaps many were conscious of their inability to do justice to so vast a subject. It is possible, there may some such lie hid in the voluminous writings of the last century. But if they are hid even in their own country, if they are already buried in oblivion, it is the same, for any use they are of, as if they had never been wrote.

3. What seems to be wanting still, for general use, is a plain discourse on the omnipresence or ubiquity of God. First, in some manner explaining and proving that glorious truth, "God is in this, and every place;" and Then, applying it to the consciences of all thinking men, in a few practical inferences.

I. 1. Accordingly, I will endeavour, by the assistance of his Spirit, first a little to explain the omnipresence of God; to show how we are to understand this glorious truth, "God is in this, and every place. The Psalmist, you may remember, speaks strongly and beautifully upon it in the hundred and thirty-ninth Psalm; observing in the most exact order, First, "God is in this place;" and Then, "God is in every place." He observes, First, "Thou art about my bed, and about my path, and spiest out all my ways." (Ps. 139:3.) "Thou hast fashioned me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me." (Ps. 139:5) Although the manner thereof he could not explain; how it was he could not tell. "Such knowledge," says he, "is too wonderful for me: I cannot attain unto it." (Ps. 139:6) He next observes, in the most lively and affecting manner, that God is in every place. "Whither shall I go then from thy Spirit, or whither shall I go from thy presence If I climb up into heaven, thou art there; if I go down to hell, thou art there also.'(Ps. 139:7, 8.) If I could ascend, speaking after the manner of men, to the highest part of the universe, or could I descend to the lowest point, thou art alike present both in one and the other. "If I should take the wings of the morning, and remain in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there thy hand would lead me," -- thy power and thy presence would be before me, -- "and thy right hand would hold me,' seeing thou art equally in the length and breadth, and in the height and depth of the universe. Indeed thy presence and knowledge not only reach the utmost bounds of creation; but

Thine omnipresent sight, Even to the pathless realms extends Of uncreated night.

In a word, there is no point of space, whether within or without the bounds of creation, where God is not.

2. Indeed, this subject is far too vast to be comprehended by the narrow limits of human understanding. We can only say, The great God, the eternal, the almighty Spirit, is as unbounded in his presence as in his duration and power. In condescension, indeed, to our weak understanding, he is said to dwell in heaven: but, strictly speaking, the heaven of heavens cannot contain him; but he is in every part of his dominion. The universal God dwelleth in universal space; so that we may say,

Hail, Father! whose creating call Unnumber'd worlds attend! Jehovah, comprehending all,
Whom none can comprehend!

3. If we may dare attempt the illustrating this a little farther, what is the space occupied by a grain of sand, compared to that space which is occupied by the starry heavens It is as a cipher; it is nothing; it vanishes away in the comparison. What is it, then, to the whole expanse of space, to which the whole creation is infinitely less than a grain of sand And yet this space, to which the whole creation bears no proportion at all, is infinitely less in comparison of the great God than a grain of sand, yea, a millionth part of it, bears to that whole space.

II. 1. This seems to be the plain meaning of those solemn words which God speaks of himself: "Do not I fill heaven and earth" And these sufficiently prove his omnipresence; which may be farther proved from this consideration: God acts everywhere, and, therefore, is everywhere; for it is an utter impossibility that any being, created or uncreated, should work where it is not. God acts in heaven, in earth, and under the earth, throughout the whole compass of his creation; by sustaining all things, without which everything would in an instant sink into its primitive nothing; by governing all, every moment superintending everything that he has made; strongly and sweetly influencing all, and yet without destroying the liberty of his rational creatures. The very Heathens acknowledged that the great God governs the large and conspicuous parts of the universe; that he regulates the motions of the heavenly bodies, of the sun, moon, and stars; that he is

Totam Mens agitans molem, et magno se corpore miscens: The all-informing soul, That fills,
pervades and actuates the whole.

But they had no conception of his having a regard to the least things as well as the greatest; of his presiding over all that he has made, and governing atoms as well as worlds. This we could not have known unless it had pleased God to reveal it unto us himself. Had he not himself told us so, we should not have dared to think that "not a sparrow falleth to the ground, without the will of our Father which is in heaven;" and much less affirm, that "even the very hairs of our head are all numbered!"

2. This comfortable truth, that "God filleth heaven and earth," we learn also from the Psalm above recited: "If I climb up into heaven, thou art there; if I go down to hell, thou art there also.

If I take the wings of the morning, and remain in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there thy hand shall lead me." The plain meaning is, If I remove to any distance whatever, thou art there; thou still besettest me, and layest thine hand upon me. Let me flee to any conceivable or inconceivable distance; above, beneath, or on any side; it makes no difference; thou art still equally there: In thee I still "live, and move, and have my being."

3. And where no creature is, still God is there. The presence or absence of any or all creatures makes no difference with regard to him. He is equally in all, or without all. Many have been the disputes among philosophers whether there be any such thing as empty space in the universe; and it is now generally supposed that all space is full. Perhaps it cannot be proved that all space is filled with matter. But the Heathen himself will bear us witness, Jovis omnia plena: "All things are full of God." Yea, and space exists beyond the bounds of creation (for creation must have bounds, seeing nothing is boundless, nothing can be, but the great Creator), even that space cannot exclude Him who fills the heaven and the earth.

4. Just equivalent to this is the expression of the Apostle: (Eph. 1:23, not, as some have strangely supposed, concerning the Church, but concerning the Head of it:) "The fullness of him that filleth all in all;" ta panta en pasin, literally translated, all things in all things;" -- the strongest expression of universality which can possibly be conceived. It necessarily includes the last and the greatest of all things that exist. So that if any expression could be stronger, it would be stronger than even that -- the "filling heaven and earth."

5. Indeed this very expression, "Do not I fill heaven and earth" (the question being equal to the strongest affirmation), implies the clearest assertion of God's being present everywhere and filling all space; for it is well known, the Hebrew phrase "heaven and earth," includes the whole universe; the whole extent of space, created or uncreated, and all that is therein.

6. Nay, and we cannot believe the omnipotence of God, unless we believe his omnipresence; for, seeing, as was observed before, nothing can act where it is not, -- if there were any space where God was not present, he would not be able to do anything there. Therefore, to deny the omnipresence of God implies, likewise, the denial of his omnipotence. To set bounds to the one is undoubtedly to set bounds to the other also.

7. Indeed, wherever we suppose him not to be, there we suppose all his attributes to be in vain. He cannot exercise there either his justice or mercy, either his power or wisdom. In extra-mundane space, (so to speak,) where we suppose God not to be present, we must, of course, suppose him to have no duration; but as it is supposed to be beyond the bounds of the creation, so it is beyond the bounds of the Creator's power. Such is the blasphemous absurdity which is implied in this supposition.

8. But to all that is or can be said of the omnipresence of God, the world has one grand objection: They cannot see him. And this is really at the root of all their other objections. Thus our blessed Lord observed long ago: "Whom the world cannot receive, because they see him not." But is it not easy to reply, "Can you see the wind" You cannot. But do you therefore deny its existence, or its presence You say, "No; for I can perceive it by my other senses." But by which of your senses do you perceive your soul Surely you do not deny either the existence or the presence of this!

And yet it is not the object of your sight, or of any of your other senses. Suffice it then to consider that God is a Spirit, as is our soul also. Consequently, "him no man hath seen, or can see," with eyes of flesh and blood.

III. 1. But allowing that God is here, as in every place, that he is "about our bed, and about our path;" that he "besets us behind and before, and lays his hand upon us;" what inference should we draw from hence What use should we make of this awful consideration Is it not meet and right to humble ourselves before the eyes of his Majesty Should we not labour continually to acknowledge his presence, "with reverence and godly fear" not indeed with the fear of devils, that believe and tremble, but with fear of angels, with something similar to that which is felt by the inhabitants of heaven, when

Dark with excessive bright his skirts appear, Yet dazzles heaven, that brightest seraphim
Approach not, but with both wings veil their eyes.

2. Secondly. If you believe that God is about your bed, and about your path, and spieth out all your ways, then take care not to do the least thing, not to speak the least word, not to indulge the least thought, which you have reason to think would offend him. Suppose that a messenger of God, an angel, be now standing at your right hand, and fixing his eyes upon you, would you not take care to abstain from every word or action that you knew would offend him Yea, suppose one of your mortal fellow-servants, suppose only a holy man stood by you, would not you be extremely cautious how you conducted yourself, both in word and action How much more cautious ought you to be when you know that not a holy man, not an angel of God, but God himself, the Holy One "that inhabiteth eternity," is inspecting your heart, your tongue, your hand, every moment; and that he himself will surely bring you into judgment for all you think, and speak, and act under the sun!

3. In particular: If there is not a word in your tongue, not a syllable you speak, but he "knoweth it altogether;" how exact should you be in "setting a watch before your mouth, and in keeping the door of your lips!" How wary does it behove you to be in all your conversation; being forewarned by your Judge, that "by your words you shall be justified, or by your words you shall be condemned!" How cautious, lest "any corrupt communication," any uncharitable, yea, or unprofitable discourse, should "proceed out of your mouth;" instead of "that which is good to the use of edifying, and meet to minister grace to the hearers!"

4. Yea, if God sees our hearts as well as our hands, and in all places; if he understandeth our thoughts long before they are clothed with words, how earnestly should we urge that petition, "Search me, O Lord, and prove me; try out my reins and my heart; look well if there be any way of wickedness in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" Yea, how needful is it to work together with him, in "keeping our hearts with all diligence," till he hath "cast down imaginations," evil reasonings, "and everything that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and brought into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ!"

5. On the other hand, if you are already listed under the great Captain of your salvation, seeing you are continually under the eye of your Captain, how zealous and active should you be to "fight the good fight of faith, and lay hold on eternal life;" "to endure hardship, as good soldiers

of Jesus Christ;" to use all diligence, to "war a good warfare," and to do whatever is acceptable in his sight! How studious should you be to approve all your ways to his all-seeing eyes; that he may say to your hearts, what he will proclaim aloud in the great assembly of men and angels, "Well done, good and faithful servants!"

6. In order to attain these glorious ends, spare no pains to preserve always a deep, a continual, a lively, and a joyful sense of his gracious presence. Never forget his comprehensive word to the great father of the faithful: "I am the Almighty" (rather, the All-sufficient) "God; walk before me, and be thou perfect!" Cheerfully expect that He, before whom you stand, will ever guide you with his eye, will support you by his guardian hand, will keep you from all evil, and "when you have suffered a while, [he] will make you perfect, will stablish, strengthen, and settle you;" and then "preserve you unblameable, unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ!"

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