

Why Does God Seem so Distant When I Pray?

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I want to read again some verses. There's so many of them but I'll just read these. But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, the Heaven of Heavens cannot contain Thee, how much less this house that I have builded. Then Acts 17, that was 1 Kings, Acts 17, that they should seek the Lord if happily they might feel after Him and find Him, though He be not far from every one of them. For in Him, we live and move and have our being.

And then of course, that Psalm 139, whither shall I go from thy Spirit or whither shall I flee from Thy presence. If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there. If I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall Thy hand laid me and thy right hand shall hold me. I read these, I just copied them out on a card there to save turning, flipping pages. There are here and are many, many more like them.

And I begin tonight with the restatement of two tenets of the Christian belief. This is not my idea. And if you haven't heard it emphasized before, it's because we preachers are falling down in the preaching of the Word. These two tenets are simply these, that God is omnipresent. That is, that God is everywhere. That God is immanent. That is, that God penetrates everything. They're standard Christian doctrines and they have been believed back until to the days, even of the Jew.

Now by this all, we mean that God is omnipresent and immanent and is penetrating everything even while He contains all things as I explained last week. The bucket that is sunk in the depths of the ocean, it is full of the ocean and the ocean is in the bucket. But also, the bucket is in the ocean surrounded by it. And this is the best illustration I can think of how God dwells in His universe, and yet the universe dwells in God.

Now, I've dealt with the fact of remoteness, that distance is unlikeness. And I pointed out that hell is for those unlike God. The moral dissimilarity creates hell, moral dissimilarity. Those moral beings that are morally dissimilar to God, hell is their final place. And those creatures, those beings, moral beings that are morally similar to God, this likeness to God, heaven is their place because they have a nature that belongs there.

I have shown that reconciliation with God is secured, or affected by three divine acts. They're all divine acts: atonement, justification and regeneration. Atonement of course, is the objective work

of Christ. It is the thing that He did on a cross. It is the thing He did before any of us now living we're living. It is something that He did alone in the dark. It's objective, that is, it's outside of us. It did not take place inside of anybody. It took place objectively, externally out there on a cross. He did it. The spear went into His side alone, and He suffered. The nails were in His hands and feet. That's atonement. And that is objective and external to us. And it could have been done without affecting anybody. And it was done, and still there are millions that have died unaffected by it. Because it's an external act. It's something that was done outside, an objective act, something done beyond, outside of and not inside of us.

But here is the beauty of it, that this act which He did in the darkness there, makes justification possible. And justification is the second act which God does to bring reconciliation, men and God together, to reconcile man to God. Justification is that which declares the sinner righteous, and that also is external to the man. That is, it doesn't reach the man.

The justified man may be no better off for his justification if that's all that happened to him. Because justification is a judicial thing. It's legal, just as a man may stand before a court and be declared innocent of a crime, not guilty of a crime, and yet it doesn't change the man any. He weighs exactly the same as he weighed before. He is the same height as he was before, the same color of hair and eyes. He has the same relationships.

He's in every way the same man that he was before, but he's judicially free. He's declared not guilty before the law. It might have a subjective effect in that when he found it out, he'd rejoice to know that he was declared not guilty. But the work is not done in him, the work is done in the minds of the jurors and before the law, it's a judicial thing.

So, justification is the second act that God performs to get us reconciled with Him. He first gives atonement to make justification possible, then He gives justification.

And then the third act, regeneration. Regeneration of course takes place at the same time justification takes place. When God justifies a man, I said that a man could be justified and not be any better off. That is technically possible to be so, but not actually so. Because, when God justifies a man, He also regenerates the man. So that, nobody ever was justified and not regenerated. But you can think them apart, though actually of course, you cannot separate them. Justification and regeneration are not the same.

And again, I'm only giving you the most ordinary, basic Christian theology that everybody ought to know, that justification is not a subjective thing. It's a judicial thing. But that regeneration takes place within the life of the man, within the heart of the man, it's a subjective thing. It deals with the man's nature. It gets inside the man, because Jesus died in the darkness and because God accepted that as atonement for that man's sin. If that man believes in Christ, God can justify him and declare

him righteous, and then regenerate him by imparting to him the nature of God. For it tells us that it is through this, through these promises, that we are partakers of the divine nature.

A regenerated man is a man who has partaken of the divine nature, who has a new relation to God which gives him eternal life.

Now, this reunites God and man and it restores some degree of moral likeness to the man. The newest convert, the newest convert that was born again; today, for born again and regenerate are the same expression. The newest convert has a degree of moral likeness to God which gives a measure of compatibility. You see, heaven is a place of complete compatibility. And sin introduces incompatibilities between God and the sinner. There cannot be any compatibility. There cannot be any communion, because sin introduces that quality which throws man and God out of accord with each other. There's no accord there, no congruity.

But when that sinner believes in the blood of atonement, puts his trust in Christ, and is justified in heaven and regenerated on earth, for that's the only place you get regenerated. Don't wait until you die. There's no place to regenerate after you're dead. But you're regenerated, you're given a measure of the character of God, so that, there is enough of the image restored to the man in regeneration that there can be quite a full measure of compatibility. And that compatibility allows God to draw feelingly near to the man and it makes communion morally consistent.

You see, as I explained at great length last Sunday night, you can't have communion where there is complete unlikeness. You can't have it. You go to a creature that has a nature other than yours and you can't have communion there. You may pet the head of a dog, but you can't commune with the dog. The dog can't commune with you, because there's too great a dissimilarity of nature. So, God cannot commune with a sinner, because there is a violent unlikeness, a dissimilarity making communion impossible.

But it says here in Colossians 3, that ye have put on the new man which is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him who created him. That new man within you is the regenerated man, the new man, if you started on your way toward God-likeness. And there was enough of it there even in the new convert, that God, I repeat, can commune without incongruity because He finds some of His image in the man. God can only commune with His own image, remember that.

God, being the God He is, can never commune with anything except His own likeness. And where there is no likeness, there can be no fellowship between God and that unlike thing. But where there is restored to that person, a similarity, something of the nature of God, a compatibility, then God begins a communion. And of course, He can commune depending upon the fullness and completeness of that, of that compatibility.

Now, it says, ye have put on the new man, you Christians at Colossi. You have put on the new man, you have, you Christians. These Colossian Christians were not perfect by a long way, but they had put on the new man. The seed was in them. The root of the matter was in their hearts. They were regenerated. So, God could commune with His own image in them and see a little bit of His own face there and hold communion with His people. That's why we can say, Abba, Father.

If I might use a rather grotesque illustration, I might say that the young father who goes to the hospital to see his newborn heir, looks into the glass and there never was a father yet who wasn't excited, and frightened and bewildered. But there never was a father yet who wasn't disappointed, because when he looks at that little fellow, his eyes are on over all twenty-five or thirty or fifty in there, and he picks on a pretty one and hopes that's his. Then when they turn the thing around and he sees that it isn't, he's disappointed.

I think little Becky was about the only one who didn't disappoint; well Stanley was pretty too. But mostly, you know, they're a mess. And, but there is enough. And when you say, he's just the image of you, and you'll never be dead as long as he lives. A father beams you know, but actually it isn't much of a compliment, the little blob of squirm and suck and giggle and red skin and hair that isn't there.

Well, yet there is a little bit of likeness there. There's something, there's a similarity now in a deeper way. A new convert, that fellow that just been born again there, he certainly may not be much like God, but he has something of the resemblance to the Deity. And so God can own him as His and the angels can recognize a family resemblance. Now that's all settled.

Now my brother, why then, and this is really the reason the sermon is being preached. Why then, this serious problem among real Christians. This feeling that God is far away, or vice versa, that we are far away from God. It's hard to rejoice, you know, no matter what, you know, it's hard to rejoice if you don't feel, for feeling is rejoicing. And it's hard to rejoice when you're suffering from that sense of remoteness.

And I'd like to say to you that I believe that most Christians do suffer from a sense of divine remoteness. They know God is with them and they're sure they're God's children, and they can take you to their marked New Testament and prove to you seriously and soberly that they're justified and regenerated and they belong to God and heaven is going to be their home and Christ is their advocate above. They've got the theology they know in their head, but they're mostly suffering from a sense of remoteness.

To know a thing in your head is one thing, to feel it in your heart is another. And I think that most Christians are trying to be happy without having a sense of the Presence. It's like having a bright, trying to have a bright day without having the sun. You could say, well now it is 12:15 noon,

therefore, the sun is up. Let us rejoice in the sun. Isn't it beautiful and bright? Let us take it by faith and rejoice that the sun is up, that all is well. The sun is up according to the calendar, the sun should be about there. You can point upward and say the sun is up, but brother, that's kidding yourself. As long as it's gloomy and rainy and wet, soggy leaves keep dribbling down and it's dark, you're not having a bright day. But when the sun comes out, then you can you can rejoice in the presence of the sun.

Now, most Christians are theological Christians, they know they're saved, somebody is given them a marked New Testament and it's proper. We should so they get their theology straight, but they're trying to be happy without a sense of the Presence. The sense of the Presence is absent, and so that yearning, that yearning, you see is a desire, that yearning to be nearer to God, to have God near to us. It's found everywhere among God's people. You will find it in two places; prayers and songs and hymns; you will find it there. If you think that I'm merely spinning this like a spider spins a web out of his stomach.

If you think that I am merely spinning this out of my head, go to the next prayer meeting and kneel down with the brethren and listen to them pray. They all pray alike. It's, O Lord come, O Lord drawn near. O Lord show thyself. Be near to me Lord. And then, if that isn't enough, sing along with us. And hear us sing come, Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing and other such songs. Draw Me Nearer, nearer blessed Lord. Near the Cross my heart can say I am coming near. The yearning to be nearer to God and have God come nearer to us is universal among born-again Christians.

And yet we think of God as coming from across distance to us, when my text declares and Christian theology back to David declares that God is already here now. That God doesn't dwell in space, and therefore God doesn't have to do like a rocket or like a ray of light, come from some remote place or start toward some remote place. There is no remote place in God. God contains all remoteness and all distances in His own great Heart. And why then do we feel Him in distance? It's this dissimilarity in our natures. It's the unlikeness.

We've got enough likeness that God can commune with us and call us His children and we can say Abba, Father, but in practical working out of it, the average one of us senses our dissimilarity. And that is why God seems remote.

Now, what I am trying to get across is simply this, that nearness to God is not a geographical or an astronomical thing. It is not a spatial thing having to do with space. It is a spiritual thing having to do with nature.

And so, when we pray, God draw me nearer or when we pray, come near. When we pray, come Thou Fount of every blessing. We're not praying if we're good theologians for God to come down from some remote distance. We know God's here now. Jesus said, lo, I am with you always. And

they said, surely God's in this place. The Lord is here. Jacob said, God's in this place and I didn't know it. He didn't say God came to this place; God is in this place.

Well then you say, then what are we praying for? What we're praying for is a manifestation of the presence of God, not the Presence, but the manifestation of the Presence. Why don't we have the manifestation? Because we, we allow, unlikenesses. We allow moral dissimilarity and that sense of absence.

Please notice I say, sense of absence is the result of the remaining unlikeness within us. This desire, this yearning to be nearer to God is in fact a yearning to be like Him. It's the yearning of the ransomed heart to be like God. So there can be perfect communion; so the heart and God can come together in a fellowship that is Divine.

Now, I want to point out some of the points of dissimilarity between God and the Christian. There I have said there is a similarity which makes it compatible for God and proper for God to commune with His children, even the poorest, weakest of His born children, these bairns as the Scots say. But there are dissimilarities and those dissimilarities are such that there isn't a degree of fellowship that there ought to be. There isn't that perfection of the sense of God's presence that we want and yearn for, and pray for, and sing about.

How are we going to know what God is like so that we may know whether we're like God? The answer is, God is like Christ, for Christ is God. Christ is God manifest to mankind. And so let us look at Jesus. And by looking at our Lord Jesus, we will know what God is like, and then we will know what we have to be like if we're going to experience the unbroken and continuous Presence of God, a sense of the Presence.

Now, the Presence is here. I can't say it too often. But it's the sense of the Presence that's absent. Just as the man knows the sun is there, even though the clouds are hanging so low you can reach up and touch them. And even though it's so dark they have to put the lights on. I've seen that and you've seen that. Even when we know the sun was there in midheaven, they had turned their automobile lights on for safety. I've seen that happen and you have because there are, were clouds between. They know the sun's there, but they don't feel it nor see it.

And so, we Christians know God is here. But there is a sense of His absence. As the man feels the sun is gone, never to return and he knows better, and yet he can't be happy because he can't see the sun. So, we feel that God is away even when we know that He's present, and He can't manifest Himself as He wants to for certain reasons.

Now let's notice some of the qualities of Jesus. The first one of course is holiness. Our God is holy and our Lord is holy, and we call the Spirit, the Holy Spirit. Now, notice how stained and how

spotted and how carnal the average Christian is. We allow stains. Months go by without repentance. Years go by without asking for cleansing or taking it. Spots on our garments, and carnality, and unlikenesses within our heart. Then we pray, draw me nearer, nearer blessed Lord. Or we sing, or we pray, come Lord, come to this meeting. Well, the Lord is there. What we're praying is, O Lord, show thyself, but the Lord cannot, a Holy Lord cannot show Himself in full communion to an unholy Christian. Do you say is it possible to be a Christian and be unholy. It's possible to be a carnal Christian, to have the seed of God in you, to be regenerated and justified and still be unholy in some of your inner, inner feelings and desires and willingness.

The second is unselfishness. Do you notice that Jesus Christ was completely unselfish and gave Himself, but how self-centered and self-indulgent most Christians are? Even when they're reading books on revival, they're still self-centered. Even when they're praying for revival, they're still self-indulgent. A revival is, among other things, a sudden manifestation; it's the breaking of the Son through the clouds. It's not the coming of the Son. It's the breaking of the Son through the clouds, and so our selfishness. How much selfishness there is.

I am sick in my own heart, sick about myself and sick about my friends and sick about the preachers in the ministry. How utterly self-centered we can become; live for self, talk loudly about glorifying God, and boast and say this is the glory of God, and yet be self-centered. And how you know you're self-centered is, if anybody crosses you, your hackles go up. Now, don't smile about it. It is not funny. It's serious. That as soon as you're crossed your hackles go up because you're self-centered and self-indulgent. How much self-indulgence there is.

Do you know something friends, there is enough money potentially in this audience tonight, not only to keep this church going hilariously, but to double the missionary offering that we make. There's enough, potentially, if we weren't so self-indulgent, but we're self-indulgent. And of course, a perfectly selfless Christ who gave Himself and poured Himself out and had no selfishness, can't warm up for the Christian heart who's self-indulgent and self-centered. He loves us. He's our Shepherd. He's our advocate above. He pleads our cause there. We are His brethren in Christ and His God, His Father is our Father. But I'm talking about the fellowship, the sweetness that changes some people into saints while they walk on earth in more than a technical sense, then love.

Now, He so loved that He gave all, but how calculating so many of us are, how calculating. I can say, now I can go to this meeting, but I can't go to this one because the doctor has told me that I'm to do thus and thus, and I must obey doctor's orders. And we let doctors push us around and tell us what to do. And we're calculating. We figure it out. We put our spiritual life on a budget and we won't spend anything for God unless we can justify it in the columns of our budget. What a cheap, carnal way of living. And yet it's true. We do it. How narrow God's people are.

The love of the Lord Jesus Christ was a great, passionate, outpoured thing, among other things that caused Him to give Himself completely. It said He please not Himself. Do you remember that beautiful passage? Jesus, even our Lord, pleased not Himself. But, do you know what's wrong with us. We're self-pleasers. We live for ourselves. There are people that would have a new car if this church went to pot and we had to close the doors. There are women that would dress in style and with the very best if the mission cause died and every missionary had to be sent home. Yet, we're saints, we're born again. We're believers. We have our marked New Testament, but and maybe we are Christians, but the love we have is a calculating love and narrow love, a love that doesn't give itself. And so how can He who gave Himself; how can He ever fellowship with us?

Do you want a Bible illustration of this? Let me give it to you. Back in the Song of Solomon, that delicate, gentle, wondrous, beautiful book that Dr. Schofield said, sin has almost deprived us of the ability to kneel before that burning bush. Well, back there you remember, that the Bridegroom who represents Jesus, had given gifts to the Bride, the bride to be. And he was out gathering lilies, taking care of his sheep, out among the lilies, and the dew was falling. And his locks were wet with the dews of the night. He was out there doing what his interest required him to do; what his heart wanted to do. And he came and knocked on her door as much as to say, won't you come and join me? And she said, How can I? How can I come? I am not dressed for it. I'm dressed for the couch and the home, and even my hand drip with the ointments you've given me. I can't come.

And so, he disappeared. He was still her lover. And he was still wanting and going to marry her. And he did finally, thank God. And it came out all right, but he was out there pouring himself out, and she was in her house admiring herself. And taking long whiffs of the fragrance of the perfumes that he had given her; standing before the mirror and admiring the robes and the jewelry that he had given her. He wanted her and she wanted his jewelry and his perfume.

Then finally, she got under conviction about it. And she quickly, hastily dressed, not really for street dress, but she got some clothes on and threw a robe about her and started out looking for her beloved. And she says, where is he? Where is he? And I asked the watchman, where is he? And the watchman beat me He said, "A harlot out on the street on a night like this, go on home," and he slapped her down. She went on staggering under the blows and couldn't find him and said, where is he? Where is he? And while she was hunting him, her friend said, what is thy beloved more than another beloved? What's the matter? Why don't you go home? What is thy beloved more than another beloved? And then, she burst out into a beautiful song saying my beloved is white and ruddy. Do you remember that passage? She described him from head to foot. He is fairer than 10,000.

Well, you see, he wanted her fellowship. And she was too selfish and self-centered and she stayed in while he was out. And of course, there could be no fellowship while he's out there doing one thing and she's selfishly staying in house doing another.

And then there's kindness. Think how utterly kind our Lord Jesus is. For the love of God is kinder than the measure of man's mind. The kindness of Jesus and the harshness of us, and the severity and the sharpness, the acerbity, the bitterness, the acidity in so many people's lives. How can a kind Savior feel perfectly at home with a harsh Christian?

Then there's forgiveness. He was a forgiving Lord. He is a forgiving Lord and He forgave them while they beat Him. He forgave them while they put Him on a cross. But how hard and vengeful so many of the Lord's children, how vengeful. You remember things that happened twenty years ago, some of you and you just can't get over. You can't. Oh, I have forgiven it all right, but you haven't. You're vengeful and He was forgiving. And He proved He was forgiving by dying in blood. You prove that you're vengeful and hard by many, many proofs, many demonstrations.

Then, think of the zeal of Jesus. The zeal for thine house has eaten me up. Think of the zeal of God. The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will perform this. Zeal is a burning fire. Do you know, the most zealous thing I know is fire, O brother. Wherever fire burns, it burns with hot zeal. And the heart of Jesus was like that. But think of the lukewarm Christian, Christians that haven't been to a prayer meeting for years. And the careless Christian, and the torpid Christian. The torpor that lies over the church of God.

Then the humility of Jesus. Though He was the highest, He came down and acted like the lowest. And though we are the lowest, we are sometimes like the proudest and the most arrogant. How completely unlike Jesus; how unlike God.

Now, you say then, am I justified by being like God? I hope I've made it clear. You're justified by being declared righteous by Almighty God basing His sentence upon the cross of Jesus and the dying of the Savior in the darkness there on the hill. Then, because He made atonement, God justifies. And when He justifies, He regenerates. And you're saved by justification and regeneration, but regeneration does not perfect the image of God in you. The image of God must continue to grow and come forth and come out. As an artist works on his pictures, at first it's only an outline and the general confuse, but he knows what's there and slowly it comes out.

And so, God seems far from us because we're so unlike God. It isn't distance. And Horace Bushnell and his friend went out on the hill to pray, talked first and went out and sat and talked about God until slowly, sunset and the stars came out in the darkness settled around while they sat on the grass and talked about God. Then before they left, Bushnell said, Brother, Let us pray before we go. So there in the darkness Bushnell lifted up his heart to God and his friend said afterwards, I pulled my arms in tight around me. I was afraid to reach them out lest I touch God.

I once knelt under an apple tree in a field, several other preachers and a Salvation Army man, Captain Ireland of the Salvation Army. Captain Ireland, we all prayed and then Captain Ireland began to pray. And as he prayed, I suddenly sensed a nearness. There was another One there that hadn't come out. He'd been there all the time. Am I a God far off? Am I a God at hand, saith the LORD?

So, this sense of the Presence, how can He continually manifest His presence to the proud and arrogant when He was so humble and low? To the lukewarm and the careless when He was so zealous? To the hard and the vengeful when He is so forgiving? To the harsh and the severe, when He is so kind? To the calculating, when His love led Him to die? To the Holy, when we are so stained? How can we have fellowship?

And then the heavenly mindedness of Jesus. Oh, think of that. He was with the Father in the bosom of the Father while He was on earth. He said, the Son of Man who is, not was, in the bosom of the Father. He never left the bosom of the Father while He was on Earth. The only time He left it was in that awful, wrenching agony when God turned away from Him on a cross that He might die for mankind, but never at any other time He was in the bosom of the Father, the other world. He talked about, I came from above, I came down from above, I am from above. I tell you things from above. He lived in the heart of God.

And the other world and the world above was the world in which He inhabited, the world in which we inhabit. And think how earthly His people are, and how worldly: furniture, TV sets, baseball, football, automobiles, picture windows, split level houses, politics, anything but Heaven and God. And then we want, draw me nearer, nearer. You're as near as you can get as far as distance is concerned, but He can't manifest Himself because there's a dissimilarity of nature. You'll have enough of His nature that you're justified and regenerated, but you haven't enough to perfect the fellowship. Do you see what I mean? The perfection of the fellowship. Oh, brethren, this is what we need so desperately bad.

Well, there was a man once who followed the Lord afar off. But you know he couldn't live with it. Some of you have learned to live with it. You've gotten older and you've learned to live in the twilight and not mind it. You've learned to live in the chill and not mind. What can I do for you? How can I help you? I know no way. Peter followed a far off, but he couldn't stand it. When the Lord turned and looked at him, he went outside and wept bitterly. He wept bitterly.

Have you any tears for your unlikeness? Have you any tears for that distance between you and God that you know isn't there and yet feel is there? You're not, you're not in any wise diminishing anything God has already done. You're grateful and thankful for every blessing and for the goodness, for justification, for the good grace of God on your life, but you can't escape that sense of remoteness.

And many a day is a heavy day because God seems far from him. You know He isn't, but you feel He is. The reason you feel He is, is that He can't show His face. You've allowed self-indulgence, harshness, vengeful spirit, lukewarmness, pride, worldliness, earthliness to put a cloud over the Face of God.

What are you going to do about it? Would you be willing to do something about it tonight? Maybe I haven't preached to anybody. I don't know. Maybe nobody's heard me tonight. Because I know it's one thing to talk and it's quite another thing to be heard, even in the same room. Only the Holy Ghost can give you the illumination that will make the words heard by you. You know the English, you know the grammar, you know the logic, that's one thing, but it's another thing to hear in your heart. Then opened He their hearts. Has He opened anybody's heart here? If He's opened anybody's heart, I think that you ought to do something about it. Let us stand please. Let us stand.

Do you know what I think? I think that repentance is called for. Repentance of what? A deed done? No. Repentance of the unlikeness? Repentance of the unholiness in the presence of the Holy? Of the self-indulgence in the presence of the selfless Christ? Of the presence of harshness in the presence of the kind Christ? Of hardness in the presence of the Forgiving Christ? Lukewarmness in the presence of the zealous Christ burning like a fiery flame? The worldliness and earthliness in the presence of the heavenly Christ. I think we ought to repent.

Now I don't know I say whether I've reached you or not. I only know this, there's a prayer room in here. And while we sing very softly, some number, our brother, would you start. Don't announce it, just sing something very gently and we'll join. Just come in here and we'll have a little prayer meeting. If your heart, has God spoken to your heart? Come on into the place of prayer.