

'The Abiding Presence: God's Gift to Us'

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It always takes a special work of grace in our hearts to understand the most important things in life. This was especially so for Asaph, one of the writers of Psalms, during the reign of King David (c 980 BC).

In Psalm 73 he tells us that he was constantly troubled by the many injustices he witnessed in life. It seemed to him as if the rich had an easy ride for the most part – 'I saw the prosperity of the wicked – always carefree, they increase in wealth...they have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong and they are free from the burdens common to man' (vv3–5). Nevertheless, as a godly man, he faced hardship, disappointments and ill-health (vv13–14). So he was deeply troubled in his soul and began asking: 'Where is the fairness in all of this?'

He searched for answers within himself but couldn't find any. The whole situation left him depressed. However, although he had no obvious answers, he knew God did. So he decided to go to 'the sanctuary' (v 17), the place where God dwelt and where His word was heard. And, it was only there, in the place of divine revelation, that his problems were resolved.

What did Asaph discover there? He discovered that he had to correct his thinking. He realized that knowing God is the supreme blessing of one's life. It is far greater than health, wealth and prosperity. Indeed it was the ultimate blessing, for Asaph exclaimed: 'Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you' (v 25). All other blessings were nothing in comparison to this. So, it was there in the sanctuary that he realized that God was the ultimate good and the source of his blessedness: 'As for me,' he said, 'it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge' (v28).

When we reflect upon Asaph's statement we learn that the world has nothing of lasting value to offer us. Possessing the world's riches doesn't make us truly rich. Earthly wealth is neither permanent nor imperishable. We cannot take it with us when we die. However, God, by contrast, is the source of eternal life and enduring blessing. And, being united to God by faith in Christ confers immortality on all sincere believers. Unless we are so united, our true selves are dead, even if we have breath. So the real question each of us must face: 'Am I living in union with the eternal God through Jesus Christ our Lord?'

You may be asking: 'How do we do this?' According to the psalmist we must always set the Lord before us. If we do this we 'will never be shaken' (Ps 16:8). This means that our focus must be on our Lord Jesus Christ, who is our only Saviour and Mediator. This means that when we face trials and perplexities in life they are always more easily resolved by drawing near to God. It is only when we are near to God that we can face life's challenges and say: 'God is working everything together for good for those who love Him' (Rom 8:28).

Many years before Asaph made this discovery, Moses had come to the same conclusion. When he left Egypt he did so because he realized that his relationship with the invisible God of the Bible was much more precious to him than his earthly inheritance in Egypt (Heb 11:26, 27). He also understood that what he needed was God's empowering presence to fulfill his calling in life. He learned this from God's dealings with the very first man, Adam. Adam was singularly blessed from knowing God and enjoying His presence during the early stages of his life. Adam knew that God was the source of his life (Gen 2:7), the One who had given him meaningful work and a special home (Gen 2:8), a life-partner (Gen 2:22), and who regularly met with him for fellowship and conversation in the wonderful garden that had become his home (Gen 3:8, 9). For Adam, the presence of God was the highest privilege and delight that the Lord had given him. It transcended every other gift that He had received. Yet this gift from God was tragically lost when he and his wife turned their backs on the Lord by disobeying His express commands. This meant that they were driven out from God's presence and banished from Eden (Gen 3:23, 24).

However, the sin of Adam did not mean that God withdrew the privilege of His presence and fellowship from every other human being who came after him. We know that the Lord looked with favour upon Abel (Gen 4:4), Enoch (who enjoyed God's presence and fellowship for 300 years) (Gen 5:22), Noah (Gen 6:9) and Moses, with whom God spoke face-to-face as a friend (Ex 33:11).

Obviously, Moses valued God's presence for several reasons. Not only did he enjoy the intimacy and communion that he had with God, but he also knew that God's presence was protective as well. Perhaps this explains his prayer on Mt Horeb: 'If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here.' (Ex 33:15). He knew that without God's presence they would not be safe, but God reassured him that he had nothing to fear: 'My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest' (Ex 33:14).

The lesson we learn from these men's lives is that enjoying the blessing of God's presence is the greatest gift of all. True religion is more than ritual. At its heart it is essentially a relationship with a Person—the true and living God. It consists not so much in liturgical formality as in the exercise of heartfelt spiritual convictions and obligations towards God and others.

Now, since the coming of Christ, Christian religion is truly expressed where subjectively and personally we become temples of the living God, where He dwells by His Spirit (1 Cor 3:16). Our hearts become God's home. This was the apostle Paul's great revelation, that God had 'revealed His Son in me' (Gal 1:16). That is why he could subsequently say, 'Christ lives in me' (Gal 2:20). Paul saw this reality as the fulfillment of God's great covenant promise to His people: 'For you are the temple of the living God: as God has said, I will dwell in them and walk amongst them, and I will be their God and they will be My people' (2 Cor 6:16).

This is God's great promise to us: He offers us His indwelling and protective presence so that we can walk securely in this world, offer ourselves to Him as our act of worship, converse with Him, and prize Him before all else.

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