

WHERE ARE YOU GOD?

A series of Bible studies

**on the theme of
the presence of God**

by

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INTRODUCTION

The seven studies which make up this booklet all centre around the theme of the presence of God. A sense of God's presence is a fundamental form of Christian experience, or indeed of religious experience in general. Religious experience, however, like all human experience, has its highs and lows, its moments of exaltation and its moments of depression, so that the sense of God's presence seems to be followed inexorably by a sense of God's absence. This is true not only of people like ourselves but also of the men and women whose faith journey is recorded in the Bible. The seven passages which I have chosen for detailed study in this booklet are alike in that they all reflect the experience of people familiar, as we are, *both* with the sense of God's presence *and* with the sense of God's absence. The primary aim of these studies is to help you to reflect on these passages in the light of your own experience of the presence and absence of God.

These studies were first published in 1994 by the Joint Board of Christian Education of the Uniting Church in Australia.

Shortly afterwards, the Joint Board withdrew from commercial publication. As a result, the studies have not been available for a number of years. Hence my decision to make them accessible, after thorough revision, on the internet. Anyone who wishes to download them is free to do so.

The studies were originally dedicated to two good friends who, at the time, had shared the struggles of my wife and myself with a sense of God's absence. I am happy to renew the dedication to these two friends.

STUDY 1 - ABSENCE, MEMORY AND HOPE

'Blessed assurance'?

'A sense of the presence of God' – in what ways has that been part of your experience? How often have you had the sense that God was with you, really *with* you, sustaining you, supporting you, releasing you, reviving you, empowering you?

For discussion

Talk this question over with your neighbour, and, if it is appropriate, share something of your conversation with the wider group also (*five minutes*).

Some people's response to this question would probably run like this:

My own sense of the presence of God is, at best, intermittent. It comes and goes. But I'm sure that if I were a better Christian than I am, it would be more constant.

Certainly some Christians seem to be favoured with a continuous sense of God's presence. Edward Wilson of the Antarctic, one of Scott's companions on his last journey to the South Pole in 1912, had a sense of God's presence that was so real that he could describe his life as 'a running conversation all the time'.

Nor is this an isolated instance. If we delve into the oral traditions of Gaelic communities in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, we discover a spirituality characterised by a remarkable sense of the constant presence of God. Thanks to the labours of a small band of scholars in the 19th and 20th centuries, notably Alexander Carmichael and G.R.D. McLean, non-Gaelic speakers can have access to a remarkable collection of hundreds of prayers and blessings which were passed on from mouth to mouth in the Gaelic-speaking regions of Scotland for generations. Selections of these prayers have been published more recently in paperback form by Esther de Waal and Sally Magnusson.¹ One of these prayers will be used at the conclusion of this study.

The most outstanding feature of these prayers is a sense of the presence of God as the most immediate reality in the lives of these people at every moment of the day and in everything they do. Thus we find prayers from birth to death, from dawn to dusk, from the start of the year until its close. These are the prayers of people who woke each day to the awareness of being surrounded by heavenly forces and renewed it throughout the day, until it was time for sleep. Then they would commend the hours of darkness to God, knowing that the Trinity, and the saints and the angels, were watching over them too.

In everything that happened in their lives it seemed natural to them to turn to the Trinity, and to the saints and angels, for support and practical aid. As de Waal puts it:

¹ See Esther de Waal (ed), *The Celtic Vision: Prayers and Blessings from the Outer Hebrides* (London: DLT, 1988); G.R.D. McLean and Sally Magnusson, *Praying with Highland Christians* (London: SPCK, 1988).

Getting dressed and lighting the fire, milking the cows and making butter, grinding the meal and weaving the cloth, driving the flocks to the fields, and fishing, sowing the seed and harvesting the grain - all these become the occasion for praying and involving the heavenly powers.²

The dark night of the soul

On the other hand, there are numerous references in the literature of Christian mysticism to what is called the 'dark night of the soul' - an expression coined by St. John of the Cross, one of the most famous of all Christian mystics, who lived in Spain from 1542 to 1591. Nowadays this expression is often used as a metaphor for periods of peculiar emptiness and depression in the religious life. In the writings of St. John of the Cross himself, however, particularly *The Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, it is used to refer not to experiences of exceptional spiritual deprivation but to the everyday life of faith. For St. John of the Cross 'night' is an appropriate metaphor for normal Christian experience. There are times, to be sure, particularly at the beginning of our Christian life, when the darkness is lit up for us by a vivid sense of God's presence, but such experiences, however welcome, do not last and were never meant to last. Over most of the journey we have to travel blind, walking by faith and not by sight.³

And what of us?

Some members of your group may feel closer at this point to Edward Wilson and the people who composed and passed on the Gaelic prayers, but I suspect that most will feel more drawn to St. John of the Cross.

Norma Spaulding of Hobart, who is a Uniting Church minister and also a poet, captures a mood with which many of us, I am sure, are familiar in her short poem, 'To Simon Peter':

I'm going fishing, too,
But my heart's not in it,
Somehow.
Adrift
On the dark, wide sea of doubt,
I contemplate the shore,
Awaiting the sunrise invitation
To a sacramental breakfast.

Some of you may also have had experience of times of exceptional spiritual deprivation, veritable dark nights of the soul. You may not have lost your faith in God altogether. You didn't actually deny God's existence. But you were, at least at the time, painfully conscious of God's absence.

² *The Celtic Vision* p. 8.

³ For a fuller discussion, see J. Neville Ward, *The Use of Praying* (London: Epworth, 1967) pp. 148-58. Ward also quotes similar statements by other Christian mystics such as St. Teresa and Dom John Chapman.

For discussion

1. Share with one another where you feel yourself to be on a theoretical spectrum such as this:



Literature and art and the absence of God

The absence of God is a recurring theme in many novels of the twentieth century, as well as in many plays and films. It is particularly prominent in the writings of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, such as Elie Wiesel's *Night*. In many instances, the writers or artists in question have had a religious upbringing against which they have rebelled, and yet keep turning back, in spite of themselves, to the question of the reality of God. What comes through their work is often not so much a denial of God's existence ('There is no God!') as a protest against God's absence ('Where are you, God?').

Two writers who articulate such a protest most clearly are Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett, possibly also Thomas Hardy, Graham Green and Chaim Potok.

The Swedish film director, Ingmar Bergman, has pursued the theme of the absence of God or the silence of God in film after film. Perhaps the most famous of these is *The Seventh Seal*. Early in that film, a knight returning from the Crusades stops at a small wayside chapel and enters the confessional booth, unaware that the one who is listening to his confession is actually Death. The following conversation takes place.

Knight: Why can't I kill God within me? Why does he live on in this painful and humiliating way, even though I curse him and want to tear him out of my heart? Why, in spite of everything, is he a baffling reality that I can't shake off? Do you hear me?

Death: Yes, I hear you.

Knight: I want knowledge, not faith, not suppositions but knowledge. I want God to stretch out his hand toward me, reveal himself, speak to me.

Death: But he remains silent.

Knight: I call out to him in the dark, but no one seems to be there.

Death: Perhaps no one is there.

Knight: Then life is an outrageous horror. No one can live in the face of death knowing that all is nothingness.

For discussion

Can you recall similar scenes in other films or plays or novels? Share your thoughts with the group. (five minutes)

What then of the Bible?

I find it enormously encouraging to discover that a sense of God's absence is found sometimes even in the Bible. In the studies that make up this book, we shall be looking at six biblical passages: four from the Old Testament and two from the New. These passages are in some ways very diverse. Two are from the Psalms(Studies 2 and 3), two from Exodus(Studies 4 and 5), and two from the gospels(Mark for Study 6 and John for Study 7). Yet, in one respect, they are all alike; *they all provide evidence of someone's intense longing for a more intimate sense of God's presence*. Whether they also provide evidence that this intense longing was eventually satisfied is a question we must continually bear in mind.

All of these passages have spoken to me in my own times of spiritual deprivation.

Recovering a sense of God's presence

Earlier in this study, we spent some time talking about what we might do, perhaps by adopting a discipline or rule of life, to recover a sense of God's presence with us. I suggest that you resume this discussion now with your neighbour. I also suggest that you make an undertaking to do something definite, between now and the next time you meet, to help you to recover a sense of God's presence. (five minutes)

A concluding prayer

Here is another prayer from the Celtic tradition.⁴ It would make a fitting conclusion to this study. Repeat it together as a prayer.

With God will I lie down this night,
And God will be lying with me;
With Christ will I lie down this night,
And Christ will be lying with me;
With Spirit I lie down this night,
The Spirit will lie down with me;
God and Christ and the Spirit, Three,
Be they all down-lying with me.

For further reading

J. Neville Ward, *The Use of Praying* (London: Epworth, 1967) pp. 148-58.

⁴ See G.R.D. McLean and Sally Magnusson (eds.), *Praying with Highland Christians* (SPCK, 1988) p.94.