

FOREWORD BY THOMAS R. SCHREINER

— THE —

P R E S E N C E

— OF —

G O D

ITS PLACE IN THE STORYLINE OF SCRIPTURE  
AND THE STORY OF OUR LIVES

J . R Y A N L I S T E R

“Ryan Lister knows more about the biblical teaching concerning God’s presence in the world than anyone else I know. And there is no theme more important to our relationship with God. Lister’s book is a great antidote to the temptation to see God only as a concept, doctrine, or formula, or to regard him only as a force in the world outside ourselves. This book shows that God is our friend and Father, and that in him we live and move and have our being.”

**John M. Frame**, J. D. Trimble Chair of Systematic Theology and Philosophy,  
Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

“We need more biblical theologies like this one! Ryan Lister has identified a central biblical theme that we easily take for granted. With the unity of Scripture to the fore, he has provided us with a diligently researched study of one of the golden threads that highlight the glories of Christ’s person and work. This is thematic biblical study at its best.”

**Graeme Goldsworthy**, Former Lecturer in Old Testament, Biblical Theology, and  
Hermeneutics, Moore Theological College

“Ryan Lister provides a great service to the people of God by tracing the theme of God’s presence from Genesis to Revelation, showing that it is not only central to the Christian eschatological hope, but also the gracious means by which God moves fallen sinners to that glorious beatific vision.”

**Steven B. Cowan**, Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religion, Lincoln  
Memorial University

“The whole of the Bible, from soon after the entrance of sin in Genesis 3 to Revelation 22, can be read as the story of God coming nearer. *The Presence of God* is filled with insight that unpacks the fullness of Scripture’s development on this theme, but also shows how precious the concept of God’s presence with his people is for our lives. Lister has been very careful to represent clearly and appropriately the development of this beautiful biblical theme, and he has done this in a way that is highly relevant for Christian identity and Christian living. Do yourself a favor—read this book and rejoice that God has chosen to come near.”

**Bruce A. Ware**, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist  
Theological Seminary

“The much misunderstood notion of the presence of God is central to the Bible’s story from beginning to end. Ryan Lister explains how it is both God’s goal for us and the means by which God accomplishes his redemptive mission. This fresh approach to biblical theology presents it as an unfolding drama, with many practical and pastoral implications. In particular, it shows that a sound and scripturally mature analysis of the presence of God can help answer this world’s deep-seated spiritual desires.”

**David Peterson**, Former Principal, Oak Hill College; Senior Research Fellow and  
Lecturer in New Testament, Moore Theological College

“Ryan Lister provides an exegetically grounded theology of relational divine presence that is traced along the Christ-centered storyline of the Bible. This work is an outstanding model of evangelical scholarship, and Lister’s conclusions invade every square inch of our lives as we seek to fulfill the primary reason for our existence—knowing the holy God who mercifully draws near to his people.”

**Erik Thoennes**, Professor and Department Chair of Biblical and Theological Studies, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University; Pastor, Grace Evangelical Free Church, La Mirada, California

“God’s presence is fundamental to God’s story. It is a profound reality. While we have access to this reality in part through our experience of it, the reality is even more than what we experience—it is deep theology grounded in what God has said in his Word about himself. Lister’s work examines this fertile soil of God’s self-revelation, out of which our experiences can flourish with renewed vigor.”

**Mike Wilkerson**, author, *Redemption: Freed by Jesus from the Idols We Worship and the Wounds We Carry*

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 **CROSSWAY**  
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To Chase Elizabeth,  
one of God's greatest  
testimonies to me  
that he is  
still present  
to bless his people

Psalm 16:11



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# Foreword

The goal of theology is to get us back to the garden of Eden. Actually, the goal of theology is to bring us into the heavenly city, for the heavenly city of Revelation 21 and 22 is even better than the garden. God's presence in the garden was lost because of the sin of Adam and Eve. But God will never abandon the New Jerusalem, the heavenly Jerusalem, the new heavens and new earth. John tells us that there is no night there, and there isn't any need for the sun or the moon because the light of the city comes from the Lord and from the Lamb. What makes the New Jerusalem new, what makes it heavenly and glorious, what makes it more desirable than anything you have ever experienced is the presence of God.

Sin is so painful and terrible because it separates us from God. He is our light and salvation. He is our sun and shield. He gives us grace and glory. When we think of the tabernacle and temple in Israel, we might think of a moveable shrine or of a stunningly beautiful building. What filled the Israelites with awe when they thought of the tabernacle and the temple was not fundamentally their structure or beauty, though the second temple was beautiful indeed. Still, the tabernacle and temple were awesome because God dwelt in them, because his glory filled the tabernacle and temple. The tabernacle and temple point us to something greater, to someone greater, for ultimately God's true temple is Jesus Christ. The apostle John tells us that in Jesus the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us. Paul says that the fullness of deity dwelt in Jesus bodily. Jesus said to Philip that the one who had seen him, Jesus, had seen the Father. God walked among Israel through and in Jesus Christ.

That is not the end of the story of course. The crucified and risen

Jesus sent the Holy Spirit upon his people. Now the people of God—the church of Jesus Christ—are the true temple. The Father has not left us as orphans and has not abandoned us. He is with us and in us. He abides in us through the Holy Spirit.

Theologians have tackled many subjects, but it is rather surprising how few have written about God's presence with his people, especially when we realize how central and important this theme is in the Scriptures. In this illuminating work, Ryan Lister helps us see the presence of God in the storyline of the Bible. Hence, we have a better understanding about how the Bible fits together. Lister doesn't appeal to a few proof texts. He shows us how God's presence is stitched into the biblical narrative so that it is clearly part of the warp and woof of the story.

We have an important contribution here, then, from the standpoint of biblical theology. But as readers we don't want to stop there, for the aim of the story is the knowledge of God. We should grow in understanding and in love, for we were created to know God, to see God, to love God, to experience God, and to enjoy his presence forever.

Thomas R. Schreiner

# Acknowledgments

I would like to begin by acknowledging that without my wife, Chase, this book would not have been written. God blesses us beyond our imaginations, and my wife is the one through whom I am consistently reminded that the grace and mercy bought at the cross overflows into all aspects of our lives. Chase, you are the one who has been with me every step of the way, from the pontoon boat (see the first chapter), to our dysfunctional basement on Springdale Road, into the teeth of Louisiana, to the Holy City of Charleston, South Carolina, and now Portland, Oregon. You finally get your A+. I know it has been quite some time since you received a report card; and I know the trauma that this can cause someone of your disposition. But please know that it has been my honor, privilege, and joy to walk—and, at times, stumble—with you on this journey. I thank you for every spreadsheet you’ve done; every tax season you’ve suffered; every budget line you’ve cut; every diaper you’ve changed, dinner you’ve made, spool of thread you’ve sewn, book on tape you’ve listened to; every “smart aleck” response to your questions you’ve endured; every anxiety you’ve prayed over; every tear you’ve shed; and every time you’ve petitioned your “Lord God Almighty” on my behalf. Though they may seem mundane, these are the true testimony of your love for me—and more importantly the testimony of God’s grace to me through his provision of you. So thank you, Chase, for all you have laid down for this little dream of mine—but, even more, for making my dreams yours.

Along with Chase, four of the greatest gifts the Lord ever gave me were my children, Jude and Silas, and Abby Kate and Asher. Books are always being published; every year more and more are churned out by much more skilled and qualified authors. But none of them are

able to say they have four precious and mischievous children just like you! My prayer, as you well know, is that you would have eyes to see God's glory, ears to hear the gospel, a heart for God to dwell in, hands to serve him and be obedient to him, and a mouth to sing his praises. May it be so. And this, too, is my hope for each of you: that you will live in the presence of God and long for an eternity where you will be with him forevermore.

There are so many others I am indebted to. To begin, I would like to thank my mom and dad, Jane and Glenn Lister. Thank you for your responsiveness to the Spirit and your God-fearing parenting. I know it was tough at times, but I appreciate your willingness to give sacrificially not only to bring me to obedience, but, more importantly, to bring me to your Lord. I pray that your love for God will continue to grow and that the unconditional love you have for your boys will be directed toward the Lord's church and toward the families with whom you come in contact every day through your ministry of adoption. The Lord has been gracious in giving you to me as parents. Thank you for your love, attention, care for my family; the free babysitting; your support in prayer and finances; and, as always, your encouragement and cheerleading.

Next, I would like to thank my older brother, Rob, and his wife, LuWinn. For all my life, outside of the three years I was in junior high, when he would have nothing to do with me, Rob has been my closest friend. At times it is a struggle having a big brother as a best friend because the lines get a little blurred. For Rob, this manifests itself in his seeing me less as a peer and more as his oldest son (though LuWinn has helped this process quite a bit). But even in this I cannot complain; for it is this part of his nature that opened him to read and edit every single chapter of this book. Over the span of my life, Rob has always been one step before me clearing the way. And though at times I have questioned why my life has followed his so closely, the answer is, very simply, that I find it a great honor to be like my big brother in any way I can.

Like my own, Chase's family has played a substantial role in this project. I know full well that Chase's siblings—Taylor, with his wife, Elizabeth; Abby, with her husband Richard; and Laura Kate—have been holding me up in prayer. They have all been extremely generous

in their time and care for us. Each of them has been a constant source of encouragement through their phone calls, conversations, and opening their lives to us.

Their generosity finds much of its source in the love their parents have shown them. From the time I met Charley and Kathy I knew that they would make wonderful in-laws—a difficult thing to find these days. And they have not disappointed. In fact, I have been overwhelmed by their generosity. Their love for us has expressed itself in many ways: financially, spiritually, in sharing their time, and in giving of their hearts. Kathy has proved to be invaluable to this project, for it is through her constant trips to the places where we lived to care for Jude, Silas, Abby Kate, and Asher that I have been able to finish this book (though it appears to be more a joy and less a chore for a grandmother). Charley, too, has given much to the completion of this work, as well as numerous Tennessee football tickets, dinners, and, most importantly, consistent questions about my walk with the Lord and growth in Christ. It is Charley and Kathy's desire to know the deep things of God that I have found encouraging and, simultaneously, challenging. So, to the Lindseys, I say thank you for all that you have done but, most importantly, for loving me as one of your own.

Along with family, there are those friends who have been gracious enough to walk this journey with me. At the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and even beyond its walls, the Lord has given me great friends, but none has been greater than Oren Martin. Oren has been a help in many ways. He has been a wonderful confidant and has assisted in the formulation of my thesis in ways he probably does not even know. Our Tuesday conversations over chips, salsa, and fajitas have done wonders for my theology, worldview, and personal walk with Christ—though they have been slightly detrimental to my physical health.

I would like to offer a special thanks to my doctoral supervisor and one of my heroes, Dr. Bruce Ware. The rare combination of strength, passion, and theological tenacity, along with compassion and tenderhearted care for God's people, is something I aspire to in my own life. Thank you, Bruce, for your kind words and kind critiques. You have been a wonderful professor, elder, teacher, example, and friend. Thank you for your faithfulness and your wisdom.

I also want to thank Tom Schreiner for interacting with this book and graciously writing the foreword. If there ever were a scholar who could take pride in his own intellect and accomplishments, it would be Tom Schreiner. But instead of boasting in himself, Tom is one of the most humble and God-centered men I know. One of his greatest strengths is his ability to uncomplicate the complicated. I have benefited from his clarity time and time again in his classroom, through his writings, and in his sermons. But of all his gifts, Tom Schreiner's greatest gifts may be his love for God's church and enduring friendship.

I want to show my appreciation for the great team at Crossway. Without them, this book would not have become a reality. I would especially like to recognize two members of this team who have been wonderful sources of help and encouragement. First, I would like to thank Justin Taylor for being open to this project and for being a friend during the process. Second, I need to give credit to Thom Notaro, who, with great skill, edited this volume and, with great patience and grace, treated every word as if it were his own. Thank you both for your expertise and your kindness.

In the end though, all credit is ultimately the Lord's, for it is he who has brought these wonderful people into my life to minister to me, and it is he who opened my eyes to this central theme in his Word. Most significantly, it is God who has justly dealt with my sin and graciously opened up access to his presence for all eternity. My hope with this book, then, is to make much of our limitless God. To this end, I pray this work brings glory to the Lord and benefits his people. I hope that it will challenge each of us to make the presence of God our passion and our pursuit in this world and the next.

# Abbreviations

BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
<i>BSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CCT	Contours of Christian Theology
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament—Supplement Series
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NAC	New American Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> . 5 vols. Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>





# Introduction

## A Forgotten Storyline

It is everywhere. We hear about it all the time. It is alluded to in the sermon. We call for it in our prayers. We sing about it in our hymns and choruses.

For Christians, it is hard to escape. As I write this paragraph, I have just returned from a Christian college's chapel service where I counted seventeen references to it in a fifty-minute service while, of course, paying full attention to the sermon, prayers, and songs. In fact, I think you would be hard pressed to leave your own sanctuary this Sunday without at least one reference to it as well.

What is this refrain we hear over and over again in our churches, small groups, and devotionals? It is the presence of God.

Take a minute to listen to the Christian-speak and, even at times, yourself. How many of us have heard or spoken a prayer that starts like this: "Lord, we come into your *presence* now to lay our needs before you, asking you to *be here with us* as we cry out to you"?

Sound familiar?

And this is only the beginning. The vocabulary of divine presence weaves its way through our hymnals and PowerPoint slides:

I need *Thy presence* every passing hour.

What but *Thy grace* can foil the tempter's power?

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Who, like Thyself, my guide and stay can be?  
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.<sup>1</sup>

As I stand here in your *presence*,  
Of your beauty I will always stand in awe,  
I reach my hands out to the heavens,  
And I will lift my voice to you alone, to you alone.<sup>2</sup>

Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;  
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art.  
Thou my best Thought, by day or by night,  
Waking or sleeping, *Thy presence* my light.<sup>3</sup>

This is the air I breathe  
Your holy *presence* living in me.<sup>4</sup>

Surrounded by your glory, what will my heart feel? . . .  
Will I stand in your *presence*, or to my knees will I fall?<sup>5</sup>

These examples—along with our sermons and other Christian teaching—reveal that the language of God’s presence is, well, omnipresent in our churches and in Christendom at large.<sup>6</sup>

But there is a problem. As we constantly hear these vague references to God’s presence, the concept remains just that: vague. So as our churches sing the chorus of divine presence, many of us simply do not have ears to hear what it means. So how do we tune our ears to hear the beautiful melody of God’s presence?

To begin, we must understand the reasons for the theological dissonance surrounding this biblical reality. First, many of us are too busy or too overwhelmed to pick up on the overused references to God’s presence in our worship. We are just happy if we can get out of church with all the kids we came with, with all their limbs intact, and with the nursery or education classrooms still standing. Between keeping

<sup>1</sup>Henry F. Lyte, “Abide with Me,” 1847.

<sup>2</sup>Jeremy Camp, “In Your Presence,” 2002.

<sup>3</sup>Ancient Irish Poem, “Be Thou My Vision,” trans. Eleanor Hull, 1912.

<sup>4</sup>Michael W. Smith, “Breathe,” 2001.

<sup>5</sup>MercyMe, “I Can Only Imagine,” 2002.

<sup>6</sup>The notion of divine presence has even leaked into the culture at large. Take the stirring song of guitar icon Eric Clapton, “Presence of the Lord.” Through the gospel roots of the blues, Clapton, unbeknownst to himself, penned a refrain that marks the future trajectory of many people when he sings: “I have finally found a place to live just like I never could before. / . . . I have finally found a way to live in the presence of the Lord—in the presence of the Lord.”

our son's restless legs from kicking the seat in front of him and running to the car for a sippy cup every seven minutes, we have limited time to reflect on the sermon, much less a threadbare Christian expression touched on by the associate pastor praying between worship songs.

Second, we can easily become too passive in our worship. Granted that reading Scripture and hearing it preached is a noncontact sport, but our minds should be engaged. We should be asking questions and pursuing truth vehemently in these small windows of study and prayer. I think this is part of what Anselm was getting at with his maxim "faith seeking understanding."<sup>7</sup> For some of us, we stop at the first word and forgo the last two. We talk much of faith but we must also talk about pursuing the Lord in an intellectually informed and spiritually vibrant understanding of him. In other words, we must *seek* God. And not only that, we must seek to *understand* him relationally as he discloses himself to us through his Word and revelation.

Finally, and possibly the most significant concern, we have simply grown too accustomed to the jargon. Talk of God's presence is part of the white noise of evangelicalism, a catchphrase that means as little to the one saying it as to the one hearing it. This is typical for many of us. The more we hear something, the less we tend to contemplate its meaning and significance. Unfortunately, this is quite dangerous—especially for the church.

True Christianity is by nature repetitious—and that is a good thing. It is repetitious because God knows exactly who we are and what we need. We bear God's image and Adam's sin. So while the gospel shows us that we are the image of God and can know him as he reveals himself, it also reminds us that, at one point, we rejected God and continue to struggle with neglecting him. For this reason, true Christianity points us to Christ and his work on the cross over and over *and over* again. Scripture tells us that we are broken cisterns, cracked and chipped, needing minute by minute to return to the well of the gospel to be refilled and refreshed.

<sup>7</sup>Anselm's petition is extremely helpful here as it helps us see that our intellectual life and our spiritual life are connected, not at odds with one another. He writes: "I acknowledge, O Lord, with thanksgiving, that thou hast created this thy image in me, so that, remembering thee, I may think of thee, may love thee. But this image is so effaced and worn away by my faults, it is so obscured by the smoke of my sins, that it cannot do what it was made to do, unless thou renew and reform it. I am not trying, O Lord, to penetrate thy loftiness, for I cannot begin to match my understanding with it, but I desire in some measure to understand thy truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this too I believe, that 'unless I believe, I shall not understand.'" Anselm, "Proslogion," in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, ed. Eugene R. Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 73.

As I hope to show in the pages ahead, the presence of God is more than a mere buzzword of evangelicalism; it is a strong, fresh current of living water that fills jars of clay like you and me. It is central to the hope-filled message of Scripture. This is what I want to make clear: beneath the cacophony we have made of this biblical theme is a deep, beautiful melody vital to God's song of salvation that is there only because of the presence of God. In short, I want to show just how intrinsic this theme is to the story of Scripture and to our story.

### A King's Treasure

Part of the rationale behind this book is that it is part of *my* story. All the busyness, passivity, and familiarity you read about above, well, that was me. I grew up in the church, so I was well versed in Christian-speak and employed such phrases quite compellingly too—especially at church and other opportune times.

I remember the day when the games stopped and the concept of God's presence became more than just spiritual jargon; it was now the attention-arresting theme of Scripture that God intended us to see. It was the summer of 2000, and I was sitting on a pontoon boat in the middle of the Tennessee River. And though before me was a pristine view of the countryside and the beautiful girl who would soon become my wife, I was blind to it all because of King David's words:

You make known to me the path of life;  
 in your presence there is fullness of joy;  
 at your right hand are pleasures forevermore. (Ps. 16:11)

Joy and pleasure were what I was looking for—things we all want, I think it safe to say—and here David was telling me exactly where I could find them. All that I sought, all this world relentlessly pursues in all the wrong places, is found in the presence of God.

Needless to say, this was a game changer. David had handed me a biblical treasure map for life.

But mixed in with the happiness of this discovery was the nagging feeling of doubt. "Okay, so the fullness of joy and eternal pleasures are found in the presence of God; but I am no closer to that goal than I was before I was hit with all of this." Where was I supposed to begin?

To my chagrin, there was no “You Are Here” sticker in Psalm 16. All I had to go on was the virtually meaningless understanding of God’s presence I had misused and misunderstood up to this point. But I knew the best way forward was to follow David’s lead and let Scripture direct my steps.

Since that day on the Tennessee River, I have been on an expedition to understand the biblical motif of God’s presence. In the past years, as I have been blessed to examine and study it in depth, the Lord has graciously directed me to a better grasp of God’s presence and helped me see the way to the promises of Psalm 16:11.

This book, in a sense, is part travelogue and part key to David’s treasure. My desire is that it can be simultaneously the “You are Here” and “You Want to Be Here” stickers of Psalm 16. Hopefully, then, this work can help us move beyond the stagnant notions of God’s presence to the joy and everlasting delight that marks those who truly understand, biblically and experientially, the presence of God. To get us there, I hope to walk with you through the vistas and valleys of God’s mighty acts in redemptive history to show where God reveals his presence and, to the best of our ability, help us understand why he does so.

## The Way Ahead

Once we step out beyond the initial overgrowth of confusion and obscurities surrounding this theme, we actually find that the biblical path ahead is well worn. Yahweh is the present God, and the biblical Canon is a beautiful and creative story of how he fulfills his promise to be in the midst of his people. Scripture’s narrative suggests that the past, present, and future realities of redemption are inextricably tied to God’s drawing near to a people.

What I hope to help impress upon us all is that the presence of God is not about mere intuitions and platitudes. It is not a mystical feeling or emotional charge. It is first and foremost a theme of Scripture; and even more, it is a theme on which the story of Scripture hinges.

To demonstrate this, I want to make one major argument in this book that rests on two very simple but very significant biblical truths. The first truth is this: the presence of God is a central *goal* in God’s redemptive mission. The second truth follows: the presence of God is the

*agent* by which the Lord accomplishes his redemptive mission. God's presence, then, is both *eschatological* (it is the end-of-time aim of the Lord's mission) and *instrumental* (it is ultimately what fulfills the Lord's mission). So to put our argument in its simplest terms, the presence of God is a fundamental objective in our redemption and, simultaneously, the means by which God completes this objective.

That is a lot to take in, so to consider this further, let's think first about the eschatological (the future goal-oriented) emphasis. The restoration of God's presence—or we could say his relational nearness—once lost in the fall is one of the most pivotal acts in the story of redemption. As John shows us, the final hope of history is that “the dwelling place of God is with man” and that God “will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God” (Rev. 21:3). Seen from a redemptive-historical standpoint, this text is essentially a summary of the eschatological purposes driving God's mission of salvation.

This objective, though, is not only prevalent at the story's end, but also woven throughout Scripture's plotline. From the beginning, the *goal* of God's presence affects the Creator-creature relationship. In Eden, God charges the first couple to expand the garden-sanctuary, the locus of God's presence, both geographically and genealogically (Gen. 1:28–30). The temple of God's presence found in the garden is meant to cover all of creation. From this perspective, we see that the Lord, in his divine wisdom, ties Adam's role to the administration of his presence to the entire world.

However, as the familiar story goes, in his sin Adam breaks this bond in pursuit of arrogant self-idolatry. The much-deserved curses add up—each levied against the couple's role in disseminating God's presence throughout the cosmos. By God's mercy, the story does not end here. God shines the light of his promises into the darkness of Adam's sin. Where Adam has failed, God succeeds, for God pledges to complete his own purposes and spread his own presence to the world.

Outside the garden, the eschatological purposes of God's presence remain front and center in God's redemptive story. From Genesis to Revelation, God's covenant voice calls a people to relationship, a call that reverberates throughout the Scriptures until it crescendos in John's

prophetic vision (e.g., Gen. 9:1–15; 12:1–3; 15:6ff.; 17:19; Ex. 19:1ff.; 24:3–8; 2 Sam. 7:12–13; Jer. 31:31–34; Matt. 26:28; Luke 22:20; Heb. 8:6; Rev. 21–22). This covenant picks up where Adam left off, with God’s creating a people and place for the enjoyment of his presence. This divine purpose pervades every covenant ratified and culminates in the new covenant arrival of Christ, the new and better Adam, the one who accomplishes what Adam could not. These covenantal promises of God’s presence line the story of Scripture like mileposts pointing the way to the New Jerusalem, the city where God will dwell with his people forever.

As we will see, redemption moves forward. It has an objective. God is working to establish a people and a place for his presence. This is our guarantee and our hope. But this story is also our story, and regrettably, it is a story that we often forget.

Remarkably, though, the presence of God is not only a future promise awaiting fulfillment; it is also the way God will fulfill his future promise of being with his people. Just as the waters of the rivers and tributaries flow into and fill the waters of the ocean, the presence of God is what brings humanity to the final source of God’s eschatological presence. Our first point—God’s goal to bring his people into his presence eternally—therefore, actuates our second point—God is present to redeem. And, of course, the reverse is true as well. They feed one another in a great collaborative act rooted in God’s glory. So while the presence of God is an end of redemption, it is simultaneously the means by which the Lord reaches this end. The presence of God, then, is eschatological *and* instrumental: the Lord becomes present in redemption to direct his people to his eschatological presence.

As you can imagine, this theme floods the pages of Scripture. It ties together all of the major plot points found in redemptive history. As we see at the beginning, God walks with Adam in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8). He stoops low to care for Adam, speak with him, and simply relate to him. He draws near to judge and discipline him as well. Likewise, God confronts Abraham and his offspring. He reveals himself to Israel. God becomes manifest to deliver his people (marked by his presence) from exile, to display his glory atop Sinai, and direct them to the Land of Promise. He is present to orchestrate Israel’s history, bringing the



nation to its pinnacle in David's reign and to its depths in the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles. Into the darkness of this dispersion God shines the light of Jesus Christ, the true Immanuel, the ultimate expression of "God with us." And now, in the time between Christ's first and second comings, the presence of God comes in the Holy Spirit to indwell and prepare his people for that treasure David heralds in Psalm 16. Even in such a brief catalog as this, Scripture makes it abundantly clear that the Lord is manifest in history. He is the active agent of salvation. He is the one who brings his people to enjoy his presence in redemption now and forever in glorification.

### Who Needs This Trip?

Unfortunately, many have forgotten this storyline, and this has had massive consequences. First it steals glory from God. It should be clear from the outset that the story of Scripture is first and foremost about the author of that story. God speaks a drama of suspense, intrigue, wonder, hope, tension, and anticipation all the while the main character is God himself. This is his autobiography, not ours.

Second, forgetting this storyline has given us delusions of grandeur. We are not the lead actor and certainly not the author. Instead our bit parts in this drama are about God as well. What the theme of God's presence shows us is that this is God's story, and we are simply a part of a grand narrative that surpasses anything we can imagine on our own. In his grace he includes us in his story through his drawing near. Because divine presence is integral to the theological message of Scripture, the presence of God helps us understand our world, our own lives, and our relationship with the God who draws near. Know the author, know the story. Know the story, know your place in the story.

Third, neglecting this part of the story has kept the church from speaking boldly to the world's *ultimate* issues. Contemporary society—whether it knows it or not—needs to hear about God's presence. Though our world scorns and scoffs at any hints of a self-sufficient, holy God who manifests himself to save sinners, this same world constantly asks questions that only this God can answer *and has answered* in his Holy Word.

For example, today's postmodern is restless in his search for "mean-

ingful” community.<sup>8</sup> Even while living, breathing, and participating in a world rampant with religious cynicism, the postmodernist remains fascinated with the prospect of some type of spiritual community (one obviously defined by the individual). As Stanley Grenz observes, people today have become increasingly aware of “the spiritual dimensions of life” as they have “grown dissatisfied with what they consider to be the truncated, materialist focus indicative of the modern world.”<sup>9</sup> Out of the ashes of the modernist’s isolated individualism arises the postmodernist’s ubiquitous pursuit for true, relevant, and spiritual community. It seems to follow that today’s Christian should be able to answer the question, What—if anything—can provide the *telos* of the spiritual quest for the postmodernist, and all others for that matter?<sup>10</sup> It is only the story of Scripture, with its emphasis on the presence of God, that can answer these concerns.

Unfortunately, many scholars and pastors have exchanged a biblically responsible model of God’s relational fellowship for models that are more culturally palatable.<sup>11</sup> To appease the masses, some theologians attempt to pull the Lord down and make him look like the rest of the world. They exploit the doctrine of God’s immanence (nearness),<sup>12</sup> por-

<sup>8</sup>It should be noted that I am not advocating postmodernism as the best approach to apologetics or evangelism. All I intend to maintain is that the desire for relationship with peers and, more specifically, with the divine is God-given, and it is also God-answered. My appeal is that a biblically based evaluation of the presence of God should be a more definitive theme within evangelicalism in order to contend with an inappropriate theological embrace of this philosophical climate and address the shortcomings of the church in dealing with the culture at large.

<sup>9</sup>Grenz argues that at the center of modernism coming out of the Enlightenment was the idea that “what it means to be human is reason and rationality.” Furthermore, this rationality was tied to “the ability to disengage from one’s own natural environment and social context so as to be able to objectify the world . . . forming the Modernist ideal: individual autonomy, understood as the ability to choose one’s own purposes from within oneself apart from the controlling influence of natural and social forces.” As a result, the world became an assortment of independent selves. In response, postmodernism is the rejection of this modernistic position of autonomy and independence and replaces it with the desire for community. Stanley J. Grenz, “Belonging to God: The Quest for Communal Spirituality in the Postmodern World,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 54 (1999): 43.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>11</sup>The desire for community and relationship has caused the recent influx of spiritual pursuits among postmodernists. Evangelicals as a whole, however, have been caught off guard. That is why the reality of the presence of God is important. If the world is captured by the truth of God’s being with and for his people as it is presented biblically, then the longings of postmodern thinkers can be answered appropriately.

<sup>12</sup>In order to answer the desires of the world, the advocates of process theism replace the God of Scripture, who is separate but involved in creation, with one who is progressing with, learning through, and obtaining from the world. It is also important to see that the influence of process thought not only is felt outside orthodox Christianity but affects evangelicalism as well. For examples of process text, see, e.g., Charles Hartshorne and W. L. Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); John B. Cobb and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976); Alfred N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1929); Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1948). For examples of modern theological approaches utilizing process theology, see, e.g., Michael Vertin, “Is God in Process?,” in *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Timothy Fallon and Philip Riley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 45–62; William Dean, “Deconstruction and Process Theology,” *Journal of Religion* 64 (1984): 1–19; John B. Cobb Jr., “Two Types of Postmodernism: Deconstruction and Process,” *Theology Today* 47 (1990): 149–58; Nancy R. Howell, “Feminism and Process Thought,” *Process Studies* 22 (1993):

traying him as not only intimately related to the world but partially—and for some even fully—reliant on the world.<sup>13</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who push God beyond the reaches of knowledge, revelation, and relationship. These theologians contend that God, in his transcendence (separation), is too distant and distinct from creation to be known in any true or significant way.<sup>14</sup> And so it goes in our world's understanding of God and our relationship to him. We continue to sacrifice good theology for cultural vacillations when what we need is a biblically grounded theology to stabilize us and our culture, and to conform us to the image of God.

This is where the biblical drama of God's presence helps. On the face of it, biblical Christianity seemingly provides a vibrant and thoughtful countercultural answer to these large existential questions.<sup>15</sup> It tells the true story of the God who covenants with his people and overcomes sin for the purposes of his glory and their relational closeness to him. In a society longing for relational and spiritual closeness, a sound and scripturally mature analysis of the presence of God can help answer this world's deep-seated spiritual desires.<sup>16</sup>

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69–106. For an explanation of the influence of process theology on contemporary evangelicalism, see Randall Basinger, "Evangelicals and Process Theism: Seeking a Middle Ground," *Christian Scholar's Review* 15 (December 1986): 157–67. Cf. Greg Boyd, *Trinity and Process: A Critical Evaluation and Reconstruction of Hartshorne's Di-Polar Theism Towards a Trinitarian Metaphysics* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992); R. A. McGrath and A. Galloway, *The Science of Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992); Collin Gunton, "A Rose by Any Other Name? From Christian Doctrine to Systematic Theology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1 (1999): 4–23.

<sup>13</sup>Such a view is open theism, in which God's foreknowledge and immutability have been questioned and, in many cases, rejected or redefined. According to the open view, God knows all things that can be possibly known, which thereby prohibits his knowledge of his free creatures' actions and decisions. Thus, the Lord does not have an exhaustive understanding of the future and is reliant upon and, in particular, related to his creation. See, e.g., Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); John B. Cobb Jr. and Clark H. Pinnock, *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994); John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998).

<sup>14</sup>See, e.g., Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige*, trans. J. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950); John Whitaker, "Literal and Figurative Language of God," *Religious Studies* 17 (1981): 39–54. For a helpful summary and critique of the ineffability of God, see Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 133–41.

<sup>15</sup>Christianity can speak to the postmodernist without succumbing to the postmodernist's disdain for metanarrative (the big-picture story that attempts to explain everything). After all, Christianity is the greatest and one true metanarrative.

<sup>16</sup>I would argue that responding to the pertinent issues in contemporary culture is one of the major purposes of systematic theology. As Frame contends, we should "define theology as the application of the Word of God to all areas of life." John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), 81. Wayne Grudem also asserts, "Systematic theology focuses on summarizing each doctrine as it should be understood by present-day Christians"; systematic theology as "what the whole Bible teaches us today" implies that application to life is a necessary part of the proper pursuit of systematic theology. Thus a doctrine under consideration is seen in terms of its practical value for living the Christian life." Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 23. Furthermore, as John Franke concludes, "The unending

I am convinced that it is only through God's drawing near—on his own terms and for his own glory—that the demands of this lonely world can be met in full. To appropriately answer the world's ultimate concerns, we need not rewrite the script of Scripture to accommodate the philosophical assumptions, desires, and commitments of sinners. Instead, we need a biblically formed theology emphasizing the Lord's relational nearness as it is progressively revealed in the Christian plot-line.<sup>17</sup> As we do this, we mitigate many of the aforementioned concerns, both practical and theological. A clearer grasp of the presence of God sheds light on the mystical and cultural misconceptions often affiliated with this critical theme, while also underscoring its significance for our theology and, subsequently, our lives.

Fourth, knowing the presence of God as it is expressed across the pages of the biblical script transforms the way we understand and live our Christian lives. The presence of God is more than theoretical; it lives. It enriches, expands, and even emends our faith at times.

This is important for all of us because to know salvation is to know God's presence. God's presence practically influences the way we live out our salvation, assemble with fellow believers, and hope in God's future promises. In our salvation we need to see that our atonement (the work of Christ on the cross that clears the rebel to enter into relationship with the holy God) *demand*s the presence of God. Christ *came into this world*, into human history, in order to give his life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45). The substitutionary death of God's Son is inextricably tied to the divine being present with *and for* man. For salvation to be efficacious, God must be with us; God must be one of us. Immanuel came to dwell among his people and substitute

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task of theology is to find ways of expressing and communicating the biblical story in terms that make use of the intellectual and conceptual tools of a particular culture without being controlled by them." John R. Franke, *The Character of Theology: A Postconservative Evangelical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 119.

<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, the significant role God's presence plays in and for redemptive history has historically been largely overlooked or been relegated to some ethereal form of "mysticism" or numinous "experience." For examples of works that do highlight the importance of the biblical theological motif of God's presence, see John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002); Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978); J. Lanier Burns, *The Nearness of God: His Presence with His People* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009). For examples of the emphasis on the mystical, see Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, trans. John J. Delaney (New York: Doubleday, 1977); Richard Woods, *Christian Spirituality: God's Presence through the Ages* (Chicago: Thomas More, 1989). Woods argues that the divine presence is spirituality, and there is, therefore, "in the depths of all experience, a sense of God as the compassionate origin, unending guide, and infinite destiny of the whole human tribe." Woods, *Christian Spirituality*, 1. For a historical survey of this experiential emphasis, see also Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, 3 vols. (New York: Crossroad, 1991–1998).

himself for the lost. In his atoning work on the cross, Christ reconciled us to God by being present with man. He became man in this world to reopen access to the Lord so that those exiled from Eden may draw near to God once again (Heb. 4:16; 7:19, 25; 10:1, 19, 22; 11:6). Christ's presence in this world is a strong indicator that the vicarious nature of Jesus's work—that which leads to his becoming manifest in human history—is at the heart of the atonement and the heart of our salvation.

The presence of God also has implications for the way we understand the community of believers. The New Testament shows us that the church is the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16–17; 2 Cor. 6:14–7:1; Eph. 2:13–22). The church, according to Paul, is where God dwells. This is a formative work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>18</sup> The community of Christ, therefore, is—in this time of waiting for Christ's return—the institution the Lord creates and uses to represent and perpetuate his divine presence in a lost and sinful world. In a lesser way, the church plays a role in bringing about God's redemptive mission. It tells others about God's presence to save and helps prepare believers to enter into God's presence once and for all in the new heaven and new earth.

This should change our understanding of the church's role in the world and in our lives. Think about what would happen if the church understood herself to be the reflection of God's presence to a lost world. How would this affect the way the body of Christ does ministry and views the other working parts of that body?

Finally, neglecting the presence of God impairs our thinking about eschatology. Some have been caught up in the seemingly endless debates swirling around the interpretation of Daniel, Revelation, and other end-time prophetic passages. And though many of these discussions are important and helpful (and some not so helpful), the eschatological nature of God's purposes has often been lost in the details of our apocalyptic flow charts and diagrams. The discussion of the presence of God helps us see that eschatology is not only the last chapter

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<sup>18</sup>Please note that I do not intend to state that the Holy Spirit dwells at a physical address or in a certain building. Often the church is assumed merely to be a place where people gather on Sundays. Though this can be an aspect of the church, the reality of this institution should not be limited to this type of expression. Instead, the notion of the church is connected to what these metaphors reveal about it, namely, that it is a relational community. Thus, I agree with Everett Ferguson, who states, "The New Testament puts no emphasis on the place of worship—house, synagogue, or temple—because wherever the community is gathered that is the place of worship." Everett Ferguson, *Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 219.

in our systematic theology textbooks or even the last few chapters of our Bibles. Instead, eschatology pervades the whole message of Scripture. Like our own circulatory system, eschatology helps the promises, plans, and purposes of God flow throughout the body of Scripture. What biblical theology helps us see is that God has Revelation 21–22 in his divine mind before breathing out Genesis 1:1, and he paints Genesis 1:1 with the same palette he uses in Revelation 21–22. The beginning is rooted in the end, and vice versa. And this helps our faith. The eschatological vein pervading Scripture reinforces our assurance in things hoped for and our conviction of things unseen (Heb. 11:1). The Lord will accomplish his purposes no matter how hard spiritual and fleshly powers work against him. All of the promises and purposes of God that fall between these bookends of redemptive history express his perfect will. The end is his purpose and it will be accomplished. For God, there is no “Plan B.” There are no “audibles.” God’s story works out the end from the beginning, and we are the beneficiaries of this providential power, control, and authority.<sup>19</sup>

### Clearing the Way

Seeing the redemptive-historical story of this magnitude is no easy undertaking, though it is a necessary one. Covering a biblical theme in a comprehensive manner while seeing its implications for our lives is a big project, hence our need for parameters. Accordingly, I want to acknowledge from the outset that it is not feasible to evaluate every text of Scripture that touches on the concept of divine presence (there are so many!). The principal purpose of this project is to bring glory to God by seeing the presence of God within a redemptive-historical perspective. As a consequence, I will address all theological issues within this context, thereby limiting the extent of Scripture and doctrinal reflection to how it informs the biblical emphasis on the presence of God as means and ends of God’s redemptive activity.

Before we set out, let me also speak to the theological assumptions

<sup>19</sup> As J. V. Fesko summarizes: “Eschatology has an irrefragable connection to the beginning, or protology. This connection becomes even clearer when one considers that the categories of the beginning are embedded in eschatology, the creation of the heavens and earth become the *new* heavens and earth (Isa. 65:17; 66:22) and the garden of Eden reappears in the book of Revelation (2:7; cf. Isa. 51:3; Zech. 1:17).” J. V. Fesko, *Last Things First: Unlocking Genesis 1–3 with the Christ of Eschatology* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2007), 34–35.

undergirding this project. There is no neutral approach to theology; there never was and there never will be. Understanding this helps us be honest, and it also helps us with what is essential. Instead of demanding neutrality, we need to be aware of our presuppositions and constantly evaluate them in light of the biblical text. To be sure, this project is not void of theological assumptions; and again, to try and defend each one is itself beyond the scope of this particular work. Yet, by no means are these presuppositions unjustifiable. These broader theological assumptions include my commitment to the authoritative, inspired, inerrant, and infallible Scripture as divine revelation;<sup>20</sup> human *and* divine authorship of the biblical Canon;<sup>21</sup> the possibility of “whole Bible” theology;<sup>22</sup> the unity and continuity of Scripture within the Bible’s textual diversity;<sup>23</sup> Nicene Trinitarianism and Chalcedonian christology;<sup>24</sup> the epistemic ability to truly know God, in a finite sense, through his revelation;<sup>25</sup> and Christ’s penal-substitutionary atonement as the Christian’s point of access to reconciliation and God’s eternal relational presence.<sup>26</sup>

## Setting Out

With this in mind, the following chapters will seek to demonstrate that the presence of God is essential to understanding Scripture’s theological message and our lives as Christians. To prepare the way for our discussion, I will use chapter 2 to set the theological context for our

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., James M. Boice, ed., *The Foundations of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986); Paul Feinberg, “Bible, Inerrancy and Infallibility of,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 141–45. Norman Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980); John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992); E. J. Schnabel, “Scripture,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 34–43.

<sup>22</sup> See chap. 2 for further description of “whole-Bible” theology.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Craig L. Blomberg, “The Unity and Diversity of Scripture,” in Alexander et al., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 64–72; D. A. Carson, “Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology,” in Carson and Woodbridge, *Scripture and Truth*, 65–95.

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 256–334; Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity in Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 37–80; Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 199–207; Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*; Ronald H. Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., Steve Jeffrey, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sachs, eds., *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Recovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007); Thomas Schreiner, “Penal Substitution View,” in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James Beilby and Paul Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 67–98.

discussion while also defining a relational understanding of God and his presence. Chapter 3 will begin the first of two major sections that form the core of this book. It is here that I will work out my thesis through a biblical-theological assessment. With this in mind, I will use part 1 (chaps. 3–5) to show how the presence of the Lord is a central eschatological purpose in the Lord’s redemptive mission. It will follow then that parts 2 and 3 (chaps. 6–10) will address the presence of God as the means of the divine mission. Here, we will trace the importance and impact of the Lord’s redemptive presence through both the Old and New Testaments, revealing that God accomplishes his promises, first and foremost, by becoming present. The last chapter will show how such an understanding of the presence of God really changes the way we understand and live the Christian life. Here we will see just how important this theme is not only to Scripture’s story but also to our own. In the concluding part we will look specifically at how God’s presence informs the way we think about our redemption, the covenant community of the church, and God’s eschatological promises. I will try to show just how the presence of God transforms the way we live, move, and have our being (Acts 17:28).

We do all this to provide a biblically based conception of the presence of God—demonstrating it to be both a means and a goal of God’s redemptive activity—in order to show its central place within the storyline of Scripture and in our lives as those redeemed by the God who draws near.

So with our destination set and our itinerary ready, let us begin our journey. Let us discover what God’s presence means. Let us see the story of Scripture and our Christian life in light of the presence of God. May we follow that story to its promises of fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore—and may we be wise enough not only to know that story, but to enter into it as well.





# Of Storyboards and Location Scouts

A Biblical and Theological Foundation  
for the Presence of God

We know that good stories do not begin at the theater or on the bookshelves. Instead they begin with the difficult (often tedious) yet necessary jobs of research, location scouting, and storyboard preparation. Likewise, a proper grasp of the biblical drama demands comparable legwork—though theological in nature and never tedious! This is what we will set out to do in this chapter. We want to do that ground-level work that will provide the theological parameters *and* theological clarity necessary to help us understand who God is and what it means for him to be present.

Let me be clear: establishing such foundations is difficult work and work that, given our focus, will be limited in scope.<sup>1</sup> Still, time spent in theological cultivation is necessary. It helps us worship God on his

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<sup>1</sup> Understanding God completely is an unattainable goal. As Bavinck rightfully concludes: “Mystery is the lifeblood of dogmatics. . . . The knowledge that God has revealed of himself in nature and Scripture far surpasses human imagination and understanding. . . . For it does not deal with finite creatures, but from beginning to end looks past all creatures and focuses on the eternal and infinite One himself. From the very start of its labors, it faces the incomprehensible One.” Still, this should not deter us from pursuing God in any way. The gift of revelation, through which the Lord has disclosed himself to creation using speech and words that can be studied and parsed, shows us that God has made a knowledge of him available, which, when pursued, often results in worship and his being glorified. Again, Bavinck sums this up well: “While Holy Scripture affirms [the qualitative difference between God and man] in the strongest terms, it nevertheless sets forth a doctrine of God that fully upholds his knowability.” Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 30.

terms and understand ourselves in light of redemption. This particular type of theological spadework will begin with the doctrine of God, especially his relationship with creation. The thought of an infinite God stooping low to relate to and redeem a broken people rightfully leaves our minds reeling—or at least it should. When we meditate on the mysteries of God’s relational pursuit of his creation, we are bombarded with theological questions that will ultimately determine our concept of God, the gospel, and ourselves. Why does the God of Christianity draw near to sinners in the first place? What does it mean for the transcendent God to engage, interact with, and even enter this fallen world and its people? My hope is to use this chapter to address these important questions by showing that God’s free decision to be with his people finds its source in his transcendence, and most fundamentally in his self-sufficiency. That which makes the Lord distinct from creation is what leads him to draw near to creation.

But our questions do not end here. Trying to understand the presence of God confronts us with the most fundamental question: what *is* the presence of God? In fact, our story will only go as far as our definition of the presence of God will allow it to go. We need a biblical definition of God’s presence to ground our understanding not in the thin air of today’s mystical-spiritual conceptions but in the bedrock of Scripture’s story. As a result, we will devote the second part of this chapter to the advancement of such a biblical definition. I will attempt to excavate our definition directly from Scripture’s own emphases, specifically that the Lord’s presence is redemptive and eschatological. The presence of God is the reward of redemptive history and the way God secures this reward for us. The answer to the question will play out organically in our analysis of the story of Scripture in the chapters ahead, but offering this definition from the outset will help organize our thinking and pave the way for a proper discussion of God’s presence that is to come.

### **Who Is This God Who Becomes Present?**

Let us begin with the doctrine of God: specifically, how we can account for his relational nature. When we pull back to see the big picture, we quickly realize that the personal nature of God grounds our salvation

and makes the gospel possible. It is only because of his relational nature that we—his reliant and finite creations—have life, delight, hope, grace, mercy, and love available to us.<sup>2</sup> It is only because he has *chosen* to be present that we are afforded the opportunity to experience the glories of his presence.

## Transcendence and Immanence

To understand the relational nature of God in a biblically faithful manner demands that we first come to grips with what theologians call God's divine transcendence (the attribute that describes God as the one who is distinct and separate from his creation) and God's immanence (the attribute that describes him as the one who freely draws near to and is involved in his creation).<sup>3</sup> In maintaining the balance between

<sup>2</sup> It is safe to say that most religions outside of the Judeo-Christian worldview, if not all, do not maintain that their divinity, "power," or god is simultaneously personal and absolute. In contrast, one characteristic is usually overemphasized to the denial or neglect of the other. For example, D. A. Carson catalogs the difference between the Christian claim and other religions when he writes: "The transcendent and the personal are separated in most of the world's religions. In animism and polytheism there are many personal spirits or gods, but none is absolute. Sometimes these religions supplement their gods as it were by appealing to fate—an impersonal absolute. Pantheistic religions adopt an absolute, but it is not personal. World religions are sometimes so internally diverse that they fit into more than one of these categories. At one level Hinduism is clearly polytheistic, but much of Hindu outlook is finally pantheistic. Buddhism in its various branches is particularly difficult to label, but at no point does it adopt a vision of God as both absolute and personal. Contemporary science, with a frequent balance toward philosophical materialism, constantly tilts toward an impersonal absolute. In other words, persons are finally explained on an impersonal basis—bouncing molecules, statistically organized motion, chemical reactions in one's brain, and so forth." D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 223–24. To be fair though, in recent Christian theology, Christianity's distinct approach, in several cases, has been overshadowed by theological trends that allow a lack of balance and accuracy to creep into its own doctrine. This has resulted in theological error and, in some cases, new religious perspectives or even systems (e.g., process theology and open theism). Again, Carson goes on to argue that many of modern-day theological problems arise out of those within Christian circles who have divided God's absolute and personal nature. He contends that contemporary religious thought leaves us with "a God not clearly personal, and if absolute, sufficiently remote to be of little threat and of little use." He goes on to show the work of process theologians and their attempt to "emphasize God's personhood while dismissing his absoluteness. Process theology, in its plethora of forms, argues that God may be personal, but is certainly mutable and changing, himself (or itself) in process" (ibid., 224–25). This same critique applies to open theism, a theological movement that underscores God's relationality to the point that it undermines his control. Needless to say, there is much confusion surrounding the nature of God's relationality and much to be sifted through before a biblical conceptualization of divine presence can be proposed.

<sup>3</sup> Millard Erickson reveals the consequent errors that arise when the proper tension between these two qualities of God is lost: "Where either is overemphasized at the expense of the other, the orthodox theistic conception is lost. Where immanence is overemphasized, we lose the conception of a personal God. Where transcendence is overemphasized, we lose the conception of an active God." Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 328–29. By this he means that when the balance is gone, divine immanence can be assimilated into a form of pantheism, and the divine becomes less personal and more a part of creation. With transcendence, the issue of separation arises. Excessive emphasis on God's transcendence ultimately conforms Christian theism into some degree of deism. Grenz and Olson, in their book on contemporary theology, describe our current theological crisis as stemming from "instability introduced when transcendence and immanence are not properly balanced." They continue, "As if in the ongoing course of theological history the twin truths of the divine transcendence and divine immanence are seeking their own proper equilibrium, twentieth-century theology illustrates how a lopsided emphasis on one or the other eventually engenders an opposing movement that attempts to redress the imbalance and actually moves too far in the opposing direction." Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olsen, *Twentieth-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 12.

these dual realities, we see one of the emphases that makes Christian theology explicitly Christian, especially within the doctrine of God.<sup>4</sup>

I am sure that for some of us, the entry point to our understanding of the Lord is his transcendence. God is “other than.” He is distinct from his creation in nature, action, and being. He is greater than all that is not God. We surmise that, at a fundamental level, God’s transcendence is a corollary of other attributes, such as his majesty, holiness, and infinitude.

This transcendence has huge implications for God’s relationship with his creation, for it is his transcendence that gives rise to his self-sufficiency and self-existence. God is self-sufficient in that he is reliant upon nothing outside of himself, out of his own being, and is in no way dependent on what he has made. Similarly, he is eternally self-existing, meaning that he draws his existence solely from himself; or, to put it another way, God *is* because God is God. In describing the transcendent God who is wholly other, Scripture articulates a Lord who is distinct from creation, existing solely in himself eternally, absolute in nature, without nonintrinsic limitations, and fully infinite.

Interestingly, Scripture most often depicts God’s transcendence in spatial terms.<sup>5</sup> The biblical authors time and time again put physical, albeit metaphorical, distance between God and his creation. As the psalmists describe, God is the “most high” (Ps. 97:9), the God “above the heavens” (Ps. 8:1), and the one “over all the earth” (Ps. 57:5). This distance, though, is much more than physical or spatial; it is first and

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<sup>4</sup>Historically speaking, the failure to balance these characteristics has resulted in many, if not most, of the doctrinal predicaments over the past century and beyond. In fact, Grenz and Olson use the distinction of transcendence and immanence to organize and structure their whole study of twentieth-century theology. They argue that the back-and-forth shifts in emphasis between these two aspects of God’s nature are responsible for the drastic theological changes defining modern theology. The goal of our discussion is to maintain a proper theological symmetry between the Lord’s transcendence and his immanence. Thus Bruce Ware holds that God is “both *transcendent*, as existing in the fullness of his infinitely glorious tri-Person unity and apart from the finite spatio-temporal created reality he freely brings into existence, but also as one who chooses to relate *immanently*, as he freely enters into the realm of the creaturely existence that he designed and made.” Bruce A. Ware, *God’s Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 35, emphasis original.

<sup>5</sup>I agree with John Frame, who argues that the biblical references to divine transcendence in spatial terms are not tied exclusively to heaven but instead point to a much larger reality. Frame asserts: “It is not biblical, therefore, to interpret God’s transcendence to mean merely that he is located somewhere far away, in heaven. That may be part of the thrust of the terms ‘Most High,’ ‘exalted,’ and ‘lifted up,’ but there must be more to it. . . . We should, I think, see these expressions primarily as describing God’s royal dignity. He is ‘exalted,’ not mainly as someone living far beyond the earth but as one who sits on a throne. The expressions of transcendence refer to God’s rule, his kingship, his lordship.” Frame’s critique of many theological positions on divine transcendence sees this characteristic of God in light of the genre and purposes of Scripture itself. The imagery of Scripture is duly noted, and the focus of the spatial requirements is brought under the intent of the author. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 105.

foremost moral. It is true that God is transcendent in his essence, but Scripture places its primary emphasis on his holiness. This is why biblical authors periodically describe God as a far off, elusive, and hidden.

We see this especially when sin enters the picture. The prophet Isaiah categorizes God's righteous response to mankind's sin as divine-human separation when he announces,

Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry,  
I struck him; I hid my face and was angry. (Isa. 57:17)<sup>6</sup>

Probably the most famous example of this moral focus of God's transcendence is found in Eden. What is the culminating consequence of Adam's sin? God removes the first man from the garden-sanctuary of his presence, a theme we will return to in the next few chapters (cf. Gen. 4:14).<sup>7</sup>

The God who is gloriously separate from and over all things is the same God who has freely chosen in his grace to be *with* humanity. He is not constrained by his own creation, loneliness, or need to draw near to the world; rather, the divine-human relationship germinates out of the sheer beauty of his grace and the relational nature of the Trinity. This is the delicate and necessary balance struck in Scripture: God is transcendently self-sufficient and self-satisfied while simultaneously free to be relationally immanent. As one scholar observes:

The OT never conceives of God's transcendence in opposition to his immanence, as if that which makes God wholly other is different from that which allows him to be a personal God who lovingly acts

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<sup>6</sup>God's elusiveness can also describe his providential ways. We see this when the prophet declares, "Truly, you are a God who hides himself, / O God of Israel, the Savior" (Isa. 45:15). The context of this verse is the Gentiles' entering Jerusalem with great goods and treasures. God has seemingly reversed the fortunes of Israel by bringing beauty out of the conquering work of King Cyrus. God works in ways that finite man cannot foresee or understand. So although we know him, we do not know him in full. For further discussion, see J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 364.

<sup>7</sup>Cain acknowledges his guilt when he announces: "Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me" (Gen. 4:14). What is illuminating in this passage is that Cain understands the weight of his actions and what it means to sin before a holy and transcendent God; yet, even in these bloody circumstances, Yahweh is graciously immanent, as is evidenced in his provision of the city of refuge, vengeance upon the people who stand against his purposes and his people, and the reestablishment of a dynastic line in Seth. Other examples of this tension include God's decision to be present in the temple but still be hidden behind the veil, the separation established in Adam's first sin, the allowance of judgment during the time of the judges and the prophets, and his concealment during the whole exilic period. The most important biblical example, though, is the person of Christ, who is himself both fully God yet veiled in human flesh. In Christ, the balance of transcendence and immanence is perfectly expressed (Phil. 2:5-11).

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in time and history. For the Bible, transcendence and immanence do not describe two divine modes of being or two sets of distinguished qualities.<sup>8</sup>

The Lord is one who is simultaneously transcendent and immanent, separate and yet personal.<sup>9</sup> As Scripture helps us see, “He is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath” (Josh. 2:11). But we must be reminded that his immanence stems from his transcendence, rather than vice versa. As Colin Gunton puts it:

Transcendence cannot be won at the expense of God’s immanence precisely because it is the ground of immanence. . . . God is transcendent in that he is able to become immanent. . . . The happening of God in time is not a negation of what God really is. It is his affirmation. . . . If God were not so supremely transcendent of reality that is other than he, he would not be the God who does the things that he does.<sup>10</sup>

It is his nature that provokes God’s relational manifestation, not some internal or external deficiency. He is wholly other and he entered history and acted among his people.<sup>11</sup> Almost every word of Scripture (including the very fact that we have the words of God in written form), exhibits God’s desire to reveal himself and relate personally to his creation in redemption and judgment.<sup>12</sup>

Numerous passages substantiate the importance of holding the dual realities of divine transcendence and immanence in concert.<sup>13</sup> Take Psalm 113 for example. Here the psalmist writes:

<sup>8</sup>Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 56.

<sup>9</sup>God’s personal and relational character extends from the intra-Trinitarian relationship that characterizes the immanent Trinity, a topic that will be developed later in this chapter.

<sup>10</sup>Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 56.

<sup>11</sup>As the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck states, “Not only does Scripture ascribe to God . . . an array of human organs and attributes; but also it even says that he walked in the Garden (Gen. 3:8), came down to see Babel’s construction of a tower (Gen. 11:5, 7), appeared to Jacob at Bethel (Gen. 28:10ff.), gave his law on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19ff.), dwelt between the cherubim on Zion in Jerusalem (1 Sam. 4:4; 1 Kings 8:7, 10–11). Scripture also therefore calls him the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the king of Zion, the God of the Hebrews, the God of Israel.” Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:30.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. James M. Hamilton Jr., “The Glory of God in Salvation through Judgment: The Centre of Biblical Theology?,” *TynBul* 57 (2006): 57–84.

<sup>13</sup>In a broader sense, each of these verses should be understood to be what Ware terms a “spectrum text.” By this we mean that these passages proclaim two truths about the nature of God that are often assumed to be contradictory in some way. These texts, however, reveal them not to be in conflict but rather to be harmonious realities in the doctrine of God. For our purposes here we find that these texts show that God’s transcendence and immanence are to be held in equilibrium. For more on “spectrum texts” and their theological impact, see Bruce A. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 150, 191–216.

The LORD is high above all the nations,  
and his glory is above the heavens!  
Who is like the LORD our God,  
who is seated on high,  
who looks far down  
on the heavens and the earth?  
He raises the poor from the dust  
and lifts the needy from the ash heap,  
to make them sit with princes,  
with the princes of his people.  
He gives the barren woman a home,  
making her the joyous mother of children.  
Praise the LORD! (Ps. 113:4–9)

Here the complementary truths of the Lord's transcendent otherness and immanent closeness bring joy to the psalmist. The Lord is "high above," and yet he is also the one who stoops low and "raises the poor from the dust."

Similarly, the prophet Isaiah captures both of these divine realities:

Thus says the One who is high and lifted up,  
who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:  
"I dwell in the high and holy place,  
and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit,  
to revive the spirit of the lowly,  
and to revive the heart of the contrite." (Isa. 57:15)

According to the prophet, where should Israel find its comfort? It is found in the God who "is high and lifted up," "inhabits eternity," and "dwell[s] in the high and holy place," the One who comes to restore the broken, needy, and repentant.<sup>14</sup> For Isaiah, the Lord's transcendence is the *source* of healing for broken humanity because only the Holy One who is greater than this world can placate the anxieties and despair of this fallen world.

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<sup>14</sup>Notice how both verses (Ps. 113:4–9 and Isa. 57:15) have used the transcendence of God to heal and comfort the weak and oppressed. This shows that in order for the immanence of God to mean anything and/or affect our lives it must have his transcendence as its origin. If not, then the Lord is not able to affect our standing in the world. But if he is over all things, then he is over everything including our hardships and all our circumstances and worthy of faith, trust, love, and hope.



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The New Testament holds the same tension. One clear example is Acts 17, where Paul delivers his theological treatise before the pagan Greeks.<sup>15</sup> God's transcendental self-sufficiency is on full display in Paul's argument: "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything" (17:24–25). At times overlooked is the emphasis on immanence that follows. Paul does not stop with God's self-existence but links it to God's relational pursuit of his creation. Paul challenges the misconceptions of an aloof, selfish, and reliant deity within the Greco-Roman world by portraying the God of Scripture to be a holy and separate God who graciously draws near to his people.<sup>16</sup> He advises his listeners to "seek God" in the hope that they might "feel their way toward him and find him" (Acts 17:27a). The Lord is near and can be found. Paul deepens the relational closeness of God, testifying that God

is actually not far from each one of us, for

"In him we live and move and have our being";

as even some of [the Greek] poets have said,

"For we are indeed his offspring." (Acts 17:27b–28)

So Paul's God is transcendently immanent. The Lord is beyond creation and distinct from it, while he has also chosen, on his own volition, to be intimately involved in creation and active in human history.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See also Ephesians 4:6, where Paul describes the Lord as "one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." This verse and its appeal to the spatial location of God being both "over" as well as "through" and "in" is another example of Paul's tying together the transcendent and immanent divine qualities. See also Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 267.

<sup>16</sup> This is theologically significant because Paul is speaking to a polytheistic culture that divided divine power throughout a panoply of gods. It is to this ignorance that the apostle speaks. He shows the foolishness of these deities by revealing the all-encompassing realities of God's transcendence and immanence.

<sup>17</sup> Again, Bavinck summarizes this balance when he writes: "The same God who in his revelation limits himself, as it were, to certain specific places, times, and persons is at the same time infinitely exalted above the whole realm of nature and every creature. Even in the parts of Scripture stressing this temporal and local manifestation, the sense of his sublimity and omnipotence is not lacking. The Lord who walks in the garden is the Creator of heaven and earth. The God who appears to Jacob is in control of the future. Although the God of Israel dwells in the midst of his people in the house that Solomon built for him, he cannot even be contained by the heavens (1 Kings 8:27). He manifests himself in nature and sympathizes, as it were, with his people, but he is simultaneously the incomprehensible One (Job 26:14; 36:26; 37:5), the incomparable One (Isa. 40:18, 25; 46:5), the one who is infinitely exalted above time, space, and every creature (Isa. 40:12ff.; 41:4; 44:6; 48:12), the one true God (Ex. 20:3, 11; Deut. 4:35, 39; 32:19; 1 Sam. 2:2; Isa. 44:8)." Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:33–34.

## God in Himself, God in Relationship

So if this is the case, why does God enter into his creation? If he is completely self-sufficient and requires nothing outside himself, then why create and relate? As hinted above, the answer to this question lies in his divine self-sufficiency. Though at first glance this may appear contradictory, the Lord's self-satisfaction is, in fact, the seedbed for the God-world relationship. Rooted in the Lord's transcendence, the doctrine of divine aseity describes God as "independent, self-existent, and fully self-sufficient."<sup>18</sup> So when we say that God is *a se*,

we say that (as manifest and eternally actual in the relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost) He is the One who already has and is in Himself everything which would have to be the object of His creation and causation if He were not He, God. Because He is God, as such He already has His own being. Therefore this being does not need origination and constitution.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, the Lord is ontologically "uncaused, without beginning, not dependent on an external person, principle, or metaphysical reality for his existence."<sup>20</sup> Moreover, as Yahweh is ontologically (in his being) *a se*, he is also internally *a se*, indicating that he is in himself completely self-satisfied, for neither his happiness nor his fulfillment is contingent upon anything external to himself, since he does not need anything outside himself to be content or satisfied.<sup>21</sup>

This doctrine has obvious ramifications for God's relationship with the world. Because Yahweh requires nothing "outside of himself to exist, be satisfied, [or] be fulfilled,"<sup>22</sup> he in no way needs creation for anything, either for some deficiency within himself or for his own personal satisfaction. As a result, God's aseity emphasizes that his decision to create and relate to that creation does not come from a specific need or insufficiency

<sup>18</sup> James Beilby, "Divine Aseity, Divine Freedom: A Conceptual Problem for Edwardsian Calvinism," *JETS* 47 (2004): 648.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, vol. 2, *The Doctrine of God*, pt. 1, trans. T. H. L. Parker et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 306. Through this type of being, Barth affirms God's freedom from (transcendence) and freedom for (immanence). He writes, "Freedom in its positive and proper qualities means to be grounded in one's being, to be determined and moved by oneself" (*ibid.*, 302). In short, out of his aseity, God has the freedom to be transcendent and immanent, separate and near. For citations and further interaction, see Michael S. Horton, *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 28–52.

<sup>20</sup> Beilby, "Divine Aseity," 649.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

within himself but *derives from his nature instead*. In other words, it is out of an abundance of his self-sufficient and independent nature that the desire and means to relate to the world arises.<sup>23</sup> The doctrine of divine aseity clarifies that the source of the God-world relationship is the independent, self-sufficient, self-existing, and transcendent nature of God.

So, we see that God's transcendence grounds his immanence, but we still need to understand how this "other than" God can, in any real sense, also be the God who is with us without contradicting his transcendent nature. Thus George Eldon Ladd asks, "How can the Infinite be known in the finite, the Eternal in the temporal, the Absolute in the relativities of history?"<sup>24</sup> His answer helps: "From a purely human perspective, this seems impossible; but at precisely this point is found perhaps the greatest miracle of biblical faith. God is the living God, and he, the Eternal, the Unchangeable, has communicated knowledge of himself through the ebb and flow of historical experience."<sup>25</sup>

Ladd shows us that the testimony of Scripture reveals that the infinite can work beyond the "normal" and conventional ways of "everyday" experience—the ways and experiences humans understand—because God *in his transcendence* is beyond our limitations. In other words, the contradictions of a transcendent God becoming immanent are *not* contradictions, because God's infinite nature transcends our finite limitations—the limitations that lead to contradictions for us. Again, Ladd, pointing to God's acts in his creation, helps us see that

the Lord of history is transcendent over history yet is not aloof from history. He is therefore able to bring to pass in time and space events that are genuine events yet are "supra-historical" in their character. This merely means that such revelatory events are not produced by history but that the Lord of history, who stands above history, acts within history for the redemption of historical creatures.<sup>26</sup>

Ladd helps us see the very evident and very important doctrine of the Creator-creature distinction. This distinction reminds us that

<sup>23</sup> See John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998), 165.

<sup>24</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., ed. Donald Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 23.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

God is the ruler of time and space. He is able to act in his creation and history in ways that surpass typical procedures of such events—the typical procedures and laws that God established. God stands above history but also uses history to bring about his redemptive purposes. John Frame explains:

God (the Son, as well as the Father and the Spirit) has an experience that transcends all physical limitations. God is not, therefore, to be defined as a physical being. (Even the incarnate Son of God had a divine sovereignty over space and time.) But as Lord of all things that are material and physical, he is supremely able to understand the world from the perspective of every physical being, to reveal himself in any physical form that he chooses, and even to take human flesh, so that he has his own body, without abandoning his transcendent existence. I argued that it is better to say that God is Lord of time and Lord of space than to say merely that God is atemporal and nonspatial. Although he does have atemporal and nonspatial existence, he is also temporally and spatially omnipresent. His sovereignty does not mean that he is excluded from time and space; rather it means that he acts toward them as Lord, not as the one who is limited by them. The same point can be made about God's incorporeality. This doctrine does not exclude God from physical reality. Rather, it teaches that he relates himself to physical reality as the Lord, transcending it and using it as he chooses.<sup>27</sup>

Because the transcendent “Lord of history” created, rules, and sustains time and space, he is not limited in his nature from being immanently present in that time and space. The aseity of God shows us that the restrictions we feel are not restrictions for him. He is free to be distinct from his creation while simultaneously drawing near to his creation. Simply put, it is precisely his transcendence that leads to his immanence.

Solomon speaks to this very idea at the dedication of the temple. The king of Israel, fully anticipating the glory of God to enter the physical building he, Solomon, has built, calls upon the king of heaven to come and be present in the new temple (1 Kings 8:10–21, 28–30).

<sup>27</sup>Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 587.

Yet, even in full expectancy, Solomon qualifies the residence of God in the temple, announcing the utter inability to limit God to one location (8:27). God enters the temple because he can. He is not limited by his transcendence to remain distant; rather his transcendence is what allows him to fill the temple with his glory while simultaneously transcending the physical walls of the temple, the national borders of Israel, and any other finite limitation to his presence.

Like Solomon, we should recognize Scripture's need to strike a balance between God's transcendence and his immanence and apply this balance within our own doctrinal formulations. Yes, God chooses to be immanent in history, but clearly transcends history as well. Likewise, he draws near to people in time and space but still transcends any sense of literal and physical manifestation of the incorporeal God.

It is the absolute nature of God that allows him the freedom to be personal with the world.<sup>28</sup> In other words, "that which makes [God] divine, and thus wholly other and so transcendent, is that which equally allows him to be active within the created order and so be immanent."<sup>29</sup> To deny God's self-existence would, then, be what denies the very foundation for his immanent activity in human history. It is because of his being "high above all nations" that the Lord is able to raise the poor from the dust (Ps. 113:4–9). It is because the Lord dwells in the high and holy places that he is able to bring respite to the contrite and lowly spirit (Isa. 57:15). Through the knowledge of the transcendent realities of God's nature we appreciate what it means for God to be in relationship with the world, and, in particular, his people.<sup>30</sup> When we see that our holy and righteous God extends himself relationally, not out of need, but out of his transcendent nature, we are compelled to worship and bring glory to the transcendent and

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<sup>28</sup> Among biblical texts that express the corresponding truths of transcendence and immanence, there is a consistent pattern. The transcendence of God is habitually mentioned first and is then followed by an expression of immanence. This order in no way eradicates the necessary balance between God's personal and absolute nature. Instead, I argue, it discloses that the source of divine immanence is in fact the transcendence of the Lord. Or, to say it another way, divine immanence is a result of transcendence. God's transcendence provides the possibility of his being relational with his creation in the first place, especially for the purpose of redemption.

<sup>29</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 56.

<sup>30</sup> Bruce Ware argues, "Divine transcendence must be conceived first in order for the beauty and glory of the divine immanence likewise to be apprehended correctly." Ware continues to express the importance of transcendence for immanence when he maintains that "yes God is both transcendent and immanent. But marvel that the God who is fully and infinitely transcendent would choose to become immanent. Marvel that the One who stands eternally independent of the world should choose to relate so intimately with those of this world." Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 46.

immanent one. Yet when we fail to do so, God quickly becomes an idol made in our image.

### The Trinity and God's Relational Nature

God's transcendence and immanence both exist because of his Trinitarian nature. The eternal intra-Trinitarian relationship that exists between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit reveals that God is self-fulfilled relationally and needs nothing outside of this fellowship (e.g., John 3:35; 5:20; 10:38; 14:10–20, 31; 15:9; 17:20–26). Here there is a perfect relationship between the persons of the Godhead. It can be said that “not only is the personal reality of each member of the Trinity discernable, but the divine persons also appear in unique relationship to one another.”<sup>31</sup> Biblically, the interrelations between the persons of the Godhead are exemplified in the Son and the Spirit being with the Father by way of “seeing,” “hearing,” and “doing,” as well as their “knowing” and “testifying” of each other.<sup>32</sup>

This intimacy between the members of the Trinity forms the basis of God's immanent relationship with the created order.<sup>33</sup> This relational nature of God in himself, first expressed and established in his transcendent self-fulfillment among the persons of the Trinity, is graciously conferred—in a limited sense—to the world. So just as “the three divine persons act in freedom to create and relate, they likewise manifest in their economic dealings with the world what is true of their logically prior and intrinsic relations.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, the relations between God and the world emanate directly from the relations between the persons of the Trinity.

<sup>31</sup> J. Scott Horrell, “Toward a Biblical Model of the Social Trinity: Avoiding Equivocation of Nature and Order,” *JETS* 47 (2004): 405.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 407. For examples of the Son's and the Spirit's being with the Father, see John 1:18; 3:11, 32; 5:19–20, 30; 6:38; 8:38; 12:49–50; 16:13–15; 1 Cor. 2:10–13. Also their knowledge and testimony of each other is seen biblically in John 1:32–33; 3:11, 34; 5:36–37; 7:29; 10:15; 14:26; 15:26; 16:7–11; 17:6; 18:37; 20:22; Rom. 8:9; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 2:18.

<sup>33</sup> I hold to differences of roles and positions among the persons of the Godhead as well. I also believe that God is singular in nature and plural in person. As Bruce Ware contends: “The Father is supreme in authority, the Son is under the Father, and the Spirit is under the Father and the Son. Yet there is also full harmony in their work, with no jealousy, bitterness, strife, or discord.” Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 131.

<sup>34</sup> Bruce A. Ware, “How Shall We Think about the Trinity?,” in *God Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents God*, ed. Douglas S. Huffman and Eric L. Johnson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 257. It is important to show that God's relation to his created order is not required for his existence, because that would ultimately deteriorate the distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity. If this distinction were erased and the aseity of God abandoned, then our only option would be something consistent with Rahner's rule, which argues that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity. To avoid this problematic supposition, John Frame clarifies that “there is a difference between what God is necessarily and

In Scripture, Jesus models his love for the world after his relationship with the Father (John 17:24–26). When Christ declares, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you” (John 15:9), we catch a glimpse into the source and origin of the spiritual intimacy available to believers. Clearly, any relationship with God (as well as Christ and the Holy Spirit) derives from the perfect fellowship and communion that typifies the union between the first and second persons of the Trinity. It would seem, then, that our relationship with God is based on, or born out of, the interrelationship that exists between Father, Son, and Spirit (see, e.g., John 13:34–35; 14:10; 17:5, 21–26).

### The Presence of God Defined

Based on his transcendent lordship and intra-Trinitarian relationality, God most high has chosen to be God most near. God covenants with fallen man precisely because he is transcendent (and gracious) and has the authority and control to do so. God is a “personal, powerful, self-existent being who is creator of the world and of humankind, *and* who is concerned about humanity.”<sup>35</sup> He is the one who “commits himself to us, to be our God and to make us his people. He delivers us by his grace and rules us by his law, and he rules not only from above, but also with us and within us.”<sup>36</sup> Emanating from God’s transcendence is his immanence, and in particular, the manifest and relational presence of God in the midst of his creation. The immanence of God as expressed through his divine presence is certainly emphasized in Scripture, is imperative for the Bible’s own theological message, and is personally applicable for our salvation and sanctification. In order to set the stage for our consideration of the power and purpose of God’s manifest immanence, let us first define what Scripture means by the presence of God.

### The Difference between “God Is Everywhere” and “God Is Here”

We begin with what the presence of God is not. There is a difference between God’s relational nearness and his being everywhere. This latter

what he freely chooses to do in his plan for creation,” which includes his choice to be relational with humanity. Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 629.

<sup>35</sup>Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 21, emphasis added.

<sup>36</sup>Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 96.

idea is what theologians call divine omnipresence (or immensity) and is, no doubt, the default category for the way many of us conceptualize God's presence. And though these concepts are by no means at odds, it is important to clarify the differences between them.

To be sure, divine omnipresence is evident throughout Scripture (1 Kings 8:27; Ps. 139:5–12; Prov. 15:3; Jer. 23:23–24; Ezek. 8:12; Amos 9:2–4; Acts 17:27–28; Rom. 10:6–8). God reveals himself to be one who “transcends spatial limitations and so is present at all places at once in his total being.”<sup>37</sup> The Lord is ontologically everywhere at once along with each point in space in the totality of his being. More specifically, Yahweh's omnipresence, or what John Feinberg calls his “ontological presence” (meaning the presence of his being/nature), allows him to be “actually present at a given place in space”; yet, because of his immaterial nature, God “can still actually be somewhere (ontological presence) but [not] present physically.”<sup>38</sup> God in his omnipresence, therefore, “is not limited to being present in just one place at a time . . . he is simultaneously everywhere ontologically.”<sup>39</sup> Scripture describes God's omnipresence as an “essential universal generality of divine presence,”<sup>40</sup> an attribute that reveals God to be nonphysical, beyond localization, and seemingly impersonal.

While it is true that God is unlimited spatially and that he also fills all space, biblical revelation focuses more on his being relationally and redemptively present with man. The biblical text shows us that there is consistent tension between these two realities of God's presence. Along with the philosophical details of his immensity, Scripture more often than not stresses the special and specific manifestation of God as he reveals himself to his people for communion and salvation. It is this particular presence that is detailed in God's being in the midst of his people in Eden (e.g., Gen. 3:8, 10; cf. Revelation 21–22), in the tabernacle/temple (e.g., Ex. 25:8; 1 Kings 8:1–13), in the incarnation of Christ (e.g., Matt. 1:23; John 1:14; 2:21), and, ultimately, in the new heaven and the new earth (e.g., Isa. 66:22–23; Rev. 21:1–5, 22–27).

<sup>37</sup> John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 249.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>40</sup> Daniel Strange, “A Little Dwelling on the Divine Presence: Towards a ‘Whereness’ of the Triune God,” in *Heaven on Earth: The Temple in Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Simon Gathercole (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2004), 212.



Scripture does not highlight “the divine presence as a general immanence” but rather as “the special realization of his presence in salvation and the final acceptance of the justified believer in his eternal presence.”<sup>41</sup> The presence of God detailed in Scripture, therefore, expresses not only the classical doctrine of divine omnipresence—in no way are we wanting to undermine this biblical truth—but also, and I would argue more centrally, a relational-redemptive presence of God.<sup>42</sup> As the Canon of Scripture will show in the chapters ahead, this type of divine presence receives most of the attention because, as I will contend, it is the relational-redemptive presence of God that is both a goal of redemptive history and the means to that goal.

### Definition of the Presence of God

This leads us to the definition of the presence of God that will guide the rest of our journey through Scripture together. To really understand the meaning of the presence of God in Scripture, I have tried to excavate our definition from the Bible’s own structure and substance. When we listen to the rhythms of Scripture regarding this biblical theme, we hear the biblical writers accent two emphases: the eschatological presence of God and the redemptive presence of God.

Regarding the first, we find an unmediated and fully relational manifestation of God’s presence at the beginning and end of redemptive history. As we will see in detail in the next chapter, God is relationally present to Adam and Eve in ways that those this side of the fall cannot comprehend. Interestingly, John the Seer appropriates this same Edenic presence to describe the new creation available to the redeemed in Christ. John goes as far as to depict our new heavenly/earthly home as a place similar to, yet still surpassing, the first garden, with the future reality of the presence of God, unmediated and fully relational, at its center (Revelation 21–22). This is the eschatological presence of God

<sup>41</sup>G. W. Bromiley, “Divine Presence,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 873.

<sup>42</sup>Jim Hamilton provides a helpful example of the distinction between the general immanence of God and his relational presence extended to his people. Hamilton writes: “Consider, for instance, the statement that God was with Ishmael (Gen. 21:20), which immediately follows God’s assertion to Abraham that the covenant would be kept through the line of Isaac (21:12; cp. Rom. 9:7). This shows that God’s presence with Ishmael did not carry the same benefits as His presence with Isaac (Gen. 26:3).” James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 161.

that bookends the biblical story and formulates a central goal for all of God's redemptive purposes.<sup>43</sup>

It is the getting to this wondrous future experience of God's relational presence that is the hard part. To do this, God's eschatological presence gives rise to the redemptive function of his presence. In his providence and for his glory, Yahweh becomes present to restore and re-create his broken world and a broken people. We see that the redemptive aspect of God's presence differs from the relational aspect of God's presence in that it is mediated (thereby limiting the experience of divine-human relations in a way that the eschatological presence does not) and is predominantly defined by its purpose to enter time and space to redeem and reconcile. The redemptive presence of God serves the Lord's own eschatological agenda by saving and preparing a people for the full experience of God's presence that is to come.<sup>44</sup> The redemptive presence of God is the means to the goal of God's eschatological presence.

With this in mind, I want to provide a convenient and succinct definition of the presence of God. Through the excavation of Scripture, we find that the presence of God is *the manifestation of God in time and space—mediated in some sense—working to bring forth redemption and redemption's objectives and, simultaneously, the unmediated, fully relational, and eschatological manifestation of God first experienced in Eden and awaiting the elect in the new creation.*

## THE PRESENCE OF GOD: MANIFEST AND RELATIONAL

Let us think through the individual elements of our definition above. Fundamental to both aspects of divine presence is the reality that God has made himself known. Even though our fallen nature as culpable sinners restrains our knowledge, God's free decision to reveal himself in word and mighty acts has nevertheless blessed us with an understand-

<sup>43</sup>In the next chapter (chap. 3) we will trace out how the presence of God is central to the covenant/redemptive promises that drive the advancement of salvation history to the completion of these blessings. For his people's pleasure and his glory, God promises a genealogy and a geography or, to put it another way, a people and a place among which his perfect, unmediated eschatological presence will dwell.

<sup>44</sup>To see how the redemptive presence of God is the means to the eternally relational presence of God, we will survey the redemptive work of the presence of God in both the Old and New Testaments, highlighting the manifest work of the Lord in the exodus, his promises in the Prophets, the fulfillment of these promises in Christ our Immanuel, the glorious indwelling presence of God in the Holy Spirit, and the divine presence in the new temple of the church.

ing of his presence. In a particular aspect of his revelation, the Lord chose to manifest himself and enter human history in order to disclose himself to humanity progressively over time in a logical and comprehensible way. As Frame summarizes, “God’s presence is temporal; he is present ‘now’” and “he is also ‘here.’ God is present in space as well as in time.”<sup>45</sup> The Lord of heaven is also the Lord of earth, and he is manifest *in* his creation.

From Genesis 3:8, where the Lord is said to “walk” among his people in the garden, to the culminating reality of Revelation 21:1–5, where believers finally enter into the dwelling place of God for all eternity, the biblical authors centrally concern themselves with the special revelation of God in time and space. In harmony with the opening and closing books of the Canon, the rest of Scripture also underscores the manifest presence of the Lord within space and time.<sup>46</sup> God is said to “come” and “go” (e.g., Gen. 17:22; 20:3; 31:24; 35:14; Num. 20:9; 2 Sam. 7:23; cf. Mark 1:14, Acts 1:9–10). He is described as being in the midst of his people and near to creation. We see him come down to evaluate the evil plots of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:5–7) and Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:2). We hear that he inhabits Sinai to covenant with Moses and Israel (Exodus 19; 33). We know that he “tabernacles” in flesh in the coming of Christ (John 1:14).<sup>47</sup>

The Lord manifests his presence in physical and/or audible appearances (e.g., Gen. 32:23; Ex. 3:1–15; 33:18–23; Isa. 49:3). This is evident in the theophanic and prophetic revelations of God detailed in the Old Testament (e.g., Gen. 18:1–15; Josh. 5:13–15; Dan. 3:19–26). More perfectly, it is expressed in the New Testament’s disclosure of divine presence in the person of Christ (John 1:1–17; 14:9; Col. 1:15; cf. 1 Thess. 5:16). We also see that God is manifest spiritually, which is most explicitly communicated in the person of the Holy Spirit and his indwelling believers (e.g. John 14:17).

The biblical expressions of God’s presence revealed in time and space are diverse and, at times, abstract. Even in its physical expres-

<sup>45</sup> Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 97.

<sup>46</sup> There are, of course, dissimilarities between the pre- and post-lapsarian experiences of God’s presence owing to sin, which we will cover later in this section.

<sup>47</sup> The rest of this volume will flesh out the specifics of God’s redemptive relational presence as it is revealed across the Canon. To avoid redundancy, I will save the specific description and evaluation of the examples listed here and others for chaps. 3–5.

sion, God's presence is often obscured by the earthly elements of fire<sup>48</sup> and cloud<sup>49</sup> (e.g., Gen. 15:17; Ex. 13:21–22; Deut. 1:33; 4:11–12, 24; 1 Kings 8:10–12; Ezek. 1:27; cf. Heb. 12:29; Rev. 4:5). When God's presence is made visible, whether through fire, cloud, or some other manifestation, it means there has been a human encounter with the transcendent God. The arrival of the Shekinah glory testifies that the Lord has entered his earthly dwelling place to be present with his people (e.g., Ex. 40:34–38; 2 Chron. 7:1–3)—and yet its description is one of nearness and separation. Thus understood, the glorious presence of God is “an image of divine transcendence as it makes itself known to people. It combines awe and terror and simultaneously invites approach and distance.”<sup>50</sup> God's glory reveals that the transcendent Lord is near, in a locative sense, to his people and working in history for his redemptive purposes while also declaring his holiness and distinction.

We must remember that “Yahweh is God-with-his people.”<sup>51</sup> God becomes present in such ways for the purpose of relationship. As Frame rightfully contends, “[Yahweh] is the one who calls people into fellowship with himself and therefore becomes intimately present to them.”<sup>52</sup> This divine-human relationship was foundational to the experience of Eden.<sup>53</sup> From the beginning of creation, God was rela-

<sup>48</sup>The symbol of fire to reveal the presence of God is significant for many reasons. This imagery pictures God in a certain way. As “fire purifies and destroys so does God purify the righteous and destroy the wicked (‘for our God is a consuming fire,’ Heb. 12:29 RSV). Just as fire lights up the blackness of night, so does God overcome the dark powers of evil. Just as fire is mysterious and immaterial, so too is God enigmatic and incorporeal.” “Fire,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 287.

<sup>49</sup>The cloud, as seen in the exodus narrative, is a symbol of God's presence mediated to his people. In Exodus 16:10 we see that the cloud in the wilderness is a representation of divine glory amid the chosen nation of Israel. Symbolically, the cloud “represents God's presence but also his hiddenness (see Lam. 2:2). No one can see God and live, so the cloud shields people from actually seeing the form of God. It reveals God but also preserves the mystery that surrounds him.” “Cloud,” in Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 157.

<sup>50</sup>“Glory,” in Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 330.

<sup>51</sup>Peter Toon, *Our Triune God* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1996), 89. Toon notes that God's self-disclosure in the name Yahweh tells that he is a God with and for his people. In his own name God has shown himself to be present and relational.

<sup>52</sup>Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 94.

<sup>53</sup>More specifically, God's presence is covenantally relational. The basis of any redemptive relationship with God is established in covenant. When we assess the Scriptures, the purpose of the covenant is clear: God will be with a people to be their God and to make them his people (e.g., Gen. 17:7; Ex. 6:7; 29:45; Lev. 26:12; Jer. 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; Ezek. 11:20; 14:11; 36:28; 37:27; Heb. 11:16; Rev. 21:3). Thus understood, “God is not merely present in the world; he is covenantally present. He is *with* his creatures to bless and judge them in accordance with the terms of the covenant.” Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 94, emphasis his. This promise reveals the relational basis that undergirds each aspect of the covenant the Lord establishes with man. Building on the relational nature of God's presence, the Lord manifests himself in redemptive history for the purpose of salvation. The presence of God centers on redemption. The Lord does not simply want to relate with the unrighteous; he wants to redeem them

tionally present with Adam. He communed and even “walked” with the first man in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8). Paradise was paradise because it was where God’s presence was; Eden was where his perfect and full relationship with creation and his relational presence with man began.<sup>54</sup>

Such a beginning suggests that God has always intended to be relationally present with his people. Moreover, the rest of Scripture details that the recovery and even expansion of this Edenic experience are central to the Lord’s redemptive mission.<sup>55</sup> For this reason, the divine-human experience of Adam in the garden provides a paradigm for what will be the even fuller experience of the eschatological presence of God in the new heaven and new earth. For instance, in the New Jerusalem—where there is no temple and, therefore, no limitation to the dwelling of God as there was following Adam’s rebellion—we find that God’s presence is freely accessed as it has never been before. It is a relationship where the believer is able to bask in the unending and unquenchable light of the divine presence while simultaneously being fully cognizant of God’s grace, his own need for and provision of divine mercy, and his desire to glorify the one in whose presence he shall eternally stand.

#### THE PRESENCE OF GOD: REDEMPTIVE AND MEDIATED

Though it is true that God is manifest and relational throughout all of redemptive history, there is a distinct change in the experience of his presence following Adam’s rebellion. After the fall, God becomes present to restore the relationship lost in sin; God is present to redeem. In a sense, this *is* the storyline of redemption: the Lord time after time extends himself redemptively to a person (e.g., Abraham and the patriarchs) or a people (Israel and the church). He does so in order to redeem this people and reestablish the Edenic-type unmediated, eschatological presence of God found in the new creation. God’s presence after Adam’s

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so that the relationship can be made right and he can be glorified in full. So God becomes manifest in time and space to deliver blessings to the faithful or curses to those who reject him.

<sup>54</sup>Though classifying the experience of God’s presence in a sinless context is difficult and can lead to conjecture, Scripture does indicate that Adam’s relationship with God was free and full. This will be fleshed out in more detail in chap. 3.

<sup>55</sup>See also the more universal reality of God’s presence in the Spirit of God dwelling within creation since its origin (Gen. 1:2).

transgression is best understood as an agent of redemption rather than pure relationship.<sup>56</sup>

With this shift in function, there is a shift in the overall experience of God's presence. Sin separates the unrighteous from the righteous, and the relationship that was once free and unrestricted prior to the fall now demands mediation.<sup>57</sup> We see repeatedly in Scripture that the Lord shrouds his presence in symbol, image, and/or physical barriers because of his holiness and for the protection of humanity.<sup>58</sup> Bavinck explains that the mediated presence of God, particularly in the Old Testament,

does not exhaustively coincide with his being. It does indeed furnish true and reliable knowledge of God, but not a knowledge that exhaustively corresponds to his being. The stone at Bethel, the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire in the wilderness, the thunder on Mount Sinai, the clouds in the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant (etc.) are signs and pledges of his presence, but do not encompass and confine him. Moses, with whom God spoke as with a friend, only saw God after he had passed by him (Ex. 33:23). One cannot see God and live (Ex. 33:20; Lev. 16:2). He is without form (Deut. 4:12, 15). One cannot make an image of him (Ex. 20:4). He dwells

<sup>56</sup>The decision to classify God's manifestation after the fall as his redemptive presence is meant to distinguish this function of the Lord's presence from the relational presence associated with the beginning and end of salvation history. Still, I acknowledge that even as God's presence is an agent of redemption, some form of relationship is implied—a form, however, that is distinct from the relationships known in Eden and the new creation.

<sup>57</sup>As will be shown in detail in the chapters that follow, mediation and God's redemptive presence go hand in hand. The Old Testament is replete with institutions and practices pointing to the mediation of God's presence. For instance, God introduces the temple as his dwelling place among his chosen people. This location is where he has chosen to manifest himself to his people, but at the same time, he has also ensured separation from them through the concentric structure of the building and the partitioning veil of the Most Holy Place. The sacrificial system as a whole was established to address the problem of sin and provide a means by which the Lord could remain in the midst of a sinful people. Sacrifices are offered perennially, and, as with the climactic Day of Atonement, this constant repetition and recurrence reveals that the atonement and forgiveness the faithful remnant seek so diligently will, in all actuality, never be finished in their own power. This requisite distance that stands between God and man is also the basis for the role of mediator evidenced in the persons of Moses, David, and, most importantly, Jesus the Christ. He is the one who rends the veil of the temple from top to bottom and secures the atonement for sin once and for all. Christ's death and resurrection deal sin its death blow (Heb. 10:1–14). He is the final Mediator. Christ stands before the presence of God on behalf of his people, taking their punishment upon himself (Heb. 9:24–28) in order to secure eternal access to the presence of God (Heb. 7:25; 10:18–22; cf. Rev. 21–22).

<sup>58</sup>One of the most famous examples of this mediated divine presence is Moses's encounter with Yahweh on Mount Sinai. In this familiar story, Moses, hoping to know God more intimately, pleads with the Lord to see the fullness of his glory-presence (Ex. 33:17–18). The Lord graciously responds, allowing his presence to be revealed, but only in a restricted way so as not to consume his prophet. Before passing in front of Moses, the Lord hides him in the cleft of the mountain for his own protection, permitting his prophet to see the "back" of Yahweh but not Yahweh's "face" (Ex. 33:18–23). If it were not for the Lord's gracious protection of Moses and humanity from himself, Yahweh's holiness would consume those exposed to his presence (Ex. 33:20). Thus, because of his transcendent holiness, the immanence of God requires mediation.

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in darkness: clouds and darkness are the signs of his presence (Ex. 20:21; Deut. 4:11; 5:22; 1 Kings 8:12; 2 Chron. 6:1).<sup>59</sup>

The moral and epistemic deficiencies marking mankind in the fallen state require this type of mediation.

This veiling allows God to be manifest with his people while, at the same time, protecting the people from his holy and consuming presence. Mediation, therefore, is for both the sanctity of God and the security and furtherance of man (e.g., Num. 4:15; 2 Sam. 6:6–7). Even in God’s merciful manifestations, fallen humanity is laid bare before a transcendent, holy, and infinite being.<sup>60</sup> There is always the stricture of unrighteousness and finitude that separates God from humanity, even in the Lord’s decision to draw near to his people. If not, sinners would be consumed, for the unholy cannot stand in the presence of the holy. As the testimony of Scripture reveals, when Yahweh draws near for redemption, the biblical pattern is that his presence is almost always revealed in a restricted and mediated sense.

## Conclusion

God is present because he wants to be; he is present because it brings him glory. There is nothing forcing him to draw near other than his very character. We see that the transcendence of God is the source of his immanent presence with and for creation. His nature—typified by holiness, control, and authority—is free to relate to a broken world in the ways he deems fit and in ways that exalt him. It is only in this understanding of God that we can truly grasp what the presence of God really is. Out of the Lord’s transcendence and freedom emerges his decision to draw near—to redeem us and to be our hope. God enters this world to establish a covenant relationship with us, to redeem us, and to usher us into new creation filled with his presence. Understand-

<sup>59</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:35.

<sup>60</sup> Even the presence of God in Christ, the fullest manifestation of the Lord, is mediated through the incarnation. In agreement with Chalcedonian christology, we correctly affirm that Christ is fully God. However, as the transfiguration clearly disclosed, Christ’s divinity was veiled in his humanity. Furthermore, in his second coming we will see a fuller revelation of such attributes as his justice, wrath, and conquering. In the fulfillment of this eschatological promise, the restrictions and limitations of God’s presence will no longer be required. The division between the general ontological presence of God and the special particular presence of God will be removed with the coming of the new creation. With Christ’s final work there is a “specializing” of the ‘general’ as there will be no distinction between God’s general presence and special presence as he will be specially present to all in the holy city.” Strange, “A Little Dwelling,” 229.

ing who God is and what his presence means, then, gives us a vision of its importance for Scripture's own theological message. We know that God's presence is both eschatological—it is our future hope—and redemptive—it is our means of salvation. So with our "location scouting" completed and "storyboards" in place, we turn our attention fully to the divine script. In the next chapter we will begin at the most strategic place to understand a story: the story's end.



# “GOD IS WITH US.”

We say this in our sermons, prayers, and songs, but what does it really mean? For many Christians, the whole notion of God’s presence remains vague and hard to define.

Exploring both the Old and New Testaments, Professor J. Ryan Lister seeks to recover the centrality of the presence of God in the whole storyline of Scripture, a theme that is too often neglected and therefore misunderstood. In a world that longs for—yet often struggles to find—intimacy with the Almighty, this book will help you discover the truth about God’s presence with his people and what his drawing near means for the Christian life.

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“Ryan Lister knows more about the biblical teaching concerning God’s presence in the world than anyone else I know. And there is no theme more important to our relationship with God.”

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CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

