

# Lesson 1

## The Essence of God

### I. Definition of Essence

When we speak of the essence of God we are talking about His substance, about what the basic or essential nature of God is.

Essence is opposed to things that are merely thoughts, or a force or power. When we say there is a God, we do not just mean that there is the idea of an infinite Spirit in our minds; **but** that such a Being really exists entirely independent of our idea of Him.

Normally, when we talk about God's essence we describe it in terms of spirituality, self-existence, infinity, and eternity.

### A. Spirituality

Jesus said that God is Spirit (John 4:24)

This means that:

#### 1) God is immaterial.

Jesus said, "a spirit does not have flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39). None of the properties of matter can be applied to God. He does not have a body or physical parts, He is not tangible, He does not have bulk or form.

#### 2) God is invisible.

- John 1:18 - "No one has seen God at any time"
- Colossians 1:15 - "He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God"
- I Timothy 6:16 - [God] "whom no man has seen or can see."

How then are we to respond to passages that say that men have seen God?

(Genesis 32:30; Exodus 3:6, 24:9-10; Numbers 12:6-8; Deuteronomy 34:10; Isaiah 6:1)

Possible answers:

1. Spirit can be **manifested** in visible forms (John 1:32; Hebrews 1:7)
2. Men saw a reflection of God's glory - when we see our reflection in a mirror, in a sense we see ourselves, in another sense we do not literally see ourselves. Men saw the "reflection" of God's glory, not His **essence**.
3. Theophany / Christophany - the **manifestation** of God (or Christ) in a visible form in the Old Testament.

### **3) God is alive.**

- Joshua 3:10 - "By this you shall know that *the living God* is among you"
- Matthew. 16:16 - "You are the Christ, the Son of *the living God*."
- I Timothy. 3:15 - "the church of *the living God*"

If God is alive the implications are that He has feeling, life, power, and activity.

### **4) God is a person.**

If God is a spirit, it follows that He is a person — by person we don't mean that God is human, rather we mean that He is a self-conscious (He is aware of His own existence and actions), intelligent, voluntary being (He has the freedom to make choices, He is not mechanical).

## **B. Self-existence**

God exists because He exists. He is the uncaused first cause. (as opposed to man's existence being dependant upon God).

- Exodus. 3:14 - "I am who I am"
- Isaiah. 43:10 - "Before Me there was no God formed, And there will be none after Me."
- Colossians 1:17 - "He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together."

## **C. Infinity**

Although God reveals Himself as a personal Being whom we can worship and love, and to whom we can pray with the assurance of being heard and answered; nevertheless He fills heaven and earth; He is exalted above all we can know or think. He is infinite.

When we speak of the infinitude of God we mean that *He is without limit or that He is not subject to calculations.*

Infinity may thus be used of God in several ways. God is infinite in relation to time, knowledge, and power.

- ✓ infinity in relation to time = eternity (God is everlasting, without beginning or end; He is not limited by time).
- ✓ infinity with respect to knowledge = omniscience (there is no limit to God's knowledge).
- ✓ infinity with respect to power = omnipotence (God's power is unlimited)

Here our discussion **focuses on the infinity of God in relation to space** which includes the ideas of **immensity** and **omnipresence**.

**Immensity** and **omnipresence** are not different attributes, but the same attribute viewed from in different perspectives.

- **Immensity** means that God exceeds all limitations of space; He cannot be contained or restricted to a particular place. Omnipresence is this same truth viewed in relation to His creatures.
- **Omnipresence** means that God is equally present with all His creatures, at all times, and in all places. He is not far from any one of us. "The Lord is in this place," may be said with equal truth and confidence, everywhere.

In other words, omnipresence means that God is everywhere present in the world; immensity means that He is not limited to or confined by it. (Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 1, 385)

#### **READING:**

Everywhere in the Old and in the New Testament, God is represented as a spiritual Being, without form, invisible, whom no man has seen or can see; dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto, and full of glory; as not only the creator, and preserver, but as the governor of all things; as everywhere present, and everywhere imparting life, and securing order; present in every blade of grass, yet marshalling the stars as a host, calling them by their names. The human heart is in his hands and He turns it even as the rivers of water are turned. He is in all, and over all things; yet essentially different from all, being over all, independent, and infinitely exalted. This immensity and omnipresence of God, therefore, is the state of His divine **essence**, and consequently of His divine power, wisdom, and goodness. (adapted from - Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 1, 385).

#### **The infinitude of God in relation to space (immensity)**

God is not "in space" in the same way that we or angels are. We who have material bodies are bound by space; thus it can always be said that if we are here, we are not there, or if there, then we are not here. That is, a body occupies a single place in space, whereas God, and God alone, fills **all** space. He is not absent from any portion of space, nor more present in one portion than in another (Sam Storms; *Enjoying God Ministries*, [www.enjoyinggodministries.com](http://www.enjoyinggodministries.com)).

God is said to fill all in all (*i.e.*, the universe in all its parts; Ephesians 1:23). Elsewhere the Scriptures ask, "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27; see also 2 Chronicles. 2:6; Isaiah. 66 :1).

Paul says, "in Him all things hold together" (Colossians. 1:17) - implying that His presence is with "all things".

### The infinitude of God in relation to His creatures (omnipresence)

We have already stated that "omnipresence" means that God is equally present with all his creatures, at all times, and in all places. He is not far from any one of us.

There is clear biblical evidence to support this concept.

- "Am I a God who is near," declares the LORD, "And not a God far off? Can a man hide himself in hiding places So I do not see him?" declares the LORD. "Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?" declares the LORD (Jeremiah 23:23-24).
- "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the dawn, If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, Even there Your hand will lead me, And Your right hand will lay hold of me. If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me, And the light around me will be night," Even the darkness is not dark to You, And the night is as bright as the day. Darkness and light are alike *to You* (Psalm 139:7-12).
- It is "in Him we (*i.e.*, all creatures) live, and move, and have our being." (Acts 17:28)

### Several aspects of God's omnipresence call for comment

(adapted from Sam Storms: *Enjoying God Ministries*; [www.enjoyinggodministries.com](http://www.enjoyinggodministries.com)).

1. First, "God is not present in creation as a king in his realm or a captain aboard his ship. He does not act upon the world from a distance; but with his whole being he is present powerfully here and everywhere with respect to his essence and power" (Bavinck, 162).
2. Second, *although God is wholly present throughout all things, He is yet **distinct** from all things.* It does not follow that because God is essentially in everything that everything is essentially God. It is the heresy of pantheism that the being of God is one and the same with the being of all reality. Pantheism asserts that God minus the world = 0; theism asserts that God minus the world = God. The universe is the creation of God and thus, in respect to essence, not part of Him. The creation is a product of the divine will, not an extension of the Divine Being itself. Consequently, although all things are permeated and sustained by God (Colossians. 1:16-17; Acts 17:28), God is not all things.
3. Third, this presence of God throughout all of space does not mean that part of Him is here and part of Him is there. The whole of His being is always everywhere.
4. Finally, matter is in no way displaced or spatially excluded by the presence of God. To put it bluntly, **when God created all things out of nothing, He did not have to "move out of the way" to make room for the world.** He is where it is.

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### The Limitations of Human Metaphors

The doctrine of God's omnipresence is not without its problems. For example, if God is equally everywhere present, in what sense can He be said to "indwell" or "abide in" the Christian but *not* be in the non-Christian?

Paul affirms that you "are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you" (Romans 8:9a). And again, "if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you" (Romans 8:11). It was Jesus who said, "If anyone loves Me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23). It is in Christ, Paul reminds us, that we are "being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Ephesians. 2:22). Christ Himself "dwells" in our hearts through faith (Ephesians. 3:17). Furthermore, the mystery now disclosed to the saints is "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians. 1:27).

Similarly, if God is wholly everywhere present, what can it mean to say the Spirit "descended" at Pentecost or "fell upon" believers (Acts 1:8; 2:17; 10:44-48)? The same question is asked concerning those texts which speak of heaven as the abode of God.

For example:

- "Look down from heaven, your holy dwelling place, and bless your people Israel and the land you have given us as you promised on oath to our forefathers, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Deuteronomy 26:15).
- "From heaven the LORD looks down and sees all mankind; from his dwelling place he watches all who live on earth" (Psalm 33:13-14; see also Psalm 11:4; 115:3).

The portrayal of God in heaven is not as difficult as it may appear. Clearly, the point of such descriptive statements is not to deny God's presence upon the earth, or anywhere else for that matter. Rather, it is to emphasize the transcendence of God over the creature. It is His holiness, His wholly-otherness if you will, that is being magnified.

The other statements noted above, however, are not so readily intelligible. The Baptist theologian J. L. Dagg attempted to explain the problem in this way:

"There are passages of Scripture which speak of God's removing from one place to another; of his approaching and departing; of his dwelling in heaven, and of his coming near to his people, and taking up his abode with them. These are manifestly accommodations of language; just as when eyes or hands are attributed to him. They refer to the **manifestations** of his presence in his various works, and dispensations, in which such changes take place, as are appropriately and impressively expressed by this language" (61).

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**Indwelling**, therefore, is something of a metaphor designed to emphasize the unique personal and saving relationship the Christian sustains to God, be it the new life bestowed and nourished, the new power by which obedience is now possible, or whatever. Thus to be "far" from God is not to be at a distance separated by space, but it is to be ethically and relationally incompatible with Him. Thus, drawing "near" to God does not require a journey, only repentance, faith, and humility (Isaiah 57:15; 59:2; Proverbs. 15:29).

Our attempts at resolving the problem of God's omnipresence and His "special" presence are not entirely satisfactory, however, our inability to reconcile every verse in every respect is due only to our limitations, not to the truths of Scripture.

We know that the Holy Spirit "indwells" Christians but not the lost. We know that God does give Christians a divine and supernatural enablement by virtue of His indwelling Spirit which He does not make available to the unbeliever. We know that at the second coming of Christ the unrepentant will be punished "with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power" (2 Thessalonians 1:9), whereas we who believe shall abide with Him forever.

### Warning and Consolation

The doctrine of God's omnipresence is of immeasurable practical benefit. It is, first of all, a stern warning to the wicked, as Charnock elaborates:

"How terrible should the thoughts of this attribute be to sinners! How foolish is it to imagine any hiding-place from the incomprehensible God, who fills and contains all things, and is present in every point of the world. When men have shut the door, and made all darkness within, to meditate or commit a crime, they cannot in the most intricate recesses be sheltered from the presence of God. If they could separate themselves from their own shadows, they could not avoid his company, or be obscured from his sight: (Psalm 139:12), 'The darkness and light are both alike to him.' Hypocrites cannot disguise their sentiments from him; he is in the most secret nook of their hearts. No thought is hid, no lust is secret, but the eye of God beholds this, and that, and the other. He is present with our heart when we imagine, with our hands when we act. We may exclude the sun from peeping into our solitudes, but not the eyes of God from beholding our actions" (174).

If God's omnipresence frightens the wicked, it should console the righteous. No matter what the trial, no matter the place of its occurrence; no matter the swiftness with which it assaults, no matter the depth of its power, God is ever with us! His loving protection ever abides. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, *for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me*" (Psalm 23:4).

Finally, Charnock reminds us of what a glorious and powerful incentive to holiness is the truth of God's omnipresence:

"Why did David 'keep God's testimonies? Because he considered that 'all his ways were before him,' (Psalm 119:168); because he was persuaded his ways were present with God, God's precepts should be present with him. The same was the cause of Job's integrity; 'doth he not see my ways?' (Job 31:4); to have God in our eye is the way to be sincere, 'walk before me,' as in my sight, 'and be thou perfect. . . . If we considered that God is present with us in our shops, in our chambers, in our walks, and in our meetings, as present with us as with the angels in heaven; who though they have a presence of glory above us, yet have not a greater measure of his essential presence than we have" (179).

#### D. Eternity

The infinitude of God when related to space, is his immensity or omnipresence; when related to duration (time), it is His eternity. As God is free from all the limitations of space, so He is exalted above all the limitations of time. As He is not more in one place than in another, but is everywhere equally present, so He does not exist during one period of duration more than another. With Him there is no distinction between the present, past, and future; but all things are equally and always present to Him. With Him duration is an eternal now. This is the popular and the Scriptural view of God's eternity. (Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, vol 1, 385)

- Psalm 90:2 - "Before the mountains were born Or You gave birth to the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God."
- Psalm 102:25-27 - "Of old You founded the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands. Even they will perish, but You endure; And all of them will wear out like a garment; like clothing You will change them and they will be changed. "But You are the same, And Your years will not come to an end."
- Isaiah 57:15 - For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever,
- Isaiah 44:6 - "Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last, And there is no God besides Me.
- Psalm 90:4 - For a thousand years in Your sight Are like yesterday when it passes by, Or as a watch in the night.
- 2 Peter 3:8 - But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day.
- Hebrews 13:8 - He is "the same yesterday, and today, and forever."
- Revelation 1:4 - God is He "which is [ever is], and which was, and which is to come."

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What is taught in these and similar passages, is:

- First, that God is without beginning of years or end of days. He is, and always has been, and always will be.
- Secondly, that to Him there is neither past nor future; that the past and the future are always and equally present to Him.

Time first has reference to external events. They are ever present to the mind of God. He views them in all their relations, whether causal or chronological. He sees how they succeed each other in time, as we see a passing pageant, all of which we may take in one view.