

“Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that the LORD, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other.” — Deuteronomy 4:39 (NASB)

The account of the prophet Elijah’s encounter with the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel stands out as one of the great stories of the Old Testament. It does so not only because of God’s dramatic manifestation in defense of His servant Elijah, but because of the humor involved. In the competition to see whether Yahweh or Baal was the true God over Israel, Elijah challenged his rivals to a duel of sacrifices—specifically, a competition to see whose sacrifice would be miraculously consumed by fire. The one who could send down fire from heaven was the one who was true. The outcome of the story, of course, is well known. Only Elijah’s sacrifice was consumed—even after being waterlogged several times over. But it is Elijah’s taunting of the prophets of Baal that stands out:

It came about at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, “Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened.” So they cried with a loud voice and cut themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them. When midday was past, they raved until the time of the offering of the *evening* sacrifice; but there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention. (1 Kings 18:27–29)

“Perhaps Baal was preoccupied with relieving himself,” Elijah contends. “Perhaps he’s too far away and cannot hear or secluded in a dark cave enjoying a fat nap.” In his mocking words, Elijah pinpointed a fatal flaw in the doctrine of Baal. In the imaginations of these pagan prophets, Baal was *limited*. He occupied space and was therefore *imperfect*. Such a god was no god—and the fire that consumed Elijah’s soggy sacrifice was proof.

One of the qualities used most often in the Scriptures to define true deity is that of *omnipresence*. That God is not measured or bound by spatial limitations is a clear indication that He is wholly other and worthy of all worship. He is utterly distinct in this way from everything else that exists—material and spiritual. Since this perfection serves as such a fundamental attribute of deity, it is necessary to study it in greater depth.

I. Definition of “Divine Omnipresence”

The term “omnipresence” comes from two Latin terms: *omni* (meaning “all”) + *praesentia* (meaning “presence”). Combined, the terms describe that which is “all-present.”

A. What omnipresence means.

The omnipresence of God refers to His limitless, non-spatial existence; He exists everywhere all at once.

In other words, God is independent *from* space and does not need space to exist. He transcends all spatial limitations and cannot be measured in any way. At the same time, God is present *in* space—present everywhere in all His fullness. As John Feinberg states, “God is present in the totality of his being at each point of space” (*No One Like Him*, 249).

OMNISCIENCE:
omni (“all”) + *praesentia*
 (“presence”) = “all-present”

It is helpful here to answer the question, **what is “space”?** Space can be defined as “the dimensions of height, depth, and width within which all things exist and move” (*Pocket Oxford English Dictionary*, 878). In the language of Scripture, “space” is the total sum of “the heavens and the earth” which God created (Genesis 1:1). Space is what is needed as the realm in which created things can exist. And because they exist in space, created things have measurement; they are marked by height, depth, width, and mass. **But even before the creation of space, God existed in the perfection of His being—not measured by anything.**

A fundamental attribute of all created beings is that they are limited by boundaries. Creatures—even angels—cannot be in two places at once, although they can be in different places in different points of time (regarding angels, see Daniel 4:13; 10:13; Luke 1:19, 26). To do so, they must *move*. Their bounded existence must be transported in order to move from one space to another. **But God never moves.**

The key issue that God’s existence raises is that of God’s relationship to *space*. Based on the biblical witness, theologians have specified it in two categories:

1. **The immensity of God** – God transcends all spatial limitations and cannot be measured by height, length, depth, width, mass—or any other possible conception of measurement. This aspect of God’s relationship to space emphasizes His *transcendence*. God is *above and beyond* His creation—utterly independent of it, wholly other.

To describe God’s immensity further, the 17th century theologian Edward Leigh wrote,

Immensity is such a property of God, by which he cannot be measured or circumscribed by any place, he fills all places without multiplying or extension of his essence. He is neither shut up in any place, nor shut out from any place, but is Immense; he is without place, and above place, present everywhere without any extension of matter, but in an unspeakable manner. (*System or Body of Divinity*, 173)

2. **The omnipresence of God** – God is present in His perfect essence at each and every point in space. There is not a square inch in the farthest reaches of the universe in which God does not exist *in His fullness*. This aspect of God’s relationship to space emphasizes His *immanence*. God is in and within His creation—He fills every point of it, even while remaining wholly other.

As omnipresent, God is neither “diffused” nor “stretched” in His presence to the opposite corners of His creation. As such, He is able to hold together every molecule of all of creation by His immediate involvement (Col 1:17; Heb 1:3). He governs all matter and time not by proxy, but by His direct presence.

But while He is equally present everywhere in the universe He has created, it is important to note that **God is not bound to act the same way in every place**. Although God does not move in His being, He does manifest His presence differently in different places. It is this

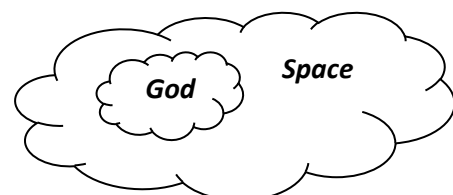
GOD’S TRANSCENDENCE OVER CREATION	
God’s <i>spirituality</i>	God’s transcendence over <i>matter</i>
God’s <i>eternality</i>	God’s transcendence over <i>time</i>
God’s <i>immensity</i>	God’s transcendence over <i>space</i>

perfection that is highlighted when we read that God “moved” in the Garden of Eden when He walked with Adam and Eve (Gen 3:8), on Mount Sinai when He showed His “back” to Moses (Exod 33:23), or on Mount Carmel when He issued fire to consume Elijah’s waterlogged sacrifice (1 Kings 18:38). When God “moved” in these ways, or when He “moves” today to bring revival to certain communities but not others, or salvation to certain individuals but not others, such “movements” do not suggest God’s essence fluctuates throughout the universe at different times and in different ways. Certainly not. Instead, such “movements” are rather the particular display God chooses to make of His infinite, boundless existence within a point of space and time. This is what some theologians call God’s **manifested presence**.

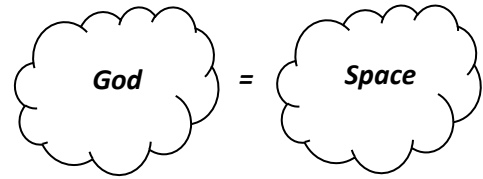
B. What God’s presence is not.

Distortions of God’s relationship to space abound in the religions of the world. These include:

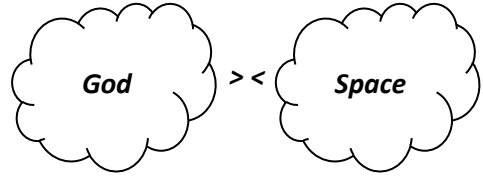
1. **God exists within space.** This is the understanding of *paganism*, evidenced in the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:27–29), or in Greek mythology, wherein Zeus is believed to reside on Mount Olympus.



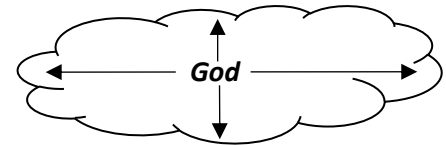
2. **God is synonymous with space.** This is the understanding of *pantheism*, which believes that all that exists—all of space and everything therein—is the divine essence. Pantheism rejects the Creator-creature distinction, seeing no difference between the two.



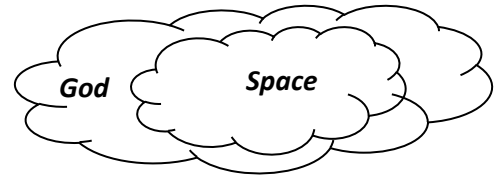
3. **God exists outside of space, not in it.** This is the view of deism and various forms of philosophical transcendentalism. This view teaches that God may or may not exist, but even if He does, He cannot have anything to do with the created world. God's spiritual realm and the realm of the material world do not intersect.



4. **God fills all of space.** This view believes that even though God and space are not synonymous, God still fills all space. Like a gas that disperses in a room, so God's existence stretches to fill the universe. The created physical boundaries of space serve as the boundaries of God. Thus, God is limited.



5. **God is "larger" than space.** This misconception goes a little further than the previous one by asserting that God is just a bit bigger—or perhaps even a lot bigger!—than the universe He created. He exists a few light years—or a few million light years—beyond the boundaries of our universe. Thus, God may be bigger, but He is still measured.



All these views are unfaithful to the testimony of God's own word, thus distorting the nature of His relationship to space and diminishing His perfection.

II. Biblical Testimony to God's Omnipresence

The biblical testimony to God's *immensity* and *omnipresence* can be arranged in four categories—each describing a particular relationship of God to space:

1. **God's creation of space:** *He brought it into existence* (e.g., Gen 1:1).
2. **God's rule over space:** *He owns and controls it* (e.g., Deut 10:14).
3. **God's transcendence over space:** *He cannot be contained by it* (e.g., 1 Kgs 8:27).
4. **God's immanence within space:** *He is wholly present everywhere within it* (e.g., Ps 139:7–16).

The following texts each reflect one or more of these categories in particular ways:

- Genesis 1:1; 14:19-20; Deuteronomy 4:7, 39; Joshua 2:11; 1 Kings 8:27
- Psalm 23:4; 97:9; 123:1; 139:7–16; Proverbs 5:21; 15:3, 11
- Isaiah 7:14 (see also Matthew 1:23); 57:15a; 66:1-2a; Jeremiah 23:23–24; Amos 9:1-4
- Matthew 1:23 (quoting Isaiah 7:14);
- Acts 7:48-50 (quoting Isa 66:1–2a); 17:28a; Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3

Question: Is God even present in hell?

Answer: "I think that if the people in hell could take a vote or have a referendum to deport one person from their midst, to expel one person from hell, I think that the universal vote would be given to God, because the person who is most unwelcome in hell is God Himself. As far as the people in hell are concerned, it would be wonderful if God would desert them altogether. The problem with hell is not simply the absence of God's graciousness. It is the presence of God that is so difficult. . . . He is there in His judgment. He is there in His punitive wrath. He is present in hell as the One who executes His justice on those who are there." —R. C. Sproul

III. What God's Omnipresence Demands from Us

A. **There is no private sin.** God not only “sees” every sin in all its vividness, but He is also present when it is committed. There is no “secret place” to retreat to in order to break God’s law.

- Proverbs 5:21; 15:3; Jeremiah 23:23–24

B. **God is never too far away to save.** Although the doctrine of God’s omnipresence instills fear in every sinner’s heart, it is also the very truth that convinces the sinner that He is able to save.

- Psalm 145:18; Isaiah 59:1.

In fact, the incarnation of the Son of God is God’s most dramatic illustration that He is *with us* to save. After all, His name is “Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23).

C. **The child of God is never alone.** To be one of the redeemed is to possess the guarantee of God’s saving and preserving presence—even when we don’t feel it. In fact, the apostle Paul’s glorious teaching of the doctrine of salvation can be partly summed up with the phrase, “I in Christ, and Christ in me.”

- Psalm 23:4; Romans 8:35, 38–39; Colossians 1:27

This presence is not based on feelings, but on fact—a truth that requires constant reminder (Psalm 42:5).

D. **Worship is necessary in every place.** Because God is equally everywhere, there is no inappropriate setting in which to live for His glory (workplace, backyard, garage, grocery store, commute, etc.). To the Christian, every place is a “worship center”!

- Psalm 16:8, 11; Psalm 139:7; John 4:19–21

E. **God’s manifest presence must be our greatest desire.** The believer’s longing is not merely a better understanding of God’s nearness in His omnipresent existence, but a full and final manifestation of that presence in glory.

- Psalm 73:21–28; Revelation 21:3

For Further Study

Memorize: Deuteronomy 4:39; Psalm 23:4 **Sing:** “He Leadeth Me ” (*Hymns of Grace* #58)

Pray: “Our Father, we know that Thou art present with us, but our knowledge is but a figure and shadow of truth and has little of the spiritual savor and inward sweetness such knowledge should afford. This is for us a great loss and the cause of much weakness of heart. Help us to make at once such amendment of life as is necessary before we can experience the true meaning of the words ‘In Thy presence is fullness of joy.’ Amen.” (A. W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 80).

Discuss:

- 1) In your own words, define God’s “omnipresence” and “immensity.”
- 2) How does the omnipresence of God impact your practice of prayer and adoration?
- 3) Meditate on Psalm 42 and Psalm 139. How do these Psalms instruct you in this perfection of God?
- 4) In what circumstances are you most apt to think that God is absent? How can the biblical witness concerning God’s omnipresence comfort you in such circumstances?
- 5) How does a better understanding of God’s omnipresence assist you in your fight against temptation?
- 6) Can you say that you truly long for the glorious presence of God in the life to come? How can you cultivate this more?

Audio, video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: 7pm, February 22, Truthfulness (livestream at 8pm)