



Responding to God's Presence

2 Samuel 11:1-15; Ps 14; John 6:1-21; Ephesians 3:14-21

There are different ways to respond to God's presence, will, and call to service. Sometimes we seek out God's presence and will. At other times, we run and hide. We trap ourselves within our petty issues and attempt to keep God from interfering with our desires, plans, and dreams. At other times, we are simply surprised to find God in our midst, forgetting our claims of his constant presence.

Hebrew is an interesting language. There are several aspects of its grammar and construction that seem odd from the perspective of English speakers. The verb in Hebrew has no tense in terms of time—past, present, and future. We infer questions of time from the larger context of a verse, not from the choice of verb. Yet there are times when Hebrew leaves out verbs altogether. We are expected to grasp from the context the form of the verb indicated. At times, there is enough guesswork with required that we may be unsure of the specific meaning. Psalm 14 is a good example. Traditionally, we read verse one as "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" More likely, however, the indication of the verse should read as "The fool says in his heart, 'No, God.'" It seems that here, the verb is actually not missing at all. As the rest of the passage denotes, the psalmist is referring to those who would ignore or refuse to follow God's will. That is one common response to God's presence, if a foolish one.

This was in essence David's response to God on the occasion of watching Bathsheba bathe. He decided to ignore what he knew to be God's will and carry on with his own desires and schemes. One step away from *Yahweh's* will called for a second, a third, and the murder of Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, along the way. David's down spiral quickly took him off God's path, but began simply by saying "No" to God.

There were plenty of ways to rationalize his actions. Bathsheba was, after all, parading herself in public. She did not seem too concerned over the consequences from her improper relationship with the king. As king in the cultural and social context, David had political rights to the women of the land. Any other king of the neighboring nations would not have taken a second thought about taking a subject's wife for himself. David at least struggled with issues of guilt and conscience. At the same time, however, that guilt was not enough to turn back from saying "No" to God. Eventually, with Nathan's prompting, he did turn back around, but before taking several steps down a path that would result in planning murder. That was a somewhat drastic response for one reporting to lead the nation in the ways of *Yahweh*, God of Israel.

The crowd Jesus fed with the five barley loaves and two fishes had a very different reaction to God's presence. They wanted to take Jesus, their miracle worker, and fashion him into their king. They wanted a political solution to questions of economics, food, and provision for their needs. Who wouldn't want a king who would feed the masses? It sounded just like their cup of tea. They could brush aside their responsibility to work and just let God take care of their needs through the miracle-working prophet before them. God's blessings with no cost to themselves—that is exactly what they wanted!

Jesus would have none of it, however. Sure, he was willing to feed them on that occasion. He was willing to enact a Passover celebration of sorts with them, reminding the disciples of God's great provision. He was not willing to become little more than a meal ticket, however. Jesus was ready to serve the nation, but not to be reduced to a puppet king to serve the whim of the nation.

The evening of that miraculous feeding, the disciples found a different way to respond to God. They saw Jesus walking across the stormy water toward their boat and responded in fear. This was beyond their expectations. This was not the natural way of the world. This was nothing they were used to experiencing. They struggled with a response to what seemed so unnatural. Their response was fear.

When God challenges us with the unusual—that for which we are unprepared—fear is a ready response. It is a mechanism of protection. We recoil from what we do not understand. We back away, possibly to assess the threat and determine how we should proceed. It did not take the disciples long to get over their fear as Jesus spoke to them and they recognized the one who taught and comforted them. Yet to arrive at that point, they had first to allow Jesus freedom to act beyond the parameters of their limited expectations.

Paul speaks of a different response to God, altogether. He does not refer us to telling God “No.” He does not speak of responding in fear. He does not speak of seeking political solutions in God, or of looking to God as a means to escape responsibility. He speaks rather of God’s indwelling presence that enables us as believers to accomplish God’s will.

This is a shift from the responses to God in the other texts we read this morning. In the passage of David and Bathsheba, attention is not on God, but on David. He is looking at his personal desires, shoving God to the side in order for him to focus on himself. In the feeding of the 5,000 with the loaves of barley, the disciples and crowd alike are not looking at the presence of God. They are focused on the mundane issues of food, money, purchasing supplies, work, and the provision of physical needs. God is an interruption in the focus of their lives. The issues are not much different on the stormy waters of the lake. The disciples fear, not because their focus is on God, but because their attention is placed upon themselves, their expectations, their concerns over danger, survival, and responding to the unknown.

Paul shifts the focus for us. Instead of dwelling on our personal issues, needs, wants, and anxieties, he prays for a focus upon the indwelling presence of God, with all the range of possibility God’s presence entails. This is no prayer stemming from isolation from real life problems and concerns. The preceding verse places Paul’s prayer in the context of the suffering inherent in his own ministry on behalf of Gentiles and the Ephesian believers in particular. Rather than focus on the persecution that forced his departure from Ephesus, Paul looks rather to the indwelling presence of Christ. It is this presence that empowered Paul to minister and face the struggles and conflicts of life. It is in responding to God’s presence that Paul expects the Ephesian believers to rise above the turmoil in their own lives.

As the psalmist suggests, turning our attention from God is a foolish exercise. Unfortunately, it is also an all too common practice. We focus so much attention on ourselves that we ignore God, effectively saying, “No, God” or even “There is no God” by our actions. If we ignore God’s presence and will in our lives, what good does it do to claim allegiance to God, or even to claim God’s existence?

If we are to rise above the folly of refusing God’s will and the recognition of God’s presence, we must refocus our attention according to Paul’s prayer. We must look not so much to our desires, fears, and concerns, but rather to the amazing possibilities opened by the indwelling presence of Christ Jesus. In his presence, we are enabled to accomplish much more than we might ask or imagine. Are we ready to look to Christ instead of lesser issues that would ignore God’s very existence?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*