

Is God Everywhere at Once?

Description



A study related to the SDA
Sabbath School Lesson for 2021, 2nd Quarter
The Promise: God's Everlasting Covenant
Week 11
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This week's lesson is entitled, "New Covenant Sanctuary." Sunday's lesson is entitled, "Relationships," and discusses the reason why God wanted His people to build a sanctuary on earth, namely, relationship. Yes, God wanted to have a close relationship with His people on earth, and that is why He wanted them to build Him a dwelling place, that is, so He could "tabernacle" which means "dwell" among them (Exodus 25:8), and even walk among them.

The lesson points to Leviticus 26: 11-12 which reads,

11 I will set My tabernacle among you, and My soul shall not abhor you.

12 I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people

From verse 3, we learn that this is a conditional promise. God was saying that he would dwell among the people if they obey his commands.

Logically (or conversely), if they didn't obey His commands, He would not dwell and walk among them.

Notice also that this promise was spoken in future tense, meaning that God was not already dwelling among them. So, if God wasn't dwelling among them, and if the possibility of Him dwelling among them in the future was conditional, that obviously implies that there are places where God is not. But if there are places where God isn't, what does that mean for the idea that God is everywhere? As much as that is a common idea, does the Bible even say that God is everywhere? This passage certainly seems to be in conflict with that idea!

This was one of those things that was difficult for me to come to terms with when I first came to realize what the scriptures were describing as far as the locality of the members of the Godhead goes. If we assume that God is everywhere at once, we miss the profound lesson of passages like Leviticus 26 – that God's presence among us is conditional. God's presence is not a given, it is predicated on our actions. The idea of God being located everywhere at once is not supported by the scriptures. In fact, there are many scriptures that plainly describe God as located in a definite place at each moment. We will take a look at some of them today.

Psalms 14:2 says,

The Lord looks down from heaven upon the children of men,
To see if there are any who understand, who seek God.

So, here we see that the Lord is described as looking down from heaven...He is not everywhere constantly observing what is in his immediate presence.

Psalms 102:19 reads,

For He looked down from the height of His sanctuary;
From heaven the Lord viewed the earth

These two passages from the Psalms are just two examples of scriptures that describe God's typical dwelling place – in heaven (better translated “the skies”), in his sanctuary. But there are times when God wants to take a closer look at something happening on earth, in which case, he comes down from his sanctuary to the earth. This is exactly what it describes in Genesis 11:5-7 when God came down to see the tower of Babel.

Genesis 11:5-7 reads,

5 But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. **6** And the Lord said, “Indeed the people *are* one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. **7** Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.”

We could always explain this away and say that God is everywhere regardless of what these passages say, but is that really what we want to do? As I hope you have all read from Ellen White before, we should not come to the study of the Bible with our preconceived ideas and try to interpret the Bible to match our own ideas. Rather, we should rid ourselves of our preconceived ideas and study the scriptures with a willingness to accept what they plainly teach, even if it contradicts what we have always thought.

And Genesis 18:20-21 tells of a similar scenario in relation to Sodom and Gomorrah. It reads,

20 And the Lord said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave, **21** I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me; and if not, I will know.”

Another relevant passage for our subject is 1 Kings 19:11-12. Here God is passing by Elijah who is standing on Mount Horeb. It reads,

11 Then He said, “Go out, and stand on the mountain before the Lord.” And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces before the Lord, *but* the Lord *was* not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, *but* the Lord *was* not in the earthquake; **12** and after the earthquake a fire, *but* the Lord *was* not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.

So here, not only is God passing by Elijah who is on a mountain, but it specifically says where God is NOT located. The point here is that there are places where God is described as not being. And if there are places where God is not – he clearly isn't everywhere.

Now, some may wonder then about the Holy Spirit. In other words, although scripture is very clear that God is localized, what does the New Testament say about the Holy Spirit?

Well, let's read John 16:7. Here Jesus is comforting his disciples by saying,

7 Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.

From this statement, we can see the locality of both Jesus and the Holy Spirit – our other Helper. The Holy Spirit needed to wait for Jesus to return to heaven in order to come to earth in His place. It is obviously not the case that either of them was already in both places, which also means that neither of them were “everywhere” since that would require being in both places along with every other place.

As we said earlier, God’s presence among us is predicated on our actions. This is even the case with the Holy Spirit. If we grieve the Holy Spirit, the Spirit also will depart from us. Ellen White said,

“O my brethren, will you grieve the Holy Spirit, and cause it to depart? Will you shut out the blessed Saviour, because you are unprepared for His presence? Will you leave souls to perish without the knowledge of the truth, because you love your ease too well to bear the burden that Jesus bore for you? Let us awake out of sleep. ‘Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour’ (1 Peter 5:8).” Ellen White, *The Review and Herald*, March 22, 1887

So yes, the Holy Spirit’s presence is conditional. And yes, the Holy Spirit is localized just like the rest of the Godhead.

Interestingly, the Pioneers and Ellen White also argued that God could not be everywhere at once. James White, in an article entitled “Personality of God,” addressed the idea that “God is everywhere – at once.” He starts out by stating the objection to his argument.

“OBJ. – God is everywhere. Proof. Ps. 139:1-8. He is as much in every place as in any one place.

ANS. – 1. God is everywhere by virtue of his omniscience [that is – by His great knowledge of the affairs on earth and the universe], as will be seen by the very words of David referred to above. Verses 1-6. ‘O Lord, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my down-sitting and mine uprising; thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compasses my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thy hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is high; I cannot attain unto it.’ “

When reading Psalm 139, people often infer that God is everywhere at once, but this passage simply does not make any positive statement to that effect. We know that God has ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands of angels serving Him. Why would this be? If God could be everywhere, why would this even be a benefit? In reality, however, since God can’t be more than one place at a time, it is a great benefit. The recording angels are gathering important, valuable information. If God is everywhere at once, their work is redundant at best. Superfluous.

Now here is the second part of his answer to the objection. James White continues,

“2. God is everywhere by virtue of his Spirit, which is his representative, and is manifested wherever he pleases, as will be seen by the very words the objector claims, referred to above. Verses 7-10. ‘Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.’ God is in heaven. This we are taught in the Lord’s prayer. ‘Our Father which art in heaven.’ Matt. 6:9; Luke 11:2. But if God is as much in every place as he is in any one place, then heaven is also as much in every place as it is in any one place, and the idea of going to heaven is all a mistake. We are all in heaven; and the Lord’s prayer, according to this foggy theology simply means, Our Father which art everywhere, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is everywhere. Again, Bible readers have believed that Enoch and Elijah were really taken up to God in heaven. But if God and heaven be as much in every place as in any one place, this is all a mistake. They were not translated. And all that is said about the chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and the attending whirlwind to take Elijah up into heaven, was a useless parade. They only evaporated, and a misty vapor passed through the entire universe.” James White, *Personality of God*

Here we see that the Holy Spirit is manifested where ever God pleases. Again, the idea here isn’t that the Holy Spirit is already everywhere. James is arguing the opposite. The Holy Spirit can “manifest” here or “manifest” there, but not everywhere at the same time. Else, the rest of the paragraph is groundless and illogical. So, no one can hide from God because God is able to know where everyone is, and he is able to send the Holy Spirit to that place.

As surprising as this is, I’m sure you can see quite plainly that James White was teaching that God is not everywhere at once. And do you remember what we pointed out earlier – that his comments here are in response to an objection? In other words, James White was teaching something, and then someone objected to his teaching by claiming that God is everywhere, and then what we just read was his rebuttal to the idea that God is everywhere. So...what was James teaching that the person was objecting to? Well, that is the subject of the article we quoted, “Personality of God.” In this article, James White’s main point is that the God of the Bible is a physical, material being, composed of a body with body parts – just like we are. You can read the article by clicking the link [here](#). The materiality of God doesn’t fit very well with the idea that God is everywhere, which is why people might object on that basis. But as James White showed, that objection is not grounded in the scriptures. God’s locality and materiality wasn’t an idea peculiar to James White, it was actually a foundational doctrine for the whole SDA movement. It wasn’t just about the materiality of God – that was just one part of the broader idea that was foundational to Seventh-day Adventism; that is, materialism.

Materialism is the belief that all that exists, and anything that even could have existence (even heaven and God) is made up of matter, and thus everything that has existence is subject to both space and time – and has a location within space and time. The idea that something could exist outside of matter is called “immaterialism.” “Spiritualism” is another term defined the same way. The idea that God, or anyone, could be everywhere at once is one of the spiritualistic ideas the pioneers were opposed to.

Again, the SDA pioneers’ belief and position that God is not everywhere but is instead localized in a particular place. was part of their overall view that everything (including God) is physical.

The SDA foundation for faith and hope was based on material reality, the same basis for hope given in the scriptures. Again, we invite you to investigate these articles by our SDA pioneers for yourself. Please see the study, “Materialism, Our Forgotten Foundation,” by Trent Wilde.