

4. The Fullness and Paul Tillich's Inescapable God

In his sermons Paul Tillich boiled down the thoroughness of his *Systematic Theology* into many great paragraphs. The paragraphs of this chapter are taken from his sermon on the 139th Psalm. This sermon is Chapter 6 in the book of sermons entitled *The Shaking of the Foundations* published by Charles Scribner's Sons in 1948. The book is now out of print but has been prepared for Religion Online by John Bushell. Put the title of the book in your search engine to find a complete copy.

The opening verses of the 139th Psalm are:

Lord, thou hast examined me and known me.
Thou knowest all, whether I sit down or rise up;
 thou hast discerned my thoughts from afar.
Thou hast traced my journey and my resting places,
 and art familiar with all my paths.
For there is not a word on my tongue
 but thou Lord knowest them all.
Thou hast kept close guard before me and behind
 and hast spread thy hand over me.
Such knowledge is beyond my understanding,
 so high that I cannot reach it.
Where can I escape from thy spirit?
 Where can I flee from thy presence:
If I climb up to heaven, thou art there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, again I find thee.
If I take my flight to the frontiers of the morning
 or dwell at the limit of the western sea,
even there thy hand will meet me
 and thy right hand will hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely darkness will steal over me,
 night will close around me,"
darkness is no darkness for thee
 and night is luminous as day:
 to thee both dark and light are one. (The New English Bible)

Tillich begins his sermon:

"Where could I go from thy spirit and where could I flee from thy face?" These are the central words of the great 139th Psalm. They state in the form of a question the inescapable Presence of God. Let us consider this statement and the powerful images in which the psalmist tries to express it. God is inescapable. He is God only *because* He is inescapable. And only that which is inescapable is God.¹

This sermon expands our vision of the experience of God. God is not only the final limit to all our cares and strivings. God is not only the enigmatic source of our lives and our cares. God is also a Presence that haunts us, follows us, meets us, knows us, knows everything about us, sees our intimate secrets, forces a companionship upon us that we cannot escape. This is an

¹ Tillich used the now obsolete convention of referring to God as He as well as employing "men" and "his" to mean both men and women. I have not attempted to upgrade his language, for I want the reader to understand that my commentary is based on his words, not on some paraphrase of them.

experience of God as Fullness. This Infinite Inescapable Fullness, this Every-thing-ness in which all things cohere, is God. Have we experienced this fullness? And have we experienced ourselves attempting to escape this Fullness?

In the second paragraph of this sermon Tillich suggests that fleeing to heaven means seeking a place of perfection, truth, justice, peace, a place of man's own making. And he suggests that fleeing to Sheol means fleeing to death. He says, "I am convinced that there is not one amongst us who has not at some time desired to be liberated from the burden of his existence by stepping out of it." Of our flight to the ends of the earth Tillich says, "Our technical civilization attempts just that, in order to be liberated from the knowledge that it lacks a center of life and meaning. The modern way to flee from God is to rush ahead and ahead, as quickly as the beams before the sunrise, to conquer more and more space in every direction, in every humanly possible way, to be always active, to be always planning, and to be always preparing. But God's hand falls upon us; and it has fallen heavily and destructively upon our fleeing civilization; our flight has proved to be in vain." And finally, Tillich speaks of the flight into darkness as flight into forgetfulness. Again, he notes that no escape is possible in this direction; our forgetfulness is overcome by the Truth.

To fully participate in what Tillich is pointing to we might each ask ourselves: When have I tried to flee into a heaven of my own making? When have I sought some sort of death rather than face the challenges of life? When have I sought travel, adventure, movement as a means of escaping from my life? And when have I sought forgetfulness in order to escape Reality?

The third paragraph of this sermon is, I believe, one of the greatest paragraphs in all of Tillich's writings. I will quote it in full.

"Where could I go from Thy Spirit? O, where could I flee from Thy face?" The poet who wrote those words to describe the futile attempt of men to escape God certainly believed that man desires to escape God. He is not alone in his conviction. Men of all kinds, prophets and reformers, saints and atheists, believers and unbelievers, have the same experience. It is safe to say that a man who has never tried to flee God has never experienced the God Who is really God. When I speak of God, I do not refer to the many gods of our own making, the gods with whom we can live rather comfortably. For there is no reason to flee a god who is the perfect picture of everything that is good in man. Why try to escape from such a far-removed ideal? And there is no reason to flee from a god who is simply the universe, or the laws of nature, or the course of history. Why try to escape from a reality of which we are a part? There is no reason to flee from a god who is nothing more than a benevolent father who guarantees our immortality and final happiness. Why try to escape from someone who serves us so well? No, those are not pictures of God, but rather of man, trying to make God in his own image and for his own comfort. They are the products of man's imagination and wishful thinking, justly denied by every honest atheist. A god whom we can easily bear, a god from whom we do not have to hide, a god whom we do not hate in moments, a god whose destruction we never desire, is not God at all, and has no reality.

This paragraph makes clear that the God Tillich recommends for our devotion is not an idea created by human beings, not a doctrine that makes sense of something, or of everything. And God is not a thing, not even a supernatural thing that visits us once in a while. We do not flee any of these false gods. And we do not find them inescapable. Indeed, we can easily dismiss them as having no deep relevance for our lives.

Also, Tillich says that God is not the same as the universe. In other words, God is not the cosmos nor cosmogenesis. We might wish to forget some of the more violent and terrifying elements of cosmic emergence, biological evolution, and human history. But since we are part of these processes, we can also feel rather comfortable with them. Tillich, however, sees God as an

inescapable Presence that shines through every process of physical emergence, evolution, human history, and daily life, reaching into the very center of our conscious being like some nosy photographer who publishes every secret movement of our inner and outer lives.

Tillich says we can all experience this Presence. He cites the writings of the atheist Friedrich Nietzsche as an example. Nietzsche created the figure of the Ugliest Man who murdered God because he could not bear to be seen through and through. Tillich also cites the experience of Martin Luther, who found that he did not love but rather hated this snoopy, ever-present judging God. Tillich says that it is these real experiences that have given us the Christian doctrines of Divine Omnipresence (God is everywhere) and Divine Omniscience (God knows everything). As doctrines, omnipresence and omniscience can be easily dismissed by the theoretical atheist. But as experiences, the omnipresence and omniscience of the Awesome Infinite Presence are inescapable. Nevertheless, when human beings first experience these aspects of the divine Presence, they find themselves already in flight from them. In the ninth paragraph of his sermon Tillich says:

Let us therefore forget these concepts (omnipresence and omniscience), *as* concepts, and try to find their genuine meaning within our own experience. We all know that we cannot separate ourselves at any time from the world to which we belong. There is no ultimate privacy or final isolation. We are always held and comprehended by something that is greater than we are, that has a claim upon us, and that demands a response from us. The most intimate motions within the depths of our souls are not completely our own. For they belong also to our friends, to mankind, to the universe, and to the Ground of all being, the aim of our life. Nothing can be hidden ultimately. It is always reflected in the mirror in which nothing can be concealed. Does anybody really believe that his most secret thoughts and desires are not manifest in the whole of being, or that the events within the darkness of his subconscious or in the isolation of his consciousness do not produce eternal repercussions? Does anybody really believe that he can escape from the responsibility for what he has done and thought in secret? Omniscience means that our mystery is manifest. Omnipresence means that our privacy is public. The centre of our whole being is involved in the centre of all being; and the centre of all being rests in the centre of our being. I do not believe that any serious man can deny that experience, no matter how he may express it. And if he has had the experience, he has also met something within him that makes him desire to escape the consequences of it. For man is not equal to his own experience; he attempts to forget it; and he knows that he cannot forget it.

So what would we like to forget that we cannot forget? And how does this affect us when we experience that Presence that knows all and forgets nothing? Do we want, like the Ugliest Man, to murder that Presence? Do we want, like the atheist, to dismiss such experiences as meaningless?

Instead of murdering God, the Palmist, according to Tillich, offers another solution.

Thou it was who didst fashion my inward parts;
thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb.
I will praise thee, for thou dost fill me with awe;
wonderful thou art, and wonderful thy works.
Thou knowest me through and through;
 my body is no mystery to Thee,
how I was secretly kneaded into shape
 and patterned in the depths of the earth.
Thou didst see my limbs unformed in the womb,
 and in thy book they are all recorded;
as day by day they were fashioned,
 not one of them was late in growing.
How deep I find thy thoughts, O God,

how inexhaustible their themes.
Can I count them? They outnumber the grains of sand;
to finish the count, my years must equal thine.

According to Tillich, in these verses the Psalmist sees that – “The God whom he cannot flee is the Ground of his being. And this being, his nature, soul, body, is a work of infinite wisdom, awful and wonderful. The admiration of the Divine Wisdom overcomes the horror of the Divine Presence in this passage.” Here are Tillich’s concluding words in the 11th and 12th paragraphs of this sermon:

There is grace in life. Otherwise we could not live. The eyes of the Witness we cannot stand are also the eyes of One of infinite wisdom and supporting benevolence. The centre of being in which our own centre is involved is the source of the gracious beauty which we encounter again and again in the stars and mountains, in flowers and animals, in children and mature personalities.

The Psalmist thus conquers the horror of the all-reflecting mirror and of the never-sleeping Witness by his recognition of the infinite mystery of life, its Ground and its meaning.

I, like Tillich, have been moved by these verses of this Psalm. As I read them over now, I feel the benevolence of this ever-present all-knowing Awesomeness. I feel my own soul’s readiness to side with the Infinite over against my own desire to flee this exposing Presence.

But neither the Psalmist nor Tillich’s sermon ends at this point. We now see the Psalmist expressing hatred toward all those who do not share in this siding with the Infinite.

O God, if only thou wouldst slay the wicked!
If those men of blood would but leave me in peace—
those who provoke thee with deliberate evil
and rise in vicious rebellion against thee!
How I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee!
I am cut to the quick when they oppose thee;
I hate them with undying hatred;
I hold them all my enemies.

I thoroughly identify with the arising of such feelings. When I am experiencing God as my friend, the bulk of humanity feels like my enemy. Indeed, the Psalmist, like myself, feels plagued by this rebellious species. The Psalmist feels and admits a hatred that I, and most of us, tend to suppress.

In the concluding sentences of paragraph 13, Tillich provides the following perspective on these feelings:

Their mood is quite different from that of the previous words. Praise turns into curse. And the trembling of the heart before the all-observing God is replaced by wrath towards men. This wrath makes the Psalmist feel that he is equal with God, the God from Whom he wished to flee into darkness and death. God must hate those whom he hates; and God’s enemies must be his enemies. He has just spoken of the infinite distance between his thoughts and God’s thoughts, but he has forgotten. Religious fanaticism appears, that fanaticism which has inflamed the arrogance of Churches, the cruelty of the moralists, and the inflexibility of the orthodox. The sin of religion appears in one of the greatest Psalms. It is that sin which has distorted the history of the Church and the vision of Christianity, and which was not fully avoided even by Paul and John. Of course, we whose religious experience is poor and whose feeling of God is weak should not judge too harshly those whose lives burned with the fire of the Divine Presence and spread this fire ardently all over the world. Nevertheless, the sin of religion is real; and it contradicts

the Spirit of Him Who forbid His disciples again and again to hate His enemies as the enemies of God.

Tillich shows us that each of us is vulnerable to the same fanaticism that we condemn in radical Muslims, vindictive Jews, and fundamentalist Christians. When we as religious fanatics side with God, we are tempted to believe that God is on our side. It is easy for us to lose sight of the truth that a fundamental question remains, "Are we on God's side?" It is easy for us to lose sight of the truth that the benevolence of God extends to those who are the enemies of God. When we lose sight of that, we ourselves become one of the enemies of God that our own hatred will hate.

The Psalmist recognizes this truth and thus concludes the Psalm with some of the most amazing and moving verses in the entire Bible:

Examine me, O God, and know my thoughts;
test me, and understand my misgivings.
Watch lest I follow any path that grieves thee;
guide me in the everlasting ways.

The Psalmist has returned to his original theme, the human tendency to flee from the all-knowing God. But now the Psalmist is asking God to know, to examine the Psalmist's own tendencies to flee into foolishness or to bolt into rage. The Psalmist asks for guidance from the very same inescapable Presence from which he wished to flee in the earlier verses of the Psalm. Here is a portion of the concluding paragraph of Tillich's sermon:

The Psalmist has overcome his wavering between the will to flee God and the will to be equal with God. He has found that the final solution lies in the fact that the Presence of the Witness, the Presence of the centre of all life within the centre of his life, implies both a radical attack on his existence, and the ultimate meaning of his existence. We are known in a depth of darkness through which we ourselves do not even dare to look. And at the same time, we are seen in a height of a fullness which surpasses our highest vision. That infinite tension is the atmosphere in which religion lives. . . . It is the tension in which modern man lives, even though he may have lost the way to traditional religion. A human being can be ultimately judged by whether or not he has reached and can stand that tension. . . . May each of us have the strength and the courage to bear that vocation! For it is to that vocation that we are called as men.

We might search through our own experience to answer this question: what is that "darkness through which we ourselves do not even dare to look"? And, how do we sense ourselves "seen in a height of a fullness which surpasses our highest vision"? And finally, let us ask ourselves if we truly see in our own lives the presence of this ever-present, all-knowing God that Tillich and the Psalmist recommend for our adoration. If we do not, maybe one day we will. If we do, then we have on our hands this question: are we are ready to accept Tillich's challenge to take up the vocation of living this tension between our darkness and our fullness that Tillich claims we are called to as human beings?