

God With Us

An Examination of Sacred Space - Creation to Consummation

I. Introduction – Discerning Sacred Space

It has often been stated that reality is what a person perceives it to be. While this assertion is not objectively true, it does reflect the fact that every human being's personal contact with and comprehension of objective reality are the product of his own sensory and cognitive processes. That is, *personal awareness and comprehension of what is real are necessarily mediated through and conditioned by the person's own faculties.*

- This is the reason for the Bible's insistence that the capacity to accurately perceive and interact with reality depends upon a properly functioning mind.
- It is the premise for Jesus' familiar appeal, "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."

The principle that reality is mediated to human consciousness is as true of spiritual realities as natural ones. Just as a person's perception of a flower is really only his brain's construction of a biochemical "image" from a sequence of electro-chemical signals, so also his discernment of spiritual truth is mediated to him by the internal faculty of spiritual "sight" – a faculty which he possesses by virtue of his created design, but which has become dysfunctional through the Fall.

A. Eyes to See

Because of what transpired in Eden, human beings must be enabled to "see what is not seen" and to "hear what is not heard." When we look at a flower our sense is that we are seeing the flower itself, but really our brains are simply presenting to our consciousness electro-chemical data processed from a broad array of signals that originated with light striking cells on the back of our eyes. We "see" only the things that reflect light within the energy spectrum that these specialized cells are responsive to. Higher and lower energy levels are not detected, not because they don't exist, but because they exist outside of the range of our perception. In this regard reality is what we perceive it to be; *if something is imperceptible to our natural senses, for us it doesn't exist.*

This truth has crucial spiritual implications: As it is in the natural realm, spiritual realities are "real" for us only when they are perceptible. But our spiritual faculties have become impaired; just as damaged eyes are unable to properly receive and process energy within the visible spectrum, so fallen man cannot properly receive and process the spiritual "data" that is ever-present and constantly presses itself upon his mind and soul. Like Elisha's servant and Christ's hearers, we have to be given eyes to see and ears to hear (cf. 2 Kings 6:1-17; John 10:22-27).

With respect to the mere existence of the divine, the Bible and the human soul are in agreement. Being created in God's image, people are unable to escape their innate awareness of spiritual realities. This is reflected in mankind's ubiquitous and irrepressible religiosity. All people are religious, though the way individuals and groups conceive religious "truth" and construct religious frameworks differs greatly. (Even the atheist is religious in that he interacts with and reaches conclusions regarding the notions of deity and spiritual reality.)

Every human being is spiritually aware and has some conception of divine realities, and religious systems are devised, not merely as a way to give formal definition to those realities, but more importantly as the means for *interacting* with the divine. That is to say, every religious system has its goal in making tangible what is spiritual and, therefore, intangible. And it does so for the purpose of securing an interface between the divine and the human; all religion, whatever its form, seeks to make present, comprehensible and accessible that which is “otherworldly.”

Fundamental to the way religion accomplishes this is the use of *symbols* and *sacraments* (sacred rituals). Tangible entities (images, altars, temples, sacred objects, texts, etc.) and rituals (such as sacrifices, prayers and incantations) are formulated and instituted for the purpose of providing a bridge between the material and spiritual worlds. Spiritual realities are represented or symbolized in physical form, and these physical constructs then provide tangible connection to the thing they represent, making that thing present and accessible to human interaction through ritual.

This dynamic is clearly seen in the role of religious images and icons. Such things are constructed as representations of particular entities, and the belief is that the physical representation provides a point of interface between the worshipper and the entity itself. When a person falls down before an image and offers his petition or praise to it, his conviction is that he is actually communicating with the entity corresponding to the image.

Two things are evident from these considerations:

1. The first is that, along with an innate awareness of divine reality, people also sense that there exists a **distance** between them and the divine. The biblical explanation is that every person instinctively senses his estrangement from the God whose image he bears, though few ever give any substantive form to that subjective impression.
2. As all people are innately aware of the divine and also sense a separation between them and it (however those things may be conceived), they equally feel the “pressure” of the need to **bridge** that separation. This is what religion is all about. Not surprisingly, as people don’t think of the distance between them and the divine in terms of the biblical concept of *estrangement*, neither do they view their efforts to close that distance in terms of *reconciliation*. Far from seeking reconciliation in the biblical sense, human religion seeks interaction with the divine for the sake of personal benefit.

As Paul walked through the city of Athens he was confronted with an endless array of temples and sacred altars representing and dedicated to Greece’s pantheon of gods (Acts 17:16ff). Every deity had its own physical symbols and sacraments which provided a point of interface for the worshipper. Thus the Athenians went so far as to construct an altar to “an unknown god.” If such a god existed, they wanted to be sure they could make contact with it and honor it in worship. Paul recognized the perceived connection between physical symbols and the spiritual entities they represented, and so rebuked the Athenians for believing that divine beings dwell in temples constructed by men (17:24). The notion that human beings can make a god present among them, accessible to them, and receptive to their petitions by devising symbolic and sacramental forms is absurd on the face of it. But it is the essence of all human religion because of what transpired in Eden. What man gained by his self-assertion is the delusion of mastery over the divine.

This brief consideration of Paul's interaction with the Athenians serves to connect the above generic discussion with the present topic of the biblical theme of God's dwelling place. If God exists and wishes to make Himself known to men, He must enter into time and space in a way that He becomes available to human faculties; the intangible must become tangible. As seen, men employ symbols and sacraments in order to bridge the gap between them and the divine, and, condescending to human limitations, God has, since the Fall, employed these same means in making Himself known and present in human experience.

Religion is nothing more than man's attempt to connect with the spiritual realities he innately senses. Those realities – even when wrongly perceived or imagined – must be mediated to human consciousness and understanding, and religion serves that end. It is no different with man's awareness of God: God is real, but He must be made real to human beings. He must communicate Himself to them in a perceptible way – first, that they would know that He *is*, but, more importantly, that He is *accessible* to them; that they are able to encounter Him.

This mediated knowledge of God begins at the level of doctrine. That is to say, it begins with the cognitive awareness of who God is and where He “resides” as the Creator in relation to His creation. But it goes beyond that: it rises to the level of personal experience, for authentic knowledge is always experiential. *In the end, the goal of human existence is communion with God, and this involves more than simply knowing that He is; it involves being with Him where He is.* Thus the way the Christian perceives the unseen reality of God and His dwelling place will determine the whole tenor of his life, not just as a Christian, but as a human being.

B. Ears to Hear

Within the scope of theological revelation, the theme of God's dwelling place arguably holds the place of greatest irony. Because God's habitation – its nature, form, and purpose – in relation to His creation is basic to His interaction with it, it is also fundamental to every biblical, theological, and doctrinal topic. And yet, it is undeniably one of the least considered and least understood matters within the entire realm of Christian thought and study.

The thesis behind this study is that a truly biblical conception of the person and purpose of God, as well as the nature, purpose, function and destiny of His creation, is impossible without a correct understanding of the reality and role of the divine dwelling place, sometimes referred to by the descriptive phrase, *sacred space*. And if this thesis is correct, it follows that the notion of sacred space is foundational and absolutely crucial to an accurate understanding of all other biblical doctrines. Whether one considers the doctrine of God, man (including the doctrine of sin), Christ, salvation, the Holy Spirit, the Church, heaven, hell, or any other component of biblical truth, each is vitally dependent upon and inseparably intertwined with the doctrine of God's dwelling place.

Undoubtedly some will regard these claims to be an instance of overstatement or overgeneralization, but soon enough such objections will be set aside. The appearance of exaggeration is the result of Christians thinking simplistically and narrowly (if not incorrectly) about the topic of God's dwelling and its relation to His presence in and purpose for creation. This is easily demonstrated by considering how Christians commonly conceive of *heaven*.

1. When Christians think of God’s habitation, they invariably think of a place called heaven. This is not incorrect as far as it goes, but most have a conception of heaven that is, at best, partial and indistinct; to that extent it is necessarily flawed. The common notion of heaven is that it is an ethereal, spiritual place that exists somewhere “up there”; a place where God sits on His throne and administers His rule over His creation while looking down upon the earth and its people and activities. This conception is understandable given that the Bible employs this sort of imagery in its portrayal of heaven.
 - a. First of all, Scripture uses spatial – and most especially *vertical* – language to speak of heaven. Notably, Hebrew and Greek each employ the same word to refer to the sky, the realm of the celestial bodies, and the place of God’s habitation. But this language is metaphorical, not literal: the “up there” representation of heaven is intended to suggest the ideas of *remoteness* and *superiority*. Heaven is “above the earth” in the sense that it is unearthly; it is a higher mode of reality.

The otherworldly quality of heaven is further emphasized by the strange and unearthly images associated with it (cf. Ezekiel 1:4-28, 8:1-4, 10:1-22). Similarly, its status as a higher realm or mode of reality is highlighted by the “enameled” imagery the Bible uses to describe it. It is associated with glass, crystal, and luminous metals such as bronze and gold. Even more, it is a jeweled realm, marked by the radiance characteristic of precious gems (cf. Ezekiel 1; Revelation 4:1-6, 21:9-21). These things emphasize *permanence* (expressed by hardness and durability) as well as *glory* (expressed by value, brilliance, and luminosity).
 - b. One important and obvious reason – though not the only reason – for representing heaven as above the earth is the fact that it is God’s dwelling. Because He is “high and lifted up,” so also is the place of His habitation (cf. Isaiah 6:1-3, 57:15).
 - c. And because God dwells in heaven, it is the place from which He exercises the various aspects of His rule over His creation. Thus heaven is portrayed in the imagery of a temple and throne room (Psalm 11:1-4, 103:19; Isaiah 6:1-4, 66:1; Ezekiel 1:26-28, 10:1-5; Daniel 7:1-10; Revelation 21:22-22:1-2; etc.).
 - d. In keeping with heaven’s status as God’s habitation, the Bible uses the language of obscurity and inaccessibility to describe it. It is a realm obscured from human sight and removed from human access. Significantly, God must grant men both the sight of it and entrance into it (cf. God’s presence at Sinai and the Holy of Holies with Acts 7:54-56; Hebrews 11:8-16; Revelation 4:1, 15:5, 19:11, 21:25ff).
2. Heaven is God’s dwelling place, but specifically *it is the realm in which God is present in relation to His creation*. Most importantly, it speaks not just to **where** God is, but **how** He is with respect to His creation. With this understanding, two things should be obvious: The first is that heaven is a biblical concept having greater scope and significance than many Christians imagine. At the same time, God’s habitation must be conceived more broadly than the place we call “heaven.” Otherwise, what are we to make of Moses’ declaration in Psalm 90:1 or the insistence of the writer to the Hebrews (12:22-24)?