

God With US

I. Genesis 1

Genesis one gives us the account of God's work in creating—and perhaps we could also say, in *building*—the heavens and the earth. On the **FIRST** day, there was light and darkness, day and night. On the **SECOND** day, a vault over the earth called the sky, separating the waters above from the waters below. On the **THIRD** day, God gathered the waters below into one place so there was both dry land and seas. And then he filled the dry land with vegetation, plants, and fruit trees. On the **FOURTH** day, God placed lights in the vault of heaven to rule over the day and over the night and for signs and seasons. On the **FIFTH** day, God filled the sea with living creatures and made birds to fly across the face of the heavens. On the **SIXTH** day, God filled the dry land with all kinds of animals. And then on the same day He made man, male and female, in His own image and likeness. The sixth day wasn't the climax, though. It was only the *seventh* day that God sanctified and blessed.

- Genesis 2:1-3 – Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

“Rest,” in the bible, is associated with “house” and “home.” The purpose and destiny of the world, then, was to be own God's *resting* place – His cosmic temple, as it were. We could say that the goal of God's “work” in creating and building was God's “rest” in His “house” and temple.

- Isaiah 66:1 – Thus says the Lord, “[The heavens are] My throne and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house *you* could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest?
- Psalm 104:2-4 (104:13; Isa. 40:22; Amos 9:6) – [He covers Himself] with light as with a cloak, stretching out heaven like a tent curtain. He lays the beams of His upper chambers in the waters; He makes the clouds His chariot; He walks upon the wings of the wind; He makes the winds His messengers, flaming fire His ministers.

When God rested from His work, we could say that He was taking up residence in His world, His temple – His resting place. And so God is *present* in *His* world. He says in Jeremiah, “Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?” (Jer. 23:24). The heavens are His throne and the earth is His footstool. But isn't this overwhelming for us, as the tiny human creatures that we are? The prophet Isaiah puts it this way:

- Isaiah 40:22 — It is He who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; it is He who stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them out like a tent to inhabit.

God is present everywhere in His world. And yet so far, we could also say that He's immeasurably remote and far off. But then we come to Genesis chapter two.

II. Genesis 2

In Genesis 2 we learn that the LORD God, who created the heavens and the earth, planted a garden in the land of Eden. Moses calls it "the garden of the LORD". Ezekiel calls it the "garden of God" (Gen. 13:10; Ezek. 28:13; 31:8-9). If the universe is the place of God's cosmic, immense, unbounded *presence*, then we could say that this garden is the place of God's special, personal, and intimate *presence*. The one who creates and shapes and forms and calls into being in Genesis one is called by His "title" – *Elohim*, God, the supreme being. The one who plants a garden in chapter two is called by His covenant name – *Yahweh Elohim*, the name by which He may be *known* and *loved*. Here, then, is the most wonderful thing of all:

- Genesis 2:8 – The LORD God [*Yahweh Elohim*] planted a garden in Eden... and *there* he put the man whom he had formed.

When God created man, He didn't just put him on the earth, He placed him in His own royal garden. God is present everywhere in His world, seeing all and knowing all; but this garden was the place where we could be satisfied in the "special" *presence* of our Creator. **God** *with us* and *among us*. It's only in this light that we can begin to understand the weight and the burden of chapter three.

III. Genesis 3

- Genesis 3:1-10, 22-24 – Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate [guilt]. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths [shame]. And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself" ... Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—" therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

From that moment on, we could say that God has been both all around us *and* infinitely remote and far away. We're still living in *His* world. The heavens are still His throne and the earth is still His footstool. He's still everywhere that we could ever go (Ps. 139). But sin has created this gulf between us. We were expelled from His garden. The wages of sin, says the Apostle Paul, is death, both physical and spiritual. And what is spiritual death? It's the misery of being everlastingly cut off from the *presence* of God in hell (2 Thess. 1:9) – it's the torment of being finally cut off from every blessing that find its source in Him. Hell, at its most basic, is God no longer with us or among us. This is how far we fell. It's how much we lost. And yet this was our choice; it's what we wanted.

IV. Tabernacle and Temple

But still, God pursued us. Still, it was God's purpose to have a people among whom He would live and dwell. Many years later...

- Exodus 25:1, 8 – The LORD said to Moses: “Let [the people] make me a sanctuary, **that I may dwell in their midst.**”

Here is the wonderful condescension of God. The God whose throne is in the heavens and whose footstool is the earth will dwell in a tent—and later, in the temple—*among sinful men*. Just like the garden faced east, so the tabernacle and temple faced east. There was a lampstand in the tabernacle made in the likeness of a tree with branches and flowers (Exodus 25:31-36). It reminded Israel of the tree of life that once stood in the garden. The walls and doors of Solomon's temple were engraved with palm trees and open flowers (1 Kings 6:29-35). The temple was now the place of God's special *redeeming* presence among His people. In other words, God with us and among us now to save and to redeem. God with us and among us to reconcile and restore. *Now* there was an altar in the temple court and sacrificial blood that God mercifully provided for His people. The psalmist wrote of this temple in Jerusalem:

- Psalm 84:1-4, 10 – How lovely is your *dwelling place*, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in your *house* [in the temple courts], ever singing your praise! ... For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the *house* of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.

But for all the parallels between the garden and the temple, there was this difference: The people of Israel weren't allowed *in* the temple. They couldn't see the lampstands in the likeness of a tree or the palm trees and open flowers engraved on the walls. They could go into the court where the altar was – but no further. Even the Levites, who had special privileges, couldn't enter the temple. Just like Adam and Eve were barred by the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life, so also Israel was barred from entering the temple that stood in their midst. Only the priests—representing the people—could pass into the holy place where there was the bread of the presence, and the lampstands, and the altar of incense –

all things that represented the blessings of God with us and among us. And yet even for the priests, there were restrictions. It's important that we understand this.

- Exodus 28:31, 33-35 – You shall make the robe of the ephod all of blue... On its hem you shall make pomegranates of blue and purple and scarlet yarns, around its hem, with bells of gold between them... And it shall be on Aaron when he ministers, and its sound shall be heard when he goes into the Holy Place before the LORD, and when he comes out, so that he does not die.
- Exodus 28:42-43 – You shall make for them linen undergarments to cover their naked flesh [guilt and shame]... and they shall be on Aaron and on his sons when they go into the tent of meeting or when they come near the altar to minister in the Holy Place, lest they bear guilt and die.
- Exodus 30:20-21 – When they go into the tent of meeting... they shall wash with water, so that they may not die. They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die.

Bells of gold, linen undergarments, washing with water. These were all just pictures of our unworthiness as sinners to live in the holy presence of our Creator. These were all object lessons intended to teach God's people their need for a better way. And so these restrictions and warnings weren't harsh or uncaring. They flowed from God's love and kindness. Once a year on the day of atonement, the high priest would enter the most holy place of God's special presence where the mercy seat was. Again, in these verses we see pictures and object lessons pointing us to our need for a better way.

- Leviticus 16:1-4, 11-16 – The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD and died, and the LORD said to Moses, “Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die. For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat. But in this way Aaron shall come into the Holy Place: with a bull from the herd for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. He shall put on the holy linen coat and shall have the linen undergarment on his body, and he shall tie the linen sash around his waist, and wear the linen turban; these are the holy garments. He shall bathe his body in water and then put them on... Aaron shall present the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. He shall kill the bull as a sin offering for himself. And he shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the LORD, and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small, and he shall bring it inside the veil and put the incense on the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony, so that he does not die. And he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy seat on the east side, and in front of the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times. Then he shall kill the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it over the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat. Thus he shall make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins. And

so he shall do for the tent of meeting, **which dwells with them in the midst of their uncleanness.**”

On the one hand, God had put His dwelling place—the place of His special presence—in the midst of His covenant people. This was the source of their blessing and joy. On the other hand, God’s presence remained a holy presence, a consuming fire. Therefore, we—in our sinfulness and our uncleanness—could not dwell there. The temple was a constant reminder of what we lost and why we lost it. But the temple was also the constant *promise* of a better way; of God with us and among us — one day *without* restrictions; *without* barriers or walls. When the psalmist rejoiced in God’s presence at the temple, He rejoiced only insofar as the temple was a type and a picture pointing him to Jesus Christ. So now we read, again, from Matthew chapter one:

V. The Incarnation

Matthew 1:18-23 – Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child **from the Holy Spirit**. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is **from the Holy Spirit**. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, **for he will save his people from their sins.**” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, **God with us**).

What does it mean when a *virgin* is with child, and the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit? What does it mean when this child is said to be the one who will save His people from *their own sins*? It means that God has come to be *with* us — with us to save and to redeem; with us to reconcile and to restore. It means that the God whose throne is the heavens and whose footstool is the earth has come to live among us, and to open, again, the way into His presence. We read in John chapter one:

- John 1:1-3, 14 – In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made... And the Word became flesh **and dwelt [tabernacled/tented] among us**, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

God with us and among us isn’t simply a baby in a manger, or even a man walking the streets of Galilee and Judea. This baby in the manger was the promise that God was about to open the way into His own holy presence with no more walls or barriers and no more threat of death. Jesus was made like us in every respect (Heb. 2:17). He was conceived and formed in Mary’s womb. He was born into this world as a baby. He grew up through all the stages of childhood into adulthood. He experienced hunger, thirst, and weariness. He was tempted in all things as we are – *yet without sin* (Heb. 4:15). And then He was “lifted up” on a cross to die (Jn. 3:14; 8:28; 12:32-34). But since this Jesus is also the one in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to

dwell (Col. 1:19), therefore His death had infinite worth and value as a payment and satisfaction for my sin and yours. So Matthew tells us that as He hung on the cross:

- Matthew 27:50 – Jesus cried out with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

No more walls. No more barriers separating God from His covenant people. Here's the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy:

- Isaiah 51:3 – Indeed, the Lord will comfort Zion; He will comfort all her waste places. And her wilderness He will make like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and sound of a melody.

God with us and among us isn't simply a baby in a manger; it's Christ in us; who by grace repent of our sin and put our *hope* and *trust* in Him. In Christ, crucified and resurrected, and through the Holy Spirit that He sends to indwell His own, **God is with us and among us** — saving, redeeming, reconciling, blessing; and fitting us ultimately for the *consummation* of His special, redeeming presence in a new creation.

VI. The Consummation

Listen to the promise Jesus makes in Revelation chapter three:

- Revelation 3:12 – “The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. *Never shall he go out of it.*”

Think what this promise must mean to the one who can say with the psalmist: “How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD ... *a day* in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere” (Ps. 84:1-4, 10). In Revelation chapters 21 and 22, the Apostle John writes:

- Revelation 21:1-3 — Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more [no more barriers]. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.”
- Revelation 22:1-4 — Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him.

In Solomon's temple, the most holy place of God's special presence was built as a perfect cube ("twenty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and twenty cubits high"; 1 Kings 6:20). We remember that only the high priest was permitted to enter that place, and only once a year on the day of atonement. But now the *home* of all God's redeemed is the New Jerusalem – a city that's represented to us in the book of Revelation as a perfect cube ("Its length and width and height are equal"; Rev. 21:16). One day, then, the redeemed will live forever in the *personal presence* of the Creator God, who, in the fullness of time came into this world as a baby, lying in a manger (cf. Gal. 4:4). God *with* us.

Conclusion

Heaven is where everyone knows what it is to say: "In Your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11). Is this the heaven you're longing for? Is this the heaven that you know is yours even now, through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ? How good it is to confess with the Apostle Peter:

- Acts 4:12b — There is no other name under heaven *given among men* by which we must be saved.