

Hope in Heavenly Places

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Why is the heavenly sanctuary important?

A discussion of the significance of the heavenly temple should examine the nature of God, His interaction with His creation, and the genuineness of this relationship. God's interaction with and presence within creation are deeply significant theological topics, and the heavenly temple plays a key role in their understanding.

1. Nature of God: God is unique. Everything within the universe belongs to the sphere of that which has been created, but not Him. Theologians refer to this dimension of God as His transcendence; in other words, He is above and independent of the cosmos. Creation is not large enough to contain Him (1 Kings 8). With respect to Creation, God is by nature the distant One. Creation did not emanate from Him, but came into existence through His word; it is outside Him. Since He is life in Himself, nothing in nature can contribute to God's existence or is needed by Him to preserve Himself. Nature is the exclusive habitat of finite creatures.

Although God is by nature transcendent, He is by choice the ever-present One. Theologians refer to this as divine immanence; God is present within His creation. This is a rejection of deism, according to which God created the universe then left it to itself. In deism God would be an absolutely absent Creator. The immanent God is clearly depicted in Genesis 2, where He is described as being active within Creation as He creates human beings. The biblical God condescended to live close to His creatures, within the space He created for them. Creation is an expression of His love.

2. Nearness of God: Now we have to ask: how is God present within His creation? Different, and at times complex, answers have been provided to this question. One of the most common ones is omnipresence, that is to say, He is everywhere. This answer risks the heresy of pantheism—that God is an impersonal force that permeates everything and therefore everything in its deepest essence is divine.

But the biblical God is a person. The Bible speaks about God's omnipresence in the sense that nothing within the cosmos takes place outside His presence and in total independence of His actions. This understanding of omnipresence assumes that He is everywhere because He is somewhere in particular. He located Himself within the space of His creatures in a specific place. The transcendental God became the immanent God by entering our space at a particular locale. Describing what took place in the beginning, the psalmist unapologetically states, "Your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting" (Ps. 93:2). God "established His throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all" (Ps. 103:19). For the psalmist, the throne of God is located in His heavenly temple (Ps. 11:4). The unique fragment of space where the infinite and the finite intersect each other, and where God's nearness is seen and experienced by His

intelligent creatures, is what we call the heavenly temple. Its majesty and grandeur remains for us mysterious and unimaginable. This place is as old as creation itself.

3. A Real Temple: The heavenly temple is not an incidental detail in biblical theology, or an unnecessary speculation. It is a real place that reveals the personal character of God and His intense love for His creatures. This temple was not made by human hands but is a unique act of divine creation. Its reality is affirmed by the fact that it is a cosmic center of worship for innumerable intelligent beings (Ps. 89:5, 6; Dan. 7:9, 10; Rev. 4:2-7), and the center of God's cosmic kingdom (Ps. 103:19). From there He reveals His will to His creatures (Ps. 103:20, 21). From this majestic temple God works in the resolution of the cosmic conflict through judgment (Ps. 11:4-6; 33:13-15). From there He comes down and delivers His people from the oppression of the enemy (Ps. 18:6-9, 16, 17), grants forgiveness of sin (1 Kings 8:30, 38, 39), and blesses and justifies His people (Deut. 26:15; 1 Kings 8:32). In this unique space Christ ministers for us before the Father (Heb. 7:25). Through Christ, God came to our sinful world, and we experienced His saving nearness (John 1:14).