

The First Temple

Genesis 2:4-25

When we stop long enough between singing carols and sipping cocoa to think about what we're *actually celebrating* at Christmas—the incarnation of Christ, the eternal Son of God leaving the glory of heaven to take on human flesh and dwell with his people—when we stop long enough to think about what we're celebrating, we realize how truly *strange* Christmas is.

There is a God in heaven who not only made us, but wants to be with us. And who not only wants to be with us, but who actually came down to be born as a baby and live among us. The Son of God took humanity into his divinity, becoming true God and true man at the same time, and dwelt with his people on earth. As the Gospel of Matthew tells us, Jesus is Immanuel—*God with us*. (Matt. 1:23; cf. Isa. 7:14).

Yet as strange as this sounds, the idea that God wants to come down and be with his people is not really new. It's not something that just comes onto the page when you turn to Matthew's Gospel and read the Christmas story. Rather, it's an essential part of the entire biblical story. We've seen it recently in our series through Exodus. When God reveals his name to Moses—I AM who I AM—at the heart of his name is his desire and plan to be *with* his people: "I AM *with* you," he repeats several times (Exod. 3:12; cf. 3:14-15; 4:12, 15). "I have *come down* to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians" (3:8). Later we'll see his holy presence descend on Mount Sinai as he makes a covenant with Israel—with thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud and trumpet blast (19:16-18; 24:15-18). Then, he'll give detailed instructions for Israel to build a tabernacle, a portable temple: "And let them make me a sanctuary, *that I may dwell in their midst*" (25:8; cf. chs. 25-31). And the book concludes with the completion of the tabernacle and the glory of the LORD filling it (40:34-38). As Exodus 29:45-46 summarizes, "I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them."

So there is a very real sense in which Christmas—the incarnation—is a fulfillment of Exodus—God's desire to dwell with his people.

But as I mentioned, God's desire to dwell with his people is much bigger than Exodus. It's one of the most consistent themes of the entire biblical story. From his presence with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden in Genesis, to his presence with Israel through the tabernacle at first and later through the temple, to the filling of the church with his Spirit on Pentecost, to the promise of a new heavens and new earth where "the dwelling place of God is with man" (Rev. 21:3)—God's intention is to be with his people. And the climax of that desire, the centerpiece of his grand plan, what ultimately makes it possible for a holy God to dwell with sinful people, is the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Matthew 1:21-23 reads:

“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).”

And so what we’re going to do this Advent, is trace this theme, this promise, this glorious reality of God’s desire to dwell with his people, to be *with* us, throughout the biblical story, starting today with what we might call the “first temple”—the Garden of Eden.

God’s Vision for Creation

The book of Genesis begins with really two accounts of one creational event. Chapter one shows us a poetic portrait of God’s creative work, structured in seven days, with the ultimate purpose of introducing us to God. He is the main character here—a God whose activity demonstrates his supreme power (he speaks everything into being), his sovereign authority (he’s the one who sees what is good), and his intentional purpose (his creation exist for a reason, ultimately for the sake of his glory). But the way he chooses to accomplish that purpose—the filling of all creation with his glory and worthy reputation—is through a people made in his image, who relate to him as his children (Gen. 1:26-27; cf. Gen. 5:1-4), who reflect his holy character (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18), and are called represent his kingdom on earth (Gen. 1:28; cf. Ps 8).

But the camera zooms in, if you will, to give us another angle on God’s creative activity, this time given to us in the form of a narrative, starting in Genesis 2:4. “These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.”

Chapter 2 gives us a more intimate portrait of God’s creative activity. He gets his hands dirty—planting a garden, forming the man from the dust, building a woman from the man. We see his love for his people more clearly, in the precision and care with which he creates the first man, forming him from the dust of the ground and breathing into his nostrils the breath of life. We see the beauty of his place displayed more brilliantly, with the boundary waters of the garden, the quality of its natural resources, the vastness of its produce. We see his rule over his people on display, calling them to work and keep the garden, and warning them against the one threat that exists in the garden—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And we see his blessing, through his abundant provision, and through his determination to provide the man with a helper suitable for him.

But can we really say that what we see in this chapter is a description of a *temple*? I said earlier that the Garden is the first temple. Is that true? Or am I just reading that into this for the sake of a clever sermon series?

What is a Temple?

The first question we have to ask in order to answer that is, What is a temple? Simply put, a temple is where you go on earth to meet with the God who is in heaven. It’s a “dwelling place” for God, a “sanctuary,” a “tent of meeting.” God says to Israel in Exodus 25:8, “And let them

make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. . .” But’s it’s not as though God is confined to that dwelling place. As Solomon prayed during the dedication of Israel’s temple, “Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!” (1 Kgs. 8:27).

And so a temple is how God makes his presence known among his people in a special way. It’s like an overlap or an intersection point between heaven and earth, between God’s hidden realm and the one we inhabit. It’s where you go on earth to meet with the God who is in heaven.

Eden, the First Temple

So is Eden properly understood as a temple—as a dwelling place for God among his people, where you go on earth to meet with the God who is in heaven?

There are several reasons that the author of Genesis wants us to understand Eden as a temple, even the model temple. First, there are multiple parallels between the way that the garden is described, and the way that the tabernacle and temple are described later in Israel’s story.

- The tabernacle and temple are filled with all sorts of garden-like imagery—carvings of gourds and open flowers, palm trees, pomegranates, and lilies (1 Kgs. 6–7).¹ All most likely echoes of that original garden-temple.
- Genesis 2 highlights the presence of gold and precious stones in the land (2:12). Virtually everything in the temple is overlaid with gold, and onyx stone is one of the specific stones used for its construction (cf. 1 Chron. 29:1-5)
- The picture of a river flowing out of Eden and dividing to water the rest of the earth in 2:10-14 is something we see in the visions of God’s future temple in Ezekiel and Revelation (Ezek. 47:1-12; Rev. 22:1-2).
- And then there’s the imagery of the cherubim, this heavenly creature. There are only two contexts in which cherubim are ever mentioned in Scripture. The first is the Garden, when, after Adam and Eve sin, God places the cherubim with a flaming sword at the entrance to guard the way to the tree of life (3:24). The other is the tabernacle and temple, where God commands Moses to make two statues of cherubim stationed on either side of the ark of the covenant, the footstool of God, the touchpoint of his special presence (Exod. 25:18-22), and later, the two statues of cherubim placed on either side of the holy of holies in the temple, where the ark rests (1 Kgs. 8:6-7). It’s an unmistakable echo of the garden and the guarding of God’s special presence.

The second indication that the Garden is a type of temple is the way Adam’s service in the garden is described, with what many have suggested is actually *priestly* language. In Genesis 2:15, “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.” Now we read the phrase “work it and keep it” and think weeding and watering and tending the garden, and that’s what we should think in this context. What’s interesting though, is that the same phrase translated “work and keep” here, is often used to describe the priests’ duty in the temple, where it’s usually translated “worship and obey,” or “serve and guard”—the priest’s job

¹ See G.K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (NSBT 17; Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 71-72.

was to obey God and take care of the temple (e.g. Num. 3:7-8; 8:25-26).² And so as one author argues, “The man’s life in the Garden was to be characterized by worship and obedience; he was to be a priest, not merely a worker and keeper of the Garden.”³

Finally, and most importantly, we should see Eden as a temple for the simple fact that *God is there*. That’s the main defining factor—the presence of God among his people. In Genesis 3:8 we see “God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.” Just as “Israel’s temple was the place where the priest experienced God’s unique presence, [so] Eden was the place where Adam walked and talked with God.”⁴

And so Eden is the first temple—the temple “upon which all of Israel’s temples were based.”⁵ Great! So what? What does it matter that Eden was a temple? What does that actually tell us about God’s vision for his world? About God’s plan for humanity and his relationship with his children? What difference does this all make? (And what does it have to do with Christmas?)

A Temple-Shaped Vision of Life

What this tells us is that *we were made to enjoy God’s presence as his priests serving for the sake of his glory*. We were made for this. And what I want to do now is draw out four practical implications from understanding Eden as the first temple, as God’s creational design. And then I want to make one observation of what that has to do with Christmas.

1. We were made to enjoy God’s unmediated presence.

There was in Israel’s tabernacle and temple a curtain, a veil separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place (the Holy of Holies), where God takes up residence above the ark. God dwelt in the midst of his people, but he dwelt behind the veil. Not just anyone could approach him. Not without washings or sacrifices. No one could see him and live. And even today, long after the destruction of Israel’s temple, there remains an unseen divide between heaven and earth—God’s realm and our realm.

That is not God’s original design. That is an accommodation because of our sin. We were *made* to enjoy God’s unmediated presence. There was no curtain in the garden. God walked and talked freely with Adam and Eve. There will be no curtain in the new creation.

And until then, we will never quite feel at home on this earth. Not until we are united with God, enjoying the intimacy of his unmediated presence. *Unmediated* meaning nothing separating us—no curtain, no veil. Just the glory of God’s presence. *That’s what we were made for*. And we will never be fully at rest until it’s true of us.

² See Beale, 66-70; J. H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 100-102.

³ Sailhamer, 101.

⁴ Beale, 66.

⁵ Beale, 79-80.

And in the meantime our hearts long for his presence. Saint Augustine put it this way: “You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.”⁶ The Psalmists put it like this:

- Psalm 42:1-2: “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?”
- Psalm 27:4: “One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.”

Do you have this longing? Do you feel incomplete? A healthy discontent with this world? We were made to enjoy God’s unmediated presence.

2. We were made to serve as priests to God.

The LORD God put Adam in the garden to work it and keep it. That was his priestly service. In other words, that was his act of *worship* to God. And when God creates the woman and gives her to the man in marriage, and says to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it” (1:28), marriage and family is also an act of worship. Because we were made to serve as priests to God, *everything* we do in life is an act of worship. We are either worshiping God in what we do and how we do it, or worshiping something else.

So often we buy into the idea that the world can be divided into the sacred and the secular, the religious and the everyday. Things I do that are overtly religious or spiritual—those are for God, those are my acts of worship. Going to church, praying, reading my Bible, helping someone in need. But when I go to school on Monday morning, or to work—that’s non-religious. That’s secular. I’m not really representing God or serving God, I’m just working, or playing, or resting, or whatever I’m doing.

If we understand that Eden was a temple, that Adam’s cultivation of *plants* was a priestly service in the presence of God, and getting married and raising kids was a priestly service in the presence of God, then we understand that all of life is sacred. Everything we do—changing diapers, changing oil, crunching numbers, taking tests, grading tests—we do as servants of the king. As representatives of his kingdom. As an act of worship to him. And if we’re not serving God, that means we’re serving something else.

Romans 12:1 says it like this, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” We were made to serve as priests to God.

3. We were made to live under God’s rule and enjoy his blessing.

What should our service look like? God doesn’t just place Adam in the Garden to figure out how to survive on his own. He provides for him, takes care of him, and so part of Adam’s service is enjoying his blessing.

⁶ Augustine, *Confessions* (Book 1).

Nor does God place Adam in the Garden to let him write his own story or chart his own course. He instructs him by his Word. God is a King and a Judge. And so serving God as priests means living under his Word.

This is about the last thing most people today want to hear. That we have answer to someone other than ourselves. We are taught from the earliest educational cartoons to the latest memes on social media that *autonomy*, being true to yourself, believing in yourself, following your own star, you do you, is what it really means to live. But that's not what we see in God's design.

According to God's design, we were designed to be dependent on God, not independent from him. We were made to live under God's rule and enjoy his blessing. But God rules us—he gives his instruction—not to enslave Adam, but to free him to live life to its fullest. To enjoy his unsearchable provision, but also to know that there is one tree that you need to avoid, and if you take from it, everything will fall apart. God's Word is not oppressive; it is loving and liberating. And enjoying God's presence is impossible, worship is impossible, enjoying his blessing is impossible, apart from listening to God's Word.

4. We were made to fill the earth with God's glory

What is the purpose of all of this—enjoying God's presence, serving as priests, living under his rule and blessing? Put another way, since we're talking about God's design for creation, what is the purpose of life? It's *not* simply about what we get out of it. Fulfilling our potential, achieving our dream (though there is nothing more fulfilling). It is ultimately about filling the earth with God's glory. His worthy reputation.

That's what happens to a temple when God takes up residence in it—it is filled with his glory. Exodus 40:34: “the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD *filled* the tabernacle.” 1 Kings 8:11: “the glory of the LORD *filled* the house of the LORD.” That's what's supposed to happen with Eden.

But God's vision is much bigger than Eden. Listen again to his instruction in Genesis 1:28: “Be fruitful and multiply and *fill the earth* . . .” And what are they supposed to fill the earth with? People, obviously. But what are people according to God's design? *Image bearers of God*. Reflections, representations of who he is in all his glory and beauty.

And so in filling the earth with people, they are filling the earth with God's glory. Eden, as it were, was designed to expand.⁷ God's vision, as Habakkuk 2:14 puts it, is that “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” We were made to fill the earth with the glory of God.

We were made to enjoy God's presence. To serve him as priests, under his rule and blessing. To fill the earth with his glory. In a word, we were made for *worship*. That's what understanding Eden as the first temple tells us. So what does all this have to do with Christmas?

⁷ See Beale, 81-82; C.H.J. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 131.

What Does This Have to Do with Christmas?

Genesis 3. That's what. God's vision for his temple is cut short when Adam and Eve choose to worship themselves rather than their creator. Adam failed his priestly role in guarding God's dwelling place from the evil serpent,⁸ and then rejected God's rule by taking from the tree they were told not to. As a result, the people made to enjoy God's presence became separated from that very presence. Kicked out of the garden; shut off from the temple. Sentenced to death for their sin, living under God's curse, cut off from the presence of his glory (cf. 2 Thess. 1:6-10).

And this problem in Genesis 3 cries out for a solution. If we were made to enjoy God's presence as his priests serving for the sake of his glory, but that's no longer possible in Eden, then we need a new temple, a new way for God to dwell with us. But that also means we need a new priest, one who is actually qualified to enter God's presence on our behalf.

This need for a new temple and a new priest, this longing for God's presence, and this plan and desire of God to dwell with his people, are all central to the biblical story that unfolds from Genesis to Revelation. We're going to trace how that unfolds in the weeks ahead, as we build toward the climax of God's plan to be *with us* at Christmas, the incarnation of Christ. But as a sample of where the story is going, and why we are able to go about the business of serving God and filling this earth with his glory right now, even though we're not yet home, let's close with Hebrews 10 this morning:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God,²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. (Heb. 10:19-23)

⁸ See Beale, 70.