
PRESENCE

December Devotional

Dwelling

Welcome!

This Year we will be exploring the Presence Of God. Where is it? What is it? And why is it important to us? Follow along as we take a deep dive in to God's Presence!

Throughout, the Devotional, click on the words in **RED** to explore more resources.(Digital version)



Did you know...?

PRIEST HOOD

What if God wanted to reach out to someone who wasn't looking for him? Another important aspect of the tabernacle was the personnel team that performed all the important rituals. We call them "priests." In Hebrew, they were called **kohanim**. They were real people—Aaron and his descendants—but their role was much larger than their individual identities. This small team represented all of Israel before God, and their role required a unique way of life that set them apart to work in God's holy presence. Israel's priests were required to live by extremely high standards of ritual purity. They were to avoid contact with anything associated with death or decay, such as mold or dead bodies. They had to maintain a perpetual state of holiness. Their actual bodies were symbols, too. To qualify as a priest, you had to be a descendant of Aaron and could not have any physical disabilities or misshapen features.

This goes against the grain of the modern western view of the universe. Doesn't the image of God in every human make them of equal value before God? Yes, and amen! That is a deeply biblical idea found in the book of Genesis. However, to impose that concept upon the priesthood is to miss the cultural symbolism.

The role of the priests was to be **representatives**, and they were to be symbols or "ideal" humans. In their culture, that was embodied by a priest whose body was without deformity of any kind. Modern western cultures have a different definition of the ideal human—one that does not exclude a person with physical disabilities. But God revealed himself to them in the context of their culture, not ours. Just as Israelite temples were embedded in ancient eastern culture, so were their priests. God wasn't endorsing their culture as superior; rather, he was meeting Israel on their terms and revealing himself to them through cultural vehicles that made sense.

The role of Israel's priests also spoke to a bigger, deeper issue in the biblical story. If God's domain and humanity's domain were ever to be fully joined again, humans needed some kind of mediator, a go-between who could represent humanity in its most ideal state. We needed a human who fulfills God's calling and purpose for humanity, and who could represent God to us. This is precisely the way the earliest Christians thought about Jesus, as the ultimate priest and mediator. In Jesus, we see perfect humanity as well as perfect deity, combined in one wise and loving person.

Focus Verses

Read about the priestly family and the requirements they had to meet in Leviticus 8-10 and 21-22

1. Leviticus 8-20

2. Leviticus 21-22

Read Ezekiel 37:27. God made this promise to Israel after they were in captivity in the land of Babylon. Why do think He made this promise then and what does it mean for us now?

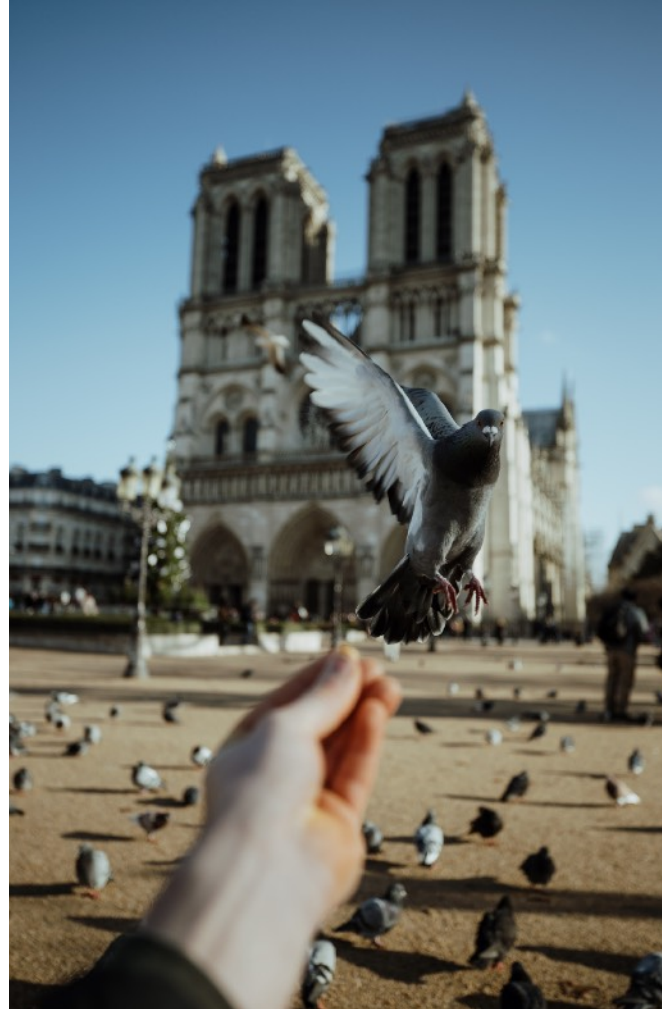
1. Ezekiel 37:27

First, read Exodus 19:1-6. What does it mean for Israel to be a “kingdom of priests” or “priestly kingdom”? How do the laws spelled out in Exodus 20-23 help in this calling? Then read 1 Peter 2:9-10 and notice how Peter quotes from Exodus 19. Who are the priests now, and what is the purpose of their calling?

1. Exodus 19:1-6

2. 1 Peter 2:9-10





Crew Discussion

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- 1. What do you consider God's most meaningful promises to his people? What promises do you rest in?**
- 2. In 1 Peter 2:9, the Apostle Peter tells Christians scattered all over the Greek world that, just like ancient Israel, they are a chosen people and a royal priesthood. How is this identity meaningful for you?**
- 3. What rituals and traditions do you have that remind you of God's presence?**

God's House

Among Us

We're going fast forward past the Israelites' famous exodus from **Egypt** and spend time, instead, with the Israelites in the wilderness as they experienced God's presence in a new way. For context, though, here's what you need to know: Jacob had a lot of children, and those children had a lot of children. Within just a few generations, Abraham's descendants grew into a small nation. After they had lived in Egypt for some time, Pharaoh decided to make them all slaves to the native Egyptians. God appointed an ineloquent murderer named Moses to lead an extraction operation; then rained plagues on Egypt until Pharaoh agreed to let the Israelites go. When Pharaoh changed his mind and had his soldiers pursue the Israelites, God parted a sea for his people and drowned their captors.

After some time in the wilderness, God formalized his promise to the family of Abraham with an ancient kind of agreement called a covenant. God gave the Israelites rules to live by that touched their business practices, how they treated the land, what they ate and wore, and how they handled disputes. In return for their obedience, God reasserted his promise to make them a great, blessed nation.

At this point in the story, God gives Israel the blueprints to build an elaborate tent, which would serve as a type of temple. This tent paved the way for the Israelites to experience God's presence in a radical way. It effectively created a consistent overlap between heaven and earth after humanity was banished from the garden.

Up to this point, Abraham's descendants hadn't had their own temple. They were very familiar with the holy sites—Egypt had impressive ones, after all—but no Israelite had been able to seek the divine presence the way their neighbours did.

That changed in the book of Exodus. God gave the Israelites a blueprint for a mobile temple called "the tent of meeting," or



Moses' Tabernacle check out the virtual tour of the life sized replica of the Tabernacle.

"tabernacle," which was to be the place where God's glory and personal presence took up residence in the middle of Israel. Instead of only encountering God's presence through experiences like Jacob's dream, the Israelites would have consistent access to God as they roamed in the wilderness.

What this means for us is that God wanted humans to realize that everything God did and is currently doing comes from the a heart that longs to live with us like we did at the beginning. Because we are separated by sin and because God loves us so much, He longs to be with us all the time.

In the beginning, God created the dwelling (eden) and charged humans with filling it ("be fruitful and multiply"), Here God says to humans, " You build the dwelling, and I will fill it". And next week we will see that God actually created a "mobile garden", a portable reminder that where ever Israel went, God would be dwelling with them. Through this example, we can know that God wants to be with us where ever we God.

Welcome to Week 2!

Did you know...?

The Literary Location of Leviticus

The construction of the tabernacle begins in Exodus 25 and extends all the way to the end of the book. The only story found in this sea of architectural blueprints is the sad story of Israel's idolatry in making and worshipping a golden calf idol. After that tragedy, we come to the construction of the tent, and you would think this should be awesome. And it is. It's the glorious moment when God comes to live among his people. But what happens? Moses, the main character and Israel's representative before God, cannot enter the space. How anticlimactic! Israel's sin in casting the golden calf created yet another rift between heaven and earth, and it got in Moses' way.

The next book in the Bible is **Leviticus**, and we see that Moses is outside the tent in the first sentence. This is not surprising, given how Exodus concluded. But turn to the next book, Numbers, and you'll see Moses has been allowed inside the tabernacle. How did that happen?

The book of Leviticus, my friends! It's a big, complex book that's full of rituals and laws that are utterly bizarre to modern readers. But pay attention to the fact that this intimidating book provided a remedy for Israel's sin. This is the book's main contribution to the larger biblical narrative. Those odd rituals are God's way of reminding Israel that he is committed to them and to forgiving their failures.

Focus Verses

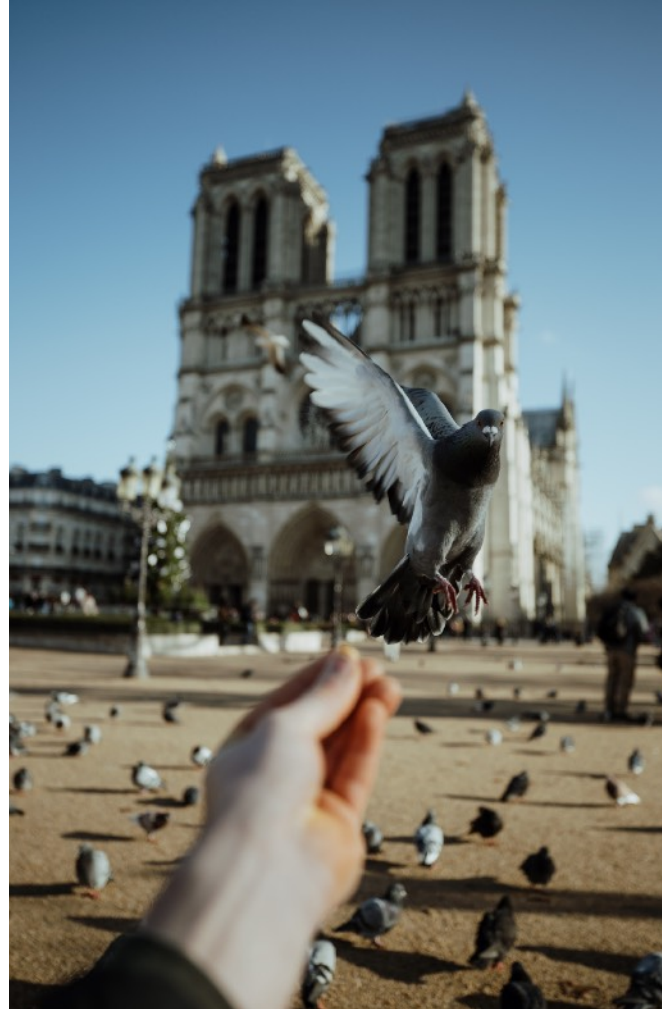
This story about the tabernacle is a major milestone in the larger narrative of two domains of heaven and earth. God formalizes his covenant with Abraham, takes up residence among the people of Israel for the first time, and establishes a host of laws and rituals that follow Israel for thousands of years. When Jesus appeared on the scene, he and his followers drew upon the images and ideas associated with the tabernacle to describe what he was all about. Understanding the covenant, the tabernacle, and the priesthood is crucial for seeing how the entire biblical story fits together.

Read [Exodus 25:31-40](#) and [Exodus 28:31- 35](#) for examples of the garden imagery found in the tabernacle.

Read [Hebrews 9-10](#). There's a lot of detail here, but write down all the details about the Israelite [tabernacle](#) that, parallel with what Jesus accomplished in his death and resurrection. How do

Read [1 Peter 1:13-16](#) and [2:9-10](#). Notice how Peter uses the language of the tabernacle and priesthood to describe this same vocation of Jesus' followers. Why is this significant?





Crew Discussion

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- 1. Why do you think that God felt it was important for Israel to have a representation of The Garden travel with them?**
- 2. If you look at all the garden imagery found in the scriptures, In your opinion, what does it have to do with you today? What are some lessons we can learn from all the symbolism in the tabernacle?**
- 3. Do you think that the buildings we gather in today should have the same level of reverence as the old tabernacle? Why or why not?**



TENT

The Mobile Garden

Exodus includes detailed instructions as to how to build the tabernacle. These sections are really boring for most readers, but buried in the weeds of technicalities are some significant details.

First, the tabernacle was to be set up in the centre of Israel's camp and built of the finest materials. The curtains were to be held up by golden posts, and the whole space was to be decorated with gold, silver, brass, animal skins, furs, and jewels. All of this fanciness symbolized something profound. Hosting the Creator God was one of the greatest privileges you could imagine, like hosting a king. The only materials fitting for such an honour are the ones listed in **Exodus 25**. This was to be a tent like no other.

Second, all the embroidery and metalwork in the tabernacle were to depict garden images. Entering the **tabernacle** was supposed to feel like entering a garden. The connection to the first and second chapters of Genesis couldn't be more clear. The tabernacle was a symbolic recreation of the garden temple in Eden, where God and humanity once dwelled together. Though God had banished humans from his presence in the garden temple, he used the tabernacle to station that same divine presence right in the middle of Abraham's family. The tabernacle was truly a gift. God's presence was not somewhere else, far away in the skies or in another land. No, now God would dwell among his people once more. They could build their lives around the rituals that connected them with their God. They could see it and smell it and think about it every day. God's presence filled the tabernacle, and fire and smoke hovered about the ark, guiding the Israelites through the wilderness.

The tabernacle brought God's presence to the Israelites, but it also generated some tension. Remember, the reason for the rift between heaven and earth was humanity's rebellion in the Garden and in Babylon. As a result, God's plan to come and live among the Israelites, as he had in the garden, had to address that problem. God's presence may be accessible now, but that access was limited and dangerous.

Average Israelites could visit the outer court of the tabernacle, but first they had to **sacrifice vital possessions**, such as grain, wine, or livestock. They also had to undergo certain purity rituals, such as bathing and abstaining from touching



Moses' Tabernacle check out the virtual tour of the life sized replica of the Tabernacle.

things associated with death. At the heart of these rituals was understanding the rift between God's domain and our domain. God's space was divine, pure, holy, and the source of all life. But human space was not. It was often the total opposite of all those things. If Israelites wanted to come close to the divine presence, they had to mark themselves as holy through the purification process.

Even then, average Israelites did not have access to the hot spot of God's presence, which was a room at the centre of the tabernacle called "the Holy of Holies." Only priests were allowed to enter this room, and only once a year. Priests were a special group of people whose role was to represent the entire Israelite community before God. This important job required attention to ritual details and a lifestyle of complete holiness. And the stakes were high. Being in proximity to God's holiness was like being close to the sun. If you don't follow procedure, you're going to get hurt. And a handful of priests who didn't follow protocol paid the price with their lives.

This new access to God—however limited—was really good news to the Israelites. But remember, this story isn't just about them. God's plan was to bless all the nations and reunite all of heaven and earth through this family of Abraham. The tabernacle was just the beginning of God's invasion of human space. It was a small, limited pocket of heaven on earth that symbolized God's intention to fill the whole earth with his unlimited presence and glory.

Welcome to Week 3!

Did you know...?

The HIGHEST Heavens

Think back to the first session when we learned about the three-tiered view of the universe.

Here's a recap: Ancient people perceived the universe as broken into three distinct tiers. At the bottom was water—one giant, chaotic ocean. In the middle was land, which they imagined as a disc floating in the ocean. On top was the sky, which was encompassed by a dome in which the sun, moon, and stars were embedded. "Heavens" or "heavens above" referred to the space extending up to the dome.

With this in mind, let's look back at Solomon's prayer of dedication of the temple in Jerusalem:

"But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!"

What does he mean by "the highest heavens"? In Hebrew, the phrase he uses is literally **"the heavens of the heavens,"** or **"the skies of the skies."** In a three tiered universe, the highest place visible to humans was the dome itself. Solomon stretched that worldview, saying that God, as the exalted King, must be present in the abyss above and beyond the dome. And even this space, according to Solomon, is not grand enough or big enough to contain all of God's holiness and transcendence. He was pushing his concept of the universe to its limit.

This concept of the heavens above the heavens shows up in the New Testament, too, in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. In **2 Corinthians 12**, Paul describes incredible visions he saw about Jesus enthroned above all creation, visions that were remarkably similar to what John describes in Revelation. Paul's language for explaining what he saw is fascinating. He says this vision took him "up to the third heaven," which he later calls "paradise." If the furthest extent of Solomon's universe was the "heavens of the heavens," Paul goes one step further: the heavens of the heavens of the heavens!

And what word does Paul use to describe this marvellous throne room in the heavens above the heavens above the heavens? In our English translations, we see "paradise." But in **Greek**? The word means "garden." The triple-heavens, the transcendent throne room of God and Jesus, is none other than the paradise Garden of Eden, where God and Humanity live together in perfect harmony.

Focus Verses

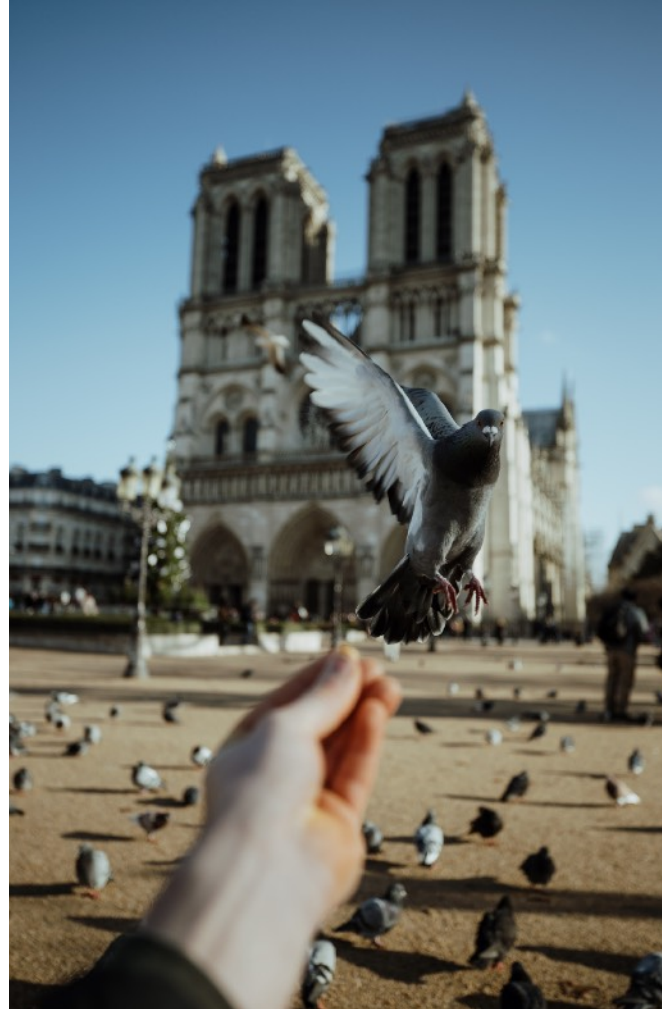
let's explore a few places in the Bible where the authors grapple with the complexity of God's presence.

Read [Isaiah 6](#), in which the prophet has a vision of God in the temple. Notice Isaiah's descriptions of God's robe as filling the temple and heavenly creatures attending from above. Consider what this visual teaches about God's presence.

Read [Psalm 72](#), paying special attention to **verse 19**. How is this connected to God's mission to reunite heaven and earth? Who might the anticipated king be?

Read [Habakkuk 2:14](#). You might wonder, "Why does he say waters cover the sea? The waters are the sea!" Reflect on this as a powerful metaphor of how God's presence will fully permeate creation someday.





Crew Discussion

Devotional Video

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- 1. How do you conceive of where God lives? Where does that idea come from?**
- 2. Solomon believed there was no single place that could contain God. What does that conviction do to your perspective of the known universe?**
- 3. Do you long for a time when God's presence will fill the whole earth? What do you imagine that will be like?**

TEMPLE

God's confusing presence

Many years after the establishment of the tabernacle—after the Israelites made it to the Promised Land, and after David killed Goliath and became king—a king named Solomon oversaw the construction of a truly glorious temple. The temple was crafted from marble with gold and silver embellishments. It had bronze pillars and cedar paneling. It was Solomon's crowning achievement and a huge upgrade from the tabernacle, which the Israelites had used up to that point.

When the temple was complete, 1 Kings 8:10–11 tells us God's presence came in the form of a great cloud to take up residence there. Then, Solomon makes a surprising statement:

"But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27 (NIV))

Solomon believed the divine presence was too magnificent for his temple or even for the vast and majestic skies. Solomon wasn't alone in this sentiment. In Isaiah 66, the prophet claimed no house could hold God because God had made all things. Psalms 139 includes one of the most beautiful expressions of this belief in the entire Bible:

***Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?***

***If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.***

Psalms 139:7–8 (NIV)

So, while we don't know for sure what most ancient Israelites believed about the location of God's presence, we do know that a number of leaders clearly considered his glory too great to be limited to the sky or the tabernacle.

If God Is Everywhere, Why a Temple?

God's presence in all of creation doesn't cancel out the fact that God came to the tabernacle and, later, to the temple in Jerusalem in a unique way. The biblical authors don't ever explain how that works in detail; they just claim that this is the case. Of course, the Creator God is present in all of his creation, and of course the God of Israel lives among his people in a special way. And because the Creator is the God of Israel, these two claims about his presence sit alongside each other without much explanation.



Solomon's Temple scale model of Solomon's temple

Even if the Israelites couldn't explain exactly how God could be present everywhere and right there in the temple, the divine presence was a source of confidence and assurance for the Israelites—a reminder that he really was on their side. They could see the mysterious cloud hovering above it. They would even direct their prayers toward the temple, much as Muslims direct their prayers toward Mecca.

But it was more than that. God's special presence in the tabernacle and the temple was a symbol of future hope—a promise that, one day, God's full and unlimited presence would fill all of creation. Though God was already everywhere, surely the Israelites sensed that his presence in creation wasn't what it could be, what it was meant to be. This special experience of the divine presence in the temple ought to be more accessible to more people than just those living in Jerusalem. The temple was a potent symbol of God's desire for heaven and earth to be reunited, and the Jerusalem temple was where it would start.

So, let's tie all these ideas together. Did God live in the tabernacle and the temple? Yes, sort of. In the skies? Yes, sort of. Does he live everywhere? Yes, also, sort of. God is not contained or limited to any of those spaces, but each one conveys a specific meaning about his presence. The skies tell us God is King of all. His presence out in creation tells us God is Creator of all. And his presence in the temple tells us he stubbornly created and maintained an overlap between heaven and earth despite human rebellion. Together, these focal points of his presence foreshadow a day when a new king will reunite all of heaven and earth and flood all creation with God's glorious presence.

Welcome to week 4!

Did you know...?

The Present-Future Kingdom of God

An interesting puzzle that has exercised the imaginations of Bible readers for a long time is the diversity of the language Jesus used to talk about the kingdom of God.

In many of his teachings, it's clear that Jesus believed God's heavenly reign was a clear and present reality. He said it had "arrived" in himself, and that by following him and living by his teachings a person could "enter" or "see" or "seek" or even "receive" God's kingdom. These phrases indicate that God's heavenly reign is an earthly reality that can be experienced here and now.

But Jesus also talks about the kingdom as if it hasn't arrived yet—at least not completely. When he taught his disciples to pray, he said, "May your kingdom come," implying that it was not present, but future. He talked about his future return after the resurrection as "the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

So, which is it? Is the kingdom a present reality or a future hope? Is God's heavenly rule something that has invaded earth, or is it an impending promise?

It seems that Jesus' answer was "yes and yes." One minute Jesus portrays the kingdom as something you pray will come; then a few moments later he talks about the kingdom as something you can "seek" and "enter" in this moment by following him. Our stark either/or categories simply won't help us in explaining Jesus' vision of the heavenly kingdom.

New Testament scholars use the word "inauguration" as a metaphor to help us understand what's going on. In the ancient world, before telecommunications and Twitter, it took time for an entire empire to be notified that a new king was on the throne—and even longer for that king to personally visit each district. So, though a new king was technically an inaugurated ruler, it took a while for the kingdom to fully experience his rule in person. A theologian named George Eldon Ladd used the handy phrase "already and not yet" to capture the kingdom's dual present and future reality.

Focus Verses

The Gospel of John presents Jesus as the temple in which heaven and earth overlap as well as the animal sacrifice offered for Israel's sins. This dual presentation of Jesus as both the temple and sacrifice continues throughout the entire New Testament. Let's explore how Paul and Peter

Read [Colossians 1:19](#) and [2:9](#). Note the different uses of the word "dwell," which is a key temple word associated with God's temple presence.

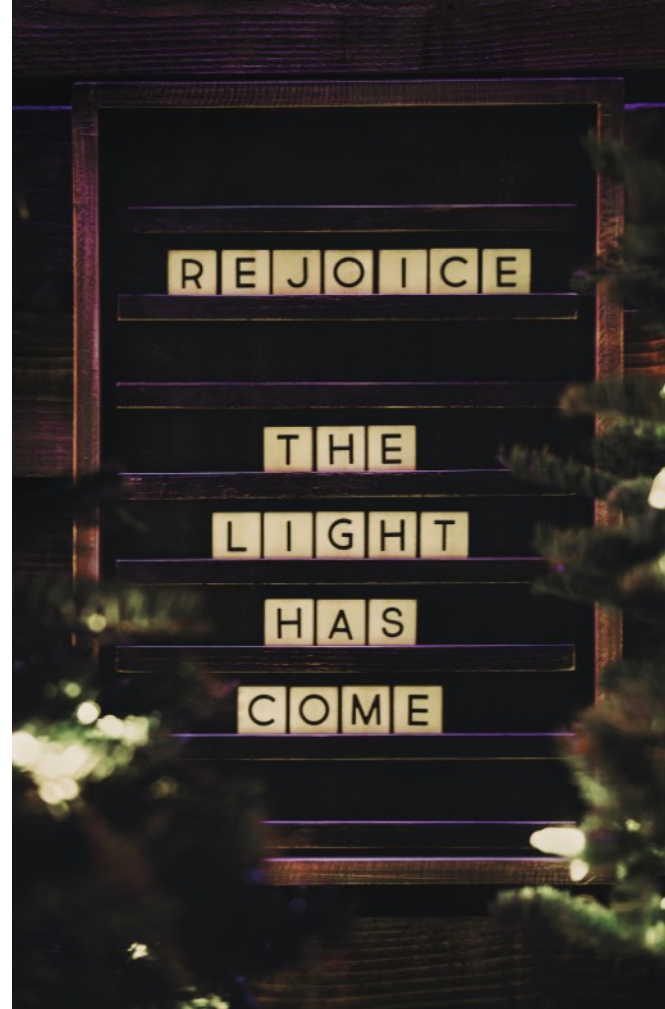
Read [Colossians 1:20](#) and [2:13-14](#). How does Paul describe Jesus, specifically, the meaning of his death?

Read [Romans 3:24-25](#), [1 Corinthians 5:7](#), and [1 Peter 1:18-19](#). Circle the word "blood." How is Jesus described

Read [1 Peter 2:4-7](#) and [Ephesians 2:21-22](#). How is Jesus described here?

Take a moment to draw all these texts and their metaphors together: Sacrifices took place in the temple where God's presence dwelled. How does all this help us understand what happened when Jesus died and was raised?





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HEART

The once and future King

It all started with a baby. Not a typical every day, baby. No, this was a unique Human. This baby was the physical convergence of Heaven and Earth that had been foreshadowed all over scripture. He was to be both the Temple and the Sacrifice. In his humanity, God himself crossed the division between heaven and Earth and initiated the final phase of the rescue mission He started at the fall. The Grand reunification had begun!

Like the first humans, this baby was to be God's representative on Earth. He was imbued with God's authority and power. His life was an example to all creation of God living among us, providing for us and caring for all parts of our lives. He was, in his life with mere humans, to remind them of the Garden. Where Adam and Eve failed, He was to succeed.

You see, Humans had drifted away from the right relationship with God and were more enamoured with following rites and rules than connecting with God on a personal level. Even those tasked with teaching and keeping the people in line were placing undue pressure on people to conform and do the rituals, even though they were not opposed to using loopholes to get out of their duties or circumvent a law. Even their kings could not rule justly.

Their ancestors experienced the desolation of Israel and the destruction of the temple. Fear of that happening again drove them. Instead of leading people to God for hope and comfort, they led through and by fear. This fear made all the Garden's symbolism and God's never-ending quest to unite heaven and Earth again rigid and procedural. A transaction to ensure that peace remained and the people got to keep their land.

Yet, this Child was sent to be their High Priest, to teach them that the Laws of God were more than a transaction of convenience. Each step they participated in inside the temple was to remind them that God wanted to be close to them. He wanted to speak with Humans and live with them as He once did in Eden.



The King Arrives

As King, this Child was to show humans what it meant to live a life that had chosen God's will and direction to define good and evil rather than our own. He has all the power in the universe, and he was to show us how to submit to the will of God and use it to care for each other without expectation nor payment. This the reason why He healed many people: because He could. His actions were an example to us that we are to help and care for each other, not only when we are powerful, but with whatever we can.

Most importantly, it was through being the sacrifice where this Child unlocked the path to the Garden. No longer did God have to confine His presence to a location or a building. He could now live in the most intimate place with humans: Inside our hearts. But God, being a perfect gentleman, will never force His way in, but instead awaits our invitation.

As we celebrate Christmas this year, with all the turmoil and despair that is happening in the world, remember that the author of peace and can care for us even in the worst of situations lives in your heart. That baby we talk about during this season was more than just an exceptional baby. He was and is the key to heaven. He is our once and future King.