

CASKET EMPTY

Part 6 – Temple

II Chronicles 7:1-6

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ November 5, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹When Solomon had ended his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. ²The priests could not enter the house of the Lord, because the glory of the Lord filled the Lord's house. ³When all the people of Israel saw the fire come down and the glory of the Lord on the temple, they bowed down on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and worshiped and gave thanks to the Lord, saying,

“For he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.”

⁴Then the king and all the people offered sacrifice before the Lord. ⁵King Solomon offered as a sacrifice twenty-two thousand oxen and one hundred twenty thousand sheep. So the king and all the people dedicated the house of God. ⁶The priests stood at their posts; the Levites also, with the instruments for music to the Lord that King David had made for giving thanks to the Lord—for his steadfast love endures forever—whenever David offered praises by their ministry. Opposite them the priests sounded trumpets; and all Israel stood. (II Chronicles 7:1-6, NRSV)

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A week ago Saturday morning I'm in the middle of making for myself what was turning out to be fantastic omelet and my doorbell rings. I open to door to find two young men standing there on my front porch, literature in hand, who clearly are hoping to have a moment to talk to me about matters of faith. Now remember, I wasn't dressed like this in my pastor garb, but in my sweats, having just crawled out of bed. So when they started to talk about the Bible and I seemed to know a little bit about its contents, they seemed pleasantly surprised.

These conversations always start the same way, with a search for common ground, which they were able to establish quickly by getting me to agree with them that the world was a mess. It's very easy, actually, to find common ground between different religious perspectives if you only look at the surface. Most every religious person agrees that the world, to some degree, is not as it should be, that we ought to love one another,

that it's right to care for the poor, that the divine, in some form, exists. But get beneath the surface, to the core beliefs at the heart of faith, and you will just as quickly see that all faith perspectives actually do not teach the same thing. Not even close.

Knowing something about the beliefs of my two new friends on the porch, I nudged the conversation in a way that quickly exposed one of these core differences, specifically in the way that Heaven relates to earth, this relationship between the Creator and creation. You see, here's how some people see that relationship, including most of the people who knock on your door when you're having breakfast. In their view, heaven and earth are a long way a part from one another. The reason for this is that this world is evil – dark, corrupt, and wicked by its very nature – and will always be evil. Heaven, the home of the divine, therefore, wants nothing to do with earth, at least in any long term way. Our best hope, therefore, is to ultimately escape this earth by death or by some kind of super-spirituality through which, by right knowledge or right living, we can find our way out of earth and into Heaven. One problem with this view, however, is that there is a nagging sense within all of us that is telling us that this world is not evil by nature and doomed for destruction, but a world that was at one time destined for goodness and life.¹

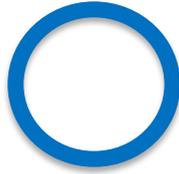
This is not the only way, however, to see the relationship between Heaven and earth. For example, there are whole other groups of religious people who believe quite the opposite, that instead

¹ In the description of these views I'm borrowing heavily from N.T. Wright in *Simply Christian* (Harper, 2006), 60-66. This first view is often called Epicureanism because one of it's early promoters was an ancient philosopher named Epicurus who believed that human beings should simply get used to living alone in this world.

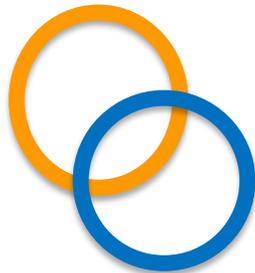
of Heaven and earth being completely separate that they are actually one, essentially the same. God is everywhere and everywhere is God. Or, if you prefer, God is everything and everything is God. Mountains, rivers, planets, animals, cities, emotions, art, music, and of course people, are divine, or at least contain the spark of divinity within. Unlike the first group, which looks beyond creation to find God, this group looks *to* creation to find God. In fact, many people in our world believe that if we look deep enough within ourselves, we will find God. One of the main problems with this view, of course, is that it can't cope with the undeniable existence of evil and suffering in the world. What do you do with a wildfire that consumes 8,000 homes and nearly 50 lives, or a terrorist who drives his truck down a crowded bike path? When all creation is divine, where do we turn when at least parts of creation seems to have become rotten to the core? In this view, where is the hope for rescue or justice from beyond? There is none.²

A third view is the atheist view, which declares that there is no Heaven, only earth.

Historically this has been, by far, the least popularly held view of reality for the primary reason that it is rationally indefensible. Most people simply can't take the mammoth step of blind faith required to swallow the idea that everything in the cosmos came from nothing. Something just doesn't come from nothing.



So what do you believe? It matters, by the way. Because the way you see God's relationship, or lack thereof, with the world has incredible implications for how you live your life in this world. For this reason, I hope that you recognize that the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments present a view of reality that is radically different than all other faith perspectives in this, and many other important ways. Specifically, the testimony of the scriptures is that Heaven and earth are not one and the same, but neither are they separated by a great, irreconcilable gulf. No, Heaven and earth overlap and interlock, Heaven continuously, though often subtly, breaking into earth. God is Creator and this cosmos is his creation, which he loves and, therefore, longs to restore. So no, God is not far. But neither is God us. God is near, and drawing ever nearer.



Think of all the examples of this we have already seen in our journey through the Old Testament this fall. Still, perhaps the most profound expression of Heaven breaking into earth in the Old Testament is the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, a structure first built by King Solomon in the 10th century B.C., and later rebuilt by Israel after they returned from exile in the 6th century B.C. From the very time of its construction, Israel believed that the Temple was the primary dwelling place of God in the world. God was not confined to the wood and stone of this structure, of course, but instead chose to draw most closely to his people in this sacred place. In Psalm 132 we read, **“For the Lord has chosen Zion [a reference to the Temple and Jerusalem], he has desired it for his dwelling, saying, ‘This is my resting place for ever and ever; here I will sit enthroned, for I have desired it.’”**³ For this reason the Temple was the beating heart of Israel, the center of worship and music, politics and society, national celebration and mourning.⁴ For Israel the Temple was the center and centering place of the whole world.

Consider the passage we just read from II Chronicles. On the very day when Solomon's Temple was dedicated the glory of God, like a blazing fire, descended from heaven and filled the Temple. Ancient Jews referred to this as the *shekinah* glory of God, a Hebrew word that literally means ‘dwelling’ or ‘settling’, and refers to the abiding and localized divine presence of God for his people, at this time the Jews. Pilgrims going to the Temple in those days would have told you that it was as though they were going to visit the very outskirts of Heaven itself.

Let me clear. The Temple wasn't itself divine, but rather was a space, the *primary* space, where God was breaking in, a very thin space between Heaven and earth where people could experience the reality of the Kingdom of Heaven, the reality of how earth would be different when that Kingdom broke in. Let me highlight four specific ways in which this was true.⁵

First, the Temple pointed to God's *victory*. In the ancient world, when a king took power he would establish his throne and his palace, the physical place where he would reside and reign. The Temple stood as a reminder that God had come, and was coming, as

³ Psalm 132:13-14, NIV

⁴ When Jews in those days were away from the Temple they would turn towards the Temple whenever they would pray.

⁵ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Edited by Leland Ryken, James Wilhoit & Tremper Longman III (InterVarsity Press, 1998), 849-851.

² This view is often referred to as pantheism.

King. Those who came to the Temple, therefore, came to worship the one who was sovereign above all.

Second, the Temple pointed to God's *truth*. In those days it was at the Temple where people would come to be instructed in the law of God through the priests and scribes appointed by God for this purpose. It was a place, therefore, of divine revelation, where people learned who God was and what God was up to in his world.

Third, the Temple pointed to God's community, or *family*. Because it was established in the middle of Jerusalem, rather than Rome or Babylon or some other site, it was clear that the Israelites, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, were God's chosen people.

Finally, the Temple pointed to God's *holiness*. As you may know, not everybody was welcome in the Temple. The more holy you were, the further into the Temple you could go. Gentiles, women, and those who had made themselves impure for some reason, did not have backstage passes. In Jesus' day, in fact, there was a marker in the outer Temple courts that warned Gentiles not to proceed any further on penalty of death.⁶ Furthermore, the Temple was the place where people had to regularly come to offer animal sacrifices in order to receive forgiveness and purity. Only clean, non-blemished animals could be offered and worshippers would often place their hands on the victim as it was sacrificed, signifying that in some way it represented them as it took, in their place, the penalty for sin.

In all these ways, therefore, ancient Israel experienced the presence of Heaven in their midst at the Temple, God's victory, truth, family and holiness. Now perhaps you can begin to understand why it was so absolutely devastating to Israel when, in the 6th century B.C., the Babylonians conquered Israel, destroyed the Temple, and then carted off much of Israel to exile in Babylon, to a city far, far away from the very place on earth they believed God lived! This was nothing short of a crisis of faith.

And maybe you can relate. I suspect every one of us in this room has had a crisis of faith at some time or another. Some of us, even though we sit here in worship this morning, are in the middle of one right now. I've had times of faith crisis myself, even recently. These are times when we, like the ancient Israelites, wonder how or where God is present with us. Maybe we feel, like they felt, that something has come and

removed us from God's presence, perhaps our own failure or some other difficult circumstance. At other times it feels as if God is the one who has retreated, for some reason left us alone in silence, or in pain, or in confusion, or even defenseless. If nothing else, I hope you can see that the experience of the Israelites all those years ago is not unique. So many of us are longing to find Heaven again on this earth, so much so that in our search we begin to wonder if perhaps it doesn't exist, or maybe it exists but has always been and will forever be distant from us in this life, or that it's only deep within ourselves that we can find it. In this crisis of faith many people either give up on hope for this life and this world, or turn completely inward.

The good news is that God doesn't give up on us. In those days when his people were far off in exile, God sent prophets. And when the political situation changed and allowed for the possibility of return, prophets like Ezra, Nehemiah and Jeremiah convinced the Israelite that they must go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple so that they could be with God again. They did and, though it was a struggle to do so, towards the end of the 6th century B.C. the rebuilding was complete. The problem was, God's *shekinah* glory did not return. The people returned to the Temple to worship, offering sacrifices day after day, but for hundreds of years God remained silent and distant.

The final prophet in the Old Testament is Malachi. He was sent to God's people in this time after the exile when, though now back home in Jerusalem, they are experiencing yet another crisis of faith as they begin to question the love and justice of a God who is now absent even from the one place they always counted on meeting him. Imagine if the places you always met God became, for years, vacant of God's voice or presence! You would do what Israel began to do, to wonder whether you had been seeking God in vain.

As it closes with Malachi's words, the Old Testament does not end on a happy note. The prophet reminds the people that, yes, God is ever faithful and will keep his promises to bless Israel and, through Israel, bless all nations. The problem is not God's faithfulness, but Israel's unfaithfulness. In the closing verses of the Old Testament he writes,

See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who revere

⁶ See Acts 21:28 and Ephesians 2:14 for references to this limited access.

**my name the sun of righteousness shall rise,
with healing in its wings.⁷**

Judgment is coming, the expression of God's holiness against evil which will set things right in the world, but also salvation and healing for all who would worship God when he comes. This is how the Old Testament ends.

Have you ever paid good money for a movie that ends without resolution? Isn't that a feeling of great dissatisfaction! As the credits unexpectedly begin to roll, you realize that those greedy suckers in Hollywood have done it again, set you up for at least one more sequel! And if they told the story well, you leave the theater knowing you can't help but come back next Christmas and drop down another \$12 to see how the story ends. As the Old Testament ends with these words from Malachi we see that the entire Old Testament, from Genesis to Malachi, is essentially a prologue to what is to come, pointing us forward to how in the coming sequel God will break in and finish what he has begun.

Flash forward to Jesus' day. The rebuilt Temple still stands in the center of Jerusalem, though still vacant of God's shekinah glory. As a result, the Jewish leaders, led most forcefully by the Pharisees, have convinced the people that if only they will obey God's laws more perfectly, *then* God's presence will return. More sacrifice. More purity rituals. More Sabbath laws. More strict adherence to the laws, some of which didn't even come from God. It's not such an unusual response to God's apparent silence and distance. There are likely many of us here today who are working overtime to clean up our lives in hopes that as a result God's favor and blessing will return to us. Many religious leaders in Jesus' day, as some still do in our day, even took advantage of this burden of shame and guilt to get people to do things that would benefit them. Some of you remember the story we looked at a few weeks ago of the poor widow who felt forced to give her last dollar to the Temple and its leadership in hopes of finding God's favor and blessing.

Well, one day Jesus goes to the Temple and, overcome by what this sacred space has become, he begins overturning the tables of those who had set up there to not only maintain this burdensome system of sacrifices but were doing so in such a way that took advantage of the poor to line their own already-full pockets. Essentially, they had created a monopoly on which animals could be brought into the Temple for sacrifice and then sold those animals in the outer courts of the

Temple at highly inflated prices, or at least charged exorbitant rates for exchanging the money that needed to be used to buy these animals. It's like movie theaters and ballparks that won't let you bring in your own food so that, once inside, they can gouge us a \$9 for a Pepsi and a \$10 bucket of popcorn. Jesus is furious, so much so that he fashions a whip and drives these people out of the Temple courts, shutting the whole system down if only for a few hours.

When the flabbergasted Jewish leadership asks him why he is doing this, he says to them - pay close attention here - **"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."**⁸ What? Now they are really confused. The Temple took decades to build and this lunatic is going to tear it down and build it up in three days? Nobody standing there that day had the slightest idea what Jesus was talking about. It was only later in retrospect that John was able to add this editorial note to the text, saying, **"But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken."**⁹

Follow me here. If there is any place in this world where Heaven has intersected earth, where the Creator God has broken into his creation, is it not in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, who, though eternally God himself, literally took on human flesh? Is not the person of Jesus the site of the ultimate abiding and localized presence of God with us, Emmanuel? Yes, Christ is the very center and centering place of the cosmos, and is so in ways a Temple built with human hands had never or could never become! To see Christ is to see, on earth, the Kingdom and the King revealed.

Just as Jesus said, or course, it was not long after when, within walking distance of the Temple, Jesus' body was torn apart on the cross and then, three days later, resurrected from the grave, the true Temple of God destroyed but then rebuilt for eternity. And in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, do we not see God's ultimate victory, that the King of Kings, the one long promised from David's line, had finally come victorious? And do we not find in Christ God's ultimate truth, the clearest revelation of the character and will of God that we will ever be given? And do we not find in Christ God's ultimate family, as Jesus came not to make people his servants, but his brothers and sisters, the very sons and daughters of God. And do we not find in Christ God's ultimate holiness as well? As Malachi said that he would, God did eventually return

⁷ Malachi 4:1-2, NRSV

⁸ John 2:19, NRSV

⁹ John 2:21-22, NRSV

in judgment, but when Christ, the Lamb of God, went to the cross God took our judgment upon himself so that by his wounds all who come to revere his name will find healing?¹⁰

If this is true, if Christ really is the true and greater Temple of God, the place, or person, where we discover Heaven most profoundly breaking into earth, then consider who it is that Jesus welcomes inside. You see, there is no sign posted on the outer edges of this Temple restricting, on penalty of death, some from coming further in. No, the penalty of death is already paid! And so just as Jesus in his earthly life welcomed those others imagined God had turned away, he now does so in his heavenly, resurrected life as well. When the Kingdom of Heaven breaks fully into earth through Christ, all find that they are welcome. All are invited and so all who come in faith will find a place prepared for them.

The problem with the Jews in Jesus' day was that they failed, so many of them, to recognize that that Temple of wood and stone in the middle of Jerusalem was merely a signpost meant, all along, to point them beyond to the truer and greater Temple. Like a dog, which can't stop looking at your finger instead of turning its attention to that which you are pointing towards, they got stuck on the signpost.¹¹ We must not make the same mistake.

So where is this Temple today, now that Christ, after the resurrection, has ascended back to Heaven? After all, God must still be breaking into our world, his Kingdom coming to earth as Christ taught us pray that it would. So where is Christ's body today? If that body, torn down at the cross but then restored three days later on Easter, is the very Temple of God, the center and the centering place of God's presence on earth, where is the body of Christ today? Where is the Temple where God is breaking into earth, revealing his victory, truth, family and holiness?

Not long after Jesus' resurrection, just before he bodily ascended to the Father he promised, before he left, that his Spirit would return soon in glory. Shortly thereafter his followers were waiting for this return in Jerusalem on the day of the Pentecost feast. And do you remember what happened on that day? The scripture in Acts 2 tells us that all at once a sound like a hurricane came from heaven and, **“they saw what looked like tongues of fire that separated and came**

to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”¹² At long last the *shekinah* glory of God had returned, the dwelling and settling of God in this world. But now instead of descending on a building it had descended on people. And not just certain, select types of people as it had before when it came only to the Jews, but now all sorts of people, eventually people of every tribe and tongue, anybody and everybody who would receive Christ in faith and be baptized in his name.

Since we don't have more time to dive into these things today, at least consider with me what it means that later on Paul drew out the immense consequences for this when he declared, in places like I Corinthians 3:16, **“Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit—[the Spirit of Christ!]-lives in you?”**¹³ What does it mean that now the place where the world is to most profoundly experience the breaking in of the Kingdom of God, made possible by the life, death and resurrection of Christ, God's Son, is in the community of the church, in the family of God, in the people now filled with his very Spirit? What does it mean, church, that by God's grace we have now become the signpost pointing to God and to what God has done, and is doing?

Brothers and sisters, the world is now meant to see the victory of God over sin and death in our lives. The world is now meant to hear, in our words, the declaration of good news we have for everybody, the revelation of God's truth. The world is now meant to see in our community, in the way we love each other in spite of all the ways which otherwise would divide us, that God's family really is for everybody. And, of course, the world is meant to recognize in our lives, as broken and sinful as any others in this world, that the forgiveness won for the whole world at the cross can transform even the worst soul among us into one who is as beautiful as Jesus himself.

If you are in Christ, and Christ is in you, then wherever you go will become holy ground, a living Temple filled with God's presence where the world can come to see that God is not far, and he certainly is not us, but is near and, every day, coming nearer still.

Amen.

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¹⁰ See Isaiah 53:5.

¹¹ I'm stealing this illustration from N.T. Wright. See his brief, but brilliant explanation of Christ as the true Temple at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2QArkjk6eMs>

¹² Acts 2:3-4, NIV

¹³ See also I Corinthians 6:19, II Corinthians 6:16, Ephesians 2:19-22, and I Peter 2:4-5.

The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read the text from II Chronicles 7:1-6 again. What stands out to you here?
2. This passage talks about the “glory of the Lord”. What do you think that means? Has there ever been a time in your life when you think you witnessed or experienced the glory of the Lord?
3. What makes something sacred or holy? Are there places or things on earth which are more sacred or holy than other places or things?
4. Remembering the circles Jeff used to describe the different ways which people describe the relationship between Heaven and earth, which picture do you believe is accurate? Why?
5. Where have you recently sensed Heaven breaking into earth?
6. Reflect on the following passage from I Peter 2:4-5. What does it mean to you that as we are in Christ we are being built into a holy Temple?

Come to [Christ], a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

7. If we, the church, are collectively God’s living Temple now on earth, the place where God’s glory has settled and is being revealed, how does that change our mission as we are sent out into the world?
8. How have you recently sensed Christ revealing himself through your life?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Where are the places in our world today where people are most likely to meet God?