

# Christ's Ascension to the Holy of Holies

## Opening

I come to Ascension Sunday with a few disclaimers. First disclaimer: I have a goal in mind last year, this year, and years to come—I pray that heaven seems lower and lower every year for us. I hope Ascension Sunday over the years (and ascension theology throughout the year) helps convert us to the worldview of the early church and Celtic Christians: heaven is intermingled with earth. Heaven isn't 'up there'; heaven is beyond the veil of this world, and it's everywhere.

Second disclaimer: I will be repeating some of the same points I preached last year on Ascension Sunday. But at least I've given you the disclosure. I had a seminary professor who published many books and one student discovered identical paragraphs cut and pasted from one book to another. The good professor had plagiarized himself, but without a disclosure. I'm repeating myself today, but at least I'm aware of it and I've told you about it.

Last year I preached a sermon addressing the question, 'where is heaven?' My reply was 'much closer than you think.' We do not live in a two-storey universe, as Stephen Freeman says. Earth isn't the lower floor and heaven the second floor, with no stairwell connecting the two spaces. Language fails when we aim to describe the mystery of heaven and earth, but the least we can do is correct misconceptions about heaven and earth.

Heaven is beyond the veil of this world (more on that in a moment), yet heaven is interlocking with earth. That is why last year on Ascension Sunday I explored several places in Scripture that **gates** and **doors** appear when a patriarch, prophet, or apostle has a vision of heaven. You cross the threshold of gates and doors into heaven; you enter a different dimension of God's realm, the realm of heaven. But heaven is much closer than we think.

Our beliefs about heaven directly affect our confidence in God's active presence in the affairs of earth. Our beliefs about heaven directly affect our conviction that Jesus' Kingdom reigns above all nations, princes, powers, and principalities in the world. If we live with a concept that heaven is far away, then we are inclined to pray in such a way that God is far off. And if we envision God residing

in a far-off place, then we will seek to save ourselves (which always turns out poorly) or look for so-called saviors (who usually turn out to be captors or oppressors).

But the ascension of Jesus has forever changed our understanding of heaven. Christ rose from the dead in his body, ascending into heaven in his body. He is seated at the Father's right hand in his body. At Christmas we praise God for bringing heaven to earth; at the Ascension we praise God that Christ has brought earth into heaven.

Today I'd like to build upon both last year's ascension theme of 'heaven is closer than you think' and explore that theme a bit more, taking cues from Luke's ascension story in Acts and our reading from the Book of Revelation.

## The Main Image of Revelation

As I've mentioned a few other Sundays this Eastertide, if you want to read and understand Revelation in its beauty and power, you need to consistently turn back to the Old Testament. When we looked at saints sheltered from persecution in Revelation 7, we saw all the images from the Feast of Tabernacles: palm trees and water springs.

That is one example among many, many references to Israel's story in Revelation. Today we're exploring *the main image* you have to understand from Israel's past to read Revelation in all its beauty and power. And that image is the Temple, especially the Holy of Holies. In other words, if you only remember one Old Testament reference when you read Revelation, remember this one: the Tabernacle-Temple of Israel.

The whole book is composed on the premise that all of creation was made to be God's holy dwelling. Not just one building (the Tabernacle or Temple), not just one bounded nation (Israel), but *the entire cosmos* was made to be the house of worship for Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When you understand that every square inch of the cosmos, heaven and earth, is destined to become God's Holy of Holies, then you begin to understand all the conflict and war in Revelation. God is removing all idols from his holy world who corrupt his beauty; he's defeating all evil spirits who harass the saints the Lord redeemed by his own blood. When Jesus turned over tables and drove out money changers who corrupted the Temple in Jerusalem, it was a preview of what the

Lord would do for his whole cosmos. His whole cosmos will finally become what she was created to be: a house of worship and prayer. That's what Revelation is about.

## Tabernacle/Temple Imagery in Israel

Now that we see the visual image of how this story *ends*, let's recall why God gave a Tabernacle and Temple in the first place. Remember, first of all, the relationship between the two. Both Tabernacle and Temple were Israel's sanctuary, the place where God would be physically present in the midst of his people. The Tabernacle was a transportable, temporary sanctuary while the Temple was the fixed sanctuary constructed in Jerusalem.

If you have a Bible reading plan, you probably get very bored when you reach the latter chapters of Exodus with its instructions about how to set up the Tabernacle. All those measurements and materials look like good candidates for skimming. But they're actually some of the best examples that every word is inspired by God and brimming with Gospel beauty.

Early rabbis had this conviction about the tabernacle: 'The tabernacle is equal to the creation of the world.' God created the world in six days; he gave instructions in six stages to construct the tabernacle, his house of worship. This connection between creation and tabernacle is crucial for understanding Jesus' ascension, and I'm greatly indebted to the brilliant theological work of Margaret Barker here.

On day 1 of creation, God separated light from darkness; on day 1 of the tabernacle's assembly, he created a separation of the tabernacle from Israel's encampment. Day one was the fencing day, placing a boundary around God's sanctuary. The tabernacle has different courts and a Holy Place.

What is most interesting regarding creation and tabernacle assembly happens on day 2-stage 2. On day 2 of creation, God created the realm of the heavens, separating heavens from earth; on stage 2 of tabernacle assembly, the veil was placed over the tent, which created a separate space, a separate room—the Holy of Holies. Now the Tabernacle has a Holy Place *and* a Holy of Holies, but the door separating the two is a veil, made of linen.

We could go on. On day 3 of creation, plants and seeds and fruits were made; stage 3 of tabernacle assembly the table for bread, wine, and incense enter the Holy of Holies. <sup>1</sup> And there's your biblical basis for Rogation Days, too.

Two main points to keep here about the Tabernacle:

1. The Tabernacle was a microcosm of the whole universe
2. Heaven was never a remote place; it was always the *most holy place*, in the middle of God's people, yet beyond the veil. Only the holiest, highest priest of Israel could enter the Holy of Holies.

## The Holy of Holies

Now I want us to note one feature about the veil that is the Holy of Holies before we connect these images with Jesus' Ascension. The veil separating the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies was made of linen, but woven with three colors: blue, purple, and scarlet. Those colors represented the raw materials of God's world: blue for air, purple for water, scarlet for fire. Some believe the veil had a fourth color, white, which represented earth. Behind that veil of course was God's presence and his glory, where angels surround the Ark of the Covenant. The veil, you see, in the Holy of Holies is a symbol that the glory of God is always *within* God's created world.

What's interesting about the four colors of the veil is that the High Priest would clothe himself in the same colors, the same materials. That wasn't just good design sense, it was a sign that the high priest would be clothed with the glory of God, veiled in physical matter. <sup>2</sup>

Now the high priest had daily duties he had to do in *front of the veil* without walking beyond the veil. Every morning and evening he had to burn fragrant incense. That's a lot of frankincense you're burning through the year. And then one day of the year, the Day of Atonement, the high priest walks through the incense, goes behind the veil, and enters the Holy of Holies to make offering for the

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology: An Introduction*, 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

people's sins. Now think about this for a moment. What do you get when you coals of incense burn for a long time? A cloud.

## Christ in the Cloud

All my life I've envisioned Jesus getting on the holy elevator, swarmed by some cumulus clouds and some angels. Maybe that's what it looked like. I wasn't there. But if you talk about two angels appearing with the cloud, it's beginning to remind us of the Ark of God's Presence, where cherubim surround his mercy seat. It sure seems like Luke wants us to see that Christ has gone beyond the visible creation into the Holy of Holies in his ascension. Our Great High Priest has passed through the veil, made atonement for our sins, and he remains in the realm of heaven. But what did the angels say? He's coming back in the same way. He's coming on the clouds of God's presence in his Temple, the cosmos, he made, to make the whole creation his Holy of Holies.

## Christ Enthroned and Reigning

So what does all this mean for us? What might this change for us? Three things.

### 1. Our vision of heaven

I hope it would change our vision of where heaven is. Heaven is a veil—it is the most holy place, the holy of Holies, but remember the veil! It has all the symbols of our life—earth, wind, fire, and water. The glory of God is always *within* created things, *filling* all things. Look for the glory of God more and more in his world. The glory of God isn't out of this world, it's within the stuff of this world.

We believe in the sanctity of human life *and* we believe in the sanctity of God's world because this cosmos was made to be his Temple.

### 2. Worship is absolutely everything

Christ's ascension to heaven, going beyond the veil of this visible world to prepare his creation to become the Holy of Holies, means all our idolatries will be revealed. All false gods will be judged. We can never bend the knee to false gods; we must cleanse our hearts of idols that seek our allegiance and the affections of our hearts. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ is coming again. We must be ready for his return and we prepare for his return by consecrating our whole lives in worship.

3. The mystery of Christ's Kingdom is the exaltation of weakness.

You may remember from the Old Testament that in the time of Ezekiel the glory of God departed from the Temple. Syrian Christians believe when the glory and presence of God departed from the Temple in Israel that the glory of God took up residence in the cross of Christ.<sup>3</sup> There are no crosses in heaven, but there are nail prints in the healed scars of our Great High Priest, seated at the right hand of the Father.

Remember that Christ entered the cloud, walked beyond the veil of this visible creation, in his body. His crucified and resurrected body. His weakness was a veil itself of his divine power. His ascension is a revelation that *our* weakness will be glorified. So we must always resist the idols of power in this world. We must always remember that Christ reigns over *all* nations because he trusted in his Father's power, which was veiled in his weakness. Mary's Magnificat wasn't just a hymn about her own life, it was a prophecy of her son's ascension: '(the Lord) has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.' Christ said in the Beatitudes, 'the meek will inherit the earth,' and his ascension is the assurance that *all* his meek and weary saints will reign with him. All those who humble themselves in the Kingdom of our Lord will be exalted.

And in the days of our struggle, our weariness, our exhaustion, how good to know that heaven is much closer than we think. None of our suffering is lost, it is destined for ascension, for exaltation in the kingdom of Jesus. John Wesley's final words in this life remain our hope: 'The best of all is God with us.' Yes, we, too, are destined for ascension *into* the eternal Holy of Holies where God's whole cosmos will be filled with his glory, where saints of all nations will praise His Name alone, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Freeman, *Everywhere Present: Christianity in a One-Storey Universe*, 98.