

# Two gardens, two mountains and a city

I've been asked to speak about **the Shekinah glory of God** this morning. That term isn't found in the Bible, but was coined by Rabbis to describe a biblical truth that runs throughout the Bible. The New Bible dictionary puts it like this: The Shekinah glory of God [is] "*the radiance, glory or presence of God dwelling in the midst of his people.*" And that's what we're going to be looking at this morning.

But rather than pick just one passage, I thought it would be good if we looked at the big picture - what the Bible says as a whole. And because we can't work through the whole Bible in half an hour, I've picked some salient passages of Scripture that I think perfectly illustrate what God dwelling with his people really means. I've titled this morning's talk: **Two gardens, two mountains and a city** in a tribute to Four weddings and a funeral and Richard Curtis. I've also done a handout with all the Bible passages on to make life a little easier, so you can either use that or turn to the Bible passages yourself.

## Introduction - God's transcendence and his immanence

Before we start I think it would be helpful to define a few terms that we'll be referring to a lot this morning. In the Scriptures, when we're talking about God revealing himself to us (humans) God demonstrates two significant characteristics. First of all God demonstrates his **transcendence** and secondly he demonstrates his **immanence**. I will explain what I mean.

**His transcendence means** that God is so **holy**, that Isaiah says God is holy holy holy. In other words there is no-one holier than God. He's also **glorious**, which is basically his holiness in action. When we talk about God's glory, it's really the bits of his holiness that we can see. And God never changes. He is absolutely holy and absolutely glorious all the time.

**The other characteristic of God in the way he relates to us is his immanence.** As well as being holy and glorious, God is also tender and compassionate. He's full of (or overflowing with) mercy the Bible says. For example the Bible tells us that God is a good shepherd caring for us, his sheep. In fact when one sheep wanders from the flock, he goes and hunts down that one lost sheep. The Bible also describes God as our heavenly Father and Paul even encourages us to use the term *Abba* to refer to God - which literally means Daddy.

The point I want to make is this - God is both transcendent **and** immanent **at the same time**. It would help us if we bear that in mind as we go through this morning.

## Garden no.1

If you'd like to turn to Genesis 1 or look at it on your handout. The Bible begins by describing God as a creator God and everything God creates is declared good (*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good*) including man and woman. The Bible story begins with the creator God **dwelling with** his creation. We need to see that clearly. A holy God is dwelling with the people he has made.

Gen <sup>2:25</sup> says *the man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame*. This means much more than they had no clothes on. The kind of nakedness Adam and Eve had was before God. It was total nakedness. Before God they had absolutely nothing to hide; their character, their emotions we're all on display before God and it was ok. But all this changed at the fall.

<sup>3:7</sup> *Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves...*

And then Adam says in <sup>3:10</sup>: *"I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."*

As a result of sin, the first response Adam and Eve have is one of shame. Suddenly they feel exposed and guilty. There's suddenly a need to cover up and to hide. Their relationship with God has been spoilt.

They also lose **direct access to God's presence**. I love Gen 3:8-9 where it says this: *Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day*. What a beautiful picture - God's presence is so real, he's walking in the garden in the cool of the day. And then we read the rest of the verse... *and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"* What a heartbreaking verse. Sin and shame has caused us to want to hide from the presence of God.

But sin also causes God to distance himself from us. On page two of your handout we have this passage:

<sup>3:23</sup> *So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. <sup>24</sup> After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.*

It's easy to focus on the fact that Adam and Eve are excluded from the garden; barred from paradise, but what's more significant is that they're excluded from the presence of God. One of the commentators on Genesis puts it like this: *"The overwhelming loss was not paradise; it was God. Throughout all the rest of the Old Testament one never hears talk of regaining the comfort of Eden, but regaining access to God's presence was paramount."*

In fact that's precisely how the Israelites would have seen things. The commentator goes onto say:

*"The most lamentable result of sin to an Israelite is not that it makes people bad [although it does] but that it makes God distant."*

## Mountain no1

For our second point we're going to go from a garden to a mountain. And we're going to read from Exodus 19. After the children of Israel have been brought out of Egypt, Moses meets with God on Mount Sinai to receive the 10 commandments and the law. And in a massive contrast with the early chapters in Genesis, access to God isn't easy and simple. In fact if you were to sum it up in one word, you'd say that access to God was **terrifying**.

From now on when God speaks to his people, rather than being a joyful picture (*the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day*), it's a terrifying one. Rather than being *accessible*, God has become *inaccessible*. He's become distant. God's people are still allowed to relate to God but it's far more complicated. And in the book of Exodus only one person can come into God's presence - Moses. God calls Moses to Mount Sinai in order to give Moses the law and it says this in Exodus 19:

*Ex 19:16 On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. 17 Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. 18 Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, 19 and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder ... 21 and the LORD said to him, "Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish. 22 Even the priests, who approach the LORD, must consecrate themselves, or the LORD will break out against them."*

Just listen to the imagery; thunder and lightning, thick cloud, a loud trumpet blast, smoke, fire, trembling mountains and trembling people. What's changed? Has God changed? God hasn't changed, the world has changed. Sin has broken us and broken our world. Sin has made God's presence distant and hard to access. You can only access God through God's appointed man - Moses and then only through rituals, and rules and law. All of which are designed by God to emphasise that he is hard to access and deliberately distant.

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve were thrown out of the garden, and access to God was withdrawn. If they tried to come back, angelic beings with flaming swords stood in their way. And here too access to God in the wrong way ends in death.

And this is how things are throughout the Old Testament. God dwells with his people through the tabernacle (a kind of portable temple) while the Israelites are in the wilderness. And then later God instructs Solomon to build a permanent temple. But the access is just as hard and God is just as inaccessible. This doesn't mean that God isn't merciful or kind in the Old Testament. God is always the same, but he's distant and inaccessible to make a point. **Sin has separated us from God's presence.**

## Mountain no2

We're going to move from this mountain to another mountain.

*John 1:14 The Word [Jesus] became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

If God was hard to access in the Old Testament in order to demonstrate his **transcendence** (his holiness and glory) - in the person of Jesus we see God demonstrating his **immanence** in an incredible way. God the Son comes to dwell with his people. In fact the phrase '*made his dwelling among us*' literally means Jesus '*tabernacled with us*'. But unlike in the Old Testament, where to attempt to see God meant certain death, Jesus is touchable, approachable, physical, human. He's immanent. Right here with us.

But we must never forget that Jesus is still the transcendent, holy and glorious God. 3 out of 4 Gospels record a very odd story. For many years I've always thought that it was one of the oddest parts of the Gospels. It's when Jesus is transfigured. Basically Jesus takes three disciples up onto a mountain to pray and something very strange happens. Here's how Luke records it and I want you to listen for similarities between this passage and the passage from Exodus:

*Luke 9:28 About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. <sup>29</sup> As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and **his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning**. <sup>30</sup> Two men, Moses and Elijah, <sup>31</sup> appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. <sup>32</sup> Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his **glory** and the two men standing with him. <sup>33</sup> As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what he was saying.)*

*<sup>34</sup> While he was speaking, **a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid** as they entered the cloud. <sup>35</sup> A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." <sup>36</sup> When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves, and told no one at that time what they had seen.*

It must have felt like a weird dream to the disciples. A quick snapshot of God's glory, but who is glorious in this passage? The God of glory and majesty in the Old Testament - in this passage is Jesus. The word transfigured literally means to '*change outward appearance*' and for a brief moment we see Jesus as he really is - the glorified Jesus.

What's the significance? It means rather than being far away, the glory of God is now near. It means that God's presence is now fully revealed in Jesus, dwelling among us again. And we

get the affirmation from God the Father, that we need to listen to him. He is very, very, very important.

## Garden no2

But the story doesn't end there as you know. To understand what this means we need to take a look at another garden. This time it's the garden of Gethsemane.

*Matthew 26:36 Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." 37 He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. 38 Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." 39 Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." ... 45 Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.*

Unlike the first garden in the Bible where God walked in the cool of the day joyfully sharing in his creation, here Jesus is in a garden in complete sorrow. And unlike the first garden where Adam and Eve were expelled and faced death, in this garden it's God himself who's about to face death. He's about to be expelled from the garden if you like, so that we could come back in. So that we could come back into the presence of God permanently, Jesus had to leave it.

On our two mountains we saw that God is glorious in thunder, lightning, earthquakes etc... Here God is just as glorious because he gives up that glory for you and me. This is the great gospel message, that the transcendent, the holy and glorious God becomes immanent. And unless you understand that God is transcendent, the fact that he's immanent makes absolutely no sense. The Bible wants us to see both God's transcendence and his immanence together.

## The city

This takes us to our final point. Two gardens, two mountains and **a city**. On the back page of your handout.

After Jesus rises from the dead, it's clear that God comes to dwell in a different way. At Pentecost God sends the Spirit, so that every believer can know the presence of Jesus all the time. Paul says this about believers:

*Colossians 1:27 To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

That's what the Holy Spirit comes to do. The role of the Holy Spirit has brought the presence of the almighty God so close, he's now not just walking with us, he's inside us. God couldn't be any closer.

But if the Holy Spirit means *Christ in you, the hope of glory* that points to something else,

something greater. We have a **promise now for the future**. We have the promise but not the complete fulfillment. We're living in the Now and the Not yet (and I believe you're going to be looking at that in a few weeks). It's what's coming in the future that's really exciting. A glorious future based on a cast iron promise now.

It's interesting isn't it that **the world we live in actually thinks that Christianity is boring**. Now some of the blame for that lies at the feet of Christians who live out a poor version of the Christian faith. But if you really understand the gospel, it's not Christians who are boring, but those who don't believe.

I've been reading a sermon by C.S. Lewis in preparation for this morning titled: *The Weight of Glory*. If you've not read it I'd recommend it and I can give you a link to it if you like. He says this about the world's hopes:

*It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.*

What Lewis is saying is that if you try to find joy and happiness without God, you'll always be disappointed. What we really need above all else is not just to be known and loved and accepted by other people but to be known and loved and accepted by the only one whose opinion really matters - God.

Whether we know it or not, because we're made for God's presence, what our hearts desire more than anything else is to be in God's presence and to be accepted. There's a desire in all of us to be like Adam and Eve in the garden - *the man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame*.

What every human longs for whether they know it or not is approval and acceptance from God, to be in God's presence and feel no shame. And that's what happens at the very end of the Bible. Turn with me to Revelation 21.

*Rev 21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." 5 He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"*

The first two chapters of Genesis and the last two chapters of Revelation is really the story of the Bible. God dwells with his *few* people in a garden and he dwells with his *many* people in a city. And this is the picture of the end of time. God finally, completely dwelling with his people.

No more suffering, no more tears, once again naked emotionally and completely before God and completely unashamed. Finally we'll have access to God's presence that won't end.

I wonder what you long for as a Christian? Is it to get to 'heaven', to be in paradise? It's not the place that really matters it's the presence of God! It's easy to think of the Christian life in terms of stuff we get. We get to live forever etc. And they are great byproducts, but what we really need is to dwell with God, to know God and to be known by him. That's what we're all made for. To hear "*well, done good and faithful servant*" is like being in the garden, naked and unashamed. No need to hide, no need to run from God, no need to be terrified of God or God to ever reject us again.

But there's also a challenge for us too as Christians to have this as our world-view. Do we really believe that for our Christian brothers and sisters and for our non-Christian friends, that the greatest thing they need is to experience the presence of God now and forever? Personally I'm not sure I really believe that about my Christian brothers and sisters. If I did I'd encourage them far more as believers. And I'm not sure I think like that about people I know who aren't Christians. If I did I'd pray for them more and share the gospel with them more. At the end of the day what really matters above all else is for us all to be in the presence of God forever.

In the essay I quoted from earlier CS Lewis also says this about people. And I want to end with this.

*The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbour's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations.... There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.*