

The Heavenly Sanctuary



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Jer. 23:23, 24; Ps. 89:14; Revelation 4, 5; Ps. 11:4–7; Deut. 25:1; Heb. 8:1, 2.*

Memory Text: “‘[T]hen hear in heaven Your dwelling place their prayer and their supplication, and maintain their cause’” (*1 Kings 8:49, NKJV*).

Where does God live?” This innocent question of a six-year-old could be quite perplexing. It could easily lead to more difficult ones, such as, “If God lives in one place, how is it possible that He is everywhere?” Or, “Does God need a dwelling place?” Or, “If He doesn’t need one, why does He have one?” Or, “If He does need one, why does He need it?”

These are good questions, and, given the little we know (and the lot we don’t), they are not so easy to answer.

Nevertheless, we can answer with what we do know. As Seventh-day Adventists, we know from the Bible that God dwells in heaven, that He is actively working in our behalf “up there,” and that the center of His work is in the heavenly sanctuary.

Scripture is clear: the heavenly sanctuary is a real place, and from it we can learn truths about the character and work of our God. Thus, the focus of this week’s lesson is the heavenly sanctuary and what God is doing there for us, because what He is doing in the sanctuary is, indeed, for us.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 5.*

God's Residence

We often say that “God is everywhere.” Or that He is “omnipresent,” which means that He is present throughout the universe. “‘Am I a God near at hand, . . . and not a God afar off? . . . Do I not fill heaven and earth?’” (*Jer. 23:23, 24, NKJV*). David understood, too, that nobody can flee from God (*Psalms 139*). Indeed, as Paul argues, God is close to everyone, at least in a spiritual sense (*Acts 17:27, 28*).

Complementing God's attribute of omnipresence is His eternal existence. God has neither beginning nor end (*Ps. 90:2*). He has always been and will always be (*Jude 1:25*).

Read 1 Kings 8:49 and Psalm 102:19. What do they teach us about the place where God dwells? How are we to understand what this means? Can we understand it?

The Scriptures are full of statements about God's residence being in heaven (*1 Kings 8:30, 43, 49*). Does this mean that God is more present in heaven than He is anywhere else? God obviously dwells in heaven in a special way, in His glorious presence and pure holiness. The greatest manifestation of God's presence exists in heaven.

There is a difference, however, between God's “general presence” and His “special presence.” God is generally present everywhere; yet, He chooses to reveal Himself in a special way in heaven and, as we will see, in the heavenly sanctuary.

Of course, we have to admit that we are limited in our understanding of His physical nature. He is spirit (*John 4:24*) and, as such, cannot be contained in any structure or dimension (*1 Kings 8:27*). Even so, the Bible presents heaven (*John 14:1–3*) and the heavenly sanctuary as real places (*Heb. 8:2*) where God can be seen (*Acts 7:55, 56; Rev. 4:2, 3*). We have to believe that even heaven and the heavenly sanctuary are places where God condescends to meet His creation.

There are many things that are difficult for us to imagine or understand, such as the dwelling place of God. Yet, the Bible says that this dwelling place is real. How can we learn to trust in all that the Bible teaches us, no matter how hard it is sometimes to understand? Why is it important for us to learn to trust even when we don't understand?

Throne Room

Read Psalms 47:6–9; 93:1, 2; 103:19. What do these texts teach us about God and His throne?

Several visions of the heavenly throne occur in the Bible. Most depict a kind of heavenly assembly with God as King. Interestingly enough, most of them are concerned with human affairs—usually presenting God as acting for or speaking in behalf of the righteous.

The Bible also reveals God as sovereign. For instance, the kingship of the Lord is a recurring theme in the Psalms. God is not only King of heaven but also “King of all the earth” (*Ps. 47:7, NKJV*), and not only in the future but already in the here and now (*Ps. 93:2*).

That God’s throne is established in heaven has several ramifications. One of them is that God is independent and superior to the rest of the universe.

Read Psalms 89:14, 97:2. What do these texts teach us about the character of God and how He rules?

God’s rule encompasses righteousness and justice, as well as love and truthfulness. These moral qualities describe how He acts in the human world and underscore His position in the entire universe. These qualities, which compose His rule, are also the same as those that He wants His people to manifest in their lives (*Mic. 6:8, compare with Isa. 59:14*), and it is our sacred privilege to do so.

“As in obedience to His natural laws the earth should produce its treasures, so in obedience to His moral law the hearts of the people were to reflect the attributes of His character.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 144.

How can we better manifest goodness, righteousness, and justice in a world filled with evil, unrighteousness, and injustice? Why *must* we do these things?

Worship in Heaven

Read Revelation 4 and 5. What do these two chapters teach us about the heavenly dwelling place of God? In what way is the plan of salvation revealed in these texts, as well?

The vision of the heavenly throne room is a vision of the heavenly sanctuary. This is made evident from the language referring to the Hebrew religious system. For instance, the words for “door” and “trumpet” in Revelation 4:1 appear often in the Septuagint (an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament) in reference to the sanctuary. The three precious stones in Revelation 4:3 are part of the High Priest’s breastplate. The seven lampstands are reminiscent of the lampstands in Solomon’s temple. The twenty-four elders remind us of the twenty-four divisions of service for the temple priests throughout the year and their prayer offering in the golden bowls of “incense” (*Ps. 141:2*). All of these verses point back to the Old Testament worship service, which centered around the earthly sanctuary.

Finally, the slain Lamb of Revelation 5 points, of course, to Christ’s sacrificial death. Christ, the Lamb, is the only Mediator of divine salvation and is accounted worthy because of His triumph (*Rev. 5:5*), His sacrifice (*Rev. 5:9, 12*), and His divinity (*Rev. 5:13*).

“Christ took upon Himself humanity, and laid down His life a sacrifice, that man, by becoming a partaker of the divine nature, might have eternal life.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 3, p. 141.

What we see in these two chapters, centering around God’s throne, is a depiction of God’s work for the salvation of humanity. We can see, too, that this work has unfolded before the other intelligent beings in heaven, a key theme in the great controversy motif.

Think about what it means that Christ, as God Himself, took on our humanity and died as our Substitute; that is, whatever wrongs you have done for which you yourself should be punished fell on Him instead. Why should this truth motivate everything that you do?

Court Room

Read Psalm 11:4–7 and Habakkuk 2:20. What else does God do in His heavenly temple, and why is this important for us to know?

Many Psalms reveal that the Lord is not indifferent to the needs of the righteous or to the injustices that they often face. He will react to the issues that cry out for redress, and He will “justify the righteous and condemn the wicked,” just as any good judge would do (*Deut. 25:1, NKJV*).

When God judges, the throne room becomes a courtroom and the heavenly throne, a judgment seat. The One enthroned is the One who judges (*see Ps. 9:4–8*), a concept known in the ancient Near East where kings often functioned as judges, as well.

Divine judgment involves both the wicked and the righteous. While the wicked receive a punishment similar to that received by Sodom and Gomorrah, the upright “will behold His face” (*Ps. 11:6, 7, NASB*). The classic combination of throne room and judgment appears in Daniel 7:9–14 (a significant passage that we will study later). There again, the judgment consists of two strands: a verdict of vindication for the saints and a sentence of condemnation for God’s enemies.

In the book of Habakkuk, after Habakkuk asks God why He is silent about injustice (*Habakkuk 1*), God answers that He will certainly judge (*Hab. 2:1–5*). While idols have no “breath” or “spirit” (*Hab. 2:19*), the Creator God is enthroned in His temple, the heavenly sanctuary, and He is ready to judge.

The prophetic appeal is, “‘Let all the earth be silent before Him’” (*Hab. 2:20, NASB*). The appropriate attitude toward God’s ruling and judging is awed silence and hushed reverence.

The place where God reveals His special presence and where He is worshiped by the heavenly beings is the same place where He is rendering righteous judgment for all humans: the sanctuary in heaven. God is just, and all our questions about justice will be answered in God’s time, not ours.

However much we cry out for justice, we often don’t see justice in the present. Why, then, must we trust in God’s justice? Without that promise, what hope do we have?

Place of Salvation

Read Hebrews 8:1, 2. What is Christ doing at the throne of God?

The book of Hebrews teaches that Christ is ministering in the heavenly sanctuary as our High Priest. His work there is focused on our salvation, for He appears “in the presence of God for us” (*Heb. 9:24, NASB*). He sympathizes with us, giving us assurance that we will not be rejected, but instead, receive mercy and grace (*Heb. 4:15, 16*) because of what He has done for us. As in the earthly sanctuary, the heavenly one is where “atonement” (or “reconciliation”) is made for the sins of the believers (*Heb. 2:17*). The Jesus who died for us is the One now ministering in heaven “for us,” as well.

Read Revelation 1:12–20, 8:2–6, 11:19, and 15:5–8. What sanctuary imagery appears in these passages?

The verses in today’s study are just some of the places in the book of Revelation where sanctuary imagery appears. In fact, most of the major sections of the book begin with or contain a sanctuary scene.

The first introductory scene shows Christ, clothed as High Priest, walking among the seven lampstands (*Rev. 1:12–20*). The second shows the heavenly throne room, and the verses reveal a wide variety of sanctuary imagery: throne, lamps, sea, slain Lamb, blood, and golden bowls of incense (*Revelation 4, 5*). The third scene refers to the continual service of intercession in the context of the first apartment of the heavenly sanctuary (*Rev. 8:2–6*). The fourth and central scene gives us a glimpse of the ark of the covenant in the second apartment (*Rev. 11:19*). The fifth scene brings the entire tabernacle in heaven into view (*Rev. 15:5–8*). The sixth scene is unique in that it does not contain any explicit references to the sanctuary, perhaps to illustrate that Christ’s work there is finished (*Rev. 19:1–10*). The final scene is all about the glorious Holy City on earth, which is portrayed as the tabernacle “coming down out of heaven” (*Rev. 21:1–8, NASB*).

A careful study of these scenes reveals that they are interconnected, showing an internal progression in the salvation accomplished by God: from Christ on earth, to His heavenly ministry in the first and second apartments, to His high priestly ministry’s end, and finally to the new earth tabernacle.

Further Study: “Paul had a view of heaven, and in discoursing on the glories there, the very best thing he could do was to not try to describe them. He tells us that eye had not seen nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for those that love Him. So you may put your imagination to the stretch, you may try to the very best of your abilities to take in and consider the eternal weight of glory, and yet your finite senses, faint and weary with the effort, cannot grasp it, for there is an infinity beyond. It takes all of eternity to unfold the glories and bring out the precious treasures of the Word of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1107.

“The abiding place of the King of kings, where thousand thousands minister unto Him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stand before Him (Daniel 7:10); that temple, filled with the glory of the eternal throne, where seraphim, its shining guardians, veil their faces in adoration, could find, in the most magnificent structure ever reared by human hands, but a faint reflection of its vastness and glory. Yet important truths concerning the heavenly sanctuary and the great work there carried forward for man’s redemption were taught by the earthly sanctuary and its services.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 414.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Look at the last statement in Friday’s study from Ellen G. White. What does she mean when she says that many “important truths” for our salvation were taught in the earthly sanctuary and its services? What are some of those truths, and why are they important?
- ❷ What does it mean that God “dwells” in heaven? How do you understand that concept?
- ❸ This week’s lesson touched on the idea that the onlooking universe sees the work that God is doing in behalf of humanity. Why is that a crucial concept to grasp? How does this concept help us to understand the great controversy motif and what that motif means in the whole plan of salvation? What does it tell us about the character of God that He would leave His ways open to the scrutiny of beings that He, Himself, created?

The Rude Neighbor

Jules and some choir members were going door-to-door to share their faith in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo. As they approached one home, a man yelled angrily, “I don’t want you here! Get out!” Jules tried to talk to the man, but he shouted angry threats at them. Quietly the believers left and went next door. The neighbor, Mangu, listened to the choir members sing several spiritual songs. He thanked them and accepted a pamphlet they offered.

On Sabbath Jules and his friends returned to Mangu’s home to sing and share their faith again. Simon, the neighbor who had been so rude to the young people, saw the visitors in Mangu’s yard and walked over to see what was happening. Mangu showed Simon the Bible study pamphlet.

Simon asked Mangu for the pamphlet. “This one is mine,” Mangu said. “Ask for your own.” Simon swallowed his embarrassment and invited the Seventh-day Adventists to come to his house.

“I saw the Bible lesson you gave Mangu,” Simon said. “I want to read it too. I want to know what’s so special about Seventh-day Adventists.”

Simon listened to Jules and his friends talk about Jesus. The young people invited Simon and his family to join the choir’s Bible-study group. “I’d like one of these pamphlets for my wife and each of my children,” Simon said quietly.

Jules smiled as he pulled out more Bible pamphlets. “Could we have Bible studies here in our home?” Simon asked. Jules agreed. He and one other young man returned to Simon’s home every week for a month. Then Simon and his wife and children joined the Bible-study group at the church.

When the church announced evangelistic meetings, Simon and his family attended every meeting. Simon and his wife asked to be baptized, and later the couple’s three teenage children joined the church, as well.

Simon, the once-rude neighbor who wouldn’t allow the youth into his home, now shares his faith with anyone who will listen. He urged his neighbor, Mangu, to check out the Seventh-day Adventists, and Mangu now attends the Bible-study group every week.

Our mission offerings help reach people in difficult places such as Kinshasa, where less than one in a thousand is a Seventh-day Adventist Christian. Thank you for sharing.



JULES TSHIAMALENGA *shares his faith in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo.*