

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 on 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 on 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?

Courtroom

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 Comments, *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 Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *1 Kings 8:49*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Grasp the reality and basic functions of the heavenly sanctuary.

Feel: Appreciate the warmth and intimacy of the heavenly sanctuary as God’s home.

Do: Accept the biblical picture of a real heavenly sanctuary and internalize its message of “God with us.”

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Reality and Functions of the Heavenly Sanctuary

A The Bible repeatedly affirms the reality of the heavenly sanctuary. Why is it important that the heavenly sanctuary be a real place in heaven and not just a metaphor for salvation?

B There are five main functions of the heavenly sanctuary: God’s residence; command center of the universe; place of worship; celestial courtroom; and center of salvation. Which of these were present even before sin, and which will continue even after the great controversy is over?

II. Feel: The Sanctuary as God’s Home

A The heavenly sanctuary is described in Scripture as God’s own dwelling place. How does it affect your feelings about the heavenly sanctuary when you view it as more than a celestial courtroom—as also the personal home of God?

III. Do: The Heavenly Sanctuary and God’s Character

A How can the understanding of the heavenly sanctuary as the place where “God is with us” (and not just a place of judgment) expand our view of God’s character?

▶ **Summary:** The heavenly sanctuary reveals a loving God who has condescended to dwell with His creatures from the beginning of Creation.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1**—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *1 Kings 8:49*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The heavenly sanctuary demonstrates the “Immanuel [God with us] principle” from the beginning of Creation throughout eternity: God comes down out of heaven into time and earthly space to take up residence with His creatures, invites them to intimate fellowship with Him (worship) and (after sin) makes a way for this intimate relationship to be restored.

Just for Teachers: We focus this quarter on a subject that is probably more pervasive and foundational in Scripture than any other: the sanctuary. In 1906 Ellen G. White wrote, “The correct understanding of the ministration in the heavenly sanctuary is the foundation of our faith.”—*Evangelism*, p. 221. Adventist pioneer Uriah Smith forcibly describes the importance he found in the sanctuary message: “The Sanctuary! Momentous subject! Grand nucleus around which cluster the glorious constellations of present truth! How it opens to our understanding the plan of salvation! How it lifts the veil [sic] from the position of our Lord in heaven! What a halo of glory it throws upon his ministry! What a divine harmony it establishes in the word of God! What a flood of light it pours upon past fulfillment of prophecy! How it fortifies the mighty truths of these last days! What a glory it sheds upon the future! With what hope and joy and consolation it fills the heart of the believer! Glorious subject! Its importance can neither be overdrawn nor overestimated.”—“Reflections on the Sanctuary,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 25, 1858.

Opening Activity: Ask your class to imagine and describe what they think the heavenly sanctuary looks like. Ask them to share why they think an omnipresent God needs to reside in a heavenly sanctuary.

Consider This: Jesus in His incarnation is called “‘Immanuel,’” “‘God with us’” (*Isa. 7:14, Matt. 1:23, NKJV*). Was the “Immanuel principle” already operative before the Incarnation when God dwelled in a location in heaven that He called His sanctuary? Explain. See Exodus 25:8 for God’s stated purpose for the sanctuary. When did the heavenly sanctuary originate? Was there a heavenly sanctuary even before the need to solve the sin problem in the universe? Give reasons for your answer.

► STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: The Bible contains scores of references to the heavenly sanctuary. These many passages, coming from all parts of the Bible, repeatedly underscore the reality of the heavenly sanctuary as an actual place in heaven (*see, for instance, Rev. 4:2, 11:19*). Scripture mentions five main functions of the heavenly sanctuary: it is (1) God’s residence; (2) the command center of the universe, where God rules from His throne; (3) the place of heavenly worship; (4) the heavenly courtroom, where God conducts righteous judgments; and (5) the place (along with the Cross) for solving the sin problem. Seventh-day Adventists often emphasize the fourth and fifth functions, which came into view after sin, and these important purposes will be the focus of several future lessons. But because the first three basic, original (and eternal) purposes of the heavenly sanctuary are often neglected, we will highlight these functions in what follows.

Bible Commentary

I. God’s Heavenly Home (*Review 1 Kings 8:49 with your class.*)

In the Old Testament, the heavenly sanctuary is often spoken of as a “temple.” These texts show that God is in His temple (*Ps. 11:4, Isa. 6:1, Mic. 1:2, Hab. 2:20, et cetera*). The Hebrew word for “temple,” *hekal*, is derived from the ancient Sumerian word *EGAL*, which means “great house.” The sanctuary is often called “the house of the Lord” (*for example, see Ps. 23:6*) and God’s “habitation” (*NKJV*) or “dwelling” (*NIV*) (*see Deut. 26:15, Ps. 68:5, Jer. 25:30, Zech. 2:13*). Thus, the heavenly sanctuary/temple is ultimately God’s residence—His home!

This heavenly temple has been in existence since the beginning of Creation (*see Jer. 17:12, whose language reflects Gen. 1:1*). Though the metaphysics of God’s existence is hard to understand, He condescended to dwell in space and time, to be close to His creatures—“God with us.” And Jesus is now preparing “‘rooms’ ” for us to live eternally in His “‘Father’s house’ ” (*John 14:1–3, NIV*), which refers to the heavenly sanctuary.

Consider This: How does understanding the heavenly sanctuary as God’s own home, where He invites His creatures for fellowship (and one day to live with Him), broaden your perspective of God as a warm, friendly, inviting Person?

II. The Command Center of the Universe (*Review Psalm 47:6–9 with your class.*)

Many passages of Scripture depict God in His throne room and speak of the heavenly sanctuary as God’s throne room. (*See especially 1 Kings 22:19; Pss. 93:1, 2; 97:2; 103:19, 20.*) Just as Solomon, the earthly king in Israel, built a “Hall of Judgment” along with his personal residence (*see 1 Kings 7:1, 7, 8, NKJV*) where he administered the affairs of Israel, so we may visualize that the heavenly King has a throne room or “Hall of Judgment” (the Most Holy Place) and His personal residence (the Holy Place). From His “command center” in the heavenly sanctuary, God conducts the “affairs of state” for the universe.

Consider This: What kind of administrative “affairs of state” do you imagine God conducting from His throne room before and after the rise of sin?

III. The Place of Heavenly Worship (*Review Revelation 4 and 5 with your class.*)

Many biblical passages describe the heavenly sanctuary as a place of worship. Isaiah 14:12–21 and Ezekiel 28:11–19 not only depict the fall of Lucifer and the rise of evil but also portray the heavenly sanctuary’s existence even before sin, with Lucifer as the “‘anointed cherub who covers’ ” (*vs. 14, NKJV*), or covering cherub (*see Exod. 37:9*). Here, Lucifer’s position as the covering cherub implies the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary on the “‘mountain of God’ ” (*Ezek. 28:14, NKJV*). The function of this pre-Fall sanctuary is stated in the parallel passage: it is the “‘mount of assembly’ ” (*Isa. 14:13, NIV*). At the heavenly sanctuary, the unfallen created intelligences assembled to worship their Creator. After the entrance of sin, the praise (doxological) function of the heavenly sanctuary continued. Isaiah is shown the heavenly temple when it is astir with doxology; the seraphim chant their praise antiphonally: “‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!’ ” (*Isa. 6:3, NKJV*). Revelation 4 and 5 depict a similar worship scene in the heavenly sanctuary after Jesus’ ascension: the heavenly creatures praise their Creator (*Revelation 4*) and Redeemer (*Revelation 5*). And doxology will continue to emanate from the sanctuary throughout the climax of the great controversy and for eternity (*Rev. 19:1–5, Isa. 66:23, Rev. 21:1–3*).

Consider This: What is your reaction to the following theological aphorism: “Before soteriology [the plan of salvation] is doxology [worship]”? What does this statement say about the character of God and His original, eternal purpose in establishing the heavenly sanctuary?

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Just for Teachers: It is vital to grasp that the original purpose of the heavenly sanctuary was to reveal part of the essential nature of God’s character—“Immanuel”—God with us. That God condescends to live in

a heavenly sanctuary among the created heavenly beings reveals that He is not aloof, distant, cold, and forbidding. He longs to be close to His creatures, to dwell with us.

Thought Questions:

- 1 Is the heavenly sanctuary a real place in space and time, or is it only a metaphor? Support your answer from Scripture.
- 2 Much of the Christian world (following the thought of Platonic dualism) still believes that God is essentially “timeless”; that is, He does not come down to dwell in space and time. How does the historical reality of the heavenly sanctuary become a key to providing a correct view of the nature of God? Why is this important?

Application Question:

How does understanding the “Immanuel principle,” in regard to the heavenly sanctuary, affect your personal understanding of the sanctuary doctrine and sharpen your perspective on the character of God?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Try to help your students visualize the warmth and intimacy of the heavenly sanctuary as being God’s own home. An interior decorator in Russia, who became a theology teacher after the fall of Communism, wrote a paper entitled “An Interior Decorator Looks at the Heavenly Sanctuary.” She pointed out that professional interior decorators can tell much about the character of the person who lives in a house by the way the home is decorated. She suggested that the furnishings of the heavenly sanctuary, God’s home, reveal much about God’s character, even before they came into play with regard to the sin problem.

Activity: Think about the various “furnishings” of the heavenly sanctuary (God’s home) as described in Revelation and as partially reflected in their earthly counterparts; visualize what these furnishings of God’s home tell us about God, even before they became symbols of salvation. (For example, how might the table of bread connote God’s “dining room,” where “table fellowship” takes place between God and His heavenly “house guests”—the heavenly intelligences who assemble to worship Him?) What about the lampstand, the incense, the ark? What insights might these furnishings reveal about God’s character?