

Where Does God Dwell?

February 12, 2022

Pastor Jacob Shaffer

Good morning! If you have your Bibles with you, you can go ahead and turn with me to Isaiah 66:1-4. And just to add a little bit of context to the passage that we are in today, this is the very last chapter of the Book of Isaiah – and in this last portion of Isaiah in particular, God is at work in revealing what is to come for His people/His servants – namely, that although they have experienced hardship and endured suffering in this life/through the world around them, that there is a future glory for all of God’s people, for all who truly trust and hope in the work of His Suffering Servant (which we know to be Jesus), that far outweighs any heartache or any sorrow that they experience in this life. They will dwell with God, in His presence and in His peace, for all eternity.

But in the meantime, as they await the promise to come, God is particularly focused on encouraging His people to stay the course – to remain focused on Him. To not give up seeking Him/pleasing Him with all of their lives, and to not grow dead in their relationship with Him, like so many others around them have done (people who may have known of God at one time or another, but they do not know Him now).

Because as we all know, there is a big difference between the two – you can know of God and not know God. You can be around God’s People and His presence, and not have God’s presence dwell inside of you personally. You can look the part on the outside, but still be far from the heart of God internally. And that is important for us to understand because what is clear here in Isaiah, and throughout Scripture, is that God is more concerned about who we are as people internally, rather than just what we are doing externally. Pleasing God is more than just looking the part or knowing the right answers.

Read Isaiah 66:1-4 In the beginning of this passage, we see that the Lord is speaking through the Prophet Isaiah to the people of Israel, and He starts off with a pretty impressive and humbling statement. He says in v. 1, “Heaven is my throne, and the Earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be?”

And I don’t think that it is very hard for us to recognize that God is asking a rhetorical question here – like God is not really asking the people of Israel to give Him the location of His house that they will build for Him or to send Him the address of the place that He can rest His presence in. And He is not just describing what kind of throne He is sitting on - this is so much more than that.

God is revealing to His people here who He is and He is illuminating the magnitude of His glory – He is re-

mind them that He is transcendent and that He is Sovereign over all things in Heaven and on Earth. That He is the one who rules and reigns over all of Creation – and because of that, there is not a single person/thing in this world, or in Heaven above, that does not answer to His authority or does not depend upon Him for their existence.

And this is not something that we only see here in Isaiah, but this is something that we are reminded all throughout Scripture - that God is sovereign over all things because He, Himself, spoke everything into existence by the power of His own might (Genesis 1:1, Psalm 19:1, Psalm 24:1-2, much more). He declares the same thing here in v. 2a when He says, “Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?”

And so, seeing God in this way, seeing Him in all of His glory, is essential to us correctly understanding who He is and who we are as human beings. It helps us to see ourselves, and the world around us, in its proper perspective – and even the things that seem to be uncontrollable in our lives – even nature and the world that we live in, that seems to be so large and so immovable to us as humans, actually falls under God’s dominion just as much as everything else does in our lives - because He created it. God is absolutely sovereign over everything.

And unlike the false gods that people worshipped in antiquity, or even in the world today, God is not dependent upon people to find a place for Him to dwell. He is not asking us to build him a temple that is big enough or marvelous enough to contain His presence because He has nowhere else to go. And He is not requiring us to jump through hoops in order for Him to draw near to us. Because the truth is that the whole world is His – and His presence covers the whole Earth.

We see King Solomon recognize this truth in 1 Kings 8:27 when he is dedicating the temple that the nation of Israel just built to/for God, and he says these words, “But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!”

King Solomon was aware that even the temple that God instructed them to build, could not contain the magnitude of His glory in its fullest capacity. Yes, God’s presence dwelt there with His people – but God was not dependent upon the temple in order to draw near to people who were seeking Him.

They weren’t God’s people because they had a great temple – they were God’s people because God was with them always.

And so, the question that He asks - “where is the house that you will build for me?” and “where will my resting place be?” are essentially God’s ways of saying – that there is no temple, and that there is no religious center, that we can build as human beings that

can contain all of God’s glory or that will provide God with something that He does not already have.

To say that another way, God is not dependent upon us as humans to do things for Him that He cannot already do. He is not waiting for us to scratch His back so that He can then scratch our back with whatever blessings that we want. It doesn’t work like that with God. We can’t curry favor with God by doing things for Him or by impressing Him with our best efforts. Because God isn’t impressed by things that we are impressed with. He isn’t reliant upon us at all.

The Apostle Paul communicates the same exact thing to the idolatrous people of Athens in Acts 17:24-25.

And so, just to get little nerdy here, theologians often refer to this aspect of God’s nature as His “Aseity” – meaning that God depends on nothing and no one for His existence. Like although, we as humans depend utterly on God for everything, even our very breath - He does not depend at all on us.

And in a lot of ways, knowing that about God, should be really comforting to us as His people. Like knowing that God’s power/presence reigns over all things should reassure us that He can care for us in ways that we cannot care for ourselves, that He is able to do things that we cannot do for ourselves, and that even if we struggle to understand certain things or if we fail in some way as humans, we can know that we are not letting Him down because He is not dependent upon us at all.

Knowing who God is allows us to take a deep breath and relax – because God is larger than the problems that we have, and He is greater than the worries that can overcome our hearts. He is the Lord.

And as it relates to our relationship with God, knowing who He is, and knowing that He isn’t waiting on us to do something spectacular in order for His presence to dwell among us, frees us from trying to do things for Him that He is not asking us to do. And instead, it helps us to focus on the things that He is calling us to do as His people..

And we see Him reveal what that actually is, in the second half of v. 2, when He says, but “These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word.”

And so, what we see here, is that God is revealing that His goal is not, and was not, to have His presence only dwell in a beautiful temple (although His people may have thought that was the perfect place for Him to dwell). And in all honesty, the temple was a good thing – like God commanded His people to build it – but the truth is, that if the temple started to become an obstacle, or to take the peoples’ eyes off of what God was actually trying to do in His people, then it was senseless. The temple, as great and as magnificent as it was, was never meant to be the end of the story for God’s people.

But God’s desire now, and truly always has been, is to have His presence dwell within the human heart. And not just any heart in general, but a heart that is humble and contrite – a heart that trembles at His Word and depends upon Him completely. This is the kind of person that He looks upon with favor and this is the kind of person that He dwells among. This is the kind of person that we should long to be.

And all three of those things really build off of one another, right? Like to be humble is to be “low” - it’s to set aside any desires of self-exaltation and to lower yourself before the Lord and before others. In this passage, to be contrite literally translates in the Hebrew as being “maimed or lame” in spirit. So, that is to acknowledge that at the core of who we are, we are broken spiritually, and even in our best attempts, we cannot fix ourselves. To tremble at His word flows out of the other two things, but it is in our humility and contriteness that we desire to obey God more than anything else. It is to have a healthy fear of an awe-inspiring God, shown through the way that we obey Him with our lives.

Jesus says something very similar when He is teaching about what life looks like for those who are in the Kingdom of God in Matthew 5:3, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

And so, if we are being honest ourselves, this is probably the complete opposite of what many people in the world, including many of us, would assume an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present God would desire from His people. Like you would expect a perfect and Holy God to dwell with those who are self-sufficient, who are strong, who are powerful, and who look like they have it all together.

But instead, He says that He dwells with the weak. He draws near to the brokenhearted. And He looks upon the downcast in Spirit. Those are the kind of people that God are close to God’s heart and that God looks upon with favor.

And what is clear throughout Scripture, is that God is more concerned about who we are (and who we are becoming), than with what we do externally. Because who we are will always affect what we do, but what we do does not always affect who we are. God wants our hearts more than He wants our begrudging obedience.

Because the truth is that God is not looking for people that can do amazing things through their own strength or in their own talent – He’s not looking for people that have it all figured out all the time – He’s looking for people that recognize and admit that they need Him in every area of their lives, all the time.

He is not looking for you to be able to be enough in and of yourself or to try to please Him through your ability to maintain perfect obedience. He wants you to come to Him and trust that He is enough for you and that He will provide for you what you cannot pro-

vide for yourself. Because like Matthew 5:3, it is in our poverty, of both soul and Spirit, that we are filled with the riches of God's Grace and Mercy through His Son, Jesus.

We are reminded of this truth in 1 John 1:8-9, "8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

This is the essence of the Gospel, isn't it? It is in the acknowledgement of our brokenness, and in the confession of our sin before God, that we are granted forgiveness through the blood of Christ. We don't earn it – we receive it freely.

But maybe you find yourself in a place today where you feel like you are doing enough – like you aren't necessarily saying it out loud, but internally you are thinking to yourself, or you are living as if, you are doing all the things that you are supposed to do, that you are obeying all of the rules, you are going to church/reading your Bible/not doing things that you shouldn't do. You aren't that bad, right?

And all of this might be true, but there could still be a lack of humility before the Lord. And in some ways, you might be convinced that just by doing the things God has asked you to do externally, that God is pleased with you.

But scripturally speaking, that just couldn't be further from the truth. Read what God says in response Isaiah 66:3-4 to this kind of thinking.

All of the things that God lists here: sacrificing a bull, offering a lamb, presenting a grain offering, and burning a memorial sacrifice – these are all things that God has asked His people to do in the temple in the OT. Ritualistically speaking, this is what they are supposed to be doing.

But God sees this differently than they do. Because yes, they are doing all of the right things externally – they are keeping up with their religious obligations perfectly – but they are doing them with a wrongful heart and therefore are actually displeasing God and choosing their own ways over His. They are trusting in themselves and in their actions, rather than depending upon God even while they obey Him.

And the truth is that all of the religious things that they were supposed to do, and all of the things that we are to do as Christians, are means to an end – not an end in itself. And what I mean by that, is that when we do things like pray – we are praying to meet with God, not just to cross an item off of our spiritual to-do list. When we come to church, we are coming to experience God's presence/worship Him with other Believers, not to make ourselves feel like we did our good deed for the week. When we give our tithes and offerings, we are giving back to God what is rightfully His, not earning favor with Him through our checkbook.

We are God's people because God's Presence is with us through the Holy Spirit, by putting our faith in Christ alone – not because we do things that look Christian on the outside.

And to view these things in any other way, is to completely misunderstand the heart of God for us as His people. Because God isn't demanding us to do things in order to earn something from Him – He is inviting into spaces that will cause us to encounter His presence, and allow Him to shape our lives for His glory.

Richard Foster says it this way, in his book, *The Celebration of Discipline*, "Spiritual Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that He can transform us. By themselves the Spiritual Disciplines can do nothing; they can only get us to the place where something can be done."

And basically, what Isaiah is saying, and what Foster says in another way – is that we can do all of the right things externally, and still not experience God's presence or know God personally. To use Jesus' language, we can be as pretty as whitewashed tombs on the outside, we can have all of the appearance of godliness and liveliness from an external perspective, but have no sense of life on the inside. Because what makes us alive in Christ, isn't our perfect obedience but it's our humility to acknowledge our sin and our willingness to trust in Him alone.

And I just want to make it extremely clear – that what God is saying here, is that it is very possible for us as people to be doing all of the right things on the outside and to still be far from God. You can even know ALL the right doctrines, and all the right Bible verses for different situations, but still have a heart that is not humbled by your sin before God. And that is so far from what God wants for us as His people.

Because ultimately, God is not impressed by how good we are at doing Christian things – He desperately longs for us to grow into His image, and be led by His Spirit, as we walk humbly with Him. To allow His power work in our brokenness.

And so, the important question then for us is, what does it look like for someone to live in humility, contriteness, and trembling before the Lord in their lives? I think one of the best passages that reveal this in full effect, both the proper response and the improper response, is found in Luke 18:9-14.

And in this passage, we see that Jesus is sharing a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector. Basically, a man who was known as being the elite of the elite in religion and spirituality, placed side by side with a man that was known for his complete and utter moral filth. So, who do you think God was pleased with? This is where it gets interesting. Because what it says is that the Pharisee walks into the temple to pray, he stands off to the side by himself, and he begins prayed out loud these words, Luke 18:11-12. Now, what I find interesting about the

Pharisees prayer is that it starts off with thanking God, but the primary focus of the prayer is on the Pharisees actions of righteousness, rather than God's mercy on His life. We see that because he sort of just sprinkles God on top of His own self-righteousness.

But the tax collector approaches God in a completely different way – Read Luke 18:13-14.

So, rather than boasting in his own works, or even comparing his deeds to others deeds as a way of justifying himself, the tax collector acknowledged his great need (his spiritual poverty) before God, and humbly asked Him for mercy. And He received it.

One was seeking justification through their own works and their moral superiority over others, and the other was seeking justification through grace alone in humility. One was known for His religious observance, and one was known for their filthy past. One humbled himself before God, one didn't. One received mercy, the other didn't.

Those who pride in themselves and place their hope in their ability to sustain their own souls, will find that they cannot produce heart change, or become the kind of people God wants them to be, just through "doing enough" for God. They will fall short every time.

But for those who humble themselves before the Lord, who acknowledge their need for Him, and who trust in Jesus alone – God will come to them, He will dwell with them, and He will lead them into everlasting life – both now and forever.

A Puritan Pastor named John Flavel puts it beautifully by saying, "They that know God will be humble, and they that know themselves, cannot be proud."

And I know after hearing all of this, the temptation for us is to think that this is for someone else. But truthfully, this is for all of us. Who are we? Who are we becoming? Are we living our lives for God merely through what we do or are we allowing Him to transform us as we come to Him in humility?

My prayer is that we, not only as individuals, but also as a church family, will be steadfast in our desire to seek the Lord in humility, and allow Him to lead us into what He has for us as a church. Because He is able to lead His people in ways that they cannot lead themselves. He is faithful and He draws near to those who humble themselves before Him. First step into what God has for us (individually and as a church) is to come to Him in humility and to desperately seek Him.

Conclusion: We are distinguished as God's people by His presence with us, not by our ritualistic behavior. As God's People, He is more concerned about who we are (and who we are becoming), rather than what we are doing.



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