

# The Dwelling of God

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*Revelation 21:1–6a; Psalm 24; John 11:32–44; Isaiah 25:6–9*

From the second reading, in the book of The Revelation:

See, the home of God is among mortals (Rev. 21:3)

—‘mortals’ is not a very successful translation there, because ‘mortals’ are creatures who die, and it immediately goes on to say that this is at a stage when ‘Death will be no more’! So, if we’re going to live for ever and we’re not going to die, ‘mortals’ are the last things we are! The word translated ‘mortals’ actually just means ‘human persons’; it has nothing to do with the fact that we die: ‘the home of God is among human persons’. So another translation says:

Look! God’s dwelling is with humanity,  
and He will live with them.  
They will be His people,  
and God Himself will be with them  
and be their God (Rev. 21:3; *Common English Bible*)

Which is amazing, because it is saying that the eternal God of the universe makes His dwelling-place—the literal meaning is ‘pitches His tent’, sets up camp—with ordinary human people. Another simple translation designed for new readers puts it this way:

God’s home is now with his people. He will live with them, and they will be his own.  
Yes, God will make his home among his people (Rev. 21:3; *Contemporary English Version*).

Incredible—*God*, with *us*! But true.

There’s a whole history behind that, going right back to the start of creation. These words from the book of The Revelation come right near the end of the Bible—the end of time as we know it. Right at the beginning of the Bible, at the start of time as we know it, is the story of

the beginnings of the human race. God puts the man and woman in a garden called Eden and, before the woman and the man turn against God, in that garden God walks and talks with the man and the woman in the cool of the day. God wants to be there—He likes being with them! And they enjoy God's immediate presence, and the sound of God's voice (see Gen. 2:8). It's when the man and the woman turn against God, and try to go their own way without Him, that they lose that being-with-God, that closeness. And that's when death kicked in—the ultimate loss and separation.

The interesting thing is that God was still determined to move in and make His dwelling with His human people. And that's pretty much what the whole history of Israel in the Old Testament was all about. Abraham didn't go looking for God—God came and spoke and manifested His presence and revealed His glory to Abraham, and to Isaac and to Jacob (see Acts 7:2 and Gen. 12–50). When the whole nation of Israel was lost to slavery in Egypt, God brought them out, and set up a tent, a tabernacle, in their midst, so He could be there camped right among them—God called it 'the tent of meeting', and He said, 'I will meet with you, to speak to you there'—how about that? And God says in the book Exodus that this is the whole reason He rescued them from slavery and brought them out of Egypt—He says:

I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them; I am the LORD their God. (Exod. 29:42–46)

After the Israelites moved into the promised land, God got Solomon to build Him a temple for the same reason, and God said, 'my eyes and my heart will be there' (1 Kings 9:3)—isn't that beautiful? 'my eyes and my heart will be there', among my people. But like the man and the woman in the garden of Eden, Israel didn't live up to that closeness with God, and God eventually had to move out of that temple and see it destroyed (see 1 Kings 9:6–9; Ezek. 9:3a; 10:18–19; 11:22–23). And the people were scattered. Nevertheless, God persisted: He brought some of them back, and got them to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, so God could once again say: 'I am with you . . . My spirit abides among you; do not

fear' (Haggai 1:13; 2:5). But the sin of the people continued, and by the time that Jesus came, when the temple was being reconstructed for the third time, Jesus had to come and clean it out, and he said that temple wouldn't last either. And in 70 A.D. the Romans came and burned the temple down and demolished it. And it hasn't been rebuilt since. I've seen the huge blocks of stone that the Romans threw down into the valley below—they are still lying there in a tumbled heap.

You see, for God to come and dwell with us, we've got to be fit to live with. We say, 'God accepts us just as we are'. Sure, God accepts us just as we are, but that is in order to change us, so He can come and dwell with us personally and permanently. Psalm 24, that we said, a song of the temple, celebrates God's moving in on us to take up residence:

Lift up your heads, O you gates,  
and be lifted up, you everlasting doors:  
and the King of glory shall come in.  
Who is the King of glory?:  
the Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.  
Lift up your heads, O you gates,  
and be lifted up, you everlasting doors:  
and the King of glory shall come in.  
Who is the King of glory?:  
the Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory (Psa. 24:7-10).

And Here He comes! That's God, determined to come and move in on us as His dwelling-place. But what question does Psalm 24 ask of us?

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord:  
or who shall stand in his holy place?  
Those who have clean hands and a pure heart (Psa. 24:3-4).

So who's got clean hands and a pure heart? Anybody here? Not really—because we've all just confessed our sins! As we say in our little 'Come and meet God' booklet, from the book Ecclesiastes, 'there isn't anyone on earth who does only what is right and never sins' (Eccles. 7:20). Incontesable.

So where does that leave us? More importantly, where does that leave God, with regard to us? It's not easy. How do you reconcile with

someone who doesn't want to have anything to do with you? If God is determined to dwell with us, then He's going to need to do something to turn our hearts back to Him. And if we then need to be made fit to live with, then God is going to have to do something about our unclean hands and impure heart. And all of that is exactly what God has done.

Before Jesus was born, he was given an ancient name, from back in the time of the prophet Isaiah seven hundred years earlier: the name was 'Emmanuel', and it means 'God is with us' (see Isa. 7:14; 8:5-10; Matt. 1:22-24). He was also given the name 'Jesus', which means 'one who saves' his people from their sins (see Matt. 1:21). Those two things go together: Jesus is God with us to save us from the things that have taken us away from our closeness with God, so we can know God with us in a new and wonderful way.

Let's have a look at how Jesus was, and is, God with us to save us. There are different ways of being with someone. We can be with someone in a casual way, just passing the time of day. We can be with someone in a common task—working together at the same thing—that can be a very bonding experience. We can share joyous experiences together, being with each other in times of laughter and fun and happiness, in the oneness of that—very unifying. We can be with someone, alongside them, in a time of need or sadness or distress, bearing with them in ourselves something of that grief or sorrow. Well, Jesus came to be with us in all those ways, and more, even more deeply. What moves me most about Jesus is his identification of himself with me, as I am, across the whole of my life. Not just when I'm at my best, but also at my worst. In his death on the cross, when we were at our worst, Jesus was saying in effect: I am you, and you are me. I am taking all that you are into myself, whatever that may cost, and I am giving to you all that I am, for that to be yours. Don't we pray in this service 'that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us'? As we used to pray: our bodies made clean by his body, and our souls washed in his most precious blood—that's an important part of it. As the bread that we eat and the wine that we drink at the communion table becomes a part of us, of our bodies, and we become a part of him. You can't get any closer than that.

In the gospel reading we saw Jesus with Martha and Mary and Lazarus down in the depths. Lazarus had been very sick, and Jesus could have gone and healed him. But for some good reason he waited until he knew that Lazarus had died. I guess he knew on this occasion that he was to be with them at the worst possible moment. When Lazarus was already in the tomb. We see him entering right into that grievous situation, holding nothing back. Into the accusation: 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died' (John 11:32)—ever said something like that, or wanted to? 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?' (John 11:37). Into the despair, into the weeping and wailing: Jesus himself 'greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved' (John 11:33). Weeping himself: 'Jesus began to weep' (John 11:35). Into the depths of it all—with the love: 'See how he loved him!' (John 11:36). Carrying the deep unconquerable love of God into that worst of scenarios, and bringing that love to bear down into that situation: 'Take away the stone'—aahh, no!—'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God? . . . Father . . . you always hear me . . . Lazarus, come out!' Someone has said, he needed to say 'Lazarus', or else they would have all come out! 'Unbind him, and let him go' (John 11:38-44). Let him—*go*!

So Jesus, with us in our worst, giving us his best. Right through to the resurrection of the dead. Christ has died, Christ is risen! Remember how we said that death kicked in when we turned against God? And that there will be a time when the word 'mortal' won't fit with us? Because by then we'll be at a stage where 'Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more'—all things made new (Rev. 21:4, 5).

This morning we say farewell to Leon and Helen Redding, who are leaving to be with family at Strathalbyn after many years at Port Lincoln. It is an important reminder to us all that our home in this place, and in this life, is a temporary home. I remember when we bought our present home in Coromandel Valley nearly twenty years ago. It is in a beautiful place, it is the first home that we have owned,

and we have lived there longer than anywhere else, but we had a strong sense when we moved in that this would not be our permanent home. The apostle Paul writes of 'a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens' (2 Corinthians 5:1). God is our true home.

We heard in the Old Testament about a dinner party unlike any dinner party you have ever been to. It is 'a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear' (Isa. 25:6)—interested? But something happens at this dinner party that you've never known the like of:

the LORD of hosts . . . will destroy . . .  
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  
the sheet that is spread over all nations

—what is 'the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations'—what are we all subject to? All peoples, all nations are subject to death—we're all going to die! A shroud is a sheet that covers a dead body. But at this great dinner party that shroud will be removed. Death itself will be abolished!

he will swallow up death forever.

Ever been to a dinner party where that happened? We're heading for it now! Not only will we see death destroyed, but also the sin that caused it, the sin that makes it so fearful and so grievous:

Then the LORD God will wipe away the tears from all faces,  
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth

—there it goes—'for the Lord has spoken' (Isa. 25:7–8). So it will happen. And at that banquet God is there with us:

this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.  
This is the LORD for whom we have waited;  
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation (Isa. 25:9).

Today we celebrate All Saints Day. I'm sure you've been told before that when the Bible calls us 'saints' it is not referring to just the special people, but to all of us who belong to God through Jesus Christ. 'Saints'

means 'holy ones'. I think a good definition of saints—of Christians—is 'those in whom God dwells'—all of us who by the gift of faith have been brought into that holy place that is Jesus Christ himself. We have not only confessed our sins; we've also had them forgiven and taken away—hands washed clean, hearts purified, in the great cleansing action of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus—that the King of glory may come in.

Hello saints! Happy All Saints Day!