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Will God indeed dwell with man on the earth?<sup>1</sup>  
Let everyone, therefore, who knows  
himself to be a Christian,  
be assured of this, that we are all equally priests.<sup>2</sup>  
The proper condition of creatures,  
is to keep close to God.<sup>3</sup>

# Introduction

## Longing for Closeness

Our independent streak runs deep. Our desire for closeness runs deeper.

- A baby stops crying when held.
- Children want to be part of a group and have a best friend.
- Face-to-face always beats digital communication.
- To be truly known, with nothing to hide, and to truly know others is life at its best.
- Loneliness is the worst. Solitary confinement remains the most intolerable of punishments. Even child's short timeout can feel unbearable. And loneliness is not confined to times you are alone. You can feel isolated when surrounded by people. At those times you know that life, somehow, is not quite right.

When close to death, we want other people to be with us. No one wants to die alone.

The human condition is bent toward connection and closeness. We know that close relationships with other people are

hard, and they can hurt us deeply, but we don't give up. Even after being devastated we still hold out hope that a close relationship is possible. Substitutes for these relationships—things and activities—always fall short.

Go a little deeper, and we notice something similar even toward God. We might prefer him at a safe distance—a distant God makes fewer demands on us—but we want him close during trouble and might be frustrated when he seems quiet at such times, though we might have ignored him for months. Even atheists have their moments. Julian Barnes, in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, wrote of his attempt to face his fear of death, “I don't believe in God, but I miss him.”<sup>4</sup>

To be close to God is certainly a human desire, but intimacy with someone you can't see has its challenges, and intimacy when you feel a bit guilty is even more challenging. This intimacy, however, is *the* Christian hope, and we will not give up on it.

All this carries the stamp of our spiritual lineage: we are priests. God's intent for humanity has been that we would live in his house and receive his divine hospitality.<sup>5</sup> That is the mission of the priests—*priests are near God*. From that starting point, we will accumulate rich details. In his royal residence, which he declares is also our own, we are known, unashamed, at peace with each other, dressed in garments he himself tailored, ushered into a feast, and joined to him in communion that leaves us searching for words to describe. This priestly identity is a premiere way of understanding God's people—all God's people, male and female.

In order to enter in, Scripture must shape the priesthood for us because we all come with memories and images of priests—some good, some odd, some horrible. Many of us want to avoid priests who are wearing full regalia. They are different from the rest of us. When they are near, levity comes to an end,

which suggests that God, too, opposes fun. They can use their authority for their own purposes, which poisons the entire priesthood and dishonors God. So we must understand ourselves as priests by how God identifies the priesthood rather than how we experience priests past and present.

Once you try on this identity, you will enjoy wearing it. Just imagine: the priests served in God's house, knew God close up, ate meals with him, and enjoyed his presence. When they circulated among the people, they had the enviable job of pronouncing a blessing over them:

The LORD bless you and keep you;  
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and  
be gracious to you. (Num. 6:24–25)

What's not to like? And this is just for starters.  
You are a royal priest. That reality will change how you live.





PART 1

# OUR PAST

EDEN

God  
Heaven  
Temple  
Near  
Eden  
Earth  
Humanity





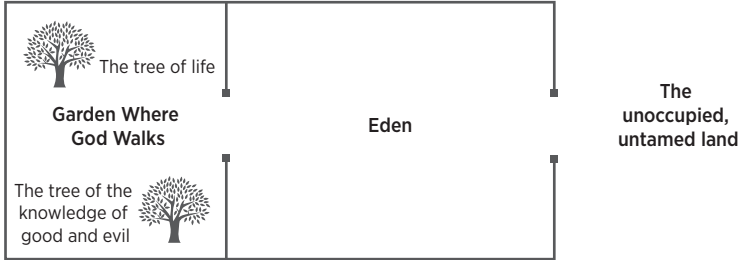
## In the Garden of God

A natural way to follow the priestly story is to look for tabernacles and temples. This is where priests worked, and this is where God came near. In Israel's history, the tabernacle was God's portable tent, assembled during the wilderness years. The temple refers to the stationary dwelling of God in Jerusalem that came later. They both identify God's house on earth.

Figure 1 illustrates the layout of the original tabernacle. It consisted of an enclosed, two-roomed tent with an outer courtyard. The innermost room of the tent was the Most Holy Place, and this was where humanity came closest to the Lord. It was designed as a 15 feet by 15 feet square (4.5 meters). If you include the covering, it was a perfect cube. It was God's throne room and the place of his presence. Access was restricted to one visit a year by the high priest. The adjacent room, with its less than perfect rectangular design (15 feet by 30 feet), was entered daily by one of the priests who cared for a lamp and an altar that burned incense. Outside the tent was an open courtyard, which was always a buzz of

activity. Surrounding all this were heavy curtains 7 feet high, 75 feet wide, and 150 feet long.

Figure 1 The Wilderness Tabernacle (Exodus 25–30)



The problem is that the tabernacle doesn't appear until later in Scripture's unfolding story—around the time of Moses. Identities are forged at creation. So we look for times when God came near *before* the tabernacle.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. (Gen. 1:1–2)

God's realm is heaven, and man's is earth, which is why the Spirit's hovering over the waters is unexpected. Hovering implies closeness. Eagles hover over their young (Deut. 32:11). The gods of legends stayed in their abodes. The one true God, however, came close, and when he did, the life of heaven came to earth. It did in the beginning. It did when the Spirit "overshadowed" Mary (Luke 1:35). It did later when the Spirit descended on Jesus at his baptism (Luke 3:22). It does now. Apparently, heaven was never meant to contain the triune God. The movement between heaven and earth was always intended to be fluid.

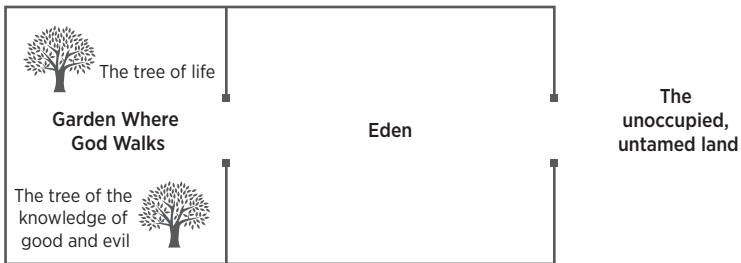
What follows is the story of that movement between heaven and earth—God coming from his abode into our own, and we

being brought into his. Here you will find priests. It is an intensely personal story of mutual engagement. The question is, How will the holy God come close to his unholy people, make them his own, and be with them in the most intimate of ways? It will happen. The hovering Spirit heralded what was to come.

Within Eden was a garden—lush, with no hint of death or unfruitful foliage. Everywhere there was rich, lively, almost-too-much-to-bear life. It could be no other way because this was the garden of God, the place where heaven and earth met. It was a “trysting place” more than a mere garden.<sup>6</sup> Here God and humanity went for a walk. This was “the holy mountain of God” that later generations hoped to gather around and perhaps ascend (Ezek. 28:14). This was God’s house.

For the ancient Israelites the reference was clear: the garden was the first tabernacle, and humanity’s home was in the presence of God, in his Most Holy Place. The evidence is unmistakable (figure 2).<sup>7</sup> Wherever God is, *there* is the tent of his dwelling.

Figure 2 The First Tabernacle in Eden (Genesis 2)



And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the

knowledge of good and evil. A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. . . . The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. (Gen. 2:8–10, 15)

- The word *garden* itself suggests something enclosed and protected. It was set apart from everything else. The garden was *in* Eden. Eden was a larger demarcated area, and then there was the world beyond. The heavenly template for the tabernacle was already in view: the holy place (Eden) was *near* him; the Most Holy Place (the garden) was *nearer*.
- Since God is life, we can expect to see water close by. “A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers” (Gen. 2:10). These rivers appear again both in Ezekiel’s vision of the temple (Ezek. 47:1–12) and in John’s vision with “the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb” (Rev. 22:1).
- Humanity had a mission in this tabernacle—“to work it and keep it” (Gen. 2:15)—which is the same language used for the priests and Levites in Israel’s tabernacle. The priests were to serve and “keep guard” over it (Num. 1:53, 3:36). This means that humanity’s work in the garden was not restricted to gardening. Humanity was to maintain the temple grounds and also protect it from intruders.
- Among Eden’s foliage was the tree of life. It may have been the means by which the Lord actually gave his people lasting life. It was also designated as a symbol of the life we have in God’s presence. God always connects the life we can have in him with a sign. In the next version of the tabernacle, the tree will be a stylized ver-

sion of itself, taking the form of a flowering lampstand (Ex. 25:31–34), merging the images of life and light. Later, in the final temple, the tree is no longer partitioned but is available through Jesus to all the nations and is intended for their healing (Rev. 22:1–2).

All this means that from the beginning, our everyday existence was intended to be lived out in the temple precincts. Our heritage is the royal priesthood. And since God's purposes for us have never changed, you are a royal priest. You have a rich job description, and his Spirit is with you. God's fellowship and hospitality have begun in earnest.

For now, imagine this priesthood as a walk with the Lord. He walked with man and woman in the garden. He continued to walk with unfaithful people in the wilderness and promised, "I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Lev. 26:12). He desires that we be close. This certainly can erode old myths of God being far off and chronically disappointed with you.

Communion. Closeness. Heaven comes to earth, and our home is at the intersection of the two. This has been God's plan for humanity, and he has done it.

## **Response**

In keeping with the personal back-and-forth communication we can have with God himself, it seems natural to respond.

1. There is a difference between being set loose in a nice garden and being placed close to God in his house on earth. What difference does that make for the way you tell your own story?
2. You learn a lot about people by spending time in their house. As you enter this early house, the garden, what do you learn about the Lord?







## In God's Image

We are created in God's own image.

Then God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. (Gen. 1:26)

Never has so much been packed into one phrase. To bear his image is to be like him and have the capacity to grow in a relationship with him. Nearness, after all, is useless if there is not a similarity of one to the other. We can enjoy the presence of a dog or a cat, and pets can sometimes touch our loneliness, but a pet can't replace someone of our own kind.

Animals, like *all* creation, reflect God's glory and bear his likeness. There is something about their strength, their communities, and their unique abilities that point to God. Light, water, and rocks do the same. They reflect God's glory and are like him in some way. Humanity, however, stands out. Whereas all subhuman creation reflects God, we are like him in every way a creature can be like him.

For those coming out of Egypt, the first to hear of this image bearing, the news was electric. They had heard that only