

Expanses and The Creation of Heaven

Genesis 1:6-8 and 14-20

Have you ever left worship feeling empty? You came wanting to experience communion with God, but you left feeling like God was still far away from you. Most of us have experienced true fellowship with God. We have enjoyed precious moments where God seems to wash over us with his glory. But we also know the frustration of times spent with God in private devotion or corporate worship where God seems absent. Through the blood of Jesus Christ, we have access to God, the Father.

The worship of God, privately or corporately, is a spiritual activity in which we enter into the presence of God and partake of his life-giving presence.

Hebrews 10:19-22 ¹⁹ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

But if we have this access through Jesus Christ, why is it that our worship of God often falls short of what we hope it to be? Strangely enough, as I studied the work of God on Day 2, I simultaneously experienced something of the presence of God in my soul and better understood why God often still feels far removed. Read Genesis 1:6-8 and 14-20. What jumps out in these verses is the number of times that the word “expanse” is used. The KJV translates this word “firmament.” The ESV uses “expanse.” In the Hebrew it is “raqia”. If you count them, you will find it is used 9 times. I do not know any symbolic significance of the number 9. But it is a large number for only a few verses of Scripture. What is even more noteworthy is that this word is only used 8 more times in the rest of the OT. Two of those times are in the Psalms, only you would not know it if you did not read an older translation.

ESV **Psalm 19:1** TO THE CHOIRMASTER. A PSALM OF DAVID. The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

KJV Psalm 19:1 <To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David.> The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork.

In Psalm 19, the firmament, or expanse, refers to the physical sky focusing on what we would call “space”. It is the open space where the Sun and the Moon and the Stars are placed. This is certainly the way in which “expanse” is used in Genesis 1 on days 4 and 5.

But in Psalm 150, the expanse does not refer to the same heavens as in Psalm 19.

ESV Psalm 150:1 Praise the LORD! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens!

KJV Psalm 150:1 Praise ye the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary: praise him in the firmament of his power.

Psalm 150 exhorts us to praise the LORD. We are specifically called to praise him “in his sanctuary”. We do not worship God in the sky, or in outer space. But where do we worship God?

In the OT context, the sanctuary refers to the physical Tabernacle, or later to the Temple in Jerusalem. One would go to the Temple to worship God in his sanctuary. The Holy of Holies was often called God’s sanctuary. A sanctuary is a holy place. It is a place “separated” from what is common. Listen to the wording used in Exodus when God is explaining the plans for the construction of the Tabernacle.

ESV Exodus 26:33 And you shall hang the veil from the clasps, and bring the ark of the testimony in there within the veil. And the veil shall separate for you the Holy Place from the Most Holy.

In the Tabernacle, there was a room called the Holy Place. In this room the priests would perform their regular duties. But at the far end of this room there was a curtain. And this curtain went from wall to wall, ceiling to floor. The purpose of the curtain was to separate the Holy Place from the “Most Holy”. In the Most Holy was the Ark of the Covenant. And on the lid of this ark were two Angels with their wings stretched out from wall to wall and touching one another above the ark of the covenant. Above these wings

was the throne of God on earth. It was the place where the Invisible God dwelt on earth with his people.

So, you might think that when the Psalmist exhorts God's people to "praise God in his sanctuary", he would be referring to going into the Most Holy place. Only if you look at Psalm 150, the very next statement is to "praise Him in his mighty heavens." Or as the KJV more literally translates, "praise him in the firmament of his power." Praise God "in his powerful expanse."

So, where exactly is the Psalmist calling the worshippers to praise the LORD? Where is this firmament, this expanse, in which God's presence dwells? It is important to clarify something about our God. God is omnipresent. That means that He is in all places at all times. This is so important for us as we go through life. We are never far from the presence of God. He is with us in all of our trials. But that being said, God often manifests himself to his people at certain times and places. God meets with Moses in the burning bush and tells him that the ground in which he is standing is "holy ground."

The Holy of Holies was another such place where God's presence was manifest to his people. God also promises his presence when we gather for worship. God is able to "be present" to his people when they worship. So, when the Psalmist calls God's people to worship "in the expanse", he has a place in mind. It is a place in which God dwells. It is rightly translated "heavens", but it is not precisely the physical atmosphere in which the birds fly, or the space in which the planets are set. We do not worship God somewhere in space, on the back side of Pluto.

Ezekiel also uses the word *raqia*; expanse. He also uses it in the context of God's presence. In order to understand these verses, I have to give you some of the context. Ezekiel is a priest. Or at least, he was trained to be a priest. Only, before he could serve as a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem, God had cast his people out of the Land of Israel for their rebellion. The Babylonians had conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. The Most Holy Place had been desecrated and destroyed. Ezekiel was living in Exile in Babylon with many of God's people.

If you were Ezekiel, you would be experiencing despair. Why? Because the place where you drew near to God was destroyed. And you were now hundreds of miles away from God's dwelling place on earth. Your hope of ministering in the Temple and ever entering the sanctuary of God seemed all but lost. As Ezekiel is wallowing in his misery, he turns 30 years old. This is also significant because it is the age at which a priest was to enter service at the Temple.

At this time, in the midst of Ezekiel's hopelessness, God shows up to him in a vision. This is Ezekiel 1. The whole chapter is rather amazing. It is vision of the glory of God. Only this glory is not contained in the Temple. The glory of God is riding on a mobile chariot. The wheels of the chariot touch the earth. They are spinning in every direction indicating that God can move his throne anywhere he so chooses, including ungodly Babylon. The chariot has wheels, but it also has angels. These angels remind us of the angels that were above the ark in Temple. Only these angels are very much alive and moving. Now you are ready to hear Ezekiel's description of the "expanse."

Ezekiel 1:22-26 ²² Over the heads of the living creatures there was the likeness of an expanse, shining like awe-inspiring crystal, spread out above their heads. ²³ And under the expanse their wings were stretched out straight, one toward another. And each creature had two wings covering its body. ²⁴ And when they went, I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of many waters, like the sound of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army. When they stood still, they let down their wings. ²⁵ And there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads. When they stood still, they let down their wings. ²⁶ And above the expanse over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance.

What is Ezekiel seeing? He is seeing the throne of God. But notice: There is a firmament, an expanse, separating this throne from what is below - very much like the curtain separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. The One on the throne has a human appearance. This can only be a prophetic foreshadow of the resurrected Christ. Ezekiel is witnessing the glory of God even while he is languishing in Exile in Babylon. God does not only dwell in Jerusalem. God is able to dwell with his people in a foreign land.

But it is not accidental that there is an expanse separating God from the earth. The expanse, the firmament, creates a separateness. This separateness enables God to be near to his creation, while still remaining separate from his creation. God dwells in his creation in such a way that he is still separate from his creation. Ezekiel makes clear to us that the expanse is God's way of drawing near to Ezekiel while still remaining separate and holy from him.

It is this tension that is first created on Day 2. Turn back to Genesis 1.

⁶ And God said,

"Let there be an **expanse**
in the midst of the waters,
and
let it separate the waters from the waters."
7 And God made the expanse
and
separated the waters
that were under the expanse
from the waters
that were above the expanse.

And it was so.

8 And God called the expanse **Heaven**.
And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

Simply put, on Day 2 God creates a place for him to set up his throne in the created world. God existed before the creation. And God exists outside the creation.

But what we see on Day 2 is God forming a place for him to dwell "in his creation."

Notice that the function of the expanse is to separate waters from waters. All of the waters make up the created order. The waters below will eventually be gathered into one place and dry land will come forth from them. The waters above may provide an explanation for the massive amount of waters that would fall upon the earth during the time of Noah's flood. But what we must not miss is that the waters are the stuff of this creation. And the expanse is formed in the midst of the waters. The Hebrew words "waters above" and "waters below" are words common to Babylonian creation myths.

In the Babylonian myth, Enuma Elish, we see that the gods who created this world were really a part of this world. According to Enuma Elish, in the beginning there were only mirky waters swirling in chaos. There was no Sovereign God above these waters. The first "gods" came out of this watery chaos. Interestingly, the first two gods are Tiamat and Apsu. Tiamat comes out of salty bitter water. And Apsu comes out of the sweet, fresh water. From the union of these two gods come the lesser gods of the pagan world. Many of these gods were gods that the Israelites were confronting in Canaan.

It would seem obvious to the Israelites in Moses' day that God was declaring himself to be above these false gods. And it also is clear that these false gods were really only part of the created order. The waters above and the waters below were not truly gods. They were only part of the creation itself.

So, Day 2 makes explicit that the God of Israel is not a part of his creation. He is separate and above his creation. The pagan creation myths have the gods as being part of the creation. But while God is not a part of the creation, his work on Day 2 reveals that he is present within his creation. God does not establish his throne outside of the creation. He establishes it within the creation. God is present with his creation, if in a limited sense.

Look at verse 8, God considers his work and specifically calls it "heaven." Only I do not think he is referring to the physical heavens. Heaven here is the place where God sets his throne in this created order. God is not aloof from his creation. He is very much present in this world. He is Ruler over this world.

But, as we see, God's presence is not fully present. There is a separation between himself and the people who walk on the face of the earth. What is confusing is that both "expanse" and "heaven" can be used to refer to the physical and the spiritual.

On Day 2 the focus is on God's spiritual heaven. But later on day 4 and 5, the same words can be used to describe the physical heavens.

Genesis 1:14-20

¹⁴ And God said,

"Let there be lights
in the expanse of the heavens
to separate the day from the night.

And

let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years,

¹⁵ and

let them be lights
in the expanse of the heavens
to give light upon the earth."

And it was so.

¹⁶ And God made the two great lights-
the greater light to rule the day
and
the lesser light to rule the night-
and
the stars.

17 And God set them
 in the expanse of the heavens
 to give light on the earth,
18 to rule over the day and over the night,
 and
 to separate the light from the darkness.
 And God saw that it was good.

19 And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

20 And God said,
 "Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures,
 and
 let birds fly above the earth
 across the expanse of the heavens."

While the word expanse only has limited use throughout Scripture, which we have already discussed. The word heaven or heavens is common throughout Scripture and can refer to any of the three senses. I have chosen a few of these to help you get the sense.

At the time when Solomon is dedicating the Temple, he recognizes that the earthly Temple cannot possibly contain God. He says:

1 Kings 8:27 ²⁷ "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!

Notice the distinction here between heavens and the highest heaven. Literally, the heaven of heavens. It is right to think of heavens in two ways. We can think of the heavens in a material sense. This would be the sky and outer space. These are material places. But it is also right to think of the heavens in a spiritual sense. And, it is important to understand that this spiritual heaven is also a part of this created world. It is a spiritual place in this creation. There are many reasons why this is important. Angels must exist somewhere. They are spiritual beings, but that does not mean that they do not need a place in which to dwell. Do we not all accept that when

Satan rebelled that he was cast out of heaven? In order to be cast out of a place, the place first needs to exist. Is it not also true that the faithful angels dwell continually in the presence of God? They may have missions to fulfill on the earth, but their home is not the earth. Where do they dwell? They dwell in heaven.

It is also important that heaven is a real place in this creation because it is from heaven that Jesus has come and to heaven that he returned after his resurrection.

John 3:13 ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except him who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

John 6:51 ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Mark 16:19 ¹⁹ So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.

Luke 24:51 ⁵¹ While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven.

Acts 1:10-11 ¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Heaven is a real place in this created world. It is a place where spiritual beings can exist. But it must also be a place where even resurrected physical bodies can exist. Jesus is a physical being and yet he exists in heaven. Do we not also pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Our Father in heaven"? As Stephen is being stoned, he is given the grace to see into this spiritual heaven.

Acts 7:55-56 ⁵⁵ But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

This spiritual place called heaven is also currently the kingdom that belongs to Jesus Christ. And for those of us who believe in Jesus Christ, our citizenship is in this heavenly kingdom.

Philippians 3:20-21 ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

And even now, when Christians die and their body lies in the grave, their spirit goes directly to God and to the throne where Jesus sits.

Revelation 4:1-2 After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." ² At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne.

I cannot stress enough that heaven is a real place that exists in this creation. Where is this place? All we can really say is that it is up! But we should not think of it as being on the back side of Pluto. God is near to us even if he is not visible to our physical eyes.

Acts 17:24-27 ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us. Why does this matter to you, today? Well, it helps to explain both how you are made to know God and yet why it is that knowing God is still so difficult.

There are two obstacles to knowing God. The first is sin. Our sin creates a barrier between us and God. We will talk about this when we get to the Fall in Genesis 3. But there is another barrier that does not so much have to do with sin as it has to do with that we are not yet at the final stage of God's plan for us.

Even before the Fall, we see that God establishes his throne in the created order, but there is a firmament between us and that throne. As human beings we are created with both a physical body and a spiritual body. So, we have a capacity to know God on a spiritual level. But our God and the realm in which he lives is not visible to our eyes. He is in some sense still separate from us.

This is why worship is a holy activity. Worship involves human activities. They are particularly activities that God has established in his Word. But worship is more than human activities. God has promised to be present in our worship. Only He is not present to our physical senses. He is only present to the eyes of faith. There still remains a holy separation between us and our God. As a pastor, I consider it my calling to help people to know God.

John 17:3 ³ And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

But knowing God is forever an act of faith in this life. We know God through the Word. But we can only know him there as the Holy Spirit opens our spiritual eyes and increases our faith.

Sometimes it has bothered me why sincere Christians can still struggle to apprehend the God who is. Even the most godly of saints can feel distant from God. Sure, there are times when the presence of God seems so real we can almost touch him. But that is not the normal experience of God's people. We seek him. We search to know him. And even now we know that even on our best day, we only know in part. I am also convinced that this separation is necessary, but only for a time. It is temporary.

In the new creation, when God rolls up this creation and starts afresh, the current separation will be no more.

Revelation 21:1-2 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

The Holy city, the New Jerusalem, will come down out of heaven and reside on the earth. In other words the heavenly realm and the earthly realm will finally be united. They will be one.

In our glorified bodies we will be able to perceive and exist in both realms simultaneously. Paul says that our faith will become sight. We will no longer sense separation from Jesus. Our sins have been taken care of already. But in this newly created realm, we will readily experience with all of our senses the heavenly realm.

Practical applications:

1. God has made you a spiritual being and this physical realm will never completely satisfy you.

“The world that is present to our senses does not satisfy human beings. Ever and again we thirst for another world that is no less rich than this one.” Bavinck

The culture in which you live either denies the spiritual world entirely, or like the pagans of old, seeks the spiritual in the creation. There is an attempt to elevate the physical realm in such a way that it will satisfy the yearnings of the human soul.

As Christians, we can be deceived into thinking that this created world can satisfy our soul. It cannot. Only as we look to God will we ever find the satisfaction for which we are looking.

2. We only apprehend God now through the eyes of faith, and through the working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

There is still a firmament between us and God that prevents us from experiencing God as we will one day experience him. We have access to God, but it is only obtained by faith in the promises of God in the Word.

From the very beginning, God has purposed to be present with his creation. But our current ability to experience God's presence is only provisional. Expect a lifelong struggle to know God to be difficult. Only in the Word and by the Holy Spirit do we know God. Use the means of grace: Study of the Word, Prayer, the Sacraments, fellowship with other believers.

God has purposes for this struggle. There is not something wrong with you because you struggle. Continue to press on to know God in faith. Do not think that your present experience with God is all that there is. Many give up and quit pursuing God out of present frustration.

Hebrews 10:35-39 ³⁵ Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. ³⁷ For, "Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; ³⁸ but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him." ³⁹ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

3. There is coming a day when our faith will become sight, when we will know God in fullness.

Heaven will descend upon the earth. The spiritual throne and the physical throne will be one. O what a day that will be!

1 John 3:2-3 ² Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we will be like him, because we shall see him as he is. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

1 Corinthians 13:12 ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.