

# Joining the Heavenly Worship through Christ, Part 1

Genesis 2:4–14, Ezekiel 28:11–14, Hebrews 12:18–24

Recently I came across an article entitled “Where We Worship: Joining the Heavenly Assembly through Christ,” written by OPC minister Camden Bucey.<sup>1</sup> I found the article insightful and helpful. My first thought was, *I need to share this with the folks at Grace*. In view of extra responsibilities this week with regard to yesterday’s wedding, it seemed a good time to use this material.

Bucey’s thesis is that faithful worship is magnificent and more consequential than many Christians realize. Particularly with those of us who attend smaller churches, we might begin to lose heart, thinking that we do not have all the resources, programs and excitement found in larger churches. We might think our church doesn’t have the impact for Christ that a larger church might have—that maybe we’re wasting our time. Bucey draws together many strands of biblical teaching and shows that faithful, regulative-principle worship is important to God, and Christ is glorified.

Bucey’s insights are derived from biblical theology. Biblical theology traces the unfolding story of the Bible. The Bible tells a single story about our Creator God, who made all things and rules over all. Our first parents, and all of us since then, rejected God’s good rule over them. But God promised to send a Savior, and the Old Testament points forward to that coming Savior. In the New Testament, we learn that the Savior has come and redeemed a people, and that he is coming again one day to make all things new. Tracing this story is the task of biblical theology.<sup>2</sup>

Bucey begins asking, Where do Christians truly worship? If someone asked you this question, you might point to our church building. But the Bible tells us something astounding: When we gather for worship, we join a heavenly assembly. Through our union with Christ, we participate even now in the worship of heaven itself. This is not mere symbolism or poetic imagery—it is a present reality that should transform how we think about every aspect of Christian worship.

Stop and think about this for a moment. Here we are, a small congregation gathering each and every Lord’s day. What we do seems unremarkable. We gather for worship at 11 AM. The pastor greets us in the name of the Lord. We hear a biblical call to worship, and the pastor leads in prayer. We sing Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs from a Psalter Hymnal approved by the elders of two Reformed denominations. We hear the reading from the law, the Ten Commandments given by the voice of the LORD God over Mount Sinai to the people of Israel. We pray a prayer of confession, confessing our sins, and asking God for forgiveness. We hear the assurance of pardon, declaring that if we believe the good news of salvation,

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<sup>1</sup> *Reformed Forum*, Spring-Summer 2025

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from <https://equipthepeople.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/10-things-you-should-know-about-biblical-theology-crossway-articles-chris-bruno.pdf>

God forgives us through Christ our Savior. Salvation is not given to the deserving, but to undeserving sinners who come to God through Christ. The pastor gets up to preach. He reads an Old Testament and a New Testament text from Holy Scripture, then preaches the sermon. The sermon consists of explaining the Scripture, then applying it to our lives. We profess the historic faith of the church, often from the Apostles or Nicene Creed. We receive the Lord's Supper, as Christ commanded. There are other Psalms and hymns, as well as prayers for the congregation. We receive the Lord's benediction, a short blessing with which public worship is concluded. The rhythm of worship is simple: God speaks, and we respond, God speaks, and we respond. The whole service consists in hearing his Word, and responding to his Word. The God of heaven—Father, Son and Holy Spirit: three Persons, one God—is the One with whom we have to do. We do not gather to be entertained. We do not gather to be enthralled by the wisdom of men. We gather to acknowledge God as our Lord and Savior. "Lord" means that he is the boss, the one we obey without question. We answer as did young Samuel in the Old Testament: "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth." *He* is Lord! He is the one who gave us life. He is the one who promises to bring us into his eternal presence at the final day, where we will gather to worship the Lamb who was slain, who redeemed us to God by his own blood. There is no other way of salvation. Christ loved us with an everlasting love. He died for us, to bring us unto God. He will never leave us nor forsake us. To know him and fellowship with him is life and peace. Apart from him is weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth in the fires of hell.

That's what we do in worship. It is simple, focused, straightforward. We love him, because he first loved us. We want to enter his presence and be blessed eternally. All the struggles that we experience in this world pale in comparison to fellowship with the living God through his Son Jesus Christ. He wants us to trust him and believe him, and when our hearts are born again by his blessed Holy Spirit, we want fellowship with God more than anything else in the world. "Take the world, and give me Jesus. He is the Lover of my soul." To know him is life and peace.

So this is what we do, week by week. The Lord's day is the first day of the week. We gather in the presence of God with his people. He speaks to us. We listen reverently. He blesses us, and we depart, to live out our faith in our daily life.

We don't gather to hear great music. We can hear that at concerts. We don't gather to hear a great orator. There are great orators in this world who can move people with their oratory, but the One whose voice we want to hear is Christ. We do not want to hear the opinions of men but the truth of the living God.

So we need to consider the question, Where do we worship. Physically, we gather at a little building north of Lansing, Michigan. But where do we worship? To answer this question, we need to trace God's story of redemption, which begins

in a garden, proceeds through multiple mountains, and culminates in the heavenly Jerusalem. This is a story that reveals how God has progressively opened the way for his people to enter his presence, and how Christ has accomplished what humanity could not achieve on its own.

We will consider four points: (1) A series of mountains; (2) Where is Christ right now? (3) A great cloud of witnesses; and (4) True, biblical worship is entering the very throne room of God. First,

### **1. A series of mountains**

The story of where we worship begins in a garden. In our first Old Testament reading we read that

“The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Now a river went out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it parted and became four riverheads. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one which skirts the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. And the gold of that land is good. Bdellium and the onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one which goes around the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Hiddekel; it is the one which goes toward the east of Assyria. The fourth river is the Euphrates. Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it.”

Eden was no ordinary place. If we pay attention to the biblical story we can see that Eden was a mountain-garden, a high and holy place where God would walk with his creature.

How do we know it was on a mountain? “A river went out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it parted and became four riverheads [literally, *heads*].” In the world before the great flood of Noah the four riverheads went forth from Eden to water the whole earth.

Our second Old Testament text, Ezekiel 28:13–14 “[describe] Eden as ‘the holy mountain of God,’ confirming its elevated status. We see additional hints of this elevation in how the river flowed outward from Eden to water the whole earth—water flows down, telling us Eden stood as a height above the surrounding lands.”

In the Ezekiel text the prophet Ezekiel addresses “the king of Tyre,” but the language used is too exalted to refer to a mere man. The king of Tyre, as a mere man, had not been “in Eden, the garden of God” (Ezek. 28:13). Rather, the best interpreters understand this to be a reference to Lucifer, the most glorious of the angels who rebelled against God, the spirit-being *behind* the king of Tyre.

In Ephesians 2, Paul reminds the members of the church in Ephesus that they “once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the

power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience.” Note that “the prince of the power of the air,” is the rebellious spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience (the enemies of God).

If you belong to Christ, if you have surrendered your life to Christ, you are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has given you a new heart, a heart capable of loving God and desiring to be ruled by him. You no longer want to follow the rebellious spirit, the devil of hell, who now works in the sons of disobedience. You want to be ruled by Christ, you want to do his will. You *gladly* pray, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.” You wouldn’t have it any other way. You don’t want to follow the devil anymore. You want to follow Christ. You want him to rule your life. You want to do the things that are pleasing in his sight. You say with Samuel, “Speak, LORD, for thy servant heareth.”

But before the Holy Spirit changed your heart, you wanted nothing to do with Christ. You ran from God. You wanted to run your own life. You loved your sin. You hated righteousness. You didn’t want God telling you what to do.

The king of Tyre was unconverted. He was an enemy of the people of God, and Ezekiel, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, unmasked him as an enemy of God who was energized and motivated by the devil himself, who had been in Eden, the mountain of God, who had tempted Eve and induced her to rebel against God and eat from the one tree in the whole beautiful garden that was off-limits.

The LORD God had commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

Surely, the man (Adam) had shared that significant bit of information with Eve! But when she ate of the forbidden fruit, she gave some to Adam, and he ate too. The same devil who induced Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit was also inducing the king of Tyre to rebel against God.

Who tempts you to sin? We are all drawn away by our own lusts, but the devil (and his host of demons—fallen angels) tempts us too. He works in the sons of disobedience but he tempts the faithful. Our job is to resist him. “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: whom *resist* steadfast in the faith . . .” (1 Pet. 5:8ff.).

So the devil had been in Eden. “You were in Eden, the garden of God . . . . You were the anointed cherub who covers; I established you; you were on the holy mountain of God . . . I cast you as a profane thing out of the mountain of God.”

Notice that Eden, the garden of God, is called “the holy mountain of God . . . the mountain of God.”

God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden to “work and keep” the garden. Bucey notes that “the same Hebrew words are later used to describe the priests’ service in

the tabernacle. Adam was meant to serve as a priest-king, tending God's holy place and guarding it from defilement. More than that, the tree of life stood in that garden as a promise—a sign that pointed to an even higher life, a more glorious existence in God's very presence. Yet we know what happened. Adam fell. Instead of ascending to glory through obedience, he plunged humanity into exile. Cherubim with flaming swords now guarded the way to the tree of life. The path upward seemed forever blocked.”

Bucey continues: “This raises the haunting question that echoes through Psalm 24: ‘Who shall ascend the *hill* of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?’ . . . The answer—‘He who has clean hands and a pure heart’ . . . —only heightens our dilemma. Since Adam's fall, who could claim such purity? Yet God did not leave humanity without hope. Through a series of covenants, he began to show how he would bring his people back into his presence.”

There are other mountains. There is Mount Sinai, where God gave his holy law. The law commands perfect obedience, and none of us has ever attained to it. Sinai cannot save us; only Christ—who perfectly kept every one of God's holy commandments with all his heart, soul, mind and strength—has attained to God's standard of absolute perfection. We cannot save ourselves; only Christ can save. If you want to go to heaven, then you must come by way of Christ.

Another mountain is Mount Zion. The phrase “Mount Zion” occurs some eighteen times in the Bible. “Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is *mount Zion*, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King. . . . Let *mount Zion* rejoice, let the daughters of Judah be glad, because of thy judgments” (Ps. 48).

Bucey reminds us that Mount Zion was “where David established his throne and Solomon built the temple. This mountain became synonymous with God's presence, the place where heaven and earth met. But even Zion, in all its glory, was just a shadow of something greater. The prophets spoke of a new mountain, a new temple, a new way into God's presence that would surpass everything that came before.

“All of these mountains—Eden, Sinai, Zion—pointed forward to what Christ would accomplish. As the last Adam, he succeeded where the first Adam failed. He lived a life of perfect obedience, facing temptation without sin. Through his death, he reconciled us to God. In his resurrection and ascension, he blazed the trail into God's presence, becoming our forerunner into the holy places.”

This brings me to my second point,

## **2. Where is Christ right now?**

Our Hebrews text teaches an astounding truth, that in Christ we have come to the *heavenly Zion*.

Now look around us. We are assembled in a rather plain room. With recent renovation it is looking better than it did before, but it is still rather plain. Here we

are right now, listening to the Word of Christ, receiving his Word, hiding it in our hearts. But as we worship in this plain room, by faith we are actually ascending to heaven itself, where constant worship of the Lamb that was slain is occurring right now. Our Hebrews text teaches that we “have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore. . . . But [we] have come to Mount Zion . . . the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant.”

Do not miss the significance of these words. Here we gather in the presence of fellow Christians to hear God’s word and sing his praises. It all seems so normal—so unremarkable. We do it out of habit, week in, week out. We know the routine, we do it all the time. We know when to stand and sing, we know when to bow our heads. We recognize the words of Scripture. But as we gather even now, Scripture says that we have come to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, through Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant.

In just a few minutes we will hear his words of institution: “this is My blood of *the new covenant*, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.”

For this reason the apostle Paul tells us, “If then you were raised with Christ, *seek those things which are above*, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. *Set your mind on things above*, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:1ff.).

Consider point three,

### **3. A great cloud of witnesses**

Hebrews 12 begins with these words: “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with *so great a cloud of witnesses*.” Who are the witnesses to whom the author refers? The honor roll of faith, the list of names of men and women of faith, who went before us, listed in Hebrews 11. The writer to the Hebrews doesn’t rehearse this list for no reason. And he’s not only saying, “Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah and the other men and women I mention had a strong faith; therefore, you ought to have a strong faith too.” He is saying that, but he is saying much more. The Old Testament saints are a great cloud of witnesses, and as we worship here in this little space every Lord’s day, by faith we know that we, a small but faithful church, are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses—faithful men and women who have gone before us. They are now—even now—in heaven. They are absent from the body and present with the Lord. They are not just floating around in the ether. They are in the presence of Christ, worshipping in heaven.

At the wedding yesterday I spoke with one of the men. I asked him if he attended church, and he said he did not. It turns out he is a very hardworking man. He works seventy-five hours a week, and Sunday is his only day off. He's got too many things to do on Sunday, so he doesn't have time for church. Now I pray that the Lord opens his heart to show him his need of Christ, but the thought occurred to me, what he's really saying is that worship is not his priority. Now if it's not his priority on earth, then why would he want to go to heaven? Heaven is not some giant amusement park or game arcade, it's a place of worship. If we are not interested in worship here on earth, then we would be out of place in heaven. But I must remind you that there are only two ultimate destinations: heaven and hell.

#### **4. True, biblical worship is entering the very throne room of God.**

As we gather for worship right now, we have entered the very throne room of God. As we heard a moment ago, we "*have come* to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem." Notice carefully: not "*you will come*" but "*you have come*." This is a present reality. Even now, while we remain on earth in our mortal bodies, we participate in heavenly worship through our union with Christ.

This truth should fill us with awe and comfort. When you feel alone in worship, remember, you stand with a great cloud of witnesses. When you struggle to pray, remember, Christ himself intercedes for you in the heavenly sanctuary. When you are weak, remember—your access to God does not depend on your worthiness but on Christ's perfect priesthood. Let us worship him both now and forever. Amen.