

God's Presence with His People

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Date: 08 July 2018

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[0 : 00] Go ahead and be seated. Would you turn with me to Exodus chapter 25? That's page 65 in the Pew Bible.

Exodus chapter 25. As we've been journeying through the book of Exodus this year, we've seen that it roughly falls into three sections, if you'll remember.

First, in the opening chapters, we've seen that God is a God who saves. In Exodus, God powerfully rescues His people from slavery in Egypt. Those are all the famous bits in the beginning of the book.

Second, we've seen that God is a God who speaks. At Mount Sinai, after the Exodus from Egypt, God reveals Himself to His people in words, making a covenant relationship with them, instructing them in His ways and His laws.

God speaks. And today, we come to the third and the last section of the book. In chapters 25 through to the end, chapter 40, we see that God is a God who not only saves and speaks, but who dwells in the midst of His people.

[1 : 13] And of the remaining 16 chapters in the book, 13 of them are taken up with descriptions of the place, of the structure where God will do just that.

And that structure is what we call the tabernacle. So let's pick up the story in chapter 25, verse 1, and we're going to read through verse 9 to get us started this morning.

Chapter 25, verses 1 through 9. Let me read this for us. The Lord said to Moses, Speak to the people of Israel, that they take from me a contribution.

From every man whose heart moves him, you shall receive the contribution from me. And this is the contribution that you shall receive from them, gold, silver, and bronze, blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, goat's hair, tanned ram skins, goat skins, acacia wood, oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, onyx stones and stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece.

And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.

[2 : 39] And for the next seven chapters, seven chapters, God shows Moses the plans for how to build this tabernacle, which is literally just the word for tent in Hebrew.

This tent where God will dwell in the midst of his people. If you look in your bulletin, there's an illustration of what the plans might have looked like.

Now I say might have looked like, because we're not exactly sure of all the sort of finer details of how the sort of little pieces might have gone together. How exactly did they hang those curtains or spread the goat skins over top of the tent?

We don't know exactly for sure, but this is a pretty good sketch of the main details that we can tell. If you're interested in a more detailed representation, we have some of these handouts in the back that kind of fold out.

You know things are getting serious in your Bible study when you've got a chart this big, right? Look at that. There they are. Go get them. Also, you know, if you have a good study Bible, like the ESV study Bible or the NIV study Bible, it will also have some really good illustrations of what the tabernacle might have looked like.

[3 : 50] We have some ESV study Bibles downstairs on the bookstall. If you're interested in picking one of those up, I would highly recommend it. But now, okay, with that overall picture in your mind, there you see it there, that sort of portable worship site that was the tabernacle that God told them to build.

With that overall picture in mind, come back to the text of Exodus. And I want to just skim really quickly through chapters 21 through 30, 25 through 31, skim really quickly through those chapters with me, looking at the ESV section headings in bold.

And what you'll notice is that the plans that God gives to Moses move roughly from the inside out. It starts with the ark in the innermost part of the tabernacle, the most holy place, the holy of holies. And then we come to the table for bread and the golden lamp stand, which would be not in the most holy place, but in what's called the holy place, in that first room of the tent or tabernacle proper. Then you'll see that there's a description of the tabernacle, the tent itself, and how to put it all together. Then in chapter 27, we're out into the courtyard at the bronze altar. Then there comes the court wall that hangs around the perimeter of the whole area.

[5 : 05] And with that set up, in chapters 28 and 29, there's a description of the priests, what their clothes should look like as they ministered, and the ceremonies for consecrating them to the priesthood. Pastor Matt will actually cover those two chapters on the priesthood next week.

And then in chapters 30 and 31, the plans are concluded. The altar of incense is described there. Now, even though that would be located in the holy place, the first room of the tabernacle, it's described right after the priest because one of the priest's main jobs was to keep the incense burning on that altar.

Then we have some more details about the collection of the tabernacle, the bronze basin where the priest would wash, the special oil and incense that they used. And finally, God tells them that he's actually gonna raise some people up to perform the skilled work for building such an elaborate structure.

So there are sort of the plans that God lays out. Now, rather than go into minute detail for each component and preach like a 13-part series on the tabernacle, speculating what exactly those seven lights really meant on the lampstand, I wanna do something else this morning.

I wanna try to take us on an overview tour of the tabernacle and try to get the big picture. God gives Moses these detailed plans for how it's supposed to be built.

[6 : 20] He actually charges Moses multiple times in this section to build it exactly as he's been shown. But what do we learn as we study these plans?

Clearly, it's important. The book of Exodus gives a lot of space to describing it, but what are we to make of it? What's the significance? And what I wanna do on this overview tour, I wanna take this overview tour in roughly the order that it's presented to us here in Exodus, starting in the very center, starting in the inner room of the tabernacle, the Holy of Holies, and then moving out from there.

And when we do that, here's what we're gonna see. We're gonna see that the tabernacle is more than just a portable worship center for nomadic people. The tabernacle was actually a sign, a physical, material illustration of God's redemption.

In fact, if we can get the big idea of the tabernacle, we'll really see the story, the whole story of the Bible. And therefore, we'll see the true story of the world and the most important story for our lives. So we're gonna take this tour in three steps according to the three sections of the tabernacle as they're roughly laid out for us in Exodus 25 through 31. We'll begin in the most holy place, move out, and then out to the courtyard in the third step.

[7 : 53] So first, step inside with me. Come into the most holy place. And there, in a room where the dimensions were a perfect cube, when you read the description, as wide and long and the same height, you'll see what's called the Ark of the Covenant or the Ark of the Testimony.

And it's essentially a rectangular box covered in gold. And it's called the Ark of the Testimony or Ark of the Covenant because inside were going to be kept the two copies of the law that God himself would write out with his own finger on tablets of stone.

And on top of the Ark is a cover called the Mercy Seat with two cherubim, two awesome heavenly beings sculpted on top with their wings extended out and their faces down in reverence.

And they're facing down in reverence because this is the place, this is the very spot where the Creator, the Lord Almighty, will show up in the midst of his people.

Look at verse 22 of chapter 25 at the end of the description of the Ark. Verse 22 says, There I will meet with you.

[9 : 19] And from above the Mercy Seat, from between the two cherubim that are in the Ark of the Testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel.

So you see, the most holy place, this inner part of the tabernacle, is meant to represent the very throne room of God the King.

In chapter 26, we learn that stitched into the curtains that make the walls would be more representations of cherubim, of mighty angelic beings, as if to say that here is heaven, the dwelling of God, touching down on earth.

Now God himself, of course, could not be represented by an image. There was no statue in there of God, of the Lord. But we're told that his presence would fill that place.

And the Ark would be like his footstool with the law at his feet and the angels bowing in worship beneath him. Friends, imagine a point on earth where the infinite touches down to the finite.

[10:40] Where God, at long last, shows up on earth and right in the midst of his people in order to be known and in order to be worshipped and adored as king so that creatures might at long last know their creator.

Did you know that that's how Jesus described eternal life? In John 17, 3, Jesus says, and this is eternal life, to know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

and can't you feel the awe of this most holy place? The reverence of standing in God's presence, the wonder of it, the way it was constructed, some of the scholars speculate that if you were to step in, it would have just been blazing with gold.

I think many people outside the church are hungry for awe and for wonder and for reverence, for something bigger and more substantial than ourselves, for something transcendent.

And unfortunately, we're looking for that in mere substitutes for the real thing. We're trying to find awe, we're trying to find wonder in created things when really it's our creator that we were made for.

[12:14] We were made to be in awe of God and we put so much weight onto created things, weight that they cannot bear and then when they break, we wonder why we're so disappointed.

We wonder why we become so jaded and so cynical. But the tabernacle was the place where God came down to reclaim his creation, to set up his throne, and to be known and loved in awe by his people again.

But our tour continues. From the Ark of the Covenant and the inner room, the most holy place, we move out into the sort of next room, the outer room of the tabernacle called just the holy place.

And here in this first room where the priests would come regularly, you see three pieces of golden furniture. On the south side of the room, there's a lamp stand with seven arms and seven lights.

And on the north side of the room, there's a table set with twelve loaves of bread and two stacks.

And then in front of the veil that divides that holy place from the most holy place facing west, smoke is rising from the altar of incense, filling the room with a sweet, rich smell.

[13:37] Now notice the basic symbolism of these three pieces. It's pretty straightforward, actually. In the lamp stand, we have God's light shining forth onto us.

And at the altar of incense, we have represented the prayers of the people going up to God. Again and again in Scripture, incense is sort of a representation of prayer, of our communion up with God.

And at the table of bread, of course, we have a meal of fellowship.

So in this room, we have what? We have the communion, the intimacy of God with his people.

Have you ever come home after someone has baked bread in the oven?

Unless you're severely gluten intolerant, that's like really good news, right? That sweet smell hits your nose, that kind of yeasty, sweet smell, and there's a warmth about it.

Or maybe you've come home and there's a candle burning. Hopefully it was your roommate or your spouse or something who lit it and it wasn't you who sort of left it burning all day while you were at work. But it's giving off that deep, rich fragrance that sort of hits you when you walk in.

[14:53] And maybe those scents and those experiences remind you of home and of fellowship and of relationship and of love. And you see, that's what's happening in the holy place of the tabernacle.

The bread is laid out and the incense is burning and the lights are on. And all of it speaks of fellowship, of communion, of intimacy with God.

Look with me at Exodus chapter 29, verse 45. A couple chapters ahead, this verse is actually found at the end of the description of the priest's ordination, but it's sort of a summary verse of this tabernacle section in many ways.

You know, if you want to ask the question, why did God redeem his people from Egypt? Why did he display his power and part the Red Sea and free his people? At the end of Exodus 29, God gives

one answer to that.

He's describing what will happen at the tabernacle in verse 45. He says, I will dwell among the people of Israel and 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.

[16:12] I am the Lord their God. In other words, God says, I brought them out of the land of Egypt so that I might dwell among them. what a stunning truth.

One of the great ends of redemption is God dwelling in our midst. God desires to be known by his people and not just known, God desires to live right in the middle of them, to be identified with them and to be their God.

You know, if we are a culture that's hungry for awe, I think we're a people that are starved for real intimacy, to be known and to be loved.

And here, the creator of all things seen and unseen is saying to his people, I'll set a table for you. Let's sit and eat and my light will go forth and your prayers will come up and I'll be with you.

Amen. Can you imagine what your life would be like if you really had that sort of intimacy with God? That sort of communion with God?

[17:30] Wouldn't your disappointments in this life be a lot less devastating? You know, because even if some good thing kept slipping out of your grasp, the career or the family or the reputation that you long for, even if those things kept on being a perpetual disappointment for you, you could still have confidence that the greatest good, God himself, was yours now and forever.

And not having or getting or accomplishing those things, whatever they are, that could never crush you because you have something better by far, intimacy, fellowship with God.

And on the flip side, wouldn't your triumphs and your successes in this life be so much less prone to make you proud? Isn't it easy when things are going our way in life to sort of elevate ourselves, to compare ourselves to others?

I've got it together so much more than that schmuck over there. And yet, if God were your greatest good, if you walked in a rich communion with him, wouldn't that keep you from puffing yourself up in those prideful ways?

Because then you know that what really matters isn't who's winning or losing according to some worldly standard. What really matters is knowing God. It's really only intimacy with him, a rich fellowship with God, walking in his ways, pleasing him, bringing others along to do the same.

[19:10] That's what matters. Man, if you really knew the kind of intimacy with God that the tabernacle is talking about, that's the only thing that will protect you spiritually from your disappointments and your achievements.

It will keep you from an overly devastated self on the one hand and an overly elevated self on the other. And the holy place of the tabernacle, the bread on the table, the light on the lampstand, the altar burning.

Speaking of just that, of intimacy with God. But there's one more place we have to visit on our tour. There's one more section that we have to see.

God's plans for the tabernacle include not just the tabernacle proper with those two rooms, the most holy place and the holy place. there's also the courtyard. Now imagine stepping out through that curtain door out of the tent, out of the holy place into the courtyard.

The sun hits your eyes, the dust is rising up from the ground and the first thing you probably see is this large bronze basin of water on a stand and there are a bunch of men standing around it washing their hands in the water and as you get closer you realize that they're washing off not just the dirt and sand of living in the desert wilderness but they're washing off blood and the water is starting to turn a pale red and then beyond the bronze basin you lift up your eyes and you see what really is the main feature of the courtyard right in the center the bronze altar and heat is rising up from the altar as the fire is stoked beneath and you know how when heat rises up in the summertime it sort of makes your vision sort of shimmer a little bit so you can see the sort of blurry rise above it and the smoke is going up but this time the smell is not of that sweet incense of the altar inside the tent the smell is of animal sacrifice which smells of blood and of roasted meat and of course that would all be a bit disorienting at first wouldn't it stepping out from that sort of pristine calm of the holy place out into this flurry of activity in the courtyard as the priests are handling the sacrifices and tending to their tasks and always returning to wash their hands and sometimes even their feet in that basin and you think where have I come how is this part of the worship of God but then standing there in the courtyard you kind of turn around and you notice something you haven't

yet noticed on our little tour that as the smoke of the sacrifices go up you turn back to the tent and you look and now you see for the first time the tent and what you see now are the barriers first there's that curtain door that you just walk through that's separating the courtyard from the holy place and then you remember now beyond that there's a thick veil separating the holy place from the most holy place and then you begin to realize that the promise of the tabernacle the promise of God dwelling in our midst the promise of having such nearness to God and awe and intimacy the promise of the tabernacle is matched by the problem of the tabernacle yes God is near that's the promise but the problem is you can't go in the way is blocked the curtains are drawn and the veil is closed and friends isn't that a lot like our experience sometimes that the thing we long for the thing we reach out for is awe and intimacy with God and it always seems to elude our grasp and as you stand there staring at those barriers you start to realize something you start to put the pieces together that inside those curtains

[23 : 39] God is on the throne inside those curtains God is king and in there with him there exists a relationship of awe and intimacy and that reminds you of something it reminds you of how this story began that there once was a place where God was king and where God dwelled in the midst of his people and where those first humans had fellowship with God and awe and intimacy but in that garden place in that garden sanctuary our first parents rejected God as king and as a result they were driven from God's presence and symbolically at the gate to the garden of Eden do you remember what God put there God placed the cherubim those mighty angelic beings and a flaming sword to guard the entrance and then things start to click because there hanging on every curtain of the tabernacle are those same cherubim embroidered telling the same story that our fellowship with God has been lost and the only way in is under the sword of judgment you see friends the tabernacle isn't just a portable worship site it's not like an inflatable stadium for a mega church that you can just take with you on tour the tabernacle is a theater and it's retelling the most important story that we could ever learn and that we always forget and in that theater in that drama is the promise that God is going to come down and reclaim his creation and that the project that God began in creation that God began in Eden in the garden would not be wrecked forever that heaven would come to earth that God will be king and that his people will know him again in awe and intimacy and that the advance of God's glory and creation will continue and yet the tabernacle also shows us that the ultimate provision for this renewal has not yet come because the barriers remain and the path from the garden to glory is still obscure but there you stand in the courtyard and though the way is obscure the clues are there aren't they there at the altar at that thing that immediately seems so strange to our sensibilities there at the bronze altar are the sacrifices and God is showing his people that he will provide a way and even in the most holy place itself even deep in the center of the heart of the all-filled middle of the tabernacle there's another sign on the ark itself there rests what the ESV calls the mercy seat or the cover that between the holy God enthroned above the cherubim and the law of the covenant underneath his feet that exposes our sin that between the holy God and his holy law there stands a covering a covering that once a year will be sprinkled by the high priest with the blood of sacrifice on what would be called the day of atonement a promise that when God comes down to dwell with his people the first thing he would see is not his law which we had broken but the first thing he would see is the saving blood

of an atoning sacrifice that pays the penalty we deserve and turns away the wrath that we had incurred there it is a picture of the way forward and that picture grinds on the drama and the theater continues day after day and week after week and month after month and year after year for literally over a thousand years imagine being part of a theater group where you played the same show every morning and every night for fifteen hundred years friends this is how much God cares to communicate to us the profound message of the tabernacle but it never stopped and when would it stop and what's the answer what's the thing that's going to get us in because we keep sprinkling this blood and yet the barriers still remain in the opening of John's gospel

John begins with creation and he says in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God very reminiscent of the opening chapters of Genesis 1 isn't it that God creates all things and who is there at creation but the Lord Jesus the Son of God the second person of the Trinity and then wonder of wonders in the opening of John's gospel he says that same eternal word came down became flesh and dwelt among us and that word dwelt doesn't just mean that Jesus came and lived in our midst that word dwelt that John uses is the same word for tabernacle the word became flesh and tabernacled among us and John is saying that the promise of Exodus

the promise of the tabernacle that God would live in our midst and that God would make a way has finally come that what the tabernacle merely anticipated

Jesus has accomplished in him God truly dwelt in the midst of his people and through his death on the cross a sacrifice was made that atones for all of our sin once and for all a sacrifice so complete so sufficient that when he died the veil of the temple was torn in two opening the way to the most holy place and what was accomplished once and for all in Christ we see in the rest of the New Testament is now being applied by the Holy Spirit you see all in intimacy with God is made possible finally through Jesus Christ when we confess that we are separated from God by our sin and we trust that Jesus has made the sacrifice for our sins when he died on the cross and when we trust in Jesus God gives us new spiritual life he indwells us by his Holy Spirit earlier in the service Matt prayed just this prayer reminding us that all those who are in Christ Jesus are now the walking temples and tabernacles of the living God the dwelling place of God is no longer in a physical structure somewhere in the Middle East but it's the people of God the church indwelt by the Holy Spirit Paul says to the church in Ephesians 2.22 that in Christ you're being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit the tabernacle points ahead to Christ Christ has poured out his Spirit but there's one more chapter actually in this story and it's the chapter yet to come when one day the dwelling place of God will be with his people in fullness when Christ returns and brings about a new heavens and a new earth when the redemption that he accomplished and that the Spirit applies that when that redemption is finally consummated and brought to bear and the glory of God covers the earth like the waters cover the sea and then on that day there'll be no temple and no tabernacle because we'll see God face to face and we will dwell and we will reign with him forever in a world where there is no sin and no guilt and no shame and that project that God began in the Garden of Eden of his glory subsuming all of creation finally reaches its fulfillment because Jesus our King has taken us there so where does this tour leave us we've traveled from inside out and then in

[33 : 00] Christ from outside back in again through the veil but how should we apply these things two ways I think at least first a word about awe and intimacy friends if the people of Israel were meant to have a relationship with God fueled by awe and intimacy with him because of the tabernacle and because of the provision of the sacrificial system how much more ought we today have that awe and intimacy who live in light of Christ's coming and Christ's sacrifice and Christ's resurrection often our devotional life will grow cold for a season often our prayers will hit a time when they become forced our worship will be cold our Bible reading and our spiritual conversation with friends will feel rote and we can start to wonder in those moments what's the way back how do I recapture that awe and intimacy with God again and what the biblical story of the tabernacle is saying to us is that the root in the way to draw near is not through more works that you provide but through the path that Jesus has blazed so the path to awe and intimacy the way to draw near is by turning from those sins and those attitudes that may have been drawing us away yes but ultimately by placing our confidence in him and his finished work on the cross again real awe and intimacy with God come only through a renewed taking hold of Christ by faith and it's the ministry of the Holy Spirit to show us the beauty of the cross and the beauty of Christ in fresh ways as we engage with one another in his word so that it flows forth in that kind of reverence and nearness to God second a word about mission the tabernacle stood at the center of the Israelite camp and you know their main job in many ways as a people was to worship God in the way he told them to and in that way to be a light to the nations around them but friends what we know now living in light of Christ's coming is that what was localized in the Old Testament at the tabernacle and then in the temple has now been globalized by Christ and the Holy Spirit the covenant presence of God friends is now no longer located in one spot in the tabernacle or the temple now the covenant presence of God the reign of God is present wherever the church meets in the name of Jesus God still desires to dwell in the midst of his people God is still the God who saves who speaks who dwells in our midst but the walls have been broken down and the presence of God has gone viral if you will now it's everywhere and the church is at the forefront of God's kingdom advance in the world that now we don't need to travel to a place somewhere far away to get near to God now we need to find the people of God gathered around the word of God where the spirit of God dwells in places as far flung as New Haven

Connecticut at the corner of State and Grove in this old building that keeps costing us money here the presence of God delights to dwell such that when we gather on Sunday we don't have to ask

God to come down we don't have to beg God to show up God's already here friends beckoning us calling us to come and meet with him and not just between these four walls but wherever Christians gather in his name and believer wherever you go in the name of Christ because the Holy Spirit dwells in you and as you go out into your work or into your family or into your neighborhood the presence of God is going with you sort of like a seed sort of like leaven that gets mixed in someone very wise once used that illustration it was Jesus he said this is what the kingdom of God is like it's seed it's leaven and it goes so you see friends our tour of the tabernacle as we've sort of gone out and gone in it's got to go back out again we have to leave even the courtyard in this tour and we've got to go out into the camp and then we've got to go out into the wilderness and then we have to go out to the ends of the earth because of what

Jesus has done and the news that we have to bring brothers and sisters the news that we have to bring the presence that we bring friends and our neighbors and our colleagues it's good news that a relationship with God can be had that because of the grace of Christ he's opened the veil separating us from our deepest longing from God himself that death has been conquered that our sins have been forgiven and that we will dwell with God forever starting right now right here and that the way is open for anyone and for all who believe so come on in come in where God dwells in the midst of his people let's pray father our prayer this morning is that by your spirit you would give us the faith to believe help us to see in Christ that the way into an intimate relationship with you full of all and full of nearness has been opened and help us to go forth this morning and this week in the joy of that nearness taking with us by your holy spirit the news that the way has been opened and we humans might dwell with God again because he has come to dwell with us in Jesus Christ our Lord we pray amen