

GOD WITH US

Exodus 25-31; Hebrews 9-10

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If you've ever had an intimate encounter with God, you may also have had the low that follows that high. You can't stay on the mountain forever—you've got to come down—and after the joy and exhilaration of a mountaintop experience, descent into the mundane can be daunting.

In Mark 9:2-13, the Apostle Peter had a mountaintop experience with Jesus, whom he saw transfigured into dazzling, radiant white. Only a few days prior, Jesus had unveiled his mission to his disciples: he would go to Jerusalem to suffer and die at the hands of the chief priests, and then after three days he would rise again from the dead (Mark 8:31). When Peter heard it, he tried to talk Jesus out of it (Mark 8:32). But Jesus rebuked Peter and warned him that he too would have to take up his *own* cross (Mark 8:33-38). Is it any wonder that Peter wanted to stay up on the mountaintop?

In our previous study of Exodus 19-24, we made it to the mountaintop. God had saved the Israelites *from* slavery and death at the hands of Pharaoh. Then he drew them *to* himself at Mt. Sinai, to be his people and his prized possession. And there he called them to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation *for* the sake of the world. Before sending them out to the Promised Land, he brought Moses and 74 Israelite leaders up Mt. Sinai for a mountaintop experience. They ate and drank with God, and caught sight of him in the fire.

But sooner or later they had to come down the mountain and get on with their mission. The Promised Land was filled with bloodthirsty, warrior peoples. How could this ragtag bunch of refugees possibly succeed against the strength and sophistication of the Canaanites? Only if the Lord led them into battle, as he had done against Pharaoh at the Red Sea.

What they needed, then, was to take the mountaintop with them. They needed a means of making the Almighty, transcendent God immanent. They needed Immanuel, God with us. That's what Exodus 25-31 is all about.

OVERVIEW OF EXODUS 25-31

After the big feast atop Mt. Sinai in Exodus 24, God invited Moses back up to the top of the mountain to receive another gift. It was then that God shared with him a vision for the tabernacle, a kind of portable temple of the Lord. Exodus 25-31 provides detailed “assembly instructions” for creating the Tabernacle tent itself, the furnishings inside (the Ark of the

Covenant, the lamp stand, etc.), the court around it, the bronze sacrificial altar, and the requirements and vestments for the Tabernacle's priesthood.

Exodus 25-31 contains seven chapters of detailed instructions. Then in Exodus 35-40 are another six chapters describing the Tabernacle's construction. This means that nearly a third of the great book of Exodus is devoted to the Tabernacle! To put it in perspective, the Bible devotes the same amount of space to story of Abraham. It's safe to assume that the Tabernacle is a very important part of our history as the people of God.

In what follows we'll answer some foundational questions regarding the Tabernacle. The goal of this message is to equip you to read and understand these chapters in Exodus on your own with the Lord.

WHAT WAS THE TABERNACLE FOR?

If you've ever seen a James Bond movie, then you'll know that after Bond gets his assignment from M, he goes to see Q to be armed with the latest spyware. Why? So that Agent 007 is equipped with the essential tools he needs for his mission.

In Ex 25-31, God reveals his heavenly throne to Moses and provides him with detailed plans for how to replicate it. Why? So that Moses and the Israelites might have an essential tool for their mission.

The Israelites didn't want to leave God behind on the mountaintop. If they did, they would surely be destroyed by their enemies in Canaan. They needed a means of making the transcendent God immanent as they set out for the Promised Land. Through the Tabernacle, the Israelites would have Immanuel, God with us.

What, then, was the Tabernacle for? It was an essential tool for *mission*. God gave it to his people for the sake of the world. He didn't want them engaging in battle without him. He intended to go with them. That's why he gave them this special gift.

It's easy to become intrigued by all the measurements and details in the Tabernacle chapters. But remember that these chapters aren't a separate book of the Bible. (The first three books of the Bible aren't Genesis, Exodus, Tabernacles...) Rather, these instructions are embedded within Exodus, which we've discovered is a missionary book. The Gospel According to Exodus, as we've seen in past weeks, is not only God's delivering us *from* slavery and death, but also *to* himself *for* the sake of the world. Mission is the ultimate reason for the Exodus story.

Why didn't Exodus end with the feast atop Mt Sinai in chapter 24? Because like James Bond, Moses and the Israelites needed to be equipped for mission. That's what the Tabernacle was *for*.

HOW DID THE TABERNACLE WORK?

When Elise and I felt were first married, we visited a lot of different churches. After visiting each one, we would talk about whether we experienced both the transcendence and immanence of God during the service. According to the Bible, both are true of God, and we ought to experience both in worship. Yet it's usually one or the other: either God is majestic, holy and remote, or God is warm and friendly. It's rare to attend a worship service in which you experience both the transcendence and immanence of God.

This isn't merely a modern problem. It goes all the way back to the Fall (Genesis 3). When sin entered the world, God's proximity became a dangerous problem. Not for God, mind you. God isn't at all threatened by sin. The Bible teaches that God's holiness is contagious, and it purifies (i.e. burns up) whatever it contacts.¹ God doesn't need protection from our sin. But ever since humanity fell into sin, we have needed some kind of protection from God's contagious holiness.

The easiest protection is distance. Keep God far away and nobody gets hurt—at least by God. But in the absence of God, the world becomes a place of injustice and terror at the hands of other men. Only the strong survive—for a little while, until stronger ones come along. Eventually everyone dies in a dark, chaotic, godless world.

Keeping our distance from God also cuts against the grain of our innermost needs as human beings. We were made to know God: to walk with him and to serve him. We need him for relationship and we need him for meaning and purpose and mission.

Thus, transcendence without immanence isn't a satisfactory solution. Is there any way, then, for sinful people like us to draw near to God without being consumed by his holiness? Yes, there is! It's the theme of "Immanuel, God with us" found throughout the Bible, and reaching full fruition on Christmas. The hope of Immanuel was finally realized fully in the incarnation, when Jesus, the God-Man, was born. John describes the first Christmas this way:

And the Word became flesh and he pitched his tent among us... (John 1:14a ESV)

The wonderful thing about John's description of Jesus' birth is that it gives a nod to the original Tabernacle. When John says that Jesus "pitched his tent among us," he's describing what God originally did in and through the Tabernacle. Before God put on human flesh to live and die among us, he first went camping with his people on the way to the Promised Land.

But how did that original Tabernacle work? Prior to the incarnation, how could God have drawn near to his people without his contagious holiness destroying them? We know from the Gospels that the touch of the Lord Jesus brought healing to the blind and the lame, to the sick and to sinners alike. But before the first Christmas, God's presence was still a refiner's fire, burning up whatever impurities it touched. So the way the Tabernacle 'worked' was by establishing a series of protective boundaries, concentric safety zones to keep people from getting hurt.

¹ The end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* vividly depicts the contagious and purifying holiness of God.

In Exodus 19-24, Mt. Sinai also had protective boundaries for the safety of the people. The higher someone went on the mountain and the closer they came to God, the more necessary it became for that person's sins to have been covered through some kind of sacrificial ritual.

The tabernacle was laid out the same way, probably to replicate the safety zones of Mt. Sinai. There was the outer court of the Tabernacle, and then the Tabernacle tent, and then the Holy of Holies inside the tent, and each one of these areas was increasingly holy. The detailed instructions given to Moses were intended to show this, as the quality of materials and craftsmanship increased as one moved from the outside into the center of the Tabernacle. So, the outer court housed the sacrificial altar that was made of bronze. But the Ark of the Covenant, that was found inside the Holy of Holies, was made of gold. Likewise, the outer covering for the Tabernacle was made with goat hair and linen, but the inner curtains were made of woolen threads dyed with blue or purple or scarlet. The result of all this was that the inner sanctum of the Tabernacle was like the top of Mt Sinai: a place where God's heavenly glory could shine forth without destroying the people in the camp.

Right at the very center of the Tabernacle God did something unique, to help his people remember to live according to his Word. All the other ancient temples were fashioned in a similar way, with an inner sanctum. And all the other peoples had idols, images of their gods, in the center of their temples. Not Israel. What did they have inside the Holy of Holies? The Ark of the Covenant, and within it, the Word of God.

It was this, not an image, that occupied the center of attention and that was at the core of [their] religion. This written reminder of God's revealed word constituted the sign of His presence and His indwelling in the midst of Israel. The 'Ark of the Covenant,' therefore, embodied one of the fundamental ideas of [their] religion: that it is only through His Word that true knowledge of God, the understanding of His essential nature, can be apprehended or at least pursued.²

Even though the Ark was hidden from view within the Tabernacle, everyone still knew that it was at the center of the Holy of Holies. They knew that instead of an idol, God wanted to be known by his Word. It foreshadowed the way into his immanent presence that God would provide for all peoples. Anyone could draw near to him through his Word.

Still, the people were strictly warned not to go inside the Tabernacle. Only those who were consecrated could enter it, and only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies once a year. Again, the purpose of all of this wasn't to prevent people from drawing near to God. Rather, God gave them the tabernacle as a gift. Just as God established boundaries in creation, so that e.g. the fish could stay in water and survive, and the birds could stay in the air and survive, so also God created boundaries within the Tabernacle so that people could survive and also be near him. That's how the Tabernacle "worked."

² Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel*. New York: Schocken, 1986, p. 209.

DID THE ISRAELITES REALLY WANT A TABERNACLE?

You may have had the experience of receiving an unwanted gift from a well-intentioned relative. Did the Israelites feel the same way about the Tabernacle? With all the chapters detailing the plans God gave Moses, it's clear that God thought it was a wonderful gift and he wanted Israel to have it. But how did Israel feel about it? Especially with all the restrictions on who could enter, and the general danger associated with God's immanent presence, wasn't it more of a curse than a blessing? Let's take a closer look at Exodus 25.

Note first the contrast between this chapter and the previous section revealing God's law. In the Ten Commandments and the legislation that followed, nothing was optional. All was black and white. The Tabernacle, however, begins with a gracious invitation:

"Speak to the people of Israel, that they take for me a contribution. From every man whose heart moves him you shall receive the contribution for me." (Exodus 25:2 ESV)

It was a matter of the heart for each family. They didn't have to participate. They didn't have to contribute. But those whose hearts were moved were welcomed to give of their wealth:

"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, goats' hair, tanned rams' skins, goatskins, 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." (Exodus 25:3-7 ESV)

As former slaves and refugees from Egypt, where would they find such wealth? In Egypt. Before God sent the tenth plague, he instructed the Israelites to seek reparations from their slave masters. The Egyptians were so fatigued from prior plagues that they gave generously to the Israelites (Exodus 11:2-3). So the Israelites plundered the Egyptians of gold and silver and bronze, and different color threads, and so on. It was from this plunder that the Israelites could give to establish the Tabernacle. Like a tithe, they could give *back* to God a portion of what he clearly had given them only a few months before.

How did the people respond? When Moses gave them opportunity to participate in the Tabernacle, here's what happened:

[The craftsmen] said to Moses, "The people bring much more than enough for doing the work that the LORD has commanded us to do." So Moses gave command, and word was proclaimed throughout the camp, "Let no man or woman do anything more for the contribution for the sanctuary." So the people were restrained from bringing, for the material they had was sufficient to do all the work, and more. (Exodus 36:5-7 ESV)

God wanted the construction of the Tabernacle. The Israelites did as well. Despite the dangers associated with it, they wanted a beautiful Tabernacle to house the immanent presence of our transcendent God. With God's immanent presence, the people of Israel would be able to go with God into the Promised Land, for the sake of the world.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE TABERNACLE?

If the Tabernacle was such a great gift, why didn't it endure the test of time? It actually did. You just have to know where to find it.

When Israel finally settled in the Promised Land and united under a single monarchy, God permitted them to build a permanent mountaintop temple in Jerusalem. It had more or less the same design, except fabulously bigger and more ornate. And it served its purpose for a season. But the people soon forgot that God's Word was at the center of the temple, and they forgot what it said. They forgot what they had been saved *for*. They forgot that God's ultimate mission wasn't the conquest of Canaan and a bricks and mortar temple. They forgot God's goal was always that the whole earth would be filled with the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. God started in Canaan, but his intent was always to make all things new. So God determined to take the Tabernacle to another level through the Incarnation of the Word.

Let's revisit what John wrote about the first Christmas:

And the Word became flesh and he pitched his tent among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14 ESV)

In the old Tabernacle, the glory of God was necessarily hidden from the people, because of the danger of the contagious holiness of God. But John says that when Jesus was born and he "tabernacled" with us, we were finally able to see God's glory. God put on flesh and became one of us, bringing the grace of forgiveness and the truth of God's holiness together in a single person. What the tabernacle anticipated, Jesus fulfilled, by finally resolving the tension between the transcendence and immanence of God. The glory of God finally became visible and accessible without becoming deadly.

But Christmas was only part of the solution, because there was still the problem of sin. As Hebrews 9 makes clear, all the animal sacrifices for sin were messy and costly. What's more, they had to keep on being repeated again and again, year after year. Even so, they still only allowed for a high priest to enter the Holy of Holies once each year.

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. (Hebrews 9:11-12 ESV)

Jesus was the sinless man, sacrificed for sinful men and women like us. By means of his own blood, Jesus went into the heavenly Holy of Holies once and for all.

Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. (Hebrews 9:25-26 ESV)

When Jesus entered into the heavenly Holy of Holies on our behalf, the Gospels say that the curtain in the Jerusalem Temple separating the Holy of Holies was torn in two, from top to bottom. From that moment onward, every earthly temple was rendered obsolete. Jesus Christ became the way into God's presence forevermore.

Therefore, since God is with us, we should draw near to him. There's no longer any reason to fear God. His proximity is no longer a threat to those who believe in Jesus Christ. Put your faith in the Lord, and enter into God's presence with confidence.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 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. (Hebrews 10:19-22 ESV)

Through Jesus, we have been saved from death and destruction so that we might draw near to God.

Finally, since God is with us, we should draw others near to him as well. The New Testament goes on to show that Christ is the cornerstone in a holy, living temple comprised of Christian believers, each of us a living stone built on the foundation of Christ (see 1 Peter 2). In Christ, all of us together become what God commissioned his people to become in Exodus 19:5-6. Together we become a holy nation and a kingdom of priests, serving our transcendent, immanent God.

Nobody wants to draw near to an utterly transcendent god who is cold, distant, dangerous, and completely 'other.' Anyone who draws near to a cuddly and cozy immanent god will soon be dissatisfied with his impotence in never standing against the evils of the world and in our own hearts. But the transcendent, immanent God is the one whom all mankind was created to know and serve.

We alone in the world have a unique vantage point and ability to testify to the good news of God. Through Jesus, we are those who have experienced both God's transcendence and immanence, because Jesus the incarnate Word is "full of grace and truth." As the living temple of Jesus, we are now his ambassadors for the sake of the world.