

A Dwelling Place for God **Exodus 25-27, 30-31**

What is your impression of God's disposition toward you? In other words, what do you think God's prevailing mood is when he thinks about you? It seems fairly common for people, even Christians, to often have a pretty negative view; to assume God is angry or annoyed or cold toward them because of their failures, sins, and weakness. We know he loves us, but it seems like a lot of people are quick to think that he's angry and distant and doesn't really like us.

Is that an accurate view of God? Why do people go there? I think for some it has to do with their upbringing and negative view of themselves. But some of those feelings can come from reading what we've been studying lately in the Bible – about how distant, terrifying and untouchable God was when he descended on Mt. Sinai to make a covenant with Israel. He comes across as pretty scary. And there are a lot of places in the Old Testament where you see God's anger and wrath and get the impression that he just really doesn't like us very much. But I hope in the next two sermons, we will come away with a more complete understanding of who God is and what his desires are for us.

Last week we saw the people of Israel enter into a covenant with Yahweh – a critically important key to understanding the Old Testament. He gave them the terms of the covenant, they agreed, the covenant was ratified with blood, and the elders went up to behold Yahweh on the mountain and eat and drink before him. That's where we ended last week and after that it says that Moses went up further to meet with God for forty days and nights to receive further instructions, and we find these in Exodus 25-31.

This is a set of very detailed instructions that are all related to one thing – an earthly sanctuary or tent that the people were to build in their camp where they were to worship Yahweh. I'm going to cover these chapters in two sermons – the first will focus on the tent itself and the objects inside of it, and the second will focus on the priests who ministered in it.

As we look at the details of this tent, I want us to see the purpose behind it and God's heart for his people. God didn't have to do any of the things we've been reading about, he did them for a reason and I hope we can see that reason today.

Read Exodus 25:1-9.

The Lord said to Moses, ² “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. ³ And this is the contribution that you shall receive from them: gold, silver, and bronze, ⁴ blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, goats' hair, ⁵ tanned rams' skins, goatskins, acacia wood, ⁶ oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, ⁷ onyx stones, and stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece. ⁸ And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. ⁹ Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.

So Yahweh wanted Moses to take a free will offering for all kinds of very specific materials – these were building materials. All of these things would be used to make a sanctuary – a sacred place – for God to dwell. He called it a “tabernacle,” which simply means “dwelling place.” And he gave them very careful and detailed instructions which they were to follow. I’m not going to go through all the details, but I am going to explain the different things and how it all fits together. I want to give a big “Thank you” to Gretchen Wahlberg from United Covenant in Clear Lake for sharing information from her own study and presentation of the tabernacle.

It starts with something called the “Ark of the Covenant.” This was the most sacred object of them all. This was a wooden box about 4ft. wide, 2ft deep, and 2 ft tall, overlaid with pure gold. It was to have golden rings fastened to its base with poles going through them for carrying it so that no one would ever come into contact with the ark after it was consecrated.

On top of the ark was a wooden cover overlaid with gold and on top of the ark were to be two golden cherubim, which were a kind of glorious angelic being. Their wings were to be outspread in front of them and touching over the top and center of the cover which was called the “mercy seat.” Inside the ark they were to put the tablets that God would give to Moses containing the laws of the covenant. It says in Exodus 25:22: *“There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel.”* It was on this ark of the covenant that God would cause his manifest glory and presence to dwell, which is why this was the most sacred of all the objects.

The next object was a table for bread. This was a wooden table about 3 feet wide, 18 inches deep, and two feet high. It was to be overlaid with gold and have golden rings at its base with poles by which to carry it. On the table were to be golden plates and dishes to put incense, cups and bowls to pour drink offerings, as well as 12 loaves of bread – two piles of 6 – which would represent the 12 tribes of Israel.

Next was the golden lampstand. The golden lampstand was an intricate design and was to have seven branches that would hold seven lamps. The entire lampstand was to be made of one continuous piece of pure gold. These are all described in Exodus 25.

There's one more article in the tabernacle that I want to mention now, even though it isn't described until chapter 30, and that is the altar of incense. Similar to the other objects it was made out of wood and overlaid with pure gold. It was a square, 18 inches wide and 18 inches deep and about 3 feet high with horns on each corner. It too was to be carried with poles that went through golden rings. This altar was to be set in front of the veil before the Most Holy Place, in the same room as the table and lampstand. Incense was to be burned upon it every day and once a year the blood of the atonement was to be put on its horns.

These four objects were to be put inside an enclosed area called the tabernacle, which is described in Exodus 26. The tabernacle was to be 15 feet wide, 15 feet tall, and 45 feet deep (about half the size of our sanctuary), made with wooden framing that was overlaid with pure gold, with finely woven curtains of blue, purple, and scarlet hung all the way around. It was a continuous curtain with only one opening in front. Over the top of the sanctuary were three layers of tough curtains that draped all the way over the sides and were fastened to the ground. There was also to be a veil hung inside the tabernacle from top to bottom to form two separate areas the front area was 30 feet deep and the back was 15 feet deep.

Exodus 26:33-35 says, "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. ³⁴ You shall put the mercy seat on the ark of the testimony in the Most Holy Place. ³⁵ And you shall set the table outside the

veil, and the lampstand on the south side of the tabernacle opposite the table, and you shall put the table on the north side.”

You can see the entrance was on the east end of the tabernacle, that went into the Holy Place, past the table and lampstand and altar of incense and then the Most Holy Place was behind the inner veil in which the ark of the covenant rested with the mercy seat on top.

That describes the tabernacle, or sanctuary and the items inside it, but there was also another outer layer known as the courtyard of the tabernacle. This was set up using wooden pillars that were held upright by ropes and had silver rods between them with finely woven curtains draped over them. The courtyard went all the way around the tabernacle and was much bigger: 75 feet wide, 150 feet deep, and 7.5 feet tall. About the size of the backyard of the church (1/4 acre). There was no covering over the top.

People entered the courtyard from the east side and the tabernacle was situated on the west half of the courtyard. In between the entrance of the courtyard and the tabernacle were two more objects. The first was the bronze altar (or laver). This was made of wood overlaid with bronze. It was a square: 7.5ft x 7.5ft and about 4.5 ft high. Similar to the altar of incense, it had horns on the four corners. There was a bronze grate set inside of it about half way down for burning sacrifices. The bronze altar had bronze rings and poles by which it was to be moved.

The second object was the bronze basin, which is just like it sounds. No dimensions are given, but it was to sit on a stand and was to be filled with water where the priests were to wash their hands and feet before going into the tabernacle or offering sacrifices at the bronze altar.

Here's a picture of the how the courtyard and tabernacle would have looked:
(Picture)

Now for most of us, what I just described doesn't really make any sense. There are tons of specifics and details (most of which I didn't go into), and there doesn't seem to be rhyme or reason to it. And I don't know if they made sense to Moses and the people of Israel either, but there is all kinds of significance and purpose

behind all of it, and I want to briefly touch on some of that so you can begin to see.

The book of Hebrews is especially helpful for understanding these things. In talking about them, it says in Hebrews 8:5: *“They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.”* In other words, the earthly sanctuary was patterned after the heavenly sanctuary. It portrayed God’s heavenly throne. Therefore they were to be careful to make everything exactly as God instructed – they didn’t have the freedom to make it how they wanted because it was representing the real thing!

There are a few places in Scripture where God gave people a glimpse of his heavenly throne. One was Isaiah. It says this in Isaiah 6:1-4: *“In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” ⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.”*

This heavenly sanctuary was what led to the detailed plans for the earthly sanctuary. The author of Hebrews calls it the *“true tent that the Lord set up, not man”* (Heb. 8:2). The Reformation Study Bible says: *“The heavenly temple of God is the original after which the earthly tent and temple were copied.”* As God was preparing a place on earth to dwell, he was setting up a sacred space that was a shadow of heaven. I don’t think we should think of it as an exact miniature replica, but rather a physical representation of a spiritual reality.

But what about all the different objects and furniture in the tabernacle? What were those all about? Those too were shadows or copies of heavenly things, and specifically the ministry of Christ as our High Priest. The Reformation Study Bible says: *“The tabernacle made by Moses provided for worship modeled after the spiritual realm in which Christ ministers. That tabernacle and its worship pointed forward to God’s plan of salvation that would be revealed in Christ.”*

So as you walk through the different aspects of the tabernacle, you see shadows of the redemptive work of Christ in the heavenly places. I'm going to go into more detail next week about the priestly ministry and how each object was used, but for now I just want us to begin to see the significance of them.

Just inside the entrance of the courtyard was the bronze altar where people would bring animals to be sacrificed to atone for their sins. The blood was placed on the altar and the animals were burned as a fragrant offering to God.

Further into the courtyard was the bronze basin that was used by the priests for washing and ritual purification to be able to perform their duties both at the bronze altar and inside the tabernacle. Priests had to be washed in order to carry out their ministry. The physical washing represented ceremonial purity as the priest ministered before Yahweh and before the people.

As you entered into the tabernacle and the Holy Place, which only the priests were allowed to go, you would have seen the golden lampstand on the left, the table of bread on the right, and the altar of incense straight ahead in front of the veil before the Most Holy Place. Each of these was significant.

The seven lamps on the golden lampstand seem to be linked with what it says in Revelation 4:2-6: *"At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. ³ And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. ⁴ Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. ⁵ From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, ⁶ and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal."* In this description of the heavenly throne, it is understood that the seven torches of fire, or the seven spirits of God represent the Holy Spirit and the golden lampstand in the tabernacle seems to be doing the same. In order to approach the throne of God, we must have the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit which Christ gives us when we are born again.

The table of bread is spoken about in Leviticus 24:8-9: *“Every Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange it (the table) before the Lord regularly; it is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever. ⁹ And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the Lord's food offerings, a perpetual due.”* The Reformation Study Bible says, *“The eating of the bread by Israel's religious representatives reminded Israel of its constant dependence on God's life-giving presence.”* This made me think of what Jesus said in John chapter 6. In verse 35 it says: *“Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”* In verse 51 he says, *“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.”* So I think that the table of bread in the Holy Place represented the Son of God, who is the Bread of Life.

Then you have the altar of incense. It was on this altar that once a year the high priest would have to burn fragrant incense and place the blood of the atonement before being able to enter the Most Holy place. So I believe this altar represents the sacrifice of Christ on the cross which was a fragrant offering to the Lord that made atonement for our sins and opens the way for us to be in God's presence. Jesus told his disciples in John 14:6: *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* I'll go into this in more detail next week.

All three objects in the Holy Place represent the things that we need in order to draw near to God and be in his presence (Holy Spirit, union with Christ, sacrifice of Christ), and it's not a coincidence – it the reason behind why God had them make them.

Finally, inside the inner sanctuary – the Most Holy Place – was the ark of the covenant fitted with the cherubim and mercy seat – we've seen already that this was where Yahweh would cause his presence to dwell.

I have just begun to scratch the surface of the significance of the details of everything involved with this earthly tabernacle, but you can see that behind every detail there is purpose and intention. Every detail was a copy or shadow of a heavenly reality in some way. And the amazing thing I want us to see this morning is that God was doing it all to prepare a special place – only one place

like it in all the world – so that in spite of the sinfulness of the human race, he could come and dwell. And not far away up on a distant mountainside somewhere – Back in Exodus 25:8 as he began giving the instructions, he said, *“And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst.”* He wanted to dwell in the midst of his people. The tabernacle was in the center of the community.

I want us to think about that – Why would he want that? Where does that come from? What would compel God to actually want to dwell with sinful man? Why not stay distant, set apart, and separate like before? As I thought about it this week, I thought about what God was doing at that point in history and what he continued to do after that.

God dwelt with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and it was very good. But they sinned and after them humans had rejected and forgotten God and turned to their own way to worship their own gods, and they deserved condemnation and wrath. But God didn't leave them to continue on that dead end road and perish. He intervened. He stepped into history and into the world. He called Abraham and chose to bless all the families of the earth through him and his descendants. He set in motion a plan of redemption and reconciliation that we've been studying in the book of Exodus and that we're part of today.

The part of the plan we're most familiar with came later in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who was “Immanuel,” which means “God with us.” The eternal Son of God went so far as to become one of us to give his life as a ransom for us – he dwelt among us and died on the cross to reconcile us to God. And anyone who turns to him in faith is reconciled to God. But even more than that, we are actually given his Spirit to dwell in us. The Holy Spirit comes to dwell in our hearts. And one day, at the culmination of redemptive history, it says in Revelation 21:3: *“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.’”*

Do you notice the pattern in all these things? Ever since Adam and Eve turned to sin and mankind strayed from God, he has been carrying out a plan of reconciliation by which he draws us back to himself and comes to dwell with us. God's desire is to dwell with us, not to be separate from us. He wants to be near

us. His desire is to dwell with his people, so that we will enjoy him, worship him, experience his glory and partake in his favor and blessing.

That's why he did what he did with the people of Israel, with the covenant, with the tabernacle, with the priestly ministry that we'll see next week. That's why he sent Jesus to be our Great High Priest to live among us and die in our place. That's why he poured out the Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts, and that's why one day in the new heavens and new earth he will make his dwelling with us.

As our hearts and minds try to grasp the wonder of these things, I hope it gives us a more complete understanding of God's heart toward us. Yes, God hates our sin and it angers him when we disobey, but his prevailing desire is to be near us and for us to be near him. Therefore let us be all the more eager to draw near to him. James 4:8 says, *"Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you."* And the way that we do that is to seek to live our lives in a way that is pleasing to him – to repent of sin and walk in obedience to him. There will be times where we know we've blown it and we feel like God doesn't want to have anything to do with us. But that's not true. God wants us to repent, turn back to him and draw near once again. Like the father in the Prodigal Son story, he is eager to welcome us back into his loving arms.