

God With Us

Exodus 25:1–31:18

This past weekend I had the privilege of chaperoning my son's sixth grade class on a field trip to Acadia National Park in northern Maine. It is truly one of the most beautiful places in New England, if not the country. The drive through Maine is pretty to begin with, but as you near the coast, you're increasingly captivated by the views. People are taking out phones and taking pictures or videos of the drive. And then at Acadia, whether it's a boat ride along the shore, or driving to the top of Cadillac Mountain, it's the same experience—you're overwhelmed by the beauty and majesty of what you see.

But what's interesting to notice is that the longer you're there, the more often you drive the same roads, the less amazed you become. All of a sudden, instead of staring out the window, students are ignoring the scenery. They're focused on what's going on inside the car. You stop taking pictures of everything—I've seen that kind of landscape a lot today already. What was extraordinary 36 hours ago feels rather ordinary and common today—no big deal.

We've all heard the phrase, "familiarity breeds contempt"? It's true. When something becomes a regular part of our lives—something amazing even—it begins to feel common and so often loses its specialness. No big deal. But to treat something truly extraordinary as common or ordinary is not merely to be neutral toward it; it is to profane it, to treat it with contempt. It is insulting to be bored or unimpressed with that which is truly amazing.

When you do that with the beauty of God's creation, that's sad. When you do that with the presence of God among his people, that's dangerous. But that's a risk we run every time we gather as the people of God in Jesus Christ. When God's people gather, God is there—*he is here!* His presence, by his Spirit, among his people. Not just in this place, but wherever Christians share life together as his church, God is with us in a special way. We are his temple. But because that's a regular part of the Christian life, it's easy to become unimpressed by the fact that the holy God of the universe shows up when we meet. To treat his presence as common, ordinary, no big deal. Which is not simply to be neutral; it is to profane it.

Our passage this morning seeks to cure us of that apathy in a big way. Seven chapters of instructions that emphasize the specialness and uniqueness of God's desire to dwell with his people, that he might speak to us, sanctify us, and satisfy us with his presence.

The importance of this section is evident immediately from the context in which it occurs. We read these detailed instructions about curtains and poles and lampstands and tables and think, this is the kind of stuff that makes people hit the eject button when trying to read through the Bible in

a year. What relevance does any of this have? But look at the end of ch. 24, and where this information comes from:

Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain.¹⁶ The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud.¹⁷ Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.¹⁸ Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights. The LORD said to Moses . . . (Exod. 24:15–25:1)

Chapters 25–31 are a record of what God said to Moses, while he was on Mount Sinai with him, in his presence for forty days and forty nights. That is one of the most unique events in the entire story of Scripture. I can't imagine God engaging in small talk during something like that. It's while Moses is on Mount Sinai with God that God gives him the two tablets of the Ten Commandments (31:18). But what dominates the conversation, what he spends his entire time speaking to Moses about, is his desire to dwell with his people, and the necessary conditions for that to happen. In fact, when the instruction narrative here is combined with the construction narrative in chs. 35–40, they take up a full third of the book of Exodus. God's desire to dwell with his people is a *big deal*. As he says in ch. 29:46, "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*." God didn't just save his people from a bad situation. He saved them because he wants to dwell with them. Which doesn't mean that God is now confining himself to this small space. God remains omnipresent—he is everywhere (cf. 1 Kgs. 8:27). He is simply choosing to make himself present in a special way with his people—which is amazing. The holy God of the universe wants to be with us.

So what does that look like for ancient Israel? That's what all of these instructions are about. What are the necessary conditions for a holy God to dwell with his redeemed people?

A Special Place

First, he needs a special place. Something sacred, unique, set apart from ordinary life. There is nothing common about God dwelling with a people, and so the place where he dwells needs to be set apart for that special purpose. Restricted from ordinary use.

It also needs to be able to serve its purpose—accommodating the God of heaven who is dwelling with his people. It should reflect his glory and majesty, and should be equipped to facilitate his ongoing presence.

And it needs to be movable. Whereas God appeared to Moses on Sinai earlier at the burning bush, and now in the giving of the covenant, Israel is not going to be staying at Sinai. God is giving them the land he promised to Abraham, so this special place needs to be able to go with them.

And so God instructs Moses to build a tabernacle—a special tent, with all the necessary furniture and instruments for his ongoing presence among his people. As he says in ch. 25:8, "And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst." The details for this special place are spelled out in chs. 25–27 and 30–31. We're not going to read all of that, but I want to give you a sense of it. The illustrations from the *ESV Study Bible* are really helpful for imagining the different components to Israel's tabernacle.

The first object he is told to construct is an **ark**, an ornate box (25:10-22; this is what Indiana Jones was after in his first movie). Within that ark he is to place the tablets of the testimony he'll receive from God up on the mountain—the law of God, a testimony of the stipulations for Israel's covenant with God. On top of the ark they were to place a cover, with two golden cherubim facing each other, wings outspread, forming a kind of throne for God. "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" (25:22). God makes his special presence known from atop the ark, with the law at his feet.



But notice what that lid is called—it's translated "mercy seat" or "atonement cover" in most of our Bibles. The reality is (as we've seen and will continue to see) that Israel cannot keep the law. How can a holy God remain in her midst? Overtop the law is *the place of mercy*. The cover of the ark, used to make atonement of Israel's sin once a year on the Day of Atonement (cf. Lev. 16).

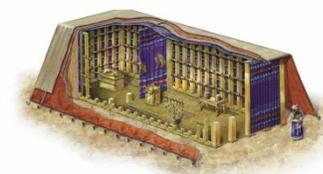


The second object is the **table** for the bread of the Presence (25:23-30), the bread being a picture of our dependence upon God—one loaf for each of the twelve tribes.¹

Followed by the **golden lampstand** (25:31-40), which gives light in the presence of the Lord (cf. 27:20-21).



Then there are instructions for the **tabernacle** itself in ch. 26—the curtains, the covering, the frames and bars, and most importantly, the veil that separates one part of the tabernacle from the rest, setting off what's called the Most Holy Place or the Holy of Holies, where the ark of God will reside.



Then comes the **bronze altar**, where sacrifices will be offered outside of the tent (27:1-8).



They are also to construct a **court** around the tabernacle (27:9-19).



Then in ch. 30 we find instructions for the **altar of incense**, which goes inside the tabernacle, across for the table for the bread, both outside the Holy of Holies (30:1-10). And in between the tabernacle and the bronze altar, there was a bronze basin for washing (30:17-21). And each of these elements were designed to be movable, with rings and poles for transporting them as Israel made their way through the wilderness toward Canaan.

¹ See Philip G. Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2005, 2015), 784-786.

More could be said about the designs and the details. For instance, the tabernacle seems to be patterned in part after God’s design in creation. There are echoes of Eden here—things like the cherubim guarding God’s presence, a tree-shaped lampstand, precious stones, and so on²—which makes sense when you remember that Eden itself was the first temple—the place of God’s special dwelling with his people, before sin entered the world. We looked at that last December in a short series on the temple throughout Scripture.³

But if there’s one impression we’re left with from these instructions, it’s that God’s presence with his people is anything but ordinary. It is special, holy, not to be taken lightly, or taken for granted. So special that all of these instructions and all of these implements are necessary for it to happen.

A Special Priesthood

But there’s a second necessary component for God to dwell with his redeemed people. He not only needs a special place, but a special priesthood. Because we’re not in Eden anymore. Israel is stained by sin and therefore unfit for God’s holy presence. They need advocates, intermediaries—a special office of servant set apart to facilitate God’s ongoing presence in his special place amid an unholy people. God appoints Moses’ brother Aaron and his sons to this office. That’s what we read about in chs. 28–29.



Chapter 28 focuses on the special clothing the priest must wear, clothing fit for the office and function of serving God. They are elaborate and ornate—“for glory and for beauty” (28:2, 40), because the God they serve is glorious and beautiful. And woven into this clothing are reminders of their office and function. On their shoulders and on the breastpiece, they bear the twelve names of the twelve tribes of Israel, “to bring them to regular remembrance before the LORD. And in the breastpiece of judgment you shall put the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be on Aaron's heart, when he goes in before the LORD. Thus Aaron shall bear the judgment of the people of Israel on his heart before the LORD regularly” (28:29-30). The priests represent God’s people, in all their guilt, as they come into his presence for atonement.

Similarly, they wear a headpiece that says “Holy to the LORD.” “It shall be on Aaron's forehead, and Aaron shall bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts. It shall regularly be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the LORD” (28:38). As intermediaries, they are able to take Israel’s offerings, stained by sin, and make them clean and acceptable to God.

But to be able to do that, the priests themselves need to be set apart and sanctified. They too are part of sinful Israel, part of the problem. So ch. 29 describes the ritual for consecrating and ordaining them for service in the tabernacle. An offering must be made for their sin—a burnt offering to bear God’s wrath, and two sin offerings to remove their guilt, with the blood of that

² See Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation: Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 263-278; and G.K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* (NSBT 17; Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 66-80.

³ See the series “[God With Us](#),” Westgate Church, December 2016.

offering applied to their ear, thumb, and toe—cleansing them that they might hear God and serve God whatever they do and wherever they go.

We don't read much here about the actual offerings these priests will make. We're given a brief glimpse at the end of ch. 29, but most of those kinds of instructions are found in Leviticus. The emphasis here is not on what we should do for God in his presence, but on what it takes for him to be able to dwell with us.

A Special Purpose

So why go to such extraordinary lengths, with such extraordinary detail? Because there's nothing ordinary about a holy God dwelling with his people. This is something unique and special. God chooses a special place and a special priesthood, because his presence has a *special purpose*. There is a reason for all of this—a reason we are at risk of missing out on when we take for granted the uniqueness of God dwelling with his people. And we see it at the end of ch. 29, this special purpose: the God who dwells with his people *speaks to them, sanctifies them, and satisfies them with his presence*.

Look again at Exodus 29:42-46. The priests are to make regular burnt offerings throughout their generations . . .

at the entrance of the tent of meeting before the LORD, where I will meet with you, *to speak to you there*.⁴³ There I will meet with the people of Israel, and it shall be *sanctified by my glory*.⁴⁴ I will *consecrate* the tent of meeting and the altar. Aaron also and his sons I will *consecrate* to serve me as priests.⁴⁵ I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God.⁴⁶ 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. I am the LORD their God.

The God who dwells with us *speaks* to us (29:42). He didn't save Israel from Egypt just to get them out of a tight spot. He saved them because he wants to dwell with them, and he dwells with them that he might speak to them and make himself known. And this is essential to the covenant relationship he wants to have with his people—what Pastor Bruce talked about last week. How will Israel know what their relationship is supposed to look like if God doesn't tell them? How will they even know the God they're serving? He meets with his people in order to speak to them.

Second, the God who dwells with us *sanctifies* us (29:43-44). He sets us apart for service. What makes the tabernacle and the altar and the priests unique is not the strength of the acacia wood or the gold that gilds the furniture, nor is it the thread-count in the curtains or the quality of linen in the clothing. It is the presence of God. His glory sanctifies the tabernacle where he dwells, consecrates the altar where he is worshipped and the priests who serve him there. He dwells with us to sanctify us—to set us apart for holy service to him. Ancient Israel was unique among all ancient nations; they alone served the true and living God who was in their midst.

Finally, the God who dwells with us *satisfies* us with his presence. The LORD doesn't just speak to Israel or sanctify them, he also satisfies them, such that because God is with them, they truly have all they will ever need. Look at the relational language of vv. 45-46. "I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God." Here's the deal: if the one true God of the universe promises to be *your* God, do you really need to go looking elsewhere? Is there anything anyone

else can do that he can't protect you from? Is there anything you need that he can't supply? Is there anything in this world that can anchor us, comfort us, stir us, or gladden our hearts more than being with God, in his presence?

This is what Asaph came to realize in Psalm 73. He knew God was good to Israel, but when he looked out on the world, it was the wicked who seemed to be having all the fun. He envied them, decided he had been wasting his time following God—*until* he went into the temple, the sanctuary of God, his presence—and there he discerned their end. He concluded, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. . . . for me it is good to be *near God*; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works" (Ps. 73:25-26, 28).

The LORD dwells with his people to speak to them, sanctify them, and satisfy them with his presence.

God With Us Today

Now of course that looks different for us today than it did for ancient Israel. Because Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's covenant, God does not attach his special presence on earth to a place but a person—the Son of God, who is with us by the Holy Spirit. As we looked at last December, Jesus is both the true temple and the Great High Priest, the Word who became flesh and *tabernacled* among us (Jn. 1:14), who fulfills what Exodus is talking about so completely that we no longer have a temple or priest. In fact, Jesus makes his church into a new temple—not the building, but the people (e.g. Eph. 2:19-22), and all of us priests to God (e.g. 1 Pet. 2:9-12). Whenever and wherever his people gather in his name, he is with us. So God's presence with his people looks very different today.

But the God who dwells with his people still speaks to us, sanctifies us, and satisfies us with his presence. And that's no less amazing today than it was for ancient Israel. But it's just as easy, if not easier, to take it for granted. We don't have a big, ornate, gilded structure that reminds us of the majesty of God, or that bars us from getting too close to his presence. In fact, the veil that once separated God's people from his presence in the Holy of Holies was torn in two when Jesus died on the cross. We even more access to God today through Jesus. As the author of Hebrews describes it:

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. (Heb. 10:19-22)

That's amazing. Absolutely mind-blowing that we have that kind of access to God, that he *wants* to dwell with us like this, and has done everything necessary in Jesus for it to happen. A closeness that ancient Israel could have never imagined.

But proximity and familiarity can easily breed contempt. Enjoying that kind of access day after day, week after week becomes common, unimpressive, no big deal. Another word for that: profane. When we neglect the holiness and specialness of God's presence among us, we're not just neutral; we profane it. That's not just sad, that's dangerous.

And so we need to ask ourselves: have we become too comfortable handling holy things? Do we treat God's presence casually, even worse, like play? The presence of God among his people is a treasure. And we treasure God's presence by listening when he speaks, serving him faithfully, and being satisfied in him through Jesus our Great High Priest.

The God who dwells with his people still speaks to us today. That's why we prioritize the preaching of God's Word whenever we gather together. The God who is with us speaks, and every time this book is open his voice can be heard. When you're invited to someone's house for dinner, you don't spend the time staring at your phone when your host is talking to you. At least you shouldn't. How much more when God invites us into his presence to speak to us? We treasure his presence by listening.

The God who dwells with his people still sanctifies them today. He sets us apart for service. As Hebrews 10:14 puts it, "For by a single offering [Jesus] has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." Whatever our sin, whatever our failures or shortcomings, Jesus not only forgives us of our sin; he not only takes our offerings—our words and our works—and cleanses them by his blood, making them acceptable to God; he also cleanses *us* and sets us apart for his service. His grace teaches us to say no to sin and yes to holiness, and his Spirit who lives in us gives us the strength to actually do it (cf. Tit. 2:11-14; Rom. 8:1-17). We treasure God's presence by repenting of sin and serving him in joyful obedience, relying on his Spirit.

And the God who dwells with his people still satisfies us today with his presence. "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you" (Ps. 73:25). Is there anything better in all creation than being near to God?

This is where the whole story of Scripture is going—the unmediated presence of God in the new heavens and new earth. Listen to the echoes of Exodus 29 in Revelation 21, John's vision of the new creation to come when Christ returns: "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" (Rev. 21:3). "I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God" (Exod. 29:45). This is our hope—not what God can do for us or give us, but *God himself* is our hope, our reward. His unmediated presence forever.

And this is true for us, in part and in advance, through Jesus. Because God is with us now by the Spirit, and because we will be with him in eternity, what can this world offer that's better? What can this world do to us that God can't protect us from? What can it give us that we don't already have, or won't one day have eternally, and much better, in Christ? Is there anything you need that he can't supply? Is there anything in this world that can anchor us, or comfort us, or stir us, or gladden our hearts more than being with God, in his presence?

The God who dwells with his people speaks to us, sanctifies us, and satisfies us in his presence. And nothing, *nothing* can compare or take that away. Not for those who are in Jesus.