

Tent Camping with God

Exodus 24:12-31:18

In Exodus we have moved from Egypt to Sinai, the Mountain of God (cf. 3:1,12 and 24:13), but we must not forget where the story began, Eden. In man's exile from Eden, mankind lost the capacity think of God rightly.

Unless God moves in and redeems us, our situation is dire. This is what the movement from Egypt to Sinai is about. We could say this another way. The movement from Egypt to Sinai is a movement from a world that did not know God to a world in which God decisively made himself known.

In this Tabernacle text, God's purpose of making himself known in the exodus event (chs. 1-15) is tied to his purpose of dwelling among his people (25:8), a kind of restored Eden. In 6:6, the LORD said to Moses, *Say therefore to the people of Israel, "I am the LORD and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burden of the Egyptians."*

Then in 29:45-46, the LORD said, *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. I am the LORD their God.*

The LORD has not only made himself known, but now he proposes to dwell right smackdab in the middle of the Israelite camp! The holy, glory presence of the LORD among his sinful people, however, creates a problem much bigger than Pharaoh. The tabernacle resolves the issue of the how the glory presence of the LORD would dwell in the Israelite camp. 25:8 says, *Let them build me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst.* The presence of God in the midst of his people is the essence of the covenant (29:45-46).

The tabernacle helps us understand how God can be present among sinful people.

1. The Tabernacle helps us understand the holiness of God

The root word for *holy* is used at least 52 times in chapters 25-31. I would say this is a profoundly important concept in this text. The root word for

dwell is used at least 21 times (translated *dwell*, *sakan*, or *tabernacle*, *misakan*). God was not only committed to dwell with them, he would, also, meet with the Sons of Israel in the tent of meeting, the holy of holies. *There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat* (25:22; 29:43; 30:6,36).

We have then the Everest of holiness absolutely committed to dwelling among and meeting with the Sons of Israel. This is the God whose glory presence is so holy that he hides it in a cloud because the eyes of sinful men may not see him and live to tell about it (24:15-18). This text puts before us the God who is both holy and present and a people who are sinful.

The word *sanctuary* in 25:8 is the same root as the word *holy*. The tabernacle was to be a holy space just like the ground around the burning bush in Exodus 3 was holy. How is it that the ground around the burning bush was holy and the tabernacle was to be *holy ground*? We have the answer in the text. These were made holy by the presence of God. Speaking of the tent of meeting, God said, *There I will meet with the people of Israel, and it shall be sanctified* (made holy) *by my glory* (29:43). Everything related to the Tabernacle is holy, sanctified by God's presence and by the fact that he laid claim to that space and the things related to it.

In the tabernacle, we learn that God is holy and all other holiness is strictly derived from him and in relation to him. God alone is holy. In his essence or essential nature, God is holy. He defines what holiness is. When we say God is holy, we are highlighting his otherness (he is not like us).ⁱ God is a unique being, in a class all his own, incomprehensible except by self-revelation and unapproachable except by invitation. Holiness is not determined by what things are in themselves, but by what God makes of them in the economy of grace.

There are gradations of holiness seen in the layout of the tabernacle. The tabernacle had 3 courts, the outer court, the holy place, and the most holy place. The closer we move to the holy of holies the holier things become.ⁱⁱ

Things related to the tabernacle are said to be holy: the ark of the testimony, the mercy seat, the table, the bread on the table, the lampstand, the bronze altar, the sacrifices on the altar (29:37b), the priestly garments (28:2), the anointing oil and whatever it touched (30:25, 29), and the incense (30:36,37). Things that God has laid claim on to be exclusively

devoted to him are said to be holy. This helps us understand holiness. It is not first and primarily ethical and moral.

People in the service to the tabernacle are said to be holy. Aaron and his sons were made holy to serve (29:44). Their holiness was not first and primarily ethical and moral, but rather in the fact that God laid claim on them, and they were devoted to his service.

God is holy and everything related to the tabernacle derived holiness from Him because it was claimed by and devoted to him.

God in his essence is holy. We are holy first and foremost because God makes us holy. God gave Israel the Sabbath as a sign that it was he who sanctified them (31:13-14). God laid claim on Israel and that made them holy. What it meant to be a *holy nation*, however, would be worked out day by day in the services of the tabernacle. They were made holy first and then that holiness was to be lived in a daily turning from sin and trusting God.

Do you see that holiness is first a marvelous gift of God's grace? Everyone in Christ is holy because he or she is in Christ. Before we can speak of being put to holy use, we must see that our sanctification is first of all God's act of setting us apart from the world for himself. Our sanctification lies not in our claim on God but on God's gracious claim on us. Our sanctification day by day is the call to become in daily life what we already are in Christ. We are holy (definitive sanctification), therefore we are to be holy (progressive sanctification).ⁱⁱⁱ

What we have been made by virtue of our relationship to God is to be lived out in our daily lives. We are to live consistent with who we are, people wholly devoted to God.

The tabernacle helps us understand holiness and resolves the tension of how God can be holy and dwell among his people.

2. The tabernacle echoes Sinai, pointing to life with God in a fallen world.

The tabernacle perpetuates the Sinai experience of the presence of God among his people. It is the architectural embodiment of the mountain of God, the transfer of God's presence from Sinai to the tabernacle.^{iv}

The purpose of building the sanctuary is that the LORD may dwell, no longer outside the camp, but in the center of the camp (33:7-11). To help us see how the tabernacle perpetuates the Sinai experience, chapters 25-40 are bookend by the glory presence dwelling in the one case on the mountain (24:15) and in the other case dwelling in the completed tabernacle (40:34-35). The LORD not only descended on the mountain, he is moving into the camp.

The tabernacle was to be constructed according to the pattern God showed Moses on the mountain (25:9,40; 26:30; 27:8). The mountain was divided into 3 zones. The foot of the mountain marked the boundary for the people and corresponds to the outer court of the tabernacle where the bronze altar was (24:4-5). The second zone was up on the mountain a ways but not at the top. This was where Aaron, his sons, and elders were allowed to go and eat a meal in the presence of God. This corresponds to the holy place where the bread of presence and lampstand were. Only the priests could enter there and eat in the presence of God (24:9-11). The final zone is where the glory presence of God dwelled. Only Moses was allowed to go up into the cloud (24:2a,12,15,18). This corresponds to the most holy place where only the high priest would enter and then only once a year.

Yet another bookend binds 24:12 and 31:18. God called Moses on the mountain to give him the tablets of stone (24:12), and in 31:18 when God finished speaking he gave Moses the tablets.^v Between calling Moses on the mountain to give him the tablets and actually giving him the tablets, the LORD gave Moses the instruction for the tabernacle. The law tablets were to be placed in the ark and covered by the mercy seat (25:16,21-22).

God in kindness gave the tabernacle and put the law covenant in the ark and covered it with the mercy seat. His throne sits on the foundation of mercy. When we read the word mercy seat, we are not to think of chair. The ark and mercy seat are not God's throne, but the footstool of his throne. Perhaps, rather than *mercy seat*, the seat of mercy communicates the idea. It is the place from which mercy is dispensed. A literal translation is *atonement cover*. It is the place where atonement is made for sins. It is the place where mercy triumphs over judgment (Jas. 2:3).

One other way we see the Sinai experience of God's presence perpetuated in the tabernacle is in the placement of the altar of incense (30:1-10). The glory presence has from its first appearance been shrouded in a cloud. In 24:15, the cloud ('anan) covered the mountain, and in verse 17 the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire. So the cloud shrouds the glory

presence of God. The golden altar of incense was placed before the veil that separated the holy place and the holy of holies (30:6). Both the veil and the smoke of the incense serve to conceal the most holy place where the glory presence dwells. The burning incense provided a perpetual cloud before the most holy place. We know from Leviticus that on the Day of Atonement, the only day Aaron could enter the most holy place, he had to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar and two handfuls of incense to create a *cloud ('anan) of incense* to cover the atonement cover, the place where God appeared, *so he does not die* (Lev. 16:12-13).

So the tabernacle echoes Sinai and shows how holy God may dwell with sinful people.

3. The tabernacle echoes Eden and points to the new creation

These final 16 chapters of Exodus with the instruction for the building the Tabernacle (chs. 25-31), the golden calf (chs. 32-34), and then covenant renewal (chs. 35-40), echo in some ways the storyline of the Bible—creation, fall, and redemption. We can see in Israel's rebellion that they are not going to be an obedient son, so the story of the Tabernacle moves us along in the story of God's revelation of himself for the redemption of man.

The tabernacle points back to Eden, but the echoes of Eden are not so much Eden before the fall but after the fall. So I want to see if we can see how the tabernacle echoes creation^{vi} and anticipates the new creation.

The tabernacle reflects Eden after the fall. Adam was expelled from the garden east of Eden and cherubim were placed at the entrance to the guard the way to the tree of life (Gen. 3:24). Likewise the tabernacle had one entrance on the east side (27:13-16). Looking in from the east to the west, you would see the bronze altar, behind it the basin, and beyond that a tent where you could not go. In that tent, the holy place, is the lamp and the bread, a place of unencumbered fellowship with God. In that tent, beyond the incense altar was a veil with cherubim sown into it, the boundary of the most holy place (26:31). Beyond that veil was the ark and on that ark was a lid, the mercy seat, on top of which golden cherubim stood spreading their wings. There God's glory presence dwelled. The only way to live was to get beyond the veil, but death is certain to any who try, but one.

Yet the tabernacle, also, testifies to new creation, God's intention to dwell with his people once again.

The parallels between the tabernacle and Eden show that the tabernacle is a step forward in story of redemption, anticipating the completion of redemption and God dwelling with his people. In the exile, God abandoned the temple. We don't see his tabernacle-ing presence again until Jesus. Finally centuries after the glory presence had withdrawn, we hear the gospel writer say of Jesus: *And the Word became flesh and dwelt (skeno) among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth* (Jn. 1:14). One day the tabernacle will find its ultimate fulfillment in the new heavens and the earth. A voice from the throne will say, *Behold, the dwelling place (skene) 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).

4. The tabernacle teaches us the need for a mediator as our representative before God

The tabernacle was a pattern of a heavenly reality, the LORD's rule over the universe. The tabernacle joins the mission of God in creation. Adam was to extend Eden to encompass the earth. His priestly function was to *work and keep* the garden (Gen. 2:15). Adam failed in his priestly mission. The mission in which Adam failed was passed on to the tabernacle. The task of the priests is described using the exact words to describe Adam's task (Num. 18:5-6). The priests were to *guard* the sanctuary and *serve* its purpose in the world. The stated purpose of the tabernacle is the LORD's desire to dwell among his people (25:8). The priests would bring the people to God. But how?

So right in the middle of this text giving instructions for the tabernacle is the instruction for making the priestly garments and the consecration of priests (chapters 28-29). High priestly garments for Aaron and the coats, sashes, and caps for Aaron's sons were for *beauty and honor* (28:2,40). The high priestly outer garments were made of the same materials as the curtains for the most holy place (26:31 cf. 28:6). Their garments represented the ideal priesthood, which Aaron and his sons could never be.

When Aaron dressed in the high priestly garments, he must have been a sight to see. He wore an ephod or a waistcoat made of gold, blue, purple, and scarlet yarns (28:6). On his shoulders were two stones with the Names of the sons of Israel inscribed on them (28:8). Aaron would bear their names before the LORD on his two shoulders for remembrance

(28:12). This is how the sons of Israel were brought into the presence of God.

Affixed to the ephod was the breastpiece of judgment (28:15, 25,28). On the front of the breastpiece were four rows of 3 stones, each with a name of a son of Israel on it (28:21). Aaron would bear the names of the Sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart when he would go into the holy place to bring them to regular remembrance before the LORD (28:29). Also Urim and Thummim were in the breastpiece of judgment for Aaron to bear on his heart before the LORD.

What does it mean that Aaron would bear judgment (28:30b *nasa mispat*)? This phrase does not occur elsewhere. Of this we can be sure, the way Israel appeared before God was in the person of the high priest. We know that Aaron is not bearing judgment in the sense of condemnation but of declaration or decision. I think the idea is that Aaron represents the people before God, and by means of the service of the tabernacle, God decision about his people is acceptance. They are his special treasure.

Further Aaron is to wear a turban. Affixed to the front of the turban is a plate of gold engraved with, *Holy to the LORD* (28:36). Aaron have wear that on his forehead bearing the guilt from the holy things consecrated as gifts from the people of Israel. In other words, the holiness of the high priest counts for the lack of the people. Everything less than sufficient is laid on the priest and made his responsibility. He is able to bear it.

We have a high priest who has gone into the most holy place bearing our names on his heart, the weight of our need on his shoulders, and has covered every deficiency of ours. So completely did he represent us before the throne that the veil has been removed. So perfect his priesthood that we now have access to the most holy place (Heb. 4:16).

Dear friend, you can see in the tabernacle that you may not approach God on your own terms but only on his terms. God is not less holy now than he was then.

ⁱ Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology*, 311-313.

ⁱⁱ The thread, cloth, workmanship (woven—oreg, embroidered--roqem, skillfully worked--hoseb), priestly garments and metals (bronze, silver, gold) all increase in value and excellence as we move from the courtyard to the holy of holies (eg. 26:31-37; 28:1-48).

ⁱⁱⁱ Horton.

^{iv} L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the LORD?* 96.

^v As God gave the law on Sinai, he would continue to command Israel from the mercy seat (25:22). We have 3 important verses that indicate the tabernacle is the perpetuation of Sinai: 24:12; 31:18; 25:22.

^{vi} There are many creation themes in Exodus. The book opened with by alluding to the creation blessing operative in Israel. In 1:7 *The people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled (teeming) with them* (cf. 1:20). In 4:23, the LORD said, *Israel is my firstborn son*. Collective Israel then has the role of a new Adam. The covenant at Sinai is the creative word spoken by God that made Israel his people.

A second echo of creation in the 6 plus 1 pattern seen in this section of text.^{vi} In 24:15-16, God called Moses up the mountain and the glory of the LORD dwelt on the mountain for 6 days, and on the seventh day, God called to Moses from the cloud. It is easy enough to see Moses in the glory presence of God on the seventh day as Adam was in the garden of Eden. Again as in the creation account, Exodus 25-31 is made up of 7 divine speeches. In the creation account, 7 times God speaks, *And God said* (Gen. 1:3,6,9,14,20,24,26). 7 times we hear the refrain, *And it was so* (Gen. 1:3,7,9,11,15,24,30). The creation account culminates in the 7th day rest. Echoing that 7 times in the tabernacle account, we read, *The LORD said to Moses* (Ex. 25:1; 30:11,17,22,34; 31:1,12). After the tabernacle is build, we hear the refrain 7 times, *As the LORD had commanded Moses* (Ex. 40:19, 21,23,25,27,29, 32). As the creation culminates in the 7th day, the instructions for building the tabernacle culminate with instructions to keep the Sabbath (31:12-17). Sabbath keeping is tied to God's creating activity (31:17).