

## The Bible's Big Picture

Caleb Nelson | Harvest Reformed Presbyterian Church | Spring 2017

### Potential Outlines: Biblical Theology in 10 Key Texts

- I. The Bible's Thesis Statement: The Woman's Seed Conquers the Serpent, Genesis 3:15
- II. The City Against God: Babylon I, Genesis 11:1-9
- III. God's Covenant I: Abraham's Call, Genesis 12:1-4
- IV. God's Covenant II: Abraham's Belief in the Coming Seed, Genesis 15:1-6
- V. God Brings His People to Dwell with Him, Exodus 15:1-18
- VI. God Tabernacles with Israel I, Exodus 40
- VII. The City Against God's People: Babylon II, 2 Chronicles 36:13-23
- VIII. God Tabernacles with Israel II, John 1:14
- IX. God Against the City: Babylon III, Revelation 18
- X. God Tabernacles with Israel III, Revelation 21

### Sermon 9, God Tabernacles with Israel I, Exodus 40

Sing Psalm 24 and Psalm 139

**Proposition:** God comes to live with His redeemed people.

- I. God's Instructions: Get the Tent Move-In Ready, vv. 1-16
- II. Moses' Obedience: He Gets the Tent Move-In Ready, vv. 17-33
- III. God Moves In, v. 34
- IV. God's Overwhelming Presence, v. 35
- V. God's Guiding Presence, vv. 36-38

#### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we continue to skate across the surface of the Biblical history, looking at key texts that help to see the Bible's big picture. So far, we've seen that the Bible narrates the conflict between the woman's seed and the serpent's seed. We've seen the woman's seed narrowed down into the line of Abraham, and we've seen God's promise to give Abraham a numerous seed and to justify by faith those who trust in His promise of a numerous seed.

We saw last week how God began to fulfill that promise. First, He preserved Abraham's descendants and increased them to almost 2 million living in the land of Egypt. Second, He brought those millions out of slavery across the Red Sea, thus showing that in the conflict

between the woman's seed and the serpent's seed, He is prepared to fight on behalf of the woman's seed and conquer the seed of the serpent.

We look today at the continuing narrative of those whom God brought out of Egypt. Here, exactly one year after they left Egypt, we catch up to them as the most momentous event in their national life takes place. This chapter is the narrative of how God moved in among His people — how He came to dwell with them, in a portable sanctuary. What I want you to see is how God continues to keep His promises by moving in with His people and then blessing and guiding them with His presence. He moved in with them--and He moves in with us too. The truth this passage teaches is profound: God dwells with His redeemed people!

### **I. God's Instructions: Get the Tent Move-In Ready, vv. 1-16**

The chapter covers a lot of material that you will have already seen in detail as you're reading through Exodus. Every part of the Tabernacle, from frame to shell to furniture, has been described already. In fact, it's been described twice. First we have God's instructions on how to make it, and then we have another complete description when we are told that Israel made it.

Why? Why does Moses insist on all these things in such detail, at such length? Fundamentally, because it's important. God coming to dwell with His people is so momentous that every aspect of His home has to be described twice, right down to the furniture.

You know what's comparatively unimportant? The name of the Pharaoh who was ruling Egypt when these events happened. The year that they took place. The salary Moses earned as prophet, general, and judge over the entire nation of Israel. These questions aren't addressed in the text. We might really enjoy knowing them. But what's significant to the narrator, and therefore ultimately to God Himself, is the truth that God comes to live with His redeemed people. This truth was externalized and made obvious and visible by all kinds of symbolic acts and entities in ancient Israel. But at the center of it all is this tent for worship, this place for God to dwell.

You see, when you keep reading, you'll find that God told Moses how to set up the camp. This tabernacle was literally to be erected in the center, with three of the 12 tribes camping on each side of it. Why was that important? Because it was a way of saying, "God is with us." In fact, it was all God's idea. It was His way of saying, "I am with you."

You see, the point of the Exodus was not simply to save a particular group from the genocidal oppression of another. That's important, of course. But far more important is God's goal of saving a particular group — the woman's seed — and bringing them to live with Him and worship Him. God describes this reality with a couple of different terms: "treasured possession" and "my people." God describes these people as a special possession, as the apple of His eye, as that thing He loves more than everything else.

My sister has a particular red blanket. She's had it since she was a little baby. She slept with it every night through her childhood, through her teens, and on into her wedded life. She's married now, and has a son — and she still sleeps with her red blanky. Brothers and sisters, that's a treasured possession. That's something absolutely irreplaceable. And that's how God feels

about His people. You can describe them however you want: the woman's seed; Abraham's seed; the line of promise; true Jews; true Christians; Israel; the church; a great multitude which no man can number. Regardless of the name you pick, know that God values this group. He honored them by coming to live with them.

So as you read the Bible, look for this theme of God dwelling with His people. Look for His promise that we will dwell in His house forever. Look for evidence of how He wants to live with us.

Is that amazing to you? Are you stunned that the God of the universe wants to be near *you*? That He moved Heaven and Earth to do just that? That He spends 15 chapters in this book of Exodus describing the furniture of His tent because it's so important to Him that He gets to live on earth, in a tent, like one of us? Because He does.

So God tells Moses to get the tent move-in ready. He describes the furniture from holiest to least holy, from the inner sanctuary to the outer court.

First Moses was to set up the tabernacle itself. Then He was to bring in the Ark of the Covenant — the symbol of God's throne, and place on which propitiatory blood was sprinkled annually. This Ark, with its two cherubim craning their necks to get a glimpse of the wrath-removing blood, symbolizes the coming sacrifice of Christ's blood. That blood saved His people, and it is the wonder of the angels. The angels who sat, one at the head and one at the feet of Jesus' body in the tomb signify the same truth: the whole cosmos wonders at the amazing glories of redemption through the shedding of the Mediator's blood!

The next holiest item was the table, prepared before God Himself and symbolizing (with its twelve loaves) the twelve tribes of Israel basking in the light of God's presence. The lampstand shows that Christ is the light of the world, and that His people are to remain in His presence, enjoying the light of His face. The incense altar shows our prayers ascending, and the screen shows just how holy this place was.

Out front was the altar of burnt offering — because you can't enter God's presence at all unless something dies in your place. Then comes the laver — you have to be clean to go into God's presence. Then came the privacy fence around the whole enclosure. God lives with His people, but He doesn't live in a glass house. He is there, but He is private. Only those who come through the proper channels can see Him.

Moses then had to anoint everything with oil and consecrate it to God's service. He had to prepare his brother and his nephew to be priests, because there is no way into to God's presence except through priestly activities. You cannot just waltz into His presence; you need a priest who will make it possible for you to enter.

Notice the final word here in this first section: Moses did exactly as God commanded Him. In fact, that statement occurs 7 times, plus 10 times in the previous chapter. Clearly, even as we move into the next section, we are primed to hear that Moses obeyed perfectly.

## **II. Moses' Obedience: He Gets the Tent Move-In Ready, vv. 17-33**

The text now tells us what Moses did. Sure enough, the tabernacle was erected one year to the day after the exodus. The exodus was a new beginning, and this is the completion of that new beginning. God brought His people out of Egypt for the purpose of dwelling with them, and here, now, finally, His house is ready. Moses builds the tent; he loads the Ten Commandments into the Ark of the Covenant and places them in right in the center of the Holy of Holies.

Just stop there for a second. This is the core of Biblical religion. Right at the heart of everything God wants us to know about Himself is that He has a law, a moral code, a way we ought to behave — and yet that law is covered over and kept beneath the Atonement Lid or Mercy Seat. God's law is at the heart of the Christian faith. No question. But equally at the heart of the Christian faith, and standing over the law, is the truth that access to God's presence is through the shedding of blood. Brothers and sisters, do you see it? Keeping the law is important. But even more important is the access into God's presence that only Christ's mediatorial blood can purchase. It's not the Ten Commandments at which the angels stare in wonder. It's the blood shed for many for the forgiveness of sins against those Ten Commandments.

This is the heart of ministry, of parenting, and of Christian living in general. You must first of all recognize that God forgives sins through the shed blood of His Son — but you must equally realize that keeping the commandments is very important to God. In fact, it's so important that His own Son died for it. So remember that. The Ten Commandments aren't tucked away in some side chamber. But neither is the atoning blood. God's demands, and God's way of meeting those demands, are both right at the heart of Israel's faith.

Other shrines and temples in the Ancient Near East had an image of the deity inside, at the heart of the shrine. Not Israel. They had a gold-plated wooden box. In that box were the Ten Commandments — words. Demands. Stipulations. But on that box was an atonement lid, a symbol of the truth that through the shedding of blood God forgives sins. Amazing!

Notice how the text moves through the instructions one by one and checks each box: Moses did just as the LORD had commanded Him. In fact, as I mentioned, the text repeats this refrain 7 times — the number of perfection. Moses perfectly obeyed. What was the result?

## **III. God Moves In, v. 34**

God moved in! The glory cloud moved off Mount Sinai and came to rest on the Tabernacle. “Whenever God's work is done in God's way for God's glory the brilliant presence of His Majesty is almost a given.”<sup>1</sup>

This is what the entire Exodus was about. Remember how God originally told Pharaoh, “Let my people go, that they may serve me”? God wanted His people to come out of slavery so that they could worship Him. Or think of what we heard last Sunday, how Moses and the Israelites sang about God guiding the people to His holy habitation. That's exactly what He did!

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<sup>1</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 617.

God's presence in the Tabernacle is not the ultimate way He would be present with His people. But it is still a massively important moment in redemptive history.

Think back with me to Genesis 3. Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, and were banished from the Garden, expelled from the presence of God. The rest of Genesis and Exodus are driven by this question: *how can sinful humanity get back into God's presence?* We were made to dwell with Him; we are not complete without Him. But we are born separated from Him, cast out of His presence because our sinfulness makes us unfit to be with Him. What can we do? Nothing. But God in His mercy comes to us with forgiveness, cleansing us and making His dwelling among us!

You see, non-biblical religion is typified by the Tower of Babylon. It says, "I will ascend into Heaven; I will be like the Most High." Every non-Christian religion is about working your way up to Heaven, or Nirvana, or Enlightenment, or Paradise, or whatever you want to call it. But Christianity says the opposite. It says that we cannot climb up into God's presence, but that *God has come down to us*.

I see two major applications here. First, do you have a desire to be with God, basking in His presence? And second, do you try to work your way into that presence (and make the people around you work their way into your favor too), or do you accept God's coming down to bless you with His own presence?

Brothers and sisters, these two questions get at the heart of what this book of Exodus is telling us. God heard His people's cries, and He came to deliver them. He led them out of Egypt, He brought them to Sinai, and He gave them the instructions on how to build the Tabernacle. They responded; they built the Tabernacle. At that point, as our text says, God moved in. He came to live literally in the middle of their camp. But they still had a choice to seek Him, or not. They could pursue a deeper relationship with this God, or they could choose to more or less ignore Him.

The same is true today. The New Testament tells us that God still dwells among us, and that Jesus Christ is present in the midst of His gathered people. That's what all the "temple" references in the NT mean. When we are told that we are the Temple of the living God, that means that we are the place where He dwells on Earth. And so, if you care about being in God's presence, you will want to be in church. Yes, right here, right now, sitting in a pew listening to a sermon, you are in the presence of God more fully than you can be anywhere else. God has not promised to be present as you chase a deer through the mountains, or as you pursue prize fish in your boat on the lake. But He has promised to be present right here, right now, in the gathered assembly of His people.

Let me put it bluntly. If you think being in God's presence is important, then you will make every effort to come to church.

Let me just remind you that the theme of the Pentateuch, of the Old Testament, and of the entire Bible is *coming to dwell in God's presence*. We'll see that again in the weeks to come. God's glory moving into the Tabernacle was simply a foretaste of the depth and power of

the Incarnation, which in turn was simply a preview of the reality that God will dwell with His people perfectly and forever in Heaven.

If you don't care about being in God's presence, then you don't care about what God cares about. Your desires aren't aligned with His. If other things are more important to you than corporate worship, then your priorities aren't God's priorities.

Secondly, if you are trying to work your way into God's presence, then you are misguided. Church isn't for people who are good enough. It's for people with whom God chooses to dwell. God first moves into your neighborhood, not vice-versa. Yes, the Israelites needed to respond and build the Tabernacle and attend worship at the Tabernacle. But the whole existence of a Tabernacle was God's idea, and it was only His presence that made the whole thing worth something. God comes to us. He comes to you. And when He does, He puts at the center the truth of the Mercy Seat — the truth that the shed blood of a perfect sacrifice, and not the broken law, is what God sees when He looks at you.

If you have not embraced Christ's sacrifice on your behalf, I beg you to do so. His death is available — so avail yourself of it. Trust Him. Say,

Lord Jesus, I know that you died for sinners. I know that your blood is the propitiation that "activates" the mercy seat. Lord Jesus, wash me with that blood. Bring me to dwell in your presence forever. I trust you, Lord Jesus. I know you've promised to save everyone who calls on you, and I'm calling on you now. Save me, please, not because I am worthy (I'm not) but because you are a God of salvation. You saved Israel from Egypt. Please save me from my sin. Please! Amen.

And do you know what? When you ask, He will answer. He will hear. And He will forgive and save.

#### **IV. God's Overwhelming Presence, v. 35**

But the book doesn't end with God moving into the Tabernacle. It has four more verses. In fact, the next verse should just about stop our hearts. Everything has been building and building (literally!) toward the climactic moment when God comes to dwell with His people — yet when His presence finally arrives, no one can enter it! God has moved in, but He isn't receiving visitors. Not even Moses, who entered God's presence on Sinai, is able to enter the Tabernacle.

It's almost as though the ultimate tragedy has occurred. God has come to dwell with His people at last, and they aren't able to get in to see Him! It's a little bit like this. Go back mentally to your wedding night. You've left the reception, you've picked most of the rice out of your hair and clothes, and you've checked into the B&B. You are really excited about the prospect of doing you-know-what with your spouse, but the instant you get into the room she dashes into the bathroom and locks the door. Then, in a very decided tone of voice, she informs you, "I'll be spending the night in here. I just am not interested in doing anything with you. Have a nice night."

What? You might very well ask. You might be very angry. But that's that. You're married, you're in the honeymoon chamber, and the bride is not interested in letting you into her presence.

That, my friends, is roughly how Moses felt when the long-awaited presence of God filled the Tabernacle and excluded him. The whole point of this Tabernacle is that it was to be a place where Israel could meet with God! That's why it's called "the tent of meeting." It wasn't a place for meeting with your friends, or your fellow-worshippers. It was a place for meeting with God — and God was there, but He wasn't interested in meeting!

This narrative crisis remains unresolved within the confines of the book of Exodus. Only by reading on can we discover what happened. What happened is that God called Moses from the door of the Tabernacle and gave him 9 chapters of instructions on how to properly offer sacrifice and consecrate a priesthood. Only then can someone actually enter the Tabernacle and meet with God.

You see, the reason Moses wasn't allowed to enter the Tabernacle is very simple. He couldn't come in because he had to learn that only through a proper sacrifice made by a properly ordained priest is access to God even possible. That was the lesson that the Babel-builders needed to learn. They wanted access to God without priesthood or sacrifice. They were scattered, because it's not possible. And, of course, today we know that Jesus Christ, the great and properly ordained High Priest, offered Himself as a properly prepared sacrifice in order to open the way into God's presence for us. And thus, for you to miss and neglect worship is effectively to say that Christ's sacrifice doesn't mean a whole lot to you. Christ died to make a way into God's presence for you, and you choose not to use that way because you have more important things to do.

Christ is our sacrifice. Through Him we both, Jews and Gentiles, have access by one Spirit to the Father (Eph. 2:18)! Do you appreciate this privilege? Do you avail yourself of that access to the Father which we have through Christ's sacrifice and the Spirit's presence?

#### **V. God's Guiding Presence, vv. 36-38**

Well, the book of Exodus ends with a preview of the next three books. Moses describes for us God's guiding presence. He was with Israel and He remained with Israel. Their wilderness travels were the result of His guidance, not of their own desires. They could see God's presence pulsing above the Tabernacle 24/7. He was with them through all their journeys.

So while God's special presence is in the Tabernacle, is in the Temple, is in corporate worship, His guiding presence is with His people wherever they go. He has promised to be with us always, to the very end of the age. He has promised to never leave us or forsake us.

Do you believe that God dwells with His people? Do you believe that God guides His people? If you do, you will seek to be present in worship, to bask in His presence. You will seek Him and His guiding wisdom in prayer, and you will follow where He leads. Brothers and sisters, God lives with His redeemed people. So live at all times as though you're in His presence. You are, because Immanuel. *Our God is with us.* Amen.