

THE ETERNAL GOD IN THE MIDST OF HIS PEOPLE
Exodus 25:8-9

INTRODUCTION:

The God of Israel is the God who dwelt in the tabernacle in the midst of His people. The God of Israel is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the God who dwells in the church. The God who dwells in the church through the Holy Spirit is the same God who dwells in the life of each individual believer through the Holy Spirit. So there is a direct connection between the tabernacle in the wilderness and the Christian life that we live day by day.

That God considered the tabernacle to be a thing of great importance for His people is evident. He gave more space to presenting the plans for the tabernacle and its significance than to any other one item in the Old Testament. God gave us only two chapters on the creation of the universe, but He included thirty-seven chapters with reference to the tabernacle and its significance. This is a staggering amount of Holy Scripture to be given to the construction of a holy tent that stood in the midst of the people of Israel.

There are two words that we need to understand as we seek to understand the nature of the tabernacle. The first of these words is "sanctuary." God instructed Moses, "Then have them make a sanctuary for me and I will dwell among them." The root meaning of the word sanctuary is a holy place. God was instructing Moses that the people were to build for Him a holy place where He could live in the midst of His people. In the tabernacle

itself, the sanctuary was actually known as the Holy of Holies. It was an enclosed cubicle into which the high priest could only go once a year. It measured ten cubits in any direction, or about fifteen feet. No other Israelite was ever privileged to walk into the sanctuary.

The second word that we need to understand is the word "tabernacle." Moses was instructed: "Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you." The word tabernacle means essentially a tent. However, this particular word in the singular is almost always used of the tent in which God dwelled. It was a tent that was constructed for habitation. In this case, it was constructed for the habitation of God. Actually the tabernacle was the tent in which the sanctuary was built.

Over the weeks to come, I want us to look at the significance and the message that was in the tabernacle itself. We will see that each piece of furniture in the tabernacle was there for a specific purpose. It was there to help us understand the nature and the work of our Savior. It was there to help us learn important lessons about our worship of God and our walk with God. We will take one piece of furniture a week for our consideration over the next several weeks. However, tonight we are looking at the tabernacle from a broad perspective. Why did God ask the people to construct such a tent? What lessons can we learn from the tent itself as it stood in the midst of the people of Israel?

I. GOD REVEALS HIS DESIRE TO DWELL IN THE MIDST OF HIS PEOPLE.

This Word of instruction from Moses reveals the heart of God. It is the eternal God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Moses, who gives this word of instruction about the construction of the tabernacle. It is His desire to have a place in the midst of His people.

1. It is revealed in the plan for the tabernacle.

It is of particular significance that God Himself gave the plans for the tabernacle.

Emphasis is given to Moses to be careful to follow the pattern that he has been given. In the New Testament, we learned that there is a connection between the pattern for the earthly tabernacle and the pattern of heaven itself (Hebrews 8).

If God is to dwell in the midst of His people, He will do so on His terms. This is what we are to understand as we read the details for the construction of the tabernacle. God is setting forth for the people the terms under which He will come and dwell in their midst.

2. It is revealed in the placement of the tabernacle.

Moses does not discuss the placement of the tabernacle in our text of the evening, but it was a matter of revelation from the Lord. When the tabernacle was finally completed, the twelve tribes of Israel were arranged in such an order that the tabernacle stood exactly in the midst of the tribes. There were three tribes to the North, three tribes to the South, three tribes to the West, and three tribes to the East. The tent of dwelling was right in the midst of the tribes.

This is a revelation of the heart of God. God wants to dwell in the midst of His people. It is a reminder to us that before sin entered the human scene this was the experience of man. The first man and woman had the privilege of walking with God and talking with God daily. They dwelt in the very sanctuary of God in the Garden of Eden. After the sin of man, for the protection of man, God excluded him from the Garden of Eden. From Genesis 3 to Exodus 25, there had been no plan whereby human beings could have God in their midst. It is true that God had appeared to individuals from time to time, but now God is doing something different. God is now revealing in a special way that it is His plan and His desire to dwell in the midst of His people.

The purpose of His dwelling in the midst of His people was to rule over His people. The sanctuary was the symbol of the Kingdom of God. The people were to understand that the sovereign of their nation dwelt behind the curtain in the Holy of Holies. He was the King over all of the elders and all of the people. He was the one with the sovereign authority to give instructions, to bless, and to punish the people. So, we see the heart of God in His desire to be among His people as their sovereign ruler.

II. GOD REVEALS HIS GRACE IN PROVIDING A WAY OF APPROACH FOR SINFUL MAN.

It is not without significance that God made the tent, in which He would dwell, a tent of worship. Everything about the tent spoke of the desire of God to be available to His people.

1. Holy God takes the initiative.

No one in Israel had proposed that they build a tent for God. Moses had not conceived the plan for a tent. It was the God of grace who took the initiative in revealing to Moses the plan for the tent. This is a reminder to us that the God of Scripture is the one who comes to sinful man. Humanity as revealed in scripture is never seeking after God, but rather is consistently seeking to avoid God. But God is always coming to man. The tabernacle stood in the midst of the people as a reminder that their God had taken the initiative in coming to them.

2. God is approachable.

As we study the details of the tabernacle, it will become obvious that God has made a way for sinful man to approach Him. God was saying to the people of Israel, "I am your God. I am in your midst. You can bring to me your prayers and burdens. I am here to make myself known to you."

It is true that sinful man had to approach God through an intermediary, a mediator, a priest. This is basic in the Old Testament tabernacle. Sinful man could not come directly to God Himself, but rather had to come through one that God had appointed as mediator. But He is still approachable. The God of creation and the God of covenant is interested in and available to His people.

3. God is approachable on the basis of sacrifice.

As you approach the tabernacle and entered into the courts, the first thing that would catch your attention was the large, brazen alter that stood in the court. You would be impressed as you watch the priest offering sacrifice after sacrifice on the altar. Most of the sacrifices placed on that alter were blood sacrifices. Innocent lambs, goats, bullocks, pigeons, would be slain and their blood poured out around the base of the altar. In some cases the whole of the sacrifices and in other cases a part of the sacrifice was consumed by fire on the altar. The tabernacle is an eternal reminder that "without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin." And without the shedding of blood there is no approach to God.

As you become acquainted with the tabernacle, you will become more aware that our God is the God of grace and mercy.

III. GOD REVEALS HIS PLAN FOR REDEMPTION THROUGH THE SON.

I have in my library a number of books that give us an interpretation of the details of the tabernacle. Quite frankly, I think some of them go to an extreme. They find some kind of eternal significance in every little detail in the tabernacle. I am more comfortable with us finding significance only in those details that are substantiated by some other clear statement of Scripture. We do have a clear statement of Scripture that we can see in the tabernacle a revelation of God's plan to work out redemption through His Son, the Lord Jesus. We find a clear indication of this in the gospel of John when John writes, "The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14).

The word translated "lived for a while" could be translated "tabernacled among us." It is the Greek word that is used of the tabernacle in the Old Testament. It literally means that the word became flesh and through that incarnation actually "tented" or "tabernacled" among us. So, it is appropriate for us to seek insights into the person and work of the Lord Jesus in the tabernacle.

1. The person of the Savior is presented.

There is a beautiful demonstration of the reality of the incarnation in the tabernacle.

When you looked at the tabernacle externally, it appeared to be just an ordinary tent. It was covered with the skin of goats just like the other tents in the camp of Israel. It wasn't until you entered the tabernacle that you became aware that it was indeed the dwelling place of God. The becoming of flesh on the part of the Eternal Word was so complete that when men saw Jesus they did not realize that He was indeed the Eternal Word of God. Their impression was that He was the son of Mary and Joseph. His humanity was apparently very real. Yet, there was dwelling in Him the very eternal presence of God, the only begotten of the Father. And there was revealed through His humanity the grace and the glory of the eternal God. So the tabernacle in bringing together the stuff of earth and the Spirit of the eternal reveals in type the person of Christ.

2. The work of the Savior is presented.

We will notice this in much greater detail as we look at the pieces of furniture. The brazen altar speaks of Him as the atoning sacrifice, His cross; the table of show-bread speaks of Him as the sustaining bread for His people. The beautiful Menorah, the

candlestick, speaks of Him as the light of the world. The golden altar of incense speaks of His priestly prayers. The ark of the covenant and the mercy seat within the Holy of Holies speaks of Him as the revelation of God and the one in whom final atonement for the sins of man takes place. It speaks of Him as the great reconciler between God and man.

It will be a special treat for us to see the Lord Jesus in type as He is presented in the language of the Old Testament and of the furniture of the tabernacle.

IV. GOD PREPARES FOR HIS DWELLING IN THE CHURCH.

This section of the Old Testament should be treated something like a picture book. God gives men pictures of earthly things so they can understand eternal truths. There is progression as God moved His people through the Old Testament. There is first the tabernacle that is placed in the midst of the camp. Later, there is Solomon's temple that stood in the midst of the nation as a symbol of the rule of God. Then, there is the incarnation and the dwelling of God among us in the person of Jesus. And then, there is the church.

1. The Church is the sanctuary of God.

Even though the Apostle Paul usually spoke of the Church as "the temple of God", the reality is still there. The word translated "temple" in the epistles of Paul is ordinarily a reference to the sanctuary, the Holy of Holies. It is reference to the very place where God

is enthroned in His glory. So just as God enthroned himself in the midst of his people in a tent in the days of Moses, He enthrones Himself today in the tent of our humanity as we are congregated as the church. You and I together make up the tent in which God dwells in our day. Understanding the tabernacle in the wilderness will deepen your appreciation for the reality of the indwelling of God in the church in our day.

2. The individual believer is also the sanctuary of God.

Interestingly, the Apostle Paul uses the same word when referring to the body of the believer as the temple as He used with reference to the Church as the temple. The body of the believer is actually a sanctuary of God. It is a holy place that God inhabits. It is the dwelling place of God.

To understand this truth about yourself is to have life transformed. If this truth could become so embedded in our minds that we would never forget it, our lives would be affected for good through all the years to come.

So, we think together about the eternal God in the midst of His people. He was in the midst of His people in the wilderness and He is in the midst of His people today. His presence among us needs to be revered and celebrated. May God help us to give proper recognition and acknowledgment to the presence of God in our midst.

