

December 21, 2014

## Emmanuel

Exodus 40:1 – 16; 34 – 38

Today we come to the very last chapter in this book of Exodus that we have been going through since September. If you remember, Exodus begins with the people of God enslaved and under a death sentence in Egypt. And God moves to miraculously rescue His people and lead them out of Egypt into the desert, where He provides for them and sustains them as they follow Moses. He eventually takes them to a mountain where He speaks to Moses, and gives him a blueprint as it were for worship. And if you haven't realized it yet, the whole end toward which this thing is moving is worship. As we have said many times, Exodus begins in slavery but it ends in worship. It begins with people estranged from God and ends with the very presence of God dwelling in the midst of His people. Emmanuel.

On the mountain, in Exodus 25, God let Moses understand the whole purpose for His rescuing His people. In their first meeting on the mountain, God tells Moses, *And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst.* Up until now God had been with them in a relationship of close proximity, but He was always somewhat separate from them. The cloud covering His glorious presence was always just ahead of the camp of Israel in the journey, and had now settled on top of Sinai with the people camped at the foot of the mountain. And God had put boundaries around it so the people wouldn't get too close and die. But God wanted a closer relationship – He wanted to be in the middle of His people. So He gives Moses instructions for building a tabernacle in the middle of the camp. His purpose for the tabernacle was to provide a dwelling place for Himself, so that He could come right down among them. Emmanuel.

The tabernacle becomes the focal point of everything. Unless you understand the significance of the tabernacle, you don't understand the point of the book. You don't see its whole narrative sweep. The story of Exodus starts in slavery, but it doesn't end and it's not completed until you get to the tabernacle of worship. All along, Exodus is telling us something about ourselves and our deep need to worship God alone. Everybody worships something. Everyone puts their ultimate hope in something. Everyone gets their identity, from something. Everyone lives for something, and whatever you live for, whatever is the most important thing in your life, that's the thing you serve. If that thing is not God, if there's anything else more important or central in your life than God, you're controlled by it. You're enslaved. You're still a slave. It is not until you are bowing in submission to Him, ravished by His glory, overtaken by the presence and the beauty of God, it is not until God Himself is the most important and central thing in your life, that you are really liberated. Until you get to worship, you're still not free. That is the message of Exodus.

So you have to understand the tabernacle here if you are to understand Exodus. And today to help us do that, let's ask three questions: Why do we need a tabernacle; how does it work; and what does it mean? Why do we need it; how does it work; and what does it mean? First of all, **why do we need a tabernacle?** I want you to keep in the back of your mind what God said about it – that it was a sanctuary – *a miqdash* – literally – *a holy place*, so that God could live right in the middle of His people. Why is that even necessary? If human history has taught us anything, it has taught us that, for the most part, people believe two things about the unknown: that behind this material world is a transcendent spiritual reality; **and** that there is some kind of barrier between us and that reality. There *is* an ultimate reality – **and** there is something standing between us and it. This is the reason religions flourish. This is why we build temples and train priests. They are trying to get at that unknown reality that must be there. There is some transcendent truth behind this material world that will explain all the things we encounter here. But our problem is we can't get there from here without some kind of mediation.

This is true even of those who say there is no ultimate reality. I may be wrong, but this may be the first generation on earth who have championed the idea that there is no ultimate reality. The prevailing philosophy of today is that the material world is all we have, and even that only happened by random chance. It's just blind luck that humans are even around. There is no ultimate authority to which we are accountable. But if they really believed that, what we would see would be anarchy – not order. As freeing to some as that sounds, they really don't live their lives that way. Even those with the most profound allegiance to the idea that the universe is just an accident of nature and there is no purpose to life as we know it, that there is no God, will nevertheless live as though there were real significance and purpose to life. They are professing atheists but functioning deists.

Somehow we know, even the most committed atheists know, that there is something out there. C.S. Lewis put it this way in his famous sermon, *Weight of Glory*: **"Our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off. To be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside is no mere neurotic fantasy, but the truest index of our real situation."** We may say, 'We don't need a temple. We don't need this tabernacle'. But we go ahead and build them anyway. If people truly believed there were no ultimate authority they would be living as they pleased without regard to anyone. But we still have laws, we still have communities engaged in life together, we still have notions of right and wrong, we still believe there is good and evil in the world – and all of these fly in the face of our stated convictions. If life were truly a product of random chance and fortuitous accident, right and wrong, good and evil are entirely meaningless in any rational sense. But that is not how we actually live our lives. We see evil in the world and we label it. We teach our children right from wrong. Deep down we know there is an ultimate reality and we know that we cannot get there without some kind of help. We need a temple – we need a tabernacle. Our inherent desire for meaning and purpose and significance compels us to build a tabernacle. But you just can't build any old tabernacle. There is a reality, and there is only one way to reach it.

**So how does this tabernacle work?** Well you really need to look at the tabernacle as it is laid out here. First of all, there are very specific instructions about how this thing is to be built. On the mountain, God gave Moses the whole blueprint for the tabernacle; and in chapters twenty-five through thirty-one we read about how to build the furniture and where to put it; how to make the curtains and the boards and the sockets; what the priests are to wear and how they are to go about their business; and seeming endless minutia about the tabernacle that make your eyes water. And you start wondering, 'Why do I need to know this stuff?' 'Why do I need to know that 'there shall be eight boards with their sockets of silver, sixteen sockets; two sockets under one board and two sockets under another board?' And the answer is not in the details so much as it is in the repeated instructions God gives Moses.

At least four times while Moses is on the mountain, God tells him to be very careful to make everything just exactly like He tells him to make it: *And see that you make them after the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain.* Exodus 25:40 **The first lesson here is that we cannot worship God any old way we choose.** He has a specific way to do it. It is not up to us. We do not choose how we are to worship God. The way to worship God is laid out for us. He wrote it down. The basis for our worship of God is in His word. It doesn't come from our fertile imaginations. If you say, 'I just like to worship God in my own way' then you make worship all about you, not Him. I have heard too many people say, 'I don't like to go to a church, I prefer to worship God alone at home or while I'm fishing, or hiking or taking a walk'. And I'll tell them, 'That's not worshipping God, that's worshipping you'. Now is it possible to worship God at home or while you're fishing or hiking or whatever? Absolutely. But that is not what God is talking about here.

What we see in Exodus is a focus not on individual worship, but on a community of worshippers. God's intention is to be in the midst of His people – not in the middle of the individual. Worship of God is primarily a corporate experience. You can only know God so much by yourself. He intended to make Himself fully known through His people. In fact, if you take God's instruction on how to worship Him, you begin to see that there is no biblical idea of individual worship that is unconnected to a corporate expression. God's eye, God's heart, God's purpose, is for His people. Look at the language of the New Testament: Peter says, '*You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession*' Paul talks about, the Body of Christ, the household of God, the temple of God, the church of God. There is never any talk of individual expression unconnected to the community. We must individually be worshippers of God, but the fullest expression of worship is found in community.

**The second thing you need to notice here was that this tabernacle becomes the center of our affections.** I know we didn't read it, but let's just take a minute here because this is really important. In chapter thirty-five, Moses tells the people that God wants to dwell among them in a sanctuary, and the way they're going to finance this building is to take an offering. '*Take from among you a contribution to the LORD. Whoever is of a generous heart, let him bring the LORD's contribution...*'. And the people respond: *And they came, everyone whose heart stirred him, and everyone whose spirit moved him, and brought the LORD's contribution to be used for the tent of meeting, and for all its service, and for the holy garments.* And they kept coming and kept bringing until Moses actually had to restrain the people from giving.

What you need to remember is that just a short time before, these were the same guys that were dancing around a golden calf, saying, 'Where is Moses? Where is this God he's talking about? We'll make our own gods' – now they are impoverishing themselves to build the Lord's tabernacle, and Moses has trouble holding them back. What's going on? What's going on is irrefutable evidence of deep repentance, and renewed passion for God. Remember how they went into mourning in chapter thirty-three when God told them that they could go, but He wouldn't go with them? Now they are emptying their pocketbooks and savings to build a place for God to dwell with them. In other words, they are holding nothing back in view of the promise of God's presence with them. They are in this thing up to their necks. It's God or it's nothing. And the evidence of that deep, overwhelming desire for God is that they gave of their wealth until Moses had to literally restrain them from doing so. ***The tabernacle becomes the center of their affections.***

How deep does your devotion to God run? How great is your desire for His presence? Hopefully you understand that I'm not saying, nor does the Bible say, that we can somehow buy God's presence. But I am saying, and I think this text is saying, that the measure of your devotion and desire for God; the reality of your faith, can be fairly accurately gauged by what you give. God says, '***I want to live among you; I want to be near you; I want to get close – what will you give for that?***' The text tells us that '***All the men and women, the people of Israel, whose heart moved them [made them willing] to bring anything for the work that the LORD had commanded by Moses to be done brought it as a freewill offering to the LORD.***' You see this is a heart matter. If our hearts have not been changed by encountering God, we won't want His presence; and we won't be willing to give everything to have it. You see there's no indication that they were holding anything back – it was all coming out. God does not look at what we give to Him – He looks at what we hold back for ourselves. That is the measure of our affections. [Zacchaeus – Luke 19] [Acts 4:32-35]

***The third thing about this tabernacle is that it makes a way through all the barriers to God.*** You see, we know that even though we sense that there is a reality beyond our knowing, with which, as C.S. Lewis said, ***we have a longing to be reunited***, we know somehow that there is something in the way of that knowing. There is a sense that we need some kind of mediation. Look at the way God has Moses set up the tabernacle. He does it from the inside out as we read this morning. He starts off by putting the ark of the covenant, with the mercy seat and the cherubim over the top, right in the center of the tabernacle – in the Holy of Holies. Then he sets up the Holy Place, with the table of incense and the bread, and the lampstand. Then he moves out into the outer court where you have the altar for the burnt offerings, and you have the laver for washing. What we're seeing here is God very precisely and very deliberately opening a way into His presence.

But if you noticed there are lots of barriers to overcome. There are curtains and veils, altars and lavers, offerings and washings and so on – barrier after barrier between you and God's presence. In other words, the message of the tabernacle is that there is a way of getting back. There's a way of getting into the very presence of God. There's a way of actually experiencing the very glory of God, ***but there's still something in the way.*** Most people feel this on some level, especially in other cultures that haven't been influenced by our post-modern philosophy. In the Kenyan culture in which I work, and really throughout Africa, there this sense that there are lots of barriers between man and God. In that culture they see barriers of spirits through which you must rise to reach God. You have to appease the ancestral spirits, and then you have to deal with the demonic spirits and the angelic powers, and only when you breakthrough these barriers can you get to God.

In our culture it operates a little differently. Most people find the idea of God, the theoretical idea of a Divine Being at least somewhat attractive. The prospect of connecting with the Divine is very attractive and compelling because they don't really know who God is; therefore they can make Him up however they like. The idea of God is attractive because they've made Him in their own image. But if they're really seeking the God who exists, the closer they get to Him, the more barriers they seem to encounter. A lot of people, particularly those who are older and were raised for the most part in a moralistic culture, heavy emphasis on right and wrong, being good is the issue. If you live a good life and provide for your family and are mostly honest and industrious, then you should be okay. After all, don't good people go to heaven? But the closer they get to the God who is, the more unworthy they feel. The whole question of how good is good enough begins to rear its ugly head and they find that there are barriers between them and God.

And then you have those who believe it's not so much about being good but about being who you want to be. You can even be god. The important thing is freedom to be what you want – self-enhancement and self-fulfillment. And they're looking for God but they've made Him in their own image and they find out that god is not much good in the crunch. They find out that you need a real God to tell you that you're loved and valuable when everything comes against you. But when they really start looking for the real thing, and they begin to get close to God, they begin to find these barriers. They begin to realize that this God might have something to say about how they live their lives. They begin to see that they won't be in control – the barriers between them and God begin to get exposed.

And this goes right back to the garden. In the garden there were no barriers. Everything was perfect. They had immediate and complete access to God. They walked and talked with Him in the cool of the day. In the garden, it was heaven on earth. There was God's unmediated, undiluted presence. Every relationship was perfect and unblemished: cultural, spiritual, psychological, social. But when we decided we were going to be our own lords, our own gods, and our own masters, all of that fell apart. And God's merciful response was to put us out. He put us out of the garden and the barriers went up. He stationed a cherubim at the entrance to the garden with a sword which represented the fact the relationship between this world and that world is broken, but this is all what the tabernacle is about.

If you read from chapter 25 all the way to chapter 40, most of it is about the details of how the tabernacle is supposed to be designed and built. And what you see is perfection and beauty; you see representations of the garden all over the place. You've got cherubim and palm trees and pomegranates on the curtains, on the veils, and on the doorposts, cherubim over the mercy seat. They're everywhere. It is a deliberate representation of what was lost and what is now being restored. This is what God is saying when He builds the tabernacle: 'I'm coming back. This broken world with all of its cultural brokenness, its social brokenness, its psychological brokenness ... I'm coming back, and I have built a prototype of the garden of Eden, and I'm in the center of that, and I'm opening a way in. You can come back. You can meet with Me. I will once again dwell among My people.' ***The tabernacle makes a way through all the barriers to God.***

So finally, **what does the tabernacle mean?** What is its significance? The answer is that it points to the reality of Emmanuel – God with us. It means that God has made a way to dwell with His people without killing them in the process. It means this is Jesus. The promise of this reality was given in prophecy to Isaiah over 700 years before the birth of Jesus: '*Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel – God with us.*' That's what this means – God with us. It is the answer to the prayer of Moses, 'Lord, show me Your glory. Come down and dwell with us, dwell among us, be present with us, be among us'. John tells us that it was this Jesus, the Son of God, the Word, that '*...became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*' And John deliberately evokes the image of the tabernacle because the word translated 'dwelt' is really the word for pitching a tent – or as the Old Testament puts it, a tabernacle. The best translation is 'He became flesh and **tabernacled** among us'.

When we understand this, we begin to understand what Jesus was saying when He said, '*Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up*'. The Pharisees and the disciples were really confused when He said this because all they could think about was the temple building which was the permanent tabernacle Solomon built according to the pattern in Exodus. ***What He was saying was that He was the real temple, the real tabernacle, the real way into God.*** Incidentally, this is the only real accusation against Him at His trial – '*We heard Him say, I will destroy this temple...*' And in saying this, He is saying much more than He is the way in to God. By saying ***I am the way in*** He is also laying claim to being God. Because the one thing in the temple, the one thing in the tabernacle was the shekinah glory of God. It was this shekinah glory we see filling the tabernacle in verse 34 so that even Moses couldn't go in. This was the same glory that God had to shield Moses from on the mountain so he wouldn't die in His presence. And Jesus had the audacity to say, 'I am that!'

But that wasn't all. He was not just saying that He was God on the other side of the impenetrable barrier. He was saying '***I am the way through the barrier into the heart of God.*** I'm not just the shekinah glory in the heart of it all; I'm the sacrifice. I'm the mercy seat. I'm the altar. I'm the laver. I'm the incense table. I'm the bread. I'm the lamp. I'm everything! I fulfill it for you.'

Again, this goes back to the beginning. When Adam and Eve were put out of the garden, what did God station at the gate? What did He put at the door between heaven and earth? A sword. The only way back into the heart of God is to go through the sword. Someone has to die. Someone has to pay for all the wrongs, pay for all the sins, pay for all the brokenness. The only way back in is through a sword. That's right in the center of the doorway between the two worlds. That's the reason why, when you look at the tabernacle and temple, you have to ask yourself, how could anyone ever go back into the Holy Place, the place where God's glory dwelt? The only way he could go in was to go through the sword. It was only once a year but he had to go with a sacrifice. Someone had to die. There had to be blood, and every year an animal had to die.

That's why when you get to the New Testament, this tabernacle imagery is all over the place. You see it in all the gospels and the letters, particularly in the book of Hebrews. We cannot understand the grand significance of Jesus's birth and life and death unless we understand the promise of the tabernacle. Look at what happens when Moses completes the work. Look at the wording in verse 33: *So Moses finished the work.* God had Moses build this tabernacle to show the way in and when he finishes the work the glory comes down. Now look at the gospels, what does Jesus say on the cross? **'It is finished'** In other words, 'The work I have come to do has been done – the tabernacle is built'. And both Matthew and Mark, at the moment of Jesus death, record that the curtain in the temple was torn in two. Almost as if God was saying, 'We won't be needing this anymore'. No veil, no barriers, the glory of God among His people, God with us.

Hebrews 10, says, *Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 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, 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.* It can't be any clearer than that. Christians are not bad people who are being made better, they are not nice people through moral effort. They are radically transformed people at the core, because the shekinah glory that terrified the people and shook the mountain and killed on contact has now come into them. Emmanuel – God with us. God in us. Christianity is not a set of rules you live by – it is a living relationship with the indwelling God.

And you might ask, 'How can this be? How can morally imperfect, fallen, failure-prone people get next to the shekinah glory of God and not die? How can the promise of Isaiah be fulfilled – God with us? And the answer to that was last week's sermon by Ben – Where Justice and Mercy Meet. And if you haven't listened to that you need to. I am not going to re-do the excellent job he did. I'll just point you again to the gospel of John. *'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.* Full of grace and truth. That is a deliberate reference to what God told Moses about His glory on the mountain. He said to Moses, **'I am completely gracious and completely true. I am totally loving and totally just. I forgive everybody, and I refuse to let any sin go unpunished.**

We beheld His glory. Do you see the glory? Full of grace and truth. **'I am utterly gracious and utterly true'**. This is a God so true and so just He had to die - He couldn't just let us off. **But He is a God so merciful and loving and gracious He was glad to die.** And the tabernacle was the promise of that. Do you see it? Under the old regulations, you had to do a lot of stuff. You came into the outer court and you had to wash in the laver – you had to be cleansed. There was confession and repentance. And then you had to offer your sacrifice on the altar – there was your substitute killed and sacrificed on your behalf. There were offerings and prayers to be made – on the way in. You could only get to the glory by doing a lot of stuff. And even then, only one man, once every year, could even go into the heart of the glory. But in Jesus, everything is reversed.

Religion says, 'I do good, therefore I am accepted'. If I do all the stuff then I get in. Christianity says, 'I am accepted, therefore I do good'. All the stuff has been done for me. **The meaning of the tabernacle is that Christ has done it all for you.** He *is* the laver, so you're clean in Him. He *is* the sacrifice, you don't have to do anything. You're completely pardoned in him. He *is* the priest, so you're accepted in Him. He *is* the bread, He *is* the lamp, He *is* the table of incense. He *is* the mercy seat, **He's the tabernacle** – which means that He's saying to you and to me, 'It is finished! Stop trying to be your own priest. Stop trying to do your own sacrifices. Accept what I have done for you.' Come to Jesus. He'll take you all the way in. **Emmanuel – God with us.**

*Our gracious heavenly Father,*

*We love You. We adore You. We proclaim that You are high and lifted up, and to our everlasting delight we acknowledge that You have drawn so near as to occupy the very foundations of our soul through Your Son. We confess that we have not worshiped You as we ought nor have we made You the highest object of our affections. Forgive us, and cleanse us and renew our hearts to true worship. We thank you, Father, for cutting through all the barriers and opening a new and living way through Jesus into Your very presence. We ask now you'd help us to understand how we are supposed to live that out. Grant us to live in light of Emmanuel, God with us, we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.*