

A couple weeks ago I said the OT ends like an old TV “cliff-hanger.” The big story of God’s work in the world -as told from Genesis to Malachi- feels unfinished. In “How God Became King” N.T. Wright describes it as: “...great beginnings, and wonderful visions of God’s plan and purposes, then a steady decline and puzzling and shameful multiple failures, all ending in a question mark.” The gospel writers answer that question declaring Jesus’ life, death and resurrection to be the God-ordained goal of Israel’s checkered history.

No writing makes it clearer that Jesus is the answer to the Hebrew Scriptures question than the book we call **“Hebrews.”** Hebrews teaches about who Jesus is all in the context of Abraham, High Priests, burnt offerings, the Exodus, Sabbath Rest, covenants, Mt. Sinai, the Tabernacle, etc. **We’ll start working our way through the book just after Easter.** Right now we’re looking at some background stuff in preparation. *We’ve talked about Israel’s patriarch, Abraham.* Today we’re talking about the **Tabernacle-** also called the Tent of Meeting or the Tabernacle of Testimony.

To do that we need to **fast forward through:** Abraham, Isaac & Jacob, Joseph’s saving Egypt and bringing his family [Israel] to live there; Pharaoh enslaving the Israelites; God raising up Moses to say, “Let my people go.” Ten plagues, a lot of suffering, and a walk through the Red Sea later, the Israelites are on well their way to **Mt. Sinai complaining as they go.** Finally they arrive and pitch their tents.

Moses tells the people: God wants to make an agreement with you. He says, “If you obey me and keep my covenant then you’ll be *my own possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*” The people heartily agree [Ex 19]. God gives them two days to purify themselves because on the third He’s coming down on the mountain.

**Ex. 19:16** So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. **17** And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. **18** Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently.

**19** When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder.

**20** The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; and the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

Now the next event is that God gives Moses the ten commandments. But the people decide they don’t really like this “up close and personal with God thing.” **Ex. 20:18** All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and **when the people saw it, they trembled** and stood at a distance. **19** Then they said to Moses, **“Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die.”**

This is too close to God for their comfort. This immense, unfiltered, presence of God is too much for them. They’re afraid they’ll die from the sound of His voice.

They want God but they want someone or something in between them and God.

*Moses calls back: It’s okay kids, Daddy will be done in a moment!*

God's just showing you His awesomeness so you'll respect Him and not drift into sin. And he goes back to receiving the rest of the law from God.

**Interestingly enough** the next time God calls Moses up the mountain it's to give plans to build a tent where God would dwell with his people and reveal himself more gently.

**This was the Tabernacle** or Tent of Meeting, basically the **traveling Worship Center** used by Israel from Mt. Sinai to King Solomon- 480 years, give or take. Exodus 25-31 is all God giving Moses precise instructions for construction of the Tabernacle, furnishings, the Priest's clothing, daily sacrifices, etc., etc. Ex 24 says Moses was up on the mountain with God for 40 days receiving all this. So we won't be going into details today. Just an overview from way high up and then one point to be made in conclusion **:SLIDE-3:**

First God says: 25:2 “ Tell the sons of Israel to raise a contribution for Me; from every man whose heart moves him you shall raise My contribution. Then comes a list of precious metals, expensive dyed material and linen, tanned hides, precious gems, anointing oil and acacia wood. **All the highest quality materials.** God says construct everything “...according to all that I am going to show you.”

**And the singular purpose for this is:** 8 “Let them construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them. The Tabernacle's purpose wasn't as a gathering place for worship-like FBC. It was a place for God to dwell among his people.

Let's start from the outside and work our way in. **:SLIDE-1: A courtyard surrounded the tabernacle.** It was rectangular 25 yards by 50 yards. The courtyard was made of bronze bases that held up posts with silver hooks and bands- twenty on each long side and ten on the short. Anchored between them were curtains of undyed “finely twisted linen.” The height of this courtyard fence was @7.5feet tall.

**The single entrance** was at the center of the East-facing end. The “gate” was a curtain 10 yards wide made: 27:16 ...of blue and purple and scarlet *material* and fine twisted linen, the work of a weaver,

**The point of the courtyard** was to separate the sacred from the profane. It was to alert everyone that stepping beyond the beautifully embroidered handwoven gate was stepping closer to the presence of God- something not to be taken lightly.

Once through the gate the first thing you met was the **Altar of Burnt Offering**, **:SLIDE-3:** It's sometimes called the brazen altar [KJV:brass/actually bronze]. It was a portable box with a grate @the midpoint- like a big barbecue. It was 7.5 ft. square and 4.5 feet tall made of acacia wood coated with bronze. There was an outside ledge around the middle of the box and a bronze horn built molded into each corner.

Here morning and evening sacrifices would be made. Here unblemished animals would be sacrificed for the sake of **atonement-** being put in right relationship with God- the animal's blood wiped onto the horns of the altar and dashed at the altar's side. In the next book, Leviticus, we're told: Lev. 17:11 For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have

given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life. The author of Hebrews writes: 9:22 ...without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. To move into the presence of God requires first that we are put right with God by the blood of a lamb.

The next item we meet is the **Bronze Basin**. :SLIDE-3: It was a large basin of water in a stand between the Altar of Burnt Offering and the Tent of meeting. The priests were to be diligent about washing their hands and feet before presenting an offering at the altar and especially before entering the Tent of Meeting. While cleansed of their sin by sacrifices they still needed regular and intentional purification especially if they were moving into the presence of God. Heb 10:22 Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled [with blood] to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and **having our bodies washed with pure water**.

**And now we arrive at the Tent of Meeting.** :SLIDE-3: It's 15 feet wide, 15 feet tall, and 45 feet long. It's situated at the back end [West] of the courtyard. The structure of it is acacia wood planks, overlaid with gold, mortise and tenoned together and set in silver bases, reinforced by gold-overlaid, acacia wood crossbars set in gold rings. But this WAS a TENT so pitched and pegged over this whole structure was a covering of multi-colored sheets of linen that stretched 60 feet by 42 feet- ten panels joined by fabric loops and gold clips- artfully embroidered with images of Cherubim [Throneroom guardians].

Over that went similar-sized coverings of **goat hair** and **tanned ram skins** [the most typical sacrifices] and a final similar sized protective covering of **porpoise or sea-cow** hide [Hebrew uncertain]. At the East-facing end- the entrance- was a curtain 26:36 ...of finely woven linen [embroidered] ... with exquisite designs, using blue, purple, and scarlet thread. All hung on gold-overlaid acacia-wood posts.

As we enter the Tabernacle we are inside **The Holy Place**. The bright light of day is gone. And the odors of outside are swallowed up by the pungent smell of incense. The only light comes from the **golden lampstand** on our left. :SLIDE-3: It is fashioned- from 75 pounds of gold- to resemble an almond tree, with buds and blossoms. Six branches extend from a center stem- a menorah with 7 oil lamps. The priests maintain it as a continuous source of light- indicating God's continuous "watchfulness" over us. Hebrew for almond is shâqêd. The root of shâqêd is shâqad which means to be *awake, watchful* [Jer 1:11-12]. We, of course remember Jesus calling out: "I am the light of the world" [Jn 9:5] and it's interesting that when Revelation describes the CONTINUOUS illumination of the New Jerusalem it says **Rev. 21:23** ...for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp *is* the Lamb.

On our right is a small [3x1.5x@2] acacia-wood table :SLIDE-3: with a 3-inch rim around the edge. It's all overlaid with gold. This **table held the Bread of the Presence**. Twelve -probably unleavened- loaves were continuously set before the face of God. At the Sabbath the priests consumed the bread and fresh loaves were set out. So alongside God's continuous illumination was a sign of his continuous provision and our continuous need for earthy things like bread. "Man shall not live by bread alone" [Deut 8:3,

Matt 4:4] but WE definitely need the bread. And we remember Jesus calling out: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again [Jn6:35]. This is my body...

The last piece of furniture in the Holy Place is the **Altar of Incense**, :SLIDE-3: centered in front of the curtain that separates us from the Holy of Holies. It's a small square altar made of Acacia wood overlaid with gold- with golden horns worked onto each corner [Day of Atonement]. The burning incense represented the continuous presence of God. And, like the cloud on the mountain, the smoke functioned as a veil to protect men from an encounter with the unmitigated presence of God. Frankincense featured prominently in the chemistry of this incense, which draws our minds to the Magi's gift of Frankincense at Bethlehem.

Immediately behind the Altar of Incense is a gloriously decorated linen curtain:SLIDE-3: embroidered in blue, purple, and scarlet yarns with designs of **Cheribim**- multi-winged, composite creatures that surround and guard the throne of God. **Psa. 99:1** The LORD reigns, let the peoples tremble; He is enthroned *above* the cherubim, let the earth shake!

The depiction is intentional because if we step behind the curtain we enter the **Holy of Holies, the Most Holy Place**. In this small square room sat a single object: **the Ark of the Covenant**. :SLIDE-2: The Ark was actually a pretty simple thing. It was an acacia-wood box two feet tall and wide and 45 inches long all overlaid in gold. Like most of the temple furniture it has rings for the insertion of poles to carry it. Very important: as touching the holy ark leads to death [2Sm6:7].

**Kept inside this box** would be the stone tablets upon which God would write his law for his Covenant people. It would also hold a golden jar of Manna and Aaron's staff that budded and flowered proving God had chosen him and his descendants as Priests forever. All of these things “testified” to God's choice of and his agreement with the children of Israel so it was called the **Ark of Testimony**.

**The lid of the Ark** :SLIDE-2: was made of pure gold and adorned with the golden figures of **two Cherubim**- one at either end of the ark- face down looking at the cover, wings outstretched overshadowing the lid. In Hebrew it is called *Kapporet* [atonement cover]. *Kaphar* means “to cover” also to “make reconciliation” –atonement. It is the Seat of Atonement or the Mercy Seat.

And it was on that cover that once a year on the Day of Atonement [Yom Kippur] the High Priest would step beyond the veil of with blood- and sprinkle it on the Atonement cover to obtain forgiveness for the people's sins.

Here's the most important thing: Remember **Psa. 99:1** The Lord... is enthroned *above* the cherubim, ...God says, through Isaiah: “Heaven is my throne, and **the earth is my footstool**” [66:1]. Jesus says it in Matthew [5:35]. *The ancient Hebrew people understood God to be “enthroned above the Cherubim” in Heaven. And they understood the earthy footstool of that throne to be the Ark of the Covenant within the Holy of Holies in*

**the Tabernacle.** The Tabernacle [later the Temple] and in particular the Holy of Holies was understood to be a **conjunction of Heaven and Earth**, a place where the throne-room of God, the dimension of purest Joy and Holiness intersected with the troubled reality and the made-of-dust humanity of Earth.

As the Christmas Carol says: “All Heaven cannot hold Him, nor the Earth contain.” But this spot, this perfect 15-foot cube holding the Ark of the Covenant was a junction of Earth and Heaven, an intersection of the temporal and the eternal, a God-ordained earthly point of Heavenly Presence. Remember the reason for the Tabernacle was always about **Presence: God’s presence** among His people. Ex. 25:8 “Let them construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them.

**:SLIDE-2:** Winding up the Tabernacle instructions God says: Ex. 29:45 Then I will live among the people of Israel and be their God, 46 and they will know that I am the LORD their God. I am the one who brought them out of the land of Egypt [SO THAT] I could live among them. Living among them meant communicating with them. God tells Moses in Ex. 25:22 “ There I will meet with you; and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak to you about all that I will give you in commandment for the sons of Israel. Later in the Book of Numbers this is stated even more clearly: Num. 7:89 Whenever Moses went into the Tabernacle to speak with the LORD, he heard the voice speaking to him from between the two cherubim above the Ark’s cover—the place of atonement—that rests on the Ark of the Covenant. The LORD spoke to him from there.

Remember how freaked out they were at God on the Mountain- the dark clouds, the thunder and lightning and the terrifying voice of God? They begged for another way, an intermediary. And when Moses went back up the mountain **God gave them another way.** Why? Because God WANTS to be present with His people. In the Tabernacle God lived among and communicated with His people in a way they could understand. Instead of forboding and distant God would “pitch his tent” in the center of His people.

And that’s precisely why gospel-author, John, used that particular phrase in his opening, as one translation makes it: John 1:14 And the Word became flesh, and did tabernacle among us, and we beheld his glory. Jesus IS that same God, again coming “to live among them.”

And, as Dan pointed out last week, also in John, **Jesus identified himself with the Temple** when he briefly, shut down its operations in protest of the Abuse of “my Father’s House” and then said: “Tear down this Temple and I will rebuild it in three days.” In a variety of statements and actions Jesus identifies himself as taking the place of the Temple: as the singular place to receive God’s light and God’s provision, cleansing, living water, the singular place to find atonement and forgiveness. **Jesus presents himself as taking the place of the Temple as the singular place where Heaven and Earth meet.** He is the intersection of temporal and eternal. He is the God-ordained earthly point of Heavenly Presence, the singular place to encounter the presence of God.

I realize some might be disappointed that I've not spent any time sharing the "hidden secrets of the Tabernacle's design." People reading these texts tend to respond like the folks in the movie: "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," "This means something..."

**Stacks of books have been written about this.** I have one that continuously uses phrases like "Certainly this means this..." or "Obviously the meaning here is..." without a spot of evidence. The Internet is bloated with sites ready to tell you that the mathematical volume of the Holy of Holies [1000 cubits] proves the 1000-year millennial reign of Christ or where the Ark of the Covenant is "actually" hidden today.

**This is all human speculation and it's been going on for thousands of years.**

Philo saw a model of the universe in the tabernacle. Maimonides interpreted it as the design of a palace. Others see a representation of the Universe or of God's Kingdom. In response one scholar- Clericus- took a functional approach: i.e. incense on the altar was for keeping the flies away. But it's all just human speculation because as OT scholar Brevard Childs, puts it: "...nowhere does the Old Testament itself spell out a symbolism by which the role of the tabernacle is to be understood."

But there is ONE THING the Tabernacle symbolizes that God has stated clearly so that it cannot be misunderstood: The Tabernacle [and later the Temple] means God WANTS to be PRESENT AMONG his people 25:8 "Let them construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them. **And...Ex. 29:46** "They shall know that I am the LORD their God who brought them out of the land of Egypt, so that I might dwell among them;

The Tabernacle MEANS, SIGNIFIES, INDICATES, SHOUTS ALOUD God's desire to be present among his people, a desire that ultimately resulted in God coming to dwell among us in an EVEN MORE APPROACHABLE FORM- namely as one of us, as Jesus of Nazareth. And then WITHIN us by the Holy Spirit of God.

The Tabernacle means God wants to be present with His people. And that hasn't changed.

As Jesus said: **Matt. 28:20** ... be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."