

9 Tabernacle – God with us Exodus 25:8-22

...so, anyway, I was round at Will's place the other day and I said to him – "Mate, you need to pull yourself together, this marriage thing is only a few weeks away. Have you got you suit sorted? Speech written? What about the rings?" But he's not as bad as the Colonel. I was in his bunker last week and I said, "Gadda" that's my name for him, "Gadda, pull your finger out, book something on lastminute.com and get out of here – you're a waster no one here wants you!"

Well, of course I would never refer to Prince William as Will, or even Colonel Ghadaffi as "Gadda", for a start I would never be allowed anywhere near either of them and even if I ever was I would be living very dangerously to speak so disrespectfully, certainly to one of them!

So, if we are separated from some mere humans to whom we need to be respectful because they have a little authority, and we need to be respectful towards them when we are granted access, then what about God? Can you or I ever be close to him?

Do you want God to be close to you? Before you answer, think carefully for a moment because God isn't some sort of cosmic mate from the pub, or a jolly acquaintance from the bowls club; God is GOD, he is almighty, he is sovereign, holy, just and righteous. He speaks galaxies into existence and he knows the deepest secrets in the darkest corners of our hearts. Surely we would be in an extremely perilous situation if we were ever to find ourselves face to face with God. Do you really still want to be with him?

Of course, when we look at God's word, the Bible, we see that in one sense the answer is given to us – God can't live with us.

The Holy God cannot be with sinful people, we go back to the Fall when Adam and Eve rebelled against God, they decided they knew better and they disobeyed him and that created sin and God therefore sent them out of his presence.

Well, independence might have been what humans wanted, but we discovered that it wasn't all it was cracked up to be and it certainly wasn't what God wanted; he created us to know him, to love him and be loved by him and that is difficult when you are separated from each other.

So how can God live with his people?

Well Exodus 25:8 tells us that God instructed his people to build the Tabernacle – a special tent (remember that at this point God's people are a nomadic tribe wandering in the desert, so a fixed building, a temple or the like would be inappropriate – God has to travel with them to be with them) and so a Tabernacle, a tent of meeting as it was called would be the safest option.

Now, the thing we need to understand is that this is not some sort of squeezing God into a box exercise, that you can somehow “contain” God in a tent, but it is God's way of enabling his people to know that he is with them, that his presence is there in their midst. But it's not perfect.

I have an unusual job, it has some perks in that I am able to be flexible with some of my time which means that I am able to be around for some of the family times which I might not if I had to go to an office 9-5. But on the down side it is sometimes difficult for the children to understand that when they get home from school, or they are off on holiday and they perhaps they want to play something or need help with something and Dad is in the house that I'm working and can't always be disturbed.

But imagine if that was always the case, in fact what if they knew I was there, all the time but the door was always closed and always had a big notice on it which read “No Entry!”? What kind of relationship would there be between me and my children?

Well, that’s what it was like with the Tabernacle. Although it was a tent, it was to be set up so that it’s focus was an area called the Most Holy Place in which the ark of the covenant – a small gold box containing the two stone tablets with the ten commandments written on them was placed. It was there, above that golden box containing the covenant commands that God promised to speak to his people. The problem was that the people couldn’t come anywhere near because of their sin – not even Moses. When God was there, the Most Holy Place was totally unapproachable, listen to Exodus 40:34-37;

“Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out— until the day it lifted.”

So there is a real problem, the Most Holy Place is separated from the rest of the Tabernacle by a huge thick curtain, something which was to continue even when a temple was eventually built after God’s people had arrived and settled in the Promised Land and only one person, the high priest was able to pass beyond that curtain and then only once a year on the day of atonement, the day when the right price for sin has been paid – a sacrifice of life. At the Tabernacle the sacrifice was of an animal, it would do for a brief moment, but it meant that the relationship that God’s people had with God was unsatisfactory, it was never a close relationship, or a really personal one.

Why then are we so interested in something which is clearly so unsatisfactory? Well, I hope that by now that you won't be too surprised when I tell you that the Tabernacle is a signpost. A Signpost pointing to what? Pointing to who? Pointing to Jesus!

Just think for a moment about the situation – God wants his people to live with him, it was his original plan as we saw in Genesis, but our sin has made that impossible, so God shows us the reality; yes he can live amongst us, but we can never really know him personally, we are cut off from him by our sin and only the payment for our sins by death makes it possible for anyone to be in his presence.

In the meantime a curtain cuts us off from God for our own protection.

So, what we need is someone to somehow bridge that gap between us and God. Someone who would die in our place – not an animal because (as we've seen) animal sacrifice isn't sufficient, someone who had never sinned themselves, whose life and death would be an acceptable sacrifice as payment for sin. But how could they be sinless if they were just human like you or me? And if they were merely human and sinful how could their death pay the penalty for everyone?

If only there were someone who could do that in our place, who would die and therefore open up a way for us to live a new life in the presence of God forever, someone whose death would be marked by that curtain being torn apart so that there was no longer any need for God's people to be separate from their God.

Well, of course, perhaps you have realised that I have just been describing Jesus. Jesus was God made man; he was 100% human and 100% God. And therefore although he was tempted like we are in every way, he never sinned.

But on the cross he died the sacrificial death for sin in our place – he was innocent, but became guilty as our substitute. And Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell us that when Jesus dies, “At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.”

But listen, the best way to understand what Jesus has done is not to hear an explanation from me, but to allow the Bible to explain itself and that is precisely what it does in the New Testament book of Hebrews chapter 9. I want to read most of it to you because it perfectly explains what the Tabernacle was and how Jesus fulfilled it. I’m going to read it from the New Living Translation which is just a little more clearly written.

So, first of all we get the explanation of what was going on in the Old Testament Tabernacle;

“That first covenant between God and Israel had regulations for worship and a place of worship here on earth. There were two rooms in that Tabernacle. In the first room were a lampstand, a table, and sacred loaves of bread on the table. This room was called the Holy Place. Then there was a curtain, and behind the curtain was the second room called the Most Holy Place. In that room were a gold incense altar and a wooden chest called the Ark of the Covenant, which was covered with gold on all sides. Inside the Ark were a gold jar containing manna, Aaron’s staff that sprouted leaves, and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the Ark were the cherubim of divine glory, whose wings stretched out over the Ark’s cover, the place of atonement. But we cannot explain these things in detail now.

When these things were all in place, the priests regularly entered the first room as they performed their religious duties. But only the high priest ever entered the Most Holy Place, and only once a year. And he always offered blood for his own sins and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance.

By these regulations the Holy Spirit revealed that the entrance to the Most Holy Place was not freely open as long as the Tabernacle and the system it represented were still in use.

This is an illustration pointing to the present time. For the gifts and sacrifices that the priests offer are not able to cleanse the consciences of the people who bring them. For that old system deals only with food and drink and various cleansing ceremonies—physical regulations that were in effect only until a better system could be established.”

So the Old Testament Tabernacle worked, but only up to a point and it revealed that something better was to come. So chapter 9 of Hebrews goes on to explain how Jesus is the Perfect Sacrifice, the perfect way for God to tabernacle with us – literally to camp with us and enable us to come into his presence. Listen;

“So Christ has now become the High Priest over all the good things that have come. He has entered that greater, more perfect Tabernacle in heaven, which was not made by human hands and is not part of this created world. With his own blood—not the blood of goats and calves—he entered the Most Holy Place once for all time and secured our redemption forever.

Under the old system, the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a young cow could cleanse people’s bodies from ceremonial impurity. Just think how much more the blood of Christ will purify our consciences from sinful deeds so that we can worship the living God. For by the power of the eternal Spirit, Christ offered himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. That is why he is the one who mediates a new covenant between God and people, so that all who are called can receive the eternal inheritance God has promised them.

For Christ died to set them free from the penalty of the sins they had committed under that first covenant...For Christ did not enter into a holy place made with human hands, which was only a copy of the true one in heaven. He entered into heaven itself to appear now before God on our behalf. And he did not enter heaven to offer himself again and again, like the high priest here on earth who enters the Most Holy Place year after year with the blood of an animal. If that had been necessary, Christ would have had to die again and again, ever since the world began. But now, once for all time, he has appeared at the end of the age to remove sin by his own death as a sacrifice.

And just as each person is destined to die once and after that comes judgment, so also Christ died once for all time as a sacrifice to take away the sins of many people. He will come again, not to deal with our sins, but to bring salvation to all who are eagerly waiting for him.”

So as we approach Easter, what better time could there be to look back at what existed before Jesus came and died for us? To see how separated from God we would be if Jesus had not submitted to the cross on our behalf and then rejoice at what a wonderful promise of salvation Jesus now brings to those who will trust in his death on their behalf.

Imagine if God's presence was still terrifying for us, that most of us were unable to know God personally, that we were still literally separated from him! Looking back at the tabernacle is important because it points us forward to Good Friday and Easter Sunday with praise and joy and thanksgiving for Jesus. And as we look at the Tabernacle we see that God introduced it to make the point that something drastic had to be done to restore the full relationship between God and humans, and, because humans are sinful, that something had to be done by God. How loved we are to have a God who does so much to restore our relationship with him. Amen.

