

Lesson 16: God's Presence on Earth

Does anything matter more than God's presence with us? Think about it: What could be worse than being separated from Almighty God? The Bible is filled with stories that describe the blessings that come with His presence and the horrors that accompany His rejection. God's presence with people is a central theme of the Scriptures. God made covenants to show that He wanted to be present with humanity. He gave the Law to show people how to conduct themselves in His presence. And He established sacrifices when sin separated people from His presence. So much of what we see in the Old Testament relates directly to the presence of God. One of the most fascinating features of the Old Testament Law was a tent, referred to as the tabernacle. This was where God would meet with His people. God had been leading Israel through the desert as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. With the tabernacle, God was creating a home for Himself on earth. The tabernacle would go with Israel wherever they went—from this point on Israel would be known as the people who literally had God dwelling in their midst. The establishment of the tabernacle and the presence of God on earth were huge events. But in order to understand the full significance of what was taking place here, we need to go back to the beginning of the story.

God's Presence in the Garden

In the perfect world that God created, humanity lived in the presence of God. In the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve could interact with God without the division that comes through sin. They lived in peace with God, His creation, and one another. The distance we feel from God now was not a part of the human experience prior to the fall. But as we've seen, the fall changed everything. When Adam and Eve rebelled against God, their fellowship with Him was destroyed. First Adam and Eve broke the relationship by sinning, then they tried to hide from God's presence when He entered the garden. This separation was only intensified when God expelled them from the garden and placed an armed angelic guard at its entrance. Since then, nothing has been more important for humanity than regaining God's presence.

Q1 Why is the presence of God so important for humanity?

The Tabernacle

After Adam and Eve walked out of the garden, people struggled to find the presence of God. Of course, God's presence is literally everywhere, and He was active throughout the Old Testament, just as He is active today. But encounters

with God only show up here and there, and God's presence—in the sense that Adam and Eve experienced it—was missing. This is why the tabernacle is so significant. God was offering a solution to what went wrong in the garden. His presence was gone, but now He would live with His people again. In the previous session, we focused on the Old Testament sacrificial system. This sacrificial system centered on a specific location: the tabernacle. The tabernacle was essentially a tent where God's presence would dwell on earth. The centerpiece of the tabernacle was the ark of the covenant. This ark was basically a box, covered in gold, that contained a copy of the Ten Commandments, a jar of the manna that God used to miraculously feed the Israelites as they journeyed through the wilderness, and Aaron's rod, which God had caused to bud as a sign of His life-giving power. On top of the ark were two cherubim, and God's presence sat atop the ark, enthroned between these angelic figures. The tabernacle was God's creating a way for His presence to dwell on earth in the midst of His people. Because the laws governing the tabernacle, its design, and the ceremonies involved are so complex, it is easy to miss the significance of the tabernacle as we read the Old Testament. The stunning truth was that God once again blessed His people with the greatest gift He could give: Himself. At this point in Israel's history, God still led them from place to place with a pillar of cloud or fire. Every time God wanted His people to stop, His presence would descend on the tabernacle until it was time to move on again. The tabernacle meant that God would now be with His people wherever they went. It was a clear sign of God's presence on earth. It was a glimpse of the kingdom of God in the midst of the kingdoms of this world. It was a taste of the garden of Eden that went with them from place to place.

Q2 Read Exodus 25:8–9 and 17–22. What is so significant about the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant?

God's Blessing without God's Presence

Before Israel had a chance to take God's presence for granted, they almost lost it. As soon as God delivered the covenant to Moses on Mount Sinai, Moses walked down the mountain to convey it to the people. But what Moses encountered was shocking. He left a discussion with God Himself only to find the people of Israel dancing and worshipping a golden calf that they had created. The first two commandments (Moses had just watched the finger of God carve these into stone) were "You shall have no other gods before me" and "You shall not make for yourself a carved image ... for I the LORD your God am a jealous God" (Ex. 20:3–5).

It seemed that God's covenant with Israel was over even before it began. The way that God responded to Israel's idolatry was devastating in at least two ways. First, about three thousand men died as a direct result of their sin. Second, the nation of Israel came uncomfortably close to losing the presence of God. In Exodus 33, God reaffirmed His promise to give Israel the land He had promised them, but He added a twist. He basically said, "I have promised to give the land of Canaan to you and your descendants. Now go and take it, but I will not go with you. I will send an angel to lead you instead." The language that God used in Exodus 33 has changed drastically from what we have seen thus far. He referred to Israel as "the people" instead of "my people." Even in sending an angel as a replacement for His presence, God's language was impersonal. He said He would send "an angel," when previously He had talked about "my angel" (compare Ex. 23:23 and 32:34). Keep in mind that in the preceding chapters, God had outlined the plans for the tabernacle. God had just said, "Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst" (25:8). Now we see Him using the same terminology to express a devastating concept: I will not dwell among you (33:3). At this point, Israel was facing life without God. As terrible as that sounds, think about what God was really offering here. God was offering to bless the Israelites apart from a relationship with Him. From a practical standpoint, this makes a lot of sense. The people are going to keep on sinning, so maybe it would be easier if they accepted God's blessing and went on their way. And sadly, isn't this exactly what most people today really want? God's presence is nice, but what we really want is what He can give us.

Q3 Read Exodus 33:1–6. What makes this such a devastating pronouncement for the Israelites?

Q4 Consider God's presence in your own life. How would you respond to the prospect of God's blessing apart from God's presence? Forget about how you "ought" to answer this, try to answer honestly.

At this moment in history, Israel was standing at a crucial turning point. Moses's response to God's offer of the Promised Land without His presence shows that Moses knew exactly what was at stake here. He said: If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth? (Ex. 33:15–16). Moses recognized that Israel had no hope—that there was no point in being the nation of Israel—if they did not have God with them. God's presence is

what made them distinct. Israel could not be the people of God without the presence of God.

Q5 Read Exodus 33:7–23. What stands out to you about Moses’s response?

Q6. As you think of the experiences Moses and Israel had with God, how might it affect the way you interact with God?

The Temple

Ultimately, God went with His people, and they carried the tabernacle from place to place until God gave them the land of Canaan as He had promised. After Israel was well established in the land, David became the king of Israel. David decided that he wanted to build a temple, a permanent dwelling to replace the tabernacle. Because David had been a man of war, God told David that his son Solomon would build the temple instead. It took Solomon seven years to build the temple. It was carefully constructed and elaborate. When it was finally completed, Solomon dedicated the temple to God, and there was a tremendous celebration as God filled the temple. Just as God’s presence had resided in the tabernacle, now it would fill the temple. The most significant difference between the tabernacle and the temple was that the temple was not portable. Remember back to Abraham and to God’s promise that He would give Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan. Now that God had fulfilled that promise and His people were living in that Promised Land, God decided to take up a permanent, stationary residence on earth. The land of Canaan, the Promised Land that He had given to Israel, was the one place out of the whole world where God chose to dwell. With the temple, God was delivering a powerful visual message. Though mankind had rebelled against God’s authority, God was reestablishing His reign on earth. The kingdom of Israel, with the elaborate temple in its midst to house the presence of God, was a glimpse of what the world ought to be. It was a picture of God’s dwelling in the midst of His earth, ruling over and blessing His people. When Solomon finished construction on the temple, he dedicated it with a solemn prayer. This prayer shows that Solomon understood the importance of this moment in human history.

Q7 Read 1 Kings 8:1–13 and 27–30. What does this passage reveal about God’s glory and the significance of God’s dwelling among His people?

An Important Warning

As soon as God’s glory descended and filled the temple, God warned Solomon that His presence would dwell among them only as long as they remained faithful to

His covenant and obeyed His Law. In other words, God was dwelling in the midst of His people, but only as long as their lives acknowledged His presence. As soon as they began to take God and His presence for granted, as soon as they turned their backs on God and His commands, then He would leave them to their sin. Instead of the blessing that comes with God's presence, Israel would experience the judgment that comes with rejecting God.

Q8 Read 1 Kings 9:1–9. What does God's warning to Solomon teach us about what it means for God's presence to dwell in the midst of His people?

Tragically, God's warning in 1 Kings 9 became a reality. In the book of Ezekiel, God's people found themselves in exile as a punishment for rejecting God's reign (we will discuss this more in a future session). Ezekiel records the glory of God departing from the temple (Ez. 10–11), an event that was just as dramatic as God's glory filling the temple in 1 Kings 8. Once again, God's people found themselves alienated from God's presence on earth. It had become clear that the tabernacle and temple would not be the ultimate solution, so how would humanity be able to live in God's presence?

God Became Flesh

Once again, Jesus solves the problems raised by the events in the Old Testament. John opened his gospel by describing Jesus as the Word, who was with God in the beginning, and who was God. Then John said something that is shocking in light of what we've been saying about God's presence on earth: "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" (John 1:14). That phrase, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," carries huge significance. The word John used for "dwelt" literally means "set up a tent." John's word is a Greek translation that comes from the Hebrew word for "tabernacle" used in the Old Testament. So John was announcing that the tabernacle has once again returned, but this time, the tabernacle exists in the person of Jesus Christ. With Jesus, the problem of God's presence among people is solved once and for all. Jesus shows us what it looks like for people to dwell with God and what it means for humanity to embody the presence of God. With Jesus, we never have to worry about losing the presence of God—He came and dwelt among us, and we are joined to Him because of His death on the cross. Beyond that, God's presence now dwells in us through the Holy Spirit! In fact, Paul said that we are "a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 6:19). He said that we are joined together as the church and we grow "into a holy temple

in the Lord” (Eph. 2:21). In Jesus we are “being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (v. 22).

Q9 How does what you have studied thus far help you understand the significance of God becoming man in Jesus and of the church being identified as a dwelling place for God?

God’s Presence Will Fill the Earth

We will discuss this in greater depth at the end of the New Testament section, but the Bible ends with a beautiful vision of God’s glory filling the entire earth (Rev. 21–22). From the moment that the Holy Spirit filled the early church in Acts 2, God’s presence has dwelt on earth through His church. But when Jesus returns to set the world to rights, the whole world will be filled with God’s presence. What Adam and Eve enjoyed in Eden will be experienced on every point on the globe as renewed humanity enjoys God’s renewed presence in a renewed creation.

Q10 Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to help you understand the significance of His presence on earth, and to help you live together with the other Christians in your life in a way that reflects His presence and glory in your midst.