

"In The Presence of the Lord"

I vividly remember how, soon after I became a Christian, I heard a song that I thought perfectly expressed what I was experiencing. I had grown up with the music of the 60s as the soundtrack of my life, but when I experienced a spiritual rebirth as a young man, I discovered the only music on the Christian radio was southern gospel. That was fine, but it wasn't my music. Then one day in the car I heard a song. Eric Clapton wrote it. I heard later some said he had experienced his own spiritual rebirth and had become a believer, a Christian. Clapton's later life and his many struggles would send mixed messages on that front. I can't judge any of that, but I can say that the song, supposedly the first one in which Clapton wrote all the lyrics, hauntingly sung by Stevie Nicks, captured what I felt that day I heard it on the radio. The song is titled, "*The Presence of the Lord*." The lyric says,

*I have finally found a way to live, in the presence of the Lord.
And I know I don't have much to give, but I can open any door.
Everybody knows the secret; Everybody knows the score,
I have finally found a place to live, in the colours of the Lord...*

Later, as I studied the Bible, I discovered this is actually a very good way to conceive of the heart of an authentically Christian life. The presence of God is what Genesis says humanity had in the garden, when we were naked and not ashamed, and the Lord walked with us in the cool of the day. In recent years scholars have pointed out that the way the Bible speaks about the Garden of Eden pictures it as a temple. In the ancient world, a temple was not just a place for worship, but it was the place where God or a god dwelt. In the Bible Eden is a garden temple, the place where God is present. The importance of God's presence runs all through the Scriptures. It's what we're made for.

The book of Revelation tells us Eden is what will be restored at the end of history when Jesus makes all things new, and the dwelling place of God will be with us. The world itself will be a garden temple in which the presence of God is at the center of life. That's what we're made for, and that is what this strange structure, the tabernacle is all about. It was a highly symbolic dwelling place for God in the midst of his desert people. It pictured what Eden had been and heaven will be and how his people could experience his presence here and now on their arduous journey. ***His presence must be central to our journey.***

The word “*tabernacle*” simply means “a dwelling place.” In **Exodus 25:8-9** God says, *And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. 9 Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.* ¹ One writer suggests this is the most important building in the history of the world because it is the only building designed by God to communicate to fallen humanity the significance of his holy presence. ²

The first lesson it teaches you that....

I. GOD WANTS YOU TO APPRECIATE THE INTRICATE BEAUTY OF HIS HOLY PRESENCE.

You may have noticed that in **Exodus 40:19** ends with the phrase, “*as the Lord had commanded Moses,*” That phrase appears seven times in this section. Everything was done as the Lord commanded. As a result, it was a beautiful, finely crafted, structure full of symbolic meaning. ³

The tabernacle was enclosed by a 7^{1/2} foot high wall-like curtain made of white linen fabric supported on posts spaced at 7^{1/2} intervals. The posts were set on bases of bronze with silver bands and hooks to hold up the linen walls. This beautifully enclosed space created a courtyard that was set-apart, special, sacred. The courtyard measured 50 yards by 25 yards. (*That’s about equal to the width of our worship area and twice the depth.*) Inside the courtyard, there was a beautifully crafted bronze altar and a large basin for sacrifices and for washing.

The actual tabernacle or dwelling place was toward the back of the courtyard. It was 15 yards long, 5 yards high and 5 yards wide. (*So its dimensions would be about as wide as this raised platform and just as tall*) and *it’s length about the distance from the West wall to where the piano bench sits.*”) The interior was made of the highest quality, finely crafted linen interwoven with rare and highly expensive blue, purple and scarlet thread. Into the linen interior, images of cherubim, powerfully angelic guardians, were artistically embroidered or woven.

One thing all of this was communicating was that...

A. The presence of God is part of a spiritual reality that transcends the ordinary.

Every civilization has had temples and shrines and things like that because, until recently, every civilization has recognized that there are two worlds. This world that is present to our perception and another reality above and beyond the natural world, a supernatural world.

The intricate artistic beauty of the tabernacle was, for people journeying through a barren place, a picture of and pointer toward a better world to come. That's important. The modern secular viewpoint says you cannot prove there is another world and you don't need to believe in it because we can handle everything without that. In recent years there has been a lot of push back against that secular view because serious thinkers have demonstrated that if this physical reality is all there is, full stop. Then there is no real basis for morality or meaning in life. One philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre said that you can't say something is good or bad unless you know it's purpose. A clock's purpose is to tell time so if it does that well it is a good clock. You don't say it is a lousy clock if it is terrible at hammering nails. You can only evaluate it in light of its purpose. If there is no creator or purpose behind this physical world than you can't call anyone or anything good or bad. Robert Jarvik, the inventor of the artificial heart, believed there is nothing beyond the physical world, and because of that, he said there are no such thing as "human rights," human beings have no more rights than a virus. So, against the emptiness of the secular world-view, the tabernacle stands in the desert as a physical symbol of an invisible, reality that transcends the ordinary and points to purpose and beauty.

Then to get more specific it shows us that...

B. The presence of God is a holy presence.

At the back of the tabernacle was *the most holy place* interlaced with symbols of God's holiness and majesty. It was a 15 X 15-foot square room. In it, **Exodus 40:20** says, Moses placed what was called the ark. The ark was a box or chest a little less than 4 feet long and about 2 feet wide and high. It was covered in gold both inside and outside. The tablets of stone containing the Ten Commandments were placed in the ark. Two golden cherubim were sculpted on the cover facing in, looking down, with their wings covering the top of the ark.

It is also interlaced with symbols of the Garden of Eden. Gold and precious stones are mentioned in the story of the garden and the construction of the tabernacle. The seven-branched lampstand just outside is artistically crafted like a blossoming tree. The entrance of the garden was on the East and guarded by Cherubim. The entrance of the tabernacle always faces east, and the images of cherubim are placed on the east entrance to the most holy place to set it apart because the presence of God, lost in the garden, is a holy presence.

Because of that...

C. The presence of God with us is always a gift of grace.

The sculpted golden cover of the ark under the sheltering wings of the angels was also called "*the mercy seat*" or the "*atonement cover.*" The blood of the sacrifices offered on the altar in the courtyard would be brought in and sprinkled there. Then the priest could proclaim to the people the forgiveness of their sins. The law that demands perfect obedience is covered by the blood of an innocent sacrifice at the place of mercy and atonement. The cherubim look down at that focal point, cover it with their sheltering wings, and there at that place of mercy God reveals his holy presence to his people. There he will show grace to his people and give face-to-face guidance to Moses, their leader.⁴

The presence of God is a gift of grace. And because of grace...

D. The holy presence of God offers relationship.

Verses 22-27 mention three things in the larger part of the tabernacle.

1. A golden altar of incense was kept in continual use as a symbol of prayer. The presence of God invites us into prayerful communion.⁵
2. There was a golden table with bread placed on it called "*the bread of the presence.*" The Hebrew word translated "*presence*" is more literally "*in the face of.*" What is the significance? God is with his people, not only to rule them as King but to feed them and fellowship with them.
2. There was also a three-foot high golden lampstand artistically crafted like a blossoming tree with seven branches holding seven lamps. The symbolism of the tree would have pictured the flourishing beauty of the garden, the hope restoration and the lamps giving light pictured the light that God's presence offers and requires.

Light can help us understand the presence of God. One of God's attributes is omnipresence. Which means he is everywhere all the time. As **Acts 17:28** says "*in him, we live and move and have our being.*" How can he be present in a special way in a particular place? Well, it is like light. From the beginning of this service, there has been light in this room, but there can be more or less light and different kinds or shades of light. In my office here at church, there is a large glass door. When the blinds are open the mid-day light from the sun fills the room. This is like the omnipresence of God. But when I am working, I turn on the overhead light to intensify the brightness of the light right on the desk where I am working. The light is still doing what light does, but it is doing it in a more focused and intense way. Imagine I was able to bring a powerful, even dangerous laser beam into the room that could

cut right through steel. It would also be light, but that would be even more intense and capable of working in a different way with different effects.

In the same way, the Bible speaks about the presence of God in various ways that are not contradictory. In the Tabernacle, God would reveal his presence as King but also as Savior enthroned in the midst of His people. He would be with them in a particularly focused way to assure them of mercy and grace to forgive their sins, to hear their prayers, to receive their worship, protect them from their enemies, provide for their needs, and guide them on their journey.

It was not that God required a courtyard and an elaborate tent to live somewhere but that he wanted to be with his people in a way that would bless them. These are the people who built the golden calf! They were a lot like us; stiff-necked idolaters and pathological grumblers. The question after God's redemption of his people is how can he live with them to bless them and be near to them without encouraging them to think that his Holiness is really not that big of a deal and their sins are not that serious either. The tabernacle was a way of simultaneously revealing God's merciful desire to be near and with his people while at the same time showing that his holiness must be taken seriously and our sins must be faced honestly. The great, undeserved mercy of God can melt the hardest heart and change lives but only when it is recognized as great and undeserved and not taken for granted.

*God wants us to see and appreciate the intricate beauty of his holy presence. Do you see it? **It is central to our journey also because...***

II. GOD WANTS US TO LIVE IN HARMONY WITH THE GLORY OF HIS HOLY PRESENCE.

Look at **verse 34**, *Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.* ³⁵ *And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.* The people had seen this before. They saw it on the mountain when the law was given. Moses saw it up-close. But no one had seen it like this. Picture a brilliant shaft of light, flashing with the brightness of lightning wrapped in a thick cloud so that the light is continually breaking through. Here it says the cloud settled on the tabernacle and the glory filled it. The whole thing was lit from within and glowing with God's glory from the inside out. It was a visible manifestation of God's presence in power.

There are two spiritual principles embodied in this story. First...

**A. To live in harmony with the presence of God,
you must see his glory.**

Sometimes God lets a glimpse of his glory break through so that the reality of his greatness can sink in. You might think, Well that's great if God shows up like this. But even in the Bible, these are unusual manifestations of a glory that is always there, and we can choose to see if we walk by faith and not by sight alone. The Bible says the heavens declare what? The glory of God! You have to choose to see the glory – it is a gift when you do that – and yet you have to choose it. You look at creation and turn inward and remember the story. You have to open the eyes of your heart and see by faith. Look at Jesus. The greatest revelation of the glory of God is Jesus. **2 Corinthians 4:4** says, *The god of this world has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. As a result, they don't see the light of the Good News about Christ's glory. It is Christ who is God's image.* **2 Corinthians 4:6** says, *For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.* Fight the blindness. Open your eyes. Get an inner vision of the glory of God. See god's glory in Jesus.

*To live in harmony with the presence of God you must see his glory.
Here's the second thing:*

**B. To live in harmony with the presence of God, you must
surrender your journey to him.**

Look at **verses 36-38** *Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. ³⁷ But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up. ³⁸ For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys.* They didn't decide on their own what campsite they liked or when they got bored with a campsite and wanted to move on. They were led, and they followed. Our story and situation is different, but the principle stands. To live in harmony with God's presence, you must surrender your journey to him.

Conclusion

To understand what this all means for your life today you have to understand that the true significance of the tabernacle was not in the

physical structure itself but from the reality that God was present in the tabernacle to relate to His people as their King and Savior.

As the story of the Bible unfolds the symbolism of the tabernacle is fulfilled in Jesus. There is a verse in the opening of the gospel of John that starts out talking about Jesus as the word, the revelation, of the invisible God. It says in him was light, and the light was the life of men. Then **John 1:14** says: *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.* The Greek word translated “dwelt” in the phrase “dwelt among us” is the word for tabernacle. The spiritual truths represented in and by the tabernacle were all fulfilled in Jesus.

He is called *Immanuel, God with us*. He’s the bread of life on whom we feed and with whom we have fellowship. He’s the light of life whose grace and truth guides us as we surrender our journey to him. He is the priest whose prayers for you and me are like continual incense offered the Father at the altar of incense. And he gives us access to come boldly to God with our prayers and needs. He is the mercy seat – the place where the blood comes between the demands of the law and the presence of God so that we get only the grace of God. *Through him, we are shown the way to live in the presence of the Lord.*

One of the most amazing things we learn from Jesus is that when we trust in him as our Lord and Savior, he comes to live not only with us but also within us.⁶ We become living tabernacles, in whom God dwells. **Colossians 1:27** says *Christ lives in you!* Don’t take his presence lightly. The church is a living temple indwelt by God. And every believer in it is indwelt by God. The Bible says all of that, great as it is, is just a foretaste of our full participation in the future day when the whole earth, renewed and reborn, will become the garden temple of our Holy God and he will dwell with us and we with him.⁷

See his glory and surrender your journey to him. I doubt that anyone will surrender their journey to God without seeing his glory. Believe it. See the glory of his majesty in creation and his mercy in Jesus. Surrender your journey to him. At some point, everyone who truly believes in Jesus has to turn to him and clearly say: *I surrender my journey to you. I want to finally learn how to live in the presence of the Lord. I want to be led not by my ambitions or impulses but by your Word and your Spirit.* Francois Fenelon said, There is only one way to love God: to take not a single step without Him, and to follow with a brave heart wherever He leads.

Amen.

¹ In his commentary on Exodus, Douglas Stuart writes, “This verse is the simplest and perhaps also the strongest statement in Exodus – a book often described as specially reflecting the theme of the presence of God – of God’s concern to center himself among his people and to have them organize themselves around him. Exodus, p. 564

² Nancy Guthrie in “The Lamb of God, Crossway, p 139.

³ The best single book I know of on this theme is “The Temple and the Tabernacle”, by J. Daniel Hays, published by Baker Books.

⁴ Exodus 25:22 ESV, *“There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel.”*

⁵ Incense in Scripture is a symbol of prayer. See, Psalm 141:2, Revelation 5:8.

⁶ John 14:15-17

⁷ Romans 8:22-25 and Revelation 21:1-4