

“When God Draws Near”

Exodus 25-31; 35-40

February 12, 2006

Dr. Jerry Nelson

My parents mostly encouraged *spontaneous* prayers of thanksgiving at meal times but when I was younger they also taught my siblings and me some very simple prepared prayers.

One of them was this: “God is great, God is good and we thank him for our food.”

Because I most often heard or said that prayer around mealtime, I thought it was mostly about thanking God for our food.

While it certainly is that, and appropriately so, the prayer is much more about the first two clauses, “God is great, God is good.”

In fact I dare say that if we understood and believed those two truths they would address most of what confuses and causes anxiety in our lives.

Imagine a simple mental grid through which you could run all the issues of life and gain both real perspective and even peace.

Or to change the metaphor, imagine seeing all of life through the eyeglass lenses of the greatness of God and the goodness of God.

Life without that perspective ought to be filled with terror.

Oh I suspect that many of us grew up feeling we could take on the world and win.

But life has a way of soon cutting us down to size and were it not for ignorance or denial many would give up on life.

But there is another way – it is to know and believe these two truths about God – God is great and God is good.

How do we keep that perspective?

That, in part, is what worship is about!

Oh, I know we can miss it so easily on Sundays, but what happens here on Sunday mornings is vitally important to our lives.

Here we are reminded of and we respond to these two great truths again and again – the greatness and goodness of God.

Has there ever been a time when God's people didn't need to be continually reminded of these two truths? I think not!

If I truly believe God is both sovereign and benevolent, all-powerful and wholly good, omnipotent and gracious, I can face anything life has to offer.

Certainly the people of Israel struggled with believing in that God.

- No sooner had they seen God deliver them from the Egyptian army by allowing the Israelites to cross the Red Sea on dry ground than they complained about God not caring for them.
- No sooner had they stood trembling at the foot of Mt Sinai as the presence of God thundered above them than they panicked and said they needed a God they could see and who would lead them.

As with us, in situation after situation they found themselves doubting either the greatness or the goodness of God.

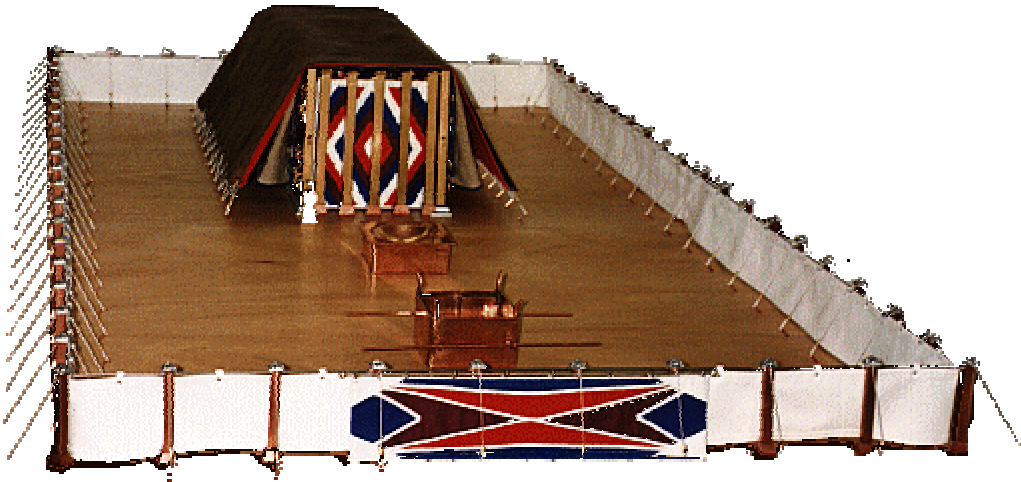
It was after one of their panic modes, when they built a golden idol in the shape of a bull-calf and after God forgave them and renewed his covenant with them, that God instructed them to build the Tabernacle – the very special place of worship.

In Exodus chapters 25-31 we see the instructions given and in chapters 35-40 we see Israel carry out those instructions.

Nearly 1/3 of the book, 13 chapters, are given to the subject of the Tabernacle.

I will refer to some of the detail of those instructions later but for now I want you to see the outcome of the matter.

Please stand in honor of God's Word as I read: Exodus 40:1-2,17-38.



Tabernacle: 150' long and 75' wide.

The Holy Place was 30' by 15'

The Holy of Holies within The Holy Place was 15' square

Exodus 40:1-2, 17-38

"Then the LORD said to Moses: ² "Set up the tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting, on the first day of the first month... Moses did everything just as the LORD commanded him.

^{EX 40:17} So the tabernacle was set up on the first day of the first month in the second year. ¹⁸ When Moses set up the tabernacle, he put the bases in place, erected the frames, inserted the crossbars and set up the posts. ¹⁹ Then he spread the tent over the tabernacle and put the covering over the tent, as the LORD commanded him.

^{EX 40:20} He took the Testimony and placed it in the ark, attached the poles to the ark and put the atonement cover over it. ²¹ Then he brought the ark into the tabernacle and hung the shielding curtain and shielded the ark of the Testimony, as the LORD commanded him.

^{EX 40:22} Moses placed the table in the Tent of Meeting on the north side of the tabernacle outside the curtain ²³ and set out the bread on it before the LORD, as the LORD commanded him.

^{EX 40:24} He placed the lampstand in the Tent of Meeting opposite the table on the south side of the tabernacle ²⁵ and set up the lamps before the LORD, as the LORD commanded him.

EX 40:26 Moses placed the gold altar in the Tent of Meeting in front of the curtain ²⁷ and burned fragrant incense on it, as the LORD commanded him. ²⁸ Then he put up the curtain at the entrance to the tabernacle.

EX 40:29 He set the altar of burnt offering near the entrance to the tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting, and offered on it burnt offerings and grain offerings, as the LORD commanded him.

(Is there a phrase you keep hearing over and over again?
“As the Lord commanded him.”)

EX 40:30 He placed the basin between the Tent of Meeting and the altar and put water in it for washing, ³¹ and Moses and Aaron and his sons used it to wash their hands and feet. ³² They washed whenever they entered the Tent of Meeting or approached the altar, as the LORD commanded Moses.

EX 40:33 Then Moses set up the courtyard around the tabernacle and altar and put up the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard. And so Moses finished the work.

EX 40:34 Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. ³⁵ 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; ³⁷ but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out--until the day it lifted. ³⁸ So the cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels.” **May God bless the hearing of his word!**

What is the end result of all the instructions and work in building the Tabernacle?

The glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle; God is dwelling among them!

Earlier, God had chosen to come and go but now, he is with them permanently.

I wish I could demonstrate before **your** eyes as dramatically as God did what took place that day. I can't!

But I can point out to you the significance of the presence of God – it was a continual reminder of those two truths I have mentioned so often already today – God is great and God is good.

Before I attempt to show you that more fully, I want you to see something of the literary context; the way the author develops the story.

Back in chapter 31 after God gave the instructions about how to build the Tabernacle, in chapters 25-31, he reiterated his command about keeping the Sabbath.

Exodus 31:12-13 "Then the LORD said to Moses, ¹³ "Say to the Israelites, `You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy.

The Tabernacle and its rituals became the media, the means, of worship.

While they were his people **every** day of the week, they needed this **one-day-in-seven** reminder of the presence, the greatness and goodness, of the Lord.

The next thing that happens in the text, in chapters 32-34, is the rebellion of the people in the making of the golden calf, which we looked at two weeks ago.

Immediately following that rebellion and God's gracious forgiveness, God picks up, as it were, where he left off, on the subject of worship.

Exodus 35:1-2 "Moses assembled the whole Israelite community and said to them, "These are the things the LORD has commanded you to do: ² For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day shall be your holy day, a Sabbath of rest to the LORD. Whoever does any work on it must be put to death."

Following that, in chapters 35-40, is the actual construction of the Tabernacle according to the instructions God had already given in chapters 25-31.

God gave the Tabernacle to his people to be the place of worship; where God would dwell in their midst and as they worshipped, God would continually remind them of his greatness and goodness.

Let me briefly describe **how** the Tabernacle did that.

There are some who take these chapters apart verse by verse and find some spiritual significance in every part of the Tabernacle from the cloth that formed the curtains to every piece of furniture in it and every design on them.

For example one author suggests that the curtain over the outer entrance to the Tabernacle was fashioned with fine linen colored in red, blue, purple and white.

He then compares words from the NT with words from the OT to indicate that this was why the certain colors were chosen.

He writes, "Each of the colors has a significance:

- *Red* signifies blood: "Behold My servant" (Isaiah 52:13 & 53:5), pointing to Mark's gospel, where Jesus says He "came to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).
- *Blue* indicates heavenly and godly.
- *Purple* signifies kingship.
- *White* signifies purity and a right humanity.

"These four colors are woven together to become the complete Door, just as the four gospels combine to give a complete picture of Jesus. Jesus Christ is pure and righteous, kingly and godly, and this is *how* He as a man can be our ransom, the Door for us to enter into God's presence in the Tabernacle <http://www.domini.org/tabern/outdoor.htm>

The problem is that there is no biblical support for this kind of free association.

The book of Hebrews and a few other places in the NT **do** make direct reference to the Tabernacle or Temple especially at they relate to the sacrifices that were offered there in anticipation of the perfect sacrifice of God the Son, Jesus.

But I am convinced that the reason the Tabernacle instruction is included in the Bible is not to make a color-by-color or even metal-by-metal analogy of some NT theme but instead the Tabernacle **as a whole** is the message.

And that message has to do with worship – believing and responding to the greatness and goodness of our God.

The greatness is revealed in both the materials that were used to construct the Tabernacle and most obviously in the visual glory of the Lord that shone out of the Tabernacle after God indwelt it.

The goodness is revealed in both the sacrificial system to atone for the sins of the people and in the nearness of God to his people, guiding them on their way.

Let's look at each of these a little more closely.

It is readily evident that God instructed them to build the Tabernacle in such a way that the closer they got to the Holy of Holies, the central feature of the Tabernacle, the more expensive and beautiful were the materials used.

The outer court and outer materials were less expensive; the Ark of the Covenant and the Holy of Holies were made of gold and the most exquisite fabrics and colors.

The closer they got to God, the more special it became.

The text also makes it clear that coming close to that center was to be done only very carefully in exact accordance with the instructions God gave.

Failure to do otherwise meant death – this was a holy place.

And when, after construction, God came down to dwell in the Tabernacle, it was obvious to all that someone holy, wholly other, had moved in.

All together there was a vivid sense of the greatness, the holiness, the transcendence of God.

Everything about the Tabernacle including the materials, the construction, the rituals necessary to approach it, and even way it was to be carried spoke to the transcendence, the “otherness” of God – his greatness.

Do you think the people had a holy fear of God? I do.

That translated into a respect for, an awe of, a reverence for, a careful attention to God.

I know it is a common lament but I think it bears repeating.

One of the problems of Christians today is the reduction of God to a buddy, a friend, someone like us.

Psalm 50:21 "...you thought I was altogether like you."

A.W. Pink wrote, "The 'god' of this century no more resembles the Supreme Sovereign of Holy Writ than does the dim flickering of a candle the glory of the midday sun. The 'god' who is now talked about in the average pulpit, spoken of in the ordinary Sunday School and mentioned in much of the religious literature of the day...is the figment of human imagination, an invention of maudlin sentimentality. The heathen outside of Christendom form 'gods' out of wood and stone, while the millions of heathen inside Christendom manufacture a 'god' out of their own worldly mind. In reality they are atheists, for there is no other possible alternative between an absolutely supreme God, and no God at all. A 'god' whose will is resisted, whose designs are frustrated, and whose purpose is checkmated, possesses no title to Deity..." (A.W. Pink, The Attributes of God, 29)

And the Bible says in 1 Chronicles 29:11

"Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power
and the glory and the majesty and the splendor,
for everything in heaven and earth is yours.

Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom;
you are exalted as head over all.

Our God is not a "run of the mill" Deity.

He is the great God of the universe.

Understanding his transcendence is essential for us to
both worship him properly and to trust him fully.

That Tabernacle with its exquisite design, with God's holy warnings, and with the cloud and fire were constant reminders of the greatness of God.

What reminds you of the greatness of God when you come to worship on Sundays?

When we worship God we worship a being we can't get our heads around. If we could, he wouldn't inspire awe.

In his book entitled Blue Like Jazz Donald Miller wrote, “I can no more understand the totality of God than the pancake I made for breakfast understands the complexity of me.” (Miller, 202)

He went on to tell of when his friend Jason and he made a trip to...Death Valley.

He said Jason had a map folded across his lap nearly the entire trip.

Jason liked to know where we were on the map.

But I was afraid to tell Jason about the universe, of how scientists haven't found the edge of it, of how nobody knows where we are on the map.” (Miller 204)

Miller said, “Too much of our time is spent trying to chart God on a grid, and too little time is spent allowing our hearts to feel awe... There are things you cannot understand, and you must learn to live with this. Not only must you learn to live with this, you must learn to enjoy this.” (Miller 205)

“At the end of the day, when I am lying in bed and I know the chances of any of our theology being exactly right are a million to one, I need to know that God has things figured out, that if my (theories) are wrong we are still going to be okay... I don't think there is any better worship than wonder.” (Miller 206)

Do you know and believe that God is God; that he is transcendent, holy, wholly other, the great, sovereign God of the universe?

At the same time do you know and believe that he is not only out there but that he is also right here?

Do you know and believe in the immanence of God?

Immanence is his “here-ness” and nearness.

As I said earlier every time an Israelite looked at the Tabernacle there were immediate reminders of the presence of God.

Of course the greatest reminders were the phenomenal cloud by day and pillar of fire by night over the Holy of Holies.

Also reminding them of God's nearness were the continual sacrifices being made for the sins of the people – a constant reminder of the

grace of God to forgive **their** sins and keep them in right standing with him.

All of it unearned, all of grace!

And then there was the direction God provided day after day.

When the cloud moved, they moved. When it stopped and stayed they stopped and stayed.

There was more but let this suffice to say they had visual reminders of the very presence of God **with** them.

Later Moses would speak of this way: Deuteronomy 4:7 “What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us..?”

Indeed! It was unheard of. That God would come down and dwell, live, with his people was unique.

Each morning the Israelite could look out and say with confidence, the **transcendent God** of the universe is **with** us; he is here.

What reminds **you** of the nearness of God when you come to worship on Sundays?

When Jesus came to earth the NT writers used language obviously linked to the Tabernacle when they said in John 1:14 “The Word (God the Son) became flesh and made his dwelling (“Tabernacled”) among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only...”

Immanuel – God with us.

But Jesus went back to the Father; so what now?

In John 14:16-17 Jesus promised: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever - the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives **with** you and will be **in** you.

The Apostle Paul using Tabernacle/Temple language of the church said it this way: 1 Corinthians 3:16 “Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?... for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.”

The people of God, the church, is now the Tabernacle, the dwelling place, of God.

It is even more intimate than what the Israelites experienced; God is not just with us in a physical Tabernacle but he is **in** us! Think of it!

That transcendent God, who is so holy that we rightfully fear him, has also, in love, condescended to be so close to us and gracious to us that the only way to describe it is to say he is IN US.

And each Sunday as we see this table (Lord's Supper) and **together** take the bread and wine we are visually reminded of the gracious provision and presence of our Lord God WITH US.

Hebrews 10:19-25 "Therefore, brothers, **since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,**²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God,²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith... Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.²⁵ Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

For Israel, worship was the weekly reminder of the greatness and goodness of God.

In that which could be seen, touched, carried, and offered the people experienced the presence of God.

That's why we worship!

And worship is necessary in the life of the believer.

One man confessed: "I don't always feel like going to church. Sometimes it is boring (to me). Sometimes I just want a break... At times like these I preach to myself, encouraging myself about what going to church means. I remind myself of the profound mystery of God's dwelling among his people. Church is not a place just where programs happen. It is not a place to go and be noticed by others. It

is not a place just to meet people. It is not even just a place to listen to sermons. It is where heaven and earth meet... Christians come together to experience communally the reality that God dwells with us. That is why we go to church – not because we have to or because we will feel guilty if we don't. We do it because it is the ordained manner by which we enter into God's time and space. Sunday is a foretaste of eternity... We go to church regularly...because the weekly rhythm becomes part of us; it seeps into our routines, not so that it can simply become routine, but so it can shape us into the people of God." (Enns, Exodus, 558,559)

Shaping us into people who know and believe that God is both great and good.

In one way it is a contradiction in terms but the transcendent God is also the immanent God; He is there but he is also here, He is great and He is good!

**With your imagination, I want you to go with me to worship God.
If you are willing, close your eyes to better see it.**

Today we are going to the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. or Notre Dame in Paris, or St John's in downtown Denver.

Hopefully you've been in such a church and you can see it now.

We enter the sanctuary and we immediately feel little as the immensity of space surrounds us.

And immediately our eyes are drawn up, up, and still further up so high we can't any longer measure the height, and so high that a sense of vertigo flits past.

As we look, we see sunlight streaming through windows high above.

The light pours in as if it is continually filling the space and yet it is never too full to take more.

As you stand feeling smaller than ever before except maybe when peering into the Grand Canyon, you hear organ music begin to swell.

You don't see where it is coming from but you are immediately surrounded by melody and even enveloped by it.

Then the sound of many voices begins to fill the space and as you hear the words, you feel compelled to slowly bend to your knees and you close your eyes and drown in the sound and space.

“Holy, Holy, Holy” are the words you hear in sounds so majestic and yet so soothing that you don’t know whether to weep or sing along.

The presence of the Holy overtakes you and you are filled with awe and joy, both at the same time.

Then for the first time you are aware of the presence of hundreds of others doing exactly what you have done – on their knees in worship of the One and Only God of heaven and earth – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As the music finally subsides, you stand to your feet and your eyes are drawn to the baptismal where men, women and children speak of God’s forgiving, renewing, grace as they step into the baptismal waters.

There they dramatize the internal working of the Spirit of God whereby they have been brought to life out of death.

And you are struck that new lives has begun – lives yet in the world to be sure, but lives with God in the world.

No sooner does this end than you are invited to come to a table where bread and wine have been prepared.

As you approach the bread and the cup you realize again that it is Jesus’ body and blood that makes your relationship with this Holy God even possible.

Suddenly you are aware that hundreds of people you’ve never even met are going with you to the same table to share in the same sacramental meal – all saved by grace through faith in Christ Jesus and his finished work on the cross.

You realize you are part of a special people – a people not determined by family, ethnicity, occupation or intellect but a people determined by grace and together belonging to God forever.

You look around and realize that not only are you now holding the body of Christ in your hand as you take the bread, but that these people together with you are the body of Christ.

And even as you still stand in awe of the **majesty, the greatness**, of God experienced in the sights and sounds you have known this morning, you realize the **nearness, the goodness**, of God in these, his people, standing with you at the table.

You have a compelling desire to **sing** your praise, to **pray** your praise, to **give** your praise in your offering, to **listen** your praise in your hearing from God's Word and in **doing** your praise in how you live when you leave this place.

You can hardly wait to stand and sing with all your heart and voice, "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow..."

Nothing is more real to you in that moment than the presence of God and his people and you can imagine no better place to be.

Whether it is the Tabernacle, a Cathedral, or a Worship Center that is our privilege and that is our calling – to experience the presence of God – to know and believe he is great and he is good.

Pray

Other notes on the next page.

In one way it is a contradiction in terms but the transcendent God is also the immanent God; He is there but he is also here, He is great and He is good!

St Augustine wrote, "You are ever active, yet always at rest. You gather all things to yourself, though you suffer no need. . . . You grieve for wrong, but suffer no pain. You can be angry and yet serene. Your works are varied, but your purpose is one and the same. . . . You welcome those who come to you, though you never lost them. You are never in need yet are glad to gain, never covetous yet you exact a return for your gifts . . . You release us from our debts, but you lose nothing thereby. You are my God, my Life, my holy Delight, but is this enough to say of you? Can any man say enough when he speaks of you? Yet woe betide those who are silent about YOU. Confessions p. 21

To believe in God's transcendence and to neglect His immanence is to fall into Deism – acknowledge a God but think he has no relevance to your life.

To believe in His immanence and to neglect His transcendence is to fall into Pantheism or the New Age God-is-everything and thus God is nothing.

"In other words, the placing of the Tabernacle theme at the close of the Book of Exodus is a reminder to us of what the purpose of redemption was: to give access to God and to secure a people who would worship God. This is brought before us clearly in 1 Peter 2:9: "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people [language used of the nation of Israel], that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light". Here is the pattern: a nation set apart through redemption in order to discover and to display the glories of the One who saves.

Rev Dr Iain D. Campbell of the Back Free Church of Scotland.
<http://www.backfreechurch.co.uk/People/people.htm>

1 Corinthians 3:16 speaks of the church as the temple of God (see above) but here Paul speaks of our bodies as being the dwelling place of God. Not a contradiction but another way of thinking of the intimacy of God's relationship with us by his grace.

1 Corinthians 6:18-20 “Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. ¹⁹ Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

“The Tabernacle does not collapse presence into immanence. The God who is present is present as the transcendent one. It is as the Holy One that God is present. God remains transcendent in immanence and related in transcendence.” Fretheim, 315

1 Peter 2:4-5 “As you come to him, the living Stone--rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him-- ⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

The Tabernacle was a place of worship – the place where heaven and earth meet (Enns, 558)

“Place” is important – not necessarily one place because God build a portable Tabernacle, but a specific place.

It will not do to simply designate under any spreading tree (NIV translation of the common places of worship for the pagans).

A “place” brings order – any place brings lack of discipline and focus – an “anything goes” attitude.

A “place” brings tangibility to the divine presence. We have need for concreteness in our relationship with God.

A “place” brings assurance and stability. (Fretheim, 273)

But Sabbath/Sunday worship is not out of duty but love.

Why do we celebrate a child’s birthday – Law? No. Love! To show them as special.

Why celebrate a wedding anniversary – to celebrate the special-ness of the relationship.

We also reflect the Divine order by how we live day by day.

Some things are unthinkable in God’s house.

