

"GOD'S TENT"

I. Introduction

- A. People have all sorts of ideas about what heaven will be like.
1. It is ironic that the most important aspect of heaven tends to receive little attention in many people's thoughts about the life to come.
 2. What I mean is that God himself is often marginalized or ignored when people think about heaven.
 3. The biblical conception of heaven is very different than this.
 4. As theologian R.B. Kuiper once put it, "Communion with God is what makes heaven heaven." [*The Glorious Body of Christ*, 360]
 5. If a person can imagine the bliss of heaven without thinking about being in the presence of the Triune God, then that person has an imaginary view of heaven.
- B. One thing that the tabernacle makes very clear that the whole point of heaven is to live in communion and fellowship with God.
1. When God pitched his tent in the midst of the Israelite camp, he was teaching them some important things his plan of salvation.
 2. As we study these instructions for how to build the tabernacle, we will consider three things that we can learn from them.
 3. This passage shows us that the tabernacle was a replica of heaven, a reminder of our need for atonement, and a representation of God's holiness.

II. A Replica of Heaven (1-14)

- A. In the first part of the passage, we see how the tabernacle served as a replica of heaven.

1. The text begins by describing the materials that were to be used to construct the curtains of the tabernacle.
 2. The tabernacle was a tent that measured 45 feet long, 15 feet wide, and 15 feet high.
 3. Included in this was a 15 foot square section in the rear, the Most Holy Place, that was separated off by a veil.
 4. To put this in perspective, the entire tabernacle was less than half the width of this sanctuary and about 10 feet longer.
 5. The tent was placed within a larger courtyard that measured 150 feet long and 75 feet wide, and the entire courtyard was set up in the middle of Israel's camp.
 6. The tent was composed of four layers in all, with the innermost layer made of costly fabric and the outermost layer made of waterproof material.
 7. The main purpose of this layering of materials was functional, but it is possible that it was also symbolic of the layers of darkness, cloud, and gloom that came upon Mount Sinai when God descended upon it.
- B. We should ponder the significance of the fact that the tabernacle was a tent.
1. God is the Creator and Ruler of all creation.
 2. He is King of all kings and Lord of all lords.
 3. His name is glorious and majestic.
 4. If he dwells in the midst of his people he is entitled to dwell in the stateliest palace imaginable.

5. But that was not possible if God was going to make his presence dwell in Israel's midst.
 6. These people had no land or city to call their own.
 7. There was no place where a palatial temple could be built.
 8. So in his gracious condescension, God chose to dwell in a tent.
 9. This shows us something that is at the very heart of God's plan of redemption.
 10. The only way we can be brought into communion with the living God is if he stoops down to our level.
- C. The supreme way in which God has done this is by sending his Son into the world as a real human being that he might be our Mediator with God.
1. As Paul explains in his letter to the Philippians, "though [Christ] was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." (Phil. 2:6-8)
 2. Jesus stooped down to the lowest place of all.
 3. He submitted himself to the painful and shameful death of the cross, where he experienced not just physical anguish but also the dreadful judgment of holy God.
 4. The reason why he stooped so low was to accomplish what the tabernacle symbolized: to make a way for people to be restored to fellowship with God.
- D. As I said earlier, the tabernacle served as a replica of heaven.

1. This becomes clear when we look at some of the details of its design.
 2. The blue, purple, and scarlet yarns that were used to make the curtains brought to mind the colors that are seen in the visible heavens.
 3. We might think of a bright blue sky, thick purple clouds, and scarlet flashes of lightning.
 4. This is significant because in the Bible the visible heavens are often symbolic of the invisible heavens, the place where angelic beings dwell in God's presence.
 5. For example, Psalm 103 says that "The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all." (v. 19)
- E. Another part of the tabernacle's design that pointed to God's heavenly dwelling place was the fact that cherubim were woven into the curtains.
1. Cherubim are angelic beings that stand in the presence of God.
 2. Their depictions throughout the tabernacle communicated that the tabernacle was a model of God's heavenly sanctuary.
- F. The purpose of the tabernacle's heavenly symbolism is to show us that God's ultimate purpose in his plan of redemption is for his people to dwell with him in heaven.
1. To be more precise, his plan is for the redeemed to dwell with him forever in the new heavens and the new earth, the new creation where there will no longer be a separation between the invisible heavens and the physical realm.
 2. While there is much in this world that we can enjoy and be thankful for, every Christian should long for that heavenly dwelling place.

3. For it is only there, only in God's presence, that we will we find full and final liberation from sin and from all of its effects.
4. Only in the heavenly sanctuary will we know fullness of joy.

III. A Reminder of Our Need for Atonement (15-30)

- A. We turn now to consider what the tabernacle can teach us about our need for atonement.
 1. One way in which this may have been symbolized was in the kinds of precious metals that were used to construct the tent.
 2. While gold was used throughout much of the sanctuary, silver was used to make the bases of the supporting frames and pillars in Holy Place.
 3. The reason why this may be significant is that the later chapters of Exodus tell us that the silver that was used to make these items was obtained through the census tax, which every Israelite had to pay to the Lord as a "ransom for his life." (Ex. 30:12; cf. 38:25-27)
 4. This tax was referred to as "the atonement money." (Ex. 30:16)
 5. The entire frame of the tabernacle was supported by bases that were fashioned out of this atonement money.
 6. It may be that God intended this to be a symbolic reminder to his people that we can only enjoy fellowship with him if our sins have been atoned for.
- B. The other metal that was used in the tabernacle was bronze, which was used for the bases of the pillars that supported the curtain that stood at the entrance into the tent.
 1. This detail was certainly functional, but it is possible that it also had symbolic significance.

2. Consider these thoughts from Old Testament scholar J. A. Motyer: “there is no mistaking the symbolism intended by this, for the great altar in the courtyard, situated along the line of approach between the gate and tent, was overlaid with bronze, and all its ancillary parts, utensils and carrying poles were likewise bronze (27:1-8). This altar was the place of regular sacrifice (Lev. 1:5; 3:1-5; 4:7), daily burnt offerings (29:38-42), and undying fire (Lev. 6:9). Fire itself... is a symbol of the holiness of God in its pure and awesome hostility to sin. Sinners have standing before God only on the basis of, and by means of, those appointed substitutionary sacrifices by which the demands of divine holiness are met and satisfied. Bronze, therefore, speaks of holiness, wrath, satisfaction and acceptance.” [Motyer, 263]
 3. The bronze supports that were placed at the tabernacle’s entrance may have pointed worshippers to the bronze altar, where the Lord provided atonement for his people’s sin.
- C. The clearest way in which the tabernacle reminds us of our need for atonement is by the way in which it was situated.
1. Both the entrance to the Holy Place and the entrance to the Most Holy Place faced eastward.
 2. The reason why this is important is because the entrance into the garden of Eden also faced eastward.
 3. Genesis 3 tells us that after Adam and Even sinned, God drove them out of the garden and placed the cherubim and a flaming sword at the east of the garden to guard the way to the tree of life. (v. 24)
 4. We see something similar in Genesis 4 after Cain murdered his brother Abel, where it says that “Cain went away from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.”
 5. To go eastward is symbolic of going away from God.

6. By situating the tabernacle with its entrance facing the east, the Lord reminded his people that their sin had resulted in their being driven away from his presence.
7. The only way to get back into God's presence was to go through the flaming sword, to go through blade and fire.
8. In other words, the eastward-facing entrance communicated that the only way back into God's presence is by way of sacrifice.
9. The blood of the Old Testament sacrifices pointed to the one true sacrifice for sin: the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.
10. Through faith in his blood, we are restored to fellowship with God.

IV. A Representation of God's Holiness (31-37)

- A. This brings us to the third point that we are going to explore in today's sermon: how the tabernacle served as a representation of God's holiness.
 1. This point was conveyed by the veil that was hung at the entrance to the Most Holy Place and by the screen that was hung at the entrance to the entire tabernacle.
 2. The tabernacle was not open to everyone.
 3. Ordinary Israelites were never allowed to enter inside the tent.
 4. They had to worship the Lord from the courtyard.
 5. Only the priests could go inside the Holy Place, and they had to be ritually cleansed before they could do so.
 6. Only the high priest could enter into the Most Holy Place, where the ark was located, and this only happened once per year on the Day of Atonement.

7. The fact that access to the tabernacle was so limited communicated that God is holy.
 8. He is entirely set apart from all defilement.
- B. Another detail that bears mentioning is that the Most Holy Place would be cloaked in complete darkness.
1. The lampstand provided light in the Holy Place, but that light would not penetrate the veil that hung at the entrance to the Most Holy Place.
 2. Just as the Glory-Cloud hid the divine presence from view when God descended on Mount Sinai, so also was God hidden from view in the tabernacle.
 3. Even though the tabernacle was given as a picture of how God was dwelling in the midst of his people, it still made it clear that he is the invisible God.
- C. It is interesting that the ark was entirely hidden from the people's view.
1. It was a beautiful object.
 2. It contained the tablets of the law that had been inscribed by God himself, as well as Aaron's staff that budded and a jar of the manna.
 3. Why not put the ark on display for all to see?
 4. For one thing, God wanted to guard his people against the temptation to worship the ark.
 5. For another, God wanted to remind them that no man can gaze upon his glory and live.
 6. Even the seraphim have to cover their faces as they serve in his glorious presence.

- D. Another thing that we should note as we consider the veil is that it was torn in two when Jesus died on the cross.
1. As Mark tells us in his account of the crucifixion, "And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." (Mk. 15:37-38)
 2. As our great High Priest, Jesus entered into the heavenly Holy of Holies and offered the one true sacrifice for sins.
 3. For this reason, his death marked the end of the Old Testament sacrificial system and rendered the temple obsolete.
 4. The reality that the temple-system existed to prefigure had arrived.
 5. The one true sacrifice for sin had been made, once and for all.
 6. As the writer of Hebrews puts it, "[Jesus] entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption." (Heb. 9:12)
 7. Because of his atoning death, those of us who trust in Christ can now draw near to God's throne of grace with confidence, trusting that we will receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.
- E. Another way in which the veil and the screen were symbolic was that they showed that there is only one way to enter into God's presence.
1. You had to go through the screen to get into the tent, and you had to go through the veil to get into the Most Holy Place.
 2. This pointed to Jesus.
 3. He is the only way to God.
 4. As he famously says in John 14:6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

5. And as the writer of Hebrews puts it, "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water." (Heb. 10:19–22)
6. Through Christ, we can draw near to the God who is holy, holy, holy.
7. We can enter into his presence without fear.

V. Conclusion

- A. This is such astoundingly good news that it is difficult to understand why anyone would not put their trust in Christ.
 1. Yet the fact of the matter is that there are many people who have no interest in drawing near to God.
 2. Even as Christians, there can be times when we prefer to remain aloof from God.
 3. We need to consider what it is that keeps us from drawing near to God.
 4. What is it that causes us, even as Christians, to grow weary of worship and prayer?
 5. It is not that there is anything lacking in God.
 6. It is that there is a profound problem with us.
- B. When human beings have no desire to draw near to God, they are like a fish that despises water.

1. Our sin causes us to prefer the darkness to the light, to choose death over life.
2. Our sin makes us find anything more interesting than having communion with God.
3. This is sheer folly.
4. There is no greater blessing than being brought near to God and dwelling in his courts.
5. So let us take care that we do not neglect this blessing.
6. Let us joyfully draw near to God through Jesus Christ in our worship each Lord's Day and in our daily times of prayer and Bible reading.
7. For our hearts will only find true satisfaction with the goodness of God's house, and with the holiness of his temple.