

## The God Who Is Near (Part 5 of 6)

### God Among His People

Exodus 40

Mark Vroegop

---

*"The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "On the first day of the first month you shall erect the tabernacle of the tent of meeting. And you shall put in it the ark of the testimony, and you shall screen the ark with the veil. And you shall bring in the table and arrange it, and you shall bring in the lampstand and set up its lamps. And you shall put the golden altar for incense before the ark of the testimony, and set up the screen for the door of the tabernacle. You shall set the altar of burnt offering before the door of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting, and place the basin between the tent of meeting and the altar, and put water in it. And you shall set up the court all around, and hang up the screen for the gate of the court. "Then you shall take the anointing oil and anoint the tabernacle and all that is in it, and consecrate it and all its furniture, so that it may become holy. You shall also anoint the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, and consecrate the altar, so that the altar may become most holy. You shall also anoint the basin and its stand, and consecrate it. Then you shall bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the tent of meeting and shall wash them with water and put on Aaron the holy garments. And you shall anoint him and consecrate him, that he may serve me as priest. You shall bring his sons also and put coats on them, and anoint them, as you anointed their father, that they may serve me as priests. And their anointing shall admit them to a perpetual priesthood throughout their generations." This Moses did; according to all that the LORD commanded him, so he did."* (Exodus 40:1–16, ESV)

*"Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. 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. Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up. 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."* (Exodus 40:34–38, ESV)

Next week will be our final message in the book of Exodus, and I plan to give you an overview of our journey through this book over the last year. This book has been intimidating, captivating, and compelling. I have not preached through many Old Testament books, and Exodus has become one of my favorites.

I have come to deeply love this book, and I feel like we will be "boxing up" some ancient and historical artifacts – the kind of material that is rich in ways that might take a lifetime to understand and explore. As I have read the Bible over the last year, I have seen glimpses of the book of Exodus in many places. I knew that Exodus was foundational to the message of redemption and the

gospel, but I feel it in ways now that I didn't before. We have seen Israel's deliverance from Egypt, and we have beheld the gospel plan over and over again.

### **The One Remaining Theme in Exodus: Presence**

There is one theme that we really do not see until the very end, and this theme may be the most important of all. It is why God spoke to Moses in the burning bush, why He raised up and conquered Pharaoh, why He gave Israel the law, and why the Tabernacle was built. Everything in the book of Exodus is driving toward this point and this moment.

But this theme has implications beyond Exodus. It is also why Jesus Christ came, why He died on the cross, why He was raised from the dead, and what the gospel accomplishes. What's more, it is central to the hope of daily living and the future events described in the book of Revelation. It is even reflected in an Old Testament name for the Messiah.

The prophet Isaiah said the Messiah would be called "Immanuel." And the gospel writer Matthew, when he cites this prophetic statement, provides the interpretation for the name: "God with us" (Matt. 1:23).

So the last theme of Exodus and perhaps one of the most important themes in the entire Bible is the presence of God among His people. The presence of God is what was tragically lost in the Garden of Eden, and it is what Jesus comes to restore. Look at how this theme emerges in Ephesians 2.

*"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit." (Ephesians 2:13–22, ESV)*

God and mankind are brought together again. God is with us. Or you could think of it in light of one of themes we have seen before: **God likes you; He is not like you; yet He lives among you.**

Now just consider the power and the grace of that last statement – a God full of grace, mercy, and kindness yet who is sovereign and powerful beyond your wildest dreams, a God who is dangerously holy and filled with eternal beauty, a God who is not like you lives among you. He is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the End, and He is right there.

This is the beauty and the trauma of God's presence. He likes you. He is not like you. He lives among you.

## Six Observations on the Presence of God

This last chapter of Exodus shows us the importance and value of God's presence in the life of the people of God. There is much to see here and to connect to the overall message of the Bible.

### 1. It is a priority

Chapter forty begins with God speaking again. We have not heard "The Lord spoke to Moses" since chapter thirty-four where Moses was instructed by the Lord to return to the top of Mt. Sinai and to bring two new tablets. Verses 2-15 record the instructions from the Lord, and this instruction is really an outline or overview of what God has said previously.

However, verses 2-3 are very important:

*"On the first day of the first month you shall erect the tabernacle of the tent of meeting. And you shall put in it the ark of the testimony, and you shall screen the ark with the veil." (Exodus 40:2-3, ESV)*

The Tabernacle was to be assembled on the first day of the first month of the New Year. Now if you were around when we talked about the Passover, you will likely remember that the celebration of the Passover marked the beginning of the Jewish calendar year (see Exodus 12:17-18). So it seems that Israel is a year from their deliverance from Egypt, and this new center for worship is going to be inaugurated on the first day of the first month. Their new year will start with a new place for worship – a new place for God's presence.

The timing of this is not a coincidence. As we will see later, God's presence would define the people of Israel, and by placing the construction on the first day of the first month, God is making a statement about the importance of their God-centeredness.

But the priority is not only seen in the date of construction. The priority of God's presence comes through by virtue of focus on the Ark of the Covenant. It is the first article of the Tabernacle that is mentioned, and this is also by design because the Ark is the central, most-important element of the Tabernacle. The center of Jewish life (even central to the setup of their camp) was the Tabernacle, but central to the Tabernacle was the Ark. The reason for this central focal point was because this was the place from which God would meet with His people.

*"And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. 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." (Exodus 25:21-22, ESV)*

Israel as a nation, the Tabernacle as a facility, and the "between the cherubim" as a specific location were all about the presence of God. The presence of God needed to be viewed and treated as a high priority for the people of Israel. Their redemption, the Passover, the Law, the sacrificial system, the priesthood, and especially this worship space were all designed to drive home the priority of God's presence among His people.

Is it any wonder that Jesus said “Seek first the kingdom of God” (Matt. 6:33) or that Paul says “If you have been raised with Christ seek the things that are above. . . set your mind on things that are above” (Col. 3:1). Or that the Psalmist said so profoundly:

*One thing have I asked of the LORD,  
that will I seek after:  
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,  
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD  
and to inquire in his temple (Psalm 27:4, ESV).*

God’s presence is that important for it to be *the* priority in the life of his people.

## **2. It requires obedience**

The second thing that emerges in this text is the importance of obedience, specifically Moses’ obedience. One of the ways that Biblical authors, especially Hebrew writers, add weight or meaning to something is by repeating it multiple times. So it is very significant that verses 16-32 contain the phrase “as the Lord commanded Moses” or some variant eight times. Let me show you:

- “This Moses did; according to **all that the LORD commanded him**, so he did.” (Exodus 40:16, ESV)
- “And he spread the tent over the tabernacle and put the covering of the tent over it, **as the LORD had commanded Moses.**” (Exodus 40:19, ESV)
- “And he brought the ark into the tabernacle and set up the veil of the screen, and screened the ark of the testimony, **as the LORD had commanded Moses.**” (Exodus 40:21, ESV)
- “and arranged the bread on it before the LORD, **as the LORD had commanded Moses.**” (Exodus 40:23, ESV)
- “and set up the lamps before the LORD, **as the LORD had commanded Moses.**” (Exodus 40:25, ESV)
- “and burned fragrant incense on it, **as the LORD had commanded Moses.**” (Exodus 40:27, ESV)
- “And he set the altar of burnt offering at the entrance of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting, and offered on it the burnt offering and the grain offering, **as the LORD had commanded Moses.**” (Exodus 40:29, ESV)
- “When they went into the tent of meeting, and when they approached the altar, they washed, **as the LORD commanded Moses.**” (Exodus 40:32, ESV)

Obviously there is a statement being made here! And we saw this last week as well. Remember Exodus 39:43 – “...and behold they had it; as the Lord commanded, so had they done it.” God’s presence is linked to the obedience of the people. They were to be holy and to keep God’s laws because God is in their midst.

Leviticus even cites this rationale as to why the camp should be kept clean from human waste.

*““You shall have a place outside the camp, and you shall go out to it. And you shall have a trowel with your tools, and when you sit down outside, you shall dig a hole with it and turn back and cover up*

*your excrement. Because the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp, to deliver you and to give up your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you.” (Deuteronomy 23:12–14, ESV)*

Do not miss the significance of the fact that God’s presence was as practical as camp cleanliness. The presence of God was that practical and that personal.

By the way, the apostle Paul used a similar argument when addressing a problem of sexual sin in the church at Corinth. He linked obedience and the presence of Christ:

*“Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two will become one flesh.” But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” (1 Corinthians 6:15–20, ESV)*

Obedience and the presence of God are absolutely linked.

### **3. It is experiential**

The presence of God was a very real experience for the people of Israel. It was more than just a feeling or sense or concept. God literally moved into the middle of their camp; it was something they could see and experience.

After Moses finished the construction of the Tabernacle in verse 33, a cloud covered the tent of the meeting. This cloud has enormous significance in the history of Israel. It symbolized the presence of God throughout their journey from Egypt. A few examples:

- 13:21-22 – the people were led out of Egypt by the Lord through cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night
- 14:19-20 – When Pharaoh’s army threatened Israel at the Red Sea, it was the cloud and pillar that moved between the army and the people of God.
- 16:10 – After the people grumbled about not having food, God appeared in a cloud and answered their cry for help
- 19:9, 16 – When Israel assembles at the base of Mt. Sinai, God descends on the mountain in a thick cloud with lightning and trumpet blasts
- 24:15-18 – Moses returned to Mt. Sinai and entered the cloud to receive the second set of tablets
- 33:9-10 – Moses set up a tent outside of the camp, and God would descend upon that tent in the form a cloud when he would speak with Moses

The book of Exodus has shown us this cloud many times, but it was always distant or frightening or outside the camp. But this is different. The cloud fills the Tabernacle in the midst of the people; it

was close, personal, and real. God was “in the midst” of his people. Think of what that must have been like to wake up and see the cloud covering the Tabernacle or, as verse 38 says, to see a pillar of fire at night.

God’s presence is experiential. It is something personal, real, and practical. In the New Testament we hear John’s description of Jesus, and you cannot help but think of the roots in Exodus:

*“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.”* (John 1:14, ESV)

Or consider how Paul encourages practical obedience due to the personal indwelling presence of the Spirit:

*“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”* (Galatians 5:16, ESV)

*“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,”* (Ephesians 5:18, ESV)

The presence of God was always something experiential, something that was very real.

#### **4. It is supernatural**

The presence of God also has a very clear element of the supernatural connected to it. Central to the power and significance of the presence of God is the fact that the holy, transcendent, creator of the universe is dwelling among God’s people. His presence is special because it is the very presence of God.

The supernatural reality of God’s presence is connected to one word in the text: glory. The cloud covered the Tabernacle, but the glory of God filled the Tabernacle. The word “glory” (Hebrew: *kabod*) means weightiness, heaviness, or worthiness. It is a word that summarizes the beautiful display of God’s character, essence, and power. “Glory” is the best word to describe the superiority and grandeur and majesty of God in comparison to the world that He has created. “Glory” means that someone of greater significance is present.

The glory of God is beholding who He is. And whenever that happens in the Bible, it is completely overwhelming. For Moses, in Exodus 40, he could not enter the Tabernacle. The same thing happened in to the priests at Solomon’s dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 8:10-11. And it happened to Isaiah in Isaiah 6. When he beheld the glory of God, Isaiah cried out *“Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips...my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts”* (Isa. 6:4). The glory of God is overwhelming.

Yet it is also glorious. There is nothing in the entire universe more lovely, attractive, beautiful, and awe-inspiring than the glory of God. It is the most beautiful “thing” that ever was or ever will be. What’s more, there is nothing more central to life than the glory of God. It is the most beautiful and it is the most important “thing” in the universe.

Think, for instance, how important and central the sun is to us. We live by it, mark our days by it, we grow food by it, and we stay warm by it, and the planets revolve around it. Guess what replaces the sun in the new heavens and the new earth? The glory of God!

*“And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.”*  
(Revelation 21:22–23, ESV)

The beauty of the Tabernacle was the fact that the glory of God was there, and the beauty of the eternal state will be the eminent and global display of the glory of God. Habakkuk 2:14 tells us of a future day where *“the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.”*

But can I also remind you that this idea of glory is not just something in the future? There is a partial experience of the supernatural glory of God that we are invited into even now through Jesus Christ? We read this text a few weeks ago, but it bears repeating:

*“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”* (2 Corinthians 3:18, ESV)

The presence of God displays His glory – in the Tabernacle and in you!

## **5. It is defining**

The people of Israel were different than all the other nations on the earth. They were marked by the personal presence of their God. They had been rescued from their slavery, delivered from their tormentors, forgiven of their rebellion, given the Law, and now God was in their midst. They were His people and He was their God.

Verse 36-37 identify that the people of Israel didn't move unless God moved. Their identity and life were so attached to God that they went wherever He led them and stayed wherever He told them.

*“Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up.”* (Exodus 40:36–37, ESV)

Their life and existence were defined by God. He was their rescuer, their provider, their law-giver, their healer, their leader, and their light. The people of Israel had nothing without God. He was everything to them. All of Exodus was leading us to the conclusion. God's people were a group of rescued slaves who were loved by God and who enjoyed the presence of their redeemer.

Listen to how the book of Deuteronomy captures this truth:

*““For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he*

*swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.” (Deuteronomy 7:6–8, ESV)*

## **6. It is hopeful**

The book of Exodus ends with a hopeful tone. God has come to his people. He has filled the Tabernacle with His glory, and the book ends with a picture of God’s continual presence with the people throughout all of their journeys.

*“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.” (Exodus 40:38, ESV)*

In other words, God was always with them. This is an amazing part of the presence of God. He not only hears, rescues, delivers, forgives, instructs, and inhabits his people. He is with them. “God with us” is with us!

This was the hope for Israel – that God would be with them. And it is the hope for those who have received Christ as their Savior. The promise sounds like this:

*“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” (Psalm 23:4, ESV)*

*“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38–39, ESV)*

*“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19–20, ESV)*

You see, God’s plan for His people has not changed. He likes you but He is not like you; yet He lives among you. And He will never, ever leave you.

That is why God’s presence is so beautiful!

© College Park Church

**Permissions:** You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. [www.yourchurch.com](http://www.yourchurch.com)