

God coming to live with us

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[0 : 00] I saw a poster the other day for a church somewhere on the Cape Flats. I don't exactly know where it was, but it was very colorful, very bold writing.

And it had the words, Divine Encounter, and the times of its service. And then as you read it, it said, if you come to this, you will, this special, it was called the Holy Spirit Service, that if you come to this Divine Encounter, you will experience the very presence of God and His power in your life.

Now, I'm sure you've come across similar adverts for church services like that. It sounds great, doesn't it? I wonder if you ever look at those kind of church gatherings, with the Divine Encounters and the Miracles and the Presence of God and the Holy Spirit doing these things.

I wonder if you ever look at those and wonder if you're, maybe you're missing out on something coming to St. Mark's. Or maybe you've been to those big churches, you know, those big sort of mega churches.

There's a few in Cape Town. Maybe you've been to one of those and what struck you as you enter what they call the sanctuary is just the atmosphere that it's, you're entering almost the presence of God and you feel something with the lights and the sounds and the music.

[1 : 33] And maybe there's a small part of you that wishes you felt that when you were here on Sunday morning at St. Mark's. But maybe you don't feel that here. Because you don't just want to come and hear about God.

You want to experience His presence, don't you? Is that you this morning? Well, if it is, I want to tell you that you're not wrong to want that.

In fact, that is what God wants for you. He wants you to experience His presence, not just to hear about Him. He wants you to actually experience His presence.

In fact, that is what God has always wanted for humans. That is what He wanted for the nation of Israel, where we come now in the story of Exodus.

And it's why He's done everything He's done so far in the story. So you'll remember from a few months ago when we last looked at Exodus, all this amazing stuff.

[2 : 43] And we know and we learn in Sunday school about, you know, the parting of the Red Sea and the plagues. And we think that's all the highlight of Exodus. And now we come to this rather dreary, seemingly, section about, you know, instructions for the tabernacle.

But this is the reason there's so much space given to this is because this is the ancient way of telling us this is actually what Exodus is about. This section we're coming into now.

This is what's important. What's important is God meeting with His people. That's actually all the reason He did all that other stuff and all those miracles and rescued them out of Egypt and brought them across the wilderness and provided for them in the wilderness so that He could bring them to Mount Sinai and they could meet with Him.

And that's where we left off. They finally arrived at Mount Sinai and the people of Israel got to experience the presence of God.

It was amazing. If you just look back the last few chapters, what was happening, they come to Sinai and they see and they experience, they have this amazing experience of the presence of God and the leaders are actually able to go up and have this meal, this covenant meal, in the presence of God.

[4 : 02] It's amazing. This was kind of the climax of all that's gone before in Exodus. They're now in the presence of God and that's at the end of chapter 24.

And that's where it should end, actually. Because that's really what the story's been leading up to. Right from the beginning, God has been telling Moses, bring my people out so that they may meet with me at this mountain.

And now they've met with Him and, okay, happy days. That should be the end of it. But it's not. There's 13 more chapters. What's going on?

Well, here's the surprise. This chapter 25 in Exodus is the twist in the story. And it's something that Israel didn't expect. And I think it's something that many Christians also don't expect.

And that is the truth that God isn't content with just giving you a way to come up to His space.

Rather, as we'll see, God wants to come down into our space.

[5 : 10] And that is very different. And just like the Israelites needed to do a lot to prepare for God to now come down to them, so we as Christians, we as humans, need to prepare our lives for God to come much closer and His presence to be much more available than we ever thought possible.

That's what this section in Exodus is about. It's not us going up to meet with God at some special service or up some mountain, but the amazing and life-changing truth that God wants to come down and meet with you in your very life.

And that's the first thing we see here in Exodus 25, the truth that God wants to dwell with us in our world. God wants to dwell with us in our world.

Look at Exodus 25 from verse 1. The Lord spoke to Moses, tell the Israelites to take an offering for me.

You are to take my offering from everyone who is willing to give. This is the offering you are to receive from them. Gold, silver, and bronze. Blue, purple, scarlet yarn. Fine linen and goat hair.

[6 : 28] Ram skins dyed red and fine leather. Acacia wood, oil for the light. Spices for the anointing oil and the fragrant incense. And onyx along with other gemstones for mounting on the ephod and the breastplates.

But then in verse 8, He tells them why. Why must they do all this? I mean, they've come to the mountain. They can access the presence of God. Now why all this extra work? Well, verse 8 is the key verse, really in this whole chapter.

They are to make a sanctuary for me so that I may dwell among them. That's the surprise here in Exodus 25.

God wants to come down to where the Israelites are. He's not content with them coming up to Him at the top of the mountain. They are to make a sanctuary for me so that I may dwell among them.

That God wants to live with humans. He wants to move in. And you know what? That has always been God's plan.

[7 : 41] Right from the beginning, God has wanted, since He made us, right from when He created and came up with humans, He has wanted to live with us, to dwell with people.

That's what happened in Eden. If you go right back to Genesis, you remember Eden. That's what was happening in Eden. That's why it was such a special place. It's not just because it was a great place to live and there was great scenery and awesome food and stuff.

It's because God was dwelling there. God and humans were in the same place. It was amazing. God and people inhabited and lived in the same space.

Eden was the place where heaven and earth met. And God and humans interacted. And that place is the place that we were made to live in.

We were always meant to live in where God dwells. And God has always wanted to dwell with people. But of course, that was lost, wasn't it?

[8 : 46] In Genesis 3. And we see the story, it continues, that humans were banished from that place because of sin, because of rebellion against God, because we thought we didn't need God and we can live lives without Him.

And so we were banished from that place, that beautiful place where humans and God dwelt together. And it had been lost all the way until now in Exodus 25.

Because what's happening here, and I want you to appreciate, as Westerners, we read this and we get bored very quickly because of all the details, but I want you to appreciate what's happening here.

God wants to begin remaking the space that once existed in Eden where God and humans dwell together. And as you read the details and you read them and you do it slowly, you start to see hints that there's Eden language all over the description of the tabernacle in this chapter.

I wonder if you noticed that when Dylan was reading it for us earlier. There's these valuable gemstones that are mentioned which reminds you about Genesis 2 and the surroundings of Eden and all the gold and the onyx that was there that we read in Genesis 2.

[10:08] Well, here we see those valuable gems and metals mentioned again. You also read about heavenly creatures that were to be made of gold. These cherubim.

And then just the vast amount of gold. Did you notice how much gold was mentioned? There's tons of gold involved in making the things here.

I just want to read to you again and I want you to picture what this would be like. Verse 11 and 12. Overlay this ark with pure gold. Overlay it both inside and out.

Also make a gold molding around it. Cast four gold rings for it and place them on its four feet. Verse 17. Make a mercy seat of pure gold.

45 inches long and 27 inches wide. Then there's this... That's the ark of the covenant. Then there's this table that they had this... What's called the bread of the presence on.

[11:05] But it wasn't an ordinary table. Verse 24. Overlay it also with pure gold. And make a gold molding all around it.

Then verse 31. You are to make a lampstand out of pure hammered gold. It is to be made of one piece. Its base and its shaft. Its ornamental cups. And its buds and its petals.

Which is interesting. But imagine that. Imagine all that gold. I mean you see gold. It's quite a cool substance. I've got a gold ring. My wedding ring.

This is nine carat. Just so you know. It's pretty tough. This is not even pure gold. Pure gold is just... Even this is awesome to look at. But pure gold.

You may have a piece of jewelry that's made out of pure gold. It's really beautiful. But now imagine. Imagine everything in St. Mark's was gold.

[12:04] Imagine what it would be like to come out of that dull and dreary world. And to walk in here and you just see gold everywhere.

You see this was deliberate. The tabernacle was deliberately built with this gold because it was saying to these people this is not an ordinary space.

This is not an earthly space only. This is an otherworldly space. This is a heavenly space come to earth. You can imagine the contrast out in the dreary wilderness.

You know, all that brown and just the brush and the dry bushes and then they look into this tabernacle and it's just this gold shining out. It's declaring to them God's space has come down into your space.

God's heavenly space has now been made accessible to humans again. like Eden.

[13:05] And like Eden this was also if you read the details of what was in here and what's mentioned first because the next few chapters go into all of these things that are in the tabernacle but the first things mentioned here in 25 emphasize to us this is a space where because God is present life is provided from here just like it was in Eden.

Remember in Eden God provided His people with life. He gave them the food they needed. They didn't have to go and labor for it.

It was richly provided for them all of their needs and life itself was eternal life was provided for them with the tree of life. Well what do we see when we look at this tabernacle this space of heaven God is making on earth we see a table with bread on it and a lampstand designed to look like a tree.

See this is all Eden language. Again God is making a space where He will dwell and provide for His people and give them life once more.

This is a remaking of Eden and it's a declaration that God wants to dwell with people again. It's amazing what's going on here.

[14:32] Even after the fall even after they've lost their place in God's space God comes to them in mercy and says despite your mess I want to come live in your space.

Isn't that amazing? Of God to say that to lost sinners and He's saying that to us today.

Even if you've messed up and you have no right to be in my space I want to come live in yours.

And that's what we start to see here in Exodus but this is not the end of the story.

Really the whole rest of the Bible is about God achieving His plan to live with humans once again which is actually how the Bible ends. You can fast forward to the end of Revelation and see that that's exactly how the new creation is described in terms of God dwelling among His people perfectly.

But this is just the beginning of God's plan to dwell with people. As we go on in the story we realize that this tabernacle once the Israelites got into the promised land it was changed to a permanent space in the temple in Jerusalem but then things didn't go well.

[16:02] The Israelites once again fell into all kinds of sin and because of that God's judgment came on Israel and the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed.

God's presence left once again but it's through the prophets after that that God made a promise to His people. He said through the prophets that He still wants to dwell with them but in a better temple not made by human hands a greater experience of God's presence than they had ever known up until then and that is how the Old Testament ends with this promise hanging in the air that God has a plan to dwell once again with His people but in a way that they'd never experienced yet a better temple.

That's how the Old Testament ends and then there's like 500 years of silence and then a promise arrives through an angel to a young woman saying you're going to bear Emmanuel.

Emmanuel means God with us. God with us. Emmanuel was coming into the world. Jesus Christ. The presence of God dwelling with His people once again in a way that nobody expected and that's why when we read the beginning of John and how John describes the coming of Jesus listen again to what he says in John 1:14.

He says the word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. Just stop there.

[17:57] You may have read this verse multiple times but did you know that the word the original word John uses for that verb to make His dwelling is the word tabernacled.

literally the word God the Son of God became flesh and tabernacled among us. He was fulfilling the very purpose of the tabernacle in the Old Testament for God Himself to come and live and dwell with us.

Jesus Himself is the tabernacle. Jesus Himself is the place that God now dwells with people on earth and brings the blessings of Eden back into our lives.

And that's why Jesus when He was here He showed Eden type blessing. Whenever He saw an opportunity He healed people of their sickness.

He provided miraculously for them. He wanted to show people that Eden's blessings were coming back. The space where God and man dwelled together was coming back on earth.

[19:12] And this tabernacle in the Old Testament where you've got the bread of the presence that represents God's provision. You've got the candlestick of light that represents God bringing life again.

Jesus then comes and what does He say? I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. He is the one who fulfills all of these sign posts to this amazing truth that God wants to dwell with His people.

But just as God surprised the Israelites in Exodus He surprised them by saying I don't just want you to come up to the mountain to my presence.

I want to come into yours. So Jesus went on to surprise us when He showed us that He doesn't just want to dwell with us.

He wants to dwell in us by His Holy Spirit. You'll remember from last week we looked at this amazing truth of Christ's life inside believers.

[20:27] Colossians 1:27 God wanted to make known among the Gentiles the glorious wealth of this mystery which is Christ in you. Jesus Himself says in John 14 verse 23 let me read that for you.

John 14 verse 23 listen to these words. verse 23 verse 23 verse 23 if anyone loves me he will keep my word. My Father will love him and we will come to him and make our home with him.

We will come to him and make our home with him. God's plan has always been to come and live here in the very lives of his people.

That is the ultimate fulfillment of the tabernacle that's where it all started but God wanted the space where heaven and earth connect to be inside your very life.

Now this truth that we start to see here in Exodus that God wants to dwell not just amongst us but in you and in me that changes the way we think of being or what it means to be a Christian.

[21:56] It changes what we think it means to be a Christian because what that's saying is that the Christian life is the place on earth where heaven and earth meet.

The Christian life is the place on earth where God and humans once again interact. The Christian life. And so that means that being a Christian is not actually about going up to God's presence on a Sunday but it's about God coming down into your life Monday to Saturday.

Do you see the difference? It's not about going up the mountain once a week and having an experience of God. It's about God coming down into your mess.

It's about God coming down into your humdrum everyday life and flowing his blessings and his presence and his power once again out there in your life every day.

That's what being a Christian is actually about. But thinking about Christianity that way is uncomfortable. It's uncomfortable when you start to consider the implications of God living in you what that means for your life and the changes you need to make to prepare the place for God to live.

[23 : 21] It's uncomfortable. It's actually much more comfortable to just come into God's presence on a Sunday and then leave again. I think one of the reasons people seek those churches that have these spectacular experiences of God and the music and the presence and the smoke machines and the lighting and you just come like you come into the tabernacle or you come into the sanctuary and you feel like you're coming into the presence of God and you have your weekly experience to give you a boost for the week.

I think the reason people like that, I think the reason a lot of people are attracted to those kind of churches where you come to experience God up the mountain on a Sunday, I think the reason is because that's actually where they want Him to stay.

Up the mountain. Where they can access Him when they need Him. It's much more uncomfortable and demanding when you realize God wants to come down the mountain into your very life.

You know those people who talk about coming into the house of God and they come into church and suddenly you're in the house of God and say, be on your best behavior. Don't swear.

Don't be nasty to anyone. Be on your best behavior when you're in the house of God, but then you leave and you're a different person out there. Is that you?

[24 : 53] Do you act differently here than you act out there? Are you a different person here in the house of God than you are in the world?

Well, if that's you, I think God is trying to say to you this morning through Exodus 25, I don't want you to come into my space once a week. I want to live in your space every day.

You know, this is not the house of God. This is a building. It's a nice building and it's going to be a nicer building soon. But it's just a building. It doesn't have some holy power in it.

It's why we can watch rugby here as well. It's why we can scream for the box. This is not some holy space, people. This is not the house of God.

Our lives are to be the house of God out there. Our lives are to be an otherworldly beautiful space where people can experience the presence of God.

[26 : 06] But for our lives to be that, for our lives to be spaces where God dwells, that's going to cost us. Did you notice at the beginning of this chapter in Exodus that the people needed to prepare for God to come?

Did you notice how they needed to prepare? It was going to cost them. It was going to cost them a lot. Exodus 25, they had to give up all this gold, silver, bronze, blue, purple, scarlet, yarn.

They had to work. They had to make sure their place was ready for God to come. And it will cost you to prepare your life for that as well, to prepare your life to be the place where God dwells.

You will have to change things. You can't carry on the way you did before. The Israelites couldn't carry on the way they did before. Their life before God came to tabernacle amongst them was very different to what their life was going to be now that God was there with them.

And it will be the same for ours. Once God comes and enters into your life, it will be very different. Is that a change that you're willing to make? Because even though it is costly for God to come into your life and live there, it is the greatest thing any human being could ever experience, and know God's real presence dwelling in the midst of your messy life.

[27 : 40] Do you want that? Well, how do we get that? How do you get that? Well, as we read on in Exodus 25, the second teaching we need to take from this chapter is that God's presence coming to dwell in your life is only possible if you follow God's specific instructions.

Did you notice how specific God's instructions were? He didn't just say to the Israelites, you know, build a tabernacle, whatever you think is best. I mean, put stuff where you want to, just as long as it looks nice.

No, he gave very specific instructions, and they needed to follow these instructions to the letter.

God's presence only happens on God's terms. God's presence only happens on God's terms.

Look again at Exodus 25. Notice right at the beginning and the end of this chapter what God emphasizes. Verse 9, he says, you must make it according to all that I show you, the pattern of the

tabernacle as well as the pattern of all its furnishings.

And he ends off, just in case they missed that, in verse 40, be careful to make them according to the pattern you have been shown on the mountain. In other words, God is saying, I am designing this place.

[29 : 00] It will only happen, my presence will only come and dwell with you and amongst you and in you if you design it according to my design, according to the pattern I've laid out.

In other words, God is the architect of the place that he dwells, not us. That's worth saying again. God is the architect of the place he dwells, not us.

And that's the problem, by the way, with people who try to conjure up, God's presence with smoke machines and music and some worship experience, or maybe you at home try to conjure up a feeling of God's presence through some meditation techniques.

That's not going to work. That's you trying to design the space that God meets you, but that's not how it works. Only God can say what space he will meet you in, and the conditions required for God's presence to come into your life.

And it has to be according to his specific instructions. Why? I mean, chill, God. Why does it have to be so, you know, according to your instructions?

[30 : 09] The reason is because God's presence is dangerous. Okay? We don't realize how dangerous the presence of a holy God is to sinners.

And we need to appreciate that. If we're going to understand why it has to be so according to his specific instructions. It's like, you know, when you buy a gas stove or something, something that is potentially dangerous, you follow the instructions, okay?

When you get a gas stove and you hook it up to your kitchen burner, just read the instructions, make sure you're doing it right, because if you don't, it could blow your house up.

So, these instructions are like for our safety, they're for the Israelites' safety, all these instructions that are given. We get a sense of that as we read the instructions, especially the part about the cherubim.

Let me read them again. Maybe you were thinking about something else when it was read earlier. So, let me read again what some of the safety instructions that God gives for His presence coming to dwell with the Israelites.

[31 : 24] The cherubim from verse 18. Make two cherubim of gold. Make them of hammered work at the two ends of the mercy seat.

Make one cherub at one end and one cherub at the other end and its two ends. Make the cherubim of one piece with the mercy seat. The cherubim are to have wings spread out above, covering the mercy seat with their wings and are to face one another.

The faces of the cherubim should be toward the mercy seat. Set the mercy seat on the top of the ark and put the tablets of the testimony that I will give you into the ark.

I will meet with you there above the mercy seat between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the testimony. So, there's a lot of the gods in the heavenly realms.

The last time we read about cherubim, where were they? What were they doing? Genesis chapter 3. They were guarding the place of God's presence with flaming swords so that sinners wouldn't dare come close.

[33 : 02] Cherubim are scary. In the ancient world they are depicted as these great winged creatures with the face of a human and the body of a lion that surrounded the throne of God.

God. But what's interesting when we read about their depicted role here in the tabernacle, what's interesting is that they're facing inwards.

They're facing inwards. Why do you think that is? There was quite a point made that they are to be facing inwards, looking at the ark. Why do you think that is? Well, if they are divine security guards, you know, when you see security guards out in the world, maybe like at the Prosper, when they're doing the ATM thing and the truck is there, you know what I'm talking about?

And they're changing the money and the security guard is standing there with his rifle and he's looking, he's looking, and he's looking at all the potential threats. So when you see a body guard protecting a president, he's looking out at where the threat is going to come from.

That's what security guards do. They look outwards towards the threat. Well, so are these heavenly bodyguards, but the threat is God himself.

[34 : 25] See, I don't think these cherubim are here to protect God. They're here to protect us in the tabernacle. They're shielding God's presence that is in the tabernacle.

They're shielding the humans from it because it's dangerous. That's what's going on here. God's holy presence among sinful people is very dangerous. And so that's the problem, you see.

God wants to dwell with his people, but he knows because they're sinners, his presence is very dangerous for them. And so what's the solution?

How can it happen? How can God's presence dwell with us? How can God's presence dwell in your life? Well, that's where we've got to realize what is in the center of the tabernacle here.

And it's very important. These next few chapters go into all the details of the surroundings of the tabernacle and the curtains and there's things in every chapter that we're going to learn from God. But right in the middle, the very first thing that's mentioned, is the ark of the covenant.

[35 : 38] It's the epicenter of the whole tabernacle. If you look at chapter 25, the ark is the first thing and then the table and then the lampstand and then the next chapter is the tabernacle, outer tabernacle itself with all the curtains and then you go on and it's the altar outside of that and the courtyard outside of that and the priest.

And so what's happening is that it starts right in the middle and then it's showing you in these ever expanding kind of circles going outwards but right in the epicenter is the ark of the covenant.

It's the nuclear core of God's presence. The ark and the center of the ark, something called the mercy seat.

The mercy seat. So look at that again. There's the mercy seat mentioned. From verse 17, make a mercy seat of pure gold which is going to be right in the top in the middle of that ark and that's what the cherubim are going to be surrounding this thing called the mercy seat.

Now, the mercy seat, you've got to understand the significance of it. But on the day of atonement, which was the day once a year where these sacrifices would be made for the sins of the people of Israel, the high priest would once a year take the blood of the sacrifices and he would go into the tabernacle and then he would go not just to the holy place but the holy of holies which was right in the middle which is only one person could go there once a year and he would take this blood and he's trembling because this is a dangerous place.

[37 : 17] It's close to the presence of God. He sees the cherubim there. And he sprinkles the blood on the mercy seat. And he had to do that once a year because this mercy seat right in the nuclear core of God's presence among his people was the place where atonement happened for sins.

The place where sins could be paid for with blood. So that it was possible for God to dwell with his people. So that it was possible for God to meet with humans and them still to live.

which tells us that in the center of any place that sinful humans meet God's presence in the center of any place where humans and God meet needs to be a place where atonement happens, needs to be a mercy seat.

And that's why when Jesus came to this earth, he didn't come the first time to bring all of heaven's blessings to us. No, he came the first time to make a place where atonement can happen.

In your life and in mine. Without which there is no way for God to dwell here. If there is no place of atonement in your life, there is no way that God will dwell in your life.

[38 : 39] And that's why Jesus went to die on the cross. To make a place of atonement for your life. So that God could come in and dwell. Romans 3.25 Paul says, God presented him as an atoning sacrifice in his blood received through faith.

Now what's really interesting about Romans 3.25 is in the original language, Paul actually uses the word mercy seat. The same word that's used to describe this place in the middle of the tabernacle. Literally he says in Romans 3.25, God presented him as a mercy seat. As the place that makes it possible for God's presence to dwell in your life.

And that is why if you want to know God's presence in your life, and there is no greater thing than to know God's presence in your life. That's not going to happen by you going to some fancy service with lights and sounds or some divine presence, Holy Spirit service.

That's only going to happen if you come to him according to his pattern. And his pattern all starts at the mercy seat, at the cross of Jesus Christ.

[40 : 03] That's the only way to come into God's presence. That's the only way to know God's presence if it starts at the cross of Jesus Christ. That's why Jesus said in John 14 verse 6, you know what John 14 verse 6 says?

You might have noticed that verse as you drive on the M5 from the N1. Have you ever noticed that? I love it. Drive off the N1 onto the M5 and you see John 14 verse 6.

And you go, what's that? And hopefully you go home and look it up and memorize it. Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

No one comes to the Father but by me. Why? Why so exclusive, Jesus? Why only according to Jesus? Why not any other religions?

Why can't, don't all roads lead to God? Don't all religions eventually get there? No, Jesus says, only by me can you come to the Father because only He has provided a mercy seat.

[41 : 05] Only He has provided a place of atonement for your sins. And so only by coming to that place, the cross, can you ever truly experience God's presence in your life.

And you come to that place by confessing your failure to God. by confessing that there's nothing that you can do to earn God's place, God's presence, and God's blessing in your life.

By confessing your sins, repenting, coming humbly to God, and trusting alone in Jesus and His death on the cross for your sins, that is how you come to the mercy seat.

And that is how you can experience God's presence in your life. And it is the only way. And that is why at St. Mark's we don't have all the lights and the sounds and the smoke machines to give you this fantastic emotional high when you come here.

No, it all looks rather ordinary, doesn't it? We don't have all that emotional experience to go up into the presence of God on a Sunday.

[42 : 14] Sunday. But what we do is we preach Christ every Sunday and we preach Him crucified so that by truly embracing Him in your life, God's real presence might come down and dwell in your life every day.

Let's pray. Oh Lord, you want to dwell with us. Wow.

We're blown away when we think about the fact that even though we've messed up, you want to come into our lives. You want to come be with us and we thank you for sending Jesus Christ to tabernacle amongst us and to die for us so that our sins could be washed away and that you might come and dwell here in our very lives.

Help us, Lord, as we go out of this place to center our lives on the cross and to be the place where heaven and earth meet for the people around us.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.