



Mountain climbing is risky business. I'm sure many of you read Jon Krakauer's book, *Into Thin Air* about climbing Mt. Everest. Krakauer's unfolding of the story kept me on the edge of my seat from beginning to end. Unfortunately, several people died on that expedition, but what surprised me most was the amount of preparation required for such a climb. I didn't realize much of the preparation takes place on the mountain itself. Because the oxygen level at 29,000 feet is so thin, it takes the body some time to adjust to the altitude. They start at base camp which is 18,000 feet. Then, over a period of a month, the climbers make three trips above base camp, climbing 2,000 feet higher up the mountain each time, and then return to base camp. If someone were to just go to Mt. Everest and try to climb it without that period of acclimatization they'd surely die before they reached the summit.

Today, as we continue our series called The Story, we come not to Mt. Everest but to Mt. Sinai. We've seen how God delivered his people at the first Passover and then how Moses led them through the Red Sea. They were on their way to the Promised Land but they were far from ready to take possession of it. They traveled through the wilderness and came to this mountain in the desert of Sinai. They'd camp beside that mountain for eleven months. The rest of Exodus, all of Leviticus, and about half of Numbers will take place at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Call it base camp. From there, as Moses climbed up and down the mountain, God revealed himself to his people.

Don't get me wrong, Mt. Sinai is no Mt. Everest. The best guess is the mountain is about 7,500 feet high, but this mountain was more dangerous than Everest! The Lord descended on Mt. Sinai in fire and smoke billowed up from it like from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently, as did the people. It was a scary scene. God told Moses to have the people consecrate themselves. You don't trifle with God.

A lot will take place over the next eleven months. It was a time of preparation, training and learning for Moses and the people. The essence of it all was for these folks to understand what it meant for them to be in relationship with God; for God to dwell with them. Centuries earlier, God had made a covenant with Abraham, but now he makes another covenant with his people through Moses. This agreement would reveal more about what was required of them as his chosen people. God said to them, *"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried*

*you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation"* (19:4-6).

The question is, What does it mean to be God's people? Notice there's a condition here: *"IF you obey me fully and keep my covenant, THEN out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession."* So what would it mean to obey him fully and keep his covenant? The answer is found in two things: the law and the tabernacle. That's what Exodus 19-40 is all about, and that even extends through the book of Leviticus.

Let's be honest; we don't normally think of law and tabernacle as significant to our lives as followers of Christ. We normally think of them as relics of an Old Testament religious system that mean little or nothing to us today, but that's not true. As we'll see, the law and the tabernacle are still the way to have a relationship with God—today!

### **The Giving of the Law**

Let's start with the law. The law includes the Ten Commandments, which are recorded in Exodus 20, and the lesser known Book of the Covenant, which is found in chapters 21-24. The Ten Commandments give us the broad principles while the Book of the Covenant applies those principles to everyday life. For example, the eighth commandment says, *"Do not steal."* The Book of the Covenant says, *"Whoever steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it must pay back five head of cattle for the ox and four sheep for the sheep"* (22:1). The bottom line is God's people had been freed from slavery in Egypt, but they weren't free to do whatever they wanted. They were free to become servants of a new King who loved them and wanted the best for them. They were His people. They lived under His authority.

We live in a time where people don't like authority and nonnegotiable morality. We prefer a morality based on our own definition of what works for us. We bristle at the idea that someone else's morality should be ours. But when you really think about that, it's nonsense. Think of it this way: I've never been skydiving, but if you go skydiving you'll need to follow some basic rules. Before you participate in a dive, your "Jump Master" will give you the following instructions: Don't curl up into the fetal position (you might slip out of your harness). Be sure to arch your back and hold your arms out in front of you (to keep you from

slipping out of your harness and to get you flying in the correct position). Stick your legs out in front when landing (Duh!). These aren't negotiable, especially if you want to live. They're absolutes. Imagine another skydiving experience. A smiling instructor begins strapping a parachute to your back as he's walking you toward a plane. Over the plane's engine noise he yells, "We believe there are many ways to get from the plane to the ground. We respect everyone's desire to skydive and we don't believe in absolute rules. Just listen to your inner voice, respond honestly to your feelings, and have a memorable experience. We'll see you when you get down!" Would you get on that plane? Most people who go skydiving are glad there are strict, nonnegotiable rules. The rules are there for good reason. These commandments are the same way. They're there because our Creator wants us to live and enjoy life.

These laws weren't given in a vacuum, but rather in the context of a relationship already established by God. Look at verse 20:2.

**"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."**

Don't miss that because it's the key to everything. ***"I am the Lord YOUR God."*** That's already been established. How do you know that? Because you keep the rules? No! Because ***"I am the one who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."*** Before God ever gave them the law, he delivered them; he rescued them. Grace always comes before law. Redemption comes before obligation. Obeying the law is to be a response to the grace and love of God. The law was never meant to be a way to earn God's grace or to get him to love us more; it was always a response.

Through Jesus, the Passover lamb, God delivered us from slavery to sin and death. We belong to him. God says, "You're mine. I rescued you. I've made you a kingdom of priests. You're my treasured possession. Now follow me. Obey me." Our obedience is always a response to his gracious activity in our lives. We're called to both keep and love God's law, but it all starts with how we view God. Do we view him as one who longs to be with us, who rescued us at great cost, and who is always acting in our best interest? Obedience is always a trust issue. If you really trust in God's goodness and love, keeping his law will be much easier to do. God says, "Don't steal." If I trust God to meet my needs I don't have to steal.

What does the Lord tell us to do in his law? There's a pattern in the Ten Commandments. They deal with two key relationships. The first four deal with our vertical relationship with God: "You shall have no other gods before me... You shall not make for yourself an image... You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God... Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." In other words, there is only one God; don't whittle him down to size, put him first, even before your work. The last six deal with our horizontal relationship to our neighbor: "Honor your

father and mother... You shall not murder... You shall not commit adultery... You shall not steal... You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor... You shall not covet."

So the law focuses on these two relationships. Jesus confirmed this. He said if we love God with all our heart, mind and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves then we've kept the whole law. How different this is than what we hear today! People tell us morality has nothing to do with God. "Just be a good person and keep the golden rule," they say. The commandments won't let us do that. Loving God and loving people are linked together. You can't really love people if you don't first love God. It's not enough to be a humanitarian. Love for people flows from love for God. But it's also true if you really do love God that will show up in how you treat people. You can't separate the first four from the last six. So the Ten Commandments keep us looking up but they also keep our feet on the ground. We can't ignore God and focus on people, nor can we ignore people and focus on God.

Jesus simplifies the law with these two great commandments, but that doesn't mean it's easy. None of us have kept the law. Consider the tenth commandment, "You shall not covet." This command is unique. It's the hardest of all the commandments to keep because it's something that's internal. I covet every time I walk through our parking lot! It's not just about keeping the rules; it's about our desires and affections. Who can say they've desired something another had?

The Israelites at the base of Mt. Sinai are "Exhibit A" when it comes to breaking the commandments. In chapter 24 after Moses gave them the Ten Commandments we read, ***"When Moses went and told the people all the Lord's words and laws, they responded with one voice, 'Everything the Lord has said we will do'"*** (24:3). They went on and took part in this ceremony where the covenant was ratified by blood sacrifice. But then what happened in chapter 32? Israel fell into idolatry by making and worshipping a golden calf. God is angry. He sends Moses down the mountain with plans to destroy them, but Moses intercedes for the people and the Lord relents.

You see, the law condemns all of us. The law reveals our brokenness and sinfulness and our utter inability to please God on our own merits. This brings up the whole question of how God would continue to dwell with this people with all their propensity towards sin and outright rebellion. Over and over Moses and God go back and forth over this. We all struggle with the same issue. We want God to be with us, but we know how sinful we are. This is where the tabernacle comes in. The tabernacle was a portable tent the Israelites would take with them throughout their wilderness wanderings. It shows us God wants to dwell with his people. He wants to be with us. He wants to be in relationship with us. But how can he dwell with broken and sinful people like us? The tabernacle reveals the answer.

## Instruction for the Tabernacle

In chapter 25 while Moses is up on Mt. Sinai the Lord said to him, *"Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from everyone whose heart prompts them to give... Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you"* (25:2, 8-9). Then in the next six chapters Moses receives God's instructions for building the tabernacle and all that was to take place there in order for God to continue to dwell with them.

The tabernacle was to be a holy place where holy people called priests performed holy acts called sacrifices. When the story of the Bible began in the Garden of Eden there was no need for a holy place set apart for people to meet with God. Adam and Eve could speak with God anywhere. But the rebellion in Genesis 3 created a barrier between God and his creatures. Now they could only come into God's presence in special places. Remember how Noah built an altar right after the flood waters receded, and so did Abraham when he entered the Promised Land? God's people built altars to mark holy ground where they could come into the presence of God, most often with sacrifices. But now after the Exodus and out in the desert of Sinai God tells Moses to build a tabernacle, which would include a sacrificial altar. God gave them specific plans. He'd already supplied them with the needed materials, since he'd moved the Egyptians to give them goodbye gifts when they left Egypt (11:1-3). He'd also given many of the Israelites the skills necessary for the work (31:1-11). This tabernacle was placed at the center of Israel's encampment and represented God's dwelling with his people. Later it would be replaced by the Temple but for now it was a tent because God's people would be moving around in tents for the next 40 years and not yet established in the Promised Land.

The whole thing was constructed in a way that indicated God dwelt there. The innermost part was the most holy part of all. There the ark of the covenant, thought to be the footstool of God's throne, was placed. The cherubim figures whose wings covered the top of the ark faced down because not even these powerful spiritual beings could bear to look directly at God. The fabric roof of the tent was made of finely twisted linen. It was deep blue in color with cherubim woven in to evoke a picture of heaven because the tabernacle was a symbol of heaven on earth. There's so much we could say about the meaning of the furniture within the tabernacle but consider the candlesticks that gave light. Also known as the menorah, it's crafted like a flowering tree to remind people of the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve freely met with God. The tabernacle was like a return to Eden.

God also gave careful instruction for the holy acts and the holy people that were to perform them. The priests were chosen and set apart by God from the tribe of Levi, because the Levites were the ones who stepped up at the golden calf incident, strapped on their swords and killed 3,000 calf worshippers. Moses said to them, *"You have been set apart to the Lord today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day"* (32:29). These Levites were the ones who would now perform the sacrifices within the tabernacle. There were all kinds of sacrifices but the most important were called burnt offerings, made on behalf of those who repented of their sins and sought to restore their broken relationship with God. The worshipper would lay his hands on the head of the animal, identifying with it. The animal stood in the place of the sinner, and when the animal was completely burned it demonstrated that the sinner acknowledged their sin deserved death.

So Moses and the Israelites followed these instructions to a tee and they built the tabernacle (35:1-40:33). And then there's this glorious moment at the end of Exodus.

**Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle (40:34-35).**

You're probably wondering what all of this has to do with us, but consider this in light of the big story of the Bible. We have a God who wants to dwell with us but who also holds us accountable. He sent Adam and Eve away from his presence after they sinned. Abraham was a sinner. Isaac and Jacob were too. And now this people he brought out from slavery in Egypt are seen to be terrible sinners as well. Even Moses won't be allowed into the Promised land because of his sin. They represent all of us. How do we get back into the presence of God? How are we reconciled to him? How can he dwell with us? Is God just like a super granddaddy with a long white beard, whose sole business is turning his head and being nice?

When God passed by Moses, remember what he said: *"The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation"* (34:6-7). Both those things are true of God at the same time. He's compassionate, gracious and forgiving, but he also holds people accountable. So how can we have a relationship with him? How can he dwell with us? With the tabernacle, God graciously says, "Here's how I can dwell with you. Here's how you can approach me. Here's how we can enjoy each other."

Fast forward to today. All of this points to the person and work of Jesus. We talked about holy places, holy people and holy acts. When Jesus came he was the holy place, the tabernacle of God. The apostle John said of him, *"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling (tabernacled) among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth"* (John 1:14). Jesus is the very presence of God, and when he ascended he sent the Holy Spirit, who dwells in us. We don't need special holy places any longer. We're the holy place. He dwells in us both individually and together as a church. Paul said, *"Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?"* (1 Cor. 6:19).

What about holy people and holy acts? What about the priests and the sacrifices? Listen to what Hebrews says, *"Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest (Jesus) had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God... For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy"* (Hebrews 11:11-14). So Jesus is our high priest who offered himself as the one and only sacrifice for sin so we could appear before God as perfect.

The tabernacle was a holy place with holy people called priests who performed holy acts called sacrifices. The apostle Peter put the three of these together when he said, *"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"* (1 Peter 2:5). Just as the presence of God filled the tabernacle, so the Holy Spirit fills us, making us holy people (priests) who serve God in this world and offer up sacrifices, not of animals, but of ourselves. That's why Paul could urge us *"to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship."* And that has implications for how we live our lives. In the next breath he says, *"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind..."* (Romans 12:1-2). There is a moral obligation to being a priest. There's a moral obligation to being the tabernacle of God. We can't be conformed to this world.

Here's the bottom line: God will do anything short of sinning to ensure he can dwell with his people. As you may know, my dad passed away in July. The week before that I was in Africa. As the days wore on my dad was failing rapidly, and it didn't look like he'd make it through the week. I began to realize he would probably die before I was scheduled to get home, so I did everything I could to catch an early flight home. It wasn't easy, but I was determined. Money didn't matter. I was even willing to leave Dan Reid behind, which no one was too happy about. I spent four hours one night in a Turkish airlines office at the airport in Cameroon trying to get a seat but had to go back to the hotel and wait until the next morning. Finally, both Dan and I were able to get a flight. I arrived in SFO and Lynn drove me straight to Sacramento. As we approached his house in the car, there was this awesome sunset with a fiery sky and a beautiful rainbow all hovering over his home. At that moment I realized, as important as it was for me to be with my dad when he passed the next day, God was there the whole time.

My desire was to dwell with my dad. God's desire is to dwell with us. That's always been his desire. He dwelt with Adam and Eve in the garden. He dwelt with Israel in the tabernacle and later the Temple. He dwells in us now. But, let's face it. We live in bodies that are wasting away. We live in a world that at times seems like the dwelling place of Satan rather than the dwelling place of God. But listen to this. The day will come when we will dwell where he dwells and he will dwell where we dwell.

The apostle John wrote, *"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth... I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away'"* (Rev. 21:1-4).

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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Catalog No. 1404-5N