

The God Who Is Holy (Part 1 of 6)

The Ark, Table, and Lampstand: Sacred Symbols of Transcendence and Immanence

Exodus 25:8-22

Mark Vroegop

"And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it. "They shall make an ark of acacia wood. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, a cubit and a half its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height. You shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and outside shall you overlay it, and you shall make on it a molding of gold around it. You shall cast four rings of gold for it and put them on its four feet, two rings on the one side of it, and two rings on the other side of it. You shall make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. And you shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark to carry the ark by them. The poles shall remain in the rings of the ark; they shall not be taken from it. And you shall put into the ark the testimony that I shall give you. "You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its breadth. And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end. Of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be. 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 25:8–22, ESV)

I would like to ask you a few questions about worship:

- 1) Why did you come to a worship service this morning? There are so many other things you could do, so why did you decide to come? What is it that you are looking for?
- 2) Think of the best "worship experience" you have ever had. What was it about that event that made an imprint on your mind and heart?
- 3) How vital is congregational worship to your life? How many weeks or months or years could you survive without corporate worship, and what would your life look like without it?

So, you are here. That's great. But why?

Sometimes we don't even think to ask ourselves questions like this, and we slip into a habitual pattern of just doing what we've always done because it is what we've always done. We come to church, sing a few songs, listen to a sermon, say "Hi" to some people we like, avoid the people we don't, and we leave.

Now I know that is probably a gross over-simplification and (hopefully) an overly pessimistic picture of your worship experience. But I would imagine that there are times – maybe even seasons – when you wonder, “What am I *really* doing here?”

Worship Matters

Over the next six weeks we are going to look at the Tabernacle and the early design for worship in the life of Israel. But the point of Exodus 25-33 is not about the specifics of the Tabernacle; the real point is about the God who will be worshipped in the Tabernacle. Worship mattered because God mattered.

Now there is a great deal of time and attention given to the construction of the Tabernacle. Chapters 25-30 provide detailed instructions on the Tabernacle itself, the objects used for worship, the priests’ consecration, and their attire. And if you look to chapters 36-39 you will see that Exodus records the construction process. In other words, there are six chapters telling us what the Tabernacle should look like and then four chapters telling us that the people did exactly what the Lord had commanded. So the Tabernacle is important enough to record the detailed instructions and the detailed construction. The point? Worship matters.

As we study this section you will see it is ripe with very specific and intricate details. The size of each Tabernacle element, the fabrics, and the colors are all identified with an attention to detail that can be a bit overwhelming. And yet this is also a part of the divine design. Part of the beauty of God being God is His attention to unbelievably creative detail. The Tabernacle was meant to communicate the worthiness of worship, and every detail mattered.

This is an important element to note here especially if you have an artistic bent. Church history is always swinging on a pendulum, and there was a season where aesthetics and the arts were too important to the church. But then the church moved in a very utilitarian direction, only being concerned about function. What we see in the Tabernacle is the importance of place. We see that the facility of the Tabernacle wasn’t everything, but it wasn’t nothing either. So if God has given you an artistic bent, and if you have an ability to use colors, textures, tones, or design to communicate a message, you need to celebrate that gift and use it for the magnification of God’s glory. Matter can make worship better.

You see, God is communicating here. He is not only speaking and giving His law. The Tabernacle itself is sending a message. One thing I found fascinating in my research is that it seems in the section of Scripture that God is following a creation motif in instructions regarding the Tabernacle. There are seven times between chapters 25-31 where the text records, “The Lord said to Moses” (see 25:1, 30:11, 17, 22, 34, 31:1), and the final time is in 31:12 – a command that involves Sabbath rest. So it seems that the instructions regarding the Tabernacle are following a re-creation theme.

Now that makes a lot of sense if you understand the Tabernacle to be a divinely prescribed pattern (see 25:9) that was meant to create a piece of heaven on earth. If heaven is “God with man” then the Tabernacle was designed to foreshadow what is yet to come. The writer of Hebrews puts it this way:

"They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain."'" (Hebrews 8:5, ESV)

In other words, everything about the Tabernacle was meant to send a message. It was meant to be a conduit to point the people toward God. It was designed to give them a taste of what the New Heavens and the New Earth will be like. I read somewhere recently where the author said, "If you don't like worship now, what makes you think you are going to love it for eternity." In other words, if worship doesn't matter to you now, why would you think it would matter to you in the future?

My aim here is to simply challenge the natural tendency that we as humans have to fall into patterns that detract from God's original purposes. When it comes to worship, I hope you would approach your assembly here together as an extremely important moment in your life. My hope is that through this section you'll come to see and feel the weight of why worship matters.

Our Role: Participation

Before we get into the specifics regarding the Tabernacle and its furnishings, it is important to note that divinely designed worship is not something that human beings passively receive. It has always been the case that there is an important role for God's people to fulfill. God prescribes the worship, but it is facilitated by His people. In other words, they provide the space for their worship. Their giving was a part of the worship expression.

Materials were needed for the construction of this worship center, but notice the way in which they were to be given:

"Speak to the people of Israel, that they take for me a contribution. From every man whose heart moves him you shall receive the contribution for me." (Exodus 25:2, ESV)

Precious resources are going to be collected. Verses 3-6 identify them for us, but take note of the principle established early in the Biblical record: God is worshipped by cheerful giving. After all, God doesn't need their resources. He has already told them that "all the earth is mine" (Ex. 19:5). So God doesn't need resources per se. The generosity of the people is not about some lack in God's storehouse; generosity is about personal participation in worship. Giving is an individual expression that says, "Worship Matters." When you give in any way, but especially to the place where you worship, it says, "Worship really matters."

Finally, don't miss the significance of verse eight. Savor the beauty of what is said here: mankind could create a place where God would meet with us.

"And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst." (Exodus 25:8, ESV)

Just think of the beauty and the value of being able to take human possessions and put them together to facilitate the presence of the God of the universe. How valuable is that? So if you believe that worship matters, if you value the powerful presence of God in your life, then giving will be a part of the equation. It is how we participate in the transcendence and immanence of God. Worship matters so much that we could give so that it can happen.

God's Transcendence and Immanence

What happens in worship? I would suggest to you that worship is our response to God's distance and His nearness. Worship is our response to the fact that God is not like us but He likes us. Worship is our response to transcendence and the immanence of God.

I do not know if you are familiar with these terms, so let me define them for you. First, to be transcendent means that God is superior or supreme. It means that God is beyond us, greater than us – that He is "other." To reflect on the transcendence of God means that you bask in the beauty of His holiness, His majesty, His greatness, or His power.

Immanence, on the other hand, means that God is close, dwelling nearby, intimate, and personal. It captures the manner in which God loves His people, is concerned for their needs, rescues them, and has a relationship with them.

True, robust worship reflects on both the transcendence and the immanence of God. It is a response to the "otherness" and the "nearness" of God. And this is reflected in the design and the elements of the Tabernacle.

The Ark of the Covenant

Interestingly and instructively the first aspect of the Tabernacle described in Exodus 25 is the Ark of the Covenant. This is by design. The Ark of the Covenant is the signature element of the Tabernacle, and that is why it is listed first. Of all the things in the Tabernacle, the Ark is the most important. We will learn why in a moment.

Verses 10-16 give the basic dimensions and composition of the Ark. It was actually a fairly small piece – approximately 3'9" long and 2'4" wide and tall. It probably could be better described as a chest. It was to be made of wood and overlaid with gold.

The Ark was to be portable. There were rings through which poles were inserted and kept in place so that the Ark could be transported easily and so that it would not be touched by human hands. There was famous instance in which the Ark was physically touched by a man named Uzzah during the reign of David, and he was instantly killed (see 2 Sam 6:3-7). The Ark was the holiest of all the elements and we learn why in verses 17-22.

On top of the Ark was a cover made of pure gold. On either side of this "cover" were gold cherubim whose wings spread over the mercy seat toward each other. Cherubim were a familiar angelic creature to people who lived in the Ancient Near East. They were viewed as heavenly beings or angels who surround and guard the glory of God. Cherubim first appear in Genesis 3 when they are set as guards of the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden after Adam and Even have been expelled because of their rebellion.

Cherubim are synonymous with the holy presence of God. They were an important symbol for God's presence, and the Ark is not the only place that they are found. The fabrics that will serve as the covering for the Tabernacle and the specific veil between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies were to have the design of cherubim woven into them (see Ex 26:1, 31). This symbol is so important that God is often described as the one who is "enthroned between the cherubim."

"The LORD reigns; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!" (Psalm 99:1, ESV). The Ark was the most important feature of the Tabernacle because it represented the presence of God. It was the early symbol of heaven.

But the Ark also communicated something about atonement. Verse 17 in the ESV calls the cover a "mercy seat." The NIV renders this as "an atonement cover." So there is something more here than just decoration and symbolism. Let me explain. The word used here basically means "cover," but Old Testament scholars tell us that the Hebrew word here has a broader meaning that extends beyond the physical. Words often have this kind of meaning. For example, if my desk phone rang and Michelle, our church receptionist, said "The White House is on line one for you" I would know that we are talking about more than a facility in Washington, D.C. J.A. Motyer in his commentary on Exodus says that the word for "cover" in its intensive form comes from a word which means to "pay a price to cover an offense" and that it was a primary Old Testament term for propitiation.¹ In case you are not familiar with the term propitiation, it is a theological word for atonement that restores the relationship between God and human beings.

Inside the Ark was the testimony or the copy of the Law that God had given Moses. The Law recorded the holy standard of God, and covering the Law of God in the Ark of the Covenant was this "mercy seat." The most holy day of the year in Israel's calendar was the Day of Atonement. On this day the High Priest would take an offering of blood into the Holy of Holies and sprinkle blood on the mercy seat to make atonement for the people (Lev. 16:14). And when God talks about His relationship with people as mediated through the Tabernacle, He connects it directly to this mercy seat:

"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)

When you put all of this together, it is a stunning picture of the starting point of God's relationship with his people. There is a message being sent here, and I think it is loud and clear. The Ark is so holy that it cannot be touched, and it is kept in the Holy of Holies, a place entered only once a year by the High Priest. It contains the Law of God with a covering on which are symbols of God's presence. Once a year blood is sprinkled on this "covering." And it is here – between the cherubim – that God will meet with His people. Therefore, it seems obvious that the Ark was the central feature of the Tabernacle because the central message of the entire Bible is atonement. The Ark was the center of gravity because atonement is the only means that an unholy people can be in the presence of a holy, transcendent God.

Everything about the Ark was meant to communicate the "otherness" of God, and this is a vital part of true worship. We'll talk about the nearness of God in a moment, but I think worship begins with a right understanding of the holiness of God, the distance of God, and the reality that God is not like us. Let me give you a few examples:

¹ J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus – The Bible Speaks Today*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2005), 254.

- Preparation – As you think about coming to Sunday worship, you ought to think about the fact that you coming to meet corporately with God’s people in the presence of a holy God. You ought to anticipate this gathering well-rested and singularly focused.
- Participation – As a worship service takes place, you ought to be engaged and looking for the ways God is going to reveal Himself to you through congregational singing, scripture reading, and prayer. You ought to be engaged because you are meeting with God.
- Unction – There are moments when you know that God is speaking. When it seems as though God, by His Spirit, has moved upon an individual or an entire congregation. We ought to long for, pray for, and anticipate those seasons.
- Reflection – God has you here for a reason. What is it? You ought to take time to reflect and to talk with others about your experience of God. You ought to be looking to respond because meeting with God is never an end in and of itself.

Of course meeting with your Creator is something you do personally, but there is something unique, helpful, and powerful about that experience in a corporate sense. In other words, we need to be gathered together on a regular basis to consider and bask in the transcendence of God. While this church building is not the Tabernacle, there still is something sacred, other-worldly, and transcendent that happens here.

The Table and Lampstand

The next two Tabernacle elements were to be kept in the Holy Place, not the Holy of Holies. This particular room would be frequented by the Priests. It was a room that contained elements that had to be maintained weekly.

Verses 23-30 give us the description of the table. It was also made of wood and overlaid with gold. It also contained rings and poles for its transportation. But the main feature of the Table was not the table itself but the bread that was placed upon it.

Leviticus 24:5-9 give us more detail about how the Table functioned:

“You shall take fine flour and bake twelve loaves from it; two tenths of an ephah shall be in each loaf. And you shall set them in two piles, six in a pile, on the table of pure gold before the LORD. And you shall put pure frankincense on each pile, that it may go with the bread as a memorial portion as a food offering to the LORD. Every Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange it before the LORD regularly; it is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever. And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the LORD’s food offerings, a perpetual due.” (Leviticus 24:5–9, ESV)

A table with food which was consumed by the priests was designed to communicate the close fellowship of God with His people. The Table symbolized the nearness of God and His provision for

His people. It was designed to communicate “He is here, and here as the one who gives sustenance.”²

It isn’t hard to see the parallels between this table and what we often call the Lord’s Table. Everything about the Lord’s Table is meant to communicate nearness and sustenance: “This is my body given for you” (Luke 22:19). A table in worship communicates fellowship and provision.

Another furnishing in the Holy Place was the lampstand. Verses 31-40 give the specific instructions for this piece. It was to be made entirely of gold – all one piece (v 31). There were six branches, three on each side, a single light in the middle, and the cups were like almond buds.

Now there is not a clear and convincing statement as to the spiritual significance of that lampstand. So we have to be careful not to “over-read” something into the text that just isn’t there. But here are a few thoughts.

First, Leviticus 24:1-4 tells us that Aaron was to prepare the lampstand from evening to morning. The Tabernacle at night would glow with the light from the lampstand, a likely symbol of God’s presence. Light from the Tabernacle would have shown throughout the Israelite camp. Second, since the lampstand was built to look like an almond tree, it seems that an image of living tree is meant to be symbolized here. Third, since fire and light indicated God’s presence in other places in the Bible (i.e., the burning bush), it would make sense that the Tabernacle would include this motif.

When you put all of this together, it seems that the lampstand was an important symbol of God’s presence or His close proximity to His people. The light that it gave would have made the Tabernacle appear to be a tent with someone living inside. The Lampstand and the Table both highlight the nearness, the presence, and the close proximity of God to His people. They highlight His immanence.

This is the other aspect of worship that is marvelous to consider. True worship considers the “otherness” of God, but it also celebrates the *relationship* we have with Him. True worship ponders what John said in John 1 – “*In the beginning was the Word...In him was life and the life was the light of men...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory*” (John 1:1, 4, 14). Worship considers the beautiful reality that God really cares, really loves us, and is present among us. It celebrates the nearness of God. Worship meditates on the fact that God is not some distant uninvolved and uncaring divinity; He is near. He is personal, loving, and kind.

Worship is the stunning consideration of two realities: the transcendence and the immanence of God. It is a heart that says: “He’s unbelievable. He’s right here.” Worship is the divinely designed intersection between the “otherness” and the “nearness” God, and the Tabernacle sent this very clear message.

God would be the center of their life. Nothing would be more mysterious or more glorious. Nothing would be more important or more life-giving. The worship of Yahweh would define and mark the people of Israel.

² Motyer, 254.

The Transcendent and Immanent Jesus

When you read about this intersection between the transcendent and the immanent in the Tabernacle, it points you to consider and worship Jesus. He was the ultimate expression of God's otherness and His nearness. He is God in the flesh. He is the God-man.

Hebrews 9:23-28 gives us a great summary of the way in which things like the Tabernacle point to him:

"Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him." (Hebrews 9:23–28, ESV)

So the transcendence and immanence in the Tabernacle, as glorious as it was, is only a picture of what was inaugurated by Christ and what will ultimately be fulfilled in the New Heaven and the New Earth.

The center of spiritual gravity for Israel was the Ark of the Covenant. But the center of spiritual gravity in the New Testament is Jesus. Therefore, when we come to worship we are meeting with Him. Our singing, our greeting, our giving, our listening, and our responding to His Word are all interactions with him. He has filled us with His Spirit such that we have fellowship with one another and with Him.

True worship is not about being friendly to one another, singing songs that you like, getting something out of the sermon, or learning about the Bible. It is personal and corporate meeting of God's people as they respond to the transcendence and the immanence of God through the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is "God among us."

So why did you come to worship today? What did you get out of the sermon? Those are not bad questions, but they are not the sum total of worship. True worship basks in the beauty and the grace-filled trauma of a God who is not like us but who has come to us.

True worship is meeting with your God so that your heart bursts forth in loving, risk-taking obedience in a world that desperately needs to know Him. It is being filled with fullness of God.

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