

LESSON 1: THE PURPOSE OF THE SANCTUARY

WELCOME to the fascinating study of God's sanctuary. In just a few lessons, we'll examine some of the most faith-building passages of Bible teaching and prophecy, and find an often-overlooked revelation of God's wisdom and love.

But before jumping into all the details, we want to get one major idea in place—God's purpose for the sanctuary. True enough, we could probably find many different things that God accomplished through the sanctuary, but there is one major, underlying intention that runs consistently through the entire Scripture record. That's where we want to start.

The sanctuary is introduced to us in the fifteenth chapter of Exodus. This first mention is only a passing poetic reference (though we will eventually find that even this is significant). Ten chapters later, God gives the definitive command that provides the starting point of our study.

1. What did God tell the Israelites to do?

Exodus 25:8 - Let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.

Isn't it wonderful that God wants to live with His people and be at the center of their lives? Here we see the sanctuary's purpose. At first it looks like a simple matter. After all, God can do anything, so if He wants to live with us, what is there to stop Him?

2. How important is this matter of "togetherness" in God's mind?

Genesis 3:8-9 - And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. Then the LORD God called to Adam and said to him, "Where are you?"

Revelation 21:3 - And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God."

Adam's sense of guilt made it natural for him to hide from God, just as our guilt does to us. But that's not what Jesus wants, and it only leads us to sorrow and death. So as soon as sin entered this world, God began seeking sinners. All through the Bible we see Him seeking to win our trust and love. This was Jesus' most common theme—just think of the parables of the lost sheep and the prodigal son.

The good news is that, way down at the other end of the Bible, we are told that He will win back the total love and trust of His people. When sin and Satan and death itself have been destroyed, He will finally be able to dwell in peace with His people.

3. What keeps God from dwelling with us now?

Isaiah 59:2 - But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you.

Some people look at this verse and see the whole thing as God's problem. "He's the one that's all upset. He needs to just lighten up a bit and accept people as they are instead of making such a big thing out of a few mistakes here and there."

4. Does God have an attitude problem? Or is there some other point of concern?

Isaiah 33:14–15 - The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness has seized the hypocrites: "Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?" He who walks righteously and speaks uprightly.

When God comes to visit His people, not everyone has the same reaction. The "sinners in Zion" see only "devouring fire" and "everlasting burnings," and can't imagine who could possibly live with that! But it's not that way with those who "walk righteously and speak uprightly."

5. What do the righteous see when God comes to them?

Isaiah 33:17 - Your eyes will see the King in His beauty.

What a contrast! There is a huge difference in the perspective of these two groups. Maybe it's not God's problem, after all. Isaiah 33 goes on to describe what God's plan was for the nation of Israel in Old Testament times. The scene is one of eternal peace, happiness, and health.

6. What is the one common characteristic of all those who have a place in God's plan for eternity?

Isaiah 33:24 - The people who dwell in it will be forgiven their iniquity.

Notice this point! It is our iniquities that separate us from God. Not because God has an attitude problem but because our guilt makes it impossible for us to meet Him in peace. He wants to live with us. He wants to forgive us. But far too many of those He loves would see His presence only as "devouring fire" and "everlasting burnings." By refusing to accept God's forgiveness and clinging to their iniquities, the wicked have made it impossible for Him to approach them. But those who are willing to accept God's gift of forgiveness have their iniquities removed.

This is the purpose of the sanctuary—to allow God to come close to His people while they are yet sinful.

7. What part of the earthly sanctuary especially symbolized this point?

Leviticus 16:2 - The LORD said to Moses: "Tell Aaron your brother not to come at just any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat which is on the ark, lest he die; for I will appear in the cloud above the mercy seat."

The veil was hung between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place to shield the priests and even the individual worshipers in the courtyard from the "Shekinah," the visible glory of God's presence. The veil was not to cut them off from His presence entirely, for then they would be left in spiritual darkness. The veil was constructed so that it did not extend all the way to the ceiling of the sanctuary, thus the glory of the Lord could still be seen indirectly, and could still draw the hearts of all who would respond to God's entreaties.

8. What was this veil like?

Exodus 26:31 - "You shall make a veil woven of blue, purple, and scarlet thread, and fine woven linen. It shall be woven with an artistic design of cherubim."

Even in the dazzling setting of the sanctuary, with gold and silver all around, the veil was considered one of the most beautiful parts of God's design. It was supposed to be, for God wanted His service to be attractive. Just as in

the New Testament, Jesus said He would “draw all peoples to Myself,” so in the Old Testament He was seeking to draw His people with “gentle cords” and with “bands of love.” (John 12:32, Hosea 11:4)

9. Did God like the veil?

Mark 15:38 - *Then the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.*

The veil was miraculously torn in two at the time of Jesus’ death. This was no small matter. Jewish historians tell us that the veil in Herod’s temple was massive, some accounts saying it was as much as nine inches thick. That’s a lot harder than tearing up a phone book!

But wasn’t that disrespectful? After all, the veil was an important part of God’s plan, and it was made just as He had directed. Why this violence?

God was making a point. With the death of Christ, the plan for our salvation had taken a giant step forward. As the final act of the Old Testament system of symbolic sacrifices and ceremonies, God showed His eagerness to remove all barriers between Himself and His people. Instead of reverently drawing the curtain aside, He ripped it in two. Though it was necessary that we be shielded from the fullness of His glory, He made clear that the ultimate goal is complete openness and fellowship. This is the purpose of the sanctuary.

10. What did the veil represent?

Hebrews 10:19 - *Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh.*

Just as the veil shielded men from the glory of God while still allowing them access, so Christ came in human flesh to show what God is like without overwhelming us with His glory.

11. What was Jesus’ work? And how was it to be accomplished?

Matthew 1:21–23 - *“And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, “God with us.”*

As through all of the Old Testament, now as the New Testament era began, God’s desire and Jesus’ lifework was to “save His people from their sins.” But only as we come to know God for what He really is will we trust Him to save us from our sins. We “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) Indeed, none on earth have known anything but a sinful world, and though we aren’t entirely comfortable with our sinful surroundings, it takes a great act of faith to let go of all we have ever known, and accept this forgiveness of God which saves us from our sins.

And so from the very beginning of His life on earth, Jesus was “God with us.” Near the close of His life He would say, “he who sees Me sees Him who sent Me,” and “He who has seen Me has seen the Father.” (John 12:45, 14:9) Paul says “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them.” (2 Corinthians 5:19) All this was to win our love, to invite our trust, to increase our faith, so that we might accept the salvation from sin that Jesus offered. This is the purpose of the sanctuary, carried out in the life of Christ.

12. Is there really any more importance to the sanctuary after Jesus’ death? Or was it strictly an Old Testament thing?

Hebrews 8:1–2 - *Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man.*

Good news! The sanctuary is still in business! But the action has moved from the earthly sanctuary to the heavenly sanctuary.

13. “Heavenly sanctuary”? Is there really such a thing?

Read again the first two verses of Hebrews chapter 8.

Hebrews 8:1-2 - Now of the things which we have spoken this is the sum: We have such a high priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens; A minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man.

The sanctuary that man erected would be the portable sanctuary built just after the exodus, or Solomon’s temple, or Zerubbabel’s temple, or maybe Herod’s temple. But these earthly sanctuaries were constructed based upon the sanctuary that exists in heaven.

14. What relationship exists between the heavenly and earthly sanctuaries?

Exodus 25:8-9 - And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. According to all that I shew thee, after the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make it.

The earthly sanctuaries were a “copy” of the heavenly. God showed Moses the pattern, and told him to make one like it. In fact, God was very specific on that point. Four times in Numbers 25–27 God tells Moses to “see to it that you make them according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain.” When it was all done, Moses—the Quality Control Officer for the project—“looked over all the work, and indeed they had done it; as the LORD had commanded, just so they had done it. And Moses blessed them.” (Exodus 39:43)

15. So there’s a sanctuary in heaven... but is anything important going on there?

Hebrews 9:11 - But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands.

Hebrews 9:24 - For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us.

We see from these verses that Christ has dedicated Himself to working as our High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary. We could ask many intriguing questions about the heavenly sanctuary. God hasn’t told us everything about it, by any means, but perhaps the most useful piece of information for us at this time is that the earthly sanctuary was a “copy” of the heavenly.

16. If Moses actually saw the heavenly sanctuary way back at the time of the Exodus, how old is it?

Ezekiel 28:14–16 - You were the anointed cherub who covers; I established you; you were on the holy mountain of God; you walked back and forth in the midst of fiery stones. You were perfect in your ways from the day you were created, till iniquity was found in you. By the

abundance of your trading you became filled with violence within, and you sinned; therefore I cast you as a profane thing out of the mountain of God; and I destroyed you, O covering cherub, from the midst of the fiery stones.

These verses are talking about Lucifer, the covering cherub, who became Satan, the adversary, the originator of sin. The only place covering cherubs appear in the Bible is in the throne room of God—in the sanctuary. Which means that long before there was sin, God had the sanctuary in place, ready to deal with the problem.

17. So is the heavenly sanctuary going to last forever?

Revelation 21:10 - *[An angel] carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God.*

Revelation 21:22 - *But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.*

In the next-to-last chapter of the Bible, the apostle John describes the New Jerusalem, the city of God, as it descends to the earth. The description is quite extensive. He tells about the city's gates, walls, foundations, streets, and dimensions. "But," he says, "I saw no temple in it."

18. But why get rid of the sanctuary? What if God needs the sanctuary again?

Nahum 1:9 - *What do you conspire against the LORD? He will make an utter end of it. Affliction will not rise up a second time.*

Apparently the sanctuary (or temple) is no longer needed. It has served its purpose of ridding the universe of sin. Revelation describes the time when God has saved His people from their sins, and is free to dwell directly with them, with no need for anything to interfere. And Nahum tells us that this victory is complete. Sin, the great affliction of this world, will not rise up again. The sanctuary has been so effective that it has put itself out of business, for all eternity.

But that's OK, because that was its purpose from the very beginning.

19. What does the sanctuary tell us about the fate of sin?

Psalms 73:1-3 - *Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart. But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped. For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*

Psalms 73:17 - *Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end.*

Many people wonder why God's people suffer while the wicked seem to prosper. But the Bible tells us that, within the sanctuary service there is an answer. In these studies we will discover more fully what this answer is.

But in a nutshell, the sanctuary service shows that there is a controversy that is being played out between God and Satan. God allows this so we will understand how wicked and deceitful Satan is. But, praise God, the sanctuary also reveals that he is a defeated foe. Jesus defeated him at the cross when He died for our sins.

20. In conclusion, how can we find the way to be fully restored to a relationship with God?

Ps. 77:1 - *Thy way, O God, is in the sanctuary.*

Lesson Summary:

- It is God's desire to live with His people.
- But sin caused the separation between God and His people because sin prevents His people from dwelling with Him in peace.
- God has established the sanctuary in order to be able to live with His people while removing their sins from them.
- The veil of the sanctuary allowed one to approach God without being consumed. This veil represents the ministry of Christ.
- When sin is finally eradicated, there will be no more need for a sanctuary. God can live directly with His people.

My Response:

It is my desire to understand God's plan of salvation as seen in His sanctuary.

Next Lesson: The History of the Sanctuary