

God's Presence with His People

In this series of articles, we're focusing on one verse from the gospel of John. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14) We've unpacked, at some length, the phrase, "And the Word became flesh...." In this current article, I want to begin to dissect the second phrase from this verse, "and dwelt among us..." This phrase is filled with images of the Old Testament. The verb that John uses here translated "dwelt" comes from a Greek noun which literally means "tabernacle." John makes this verb out of the noun "dwelt" by declaring that the Word, "tabernacled among us." The reference to the tabernacle during the time of the wilderness wanderings of Israel can't be missed. The tabernacle is incredibly important because it's directly tied to the "glory of the LORD." That's the connection that John makes beginning in the third phrase of this verse, "...and we have seen (beheld) his glory..." Because they touch on Old Testament truths that overlap, it will be helpful to look at these two phrases together.

To discover the importance of the Old Testament tabernacle we can look to the book of Exodus. There we find God's detailed instructions for the design and function of this holy dwelling place where he chooses to be especially present with his people. When all God's instructions were completed, "the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the *glory of the LORD* filled the tabernacle." There's a visible guarantee of God's continuing *presence* with Israel in the cloud by day and the fire by night (Ex. 40:34-38). Old Testament scholar Tremper Longman writes, "During the Old Testament time period the faithful would go to certain locations in order to meet God in worship. The tabernacle was such a place, and the symbolism of the entire structure revolved around that one central idea: The holy God was *present* in the midst of the camp...."

Although the tabernacle was the place where God dwelt with his people—because of their sins—they were forbidden to go directly into certain areas of that elaborate edifice. There was a complex system of dealing with the sins of the people that included priests and sacrifices. This included the "Most Holy place" where only the high priest could enter and only once a year on the Day of Atonement. John, in this gospel, calls our attention to the fact that the tabernacle was only a shadow that pointed forward to the perfect tabernacle and later the temple of Jesus' body (John 2:19). "When we view the tabernacle in terms of *God's presence*, it becomes obvious how Jesus, our Immanuel ("God with us"), fulfills the role the tabernacle played in the time between Moses and Solomon." So, then, the imagery can't be

missed. John is saying at least this: *Where Jesus is, God is!* Jesus was the once for all sacrifice for sins as well as the Perfect High Priest. The great curtain that separated the Holy place from the Most Holy place, was “torn in two from top to bottom...” at the time of Christ’s death, signifying that the way to direct access to God is now in Jesus Christ (Mt. 27:51).

And this is exactly what the writer of Hebrews says. “Therefore brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, *by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,* and since we have a great priest over the *house of God,* let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith....” (Heb. 10:19-22)

John goes on to say that “we *beheld* his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father...” The word translated “have seen” or “beheld” is never used of having a vision. Rather, it can refer to “looking intently at something or someone” or “meditating deeply” with the purpose of deep understanding. It’s clear from the context that John is speaking directly of those who truly beheld the historic Jesus of Nazareth—the disciples and many others in the first century (1 John 1:1). This verse gives us so much *doctrinal* truth that should profoundly impact us, *practically,* in our daily lives. The Old Testament tabernacle—the place where God was *especially present* with his Covenant people—is fulfilled in “Immanuel, God with us” who “tabernacles” with his people. Just as God chose to especially meet with his Old Covenant people in the tabernacle and later the temple, he is *especially present* with Christians when we gather in the local church for corporate worship each and every Lord’s Day! Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Illinois.