



The Mystery of Prayer & Our Purpose in the World

The Story of Scripture – Part 8

Today we've got a lot to cover and this text is awesome. They all are, of course, but this one is even more mind-blowing than others. This last Friday night, people gathered together all across this room here at Tysons for a prayer gathering, from 8:00 to midnight, but it was more like 12:30. It was awesome. These Friday night prayer gatherings are becoming my most favorite moments in this church.

Also, the Friday after Easter, April 26, we'll have Secret Church, another long night from 7:00 to 1:00 a.m. We like doing things late. We're going to dive into an intense Bible study on prayer and fasting and the pursuit of God. This is the first time Secret Church will be hosted here, although it's a simulcast with 60,000 other people.

One of the things we're going to dive into that night is something I want us to think about today, and that is how does prayer work? If God is sovereign—if God is in control of all things and all of God's purposes will come to pass—then why pray? Does prayer really change anything? Does prayer actually have an effect? Today I want you to see that it does. I want you to see that your prayers affect the way God acts in the world.

If this idea does not blow your mind, then you need to check your pulse. I want you to see that God uses your prayers. I'm not just talking about the person beside you or in front of you or behind you. God uses your prayers to accomplish world-changing purposes. You might think, "That sounds like preacher talk," but it's not and I want to show it to you.

So we're going to start in Exodus 32:7. Here's the set-up: God was meeting with Moses on Mt. Sinai, giving His law to His people, including the Ten Commandments. While Moses was meeting with God up on the mountain, God's people—the Israelites—were down at the base of the mountain indulging in idolatry. The blood of God's covenant with them had barely had time to dry when they said, "We're going to make a golden calf to worship instead of God." They were celebrating this idol in their midst, diving into all kinds of immorality.

So that's what's happening at the bottom of the mountain, while God was saying these words to Moses at the top of the mountain. Exodus 32:7-10:

⁷ And the Lord said to Moses, 'Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. ⁸ They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought

you up out of the land of Egypt!”⁹ And the Lord said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰ Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.’

Did you catch that? God just said, “I’m going to pour out My holy, right, just wrath upon these people.” So what does Moses do? He prays. Listen to verses 11-14:

¹¹ But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. ¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.’”

God said, “I’m going to pour out My wrath on this people,” and Moses pleads, “Show mercy.” Now listen to verse 14: *“And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.”* God relented. What is that about? God didn’t do what He was going to do. That word “relented” is translated in some Bibles as “God changed His mind.” It’s the same word that’s used in other places in Scripture to describe how people change their minds.

The same word is used in other places in Scripture, like Numbers 23, to describe how God does not change His mind. Or in 1 Samuel 15:29 (NIV), *“He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind.”* What is happening here? Did God change His mind or not? In order to answer that, I want to show you what we need to know, based not just on this passage, but on the entire Bible.

God’s perfections, purposes and promises are unchanging.

Let me unpack this one by one. God’s perfections are unchanging. When I use that word ‘perfections,’ I’m talking about the perfect attributes of God which never, ever change. God is perfectly holy. Isaiah 6:2: *“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord.”* God is perfectly loving—that never changes. We saw this in 1 John 4:16: *“God is love,”* period. Deuteronomy 32:4b: God is perfectly just, *“A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.”*

We could go on and on and on. God is perfectly omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, transcendent, immanent. God is perfectly self-existent and self-sufficient. In all of these attributes, God says in Malachi 3:6, *“For I the Lord do not change.”* James 1:17: He does not change like shifting shadows. Hebrews 13:8: He is *“the same yesterday and today and forever.”* Psalm 90:2: *“From everlasting to everlasting, you are God.”* So the perfections of God are unchanging.

Moses knew this. His prayer from the start in Exodus 32:11 uses the covenant name for God: “O Lord...”—Yahweh—which we studied two weeks ago. As his prayer unfolds, Moses acknowledges so many of God’s perfect attributes. He’s acknowledging God’s wrath, love, might, mercy, glory, goodness—they’re all here.

We need to know that the perfections of God are unchanging, as are His purposes. Here in verse 12, Moses appeals to God’s unchanging purposes. He said, “You brought Your people out of Egypt for Your praise among the Egyptians. Your purpose is not to kill them, but to save them for Your name’s sake among the nations.” That purpose, Moses pleads, has not changed.

So in this prayer, Moses is relaying what we know from the rest of God’s Word. Psalm 33:11 (NIV): “*The plans of the Lord stand firm forever; the purposes of his heart through all generations.*” In Isaiah 46:10-11, God says, “*My purpose will stand...and I will do all that I please. What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.*”

When you know God’s purposes are unchanging, you also know His promises are unchanging. How about Exodus 32:13 for boldness in Moses? He says “Remember” to God. To the omniscient God of all things, Moses has the appalling audacity to say to Him, “Maybe You need to remember something.” Then he starts listing names. “Remember Abraham? Remember Isaac? Remember Israel?” Moses points to these patriarchs we read about in Genesis, and he says to God, “You promised that You would give their family the land to which You are now leading them. You cannot go back on Your word.”

Moses knows, “*God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?*” (Numbers 23:19). God promises and fulfills. Praise God for the reality that His promises are real and reliable forever. God’s promises are unchanging.

Let’s pause for a minute and think about this. This passage sparks a lot of questions about what changes in God. Moses actually bases his entire prayer on that which never changes in God. That brings us to verse 14, where the Bible tells us, “*The Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.*” So back to our question: what does that mean? Because amidst all that is unchanging in God, it certainly seems like something changed here. That leads to this next truth we need to know.

God’s plan is unfolding.

While God’s perfections, purposes and promises are unchanging, God’s plan is unfolding. To be clear, this does not mean that God’s plan is changing, as if God was surprised by Moses’ prayer and decided to change His plan. God’s plan is just as settled here as it is anywhere in history. But we have this story for a reason—to show us how God’s plan unfolds. This story shows us how God judges people in their sin.

The people of God have seriously sinned against God and He says, “They have turned away. They are stiff-necked and are worthy of judgment and death.” Remember, the unchanging character of God is that He is holy and He will judge people in their sin. Sin is an infinite offense in God’s sight. Sin warrants God’s just wrath.

In Exodus 9-10, we see that God judges people in their sin, but then He provides a mediator for sinners. This is the whole picture Exodus has given us up to this point. Moses is the covenant mediator, the one who goes back and forth between God and His people. He’s the one who stands before the people on behalf of God, and he stands before God on behalf of the people. God is the One Who set it up that way.

So when you get to Exodus 32, look at the text back in verse seven. God says to Moses, “Go down to your people.” Think about this. If God was going to destroy the Israelites on the spot, then why does He send Moses down? God was planning to spare His people through Moses’ mediation. The reality of Exodus 32 is crystal clear: God will demonstrate His judgment against these people, unless somebody steps in and mediates on their behalf.

All of this squares with the unchanging perfections of God. God is holy and just; He will punish sin. At the same time, God is loving and merciful; He will be true to His promise to save His people. So how does He do it? How is God true to His unchanging perfections, His unchanging promises, while fulfilling His unchanging purposes? God does it through an unfolding plan. He appoints a mediator to stand in the gap for sinners, to pray for them. As Moses prays, he is not changing God’s plan. As Moses prays, he is fulfilling God’s plan.

Now, that might sound a little confusing, but just think about other stories where we see this in the Bible. Think about Jonah, whom God sent to Nineveh to proclaim, “Forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” That was the word that Jonah was to proclaim. Nineveh was going to be destroyed because of their sin in 40 days. That’s what God said. At the same time, what did God do? God sent a prophet to tell them that. Why would God do that? It’s the same picture we’re seeing in Exodus. God was judging the Ninevites in their sin and at the same time, He was sending a preacher to warn them. So Jonah, after spending a few days in the digestive system of a fish, does in fact warn them. Listen to what it says in Jonah 3:10: *“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.”*

This is the same picture we see here in Exodus 32. God judges sin and provides a mediator that leads to salvation. We don’t ultimately look to Jonah to figure this one out; we look to Jesus. This is the gospel, right? In our sin, you and I stand under the judgment of a holy God. The just and right payment for sin before a holy God is death. That is what we deserve. But praise be to God for His unfolding plan in which God has provided a Mediator. God said to His Son, “Go down, Jesus. Go down, because people have become corrupt. They have turned away from Me in idolatry and immorality, and unless somebody stands in the gap for them, they will experience My judgment.” Jesus comes down, stands in the gap as a

Substitute for sinners and, by the gracious plan of God through Jesus' death on the cross for you and me—God relents His wrath from you and me, so we are saved. Hallelujah!

God does not change in His reign over us, but He does change in His relationship to us. That means you can bank your life on the sovereign reign of God, the unchanging perfections, purposes and promises of God. You don't have to worry about whether or not God's Word is true. You don't have to wonder if God's purposes will come to pass. You don't have to guess what God will be like tomorrow, or ten years from now, or ten billion years from now. All of these things are absolutely unchanging in God.

However, in His mercy, God does change in His relationship to us. There was a time when I was under God's judgment in my sin, until one day God, in His grace, opened my eyes and my heart to what Jesus did on the cross for me. On that day, God radically changed His relationship with me—from being under His judgment to being under His mercy. Nothing in His perfections, purposes or promises changed that day, but everything about His relationship to me changed.

If He has not done that in your life, He wants to. God desires for you—right where you are sitting—to know Him as the Savior from your sin, as the Lord of your life, if you will trust in Jesus and what He has done as your Mediator. You are a sinner before a holy God, deserving of judgment. The payment for sin is death. Yet when you trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord—trust His blood that covers over your sin and His death to forgive you of your sin—God will forgive you of your sin, cleanse you from all unrighteousness and reconcile you into a relationship with Him that will last forever. Praise God that He does not change in His reign over us, but He will change His relationship to us when by faith we trust in Jesus as our Mediator. This is so awesome!

Then it gets better. When you trust in Jesus and you're now in relationship with God, you get what Exodus 32 is teaching. Yes, God's perfections, promises and purposes are unchanging, and God uses our prayers to accomplish those purposes. God has purposes He's accomplishing in the world and He has set it up in such a way that our prayers are the means by which God's purposes are accomplished.

The unmistakable, unavoidable, unbelievable reality of Exodus 32 is that when we pray, God acts. Did you see this as we're reading Exodus? Listen to Exodus 8:13: "*And the Lord did according to the word of Moses.*" The Lord—Yahweh, the sovereign God over all—did what Moses asked. That should blow our minds. We see this throughout the Bible. I'm not making this up. People pray and fire falls from heaven. People pray and the lame walk, the hungry eat, the dead come to life.

We saw this a year ago when we were walking through the book of Acts. Every major move of God in the book of Acts comes about directly in response to the prayers of His people. Through prayer, God has called you and me, not to watch history, but to shape history for the glory of God's great name. Let me be clear what this does not mean. This does not mean God is like a weak king, just sitting on His throne waiting for somebody to pray so He can start doing something in the world. That's not what we're seeing in this text. Instead, we're seeing that when we pray, we take our God-ordained place and use our God-ordained privilege to participate with Him in the accomplishment of His purposes in the world.

I told you this was mind-blowing and life-changing. This will change your quiet time with God tomorrow morning when you understand this. Think about what this means.

We need to plead for God's mercy upon those in need.

How does this change our lives? How do we need to pray? If this is true, we need to plead for God's mercy upon those in need. This is the privilege and responsibility we have before God and before others. When we pray, God acts. So we need to pray like Moses prayed. "God, save. God, show Your mercy." Later in this chapter, in Exodus 32:31-32, listen to the pleading:

So Moses returned to the Lord and said, "Alas, this people have sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written."

Do you hear that? Moses says, "God, do whatever it takes. Take my own life if necessary, but please save them for Your glory." Is this the way we pray? I fear that all too often we kind of close our eyes and just start saying some words, but we're not feeling the wonder and weight of what we have the privilege of doing when we pray, particularly on behalf of those in need.

Friday night in our prayer gathering, there was a line of people coming up and publicly saying, in different ways, "I need God's grace and mercy in my marriage, for my kids. I need God's strength to be free from this addiction. I need God's strength to walk through this cancer." As I listened, I was thinking we have the privilege of standing in the gap for brothers and sisters in need, pleading and knowing that as we do, God hears and God answers. God did according to their word Friday night. That will make you come on Friday night, when you realize that's what's at stake.

I'm putting the final touches on a book I'm working on that's a journey through remote regions in the Himalayas, where I've seen the collision of urgent spiritual and physical needs. In a recent study, they found that half the children there die before their eighth birthday. One mom had 14 kids, but only two made it to adulthood. They're dying of things like diarrhea or simple infections that we can get a quick antibiotic for, even over the counter. There was a cholera outbreak in one village where 60 people died in two days. Imagine your neighborhood having 60 people die by Tuesday.

There's poverty everywhere. One of the worst byproducts of that poverty is sex trafficking and the way traffickers prey on people in these villages. A trafficker goes into a village, meets with a family and promises their daughter a better life if she will go with him down to the city. So they send her away. The young girl is taken to a brothel in the city, where she is broken and abused by numerous so-called "customers" every day. Other girls are taken to other countries. I'm talking about thousands of girls taken from these villages. And these villages are totally unreached by the gospel. There are nine million people in these villages and about a hundred followers of Jesus. Most of them have never even heard His name.

I've been praying this week, "God, have mercy." I've been pleading for God's mercy for these men and women, their families, especially these girls. I've been praying that God in His providence might use my pleading and the pleading of many others. "God, wake us up, so we might plead on behalf of those in urgent need. God use our pleading to achieve Your purposes in that place. Glorify Your name as the Defender of the poor, the Deliverer of the slave and the Savior of the people. You love these people and desire their salvation. So use my life however You want—use this church however You want—to show Your mercy among them."

We must plead for God's mercy for people right around us and for people far from us. God has ordained your prayers and my prayers to be the means by which His mercy is made known. Let's not be a prayerless people. Let's not be a people who just casually, every once in a while, bow our heads before our meal. There's so much more that God has called us to here. There's a mystery to how this works. I don't understand it all. But I do know this: if my prayers, if your prayers, have the power to bring about change, then we must pray. We must plead for those who are in need.

This leads right into Exodus 33. We plead not only for God's mercy on those in need, we also plead for God's presence and power among His people. Look at what happens beginning in Exodus 33:1:

¹ The LORD said to Moses, "Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your offspring I will give it.' ² I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ³ Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people."

God says, "Okay, the land is yours, but I won't go with you." In other words, "You can have My promises, but you won't have My presence." Moses says, "No way." So he goes before God and prays again. Look down at verse 12:

¹² Moses said to the LORD, "See, you say to me, 'Bring up this people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' ¹³ Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people."

Basically, Moses is saying, "God, we cannot survive without You." So he prays until God says in verse 14, "*My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.*" What's interesting is that the "you" there is singular. He's talking to Moses. But that's not enough. So Moses continues in verse 15:

¹⁵ And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. ¹⁶ For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?"

Moses doesn't just want God's presence and power with him; he wants God's presence and power with the people. See this picture of how we need to pray. We need to plead for God to show His power and His presence in the midst of His people. We need to come before God and say, "We cannot do it on our own." What do I mean by "it"? Anything.

As we saw two weeks ago, we cannot be the men and women, singles, husbands and wives, moms and dads, grandparents, coworkers, neighbors or witnesses God calls us to be on our own. We don't want to live on a natural plane; we want to live on a supernatural plane with the presence and power of God in our lives and in our church. Don't we want to see God move in power among us? Don't we want to see God save multitudes of people on Easter Sunday? So we pray for God to show His power—not just on Easter, but every week. Church, don't we want to be a part of that which can only be explained by the hand of God at work?

Jonathan Edwards said, "It is God's will that when God has something very great to accomplish for His church, it will be preceded by the extraordinary prayers of His people." So let's pray for His presence and power among us. Do we want to be content to go through week after week in kind of a casual, routine, mundane version of religion? No! We've been created for so much more. We've been created to know God, to walk in the power of God in our lives, in our families, as a church. Let's plead for that.

We plead for God's glory to be made known in the world.

Then third, let's plead for God's glory to be made known in the world. As if Moses has not been bold enough already, God has relented wrath and promised His presence among His people. If I'm Moses, I'm content at that point. It's been a good day. But not Moses. He's prevailed with God in prayer, but he doesn't stop. When we get down to Exodus 33:18, we'll see him ask for one thing more. "*Moses said, 'Please show me your glory.'*"

Now, what is that about? Think about who just made that request. This is the one guy who got to speak to God in a burning bush. That's pretty glorious. This the man who was on the front lines of seeing God split a sea in half. This is the guy who got to strike a rock and water came flowing out in the middle of the desert. This is the guy who prayed and bread came down from heaven. This is the guy who, when everybody else had stayed at the bottom of the mountain, went up on the mountain to meet with God. If anyone had seen the glory of God, Moses had seen the glory of God. But he wanted more.

Apparently, when you taste the glory of God, you have an insatiable desire to see more and more and more and more. So God agrees to show him a glimpse of His glory. In Exodus 34, beginning in verse five, we read this:

⁵ *The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD.* ⁶ *The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,*
⁷ *keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but*

who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.”⁸ And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped.

Moses asked, “Show me Your glory” and God shows him His name. Based on this text, I would define the glory of God as the awesome display of Who God is in all of His incomparable attributes: His holy mercy, grace, patience, love, faithfulness, forgiveness, justice and majesty. The glory is the manifestation of Who God is in all of His fullness. This is what the last part of Exodus is all about: God’s glory being made known, displayed, manifested among and through His people.

Worship at creation.

I want you to think about worship at creation with me.. When we started this Bible Reading Plan at the beginning of February, the dwelling place of God was in the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve enjoyed His presence. There were no needs there. Right now in Exodus we’re reading about a tabernacle where God’s glory dwells in the middle of His people, but there was no need for a tabernacle or a temple for God’s glory to dwell in Eden. All creation reflected His glory. Adam and Eve were surrounded by God’s glory on all sides, until sin entered the world and everything changed.

Yet even in the midst of sin, we saw that God promised salvation and began calling people to Himself. Then we have come to Exodus, where we have seen God deliver His people out of slavery in Egypt—for what purpose? We talked about it last week. God saves us by His grace, God saves us for our good and God saves us for His glory.

Worship at Mount Sinai.

This is where I want you to see the bookends between the beginning Genesis and the end of Exodus. In the beginning of Genesis, the dwelling place of God was Eden. At the end of Exodus, the dwelling place of God is the tabernacle. It was a physical structure set up by God to be the place where His glory dwelled among His people and where Aaron the priest would enter into God’s presence. “Tabernacle” literally means “dwelling place” —the dwelling place of God.

If you’ve been reading through the Bible Reading Plan this last week, let’s be honest, you’ve probably got a little bored at a few points. “Acacia wood. Cubits. I just don’t get it. I’ve got a lot of things going on in my life and I’m trying to apply acacia wood and cubits to my life?”

This is where I want you to see that every detail of what you read is significant. I’ll give you one example. Go with me to Exodus 25. Think back with me to the beginning of the Bible in Genesis 1. God spoke and creation came into existence. In fact, if you look back there, there are seven distinct creative acts in Genesis 1. God created a world that displays His glory through seven creative acts and every single one of them started with, “And God said... And God said... And God said, ‘Let there be light...’ And God said, ‘Let there be this...’” There were seven distinct creative acts all prefaced by, “And God

said...” So now we get to Exodus 25, the start of the construction of the tabernacle. Let’s count how many times we see, “The Lord said...”

Exodus 25:1: *“The Lord said to Moses...”* That’s where they start these instructions for collecting contributions and then how it’s going to look. Fast forward to Exodus 30:11. We’ll see this phrase over and over again. *“The Lord said to Moses...”* He starts talking about the census tax to make this happen. When you get to Exodus 30:17, *“The Lord said to Moses...”* That’s the third time. Exodus 30:22, *“The Lord said to Moses...”* You get to Exodus 30:34, *“The Lord said to Moses...”* Then in Exodus 31:1, *“The Lord said to Moses...”* That’s the sixth time. Verse 12, *“The Lord said to Moses...”* There are seven times.

Now, if you remember back in Genesis, after those seven distinct creative acts, what did God do next? He rested. Well, Exodus 31:13-14—after the seventh time—we see the Lord saying to Moses, *“You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, ‘Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death.’”*

The point is this is not accidental. What God is doing here is intentional. These are bookends. God is forming a new creation. He’s saying, “I’m dwelling among My people again.” Obviously, it’s different than Eden, because man is now separated from the inner part of the tabernacle, the Holy of Holies, where God’s presence dwells. And we see in Exodus 27 that the presence of God is guarded by cherubim on each side in the Holy of Holies. Now remember in Genesis 3 what guarded the entrance to the Garden of Eden where the presence of God dwelled? Cherubim.

And you could only enter the garden from the east, back in Genesis 3, which just so happens to be the direction from which you enter into the tabernacle as well. Here’s the deal. The tabernacle—with all those details about acacia wood and cubits and everything—is not just a place of worship. This is a picture of original creation, a piece of heaven on earth, a visible symbol of the glory of God dwelling in the middle of His people. But this is only made possible by sacrifices offered by Aaron the priest to cover over the people’s sin. He wore deliberate clothing—that’s one of the other things we read about—that reflected God’s glory. He offered sacrifices while everybody else gazed from the outside.

Go one more place in Exodus—Exodus 40, the very last chapter. See how the book ends in verses 34-35. Just imagine this scene: *“Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.”* See this picture: God’s glory dwelling over the tabernacle, in the tabernacle. The people didn’t just behold God’s glory; the Israelites followed God’s glory.

Pick it up in Exodus 40:36-38:

³⁶ Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. ³⁷ But if the cloud was not taken up, then

they did not set out till the day that it was taken up.³⁸ For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys.

Here's the picture. As we continue reading through the Old Testament, we will see God's glory dwelling in the tabernacle, with a cloud over it, leading and guiding them as they go to different places. We'll see that happen all the way until they finally get to the place where they settle, then a temple replaces the tabernacle, a stationary place where the glory of God dwells among His people.

This is where I want us to pause. Step out. Zoom out for a minute and realize again that every story is whispering one Name. See how all of this connects with the big picture of the Bible.

Worship in the gospel.

This whole picture in Exodus is setting the stage for worship in the gospel. When we get to the New Testament, where do we see the dwelling place of God? In the New Testament, the dwelling place of God is Jesus—the Man Who embodied God's presence.

You've got to see this in John 1:14. This is John the disciple's introduction of Jesus. Listen to what he says: "*The Word*," talking about Jesus, "*became flesh and dwelt among us*." Do you see that word "dwelt"? You know what that word is in the Greek? It's tabernacled. Jesus is the tabernacle. Let me read the rest of the verse: "*And we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*." We have seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus. Hebrews 1:3: "*He is the radiance of the glory of God*."

I don't know what I was thinking when I put all these together, as though we would have time to do all these things, but I'm going to fly through them. In John 2, Jesus is the temple. In John 1:29, Jesus is the Lamb Who takes away the sins of the world. In John 8:12, Jesus is the Light of the world—a picture of the lamp in the tabernacle whose light never went out. In John 6:35, Jesus is the Bread on the table in the tabernacle. And ultimately, Jesus is the blood on the mercy seat and it's Jesus' blood that makes the forgiveness of sins possible. The point is: Jesus is the glory of God with us. In Jesus, the disciples beheld God's glory.

But it gets even better after that. Keep going in the story of Scripture and you'll see worship in the church. Jesus dies on the cross, rises from the grave, ascends into heaven. Does that mean there's no longer visible evidence of the dwelling of God with us anymore? No tabernacle, no temple, no Jesus. No. God's glory is dwelling among us, because once Jesus descends into heaven, God sends His presence to His people and the dwelling place of God becomes us—the people who possess God's presence.

Worship in the church.

You might think, “Are you making this up?” Look at the Bible. First Corinthians 3:16-17 says you yourselves are God’s temple. God’s Spirit lives in you. The church has become God’s dwelling, God’s temple and tabernacle. And not just the church in general, but you as a follower of Jesus. First Corinthians 6:19 says, “*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?*” Christian, follower of Christ, do you get this? The glory of God dwells in you!

Let me give you another picture. When you read Exodus 33 just picture this. There was a moment when Moses goes into the tent of meeting to meet with God. As soon as he starts to go toward the tent of meeting, the Bible says all the Israelites stood outside their tents and watched. Picture the scene. Tens of thousands of people, standing outside their tents in silent awe, watching this man walk in front of them out to a tent where there’s a cloud that rests over the tent. Everybody’s standing in silent awe, because this is a man who is meeting with God.

Now, take that scene for a second and realize what is happening right now. We have not gathered together to watch me or anybody else go into a tent. That’s not what has brought us together. We’re not watching somebody else go into a tent. That tent is available to every sinner in this room who trusts in Jesus. And it’s not a tent that’s available to you. You don’t have to go to a building. The beauty is you are the tent. The glory of God dwells in you. Do you realize this?

The privilege we have to pray before God is a privilege Old Testament saints could have only longed for. You and I can do it any time, anywhere, when we pray. Now think about this: we possess His presence, so as we live lives that reflect His glory, what happens? What do we say at the end of every service? The Great Commission: “Go and make disciples of all the nations.” And as we go, we are tabernacles. We are temples. We are living manifestations of the compassion of God, the love of God. That’s what we’re called to be in this world. And as we go, the nations will witness God’s glory.

When the people of God in the Old Testament transported the tabernacle, it was a picture to the surrounding nations of the glory of God in their midst. Now, with our bodies as His temple and tabernacle, we spread His glory wherever we go. The wonder of the gospel is that God’s glory is seen in temples everywhere. We’re not talking about buildings made by human hands; we’re talking about lives changed by the power of Jesus Christ who go as a testimony to His glory all over Washington, DC, and all over the world. It’s even greater than God’s glory in Jesus.

We think, “Well, how do you get more glorious than that?” That’s why He said in John 14:12, “You’ll do even greater things than Me. It’s not just going to be the glory of God in one person; it’s going to be the glory of God in all My people, spreading the manifestation of all these characteristics all over the world, for the spread of My grace and My love and My compassion.”

Worship in the new creation.

People of God, let's fill the earth with His glory as we make disciples and multiply churches, because that's where all history is headed—toward worship in the new creation where the dwelling place of God will be heaven, the place where we will forever delight in God's presence.

I wish we had time to dive into more detail here, but look at Revelation 21 where John describes a new heaven and a new earth. Again, you'll see all kinds of measurements and you'll think, "Let's see if we can draw an architectural rendering of heaven." But if you get too caught up with that, you'll miss the point. As you read about heaven, you'll read that it's shaped like a cube. You'll think, "Why would it be shaped like a cube?" Well, the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle was shaped like a cube. It's a picture of how the perfect dwelling place of God will be where we will live. It's like living in the Holy of Holies.

Keep going. You see all this gold in the tabernacle here; then you'll see heaven is a place of pure gold. The whole point is not, "Oh, it's going to be like our Western economic prosperity." No, don't miss the point. The whole point is it's going to be the dwelling place of God with men and women. We are going to be with Him. You see the priests with things written on their foreheads in the whole picture of the tabernacle. When Aaron and the other priests would go into the presence of God, they would be wearing the name of the Lord on their heads. What you find in Revelation 22:4 is that His name will be on our heads. We will be like priests, with unhindered access to God, to enjoy His presence forever and ever and ever.

All creation will be filled with God's glory. Everything in the new heaven and the new earth will be filled with the glory of God. All creation will be restored to Jesus. There will be no more crying, no more pain, no more cancer, no more sickness, no more hurts, no more "I need this and this and this," because we will forever delight in God's presence.

Think about it. How does this drive the way we pray? How did Jesus teach us to pray? "*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" This is how we pray. We plead for God's Kingdom to come and for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Revelation 8 is another great text where you'll find that the prayers of God's people are like incense before Him. Throughout history, every one of the prayers were not given in vain. Every one of them has been stored up. And there is coming a day when the Kingdom is going to come and the new creation is going to be a reality. It's going to be in response to the prayers of God's people throughout history. Every time you pray, "Father in heaven, Your name be hallowed, Your kingdom come, Your will be done," not one of those prayers is in vain. One day God is going to bring about the fruition of that prayer.

So brothers and sisters, put all this together and I exhort you to pray like it matters. I plead for God's mercy on those in need right around us. As brothers and sisters in the church, let's plead. Let's take our God-given place, praying for mercy for each other, together in smaller groups, in our Friday night

gathering or wherever it might be. And not just for here, but pray for men and women around the world who are in need. God has given us that privilege.

This will change your Monday morning, when you realize that before you get out of bed, you can join in what God is doing in North Korea. You can join in what God is doing in the heart of the Middle East. Before you even set your feet on the floor in the morning, by prayer you have the privilege of participating with God in what He's doing around the world. This is awesome! So plead for those in need. Plead for God's presence and power among us as His people. Let's ask God to do in and through McLean Bible Church that which can only be attributed to His hand at work. And let's plead for God's glory on the earth. Let's plead for the hallowing of God's name across Washington, DC. Let's plead for the hallowing of God's name among the nations.

As we plead and plead and plead some more, let's do it with confidence that, just like Scripture promises, one day we will see His face in all of His glory, in all of His unchanging perfections. All of His unchanging purposes and promises will come to pass in the ever-unfolding plan that you and I have the privilege of playing a part in today. Let's live in that today.

Let's pray.

O God, I don't even know how to grasp the fullness of what I just preached and what we've just seen in Your Word. But God, we praise You for this privilege of communion with You right now in prayer, that the same God Who did all this in the book of Exodus is here with us right now. You're listening to our hearts. This prayer that I'm praying on behalf of people You're hearing. So teach us to pray. Help us to experience all You've designed for us in prayer. God, we come with all kinds of needs in our lives right now. I pray for Your mercy across this church.

I pray for Your mercy specifically for people right now who have not put their trust in Jesus. As I'm praying right now, they're under Your judgment in their sin. God, have mercy, we pray. Act. Open eyes right now to trust in Jesus. I pray that You would do that supernatural work right now. Save people from sin. Shower Your mercy in all the ways we need it.

God, please, please, show Your presence and power among us. Lift our eyes above the mundane to see You in all Your glory and plead for You to work in ways that can only be explained by Your hand. We ask for more of Your glory. Display, more of Your glory in this church and across our city. We pray for Your name to be hallowed in Washington, DC. Cause Your name to be known as holy and compassionate and gracious. Use us as temples of Your Holy Spirit this week for the spread of Your glory in that way.

God, we pray for the hallowing of Your name among the nations. We pray that You would use our church as an instrument in Your hands to make Your goodness, Your grace and Your glory known to the ends of the earth. God, thank You for this privilege. Jesus, thank You for making it possible. Help us to take full advantage of it in our lives today, tomorrow, this week. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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