



# The Voice from the Tent

## Kicking It Off

When was the last time someone reached out to you first, at a moment when you would never have made the first move yourself?

## Read

Exodus 40:34-38;  
Leviticus 1:1-2

## Summary

Exodus ends on a note that sounds like a happy ending and then turns strange in the very next sentence. The tabernacle is finally finished, built exactly the way God told them to build it, and the cloud comes down and the glory of the Lord fills it. God is living in the middle of the camp. And then the text says Moses could not go in. This is the same Moses who talked with God face to face, standing outside a tent he built himself, and what keeps him out is not sin or failure. It is the glory. God got close, and closeness to holiness is not safe for people who are not holy.

That could have been the end of it. Instead the cloud stays, and nobody moves until it moves. So this is the shape of their life now. They can see exactly where God is, and they cannot walk in. Around them the other nations had temples full of gold and priests who came out claiming to speak for gods who never actually said anything. Israel had the opposite problem. Their God was unmistakably there, and He had not spoken yet.

Then comes the first line of Leviticus. The LORD called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting. Moses is still outside. The voice comes out to him. The Hebrew name for the book is not Leviticus, it is the first word of that sentence, and He called. The book is named after the moment God broke the silence. And the first thing He says to people who cannot come near Him is how to come near, using animals they already owned, from the herd or from the flock. He did not ask them for what they did not have.

That is the pattern of the whole Bible, and it is worth checking against your own instincts. Most of us pray like we are knocking on a neighbor's door, hoping we are not

interrupting. Scripture keeps running the other direction. He called Abraham. He called Moses. And now he is calling you.

### Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the sermon or the passage that stuck out to you?
2. Exodus 40 says the glory filled the tabernacle and in the same breath says Moses could not enter, so the nearness and the distance arrive together. When has God felt closest and least approachable to you at the same time?
3. The cloud stayed where the whole camp could see it, by day and by night, and Israel did not move until it moved. What in your life right now is waiting on God to move before you do?
4. Noah was not asked to be clever, only to listen and obey, and Israel obeyed commands about offerings that made no obvious sense to them. Where has God asked something of you that you would not have chosen if you were going by your own reasoning?
5. Leviticus opens with God speaking first to people who could not approach Him, and the first thing He tells them is how to draw near. Do you tend to assume you have to get God's attention before He will speak, and where did that assumption come from?
6. The Spirit now lives in us, which means the voice that came out of the tent is closer than it has ever been, and it usually gives ordinary instructions about loving actual people. What is one specific thing you sense God asking of you this week, and who would know if you did it?

### Significant Quotes from Sermon

"God is holy. It simply means God is set apart from us, that His ways are higher than our ways, His wisdom is higher than our wisdom."

"It was not Noah's job to be smart. It was not Noah's job to come up with a good plan. His job was to listen to the plan of God."

"God doesn't just rescue His people and then leave them alone. He rescues His people, and then He moves into our lives and He speaks."

"You aren't required for anything. You get to. It is an absolute privilege to worship a living and active God, because everywhere else they are worshipping dead gods, gods who were unable to speak."

**Sermon Notes****Exodus 40:34-38**

*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. Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up. 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.*

**Leviticus 1:1-2**

*The Lord called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When any one of you brings an offering to the Lord, you shall bring your offering of livestock from the herd or from the flock.*

## Outline

### 1. Grace Comes First, and Then Instruction

- a. The Torah is one book, not five, and it runs on a single pattern. God acts, and then God instructs.
- b. Adam and Eve were made to dwell with God and were given one commandment they could not keep. Babel was humanity saying we have everything we need and can be as glorified as God, and God scattered them (Genesis 11).
- c. Noah was not asked to be clever. He was given instructions and his job was to obey. The rainbow is God's promise that He will always provide a way of salvation for humanity (Genesis 9).
- d. God extended His grace to Abraham with promises he did not earn, and Abraham's life became a long lesson in obeying the God who had already blessed him.
- e. Moses was rescued as an infant, and God did not say the story was finished there. He saved Moses so that Moses would obey Him, and at the burning bush Moses learned that the ground itself was holy (Exodus 3).
- f. The law never saved anyone. Israel was out of Egypt before Sinai, and the ten commandments were given to a people already rescued.

### 2. God Moved In, and No One Could Come In

- a. Exodus ends with the cloud covering the tent and the glory filling the tabernacle, which is everything the rescue was for (Exodus 40:34).
- b. The same sentence shuts the door. Moses, who spoke with God face to face in chapter 33, cannot enter the tent he built to God's own specifications (Exodus 40:35).
- c. What kept him out was the glory itself. God is holy, meaning set apart, and His ways and wisdom are higher than ours.
- d. The cloud did not visit and leave. It stayed, cloud by day and fire by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, and the camp moved only when it moved (Exodus 40:36-38).
- e. Israel could see where God was and could not go where God was, every day and every lit night. The surrounding nations built ornate temples to gods who never spoke. Israel had a tent they could not enter, over a God who would not stay silent.

### 3. He Called First, and the First Word Was a Way In

- a. Leviticus 1:1 answers Exodus 40:35. Moses is still outside, and the voice comes out to him.
- b. The Hebrew name of the book is its first word, *wayyiqra*, and He called. The book we skip is named for the moment God started the conversation.
- c. The first thing God says to people who cannot approach Him is how to approach Him, and He asks for what they already own, from the herd or from the flock (Leviticus 1:2).

- d. Israel wanted to hear that voice. The six hundred and eleven commands were not their ladder to God; they were their response to the God who had already broken Pharaoh's grip.
- e. At the cross the veil tore from top to bottom, and the exclusion of Exodus 40:35 was reversed. We are now the tent, and the Holy Spirit speaks from inside us.
- f. Because He has given us the body and blood of Christ, we do not owe Him payment. We get to dwell with Him, and dwelling looks like obedience. Love God and love others.

## Notes

I am excited about Leviticus, and I know how that sounds. Most of us have never heard it preached, and the honest reason is that it is strange. So before I say anything about blood or smoke or mercy, I want to hand you the tool that makes the whole book readable, because it is the tool that made the Bible open up for me.

There are two kinds of things in Scripture. There is the unchanging character of God, and there is the instruction God gives to a specific people at a specific time. When I say God is love, I am not worried that culture or language or translation has garbled it. When I say God is holy, you do not need a semester of Hebrew to understand me. Holy means set apart. His ways are higher than our ways, His wisdom is higher than our wisdom, and His glory is heavier than anything we can picture. That never moves. But the instructions God gives do change with the people He is speaking to, and Leviticus is full of instructions given to Israelites wandering in a wilderness before Joshua brought them into the land. Those temporary laws reveal an eternal character. The trouble starts when we would rather keep a temporary rule than deal with a holy God. For a lot of people religion works as a smoke screen, a way to manage my relationship with God by how well I am performing. Read that way, Leviticus becomes a list of do's and don'ts, and the God who wrote it disappears behind the list.

The Torah is one book. Genesis through Deuteronomy is one narrative about the people of God, and the book divisions are ours, not the scroll's. That narrative starts with people made to dwell with God. This is the thing I will keep saying until you are tired of it, and then I will say it again: the purpose of humanity is that God would dwell with us. Everything else we have named as the point of our lives is downstream of that. God wanted our volition in it, so He left a way out, one tree and one commandment, and Adam and Eve could not keep it. Their children filled the earth, and at Babel the nations built a tower that was never about height. It was a message. We do not need You. We can be like God. They wanted a pedestal only He has the capacity to stand on, so He scattered them.

From there Genesis is a record of grace extended to particular people. God told Noah how to save the human race, and notice what Noah's job was. It was not to be smart. It was to listen to the plan of God and obey it. Afterward came the rainbow, a promise that God will never wipe humanity off the face of the earth, which is also a promise that He will always make a way of salvation. Then Abraham, who received covenants he had done nothing to earn, and whose life became a long education in obeying the God who had already blessed him. Every time the initiation is God's. A holy God extends grace so that a people will obey His instructions and dwell with Him.

Israel forgot who they belonged to and ended up enslaved, and God saved them again. He saved Moses from Pharaoh's infanticide and raised him in Pharaoh's own house, and He did not say afterward, congratulations, enjoy the palace. Moses tried to rescue his people by his own strength and killed a man for it, and that is not the way of God. At the burning bush he learned to take off his sandals before he could speak with the Lord, and that the rescue would come by God's wonders rather than his own arm. Hold on to that name, because Moses is still the man standing in front of the tent when Leviticus opens.

Then Sinai. Moses went up into the glory, and while he was up there the people at the bottom of the mountain built a golden calf. They were eating manna every morning, receiving provision from their Father, and they melted their jewelry into a picture of prosperity. That is the heart the law was given to. The ten commandments are a good law and a clear reflection of God's character, which is why Jesus can gather all the law and the prophets into loving God and loving others. They still land on us, not because they are the ten commandments but because the God whose character they reflect has not changed.

Then Exodus ends, and it ends in a strange place. The tabernacle is finished exactly as commanded, the cloud covers the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD fills the tabernacle. That is the good news the whole rescue was for. And in the same breath the text says Moses was not able to enter. The man who spoke with God face to face in chapter 33 is standing outside a tent built to God's own blueprint. Nothing malfunctioned. It was the glory that kept him out, the way standing near a fire keeps you from putting your hand in it. Moses was not a perfect man, and we will watch that again later when he strikes the rock twice instead of once and loses the promised land over it. That looks severe to us, and I think it looks severe because we have watered down what obedience means. God is infinite in grace and will forgive you again and again. That is not the same as saying our obedience does not matter.

What makes it heavier is that the cloud stayed. God did not fill the tent once and move on. He settled in, cloud by day and fire by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, and Israel moved only when He moved. This was not a private assurance handed to leadership. Every person in the camp could look up and see He was still there, which means the exclusion was not a moment they got past. It was the condition they lived in. Around them, other nations built beautiful temples to gods who never said a word, and their priests came out and announced what the gods had supposedly told them. Israel had something different. They could see the presence with their own eyes, and they could not walk into it.

Then the next word in their Bible and ours is Leviticus, and the silence breaks from inside the tent. The LORD called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting. Moses is still outside. The voice comes out to him. In Hebrew the book is not named for priests; it is named for its first word, wayyiqra, and He called. The book everyone skips is named for the moment God started the conversation. And what He says first is not a warning and not a list of failures. It is how to bring an offering, which is to say, how to come near. He asks for livestock from the herd or from the flock, which is what an ordinary Israelite already owned. He does not ask for what they do not have.

That is why I think Israel's obsession with the law makes more sense than we give it credit for. Underneath the grumbling and the calf, they wanted the voice. The commands were never the thing that saved them, and when they treated the law as their salvation they were wrong. But when they said, I am not breaking Sabbath, are you crazy, they were saying something right: my God rescued me, He is my King, and I would be a fool not to listen. If God says give a burnt offering, I will, not because it makes sense to me but because He said it. The moment I insist on my own sense, I am talking like the men at Babel, who by their own reckoning got close to the glory of God.

We live on the other side of the veil now. When Jesus died, the curtain tore from top to bottom, and the exclusion of Exodus 40:35 was reversed from the inside. There is full access. So where is the tent, and where is my invitation? You are the tent. The Holy Spirit lives in you, and He is going to tell you how to live. This is where we lose the plot. We celebrate salvation, and we should, but we stop there as though rescue were the whole story. Israel had to remember they came out of bondage, and so do we, and the book of Leviticus asks the next question. Saved for what? To dwell with God. Not someday in heaven only, but now, in a body that is a temple and is presented as worship.

The danger is that we answer that question by looking sideways. How do I look like a good temple? Well, I will do what the Christians around me are doing. If Israel had worshipped the way their neighbors worshipped, they would have had a dead religion too. What they had instead was a voice, and so they built the tabernacle and followed the law. We have the same voice living inside us, which is why we are people of the word. Reading Scripture is not a mechanism that works on its own. It takes prayer, and as you read, God speaks. I love the Bible because the Spirit in me can take words thousands of years old and tell me what to do today.

So the last two verses land on an offering, and God asks for what they already have. Bring the herd. Bring the flock. Prepare it as worship. You are not required to pay anything. You get to, and it is a privilege to worship a living and active God when everywhere else people are worshipping gods who cannot speak, cannot move, and cannot love you the way you were made to be loved. Communion works the same way.



God gave first, His Son's body, His blood, His righteousness. When we ask what we owe in return, the answer is not a payment. The answer is that we get to dwell with Him.

What that dwelling looks like is following Him, often into places we would not choose. I would rather you forgive an enemy than give some arbitrary amount of money. I would rather you love your neighbor wholeheartedly, kind to someone who spits in your face, than build a fine building for the Lord. I would rather you show kindness to people who are lonely and have no friends, because that is how the Spirit talks. He says, that guy needs lunch. It is not about the lunch being impressive. It is that the voice from inside is God Himself giving daily instruction on how to live in His presence. It is better to give than to receive, and we have already received, so what else is there to do but give. As I follow that leading, I experience His joy and His love, and then generosity and peace and forgiveness stop feeling like costs.

Israel was given very specific commands in Leviticus. You are given one every day. Love God and love others.

## Blog

This Sunday we start a new series in the book of Leviticus. Most of you have never heard a sermon from this book, and this is the first time that I have ever taught it. Some of you have tried to read it. You made it through Genesis, you were fine through Exodus, and then somewhere around the third set of instructions, you started skim reading.

Leviticus is a hard book.

We read the first five books of the Bible as five separate books, mostly because they have five separate names for them in our Bibles. They were written as one scroll. One continuous story. Leviticus does not begin a new subject, and in Hebrew it opens with a verb that signals the story is already in progress, the way you would not normally start a sentence with "and then."

So to understand where it starts, you have to see where the story has been.

It opens with a man named Adam in a garden who walks with God and decides he would rather not. It spreads from there, one family to every family, until Genesis 11 has the whole human race scattered and talking past each other, and the problem is no longer one man's rebellion. It is everyone's. Then God calls Abraham. Not because Abraham had earned anything. God answers a problem that belongs to all of humanity by starting with one family, and the promise is that through that family everyone would get back what Adam lost.

Abraham's descendants end up enslaved in Egypt. They forget who they belong to. And God rescues them anyway, before they ask, before they deserve it, before there is a single commandment on a single tablet. God did not hand Israel a law and say keep this and I will rescue you. He rescued them, and then He told them what life with Him looks like. His grace unto them came first.

Exodus ends with the tabernacle finished. Seven times the text tells us they built it exactly as the LORD commanded. Nothing has gone wrong. And then the glory of God comes down and fills the tent, which is why He rescued them so that He could be with them, and the very next sentence says Moses could not go in.

That is how the book of Exodus ends. With a man standing outside a tent he built himself, because God is inside it. What kept Moses out was not sin, and it was not failure. It was the glory itself, in the way that standing next to a bonfire keeps you from putting your hand in it. God got close, and the closeness turned out to be the problem.

So Israel can see where God is and cannot go where God is. They can follow Him and cannot approach Him. Exodus leaves them standing there on purpose.

Leviticus begins with saying, The LORD called to Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting.

Moses is still outside. He has not found a way in. He has not earned entry or performed a ritual or said the right words in the right order. The silence breaks from the inside, and God is the one who breaks it.

The Hebrew name of the book is simply its first word, wayyiqra, He called. The book we skip is named after the moment God started the conversation.

And what He says first is not a warning. It is not an inventory of everything Israel has done wrong. It is an instruction for how to bring an offering, and the Hebrew word for offering comes from a verb meaning to draw near. The first words out of the tent are a way in.

Leviticus is not a religious system for coping with God's absence. It is a manual for being in His presence. Everything strange in those twenty-seven chapters, the blood and the smoke and the rules about mold in the walls, is God answering a problem He raised on purpose, that He moved in and no one could come to Him, and He would not leave it that way.

Eden is God walking with His people, and then due to their disobedience, He must exile them. The tabernacle is God among people, behind a curtain. Then John writes that the Word became flesh and pitched His tent among us, using that word deliberately, and adds that we have seen His glory. That is Exodus 40 walking around in a body.

And when Jesus dies, the curtain in the temple tears from the top down. The barrier comes down from the inside, by the same God who spoke from inside the tent. Then Pentecost, and the voice that once spoke from the tent comes to live inside His people. Which means the question was never really whether you keep the law. It was always whether you will listen when God speaks.

If the point is listen to the voice rather than follow the rules, somebody is going to hear that as do whatever you feel. Leviticus is the answer to that. The voice from the tent has a documented character, twenty-seven chapters of it, and it turns out to care a great deal about honest scales, wages paid on time, leaving the edges of your field for people who have nothing, and how you treat the immigrant living among you. The Spirit does not contradict the voice from the tent. He lives inside you and speaks these commands to you.