

Series Immanuel, God With Us

This Message #2 His Love Kept On Reaching Out

The universe was created to be God's temple, His dwelling place. The universe had to be on a grand enough scale so that the infinite power and greatness of God could be displayed. The Apostle Paul emphasized this when he wrote, "Since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made" (*Romans 1:20*). Creation revealed God. Creation was God's temple dwelling.

The universe also had to be without any faults in keeping with God's holy character. It had to be perfect in purity — suitable for God Himself to dwell comfortably within it.

Humanity was created with the purity and capacity to fellowship with God. Adam and Eve were created in the image and likeness of God, and they had all the necessary spiritual qualities to live in the presence of God. There was genuine love, intimate fellowship, and open communication between these first humans and their Creator. Their relationship was the perfect blending of the spiritual nature of God with the physical nature of mankind. It was a time when the infinite God and the finite creature were in perfect harmony. God was Immanuel; He dwelled among His creation.

We don't know how long God was able to have this special relationship with Adam and Eve, but at some point in time, because of their disobedience, the perfect holy environment that God had created became contaminated by sin. As a result, the personal and intimate interaction between God and mankind was severed. The entire creation was cursed (*Romans 8:19-22*), and, in place of the harmony and restfulness and enjoyment of the smoothly functioning order of God's good creation, Adam and Eve were banished from the special garden in which God had placed them, and they began to experience lives of painful toil.

In spite of the fact that His desires were thwarted by the disobedience of Adam and Eve, God remained determined to be with and to interact with His human creation. In spite of the fact that God's perfect, complete, and functional universe, His cosmic temple, which He had so carefully put in place, was thrown into chaos, God was not about to let the chaotic overturn of His creative efforts to be the final word on the matter.

The commitment of God to be close to humanity did not change when Adam and Eve disobeyed His instructions. His overall plans and purposes were not altered, in fact, could not be altered because they were eternal. It was love which had compelled God to create outside of Himself and to bring the universe into existence. After the relationship between Himself and mankind was broken, it was this same attribute of love which compelled Him to find a way to redeem sinners and restore the relationship.

The Old Testament is the record of God reestablishing His presence among the human race. God made it clear that He was eager to maintain His connection with people. His promises and covenants, prophets and priests, the system of laws and animal sacrifices, the special centers of worship represented by the wilderness tabernacle and Jerusalem temples, and even the miracles and other displays of supernatural power, were evidence of what God did to reach out to His fallen humanity.

In this part of the reading, we are going to think about a few of the Old Testament action steps initiated by God to retain a measure of fellowship with people. We need to understand that, because of His love, God has done everything necessary to retain the loyalty and affections of people. The Old Testament is a record of how God moved as close to His fallen creation as His holiness allowed.

The first passage is **Genesis 3:14-15**.

Commentators agree that this is the first proclamation of the gospel in Scripture. It was a positive statement spoken by God in the midst of judgment. Adam and Eve were afraid about what God would do to them and they tried to hide themselves, and I think they were greatly surprised by the grace in which God spoke about the future. They undoubtedly remembered God's command, "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (*Genesis 2:17*).

God promised that the seed of the woman would eventually destroy the serpent. Eve had been the one to give into the temptation of the serpent, and she would be the means by which God would someday destroy the tempter. It was many centuries before the full meaning of this promise was understood. For Adam and Eve, the promise must have been a very mysterious and veiled utterance, but God's words were sufficient to stimulate their faith. It also stimulated the faith of the Old Testament patriarchs who came along in future generations.

The fulfillment of Genesis 3:15 did not become fully evident until the birth of Jesus and His subsequent crucifixion. It was on the cross that Satan bruised Christ on the heel. At first, the death of Jesus on the cross seemed like a great victory for Satan and a terrible defeat for God, but the resurrection proved to be the crushing blow to Satan.

The promise in Genesis 3:15 set forth God's program for human history. This verse established the plot for the entire Biblical record. It describes the context for God's interactions with people until the end of the age. The central theme of the Bible is God reaching out in love in order to overcome evil and redeem humanity.

There were other significant ways in which God maintained His connection with humanity. He established covenants with selected individuals. In the Old Testament there were important covenants with Noah, Abraham, the people of Israel in the time of Moses, and David. Some of the covenants were "unconditional," that is, they were freely offered by God to recipients without any "strings" or conditions attached. An example of this kind of covenant was the one extended to Abraham in Genesis chapter 15.

Read Genesis 15:5-6, 18

On the basis of this promise, Abraham did not weaken in his faith even after Sarah was past the time of bearing children. Romans chapter 4 states that Abraham "did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised" (*Romans 4:19-21*).

The point is that God, through His interaction with certain individuals, was maintaining His objective to be in contact with people. The purposes of God were revealed little by little over a long period of time. From Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and other individuals “who called on the name of the LORD,” God raised up a people group with whom He wanted a close relationship.

Leviticus 26 describes the terms and conditions of that relationship:

Scan Read Leviticus 26:3-13

God spoke these words to the Hebrews after He rescued them from Egypt. This is an example of a “conditional” covenant. The people were expected to obey the commands of the LORD. If they did not, God said that there would be specific consequences, such as the following: “If you will not listen and carry out all these commands, and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws ...I will set my face against you, ... I will make the ground beneath you like bronze, ... I will multiply your afflictions, ...I will turn your cities into ruin, ... I will scatter you among the nations” (*Leviticus 26:14-35*).

This threatening approach didn’t represent the level of mutual love and respect that God originally intended for His creation. However, it was God’s way to gain and maintain the cooperation of His people. It was the best that He could hope to achieve given the inclination of sinful people to pursue their own, rather than His, ways. It was necessary for God to set some tight parameters around the conditions whereby He would be able to have close relationships with a group identified as “His chosen people.” By offering these conditions, God was providing an opportunity for individuals to voluntarily choose to be close to Himself, and for these chosen people to lead individuals from other people groups to Himself.

There are several other Old Testament examples describing what God did to maintain a presence among His people. Think about the tabernacle set up by Moses in the wilderness. After the Israelites were rescued from Egypt, and after their encounter with God at Mount Sinai, and after they were given the commandments to guide their living, then God said to Moses, “Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them” (*Exodus 25:8-9*).

God gave specific instructions about the materials to be used, the design and dimensions for every part of the construction, the clothing to be worn by the priests. Why was God so specific about everything? Because “the tabernacle and all its furnishings” had to fit a specific pattern which had been established at the time of creation.

The tabernacle was God’s way to reestablish and maintain His presence with His chosen people. The tabernacle was called the “Tent of Meeting” (*Exodus 40:2, 6, 12, etc*). There was established a specific way for the interaction between humanity and God. Because people were no longer the pure and holy creatures they had been, but rather had become sinful and defiled, they could no longer have direct access to God. They needed atonement cleansing before they could approach God: their sins had to be covered with the blood of animal sacrifices. All things considered, the only essential difference between the structure of the universe/temple and the tabernacle/temple of the Israelites was the sacrificial system.

Under the tabernacle system, the holy God could not openly manifest Himself to the people. In the instructions about the design of the tabernacle, God said that His presence would be centered between two cherubim on a mercyseat placed on top of the Ark of the Covenant in a room, called the Holy of Holies, behind a curtain, through which only the High Priest could pass, and then only on one day of the year. God could not have open intimate interaction with people as at the time of the creation. However, for its time, the tabernacle was the best possible solution to the relational problem which existed between a holy God and sinful people.

When the tabernacle was set up for the first time, “a cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (*Exodus 40:34*). This cloud was the evidence that the LORD was present among the people. It was a shade over the Israelites by day and a pillar of fire during the night, and thus the Israelites were always aware of God’s presence.

Several hundred years later, King David sought to build a permanent temple for God in Jerusalem. He was allowed to collect materials and resources for the project, but it was the responsibility of his son Solomon to oversee the construction. The Solomonic temple in Jerusalem followed the basic design of the wilderness tabernacle, but it was on a much much grander scale.

After the construction was completed, and after the priests had placed all the furnishings, “the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the temple” (*I Kings 8:10-11*). Once again God was assuring the people that He was with them.

Read I Kings 8:22-24, 27-30

The presence of the LORD in the temples of the Israelites was conditional on the faithfulness of the people. In spite of the consequences announced by God for evil offensive behavior, and in spite of the warnings pronounced by numerous prophets, the Jewish people turned against their God and persisted in their sinfulness. God had no choice but to do what He said He would do. Although God patiently and persistently reached out to His people, they were not obedient to Him nor did they follow His ways.

Throughout Israel’s history, God frequently used non-Israelite people groups and nations to punish His chosen people. In the book of Daniel, the LORD used the Babylonians as His agents to destroy Solomon’s temple and the city of Jerusalem and carry away many captives into exile. A century later, some of the exiles who returned to Jerusalem rebuilt a small temple. The people rejoiced greatly when it was completed, but they were very disappointed because their effort seemed as nothing compared to the former glory of Solomon’s temple. God sent the prophet Haggai to encourage them.

Read Haggai 2:4-9

It was another four hundred years before this promise was fulfilled, and God presented Himself to the people of Israel. Herod the Great initiated the construction of a magnificent new temple in Jerusalem, an effort which required several decades. The presence of God in this temple was the person of Jesus, but the Jews did not recognize Him or what God was doing.

When Jesus drove out the money changers and sacrificial animals from the temple, and the Jews challenged His authority to do these things, Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” The Jews replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple and you are going to raise it in three days?” When the Apostle John wrote about this, he added this commentary: “The temple He (Jesus) had spoken of was his body” (*John 2:18-21*).

Let me conclude this message by paraphrasing some words from a cantata which was popular 40 years ago:

“From the beginning God’s love was reaching out to mankind, and from the beginning people have refused to understand. God did not give up. With His love, He went on reaching out, risking rejection, offering Himself. He never gave up.

He is still reaching out. In love He offers the eternal, we want what is immediate. Love offers deep joy, we want thrills. Love offers freedom, we want license. Love offers communion with the Almighty, we prefer to worship at the shrines of our own minds. And yet, even yet, ... ”

His love still is longing,
And His love still is reaching
Right past the shackles of our minds,
Let us bow to the Father
And submit ourselves to Him
For His love reaches all the way
To where we are.