

EXODUS 27: THIRD PLACE WITH GOD

SERMON-ALIGNMENT CURRICULUM

by Kevin McGill

Third Place with God

As we continue our series Living with God, we're exploring what it looks like to have a relationship with the living God in Exodus. The last two sermons focused on who God is to us—seen in the Holy of Holies with the Ark of the Covenant, the golden lampstand, and the table of showbread (Exodus 25:10–40). Last week we considered the tabernacle coverings, representing Christ: simple on the outside, glorious within (John 1:14). But every relationship is two-way. We must also ask: who are we to God? In the tabernacle's design, God created a space for us to relate to Him. Only the priests could enter the tent (Leviticus 16:2), but God provided a "third place" for all Israel—the courtyard surrounding the tabernacle (Exodus 27:9–19).

Third places matter. They are not home or work but neutral spaces where friendships grow. Pop culture gives examples: Central Perk (Friends), Cheers, even the Krusty Krab (SpongeBob). Some places foster relationships; others, like a Zoom chat room, do not. The space itself communicates something. Israel often misunderstood God's courtyard. They saw sacrifice only as duty—religious, weighty, even burdensome (Micah 6:6–7). However, the courtyard was intended as a joyful gathering place where people could come to know and be known by God, as well as by one another. Worship was not meant to feel like an obligation but like a community drawing near to God's presence (Psalm 84:1–2).

Think about when we leave here on Sundays—baptisms, missionary commissioning, even Super Snack Sunday. Those moments remind us that God designed His house to be a relational community. Like my childhood church where we discovered hidden basements and backstage corners, the church became a place of friendship. The courtyard shows us worship as God's third space: a place to work out our relationship with Him, together.

Group Discussion Questions:

What are some of your favorite third spaces? What do you get out of it that maybe you don't get out of work or home?

I. Cultivating our Relationship with God (Exodus 27:1-9)

As we look at Exodus 27:1–9, we come to the altar. At first glance, it may look like just another religious item, part of spiritual duty. But it was far more—it was the relational center between us and God. Every relationship gathers around something. For Israel, it was the altar. Each sacrifice communicated something to God, just as our actions communicate to friends and family.

Burnt Offering (Leviticus 1:1–17; Numbers 28:3–4): A pledge of total life commitment, like renewing vows in marriage. Offered daily, on Sabbaths, new moons, and annual festivals. It was the wedding ring or matching tattoo saying, “I am fully Yours.”

Grain Offering (Leviticus 2:1–16): An expression of gratitude. Just as we give thank-you notes or gifts in relationships, Israel offered flour and oil to thank God for His provision.

Peace/Fellowship Offering (Leviticus 3:1–17): Sharing a meal with God, just as meals deepen human friendships.

Sin Offering (Leviticus 4:1–35; Leviticus 16:15–22): Reconciliation for unintentional sins. Like making amends when we’ve hurt someone unknowingly.

Guilt Offering (Leviticus 5:14–19): Restitution for intentional sins, restoring trust when it has been broken.

Drink Offering (Numbers 15:1–10): Wine poured out with other sacrifices, symbolizing joyful self-offering to God. Worship was never meant to be dreary; it was celebration.

Israel often misunderstood, treating sacrifices as transactions rather than relationship (Micah 6:6–8). But God wanted cultivation, like tending a garden—not swiping a card at a grocery store. A garden requires care, attention, and joy. The same applies to us. If I cultivate my marriage with Jenny, I give myself fully, express gratitude, share meals, apologize, and celebrate joyfully. Neglect these, and the relationship dies. Our prayers, devotions, serving, giving, and confession are not “religious points.” They are relational practices drawing us closer to God (John 15:4–5). God doesn’t want transactions; He wants joy-filled communion.

Group Discussion Questions:

1. In Exodus 27:1–9, the altar was the relational center between God and His people. Each offering—burnt, grain, fellowship, sin, guilt, or drink—communicated something of devotion, gratitude, reconciliation, or joy (Leviticus 1–5; Numbers 15:1–10). How might these relational expressions help us see worship today as more than religious duty, but as ways of drawing closer to God (Micah 6:6–8; John 15:4–5)?

- *Which type of offering resonates most with your own walk with God right now (commitment, gratitude, fellowship, reconciliation, or joy)? Why?*

- *Share an example of how one of your everyday actions—like apologizing, giving thanks, or celebrating—can become an act of worship.*

2. Israel often misunderstood the sacrifices, treating them like transactions. But God desired relationship—cultivation like a garden, not a grocery store. How does this picture challenge the way you think about prayer, service, or giving? What does it look like to approach God with joy-filled communion instead of a checklist (Micah 6:6–8; John 15:4–5)?

- *Can you think of a time when your faith felt more like “checking boxes” than a relationship? What shifted your perspective?*

- *What’s one small way you can “tend the garden” of your relationship with God this week, rather than treating it like a quick transaction?*

II. Communal Faith (Exodus 27:10-19)

As we continue exploring the Tabernacle, we come to the courtyard (Exodus 27:9–19). It was surrounded by a fabric wall and served as the shared space where God's people brought their sacrifices to cultivate relationship with Him. Spirituality was not worked out individually, but together.

Imagine two people arriving with guilt offerings. One confesses, "I stole my neighbor's ox and butchered it for my family." Another says, "I lied to my boss about lost money." Side by side, they bring their offerings. That is a real moment—confession and reconciliation before God in community. This teaches us that faith is personal but never private. N.T. Wright said, "Faith is personal but never private." Tim Keller wrote, "A Christian's relationship with God is deeply personal, but not at all individualistic." And Scripture commands, "Do not neglect meeting together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another" (Hebrews 10:25).

In the courtyard, Israel celebrated commitment to God, gave thanks, and sought forgiveness—all in community. Today, we no longer need an altar or fabric walls, but discipleship still requires community. Why?

First, communal spirituality reminds us we are not alone. Others share our struggles, doubts, and even frustrations with God. Others cheer us on in victories. Celebrating together gives lasting weight to those moments (Romans 12:15).

Second, community keeps us grounded. Being surrounded by others who take God seriously strengthens us, especially in a world where faith often feels lonely.

Third, community makes space for us. The church is distinct in that it invites people in—discipleship always makes room for another: "Walk with me as I follow Jesus" (1 Corinthians 11:1).

God designed His people to gather, not scatter. The courtyard was a place of belonging, acceptance, and identity. In the same way today, we are meant to follow God together, never alone.

Group Discussion Questions:

1. In Exodus 27:9–19, the courtyard was where Israel worshiped, confessed, and celebrated together. Hebrews 10:25 reminds us not to neglect meeting together, while Romans 12:15 calls us to rejoice and weep with one another. Why do you think God designed faith to be lived out in community instead of privately?

- *Share a time when another believer's honesty about their struggles encouraged you in your own walk.*
- *How has celebrating or grieving with others deepened your faith compared to when you faced those moments alone?*

2. The church today is called to be a "courtyard" community—making space for confession, encouragement, and belonging (1 Corinthians 11:1). What would it look like for our church to embody that kind of open, relational space where people feel invited in rather than left out?

- *What practical steps can you take to make someone feel "there is space for you here" in our community?*
- *Have you ever been on the receiving end of that welcome? How did it shape your experience of God?*

III. The Church - The Light of Christ (Exodus 27:20-21)

In Exodus 27:20–21, God commands Israel to bring pure beaten olive oil for the light, that a lamp may regularly be set up to burn in the tent of meeting. Aaron and his sons were to tend it continually before the Lord. At first, this may feel like a throwaway detail, but it reveals something vital about our relationship with God.

The menorah symbolized God's presence (Exodus 25:31–40). The priests maintained the flame, but the community supplied the oil. In other words, the presence of God was a communal project. Jesus echoed this truth: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Matthew 18:20). The church, the ecclesia, is the gathering of God's people, and together we bear the light of Christ (Matthew 5:14–16).

Throughout Scripture, when the lamp went out, it symbolized the people ceasing to gather (1 Samuel 3:3). When God's people stopped showing up with their oil, the presence and blessing of God dimmed. But when we gather with sincere hearts, His favor shines on a community (Psalm 133:1–3). I saw this during our Back-to-School event. Parents arrived with their kids for hot dogs, games, and bounce houses. Our volunteers welcomed them warmly—casual smiles, genuine conversations, no hard sell. Many families, weary from life's stress and anxieties, unexpectedly encountered joy and peace. Through our simple hospitality, they experienced the presence of God.

What if the church took seriously that when we gather, the light of Christ shines? That His blessing shows up in our unity? Gathering together is not just about us; it's for the world. As Jesus said, "No one lights a lamp and hides it under a basket. Instead, they put it on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house" (Matthew 5:15).

God gathers us to be with Him, with one another, and for the world.

Group Discussion Questions:

1. In Exodus 27:20–21, the people supplied the oil while the priests tended the flame. This shows that God's presence was a shared responsibility of the community. How does this shape the way you think about your role in the life of the church today (Matthew 18:20; Psalm 133:1–3)?

- *What "oil" do you bring to sustain the light of Christ in our community (time, prayer, encouragement, service, hospitality)?*
- *Share a time when someone else's contribution of "oil" helped strengthen your faith.*

2. Jesus said His people are the light of the world (Matthew 5:14–16). Just as the lamp had to stay burning, the church is called to shine together for the sake of others. How can our gatherings, both big and small, become places where God's presence is visible to the world around us (1 Samuel 3:3)?

- *Think about our Back-to-School event or a similar time of outreach. How did simple acts of hospitality reveal God's presence?*
- *What practical steps can you take this week to let Christ's light shine through you in everyday settings—work, home, or neighborhood?*

