



MT. ROSE REFORMED
ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Bread of the Presence

Reverend Scott Johnson | May 3, 2026 | Exodus 25:23-30

Old Testament Reading

Our Old Testament reading is Exodus chapter 25, verses 23 through 30. And this is the infallible and inerrant word of God. Exodus 25, 23 through 30. You shall make a table of acacia wood. Two cubits shall be its length, a cubit its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height. You shall overlay it with pure gold and make a molding of gold around it, and you shall make a rim around it a handbreadth wide and a molding of gold around the rim. And you shall make four rings of gold and fasten the rings to the four corners at its four legs. Close to the frame, the rings shall lie as holders for the poles to carry the table. You shall make the poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold, and the table shall be carried with these. And you shall make its plates and its dishes for incense and its flagons and bowls with which to pour drink offerings. You shall make them of pure gold and you shall set the bread of the presence on the table before me regularly.

New Testament Reading

You can keep your place there since this is our sermon text and turn to the New Testament to Acts chapter 17 for our New Testament reading. Acts chapter 17 verses 22 through 31. This is the Apostle Paul's address to the Areopagus in Athens, after he had seen all of the various idols that the people of that city worshiped. So Acts 17 verses 22 through 31.

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus said, men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I

found also an altar with this inscription, To the unknown God. What therefore you worship is unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being. As even some of your own poets have said, for we are indeed his offspring. Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine image is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

The Significance of the Tabernacle

In this section of Exodus, God is giving Moses very detailed instructions on how the tabernacle was to be built. And just to remind ourselves of the overall significance of the tabernacle, we can say that there were two things that made the tabernacle a glorious thing, a place of glory. First of all, the tabernacle was the place where Almighty God, the creator of heaven and earth, where he made his dwelling place on earth among his people. The Old Testament sometimes refers to God as the one who is enthroned upon the cherubim. The two cherubim, as we saw last week, they were made out of pure gold and they were on top of the mercy seat, which itself was on top of the Ark of the Covenant. And it was there in the tabernacle above the cherubim that God said that he would be present among his people. And that in itself is sufficient to make the tabernacle the most glorious structure ever built by human hands. It was because this is where the Lord dwelt. He was with his people. His home, you could say, his tent, was among the people of Israel in that tabernacle.

But the second thing that made the tabernacle a thing of glory was that it was full of symbolism. Many of the elements of the tabernacle pointed to spiritual realities concerning the character of God, concerning God's work of salvation for his people. And these spiritual truths that were

symbolized and represented in different ways by the tabernacle, they would find their fulfillment and their fullest expression in the person of Jesus Christ and in the work that he has done for our salvation and his incarnation, his life, his suffering, death, and resurrection. And we saw this last week when we looked at the mercy seat that was on top of the Ark of the Covenant. We saw how the death of Jesus on the cross was the fulfillment of everything that the mercy seat signified. And that is the mercy seat signified that an atonement was necessary, that there had to be a propitiation, a satisfaction for the wrath of God in order for us as sinners to be saved. Our sins have to be atoned for. And the mercy seat pointed to that. And so in that way, as the mercy seat pointed ultimately to Jesus Christ and his saving work for us, the tabernacle really preached the gospel. It was, in a symbolic way, it communicated the truth of what Christ would come to do, not only for his people among the people of Israel, but for his people throughout the world.

Interpreting Tabernacle Symbolism

Now, having said that, this is where, as readers, as students of the Bible, as Christians, we need to be careful how we interpret and understand the symbolism of the tabernacle. In the history of the church, there have been very well-meaning scholars and theologians who have found all kinds of Christian truth in the tabernacle that probably was more the product of their own fertile imagination than it was the mind of God. For example, the church father Origen, he found much meaning in the precious materials that were used to construct the tabernacle. He wrote, faith is to be compared to gold, the preached word to silver, patience to bronze. Another example, Gregory the Great said the ark symbolized the church. And the four rings on the four corners of the ark represented the four gospels. And there were four rings on the four corners of the ark because the gospel was going out to the four corners of the world. Others said that the Ark actually represents the incarnation, because it was built with two materials, wood and gold. The wood stands for the humanity of Christ, the gold for his deity. And yet, just as Christ is one person with two natures, so the Ark is one Ark made out of two materials, wood and gold.

As we hear these things, of course, we say amen to the biblical truths that are being explained with these various kinds of interpretations. At the same time, we need to ask, are these kinds of allegorical, fanciful interpretations, is this where the scriptures naturally lead us? It's hard to see how it does. A better way to study the tabernacle and everything in it is to allow the scriptures themselves to guide us in our interpretation of the symbols of the tabernacle, of what they

represent. Does the Bible itself suggest or indicate a symbolic meaning to some feature of the tabernacle? And if so, how is that ultimately fulfilled in Christ? And so that is the guiding principle that should direct us as we seek to understand the true meaning of the tabernacle in light of the coming of Jesus Christ. And that's how we will proceed as we look at the various parts of the tabernacle.

Last week, we already began to look at parts of the tabernacle. We looked at the Ark of the Covenant, the most important part of the tabernacle. Today, we will look at the table that was in the holy place of the tabernacle and the gospel truth that this table, but particularly the bread on the table, the gospel truth that is communicated to us by it is this: that through Jesus Christ, through the Son of God, we have been given the blessing of intimate and unbroken communion with God. So God is with us. And this is, as we'll see, what the bread and the table indicate to us.

Description of the Table and its Furnishings

So first, let's take a look at this table that is described for us in the passage. After the Lord told Moses how to make the ark. And remember, Moses is on top of Mount Sinai. He had entered into the cloud in the top of the mountain. He's with the Lord 40 days and 40 nights. And throughout that time, God is giving him instructions on how to build this tabernacle. So first he tells him how to make the ark. Then he moves on to what will be in the room that is next to the room where the Ark is. And so the Ark is in the innermost part of the tabernacle. That's called the Most Holy Place. And then the room adjacent to the Most Holy Place that's separated by a curtain, that's referred to as the Holy Place. And in the Holy Place, it's a bigger room. It's the room that the priest would enter into first before going into the Most Holy Place. But in this holy place, there were three items or three things there. There was the table for the showbread, which we will look at today. There was the golden lamp stand, and there was also the altar of incense.

So our concern this morning is the table for the bread. Like the ark, it was made out of acacia wood. Acacia wood was easy to find in that area where they were around Mount Sinai. It was overlaid with pure gold. It wasn't a huge table. Its dimensions, as given to us in cubits, of course, but in feet, it was roughly three feet long, one and a half feet wide, and just over two feet tall. So you can picture it being about the same size of a typical coffee table that you might have in your living room. So it wasn't huge. It's not exactly clear what the two moldings and the rim were for

or what they looked like or where they were placed on the table. The rim may have just been for a very practical purpose to be around the surface of the table so something couldn't slip off of it. But in any case, like the Ark, the table was to be carried with two poles, two poles that were covered with gold. And these poles would be inserted into the four rings that were fastened to the table. One interesting little detail, specifically with the Ark, Moses was told that the poles were never to be separated from the Ark. They were always to be with the Ark. But here, the poles could be taken in and out of the ark. Presumably that's because the less handling of the ark, the better, because it was the most holy object in the tabernacle.

Now, unlike with the Ark of the Covenant, I'm not aware of any movies that give us a good visual of what the table looked like. I'm not aware of any movies like Raiders of the Lost Ark that's all about the table for the showbread. However, there is a fascinating picture of what the table may have looked like that is given to us later in history. In 82 AD, the Roman Emperor Domitian, he built what is called the Arch of Titus in Rome. And he built this arch as a monument to celebrate the great military victories of his older brother Titus, who served as emperor before Domitian. And one of the victories of Titus was the conquering and destroying of the city of Jerusalem in 70 AD. And so in order to commemorate that military conquest that Titus accomplished, this Ark of Titus has a sculpture built into it, and in this sculpture, we see Roman soldiers carrying away some of the holy articles that they found in the temple that was in Jerusalem before they destroyed it. One of those articles is the golden lamp stand, and it looks very much like a menorah, like you might picture, like you've seen before. But also in that sculpture, there is a sculpture of the table that we are considering today.

Now, the lampstand and the table that were found by the Romans and plundered by them in 70 AD, these most likely were not the original equipment, not the original table that was made by the Israelites in the wilderness. However, they may have been accurate reproductions. And in any case, if you look it up online, I think you'll find it interesting to see what may have been an accurate representation of what this table looked like and what the golden lamp stand looked like after reading about it in the Book of Exodus. But along with the table, Moses was to make various kinds of dishes. So there were plates, presumably for holding the bread as it sat on the table. There were dishes for the incense, the frankincense that was to be put on top of the bread. There were different kinds of pouring vessels of different sizes. The priests would use these for their drink offerings as they offered sacrifices to the Lord. And all of these were made out of pure gold, nothing but the finest material for God's tabernacle. So they were all made out of pure gold.

The Bread of the Presence

Now, the most important feature of the table is not something about the table itself, but the most important, most significant thing about the table was what was placed on top of it, and that was the bread, what is called here the bread of the presence. Verse 30 says, and you shall set the bread of the presence on the table before me regularly. It's very, very helpful for us as we read this passage in Exodus to read another passage from Leviticus that gives us a lot more information about this bread. So I'll read Leviticus chapter 24 verses 5 through 9. You're welcome to read along in your Bibles if you like. This is Leviticus 24 verses 5 through 9. It says, You shall take fine flour and bake 12 loaves from it. Two tenths of an ephah shall be in each loaf. And you shall set them in two piles, six in a pile on the table of pure gold before the Lord. And you shall put pure frankincense on each pile that it may go with the bread as a memorial portion, as a food offering to the Lord. Every Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange it before the Lord regularly. It is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever. And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the Lord's food offerings, a perpetual due.

And so we learned a lot more about this bread from this passage of Leviticus. First of all, we learned that there were 12 loaves of bread. No doubt that was to represent the 12 tribes of Israel. And the text doesn't say for sure, but most likely this was unleavened bread, particularly since the bread would be stacked on top of each other. So these were not really thick loaves of bread, but flatter loaves made out of unleavened flour. And given the specific quantities of flour involved, we can guess that each loaf was about 12 inches in diameter, about four inches thick. And so you can picture then this table made out of gold, and on top of it were two piles of bread, six loaves on each pile or in each pile. And so that can give you a kind of a visual image of what this looked like.

A Symbol of Divine Provision

Now, the bread, you'll notice if you remember from the Leviticus passage I just read to you, it's called a food offering. It's called a food offering. Now, it would be a mistake to think that what was meant by this is that somehow the bread was given to God by the Israelites in order to feed God. That's not how the Israelites understood the Lord, because that's not how the Lord revealed himself to them. But that was the reason why the pagans made food offerings to their

gods. It was because they were hungry. They were thirsty and they depended on their worshippers to give them food and drink, just like a dog is dependent on his owner to feed him and water him. So the idols, the false gods of the pagans, they needed their worshippers to supply them with their daily bread, their sustenance. But nothing could be further from the truth when it came to the true God, the living God, the Lord, the God of Israel. He is the creator, he is the sovereign Lord of all. There is nothing that God needs from man. In fact, there is nothing that God needs from any of his creation, of all that he created. He does not need anything from it. His creation did not somehow complete him or make him more whole. He was perfectly, infinitely bliss as God, as the triune God before he created anything. And so he needs nothing from creation in the way we need things from creation. In Psalm 50 verse 12, the Lord says, if I were hungry, I would not tell you for the world and its fullness are mine. In other words, I do not need you to keep me alive or to feed me. I do not need anything from you. I am the Lord.

This is why I had us hear the passage from Acts chapter 17, when the apostle Paul preached the gospel to the pagans in Athens, he saw all of their idols, all of the temples there. And the Apostle Paul said this, the God who made the world and everything in it being Lord of heaven and earth, he does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. It is the Lord who gives us life. It is the Lord who feeds us, not the other way around. And so when the Bible calls this bread of the presence a food offering, it was not in the sense that the pagans offered food offerings to their idols. In fact, the bread in the tabernacle was a symbol of the very opposite. It was a symbol of God's provision for man. You know, later in the history of Israel, that's given to us in the Old Testament in first Samuel chapter 21, the show bread or the bread of the presence, it became the literal provision for David and his men. On one occasion, you remember that David and his men were fleeing from Saul. Saul was chasing David with a murderous intent to destroy him. And David and his men needed food to eat. So they went to the tabernacle, and Ahimelech was the priest in those days. He had no bread to offer David. All he had was the bread of the presence, these holy loaves of bread in the tabernacle. It was only supposed to be eaten by priests, but since David needed it to eat, the priest gave him the bread. And of course, we learn from Matthew chapter 12 in our Lord's teaching there that Ahimelech did the right thing. It was right for him to feed David even with this bread that was only for the priests to eat because there was a higher law and that was to show mercy and compassion to those in need. But the point is, is that when the Bible calls this bread a food offering, it doesn't

mean that the Lord was fed by his people, rather the bread was a sign of God's provision for his people.

A Covenant of Communion and Fellowship

But the bread symbolized more than that. The greater significance of the bread was not just that God is the one who gives us our daily bread, but it also represents the truth that God was in the midst of his people. He was present with them. And the Israelites, because he was with them, they could enjoy communion and fellowship with him as their God. Again, from Leviticus chapter 24, verse eight, we read this. It is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever. He's referring to the bread there, the bread. It is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever. And so the bread had everything to do with the covenant that God made with his people. And that covenant that God entered into with His people, Israel, at the heart of that covenant, the promise of the covenant was that God said to His people, I will be your God, you will be my people, but at the very heart of that was that promise of fellowship, communion. The Israelites could know God as their God and enjoy that blessedness of communing with Him. If you remember, in our look at Exodus back in chapter 24, when the Lord confirmed his covenant with his people, he called Moses and Aaron and his sons and 70 of the elders of Israel up to the top of Mount Sinai. And this is right after he made his covenant with Israel. And Exodus 24, 11 says, they beheld God and ate and drank. And so this covenant that God entered into with his people, this covenant that brought them into a true communion with him as their God, how was this covenant confirmed? How was it sealed? It was with a meal. They shared a meal together. They ate together. The elders ate in the presence of the Lord. Of course, the Lord did not physically actually eat anything, but figuratively speaking, they shared a meal together.

And so, since this bread is in the tabernacle, which is a place where God dwelt among his people, and since the Lord uses the language of covenant to describe the bread, therefore what the bread of the presence stood for above all else was that communion and fellowship that the Israelites had with the Lord their God. The Puritan Matthew Henry puts it kind of quaintly, he says, he supped with them and they with him. But this life-giving communion that God gave to his people, that he brought his people into, this is one thing, at least one thing, that separated the true God from all the idols and the false gods of the nations around Israel, those false gods that they worshiped. God was not and is not a distant and aloof deity. He is not temperamental. He is not unpredictable or arbitrary in his dealings with man. He is not the kind of God that the

Israelites had to appease with their sacrifices in the hope that he would not destroy them. That is how the pagans thought about their gods. I happen to be reading right now Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*, and throughout that poem, the Greeks are constantly making sacrifices to the gods in the hopes that they might somehow placate them and save themselves from their capricious and impulsive anger. It seems at times the gods of the pagans were more like divine bullies that had to be appeased than they were anything like the true God.

But the worship and the service of the true God, the Lord, was nothing like that. Rather, for the Israelites to serve the Lord, to worship the Lord, to offer these sacrifices was to be a joy because he had made himself known to them. God had revealed himself to the Israelites as a God who is good, who is merciful, who is kind, who is compassionate and loving. This was the God who heard their cries for deliverance as they suffered under bondage and their slavery to Egypt. This was the Lord who answered their cries, who had mercy on them. He chose them of all the nations of the world. He loved them. He saved them. And he did so that he might bring them to himself, that they might find their eternal life, their blessedness, their joy, in having fellowship and communion with him as their God. And so God's covenant with his people Israel, it was a covenant of communion and fellowship. You know, it's indicated also by the name of this bread. The bread is called the bread of the presence. In Hebrew, presence, the word is literally face. So you could say the bread of the face, that is the face of God. And so the bread was always present before the face of God. And that stood for the truth that the Israelites lived their lives before the face of God. His face looked upon them. His face shone upon them for good, for blessing. And so the bread represents that fellowship that the Lord brought his people into.

Fulfillment in Jesus Christ

And yet there were limits to that fellowship. There were boundaries that had to be set by God because he is a holy God. And so there were boundaries of how closely the Israelites could approach the Lord. The bread itself was holy. It was only to be eaten by the priests. It was kept in the holy sanctuary. It was kept in the holy place in that sanctuary. Only the holy priests could eat it. They had to eat it in a holy place. And so there were limits. But when God sent his son, Jesus Christ, into the world, he sent him into the world so that we might enjoy a fuller, a greater, a richer communion with him than the Israelites could enjoy under the old covenant as described for us here in Exodus. And with the coming of Christ, with the coming of the son of God, with God himself coming to us in the person of his son, taking on human flesh, coming to

live among us, to walk among us, God no longer dwells in a separate tabernacle or a temple. He is no longer separated from us by this curtain that barred our entrance into the most holy place, to that place of most intimate fellowship with the Lord. But he has come to us in his Son, Jesus Christ. When Jesus was crucified, that curtain was torn asunder so that we could come into the presence of God through Jesus Christ. He even dwells in us. He dwells in us by His Holy Spirit.

Now, God is still as holy as He ever was. He is no less holy than He was in the days when He made Himself known to the Israelites. But now, He has given us His Son, Jesus. And being covered with the righteousness of Christ, we may approach Him without fear or dread. In fact, God calls us to draw near to Him, to come to him, to approach him with confidence, with joy, knowing that he receives us. Hebrews 10 says this, 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 and full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. So God, through Jesus Christ, he calls us to enter into that holy place in order to enjoy that communion that we now have with him. And so just as the bread was always there on the table in the tabernacle as a reminder to them that God was with the Israelites for their good, he loved them, he was among them, so as a believer in Jesus Christ, you have the promise, the assurance, that God, he is with you. He is always with you. He loves you. He is your father in heaven.

The Love of a Perfect Father

About 10 years ago, I read a book, an autobiographical book written by a young man who grew up in what was an extremely broken home. The author actually went on to become the vice president of the United States, but the book had nothing to do with politics, really. It was just his story of the kind of circumstances he grew up in that were so broken and so devastating to him and to others. And so when he was a kid, his biological father left his home. And from that time on, his mother was either married to or romantically involved with a series of men. And it's very sad how he tells the story. He got to like some of the men who lived in his home for a time, but he never got too close to them because he knew that someday they would be gone. And this man would be replaced by the next man who would be his mom's boyfriend or husband. And as he writes in the book, he looks back on his childhood. He sees that what he really, really wanted

was just a dad who would always be there for him, that he could count on, who would never leave.

And maybe some of you have had a similar experience. Maybe you've never really known what it is to be loved by a human father, one who is there always, who never leaves. The gospel is the good news that Christ has done everything for us that we might come to know the true father, the father who is always there, whose love is steadfast, who loves us with a perfect love, who has loved us from all eternity, and who will love us for all eternity. The gospel is the good news that God sent his only begotten son into the world that you and I might be adopted as his children, and to know that perfect fatherly love that only God can truly give to us. Jesus laid down his life for sinners, sinners such as you and me, that we might be forgiven, that we might be brought to God. And we come to him now in Jesus Christ, not as those who deserve condemnation. Yes, we do, but we are no longer under condemnation because Jesus has taken that for us. But we come to God as our father. He receives us as his son, as his daughter. And so one thing that the gospel means for you is that God is always there. He is always there. He has promised, I will never leave you nor forsake you. He is a perfect father. And if your hope is in Jesus Christ, this is what God is to you, your father in heaven, the one that you can come to always at any time and enjoy that perfect fellowship with him through Jesus Christ. And because He is your Father in heaven, His love for you will be your joy and your life forever and ever. Let's pray.