

The Message of The Tabernacle

Intro: Recently in your readings you read those chapters in Exodus that speak about the tabernacle. Sometimes its the place where we get bogged down in the details of its construction. But don't get discouraged, keep reading and realize that that part of Scripture has a wonderful message for the faithful. (Here I must beg the indulgence of my Sunday morning class, since I've just recently been talking with them about these things; so they have heard some of what I am wanting to say.)

The word “tabernacle” may not indicate clearly to the inexperienced Bible student what it was that the Israelites were building; but it may helpful to know that our word “tabernacle” is just a loan word from Latin “tabernaculum” meaning “tent”. Just as today our dwelling places are houses, among the wandering Israelites their dwelling places were tents. So one of the Hebrew words the Jews used for their homes was “ohel” meaning “tent”; and the other was “mishkan” meaning “dwelling place”. So when God told the Israelites to build a “tabernacle” He did not invent a new or special word to describe what they were building; He just called it the same thing they called their own dwellings. So what we call “the tabernacle” was God’s tent, the place where He would dwell among them.

Because this “tabernacle” was the dwelling of God, it was important to make it a house worthy of Him and furnish it in a way that pleased Him. It was made with the voluntary gifts of the Lord’s people and constructed of the finest materials, making it a tent of incomparable beauty and value. It has been estimated that over a ton of gold was used in the construction and at today’s value would be worth over 54 million dollars!

But as we read there are at least two things that stand out in God’s instructions:
First we are amazed and maybe even bewildered at the specificity or particularity with which God gave the instructions. Moses spends seven chapters giving God's people the details as God had given them to him. Second we see God's repeated and sober warnings to make the tabernacle after the pattern that He had shown Moses in the mountain. According to all that I am going to show you, as the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furniture, just so you shall construct it. (Exodus 25:9) This warning is repeated 4 times in these chapters.

Why all these details and warnings?

Probably everyone who has read this section of the Bible might have wondered, “Why?” Why all these details and warnings? The answer is found in Heb. 8:2-5 where the Hebrew writer pauses to summarize the main thrust of the first part of His epistle to the Hebrews:

Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the

heavens, a minister in the sanctuary, and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man. For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary that this high priest also have something to offer. Now if He were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law; who serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things, just as Moses was warned by God when he was about to erect the tabernacle; for, “See,” He says, “that you make all things according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain.” (Heb. 8:1-5)

God’s specific ness and warnings to Moses are due to the fact that the tabernacle was the earthly correspondent to a heavenly reality.

The OT tabernacle was an earthly tent build by man; but there was another tabernacle, a heavenly one built by God.

The OT tabernacle was a shadow or copy of the true one.

The Hebrew writer is trying to tell us that God wanted everything in the tabernacle made a certain way because it stood in spiritual relation to a greater and more perfect tabernacle.

By looking at the OT tabernacle we are being given insight into the heavenly realm and clues as to what God would do in the future. But how?

Ideas symbolized in the tabernacle and its furnishings

Since the purpose of the tabernacle was to be a dwelling place of God, its arrangement and furnishings were intended to teach lessons about the presence of God.

God is a holy God and drawing near to Him requires increasing holiness.

And let them construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them. (Exodus 25:8)

The word “sanctuary” means a “holy place”. God was proposing that Israel build a “tent” for Him that He might “dwell” among them; but because it was the dwelling of God it had to be a “holy place”, that is, it reflected God’s “wholly-other” nature and separateness from sinful humanity.

The closer one came to God, the more limited the access. Let me illustrate the idea.

For the Israelite the journey into the presence of God centered around three narrowing levels of nearness:

All of the people could come “near”.

The tabernacle was placed within a walled court that separated it from the Israelite encampment. But by coming through the gate, the Israelites could draw near to God; but this was as close as they could come to God’s presence. Whatever additional nearness they might have hoped for could only be called a “representative” one through their priests.

Only the priests of the people could come “nearer”. In order for them to serve in God’s house there must be:

An atonement at the brazen altar

A Cleansing at the laver.

And as a result they could offer the worship of God. They could light the menorah, eat of the bread of His presence, and offer incense upon the altar.

But here even the priests reached a barrier they could not cross. Beyond this point they dared not go. For there stood between them and God's presence a veil that obstructed their view of God and prevented their entrance into His presence.

Only a single high priest could come "nearest".

The most holy place was as far as one could go in "nearness" to God in the OT worship.

Here God manifest his kingly glory. There was placed the "ark of the covenant", a sacred footstool for the invisible throne of God. And like the thrones of other ancient kings, it contained the important documents of the king, the evidence of His provision (food to eat, a law to guide, priests to intercede indicated by the manna, the tablets, and the budding rod of Aaron). Yet even so, there were limitations:

The high priest could enter only on one day each year for just a few moments.

Two cherubs, heavenly guardians, hovered over the mercy seat as if to prevent any who came in from seeing the glory of God. Likewise the image of these same beings were sewn into the fabric of the coverings of the holy place as if to protect it also from unauthorized eyes.

It is as if the whole arrangement was ultimately intended to frustrate the longing of those who wanted to see God most. Even those who could come nearest could not go far enough or see clearly the presence of God since on the day of entry the smoke of incense filled the room..

But what is the message that God is conveying?

The structure of God's OT tent indicated the need for redemption.

There was a barrier that kept man from coming into God's presence—sin!

Because men were sinners, no one could come and stay in the presence of God.

The priests & sacrifices indicated the actions of redemption.

There had to be another sacrifice to remove that barrier. The blood of bulls and goats was not

adequate to remove sin. Another sacrifice must be offered in God's presence!
Sin must be punished. Guilt must be pardoned.
Reconciliation and peace must be made
The furnishings likewise indicated the principles of redemption.
There must be not merely be symbolic rituals. Instead it anticipated "better things to come"-- real atonement, real cleansing, real acceptance, real illumination, and real intercession.

How would this be achieved? How could sinful man ever come into the presence of God? In the tabernacle God was giving clues as to how He would accomplish this.

The Tabernacle points to Jesus, the Redeemer

Listen now to the Hebrew writer:

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. (Heb. 9:11-12)

For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; nor was it that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the holy place year by year with blood not his own. Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. (Heb. 9:24-26)

Jesus came and did everything that the symbolism of the tabernacle pointed to!

He removed the barrier of sin!

He offered the needed sacrifice!

He established the principles of redemption.

Thus, He leads us into the presence of God!

Instead of coming to a curtain that prevents man from coming into God's presence, His offering has removed the curtain forever! And it is not a mere coincidence that when Jesus died on the cross, back in the city the walls of God's temple shook and the curtain which separated the holy from the most holy was "rent asunder from top to bottom". But the Jews failed to perceive this clear sign from God!

Conclusion: Knowing what Jesus had done reminded the Hebrew writer of the boldness and the confidence we have in coming into God's presence. Approaching God is no longer a fearful matter for a few, but a joyful hope for the many.

This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. (Heb. 6:19-20)

Consequently, the exhortations to God's redeemed people are not "Don't cross that line!" But rather,

Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:16)

Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Heb. 10:19-22)

Do you hear what the Hebrew writer is saying! Draw near! Receive the sacrifice and the cleansing.

Draw nearer! Receive his acceptance, walk by His light, and go right on in to the throne room and talk to the God who loved you enough to give His son for you!

And then realize that we will experience God's presence in an even greater way:

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them, and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." (Rev. 21:2-4)

Drawn nearest! Receive the inheritance God has prepared for you to live in His eternal presence in heaven!