

The Tabernacle, Part I
Exodus 25 | October 3, 2021
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Introduction

I am thrilled today to start looking at the Tabernacle. So far in the book of Exodus we've seen God use Moses to free his people out of Egypt. We've seen God provide water, manna, and quail for all of Israel. We've seen the incredible glory of God at Mount Sinai, where God gave Israel the 10 Commandments. And just last week, we saw God re-confirm the covenant he had made with Israel. It's been an amazing journey so far.

We're going to spend about 10 weeks in these 16 chapters we have left in Exodus. Just so you can have an overview. Chapters 25-31 detail God's instructions on how to build the tabernacle. That's what we're starting today with chapter 25. Then, in chapters 32-34, we find the Golden Calf debacle. If you don't know what that is, you'll know soon enough. And then, in chapters 35-40 we see the actual building of the Tabernacle. Those last six chapters we will look at in only one Sunday, because much of it is word-for-word what we find in the instructions God gives in chapters 25-31. That will be a rare Sunday where we won't read every verse because we already have, as it's virtually word-for-word the same. So that's an overview of the next 10 or so weeks.

Now, as we jump into the Tabernacle today, I want to encourage you not to get too frustrated with all the details. Especially next week as we get into chapters 26 and 27. You have to keep in mind, God is saying, I'm going to dwell with you. The central verse of the chapter we're reading today is verse 8: "Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst." God was literally giving them instructions here as to construct the house in which he was going to live, in their midst!

Can I just tell you something? If I ever build myself a house for me and my family, I'm going to be picky. That makes sense, doesn't it? If you're building it from scratch, you can speak into every little part of that home and how it's going to be built. God, of all beings, not only has that right, but it's also even more appropriate for God to be picky. Because this is God. He is holy. He is set apart from the world, set apart from us. He wanted the Israelites to know just how set apart he was, even though he was going to dwell in their midst.

So, let's read these instructions that God gives, and see what we can learn from them. Let's start by reading Exodus 25, verses 1-9:

The Lord said to Moses, ² "Speak to the people of Israel, that they take for me a contribution. From every man whose heart moves him you shall receive the contribution for me.³ And this is the contribution that you shall receive from them: gold, silver, and bronze, ⁴ blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, goats' hair, ⁵ tanned rams' skins, goatskins, acacia wood, ⁶ oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, ⁷ onyx stones, and stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece. ⁸ And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst.⁹ Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.

Alright, we're going to focus in on these verses more in a few weeks, but you can see that God is asking all the Israelites to contribute to the building of the Tabernacle. If you remember, God had promised that when they were delivered out of Egypt, they would have spoils to go with them. That's where all these precious metals and materials were going to come from.

God says, in verse 8, “Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst.” What is a sanctuary? A sanctuary is a holy place. What makes a sanctuary holy, though, is not the material, or the location, or really anything about the place itself. What makes a sanctuary holy is the presence of God! If you remember back in Exodus chapter 3, with the burning bush, what made the ground holy, so that Moses had to take off his sandals? Was it extra special grass, like St. Augustine for Kentucky Fescue? No. God was there. That’s what made that place holy.

So, they’re preparing a place for God Himself to dwell with them, in their camp. And in verse 9, he is very clear: follow my instructions exactly! God was going to show them and express to them what it meant to have a holy God dwell with him. That’s why there are such specific details in the building of the Tabernacle. So, there are three items in chapter 25 that will go inside the Tabernacle. That’s what we’re going to look at a bit more in-depth. Let’s start with the most important item; that’s why it is described first here—the ark of the covenant. Let me read verses 10-22. Follow along. We’re on page 61 of the pew Bibles, by the way.

¹⁰ “They shall make an ark of acacia wood. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, a cubit and a half its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height. ¹¹ You shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and outside shall you overlay it, and you shall make on it a molding of gold around it. ¹² You shall cast four rings of gold for it and put them on its four feet, two rings on the one side of it, and two rings on the other side of it. ¹³ You shall make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. ¹⁴ And you shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark to carry the ark by them. ¹⁵ The poles shall remain in the rings of the ark; they shall not be taken from it. ¹⁶ And you shall put into the ark the testimony that I shall give you.

¹⁷ “You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its breadth. ¹⁸ And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. ¹⁹ Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end. Of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. ²⁰ The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be. ²¹ And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. ²² There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel.

The Ark of the Covenant

This is by far the most important part of the Tabernacle. The ark itself was actually much like a box made of wood. If you do the math, it's 45" long, 27" wide, and 27" tall. The ark was made of wood, but it was overlaid with gold. And it had feet so it wouldn't rest directly on the ground, and it had four rings with poles for carrying. What would go in here? Well, we just saw it, right? The "testimony," which is what? It's the tablets with the 10 Commandments. We know from Hebrews 9:4 that this ark would also hold a gold jar full of manna that God had provided for the Israelites if you remember, and the staff of Aaron, the brother of Moses. Here's a rendering of what the ark of the Covenant may have looked like.

On top of the ark was a covering, or a mercy seat. This covering was not wood; it was pure gold. And on top of this covering was two pure gold cherubim, two golden angels. We're not sure exactly what

they looked like, but based on our discussion last week, they probably didn't like Cupid or harp-playing, cloud-floating angels. These were likely magnificent, majestic cherubim, much like what we see in the book of the Revelation.

What do we really see here, though? What's the point? Here are the two main things I want you to walk away with today. These are true for the Israelites, and they are also most certainly true for us. We are children of God who are now part of God's family because of the body and the blood of Christ, right? So, these two main things I want you to walk away with today; they were true for the Israelites, and they are certainly true for us. Here they are, and we're going to come back to these over and over this morning.

God is holy, and God is here. God is holy, and God is here... Think about this: Why overlay the wooden ark with gold? Why have the covering be made of pure gold? Why the two cherubim made of pure gold? Why? Our utilitarian minds might think, "Well, isn't this a waste?" Couldn't that be put to better purposes? It reminds me of Judas in John chapter 12 when he rebuked Mary for pouring expensive, nice perfume on the feet of Jesus. Judas said, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" Couldn't this gold also be used more effectively than for an ark? Why so lavish? Why so precious the materials they had to use for this ark?

Because God is holy! There is no more fitting purpose for pure gold than the symbolize the holiness of our God. This wasn't your everyday false god in the ancient near east. This wasn't even your everyday altar or place of worship. God, the holy God, was going to dwell here, directly on the mercy seat, between these two golden cherubim.

God is holy, and God is here. Unspeakably, God was going to dwell with the Israelites. This covering on the ark, the Hebrew word for covering is “Kaparet.” It literally just means to cover. But it was often used in the context of atoning for sin. In other words, covering sin. In fact, maybe you’ve heard of “Yom Kappur”, the Jewish holiday. It means “Day of Atonement.” Kappur has the same word stem as Kaparet, the word for “covering” here in Exodus 25. That’s why the ESV here and some older translations use the phrase “mercy seat.” Why is that so important? Because we see here, symbolically, that God only meets with his people when their sins are covered. That’s the symbolic meaning here.

Where God meets us, our sins are covered. How? Through sacrifice. Through blood. Through covenant, which is what was housed in this ark. I mentioned to you last week that there was an altar in the courtyard before you go into the tabernacle. That altar is where a sacrifice was made before the priests could enter the tabernacle. Only through blood can God’s justice be upheld and yet his mercy be shown to us. Only by blood can God meet with us.

God is holy. God is here, only by His mercy. He is present with us only because He covers our sin through sacrifice. Ultimately, he covers our sin through the sacrifice of Jesus. God is holy, he cannot let sin go unpunished. And so he provides a substitute for us, who covers our sin. And then and only then, is God truly with us. God is holy. God is here. We’ll come back to that again and again this morning. The second item we find here in the tabernacle is a table. Follow along with me as I read verses 23-30:

²³ “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. ²⁴ You shall overlay it with pure gold and make a molding of gold around it. ²⁵ And you shall make a rim around it a handbreadth wide, and a molding of gold around the

rim. ²⁶ And you shall make for it four rings of gold, and fasten the rings to the four corners at its four legs. ²⁷ Close to the frame the rings shall lie, as holders for the poles to carry the table. ²⁸ You shall make the poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold, and the table shall be carried with these. ²⁹ And you shall make its plates and dishes for incense, and its flagons and bowls with which to pour drink offerings; you shall make them of pure gold. ³⁰ And you shall set the bread of the Presence on the table before me regularly.

The Table of the Bread

So this table, if you do the math, it's 36" by 18" by 27". It's also made of wood and overlaid with gold. And it has the rings and poles to be carried like the ark. And this is the second most important item in the Tabernacle. We know from Deuteronomy that this is the only other item that's going to have more than one covering when they're moving it. Just like the ark, it will have three coverings to protect it. That shows us how important it was. Here's a rendering of what this table may have looked like.

There were twelve loaves of bread that represented the twelve tribes of Israel. Philip Ryken makes the point that this was a way of showing God's people that they all had a seat at God's table, no matter which tribe they were in.

This was also a way God showed his people that he was a God of provision. This is God's table, and he provided the bread. This is why the priests would eat it each week, because that symbolized God providing Israel their daily bread. God was not only their Creator, God was their Sustainer. We see here yet another angle of God's presence, this truth that God is here. He's present not only in the sense that he is physically and spiritually with us. But he's present in that provides our every need!

And of course, the ultimate need that God provides us with is not only through daily sustenance and bread, but with the Bread of Life! In John chapter 6, after Jesus feeds the 5000 people miraculously, he says this: “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.” Do you see where the Lord’s Supper fits in here as well? This is a physical symbol of being sustained by Jesus Christ, the bread of life. Do you see just how overt the presence of God really is among His people?

God is holy, and God is here. He was with the Israelites and quenched their hunger and thirst by providing every need they had. And now, in Jesus most ultimately: God has provided every need we have. He is the Bread of Life, Church. He really is here. And he’s not just sitting around uninvolved! Like, “Oh sure, he’s here, but clearly he’s a bit preoccupied or checked-out.” No, he’s really here in every way! He created us, He redeemed us, and now He sustains us. God is holy, and he really is here. The third item in the Tabernacle was the Lampstand. Let me read verses 31-40:

³¹ “You shall make a lampstand of pure gold. The lampstand shall be made of hammered work: its base, its stem, its cups, its calyxes, and its flowers shall be of one piece with it. ³² And there shall be six branches going out of its sides, three branches of the lampstand out of one side of it and three branches of the lampstand out of the other side of it; ³³ three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower, on one branch, and three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower, on the other branch—so for the six branches going out of the lampstand. ³⁴ And on the lampstand itself there shall be four cups made like almond blossoms, with their calyxes and flowers, ³⁵ and a calyx of one piece with it under each pair of the six branches going out from the lampstand. ³⁶ Their calyxes and their branches shall be of one piece with it, the whole of it a single piece of hammered work

of pure gold. ³⁷ You shall make seven lamps for it. And the lamps shall be set up so as to give light on the space in front of it. ³⁸ Its tongs and their trays shall be of pure gold. ³⁹ It shall be made, with all these utensils, out of a talent of pure gold. ⁴⁰ And see that you make them after the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain.

The Lampstand

You may not have caught every part of that description, but basically this lampstand is made of pure gold, and really is made to look like an actual tree. At least somewhat—the traditional rendering of this lampstand is very symmetrical, but the leaves themselves and the branches going up from the middle of lampstand: these were made to look like an actual tree. In fact, here's one example of what it may have looked like.

This lamp was lit specifically during the night hours. Why? Was it because they didn't want God to get lost in the Tabernacle—you know, he needed to be able to see where to go? Is that why? Of course not. Why, then? Why a lampstand? This was God's way of giving a constant reminder to all the Israelites that He was there with them! Not just in the daylight hours, but at night, when they rested their heads—The light from the Tabernacle shined! All night long!

When we lived in Ennis, Lauryn was a band director and I was a Youth Pastor, and so we went to all the football games. And Ennis has a pretty good history of an excellent football team. One of the years we were there, the Ennis Lions made it to the state championship game, and it was held at Cowboys Stadium, just two miles from here. And in a small, one high school town like Ennis—let me just tell you: everyone showed up at Cowboys stadium for that game. Everyone did! You could have driven through Ennis, and it

would've felt like a ghost-town, almost no house lights on anywhere. Why? Because no one was home! They were all at the game! In fact, it actually ended up being a night with quite a few home burglaries, because everyone knew the vast majority of the town would be at the game. It was pretty easy to pick out the home where no one was there, right? Usually, it was a house with no lights on.

What does the lampstand in the Tabernacle tell us about our God? It tells us God is home! God is HERE! Yes, He's holy, He's set apart. He's different from you and from me. We see that in the pure gold of the mercy seat and the cherubim. We see that in the fine, lavish, materials used to construct the Tabernacle and the three items withing. This isn't just some man living among the Israelites. This isn't even some famous or influential person. This is God! He is holy. He is different from us.

But listen, church: That's what makes it so amazing that He is HERE. That's what we see with this lampstand: God is always home! He is always present. He's not busy. He's not preoccupied. He's not on vacation. He's not taking a nap. He is here, and he is AWAKE and ACTIVE!

Conclusion

Again, we come to these two main things I want you to take with you today. God is holy. Uniquely so. No one is like Him. And yet God is here, which is a miracle in and of itself, that He would care at all to be with us, much less to provide the way for that to happen! God is holy, he is transcendent, majestic, and glorious. And yet, he was with the Israelites, and he is here with you and with me.

No matter where the Israelites would go, God was going to be there with them. That's why this tabernacle was made to be portable! God was going to go with them wherever they went. This is the greatest

promise God gave the Israelites and it's a promise he has also given to us, those of us who are Christ. That promise is found in Deuteronomy 31:6- "Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you."

Let me just say that again, because we need to hear this, church. "Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you." Jesus echoes this in the New Testament, in the Great Commission itself. Matthew 28:19-20-

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

God is holy, but God is here. He is with us, church. One of my favorite writers put it like this: "God wants not just your obedience; he wants your fellowship. Not just your conformity, but your communion. Not just your duty, but your delight. Not just sticking to the rules but sticking close to Him."

Does it overwhelm you what God has done so that you and I can be in fellowship with Him? So that we can be with Him, and He can be with us. Does it overwhelm you? Because if it doesn't, I don't think you fully understand just how magnificent it is that God is holy, and yet He is here. Sitting upon the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant for the Israelites, and for us: sitting upon the mercy seat of the Cross. Say it with me, would you church? God is holy, and yet God is here. One more time: God is holy, and yet God is here. I beg of you, church. Do not let that fall on deaf ears. Take it in. Let it sit deeply upon your hearts and upon your minds.



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