

Exodus 24:12-27:19

We have a long passage today, full of what looks like very detailed instructions about the making of the Tent of Meeting, and its furnishings – we have seven references in the Old and New Testaments that Moses was instructed to make all things according to the pattern laid down by God himself. While I am going to talk about the Tent and its furnishings, I will start with a couple of overall things. The first is that the instructions do seem very detailed and complete, but if you do try to make a reproduction of the Tent, you will see that there is information that is missing – important pieces of information that would allow us to make a reproduction. By the way, I am going to use “the Tent of Meeting” and “Tabernacle” interchangeably, even though I understand that they are slightly different: the “tabernacle” refers to the whole structure. The “tent of meeting” appears to mean the tent inside of the enclosure that contained the Holy of Holies and the antechamber. But I’m not going to be picky about this.

By saying the details are missing for a complete reconstruction, I am not denigrating the reconstruction that you see in Lancaster, for there is nothing wrong with giving people an overall idea of what the Tabernacle looked like. I am only saying that Moses was given exact instructions by God himself about the Tabernacle and its furnishings. These instructions allowed the Israelites to make a center of worship exactly the way that God wanted it to be. When the instructions were written down, God allowed a great deal of information to be given to later readers to show how seriously he takes our worship; his desire to dwell among us; and our need for atonement, but God also knew that the Tabernacle was not meant to be permanent. I don’t know the mind of God, but I wonder if that is the reason why every single detail about how to make the Tabernacles wasn’t passed down on purpose, because God *always* intended to replace the rites of atonement and the worship of Him which were centered on the Tabernacle. He always intended to replace the rites of atonement with the life and death of Jesus. He always expected that the worship of Him in a specific place would be worship that occurs in each one of our hearts.

So, I debated with myself for a long time about whether or not to show pictures of the things we might know something about, but then decided not to, and I’ll tell you why: we have not a single thing that survives from the Tabernacle, nor even from the Temple built by Solomon (if you are interested in the counterfeiting of “Biblical” artifacts, come talk to me about the faked

ivory pomegranate supposed to be one of the adornments of the robe of the High Priest from Solomon's time). The truth is, we don't exactly know what the Tent of Meeting, the Ark of the Covenant, the two menorahs, or the other things used in the Tabernacle looked like. We may have some *idea* what some of those things looked like in the Temple that Herod built 1000 years later, the Temple that Jesus would have seen, but we do not have a single item from the time when God first commanded Tabernacle and these objects for his worship to be made. This is partly because the Tabernacle was no longer needed when Solomon's Temple was built, and partly because all the utensils, including the Ark of the Covenant, were looted – some were given away by Jewish kings to potential conquerors; some were looted by the Assyrians, some by the Babylonians. By the way, we don't know what happened to the Tabernacle after the Temple was built. God just didn't think it was important for us to know. We do know that when a Roman general showed up in the building that was being used as a Temple before Herod rebuilt it, he was astonished. He expected, because he was a pagan, to find a statue of the god being worshipped or some other physical object representing the god, but he came out and basically said, 'are you crazy? There is nothing in the Holy of Holies – it is completely empty! What kind of a god do you worship?'

My second point is that you can find a lot of speculation out there about the application of each element of the Tent and its utensils. Ivan Doig, at the last men's retreat, had an excellent diagram about understanding the OT in light of the NT. There were a couple of things that I found really helpful: we do need to read the OT in light of its own context and in light of the culture of the time when it was written, in this case, the Bronze Age in the Levant. Scholars of the ancient world - and I - can find a stopping place there, but that is not the point of the OT. The point is both to understand that context and see how it worked and works out in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. But if we skip from reading, for instance (as Pastor Doig had as an illustration) that the tent pegs were driven into the ground to hold up the tent to: this shows that Jesus was half man and half God, he was buried and resurrected, we are skipping past the context – you need tent pegs to hold up a tent – and moving too quickly into application. Thus, I am going to be a little cautious in the application, and I will concentrate on the fact that God has some specific ideas about how we are to worship Him and how He make a provision to allow for atonement, through an intercessor, for our sins so that we can dwell with Him.

Let's begin with Chap 24:12-18. We talked last week about how the covenant between God and his people was confirmed on Mt. Sinai, through hearing what God wanted concerning his people and through the blood sprinkled on the altar and the people. This ceremony was sealed by a banquet. In this section today, Moses is to be given more instructions, which will be confirmed by a miraculous shout from God at the end of our passage, where Moses's leadership and role as intercessor are established. The instructions in this part of the story underline how serious the undertaking of setting up the Tabernacle is: Moses sets out with only one other person, Joshua, who is already singled out as a leader, although Moses alone reaches the top of the mountain. Moses is told that he will come down off the mountain with stone tablets of what are probably the 10 commandments, as well as longer instructions written on some unstated material. The importance of these instructions was understood by the writer of **Hebrews**, for in **8:5** he writes, "[the law] serves as 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," God says, "that you make all things according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain"" (this specific instruction is given in Ex 25:40). The writer in Hebrews also calls the Tabernacle a pale imitation of the Heavens, which stretch over the thrones of God the Father and Jesus as high priest (**Hebr. 8:2**).

Moses fatefully leaves Aaron and Hur in charge of all the people who are camped at the foot of the mountain – the writer is leaving us in suspense for the moment, although we know this will not end well. But in another reference to the 7 days of creation and the rest day on the 7th, Moses is alone for 6 days at the top of the mountain, before God comes to him on the 7th day. And in a reflection of the time of testing for Jesus, Moses also stays on the mountain for 40 days.

Chap 25: The first instructions from the Lord about the construction of the Tabernacle and all the robes of the priests are how the materials are to be assembled. These materials are to come as voluntary contributions from all the people – this may be why God wanted the Israelites to strip the Egyptians of all their gold and silver, which they have been dragging around with them for at least two months; they could use these metals to purchase the other luxury materials that God commands to be used. But these are all to be voluntarily given, as an offering, just as we today are asked to voluntarily give our tithes and offerings. Since the Tabernacle was to be made for the benefit of the people – God did not need it – the people need to provide the

materials – willingly, cheerfully - so that God could be seen to dwell among his people. Some of the listed materials are easily translated – gold, silver, bronze, wool, acacia wood, olive oil – but some are a little more ambiguous. Your translation might read, “porpoise skins” or just “durable leather”, but it is not at all clear what kind of leather this is. It doesn’t really matter what kind of leather it is, we are just to understand that this was no flimsy tent, but God wanted to let people know that this was durable, just as was his relationship with them.

V.10-22 God begins with the most important part of the Tabernacle, the Ark or Box or Chest, which is to be made of wood covered over with gold, and since it is to be both portable and no-one is allowed to touch the box itself, it has rings and poles allowing it to be carried (we hear of a time during David’s reign when a man did touch the Ark and died because he did so). We are told what is to go inside the chest: the stone tablets, later augmented, we are told in **Hebrews 9:5** with a jar of manna and Aaron’s staff that had grown leaves. It may be that these symbolize the law and the prophets or priests and God’s daily provision for us.

Over the top of the chest goes a golden lid topped by two cherubim. I know you are all thinking of the Raiders of the Lost Ark scene here, but I think their appearance might have been very strange to us. We are told the creatures are to be winged and look down. **Ezekiel** describes more of what he called cherubim, in **chaps 1 and 10**. He says that they look something like humans, with arms, four wings and hooves; they have four faces, one human-like, one lion, one bull and one eagle. Somehow there are wheels with eyes attached to the creatures. I don’t know how the craftsman in Moses’s time made these cherubim, but I did want to note that we have to look at details from other places in the Bible that talk about cherubim, details that are not mentioned here. What is *important* is that cherubim are guarding the mercy seat, just as they guard God’s throne in Ezekiel. So, we are to think of the Ark of the Covenant as standing in for the throne of God.

V. 23-28, 30 give instructions for the Table of “showbread” – this is the table for the daily grain offering, in the form of bread, 12 loaves, baked specifically for this altar. This bread is not laid out to feed the Lord, as pagan priests did for their gods, but as a thanksgiving offering daily for all of the Lord’s provision (as in the plea we make when we pray the Lord’s Prayer, “give us this day our daily bread”). The instructions about the loaves are given later, in Lev. 24, but they clearly represent the thank offering of the 12 tribes of Israel. David took loaves from this altar as

he fled from King Saul, in **1 Sam 21: 2-6**, which he was not condemned for, but this story was used as an example by Jesus about how God does make the world to provide for our daily needs (**Matt. 12:3-8**). The instructions here are again to make the altar portable by giving it rings and poles; it is also to be overlaid with gold, showing the importance of this piece for worship. We don't have any stories of people being put to death for touching it, but in later instructions for how to perform sacrifices we read that only the High Priest and other high-ranking priests were able to approach this altar, which stood outside of the Holy of Holies, separated from the mercy seat by a curtain so that priests could minister here.

V. 31-40 where the instructions are given for the two great golden lampstands that are to be put near the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. These instructions are so important that the Lord wraps up this section by warning, "see that you make them after the pattern for them, which was shown to you on the mountain." Of all the other furnishings of the Tabernacle, this is the one that we probably have the best idea about, even if there are still elements missing from the description – for instance, we know that the lampstand (for that is what it was – clay lamps were balanced on the gold arms) was to be built with 7 branches, but we don't know if the arms were all supposed to be of equal height, for instance. Theologians are not sure why there is floral imagery to be incorporated. Possibly the lampstands symbolize Israel as a tree flourishing under God's protection, an image of Israel that is found in the prophets (see, for example, **Jer. 11:16**). Possibly it alludes to the burning bush that manifested God to Moses. We, of course, can make the reference to Jesus being the light of the world, or lighting the way to God. Whatever the case, the symbolism must be important, as we return to the 6 + 1 imagery found elsewhere in this section of the book, a testament to God's promise of rest.

I'm going to have to move a little more quickly through the rest of the furnishings: by chapter 26 and the second half of chapter 27, Moses is given instructions for the tent and its surrounding curtains. Again, there are important details that are left out, but we can understand that the enclosure is rectangular, with a doorway to the east. Inside the enclosure are two sections or chambers. The most interior one is the holy of holies, which only contains the Ark of the Covenant and which is allowed to be entered only one day a year by the high priest (we later learn). A curtain hides the Ark from the priests who can enter into the first section, where the Table of Showbread and the menorot stand. We will also see in the next section that the table of

incense is in this section – this must have been quite an assault on the senses to step into this enclosed space with burning oil lamps and incense! The lights from the lamps would have flickered over the gold on the altars, leaving pockets of dark shadows closer to the curtain of the holy of holies – an awe-inspiring experience as you approached the mercy seat.

What we know about this structure is that it is intended to be weatherproof and durable – there are layers of wool and leather – but also portable, so God will move with his people as he leads them to where he wants them to go. The decoration of the interior, with embroidered cherubim, remind those who can approach that they are not to approach God unthinkingly or flippantly, but with great reverence and awe. The large curtain barrier is to make sure everyone understands where God has chosen to represent His presence with them; they are protected by the curtain from themselves approaching God casually or without thinking about making an atonement or thank offering.

In Chapter 27 v. 1-8, the altar that most priests would be using is described. This is the altar where the sacrifices are burned. It is outside the Tent, but inside the Tabernacle, so that God and the people could see the smoke rising from the sacrifices over the curtains surrounding the Tabernacle. We are told that God delighted in the smell of sacrifices. This altar, too, had to be portable, but it also had to be durable, since fire burned on it daily, so it is made of bronze, not gold. We do have images of ancient altars, and having horns on the corners is very typical of these altars – these would be triangular projections. We don't know if they were used for a specific purpose.

After these quick comments about instructions on the Tabernacle and the objects for worship, what can we understand about this section of Exodus? Again, the intention was not to provide detailed instructions about how to reconstruct the Tabernacle. God clearly has ideas about how he wants to be worshipped and is intent on telling us about the importance of atonement. The entire size of the building and its construction may show us that the place where we meet God is special. The barrier emphasizes the holiness of God and our need to be aware that we are approaching holy ground when we approach him. And we need to remember that his glory in the Tabernacle was hidden and we can only approach Him through an intermediary. The altar of sacrifice behind the barrier tells us that when we approach him, we can only do it through

atonement for our sins. Yet the interior is meant to reflect, in all of its beauty, the beauty of God's character and an indication of his holiness, so that angels attend him constantly.

We are even told about the most holy of the implements first, which are to be kept away from almost all people because of the nature of what they represent: God cannot be approached by sin, but he had made a way for approaching him, through an atonement for sins. This approach leads directly to the extension of His mercy.

Yet this Tabernacle was never intended to be the permanent way that sinful people could approach God. The writer of **Hebrews**, in **chapter 9**, tells us directly "There was a tabernacle prepared...which is a *symbol* for the time then present, according to which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshipper perfect in conscience...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...and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through his own blood." When Jesus was on Earth, he told the people who confronted him after he cleansed the Temple, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up", which John goes on to tell us "He was speaking of the temple of His body". By his very presence on Earth, Jesus was already pointing to the end of the need to approach God through sacrifices and offerings, since the sacrifice *he* made put an end to the need for anymore sacrifices in the Temple. By being made in his image when we accept this sacrificial atonement for our sins, we somehow can enter into that same replacement of the Tabernacle, for as Paul, in **1 Cor 3:16**, tells us we have become that "tabernacle, where the Spirit of God dwells".

We began our study understanding that only one person, once a year, after the sacrifices have been made in exactly the way that God has ordered them to be, is allowed into the presence of the mercy seat, where he (and only he) can catch a glimpse of the glory of God. We end our study with the awe-inspiring remembrance of how this Tabernacle was a shadow of things to come, where we no longer need a human intermediary who is allowed to once approach the mercy seat for us once a year, but we have an intermediary who constantly dwells in glory, making intercession for us daily, hourly, every moment. Let's take a minute to thank the Lord for this provision.

Prayer: Lord, we are humbled by the very fact that you want us to approach you and that you began working out a way to allow us to do that, even before we were created. We bow in

awe before this plan that was revealed so many years ago in ages that are very different from our own. But your purpose has not changed nor has it ever been hidden. We thank you today for the provision of Jesus, who allows us approach you; we thank you for the provision of the Holy Spirit, who can now dwell within us and remind us of your goodness and mercy.

I pray that as we move to our small groups that we will rejoice with each other in the saving work of Jesus and that we will encourage each other to turn to the mercy seat. And I pray these things in Jesus's holy and mighty name.