

The God Who Is Holy (Part 2 of 6)

The Tabernacle: A Place for God to Dwell

Exodus 26:1-14

Mark Vroegop

"Moreover, you shall make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine twined linen and blue and purple and scarlet yarns; you shall make them with cherubim skillfully worked into them. The length of each curtain shall be twenty-eight cubits, and the breadth of each curtain four cubits; all the curtains shall be the same size. Five curtains shall be coupled to one another, and the other five curtains shall be coupled to one another. And you shall make loops of blue on the edge of the outermost curtain in the first set. Likewise you shall make loops on the edge of the outermost curtain in the second set. Fifty loops you shall make on the one curtain, and fifty loops you shall make on the edge of the curtain that is in the second set; the loops shall be opposite one another. And you shall make fifty clasps of gold, and couple the curtains one to the other with the clasps, so that the tabernacle may be a single whole. "You shall also make curtains of goats' hair for a tent over the tabernacle; eleven curtains shall you make. The length of each curtain shall be thirty cubits, and the breadth of each curtain four cubits. The eleven curtains shall be the same size. You shall couple five curtains by themselves, and six curtains by themselves, and the sixth curtain you shall double over at the front of the tent. You shall make fifty loops on the edge of the curtain that is outermost in one set, and fifty loops on the edge of the curtain that is outermost in the second set. "You shall make fifty clasps of bronze, and put the clasps into the loops, and couple the tent together that it may be a single whole. And the part that remains of the curtains of the tent, the half curtain that remains, shall hang over the back of the tabernacle. And the extra that remains in the length of the curtains, the cubit on the one side, and the cubit on the other side, shall hang over the sides of the tabernacle, on this side and that side, to cover it. And you shall make for the tent a covering of tanned rams' skins and a covering of goatskins on top." (Exodus 26:1–14, ESV)

Sarah and I celebrated our 20th wedding anniversary last week, and I found myself saying "Two decades!" more often than anyone in our house appreciated. It was a great week of reflection on twenty years of an amazing marriage to a woman who has been a gift to me in ways that only the Lord fully knows. A twenty-year anniversary is a big deal.

To mark our special anniversary, I bought my wife a tree. Not just any tree, but a white spire birch. The reason I chose this tree was because we were given a white spire birch tree by some family members after the passing of our daughter, and we have often talked about how we wished that we could have taken that tree with us. When I thought of a gift that would mark the significance of two decades of life together, it seemed fitting. And it was. She loved it.

Last weekend I planted the 400 lb tree in our backyard, and it is beautiful! But I love the tree, not just because of its appearance; I love the tree because of what it means. Every time I see it I'm reminded of

something more than just a tree. That white spire birch tree is a dynamic symbol of a marriage that has bent and blown in the sunshine of blessing and the storms of life but has remained gloriously alive!

I'm sure that you have dynamic symbols like that in your life. You might wear them on your hand or around your neck. Perhaps they are placed in a prominent position on your mantle or at your office at work. Maybe they've become your profile picture on Facebook or your screen-saver at work. Regardless, there are "things" that we cherish which have a symbolism or a message beyond themselves.

The Meaning of the Tabernacle

In our study of Exodus we are examining the detailed instructions for the first worship center for the people of Israel – the Tabernacle. Chapters 25-33 give us amazing and intricate detail regarding the construction of this meeting place with God. It was designed to be a unique and special place for God's people.

Peter Enns, in his commentary on Exodus, gives us a great summary of the significance of the Tabernacle beyond its actual construction. He connects the Tabernacle to the idea of "heaven on earth." Here is what he says:

In the midst of a fallen world, in exile from the Garden of Eden – the original heaven on earth – God undertakes another act of creation, a building project that is nothing less than a return to pre-Fall splendor. The Tabernacle, therefore, is laden with redemptive significance, not just because of the sacrifices and offerings within its walls, but simply because of what it is: a piece of holy ground amid a world that has lost its way.¹

Don't miss what he says, because it is relevant to our understanding of the Tabernacle and even how we should approach the gathering of God's people here on Sunday morning. Let me summarize it for you: **the assembly of God's people is a piece of holy ground in the midst of a fallen world that has lost its way.**

Now that statement struck me with force on Wednesday morning, because just after I read that paragraph, the news broke about the Supreme Court ruling regarding the Defense of Marriage Act and Proposition 8 in California. I found my heart longing to be together with God's people to be reminded of what God says about life and to sing about things greater than myself and my world. I found myself longing for refuge in the midst of feeling like an exile.

My hope today is to connect the tabernacle and some of the cultural challenges that we face as believers in 21st Century America. I want to show you the significance of the tabernacle and then consider some applications for us today. I hope that you'll not only have a new appreciation for the beauty of the tabernacle, but you'll also be motivated to live out the gospel in a world that desperately needs it.

¹ Peter Enns, *Exodus – The NIV Application Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 2000), 521-522.

The Design

The word “tabernacle” means living or dwelling place, and it was a worship center designed by God Himself (see 26:30). It will be the place where God will meet with His people, and it will resemble the kind of dwellings that the people of Israel live in. It will be a place for the intersection of God’s transcendence and is immanence.

The tabernacle facility was comprised of a system of curtains and frames which overlapped and interlocked with one another. Verses 1-2 tell us that there were ten curtains of beautiful linen with cherubim skillfully woven into them. This was the first layer of curtains. On top the fine linen was another layer of goats’ hair (v 7) for a middle covering, and on top of that layer was a covering of tanned rams’ skin and goatskin which likely made the sanctuary waterproof (v 14).

The entire tabernacle was supported by series of ladder-like frames which were placed in forty bases of silver (see vv 15-30). These frames locked together, were overlaid with gold, and would have been visible inside the tabernacle.

You might find it surprising how small the tabernacle really was. Its total dimensions were 45 feet in length, 15 feet in width and 15 feet in height. There were two rooms. The Holy of Holies, or the Most Holy Place, was a perfect cube (15’x15’x15’), and it housed the Ark of the Covenant. The Holy Place was 30’x15’x15’ and it contained the Table of Showbread, the Lampstand, and the Altar of Incense.

Separating the Holy of Holies and the Holy Place was a solid curtain or veil with no opening in the middle. It was not designed to be a curtain to be opened but a veil that created separation (vv 31-35). The curtain was meant to be a barrier, and only once a year was the High Priest allowed to cross the line between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place.

While the Holy of Holies had no opening, the Holy Place did. Verses 36-37 gave instructions for this curtain, which would be opened every day and which did not have cherubim embroidered into the fabric. It was holy but not like the Holy of Holies.

Outside the Tabernacle was a courtyard which contained the Altar of Burnt Offering. It was made of bronze, as opposed to gold, likely indicating a graduated sacredness. It was a square box measuring 7’6” on each side and 4’6” in height, and it featured four horns at each corner (see 27:1-2). In the middle of the Bronze Altar was a grating (vv 4-5), and it was on this grating that the various sacrifices were offered.

There were many kinds of sacrifices, and next week we will look into this in more detail, but for today I simply want you to note the significance of this altar in the life of Israelite worship. After all, the Bronze Altar would have been the aspect of worship with which they would have been most familiar. They never saw the Ark and could only see into the Holy Place. So their gathering in the Tabernacle was mostly about sacrifice. The message was clear: regular atonement was necessary because of God’s presence. In other words, something must die so that they could live.

The final design element that we need to mention is the size of the entire court. The complex faced east (see 27:13), and it was approximately 150 feet long by 75 feet wide, with a 30 foot entrance. The curtains surrounding the tabernacle courtyard were 7 ½ feet tall (see 27:11-16). Therefore, the entire courtyard was a rectangle made up of two 75 foot squares.

When you look at the whole picture of the Tabernacle you see the following:

- The Holy of Holies is a perfect square
- The Tabernacle itself is contained in one of two squares
- The Tabernacle is in the same proportion as the entire Courtyard

The Tabernacle's design is such that there is movement from greater to lesser degrees of holiness, which is similar to Israel's experience of God on the Mt. Sinai. The people were at the base, the Elders were on the mountain, and Moses ascended into God's presence. The tabernacle was designed to model the cosmic reality of God's presence. It is a dynamic symbol.

A True Sanctuary

There is an important message here in the Tabernacle. Peter Enns says the following about the embedded message:

The precise measurements of the structure combined with the symbolism of the curtains and the furnishings are not without deep significance. The tabernacle seems to represent a microcosm of creation itself. The splendor and beauty of the materials used – fine fabrics, precious metals, and stones – affirm the goodness of the created world. The precise and perfect dimensions of the tabernacle indicate a sense of order amid chaos.²

The Tabernacle was designed to bring them into connection with the living God and to remind them about true reality. It brought spiritual order or peace in the midst of chaos. Remember the quote from earlier? The tabernacle was a "piece of holy ground in the midst of a culture that has lost its way."

There is something about corporate worship that centers us and grounds us. This was the psalmist's experience in Psalm 73

"Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment. Their eyes swell out through fatness; their hearts overflow with follies. They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue

² Enns, 521.

struts through the earth. Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them. And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?" Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed the generation of your children. But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, **until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.** Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms. When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you. Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. **Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.**" (Psalm 73:1–26, ESV)

To me this is a beautiful picture of what the worship of our God was meant to be: a reminder of spiritual order in the midst of chaos. It is shalom in the midst of brokenness. It is sanctuary in the midst of exile.

This is what Jesus brings in a way that the tabernacle or the temple could never have accomplished. He brought peace.

*"Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. **For he himself is our peace**, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."* (Ephesians 2:11–22, ESV)

So there is a clear sense that Jesus brought us peace and that we together are now the temple of the Holy Spirit which God is building.

The book of Hebrews echoes this sentiment.

"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 in full assurance of faith, with our

hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (Hebrews 10:19–25, ESV)

So there is something about the gathering of God’s people, whether in the Old Testament or the New, that was designed to be sanctuary.

Living and Worshipping as an Exile

Now that we’ve looked at the specifics about the Tabernacle, I want to speak to a few things regarding how to live in the midst of a culture that is changing rapidly. I want to provide a spiritual refuge for you and to help you think biblically during these days. Last week I announced that we are going to host a College Park Institute Forum on the subject of sexual identity and homosexuality. We will host this during our regularly scheduled Fresh Encounter Service on August 18th. I also mentioned that we were going to post a blog article by one of our staff on Exodus International’s apology, but I’ve deferred that post for a few weeks because we have more urgent things to talk about.

Thursday morning I spent some time with the Lord just thinking about how I needed to respond as a man, husband, father, and pastor to my culture. I took out my journal, and I wrote down the following things as a way to guide my own thinking:

- 1) **Nothing foundational has changed.** I was reminded of Psalm 46.

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah” (Psalm 46:1–7, ESV)

God is still on the throne. The gospel is still our hope. Righteousness, in the end, still wins the day. And the gospel still changes the hearts and minds of people.

- 2) **American culture is changing rapidly.** If you feel like things are changing fast, they are. In the last year there has been a doubling of the number of states approving so-called same sex marriage, more and more prominent and political figures are affirming homosexuality, and the tide of public opinion is turning fast.
- 3) **New categories are part of the problem.** Before the advent of post-modernity, followers of Jesus might have been excoriated for believing something that non-believers believed was false. They would have been shamed for their ignorance. But now the categories are no longer “true and false”; the new cultural categories are tolerance or arrogance. In other words, the problem now is not being “wrong” but in thinking or saying that someone else is wrong. The issue then is

that the cultural discussion has been framed such that Bible-believing Christians will be shamed for their arrogance of thinking that they are right and someone else is wrong.

- 4) **Christians have always been considered foolish, and yet the gospel thrived.** If you search the Bible and church history, you will find that Christians are often treated or viewed with hostility. *"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."* (1 Corinthians 1:18, ESV) Cities like Corinth, Ephesus, Rome, and Jerusalem were not hospitable to the gospel, but yet the church thrived.
- 5) **There is a difference between being shamed and being ashamed.** There is a temptation out of the shame or fear of being called "arrogant" or "intolerant" to simply be silent. But the Bible calls us to not be ashamed of the gospel (Rom 1:16) and to endure the shame by considering Jesus, who "for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame." (Heb 12:1-2) We need to heed the words of Hebrews 13:12-15 :

"So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name." (Hebrews 13:12-15, ESV)
- 6) **We have an unprecedented opportunity to be salt and light.** We must not panic or become angry. We must love neighbors and co-workers who identify themselves as gay, and we have to work at skillfully applying the gospel to those who do not share our views. We have to work on better answers, winsome arguments, and gracious words, while not fearing unpopularity. What an opportunity for Christians to show the way that love and truth can be applied together.

"When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things." (1 Corinthians 4:12-13, ESV)
- 7) **We should celebrate the sanctuary of Christianity.** I would suggest that we have an opportunity to present to the world the refuge of God's way. Post-modernity will not last. Truth inside of oneself and morals chosen by public opinion will collapse, personally, and eventually, culturally. What an opportunity to hold up the sanctuary of blood-bought, grace-filled, Jesus-cherishing, and righteous-living Christianity. What an opportunity to cherish sexual purity, healthy marriages between a man and a woman, vibrant families, joyful Christianity, and sacrificial living. Darkness makes the light shine brighter

The Tabernacle was designed to be a piece of holy ground in the midst of a broken culture. But, friends, we are now that tabernacle. We are the dwelling place of God by His Spirit. This is not a time for building a fortress in order to defend ourselves against the world. It is a time to demonstrate to the world through our lives, our passions, our relationships, our words, and our worship that there is still a place of sanctuary in the midst of chaos.

Now, more than ever, we need to be gospel-centered people who live out and declare the message of the Prince of Peace.

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