

A Sanctuary in the Desert

Exodus 35-40

Introduction

We are going to be studying a passage of scripture in our Bible today that represents a very dusty portion. In fact, when you think of the tabernacle of the Old Testament, I am sure such exciting images come to your mind that you wait breathlessly to discover what God has in this book of Exodus. It has been a real thrill for me, however, as I have studied this passage this week, because it has opened up.

We do not have time to get into all of it. I am sure, in fact, that we could preach a series of sermons on this. Today, however, I am going to try to touch on each of the six (or seven if you count the mercy seat), articles in the tabernacle and make the application to the New Testament Christian. Then we are going to apply this to our hearts by way of music.

So, let us take an overview of the tabernacle. Turn in your Bible to Exodus, chapter 35.

The Tabernacle was Built . . .

The tabernacle was given by God for three specific reasons. Let me give them to you.

To provide Israel with a worship center

1. The first reason the tabernacle was built was to provide Israel with a worship center.

Until this time, the Israelites did not have a coordinated worship center or place where they could go and, as it were, meet with God. The tabernacle was God's design whereby they could come and worship Him in the desert.

Understand that the tabernacle had the desert for a floor, so the priests would walk about doing their duties on the desert sand. It was a rather large complex, one hundred fifty feet in length and seventy-six feet in width. This tabernacle was uniquely master-planned.

To preview the work of Jesus Christ

2. A second reason the tabernacle was given by God, and this is very important, was to preview the work of Jesus Christ.

If we fail to see Jesus Christ in the tabernacle, then we have failed to understand one entire book of the New Testament – the book of Hebrews. In fact, God felt that the tabernacle was so essential to us today that He took the time to give us an entire New Testament book to explain all that happened in the Old Testament tabernacle worship. It previews, in a beautiful way, the work of Jesus Christ, who was the ultimate, once-for-all sacrifice.

John, chapter 1, verse 14, says, in fact, that,

. . . the Word [Jesus Christ] became flesh, and dwelt among us . . .

The word “dwelt” could be translated “tabernacle”. Jesus Christ came and He “tabernacled” in the New Testament era, in the way that God “tabernacled” with men, the Israelites, in the Old Testament. That gives us a clue that Jesus Christ is previewed in this tabernacle.

To picture God's plan of salvation

3. Thirdly, the tabernacle was built to picture God's plan of salvation.

During this day and time, you could not approach God in any way or fashion you so desired. An Israelite could not decide, “I'd rather worship God this way, so I'll do it this way.” They would be consumed.

It is the same in the New Testament era. We cannot worship God any way we please, we must come by God's prescribed method.

In the Old Testament, God's way of worship was the tabernacle. The Israelites would walk through the gate and would see, first of all, an altar of brass upon which the sacrifices were given. Beyond that, they would see the laver and then, the holy place, where the priest would commune with God. In addition, once a year, the high priest would go into the holy of holies, where they would meet with the glory, majesty, and

holiness of God. That was the way they were to worship; there was no other way.

It is interesting that Jesus Christ would say, in John, chapter 14, verse 6,

. . . I am the way, and the truth, and the life . . .

In the original Greek, that is a double positive. It could be translated, "I am the way, the only way, the truth, the only truth, the life, the only life."

Jesus then ends that verse by saying,

. . . no one comes to the Father but through Me.

In other words, "I am the prescribed method, in this New Testament day."

So, the tabernacle gave the Israelites a center of worship, a picture of the plan of salvation, and a preview of the work of Jesus Christ.

The Tabernacle was Financed . . .

Now the tabernacle was financed in an interesting way. We will briefly look at two ways in Exodus, chapter 35.

By resources willingly donated

1. First, the Israelites financed the tabernacle by resources willingly donated.

Look at verses 21 and 22 of chapter 35. I love this.

Everyone whose heart stirred him and everyone whose spirit moved him came and brought the Lord's contribution for the work of the tent of meeting and for all its service and for the holy garments. Then all whose hearts moved them, both men and women, came and brought brooches and earrings and signet rings and bracelets, all articles of gold; so did every man who presented an offering of gold to the Lord.

It is fascinating that these people would have their center of worship by gifts willingly donated. In fact, the Old Testament tells us that Moses eventually had to say, "Stop! That's enough. You have even given too much."

By gifts willingly exercised

2. Secondly, not only did they donate their financial resources to build the tabernacle, but

we are told they also willingly exercised their gifts.

Note verses 25 and 26 of chapter 35.

All the skilled women spun with their hands, and brought what they had spun, in blue and purple and scarlet material and in fine linen. All the women whose heart stirred with a skill spun the goats' hair.

Now those of you who have talked to me know that I am a dispensationalist. That is, I believe that God moved in different eras with men in different ways. This passage, however, starts to pull me over that line because it is a beautiful picture of the way in which a New Testament church should operate and move in a community. We should not only contribute what we have, but we should exercise the gifts, the talents, the skills that God has given us to motivate and energize the work for His kingdom and His cause. That is how it was financed and that is how it worked.

The Tabernacle was Master-Planned . . .

The tabernacle was master-planned in three different sections. There was the outer court, the holy place, and the holy of holies, or as it is biblically referred to, the most holy place. Now let us take a closer look at these.

The outer court

1. The first section of the tabernacle is the outer court.

The brazen altar

When approaching the tabernacle and walking through the gate and into this outer court, the first thing the Israelite would come to and see was an altar of brass or the brazen altar. This brazen altar was a picture of Jesus Christ's sacrifice. Just as the Israelites sacrificed their animals on that altar, so, as Hebrews, chapter 10, verse 10, tells us,

. . . Jesus Christ [was sacrificed] once for all.

Jesus Christ was sacrificed once for the sins of the whole world.

Turn to chapter 27 of Exodus, where we read of the brazen altar. This altar is a little different than I had originally pictured in my mind. If you realize that

a cubit is 18 inches, you discover that this altar was seven and a half feet square. That leads us to believe, and some expositors have illustrated, that this altar was too high to get up over to sacrifice the animals. Therefore, the altar must have had ramps leading up the sides to it. I would imagine then, the priests, by the dozens because they would stand in line to approach the altar in uniform fashion, as they were approaching the altar with their sacrifices, would walk up a ramp and lay their sacrifice on the open grate inside, situated nearly halfway down.

The first sacrifice that the priests laid on that altar was consumed by fire sent from God. This is an interesting point. The Israelite priest could only lay the sacrifice on the altar. It was God that, in Leviticus, chapter 9, tells us that when the priest did that, God sent fire from heaven and consumed the offering. Then, at that point in time, a perpetual flame began that would continue burning the sacrifices, or the animals that were laid on that open grate.

In the same way, we, represented by the Roman unbelievers and the Jewish people that rejected Jesus Christ, could only place Christ on that altar, being the cross of Calvary. But it was God's judgment; it was God's wrath that was evidenced against Jesus Christ.

Try to visualize and understand what is happening with this altar. There is the open courtyard with this huge altar, and priests are carrying the animals up and are laying them on the altar in perpetual motion. There was no chair mentioned in the outer court, by the way. Why? Because no priest ever sat down. Why? Because the work of the priest was never completed. Isn't that beautiful when you consider Jesus Christ, the high priest? Hebrews, chapter 10, verse 12, tells us that,

. . . He [Jesus Christ], having offered one sacrifice [Himself] for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God,

In other words, *this* priest, sacrificing once for all, was able to sit down. The Israelite priests never did. They were constantly in motion.

It is interesting, as well, that this altar began to represent a picture of not only judgment, but mercy. On the corners of the altar were, what are referred to in Exodus, chapter 27, as, horns. I never understood that. These were cone shaped with a pointed top and were simply built into each corner of this altar. It was the place where the priest would tie the animal sometimes, during certain sacrifices, before splitting

its throat. This would keep the animal at bay. These horns began to represent the place of mercy.

We read, in fact, in the Old Testament, that Adonijah was fearing that Solomon would take his life. So, he rushed into the court and grabbed the horns of the altar and hung on, pleading for mercy (I Kings 1:50). We also learn that Joab, when he turned coat on David, ran into the court and grabbed the horns of the altar, pleading for mercy (I Kings 2:28).

What a beautiful picture this is. Jesus Christ, *the* sacrifice, slain once for all on the cross, which is the emblem of God's wrath and judgment against the sin of the world, is also the place of mercy. You and I come and cling to the cross, pleading for mercy before God for the sins we have committed.

How is it possible that Jesus Christ could be seated? How is it possible that He could perform, in one act, what none of the priests could perform over hundreds and hundreds of years? It is because Jesus Christ, Himself, is the worthy sacrifice; He is the worthy One.

Apply this to your heart by singing the words to *Worthy Is the Lamb*.

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain,

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain,

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, to receive:

Power and riches and wisdom and strength,

Honor and glory and blessing!

Worthy is the Lamb, worthy is the Lamb,

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain,

Worthy is the Lamb!

The brazen laver

In Exodus, chapter 30, we read about the laver of brass. This was also part of the outer court. The brazen laver was a picture of cleansing.

As the priests would work, ministering in their sacrificing before God, they would have to be cleansed. Their hands would become dirty with the blood of animals and their feet would become dirty with the sands of the desert. So God instituted a way whereby they could be cleansed.

This cleansing was more ritual, or symbolic, than it was literal. Also, the laver was more than one basin; it was two. There was one basin on the top where the priests would cleanse their hands in the

water and there was a basin built around the bottom of that where they would place their feet. This represented that the priest, as he served before God, would be a cleansed individual.

In the New Testament, in I Peter, chapter 2, verse 9, Peter writes of the New Testament believer,

. . . you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood

. . .

As we serve and live before God, with our hands representing our service and our feet representing our walk, do you know what happens to us, men and women? We are dirtied. We pick up the stains of our culture and of our own flesh and are in constant need of cleansing.

What is it that cleanses in the New Testament era? What is it that speaks of cleansing?

I think we could refer to several things that cleanse us. Obviously, the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin. Yet, this laver was not a once for all cleansing that we experience by coming to Christ, who forgave our sins, past, present, and future.

The laver refers to daily cleansing. So my mind thinks of the word of God. Jesus Christ once said that He will sanctify or cleanse the church by the washing of the water of the word. So the scriptures are that cleansing element in our lives, just as the laver in the tabernacle represented the cleansing.

It was interesting, as I studied this laver, that it was made specifically from one item that was given by the Israelite women – their mirrors. Now mirrors, in this day, were not made of glass, but were made of highly polished brass. They could view their reflection in these. The Old Testament tells us that Moses specifically asked for the looking glasses, the mirrors, from the women (Exodus 38:8). That expands even more the fact that this anti-type may be the word because James, in chapter 1, verses 22 through 25, of his book, refers to the word as what? A mirror. We behold in it our reflection and we dare not walk away from it unchanged.

Picture in your mind, the priest walking up to the laver and putting his feet in the bottom and his hands in the top. And while he is cleansing, he sees his reflection. As we serve God; as we walk about; as we dirty ourselves by our flesh as we sin, we find cleansing through the word; washing by the water of the word, and we dare not leave unchanged. We go to the word and we leave cleansed.

I think a hymn that speaks well of this is *Whiter Than Snow*.

Lord Jesus, I long to be perfectly whole;

I want You forever to live in my soul;

Break down every idol, cast out every foe

Now wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.

Chorus:

Whiter than snow, yes, whiter than snow

Now wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.

Lord Jesus, for this I most humbly entreat;

I wait, blessed Lord, at Your crucified feet;

By faith, for my cleansing I see Your blood flow

Now wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.

Lord Jesus, before You I patiently wait;

Come now and within me a new heart create;

To those who have sought You, You never said "No"

Now wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.

The holy place

2. Secondly, in the tabernacle, when the priest had completed the duty at the altar, he would enter the holy place.

There was a veil separating the holy place from the outer court. Then, inside the holy place, there were three articles: the table of shewbread, the lampstand, and the altar of incense. Let us look at these.

The table of shewbread

First, let us note the table of shewbread. This was a table overlaid with gold. On it was primarily, bread that was in two stacks with six loaves in each. These stacks of bread represented the twelve tribes of Israel.

Now these loaves of bread would stack because they were fashioned like our modern day pancake. The interesting thing about this bread is that the priests ate it as they worked in the holy place. It was the symbolic sustenance that they gained in serving before God in this special enclosed place of communion. Only the priests were allowed in the holy place. Only the priests were allowed to sacrifice. Not even the people of Israel could look through and see what happened on the inside. It was a mystery to them as the priests went about their service – trimming the lamps, eating the bread, and offering the incense. It is interesting that this bread would sustain the priests.

You and I, as priests serving before God, find our sustenance from several things. One is obviously, the word. It is interesting that Jesus Christ, Himself, would say, as recorded in John, chapter 6, verse 51,

I am the living bread . . . if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. . . .

Obviously, this table of shewbread, with its golden plates and utensils and its two stacks of bread, twelve in all, represented the communion between the priest and God and also, the sustenance a priest has as he serves his God.

The interesting thing about this bread is, it was never stale. It was changed often and systematically. Isn't it beautiful to think, in our lives as we serve before God, that the bread, representing Himself, never grows stale? He is always fresh; He is always near. As we serve Him, as a holy priest, as one who represents God to people and one who goes to God on behalf of people, we are sustained by the bread of Christ.

There is a hymn, *Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah*, that I think would be appropriate as we feed on that sustaining power of Jesus Christ, Himself. Lift your voices and sing.

*Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah,
Pilgrim thru this barren land;
I am weak, but Thou art mighty
Hold me with Thy pow'ful hand:*

Chorus:

*Bread of heaven, Bread of heaven,
Feed me till I want no more,
Feed me till I want no more.*

*Open now the crystal fountain
Whence the healing stream doth flow;
Let the fire and cloudy pillar
Lead me all my journey thru:*

*When I tread the verge of Jordon,
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Bear me thru the swelling current,
Land me safe on Canaan's side:*

The lampstand

Another article of furniture in the holy place was the lampstand. This was made from one solid piece of gold that weighed between 75 and 90 pounds. It was carved in a unique fashion with seven arms.

I always thought this was a candle holder and there were seven candles, but that is not the case. There were seven lamps. Each arm was made with a cup at the top and that cup held a lamp. In each lamp, there was oil and a wick. The priests, in their daily duties, trimmed the wicks and added the oil.

This was a perpetual light. In fact, in this linen covered holy place, the only light was the light of this lampstand. As the priests moved about in communion with God and in service before God, the way was lit by a lampstand.

Now the lamp, obviously, could refer to Jesus Christ because He is, as He said in John, chapter 8, verse 12,

. . . the light of the world . . .

However, the light of the lamp was not visible to the world, it was a light for the priests only. So what light, ladies and gentlemen, has been given to you and to me that is for us only? What is the light that the natural man cannot receive because it is foolishness to him (I Corinthians 2:14)? That light is the word; the scripture.

The scripture illumines our path. It sheds light on our communion with God. It sheds abroad light so that we can serve our God as high priests before Him. So, I believe the lampstand was a beautiful picture, in this place of fellowship, of the word.

David, in fact, succinctly writes, in Psalm, chapter 119, verse 105,

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light unto my path.

This lampstand, to the Israelite, was perhaps a picture of light given by God's own glory or presence. It, today, represents the word that illumines our path.

David was referring to a shepherd when he said, "Your word is a lamp to my feet". In his day, an ankle lantern was often strapped to the ankle of a shepherd. Then, on a dark night when the stars did not shine, that ankle lantern would give just enough light for the next step as he tended his sheep.

Often the scripture does not give me direction for next week. It sometimes seems, and this is frustrating, that it gives me just enough light for the next step, and then the next step. However, just as the priest had enough light to illumine the holy place for his service, we are confident that this Bible, the word, illumined by the power of the Holy Spirit, gives us enough light; enough direction, for the next step.

Sing, *Thy Word Is a Lamp Unto My Feet.*

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet

And a light unto my path.

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet

And a light unto my path.

When I feel afraid,

And think I've lost my way,

Still, You're there right beside me.

Nothing will I fear

As long a You are near;

Please be near me to the end.

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet

And a light unto my path.

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet

And a light unto my path.

I will not forget

Your love for me and yet,

My heart forever is wandering.

Jesus be my guide,

And hold me to Your side,

And I will love You to the end.

Nothing will I fear

As long as You are near;

Please be near me to the end.

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet

And a light unto my path.

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet

And a light unto my path,

And a light unto my path,

You're the light unto my path.

The altar of incense

Also in the holy place would be the altar of incense. This was fashioned one and a half feet square and three and a half feet tall. It was located next to the veil that separated the holy place from the holy of holies.

This, even to this day, was a picture of intercession between the priest and God. Perhaps it is a picture of Jesus Christ, who now intercedes on our behalf forever. Yet, remember, this is the place of communion between the priest and God. So this, I believe, represents the priests communion before God.

This perpetual offering; this sweet smelling incense, floated through that linen ceiling and up into the clouds. The Israelites could catch a smell of it, depending on the direction the wind blew. This was a beautiful picture of constant, perpetual communion with God.

This is obviously a picture for us, as New Testament priests, of prayer before God. In fact, Paul writes, in I Thessalonians, chapter 5, verse 17,

pray without ceasing;

In other words, "Pray perpetually." Does that mean that I pray and never stop to eat or sleep or go to work? The word, in the original, for "without ceasing" or "unceasing," was used by the Greek writers for a person who had an incessant cough – they were always coughing. That does not mean that they had one long, drawn out cough, or they would never be able to breathe. This was a cough that seemed to always be there. So Paul is telling us, as priests before God, to live in such a way that a prayer is always there; it is never far away; it is as close as the cough when you cannot get over a cold.

So, this is a picture of beautiful communion with God. I can just visualize in my mind, the selected priests, as they would serve on a rotating system, would be in the holy place trimming the lamps and eating some of the bread and moving about in a hushed awe and silence as they communed with the holy God of Israel, Yahweh. Then, at this altar, they would add just enough incense and would check it periodically to make sure the aroma was ascending to the heavens.

They had a passion about communing with God. Can we have any less, as New Testament priests? Must we not have in our hearts, a passion to commune with the God of our hearts, the one and only true God? That must be our passion.

Let us sing about that passion by singing, *As The Deer Pants For The Water*.

As the deer pants for the water

So my soul longs after You.

You alone are my heart's desire

And I long to worship You.

Chorus:

You alone are my strength, my shield,

To You alone may my spirit yield;

You alone are my heart's desire

And I long to worship You.

I want You more than gold or silver,

Only You can satisfy;

You alone are the real joy giver

And the apple of my eye.

You're my friend and You are my brother

Even though You are a King;

I love You more than any other

So much more than anything.

The most holy place

3. There was a curtain in the tabernacle that separated the holy place from the holy of holies or the most holy place.

Now the most beautiful part of the worship system was on the day that was held in awe by the entire nation of Israel – when the high priest would enter the holy of holies.

The curtain or veil had patterned in it, in brilliant gold, the figures of cherubim, which is plural for cherubs. Cherubim are the angels in heaven that constantly adore God, in that day and today, as well. I am certain, as the one who had the privilege of being the high priest moved through that veil and into the holy of holies, or the most holy place, that they did so with a sense of awe.

I use the word privilege, but I do not think they really used it then. This was the place that represented God's holiness.

The ark of the covenant

Understand that in that day, the cloud representing God's presence hovered over the ark of the covenant that was in the holy of holies. Picture it perhaps, like a tornado funnel that stretched high into the sky with the lowest part of that funnel literally, resting just over the mercy seat, or the lid of the ark of the covenant. This was the presence; the holiness; the glory of God – and there was a priest about to go in there!

I am not sure whether, in that day, we would have considered going into the holy of holies a privilege or not. The historians tell us, in fact, that over time, the Israelites were so fearful that the life of the high priest would be taken that they had sewn into the hem of his robe, little bells. Then, as he moved about the holy of holies and offered the blood and sprinkled it on the mercy seat, the bells would make noise. The people would listen for the sound of those bells, holding their breath for fear that God would not accept the sacrifice and take the life, in a consuming act of wrath, of that high priest.

Another thing that they did, that makes it even more awesome, is tie a rope about the ankle of the high priest. No one was allowed into the holy of holies except the high priest. If the people did not hear the bells and they were afraid the high priest's life had been taken, they could not barge in through the veil, take the body out, and bury it. So they had a rope tied about his ankle so that they could pull his body out if God did not accept the offering.

That was the fear, *that* was the awesomeness in their hearts toward the holiness of God.

Now we know, being New Testament saints and priests before God, that we can enter with boldness before His throne. However, ladies and gentlemen, one thing has not changed and will never change, and that is that God is still holy; He is still a God of righteousness. We approach Him and go with a heart of love that He is an accepting Father. However, so often we forget that He is also a holy God and we do not take Him for granted. We do not turn Him into something else, someone who does our bidding. We go to worship Him in majestic holiness.

Let us sing about that attitude of worship in the hymn, *Holy, Holy, Holy*.

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!

*Early in the morning our song shall rise to
Thee;*

Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty!

God in three person, blessed Trinity!

*Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide
Thee;*

*Though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may
not see;*

Only Thou art holy; there is none beside Thee

Perfect in pow'r, in love and purity.

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!

*All Thy works shall praise Thy name, in
earth, and sky, and sea;*

Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty!

God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

The mercy seat

Now stand and remain standing. There was one other item in the holy of holies. Obviously, it was that mercy seat. This is where they ended in their worship system; this was the ultimate end of that annual feast time.

In the same way, we, as New Testament believers, cannot end with the awful righteous, holiness of God. There is mercy.

God designed that a solid piece of gold would be fashioned to form the lid of the ark of the covenant. The ark of the covenant resembled a modern day cedar chest in size. It was overlaid with gold and if you

opened the lid, you would find three things: Aaron's rod, a jar of manna, and the stone tablets upon which God, with His own finger, wrote the Law. Then you would close the lid.

God had the Israelites fashion a golden lid. On either side of this lid, called the mercy seat, were two cherubs or cherubim. They, with outstretched wings, looked down onto the mercy seat. That is a wonderful picture of I Peter, chapter 1, verse 12, in which we are told that salvation was preached; mercy was preached,

. . . things into which the angels long to look.

Even in this tabernacle, the angels looked on as if to say, "What amazing mercy." That was because, once a year the high priest would enter with a basin of blood and would sprinkle it on the mercy seat, the lid of the ark of the covenant. That was God's way of saying, "I now view the Law, which you broke, through the covering of the blood and I grant you mercy."

Jesus Christ, once for all, shed His blood so that now, men and women, God views us through the covering of blood. We have broken the Law and yet, because we have Jesus Christ in our hearts, He views us through the blood and says, "Forgiven. Mercy. You're free."

We cannot help but sing a hymn of adoration because of what Jesus Christ, or His shed blood, has done for us. Sing, *It Is Well With My Soul*.

When peace like a river attendeth my way,

When sorrows like sea billows roll;

Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,

It is well, it is well with my soul.

Chorus:

It is well with my soul,

It is well with my soul,

It is well, it is well with my soul.

*Though Satan should buffet, though trials
should come,*

Let this blest assurance control,

That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,

And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought,

*My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!*

*And, Lord, haste the day when the faith shall
be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll,
The trump shall resound and the Lord shall
descend,
Even so it is well with my soul.*

We can look forward to that day when we can tell Him personally, how thankful we are for what He has done. Amen.