

LESSON 4: THE MEANING OF THE HOLY PLACE

Review:

Lessons One, Two, & Three - The purpose of the sanctuary is to remove the barriers of sin and guilt that keep us from face-to-face communion with God. The development of the sacrificial system and of the sanctuary services illustrate "progressive revelation". The courtyard illustrates the means of forgiveness the Lord offers those willing to trust Him.

IN this lesson we move into a consideration of the holy place, the first apartment of the tabernacle. Not content to merely concern Himself with our past (the forgiveness of sins in the court), God used the sanctuary to point us to the path of spiritual health and strength, showing us how to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 3:18)

1. "First apartment of the tabernacle"? Isn't the tabernacle the same as the sanctuary?

Numbers 18:3 - *[The Levites] shall attend to... all the needs of the tabernacle; but they shall not come near the articles of the sanctuary and the altar.*

People occasionally use the two terms interchangeably, but most Bible translations are quite consistent in using "tabernacle" to describe the "tent-like" part of the sanctuary, which was divided into two sections, the holy and the most holy.

When you see "tabernacle" in the Bible, it usually represents one or the other of two Hebrew words. One of these means "dwelling" and the other means "tent." The context of the verse shows whether it is the "tabernacle" or just a regular tent or dwelling.

2. So what was this "tent" like?

Exodus 26:15-16 - *And for the tabernacle you shall make the boards of acacia wood, standing upright. Ten cubits shall be the length of a board, and a cubit and a half shall be the width of each board.*

The Lord's instructions to Moses specify that twenty of these "boards" were to be used to form each of the two longer walls (southern and northern) of the tabernacle, and another eight were to form the west wall. Since each "board" was a cubit and a half, the length of the tabernacle was thirty cubits, or forty-five feet, while the width is specified as ten cubits, or fifteen feet.

Exodus 26:29 - *You shall overlay the boards with gold,*

So the basic shape of the tabernacle is thirty feet long, fifteen feet wide, and fifteen feet high. Entirely covered in gold, it would make an impressive sight, even before the curtains, veil, and screen were in place.

3. What's the difference between a "curtain" a "veil" and a "screen"?

Exodus 26:7 - *You shall also make curtains... to be a tent over the tabernacle.*

Exodus 26:31, 33 - *You shall make a veil woven of blue, purple, and scarlet thread, and fine woven linen. It shall be woven with an artistic design of cherubim.... The veil shall be a divider for you between the holy place and the Most Holy.*

Exodus 26:36 - *You shall make a screen for the door of the tabernacle, woven of blue, purple, and scarlet thread, and fine woven linen, made by a weaver.*

The curtains were the “roof” of the tabernacle, the veil formed an interior wall that separated the holy from the most holy place, and the screen (called a “hanging” in some translations) was the “front door” of the sanctuary.

4. Were all these things just “things,” or were they symbols, too?

Isaiah 40:22- *[God] stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them out like a tent to dwell in.*

The curtains which formed the roof of the tabernacle were more complex than might first appear. There were actually four layers, all made to God’s specifications. The innermost layer was to be made of “fine woven linen and blue, purple, and scarlet thread,” and was decorated with “artistic designs of cherubim” woven into them with gold threads. (Exodus 26:1)

This first curtain formed the inner ceiling of the tabernacle, and—with its embroidered cherubim—represented the surrounding universe of God’s created beings, all watching to see the workings of His government, and His progress in this task of saving sinners.

The second curtain was made of white goat’s hair—invisible normally, because it was covered over by the third and fourth layers, but representing a righteousness that doesn’t change just because no one can see it.

The third layer was made of ram skin, dyed red (representing sacrifice). The fourth layer, which formed the outer covering of the tabernacle, was made of seal skin and provided a thoroughly waterproof protection. (Exodus 26:14, 36:19)

5. What was the veil like?

Exodus 26:31 - *You shall make a veil woven of blue, purple, and scarlet thread, and fine woven linen. It shall be woven with an artistic design of cherubim.*

The veil is described much the same as the inner curtain, or ceiling. We do not, however, know the exact pattern of either, so it’s left to our imaginations to picture the rich colors of the background with the bright gold of the cherubim shining in the flickering light of the lampstand and the mysterious radiance of the Shekinah glory shining over the top of the veil.

Hebrews 10:19–22 - *Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith.*

The symbolism of the veil is spelled out in the New Testament. It is Christ’s flesh (the Greek word is sarx), His humanity, that allowed God to come close to His people without overwhelming them with His glory. It is His humanity which allowed some of that glory to spill over into our world so that our hearts might be reconciled to God. It is His humanity which was torn and broken so that we could gain access to the most holy.

John 1:14 - *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*

This is pure sanctuary language! God became flesh [sarx], and dwelt [tabernacled] with His people so that they could see the Shekinah glory of the Father.

And though that glory will appear threatening to the “sinners in Zion” (Isaiah 33:14) in the day of judgment, it was so veiled during His life on earth that “the darkness did not comprehend it.” (John 1:5) Nevertheless, “in Him was life”; He was the “light of men” (John 1:4); and to all who received Him “He gave the right to become children of God.” (John 1:12)

6. That sarx business sounds like Greek to me. Does it mean "body" or something more?

Galatians 5:19 - Now the works of the flesh [sarx] are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness....

Romans 7:18 - For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh [sarx]) nothing good dwells.

When the Bible speaks of the "flesh" it's not just talking about the physical body. The thought in these verses is the "lower" or "corrupt" nature. The bad news is that, like Paul, we all have one, and there's nothing good in it.

7. It's obvious that people have moral problems, but what has that got to do with the veil? Didn't the veil represent Jesus' flesh?

1 Timothy 3:16 - And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh.

Romans 1:3 - Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh.

Romans 8:3 - God sent His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh.

The really amazing thing here is that the Bible tells us that Jesus came in the flesh, the same kind of flesh that you and I struggle against.

Hebrews 2:14, 17 - Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same.... In all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest.

Hebrews 4:15 - For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.

8. But the veil was a beautiful thing; this makes it sound like Jesus' flesh was like ours—and that's not so pretty.

Hebrews 5:7-10 - In the days of His flesh... [Jesus] learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, called by God as High Priest.

This is why Paul called it "the mystery of godliness: God... manifested in the flesh." (1 Timothy 3:16) Jesus was fully human, as weak as we are; but instead of relying on His human power, He recognized His weakness and depended fully upon His Father.

John 5:19 - Then Jesus answered and said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do."

John 5:30 - I can of Myself do nothing.... I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me.

Though He was perfected through suffering (scarlet), He was ever loyal to His Father (blue), and maintained the purity of His soul (white). In the end it is "the Lamb who was slain" who is "Lord of lords and King of kings" (purple). (Revelation 5:12, 17:14)

The beauty of the veil accurately depicted the life of Christ, hundreds of years in advance.

9. The tabernacle sounds like a beautiful structure, but what was in it?

There were three articles in the holy place—the table of showbread, the seven-branched lampstand, and the altar of incense. Each of these shows us something of God's plan for our growth in His service. We'll consider them one at a time.

Exodus 25:23, 30 - *You shall also make a table of acacia wood; two cubits shall be its length, a cubit its width, and a cubit and a half its height. And you shall overlay it with pure gold.... And you shall set the showbread on the table before Me always."*

The table of showbread was a beautiful golden table designed to hold the twelve loaves which were always to be before the Lord. It sat along the north wall of the tabernacle, to the right as one entered.

The loaves are described in Leviticus 24:5–9. Though they are called "cakes" in almost all Bible translations, they were unleavened loaves, and quite large. Because of their size, it was necessary that they be pierced to prevent them from puffing up in the oven. It's easy to see here a foreshadowing of the pierced hands and side of Christ.

Following a recipe which called for fine flour, salt, and oil, twelve loaves were baked every Friday, and placed on the table the next day, the Sabbath. The old loaves were then given to the priests to eat, as an enacted parable of God's provision of all our needs.

Since every meal offering was to be accompanied by a drink offering, golden pitchers and bowls were used to serve the unfermented grape wine. The priests, of course, were forbidden to partake of strong drink, and fermentation was ruled out by the prohibition of leaven. (Leviticus 10:8–9, Leviticus 2:11)

The table of bread and wine tells us of the body and the blood of Christ, and foreshadows the Lord's supper. But, more personally, they tell us that we must each eat the bread and drink the wine for ourselves. Looking at food, hearing about food, even smelling food, won't cure our hunger and strengthen our bodies.

10. How was the lampstand constructed?

Exodus 25:31 - *You shall also make a lampstand of pure gold; the lampstand shall be of hammered work. Its shaft, its branches, its bowls, its ornamental knobs, and flowers shall be of one piece.*

The solid gold lampstand was to have three branches coming from each side of the central pillar, making a total of seven.

In the earthly tabernacle, the lampstand stood to the south, on one's left upon entering. Made of a single piece of beaten gold, the lampstand gives mute testimony of the cost—both to Christ and to His followers—by which the privilege of shedding light to others is gained. Thousands of hammer blows, slowly formed the artistry, but would also weaken the metal. To offset this, the gold must be annealed in the furnace flame.

Only by such discipline can God prepare those who would do Him service.

The flames of the lampstand burned olive oil, a symbol of the Holy Spirit. As the prophet was told, there is no substitute for the Spirit's presence: "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the LORD of hosts." (Zechariah 4:6)

A final lesson from the lampstand is the Lord's requirement that it never be lighted with any fire but that which burned on the altar of burnt offering. If we are to accomplish anything of value, if our witness to others is to be a saving influence, we must never depend on our own wisdom. The "sparks" we can "kindle" may seem intelligent or even profound, but in mercy God warns us that the end result of turning from His instruction is that we will "lie down in torment." (Isaiah 50:11)

11. And what was the role of the altar of incense?

Exodus 30:1-3 - *You shall make an altar to burn incense on; you shall make it of acacia wood. A cubit shall be its length and a cubit its width—it shall be square—and two cubits shall be its height. Its horns shall be of one piece with it. And you shall overlay its top, its sides all around, and its horns with pure gold.*

The altar of incense was placed at the far end of the holy place, immediately in front of the veil which partitioned off the most holy place. Like so many other articles of the sanctuary, its gold-covered wood points us to the divine-human nature of Christ.

Upon this altar, coals from the altar of burnt offering were spread each morning and evening. Then the priest would sprinkle on the incense, and the fragrant smoke would rise and drift throughout the camp of Israel and beyond.

Scripture makes a clear application of this symbolism in Psalms 141:2. "Let my prayer be set before You as incense."

As the incense rose to heaven at all hours of the day and night, so we are admonished to "Pray without ceasing." (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

And yet prayer must not be mindless. "When you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do." (Matthew 6:7) Worse yet would be to pray in a way which fails to recognize the merits of Christ, offering instead some imagined goodness of our own. God was very clear about "counterfeit" incense!

Exodus 30:37 - *As for the incense which you shall make, you shall not make any for yourselves, according to its composition. It shall be to you holy for the LORD. Whoever makes any like it, to smell it, he shall be cut off from his people.*

12. It seems like a lot of the meaning coming from the holy place has more to do with us than it does with Jesus. Isn't the sanctuary supposed to be symbolic of Christ?

2 Corinthians 6:16 - *For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people."*

Perhaps the greatest truth of the sanctuary is that even as it shows us Jesus, it also shows God's plan for every one of us.

1 Corinthians 6:19 - *Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God?*

Just as the sanctuary is God's dwelling place, so we are to be temples for His dwelling. In our lives, through our actions and words, He seeks to reach others, and in the process of working for them we are brought to feel our own need of Him. Our need for the bread of life, for the Holy Spirit, for communion with our Heavenly Father—and how to meet these needs—these are the most practical lessons of the holy place.

Lesson Summary:

- The construction of the holy place represented the life and ministry of Christ as well as what we are to do in our daily walk as we follow Him.
- The veil represents the human flesh that Christ took upon himself. Though weak like our own, he never gave into it but sought always to do His Father's will.
- The table of showbread with the wine represents the body and blood of Christ which foreshadowed the Lord's supper.
- The golden lampstand burning olive oil represents enduring sufferings and shining witness. We have Christ's life to show us how to endure and the Holy Spirit to enable us.
- The altar of incense represents the prayers of God's people which rise into the very throne room of God.

My Response:

I desire to grow each day through God's word, prayer, and sharing with others.

Next Lesson: The Daily Sacrifice