

## Sermon 96, Building the Tabernacle, Pt. 1, Exodus 26

**Proposition:** God came and tabernacled among His people, but the quadruple-thick covering under which He dwelt emphasized His inaccessible holiness.

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### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the chapter that we just read may not seem to you to be at all comparable to the drama and power of, say, Exodus 3 and the encounter at the burning bush, or even to the rules for justice and piety that we saw in Exodus 21-23. Now, we just have a long description of a tent, and not even a particularly exciting tent — at least, the description seems to be rather long on detail and short on drama. Why, when the church has fought about issues of all kinds, do we have 37 verses on the fabric and frame and furniture of the tabernacle, but no chapter on church government or the mode of baptism or the advisability of contraception? Brothers and sisters, God's ways are not our ways. God wanted to come and live with Israel, and all this material on His dwelling place is here because, well, it's His dwelling place and He cares what it's like. I daresay all of you spend a lot of time on and in your

home. You don't talk about it much because you've found that most people really don't care about how you wired that snazzy new outlet or what color you painted your bathroom. But rather than the Almighty saying "Well, people don't care about my home so I won't say anything about it," His attitude is "People should care about my home." The most important point in this part of Exodus is that God has come down to dwell with us, and He did it first by moving into the tabernacle as a prefiguration of the day when the Word would become flesh and tabernacle among us. We will see that God came and tabernacled among His people, but the quadruple-thick covering under which He dwelt emphasized His inaccessible holiness.

### **I. The Tent Structure, vv. 1-29**

I'm not going to spend a lot of time trying to describe the Tabernacle. Despite the description here in the text, we don't know exactly how it looked. I have provided a couple of pictures of it in your notes page to help you visualize it. But the point is actually not exactly how the tabernacle looked. It is a literary tour of Yahweh's house that we're after, as I said last week. On a regular tour the guide points out certain things and disregards others. The same is true of this literary tour. Some things about the house are not mentioned at all — such as whether it had a dirt floor or some kind of floor covering, or whether the posts holding the veil were equidistant, or whether the inner tent wall was inside or outside the boards. Those things are not the point. The symbolism of the cherubim on the curtains is not the point. The point is that God dwells with His people, and the lavish detail in which His personal tent is described helps to highlight that overwhelming reality.

#### **A. Four Layers of Curtains, vv. 1-14**

Over one third of this chapter on the tabernacle structure is devoted to the fabric, the main material of the tent itself. Obviously a tent is mostly fabric. The Tabernacle was no exception.

##### **1. Linen Curtains Decorated with Cherubim, vv. 1-6**

The first layer, the innermost, was of the finest linen. One commentator suggests that the reason linen was employed for the inmost fabric is that it is from plants, and there can be no death in God's house. Thus, just as gold is the most valuable metal and most suitable for the immediate presence of God, so linen is a plant-based fabric that can be made without (animal) death, and thus is also suitable for the immediate presence of God. Notice too that these curtains feature the cherubim, just like the garden of Eden when Adam and Eve were expelled and just like the other throne room scenes in Scripture. Like other royals, God maintains guards in the throne room — and His are these fearsome winged creatures that would certainly have no trouble taking on any possible human threat.

##### **2. Goat-hair Curtains, vv. 7-13**

The second layer of tent curtains is made of goat hair. This was a rough, coarse black fabric that was commonly used for tents in that era. It too did not require death, because the goats were shorn and then their hair was made into fabric. Thus, like silver, it can be next to the place of God's presence.

### **3. Red Sheep Leather, v. 14a**

The final two layers are described much more quickly. The third layer was sheep leather dyed red. Why was it dyed red? The text never says. Obviously the tabernacle was a place of blood. But the other curtains were embroidered with blue and purple in addition to scarlet. The bottom line here, more than the symbolism of a particular color or of all the colors mentioned together, is that God loves colors. (Have you looked out the window lately?) His house is not drab any more than His world is drab.

### **4. Marine Leather, v. 14b**

Now, that said, the outermost layer of the tabernacle is indeed a bit drab. It is made of some kind of marine leather, most likely dugong or porpoise skins. This leather was probably gray in color.

#### **B. Wooden Frame, vv. 15-29**

The curtains that are described were stretched over a wooden frame that was mounted on heavy silver bases. This design makes a lot of sense, and as far as tents go, this is about the nicest of the nice. I did enjoy the Scottish architect who commented in the 19th century that the tent would be quite leaky in the rain, and that it would collapse altogether in the snow — as if the Israelites were traveling through Scotland! It does not rain much in the Sinai peninsula, and it certainly doesn't snow much. In forty years of wilderness wandering it may have never snowed at all.

#### **II. Note: The Text Does Not Contain All the Information God Gave Moses, v. 30**

Now, those who try to draw pictures or build miniature models of the tabernacle run into this problem: The text doesn't tell us everything we need to know to draw a complete picture or build a complete model. Rather, Moses was shown a plan, either a view of the heavenly tabernacle, or some kind of architectural drawing that would allow him to cast a vision to his workmen of what the finished product would be.

Why doesn't the text contain all the information God gave Moses? For one thing, it would turn the Bible from a general-interest book, relevant to all humanity, into a technical work valuable (at least in parts) only for the particular physical process of building the tabernacle. You don't go read the owner's manual for your dryer unless something goes wrong. In the same way, if Exodus were not just a literary tour but a full-blown set of architectural plans, it would be beyond the ability of most people (myself included) to read it.

God wants us to know Him, so He tells us about His house.

#### **III. The Tent Furniture, vv. 31-37**

In addition to the linen curtains, covered with goat hair curtains and two kinds of leather, all stretched over a wooden frame, Moses mentions the arrangement of the furniture.

##### **A. Veil / Room Divider, vv. 31-33**

The first piece of furniture in the tabernacle is the veil, which functioned as a wall-to-wall curtain that divided the tabernacle into two rooms. The overall tent was 10 x 30 cubits. This veil was hung 20 cubits inside the door, thus creating one room that was two-thirds of the building and another that was one-third of it. The two-thirds room was the holy place, while the one-third room was the most holy place. In other words, just as in your house, so also in God's house there is a distinction between private and public space. The kitchen, dining room, and living room are

all considered public space. The bedrooms and bathrooms are considered private space. God had a private space within His house, a space into which only the high priest was allowed once each year.

#### **B. The Ark of the Covenant, v. 34**

In this private space stood the ark of the covenant. That is the most holy item of furniture in the house.

#### **C. Table, v. 35a**

In the public space stood the table and the menorah. God had a table on which sat the loaves of showbread.

#### **D. Menorah, v. 35b**

Across from the table was the menorah.

I just want to contrast this with the bare-minimum furnishing the Shunamite woman offered to Elijah — “a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp.” If you don’t have to cook, that is complete furnishing for one person — for sitting, for sleeping, for dealing with the dark, and for eating. God had a table and a lamp, and He had a footstool (the ark of the covenant). But this earthly tent was not big enough to contain a chair for Him, much less a bed. He has no need to sleep and no need to sit down. Nothing clarifies that point about Him like touring His house and seeing that He has no chair and no bed.

There is one other item of furniture that this tent contained, but it’s not mentioned here. That is the incense altar, which sat in front of the veil. The incense altar taught that we get in touch with God by sacrifice and prayer.

#### **E. Screen / Door Curtain, vv. 36-37**

Finally, the tabernacle had a door. It was not open to the gaze of passersby. It was most definitely set apart from the world outside, from the desert and from the camp alike.

This, I think, says something about universalism. There is a way into God’s presence, but it is not wide open. You have to have the door opened to you.

### **IV. Application**

What do we take away from this chapter?

#### **A. The Tabernacle Is Not a Sufficient Way of Access to God**

The first thing I want to comment on is based on the words of one commentator to the effect that the dominant impression created by Exodus 26 is of the many layers of curtains under which God is hidden.

##### **1. He Is Still Under Four Layers of Curtains**

As I mentioned, about 40% of the chapter is given over to describing all the curtains under which God resides. His presence is in the camp, but at the same time, He is still functionally separated from His people.

##### **2. Joe Israelite Isn’t Allowed in the Tabernacle**

Joe Israelite is not allowed into the tabernacle. It is called “the dwelling” and “the tent of meeting” throughout the text. And yes, God is clearly going to meet with a few priests there. But He is not going to meet with just anyone. It’s not mentioned in our text here, but the reality is

that ordinary Israelites outside of one family in one tribe were never allowed to enter the tabernacle. This literary tour is necessary because the vast majority of Israelites would have never been able to go inside and see the interior of the tabernacle.

### **3. The Tabernacle Can't Hold Many People Anyway**

Aside from that, the tabernacle was pretty small — 15 x 30 ft. That is smaller than the room we're in, I believe. Not a lot of people would have been able to come in and meet with God.

### **B. God Loves His People**

But though the tabernacle had defects in terms of providing access for all God's people to His presence, the tabernacle still says loudly that God loves His people.

#### **1. He Humbles Himself to Dwell with Us**

First of all, He humbles Himself to dwell with us. Everyone in this church lives in a house. I daresay that none of you has the slightest desire to leave your comfortably solid house and go live in a tent. I thought not. Well, if your house is comfortable, Heaven is infinitely more so. Heaven is beyond luxurious. Heaven is a place where the God who has everything has spared no expense to live the finest life imaginable. And God left that, in a very real sense, to go and travel around the desert in a tent.

That is because He is humble. He gladly lowers Himself to our level because He desires to be with us and save us.

#### **2. He Lives Like We Do**

Not only does He dwell in a tent; He lives like we do. The truth of the tabernacle is the truth of the incarnation. The tabernacle prefigured the coming of Jesus, when God became one of us and lived like you and I do. That is a signal mark of love. I love my disabled veteran friends, but I'm not about to start living like they do. I love the non-believers I witness to, but I'm not about to start living like they do. But God has come and lives like we do.

#### **3. He Furnishes His House Entirely for Our Sakes**

The description of the furniture makes it clear: He furnishes His house for our sakes. The ark is, perhaps, His footstool. Otherwise, though, He doesn't eat at the table; He doesn't need the light; He doesn't require the incense. Perhaps one could say that the veil protects His privacy, but He is invisible anyway. No, the veil is primarily about demonstrating His holiness to us.

Brothers and sisters, you and I aren't interested in living like those whom we consider to have a worse life than we do. How much less interested are you in furnishing your entire house for their comfort, convenience, and learning? But God not only came to live with His people; He furnished His house for their convenience.

Brothers and sisters, you may not enjoy this passage. But you should adore the God who dictated its contents to Moses. He said all these things because He loves you, and the content of what He said demonstrates that love so clearly. He loves you enough to come and live with you here on earth, and then take you to live with Him in heaven. Fine twined linen and ram's skins dyed red and all the rest of it only scratch the surface of what God has prepared for those that love Him. Amen.