

The Heavenly Tent

Exodus 26

The tabernacle is God's holy dwelling where He draws near to bless and transform Israel. Now that instructions for the ark, table, and lampstand have been given, the Lord tells Moses how to make the structure, thirty-seven verses of curtains, clasps, boards, coverings and veils. This is not just a place to worship, but a plan for the world.

From Heaven to Earth

Every house is built with walls, and God's is no different. The tabernacle is 15' wide by 45' long by 15' high. Access is on the west side because Adam was expelled from God's presence to the east, so people come back to the Lord symbolically as they head west. The holy place is a 15' by 30', and the holy of holies is 15' by 15', and the curtains cover these dimensions including the roof. The ten curtains are made of fine woven linen of blue, purple, and scarlet thread, 28 cubits by 4 cubits, adorned with cherubim (vv1-2). They are connected with blue thread and golden clasps, making one tent out of many pieces (vv3-6). There's also a curtain of goatskin that goes over the tabernacle and hangs off the back and sides (vv7-13). A third covering is made of ram skins dyed red, and a final fourth covering made of dolphins skins (v14). The walls are made of upright acacia wood covered in gold, 15' by 2 ¼', two "hands" on each board for connecting and sockets of silver, coupling them at the top and bottom (vv15-25). The bars are also made of acacia wood, and the boards overlaid with gold, everything made after the pattern Moses saw (vv27-30). The veil that separated the holy from the most holy place was woven of blue, purple, and scarlet thread, and decorated with cherubim (vv31-34). Inside the holy of holies dwells the mercy seat and the ark of the Testimony, and outside of it in the holy place is the lampstand on the south side and the table on the north (v35). A screen functions as the door to the holy place, made of blue, purple, and scarlet, held up by five pillars of acacia wood covered in gold (vv36-37). We don't have every detail to construct the tabernacle, but the details we do have are theologically significant. In the first verse, God says the cherubim are to be woven into the curtains with "artistic designs" or "by skilled craftsmanship". The Bible commends artistic excellence and only forbids bowing down to worship things made by God or man (Ex. 20:4-5). All the parts of the tabernacle required hard and skilled work to make, and wisdom to put together. This doesn't mean that every Christian has to work with wood, but it does mean that every Christian has to know how to work and be willing to use his body to serve the Lord. Gnostics believed that the body was a husk for the soul, to be tolerated and eventually discarded as irrelevant. But God gave Adam a good body, and issued the dominion mandate to fill and subdue the earth before the fall, to make the wilderness into a garden (Gen. 1:28). Like physical matter, including our bodies, work is still fundamentally good and our task of dominion continues as we look forward to the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21:1). The tabernacle is a garden-city in miniature with "trees", walls, and lights, all glorified in the worship of the King of creation. An

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enormous amount of callous-building, repetitive labor goes into constructing and maintaining the tabernacle where God was worshiped. It's the same in the church today. Even in own homes, if we want to have someone over, it takes physical and emotional work. It's trendy right now to emphasize theology and the creative arts, but God values theology and all sacrificial obedience. The tabernacle facilitates heavenly worship performed by God's people living in the wilderness in order to transform everything. The curtain around the outer courtyard is white or off-whiter, indicating a heavenly environment. Blue, purple, and crimson curtains along with cherubim on the walls and ceiling of the tent reveal that worship happens in God's heavenly home. We are surrounded by an even greater cloud of witnesses worshipping at a better mountain in heaven (Heb. 12:1, 22-24), and we are still praying God's kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Degrees of Access

The curtains of the tabernacles reveal God's desire to bring people close and the distance that was necessary at the time. The fine woven curtains with cherubim guard the holy of holies where only the high priest would go on one day a year, the Day of Atonement. The next covering is goatskin which is associated with the priests who are the next closest by access to God. Next is the red ram skin, associated with Passover and the Israelite people. And last, the outer curtain is made of dolphin, a sea creature, which represents the Gentiles (cf. Ps. 144:7; Is. 17:12, 60:5). This how people were arranged in camps around the tabernacle: priests on the east, closest to the entrance; Levites on the other three sides; Israel by tribes around all four sides; and the mixed multitude of Gentiles around them. The tabernacle is a portable Sinai and looks like brown mountain from the outside. It's wonderful and mysterious, and once you are close you get glimpses of what is going on. But you can't get very close: "Lord, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill?" (Ps. 15:1). God's people wanted to see the Lord, but being unholy, they couldn't.

Jesus the Man from Heaven & Way to the Father

The tabernacle was built from earthly material, and so Jesus was made of flesh and blood. But He was also from heaven (Matt. 21:25). Jesus came to show us the Father and to make the way to Him: "He who has seen Me has seen the Father"; "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (Jn. 14:9, 6). To hear the words and see the works of Jesus is to know God the Father (Jn. 14:10-11). Jesus is the greater Moses who is building His own house with living stones (1 Pet. 2:5; 1 Cor. 3:9, 11-13). We see His work in one another, and by the Spirit He uses us in His work.