

These three chapters focus on the detailed instructions for the building of the Tent of Meeting. We are covering these as a single lesson because, while there has been much discussion over the centuries about the meaning of the size, shape, materials and design of the Tabernacle, those discussions contain more speculation than certainty.

The instructions for building the Tabernacle begin with a request for materials. There are four things to note here. First, God, unlike Pharaoh, does not demand that people participate. The gifts are to be voluntary. Second, the gifts are to be the best of what the people possess, which harkens back to the Cain and Abel story, in which Abel offered the best and Cain did not. Third, God wants a portable place in which to appear to the people so that God can dwell with them as they journey. Thus, God is not restricted to a single location such as the mountain where the Law is being given. Fourth, the Tabernacle is not God's house, but a place in which God will "dwell" or "tent" with the people. This means God will come and go.

The construction project manual begins not with the tent but with the contents. The first content is the ark (this is the same word used to describe the ark in which Noah and his family were saved). The ark has two purposes. The first purpose is to house the covenant, perhaps as the life-giving words of God to save the people. The second purpose is to create the seat where God will "sit" and dispense more words to Moses. This is a reminder of the continuing nature of revelation. One note about the cherubim. They don't violate the command to not make graven images because they are not an image of a "natural" being, and they are not intended to be worshipped, but to worship God.

The table of the bread of the presence offers a contrast with the worship of other nations. The bread for the table is not for God, but for the priests to eat (it is an offering of the earth) and the cups and bowls are never to be filled. Other nations bring food and drink to feed the gods, which YHWH does not require. Think of the table as representing the earth...what the earth produces.

Though Moses is not given any explanation as to the purpose of the Lampstand, it has been suggested that it not only will illumine the tent, but that perhaps it represents the lights of the heavens, reminding the priests that the lights in the heavens are not gods, but creations of the one God.

The text next turns to the Tabernacle itself. The Tabernacle will be about fifteen feet wide and tall, and forty-five feet long. The inner hangings will be fit for royalty (gold, blues and fine linen). The exterior will weatherproof. The cherubim will once again be woven into the fabric. Inside the Tabernacle will be two smaller spaces, one will house the table and lampstand and the other (the Holy of Holies) will house the ark.

The next set of instructions concern "the" altar. Moses is told not to construct "an" altar, but "the" altar. This altar is "the" altar as opposed to the other altars Moses created without any instructions from God. We are not sure why there are horns on the altar (speculation is that since many other cultures worship bull gods, having horns places the bull as a creature serving God and not a god in itself). Finally, the altar is created hollow so it can be portable.

The final portion of the Tabernacle is the courtyard, where the altar will be housed. The size of the courtyard is the same as the Tabernacle, which means the entire structure will be about half the size of a football field.

Reflections: From the beginning of recorded history, human beings have made holy spaces; spaces in which to worship and meet with the gods. Some spaces have been trees, while others have been elaborate structures such as the pyramids in Mexico or the great cathedrals of Europe. These spaces have allowed human beings to step out of ordinary life and step into the sacred world.

Questions:

1. Where is your sacred space? Where do you encounter God?
2. What is your impression of the Tabernacle?
3. Do you think of a church sanctuary as a sacred place? If so why or why not?