

TABERNACLE BIBLE STUDY (1)



The World's Largest “Visual Aid”

Dr. David Murray

Dr. David Murray, professor of Old Testament and Practical Theology at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, has written a series of Bible Study articles with accompanying questions on the Tabernacle.

If you went to a primitive people with little or no education and with little or no knowledge of God, how would you begin to teach them the way of salvation? What lessons would you begin with? What teaching methods would you use? To make things even more difficult, imagine there was no Bible available — not even one book of Scripture. What would you do in that situation? Then, as if you were not facing enough problems, you are informed that there are over two million people to teach, they live in a desert, and they are constantly on the move. “That’s impossible!” you exclaim. Well, as Jesus said in another situation, “With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible” (Mark 10:27).

God faced this exact situation when the children of Israel came out of Egypt and were encamped in the desert at the base of Mount Sinai. Two million displaced Israelites, mostly uneducated, spiritually Egyptianized, and not one book of Scripture between them! Genesis had not even been written yet. What was the Lord’s solution to this seeming impossibility? It was, “Let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them” (Ex. 25:8). God started a building project. He ordered the construction

of the Tabernacle and its furniture to serve as a huge “visual aid.” Paul described these “holy places made with hands” as “figures of the true” (Heb. 9:24), or “pictures of truth.” God pictured the truth to preach the truth. This divine method of teaching is sometimes called “typology.” In this article, we will look at four characteristics of typology, and in subsequent articles, we will look at the “types,” or the pictures themselves.

Simple Pictures

If your young child asked you, “Daddy, what is a rocket?” you wouldn’t contact NASA and ask them to send you the technical specifications of a rocket. No, you would sit down and draw a simple picture. You show rather than tell. Your drawing does not say everything there is to say about a rocket, but it does say something—something that is true, understandable, and memorable. By putting it in simple picture form, you communicate truth in a far more effective way than all of NASA’s volumes would in this situation.

When a young Israelite girl asked, “Daddy, what is God?” her father couldn’t pull out a catechism or a systematic theology. They didn’t exist. No, her father would say something like, “Hannah, hold my hand and I’ll take you through the camp to God’s tent, and I will show you what God is like.” There, he would show rather than tell. God’s tent, the Tabernacle, did not say everything there was to say about God, but it said something—something that was true, understandable, and memorable. It was Israel’s first “Bible” and it showed them God and His way of salvation in a series of simple, steppingstone pictures.

Important Pictures

When you pick up your newspaper, what do you read first? The most important stories are those with major headlines and significant space is devoted to them throughout the newspaper. There are other stories summarized in digest form on the sidebars. They too are important enough to be included in the paper, but not as important as the main headline stories. Usually you read the main headline stories, the ones with most space devoted to them. You trust the editor’s judgment on what is the most important news.

When we pick up our Bibles, while acknowledging that all its contents are important, we may also ask what is especially important. One way of deciding this is by looking at how much space is allocated to the various stories. For example, the creation of the world has about two chapters. That’s clearly important. But, how many chapters are given to the Tabernacle? Half of Exodus and all of Leviticus are devoted to it. And then, when the Tabernacle becomes more permanent in the form of the Temple, even more chapters are given to it. What is the “Editor” saying to us? He is saying, “This is very, very, very important. This is one of the chief ways I reveal Myself.” Indeed, God reveals far more of Himself through the Tabernacle than through the creation. And, if we trust the “Editor,” our preaching and witnessing would reflect that far more.

Theological Pictures

The main question the Israelite asked when looking at the Tabernacle was, “What does this teach me about God?” The Tabernacle, its furniture, and rituals painted theological pictures (Heb. 8:5; 9:11).

These “figures of the true” or “pictures of truth” were God-centered. If your only Bible was the Tabernacle, and you yearned to know about God, would you not have spent many hours in and around it? Would you not have asked the priests who served there to instruct you and share with you the light God had given them? Would you not have sought out the fellowship of like-minded seekers — and “finders”— that they might do you good? Would you not have prayed to the Lord to open the eyes of your understanding?

God recognized that theological truth in sentence form would be very difficult for the Israelites to grasp. So, He gave them theological truth in sensory form. Every touch, sight, sound, smell, and even taste conveyed truth about God’s character and, as we shall see in later articles, especially about the truth of His mercy and grace. This is the most vital truth to grasp about the Tabernacle. It set forth in picture form the only way of salvation. No Israelite was ever saved by making the Tabernacle, serving in the Tabernacle, or trusting in the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle never saved anyone. What it pictured did.

Prophetic Pictures

While the Tabernacle revealed much about God and His way of salvation, there was also an inbuilt inadequacy. There was a divinely intended insufficiency in the Tabernacle and its service (Heb. 9:8). God designed it in such a way that, while it taught much, it also taught that there was much more to learn. The author of Hebrews highlights how the Tabernacle not only revealed God to the Israelites but also created a longing and a hope for an even greater future revelation of God and His way of salvation. Thus, the Tabernacle served the present but also pointed to the future. It pictured truth for the present but also predicted more truth for the future. Wherever the Israelite looked in the Tabernacle, his response would be, “That’s true, but there is a fuller revelation of that truth to come. God has shown the way of salvation, but there is a more glorious manifestation of salvation to come.” The psalmists and the prophets give insight into the thoughts and desires of the spiritual Israelites as they meditate on the Tabernacle. Time and again, they take Tabernacle vocabulary on their lips and use it to express hope that an even greater Tabernacle of God would yet appear. In this way, Messiah-centered faith, hope, and expectation were cultivated. Eventually it was satisfied when “The Word was made flesh and dwelt (literally, “tabernacled” or “tented”) among us... full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

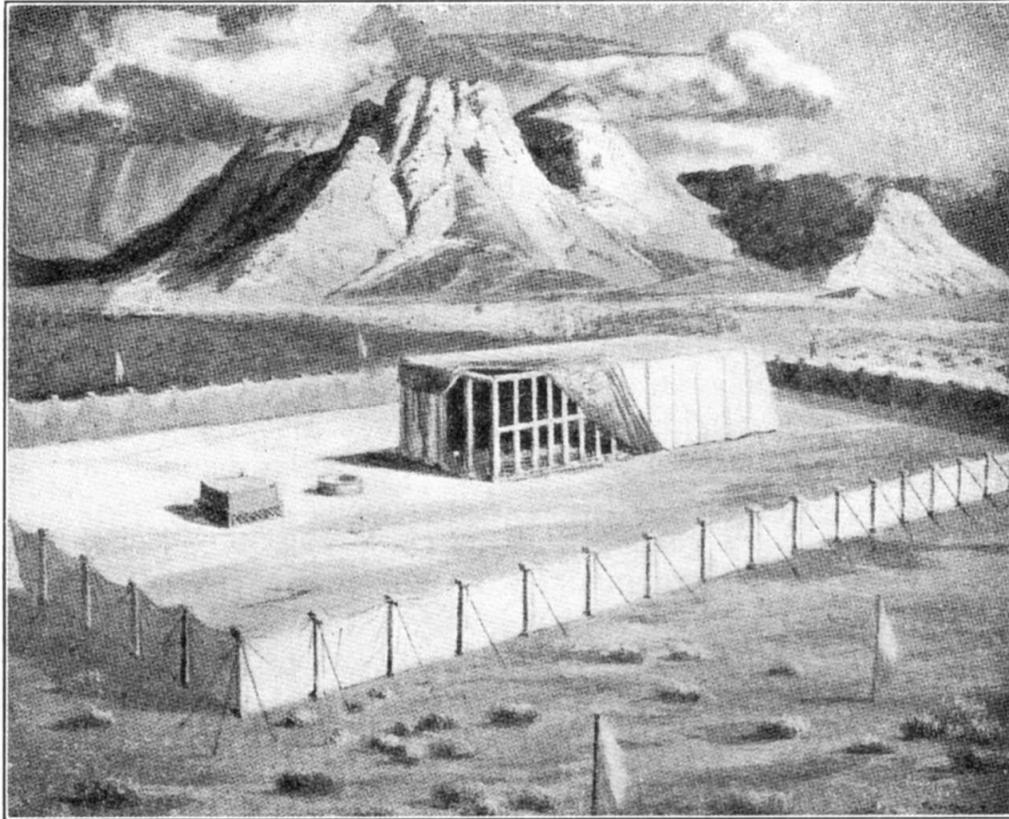
Study Questions

1. How did Christ explain the Tabernacle as a prophetic picture of Himself (Matt. 12:6; John 2:19–21; Luke 24:27)?
2. Study 1 Peter 1:10–12 and answer the following questions:
 - a. Moses was the “model” prophet (Deut. 18:15). Was he a prophet of legalism and condemnation or of grace and salvation (v.10)? Why?
 - b. What spirit was in the prophets (v.11)?
 - c. What two aspects of Christ’s person and work did they predict (v.11)?
 - d. Why didn’t the prophets understand everything they preached (v.12)?

- e. How can we see more in the Old Testament than the Old Testament prophets did (v.12)?
- 3. What Psalms use Tabernacle vocabulary to predict Christ's person and work?
- 4. How did Old Testament characters get to heaven (Matt. 8:11)? Was it by works, by faith, or by a mixture of the two? If faith was involved, was it in God in general, or in the Messiah in particular?
- 5. Consult John 8:56, 14:6, 17:3; Acts 4:12; Heb. 11; 1 Tim. 2:5; Eph. 2:9; Rom. 3:2.
- 6. Read Hebrews 7–9. What verses highlight,
 - a. The spiritual usefulness of the Tabernacle and its services,
 - b. The spiritual “deficiencies” of the Tabernacle and its services.
- 7. Do you think mission work to primitive peoples should start with the building of a model Tabernacle? Why or why not?
- 8. Does the balance of your spiritual diet reflect the balance of Scripture?
- 9. Memorize the following definition of a type: “A type is a prophetic picture of Christ's person and work. It is a real person, place, object, event, etc., which God ordained to act as a predictive pattern or resemblance of Christ's person and work.”
- 10. How can Christians use the Tabernacle in their own devotional lives?

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TABERNACLE BIBLE STUDY (2)



God's Tent

And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. — Exodus 25:8

Last month we began looking at typology — God's way of teaching His people about Himself through the use of divinely approved visual aids. We will now look more closely at the largest of these visual aids: the Tabernacle. We will survey the truths it pictured and predicted (Old Testament Theology), and we will also make some suggestions as to how spiritual Israelites might have experienced these truths (Old Testament Spirituality). You will find it helpful to read Exodus 25–26 and Hebrews 8 – 9.

The Tabernacle is a Residence of God

Before the first sin, God was present everywhere and met with Adam and Eve anywhere. Everywhere and anywhere was sacred. There were no special places or times for communion with God. It was all sanctuary, and access to God was free and easy. But sin alienated our first parents from God and banished them from God's friendly presence.

The book of Genesis reveals that the way back into God's gracious presence was through individuals, usually heads of families, sacrificing on altars at special places. An altar was built of either stone or earth, and there God met with sinners through sacrifice.

By the time of the Exodus, however, the people of God had grown into a great nation. So God instructed Moses to build one large tent, the Tabernacle, in which the nation could approach Him in a united and organized manner. Instead of multiple altars, there would be one altar where God would meet with His people (Exod. 25:8). This is why the Tabernacle (literally, “Dwelling Place”) is frequently called “the Tent of Meeting” (Exod. 38:8, 30). It was God’s way of living in the midst of Israel and meeting with Israel. The Israelites lived in tents and so God lived in a tent. Like theirs, His tent had a couple of rooms and a fireplace. He lived with them and He lived like them. The tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them!

The spiritual Israelite (let’s call him Baruch) looked at this sin-stained world and asked, “Will God indeed dwell with men on the earth?” The Tabernacle answered, “Yes! He lives with us and He lives like us!” As Baruch walked around the Tabernacle and praised God for this picture of truth, the Holy Spirit led him to think, “If this is only a ‘shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things’ (Heb. 10:1), what must the very image be like? It must mean that God will live with us and like us in an even more astounding manner. Oh, how I long for that day! May I live to see it, my condescending God! ‘Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down, that the mountains might flow down at thy presence... to make thy name known to thine adversaries, that the nations may tremble at thy presence!’” (Isa. 64:1–2)

Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of this prophetic picture and the answer to that pleading prayer. In Christ, God came down and took up residence among His people in human flesh. He is Immanuel, God with us (Matt. 1:23). He not only lived with us, He lived like us — like us in every way except sin. “The Word was made flesh and dwelt [literally, “tabernacled” or “tented”] among us... full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them! What amazing grace! Will God indeed dwell with men and like men on the earth?

The Tabernacle is a Revelation of God

The Tabernacle revealed the character of God. It was Israel’s “catechism,” their “Sunday school.” It taught them, first, that *God is King*. Through the Exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Law at Sinai, God said to Israel, “I am your King and you are My kingdom.” But a King must have a palace. The Tabernacle was God’s portable royal residence. As the always-visible earthly palace of the heavenly King, it reminded Israel that God was its ultimate Governor, who was to be served and obeyed.

Secondly, it taught them that *God is Holy*. The location, design, and building materials of the Tabernacle all emphasized that a holy God dwelt in the midst of the Israelites. For example, there were circles of holiness of decreasing size and increasing holiness as the worshipper moved through the camp towards the central Tabernacle. The outer circle of the Gentiles and the unclean was outside the camp. The next circle was inside the camp. Only those who were in covenant with God and who were ritually clean were permitted to enter. On the inside rim of this large circle were the Levites — the tribe specially consecrated to the service of the Lord — who buffered the Tabernacle from the rest of the camp. Inside the Tabernacle courtyard were many priests performing various rituals, but also some ordinary Israelites with their sacrifices. Then there were two smaller tents within this larger Tent. The first was called the Holy Place, with access strictly limited to the priests. Inside this was another tent, the Most Holy Place, and this could be accessed only by the High Priest — and that only once a year.

It was in the Most Holy Place that God specially resided. Why these circles of ever-decreasing size, and ever-increasing restriction? Because God is holy.

This was reinforced by the materials used in the construction of the Tabernacle. A common metal, brass, was used for everything connected with the outer court and its furnishings. As one got nearer to the Most Holy Place, the materials changed to silver, then to gold, then to the fine gold. These graded distinctions again emphasized the immaculate holiness of God.

Thirdly, Israel learned that *God is Saviour*. The Tabernacle demonstrated how sinners may approach a holy God — through a divinely appointed priesthood offering divinely appointed sacrifices. Wherever you looked in the Tabernacle there was blood: the blood of bulls, the blood of goats, and the blood of lambs; blood poured, blood sprinkled, and blood spattered; blood on the altar, blood on the priests, and blood on the floor. Whatever else the Israelites grasped, they knew that God could be approached via blood.

Fourthly, *God is beautiful* was proclaimed by the impressive artistry and symmetry of design in the Tabernacle. The gold and silver and brass, the fine linen of the curtains, the elaborately embroidered hangings or veils, made the sanctuary a thing of “glory and of beauty.” In the Holy Place, the air was fragrant with the sweet aroma of burning incense from a golden altar. A golden lamp cast soft light upon an ornately crowned golden table. There were gold-plated wooden supports from which hung deep blue curtains exquisitely embroidered with cherubim, the most sublime of heavenly creatures. Then, a step away, the heartbeat of it all, the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place, from which shone a mysterious, other-worldly cloudy light. Everything said, “God is so, so beautiful!”

Let us ask Baruch, our Old Testament Israelite, how God was revealed to him through the Tabernacle. “Well, my New Testament brothers and sisters, as a young man, I wanted to run away from God. But, because of the Tabernacle, I could never escape. No matter where I went in the camp, I could either see it, smell it, or hear it. Some evenings I would go out with other young people on the far side of the camp. But I always dreaded passing the Tabernacle on the way back. It preached against my lawless and unholy lifestyle. It speared my conscience as it declared, ‘God is King and God is holy.’ But one day — what a blessed day! — I felt irresistibly drawn to the Tabernacle. The nearer I got to God’s holy and royal residence, the more I seemed to hear, ‘God is King and God is holy.’ Trembling, I entered the outer court, found a kind-looking priest, and poured out my heart to him. He gently led me over to the brass altar and sacrificed a lamb for me, while whispering in my ear, ‘God is Saviour. Look to the Saviour.’ As I saw the blood poured out and the lamb in flames, I saw a picture of how God saves sinners like me — through a divinely appointed priest offering a divinely appointed sacrifice. Now I love the Tabernacle and its prophetic pictures of the Saviour. Every sight, every sound, and every smell says, ‘God is so beautiful, God is so beautiful.’ Yea, He is altogether lovely!”

Questions

1. What other attributes of God are taught through the Tabernacle?
2. Christ is “a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands” (Heb. 9:11). How does Christ reveal God in a greater and more perfect way than the tabernacle made with hands?

3. The Christian is also described as a temple or tabernacle of God (1 Cor. 3:16, 6:19).
 - a. How does God “tabernacle” in a Christian’s soul?
 - b. What are the evidences of God’s dwelling in your soul?
 - c. If you are a tabernacle of God, what does your tabernacle reveal about God?
4. The Tabernacle is also a replica of heaven (Heb. 8:2, 9:24; Rev. 21:3, 22). What can we learn about heaven from the Tabernacle?
5. Look up “Tabernacle” in a Bible Dictionary and study a layout plan to prepare for the next study.

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TABERNACLE BIBLE STUDY (3)

We Have an Altar

Read Exodus 27:1–8; 38:1–8; Matthew 23:17; Hebrews 13:10–12

Jerusha had waited a long time for this moment — her first visit to the Tabernacle with her father, Baruch. She had heard so much about it from her parents and from the friendly priest who visited them every few months to talk and pray with the family. She had seen its distant smoke above the camp during the day and the strange glow in the distance at night. When the wind came from the west, she could even smell some of the burning animals. Now the long-promised day had arrived.

Baruch and little Jerusha quickly covered the few miles from their tent on the camp’s outskirts to the Tabernacle at the center. As they entered the outer court, Jerusha saw a sight she would never ever forget — a big, black, blazing altar. She could feel the heat even from the Tabernacle door. She was so overwhelmed by the sights, the sounds, and the smells that she suddenly forgot all she had been taught by her parents and her priest. Her mind blanked. “Daddy, what...what...what’s that?” she stammered.

Baruch had suspected this would happen and was prepared. He had arranged for their priest to meet them at the altar this morning to explain it all to her in a simple way. And there he was, Priest Elnathan, right on cue. “Good morning, Baruch. And my dear Jerusha, welcome to the Tabernacle — God’s picture gallery. There is too much to see in one visit; I thought that today we would simply look at one of these pictures of truth — this big brass altar. Do you remember the three S’s I taught you about the altar? No? Don’t worry, that happens to most children on their first visit. Let me remind you. The three S’s are: sanctification, support, and salvation.”

Sanctification

“Sanctification is a big word, isn’t it, Jerusha? What does it mean? Well, it can mean two things. First, it describes how God removes the weeds of sin and waters the seeds of grace in the believer’s soul. But it can also mean ‘set apart’ or ‘consecrated.’ For example, when I became a priest, I was ‘sanctified.’ Now, that does not mean I was made sinless — I wish it did! No, it meant that I was taken away from common and everyday work, and dedicated, or set apart, to God’s service. This is what we mean when we say, ‘Whatsoever toucheth the altar shall be holy’ (Ex. 29:37). Our sacrifices and offerings are sanctified by the altar. They are made acceptable and effective through contact with the altar. Without that contact, they would have had no value whatsoever. You might ask, what gives the altar this power? Is it magic? No. It’s because God simply says it is so. But it might also be related to how it’s made. Underneath the brass is shittim wood from the acacia tree. This is the most beautiful and valuable wood in the world. Some call it incorruptible wood because it does not rot. So, our sacrifices are made beautiful and holy and acceptable when offered on this altar because God says so, and because they come into contact with something beautiful, holy, and incorruptible.

“But, precious Jerusha, remember this altar is only a picture of truth. Like every picture, it should make us want to see what is pictured. And do you know what is pictured here? It is the Messiah. He is the real altar behind this picture altar. We don’t know everything there is to know about Him yet. But what the picture teaches us is that ‘whatsoever toucheth the altar shall be holy.’ Only through Him can our gifts and sacrifices be accepted. Every song, prayer, sermon, and service must be sanctified by contact with His beautiful, valuable, and incorruptible person.

Support

“The second ‘S’ is support. As well as sanctifying the sacrifice, the altar supports it. You will notice, Jerusha, that the altar is covered with brass, a metal which is associated with strength and endurance (Exodus 27:2). In its hollow middle is a brass grate, which sustains and supports the sacrifice while the fire eats it up. Being made of brass, the altar and the grating are strong and firm enough to endure the constant blazing fire and burning heat until the sacrifice is completely burned up.

“Look at the fire, Jerusha. You wouldn’t last long if you fell in there, would you! That fire burns every day and every night, yet the altar is never burned up. Some of our older priests believe that this pictures the amazing strength of the coming Messiah. They say that when He comes, He will bear the burning wrath of God as He offers Himself, the ultimate sacrifice for sin, and yet He Himself will not be burned up. He will be like this altar — able to support the sacrifice for sin, able to lift it up from earth to heaven, until the sacrifice is consumed. I am inclined more and more to agree with these experienced, old men. They’ve been studying these things and praying over them for longer than I have. Jerusha, wouldn’t you love to be alive when our Messiah comes, when these pictures will come alive? What a great day that will be!

Salvation

“I see you are getting tired, my dear Jerusha. Let me give you the last ‘S’— salvation. The altar teaches us about the importance of salvation. Do you see how this altar dominates the Tabernacle? It was the first thing you saw when you came in the entrance, wasn’t it? It overshadows everything else. It is

about eight feet wide, eight feet long, and five feet high. You can't get anywhere else in the Tabernacle without passing it. Our national life centers upon it. Daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, and festival sacrifices are made on it. By all these things, God is telling us that salvation from sin is the most important thing in the world. Our whole lives must center upon it and revolve around it. Jerusha, this is far more important than friends or play or school. The Messiah must be the most important person in your life — even more important than your mother or father.

“The brass altar also teaches us the uniqueness of salvation. How many sacrificial altars has God authorized, Jerusha? Yes, that's right, only one. You must remember that, especially when you enter Canaan. There you may meet people who say that there are many ways to God. Please remember, Jerusha, that there is only one divinely authorized altar. God has appointed and approved of only one way of salvation. There is no other way to God, except through the Messiah who is pictured in this altar. There is no other name under heaven by which anyone can be saved.

“Lastly, the brass altar teaches us the power of salvation. What do you see on the four corners, Jerusha? Horns, that's right, one on each corner. The animals with the largest horns were usually the strongest. That's why God often uses horns as symbols of strength. So here God is calling to the four corners of the earth, ‘Come to my powerful altar for a powerful salvation.’ That's Israel's role in the world, Jerusha. We are to call the nations to the one true God and the mighty salvation He offers through the coming Savior.

“Anyway, you look very tired. There is an awful lot to take in, isn't there? You have seen plenty to keep you thinking for many weeks. Talk to your father about the altar, and seek out the fellowship of God's people. Above all, speak of the altar to God in your prayers, and ask Him to show you the Savior and the way of salvation He has pictured here. And, as He is revealed to you, whether suddenly or slowly, put your whole faith and confidence in Him and in Him alone. We will talk again.”

Conclusion

Well, New Testament believer, the Messiah has stepped out of the picture, the altar has been made flesh. In confirmation of the Old Testament, He said, it is “the altar that sanctifieth the gift” (Matt. 23:17). In fulfillment of the Old Testament, He said, “And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth” (John 17:19). In the context of speaking about Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever, the Apostle asserts, “We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle” (Heb. 13:10). He calls all believers to the one altar of the New Testament church, Jesus Christ, and excludes all who still look to the Old Tabernacle altar. And he goes on to argue that as the Tabernacle altar sanctified the people's sacrifices, so Christ's blood sanctifies the people (Heb. 13:12). We have an altar!

Questions

1. What are the two meanings of sanctification?

2. We conclude our prayers by commending them to God, “for Jesus’ sake.” How can we be more conscious of the need for Jesus to sanctify our songs, our sermons, our witness, our service? What steps can we take to cultivate more of a “for Jesus’ sake” mindset and heartset?
3. What Scriptures might help you to better understand and worship the almighty endurance of Christ as your altar?
4. Christ and Christ alone is our priest, our sacrifice, and our altar — all three. Why is it a common error to speak of the cross, or the communion table, or our heart as an altar? Do you need to confess such Christ-diminishing misunderstanding?
5. Ancient heathen altars tended to be extraordinarily elaborate and beautifully ornate. Israel’s altar was simple and plain. What does this tell us about the Savior and His salvation?
6. Sacrifices were often tied to the altar with cords (Ps. 118:27). What does this teach us about the willingness of the animals to be sacrificed, and how does this contrast with Christ’s sacrifice?
7. What other Scriptures refer to Christ as the only way of salvation?
8. How can parents and churches make the importance of salvation as clear as the brass altar made it to Israel?

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TABERNACLE BIBLE STUDY (4)

The Bath Made with Mirrors

Read Exodus 30:17 – 21

The purpose of the Tabernacle was to reveal God, and so bring Him near to the Israelites with a view to mutual communion and fellowship. Such a physical representation of spiritual truths and experiences, usually called typology, was a temporary concession to the weakness and frailty of sinful humanity. Patrick Fairbairn writes:

The Israelites would certainly, without such outward and visible help as was afforded by a worldly sanctuary, have either sunk into practical ignorance and forgetfulness of God, or betaken themselves to some wrong methods of bringing divine things more distinctly within the grasp and comprehension of their minds.... Till God was made manifest in the flesh, in the person of Christ, even the pious mind anxiously sought to lay hold of some visible link of communion with the higher region of glory.

However, even we can profit from studying the Old Testament types. We do so by asking four questions:

1. What truths are pictured and predicted? (Old Testament theology)
2. How did spiritual Israelites experience these truths in the types? (Old Testament spirituality)
3. What was the New Testament fulfillment of this type? (New Testament theology)
4. How do I apply or experience these truths? (New Testament spirituality)

Keeping these questions in mind, let us proceed to the second item of furniture in the Tabernacle, the “brass laver” or “brass bath.” This was a metal, water-filled tank which sat on a large metal plate. Taps let water flow out of the tank and into the base plate. We do not know the shape or dimensions of it, but the later laver in Solomon’s Temple was circular and huge.

Let’s first consider the cleansing provided by the laver. Then we will consider how that cleansing is perfected.

Cleansing Provided

Water is the most abundant and necessary element in the world. It has many uses. It is drunk for refreshment. It is sprinkled for fertility and fruitfulness. In the case of the laver, it was used for washing and purifying the priests. Let’s ask Priest Elnathan to explain the details.

“Thank you. I love the brass laver. I didn’t used to. As a teenager and even into my twenties, I found all the priestly washings so tedious and boring. ‘Why can’t they just get on with the sacrificing, and then I can get back to my friends?’ I used to think, as I stood with the congregation. However, a year before my thirtieth birthday and my own entrance into the priesthood, I was mercifully and sovereignly born again by the Spirit of God. It was then that I began to understand the holiness of God and my own unholiness. As the day of my consecration drew near, I felt increasingly unfit and unworthy for the priesthood. In fact, on the morning of my consecration service, I remember feeling so dirty and so filthy within and without that I almost ran away. But, by God’s grace, I overcame my fears and joined my new colleagues in the Tabernacle for the start of the service. Then came the part of the service I used to find so tedious: the washings. There was the one-time full-body washing with water from the brass laver (Ex. 29:4). Oh, how wonderful that felt! It reminded me so vividly that in the gospel my holy God provides cleansing for unholy souls. What a mercy! I would gladly go through that all-over washing every day I go to serve in the Tabernacle. However, that was a one-time occurrence. Instead, every day I often wash my hands and feet at the laver (Ex. 30:19). This reminds me of my onetime full-body wash. It also reminds me of the ongoing cleansing God continues to provide for my sins — and spurs me on to greater holiness.”

New Testament believers, Christ has not only consecrated all of you as priests (1 Pet. 2:5; Rev. 5:10) but has also provided a double cleansing. There is the one-time, all-encompassing washing of the soul in regeneration. “According to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). And there is the oft-repeated ongoing sanctification of various areas of the soul. “Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word” (Eph. 5:25, 26). This same two-fold work of the water is referred to by Christ when seeking to wash the disciples’ feet: “He that is washed needeth not save to wash his

feet, but is clean every whit” (John 13:10). The brass altar preaches pardon of sin. The brass laver preaches purging from sin. The altar is concerned with the believer’s status; the laver with the believer’s condition. The altar’s blood aims at acceptance with God; the laver’s water aims at communion with God. The altar says, “without shedding of blood is no remission,” while the laver announces “without holiness no man shall see the Lord.”

Cleansing Perfected

The laver itself was made of brass, a symbol of strength and indestructibility, endurance and solidity (Dan. 10:6; Rev. 1:5). The base, however, was made out of the burnished and polished metal mirrors of the ladies who assembled at the door of the Tabernacle (Ex. 38:8). They gave up the mirrors which showed them their appearance and helped them to adjust to the fashions and standards of the day. By doing so, they were saying, “No longer will we judge ourselves by our standards or others’ standards. We want to please God and live by His standards.” In his excellent commentary on Exodus, Dr. Philip Ryken suggests that this must have been a time of spiritual revival in Israel. And A.W. Pink writes:

The very material from which the laver was made spoke of *surrender*, a willingness to part with what was calculated to make something of self; and this, in order that conditions of holy purity might be maintained in the priests. Thus we, too, must sacrifice what would minister to pride if we are to obtain that cleansing which fits for communion with God.

Patrick Fairbairn translates the phrase referring to the women as “the mirrors of the serving-women who served at the door of the tabernacle of meeting.” Fairbairn presents evidence that there were groups of pious women who gathered around the Tabernacle entrance and “devoted themselves to regular attendance on the worship of God, for the purpose of performing such services as they might be capable of rendering.” They were Old Testament prototypes of Anna “which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day” (Luke 2:37).

It is likely that this polished metal not only formed the basin at the base of the laver, but also acted as a mirror in which the priests might look at themselves to remove every last spot of dirt.

The vital necessity of this cleansing is emphasized in the instructions: “When they go into the tabernacle of the congregation they shall wash with water that they die not” (Ex. 30:20, 21). A speck of dust or dirt not only rendered them unfit for God’s presence but also rendered them subject to fatal judgment. For the conscientious priest, this must have caused excruciating worry. He would have thought: “If a minimal neglect of outward purity be judged so severely, what hope do I have with my impure heart?” With what trembling and fear would he go about his daily duties (Ps. 24:3 – 5; 26:6).

The imperfect Old Testament priests, in need of both outward and inward purity, in need of both regeneration and sanctification, must have longed for a priest they could rely on without fear or worry. As they looked anxiously in the mirror at the base of the laver, how they must have longed to see a reflection of one who was perfect and undefiled. Such a one was Jesus Christ — the One toward whom the laver and the mirrors pointed. “And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth” (John 17:19; cf. Heb. 7:26 – 28).

The hope of perfect cleansing becomes a personal reality for believers in heaven. In Revelation 15:2 – 3, we read of a heavenly laver. The saints are standing on a “sea” (a laver) of glass, singing to the One who has washed them and made them clean forever. As Samuel Ridout concludes:

When all the redeemed of God are gathered there, the day of cleansing from defilement is over, no more need to wash one another’s feet; no more need for the Lord’s washing our feet, but there we stand with harps of God in our hands, nothing to hinder praise and worship. But the sea of glass, the witness and perpetual reminder of our cleansing, will flash forth there a continual remembrance of our Lord’s gracious and humble service throughout our journey here.

Questions

1. Can you see a link between the Old Testament washings, John the Baptist’s “baptism of repentance for the remission of sins,” and the New Testament practice of infant baptism? If so, what are the common lessons taught in these washings?
2. How do you know if you have experienced “the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5)? What evidence would you present to prove your case?
3. What means, or instruments, does God use to regenerate our souls? (Titus 3:5; 1 Pet. 1:23; John 3:5).
4. How many times a day do you look in the mirror? How many times a day do you look in the mirror of God’s Word? What does that say about your standards?
5. What would be the marks of revival in our society? What would we expect to see surrendered — by men, by women, by teenagers, by children?
6. Name one thing you could surrender today to keep yourself more unspotted from the world.
7. What difference would it make to your Christian life if you thought more about your priestly role and status?
8. How can you increase your desires for holiness in this world and in the world to come?

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Tabernacle Bible Study (5)



The Bread of God

Read Exodus 25:23–30 and Leviticus 24:5–9

Elnathan the priest had bad news for his Sabbath school class. The children had been enjoying the visual aids he had been using recently to teach them. They had stood beside the brass altar and then the brass bath as Elnathan explained the Messiah-centered meaning of these pieces of furniture. Today the children were looking forward to seeing what was in the Holy Place, the tented room in the middle of the Tabernacle. But, as he reached the curtained entrance, Elnathan turned around and said, “I’m sorry, dear children, but only the priests can go into the Holy Place. I can tell you what is in it, but I can’t take you inside.” Disappointment spread across every face. But Elnathan knew from previous classes that this disappointment could be turned to his advantage. If there was one way to arouse children’s curiosity about something, it was to tell them they could not see it! So, as the children tried to squint between the curtains, Elnathan began to describe what was on the other side.

“My dear children,” Elnathan began, “Although the outside of the tent looks very plain, the inside is very different. On the roof and walls hang blue, purple, and scarlet curtains covered with beautifully embroidered, golden cherubim. There is no sound in this sacred place; silence reigns. A large, golden lamp casts its yellow light on a golden altar and a golden table. The table is 3 feet long, 18 inches broad, and 2 feet 3 inches high. Around the edge are two hand breadth high golden rims — they look like crowns and stop things from falling off the table. And what is on the table, children? Does anyone know?”

Just at that point, a group of priests arrived. Twelve of them were each carrying a large loaf of unleavened bread. Others carried bowls of wine.

One of the older children shot up his hand and asked, “Mr. Elnathan, do these loaves go on the table?” “That’s right, Benjamin,” Elnathan smiled. “On the table are twelve large loaves of unleavened bread, set out in two rows. Every Sabbath the priests put fresh bread on the table. But what does all this mean, beloved children?” The children’s eyes widened as the priests passed through the curtain and into the Holy Place with their bread and bowls. They peered in, trying to catch a glimpse of this mysterious

place. Elnathan had timed the lesson perfectly. He now had the children captivated with rapt attention. “My dear pupils, let me tell you about the ‘Four Fs.’”

FOR GOD

“First of all, this bread is *for God*. It is an offering from our nation to God (Lev. 24:8). Although this is only a small part of our crops and produce, we offer it as a sample of all we have, and so acknowledge that all we have is *for God*. Why twelve loaves? Well, they represent everyone in the twelve tribes. So, when the priests put the twelve loaves on the golden table and sprinkle them with the sweet ascending fragrance of frankincense (Lev. 24:7), we are acknowledging that we are all *for God*. We exist for Him and live to Him.

“Now, as you know, this bread has a special name. It is called ‘Shewbread,’ which means ‘the bread of presence.’ And, just as the shewbread is continually on show in His presence, so our twelve tribes are reminded that we too and we all are continually before Him (Lev. 24:8). This theme of remembering is underlined by the frankincense, which is on the bread for ‘a memorial’ (Lev. 24:7). Its sweet fragrance rises up to heaven and reminds us that we are constantly in the presence of God (Lev. 25:4 – 9).

“Some of you look a bit worried about that. Maybe you should be! However, if you are living a life for God, the ‘bread of presence’ should bring you much comfort. Remember what is around the table? A protective crown of gold rims the table and makes sure that nothing falls off. My dear believing children, no man shall be able to pluck you out of the Lord’s hand. His presence is your protection.

“And, remember, the Tabernacle and its furniture ultimately pictures the Messiah. He will be the Bread of Presence. When He comes, He will live with God and for God perfectly. I sometimes wonder if the fine flour we use to bake this bread tells us something about the Messiah. We sift it eleven times to make sure it is free from grit and imperfection. Could that tell us something about the Savior? And what about the bread being baked in a hot oven — does that contain any lessons? I don’t have all the answers, children. A day will come when these things will become more clear. May our gracious God hasten the day!”

FROM GOD

“But we must hurry on. Your parents will soon be here to pick you up. The second ‘F’ is *from God*. People in the nations beside us regularly bring produce to supply their kings’ tables. This is their way of acknowledging that their piece of land and Artist’s impression its resulting produce is the king’s gift to them, as is the security and peace of the land.

“So, by offering the shewbread to God, we are acknowledging that all our bread is from our heavenly King. We are returning to God what He had given us. We are saying that all our support and sustenance is from Him. The twelve loaves always in God’s presence signify that all twelve tribes are always dependent on Him.

“But, there is a spiritual lesson here, too, my little ones. Just as God provides for Israel’s physical needs, so He provides for the believer’s spiritual needs. And God’s ultimate provision for His people’s

spiritual nourishment is the Messiah who will be ‘of and from God.’ Let us look in faith towards the bread of God which will come down from heaven, and give life to the world.”

FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

“Thirdly, the shewbread represents *fellowship with God*. As you know, our family tables are places of fellowship, places where our families gather to talk and share. But here we have a golden table, a symbol of royal fellowship. And it’s fitting, isn’t it, that in God’s royal palace and dwelling place there should be a royal table?

“Some of you are wondering why the priests are taking so long in there, aren’t you? Do you know what is keeping them? They are eating the old shewbread before replacing it with the new bread. This again underlines the link between fellowship and the shewbread. I love it when my name is on the roster to change the shewbread. My most memorable times of spiritual fellowship have been in the Holy Place, eating the sacred bread of presence, drinking the wine from the bowls, and discussing the meaning of the bread, the wine, and the table with some of the older priests. I can’t wait until it’s my turn again!

“Are some of you thinking that it’s a bit unfair that only the priests are allowed this privilege? Well, you’ll be glad to know that the older priests believe that when the Messiah comes, all of God’s people will be priests, and they will all eat of the bread of God. What a table of love and fellowship that will be!”

FUTURE WITH GOD

“Finally, the shewbread speaks of the *future with God*. God’s gracious supply of physical and spiritual nourishment on earth encourages the believer to look forward to heaven, when he will eat and drink at Messiah’s table in His heavenly Temple. Is this not what we sing of in the Psalms, ‘In thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore’? “I see your parents at the door of the Tabernacle. But, before you run off, take down the following words and memorize them for next week. How excellent is thy lovingkindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of thy wings. They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of thy house; and thou shalt make them drink of the river of thy pleasures. For with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light (Ps. 36:7–9). “And...there is a bonus prize for anyone who can tell me how many pieces of Tabernacle furniture are hinted at in these verses. “Let us conclude with prayer: Our heavenly Provider, we thank Thee for all Thy provision for our physical and spiritual needs. We thank Thee for the shewbread which reminds us of the source of all our bread on earth, and which makes us long for the bread of God to come down from heaven. Please give us deeper and wider and longer fellowship with Thee on earth. And increase our desires for eternal fellowship with Thee in heaven. Look on the face of Thine Anointed and hear our prayers. Amen.”

Questions

1. How can we show that we are “for God”?

2. Does God's presence scare you or support you? What does that tell you about your spiritual state?
3. What did the showbread teach Jesus about His person and work as He read His Bible?
4. What light does the New Testament cast on the meaning of the showbread? Can you think of specific verses?
5. The showbread helped Israel remember that all they had was from God. What helps can we use to remind us more of this?
6. Do you desire and enjoy fellowship with God? Can you think of ways in which you can increase that desire and enjoyment?
7. Heaven is often portrayed as a feast around a table. Search for the verses which describe heaven in this way and meditate on what this teaches us about the nature of heaven.
8. Can you think of Psalms which refer to the table of showbread?

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Tabernacle Bible Study (6)

The Golden Lamp

Read Exodus 25:31–39, 27:20, and Leviticus 24:1–4



“And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Command the children of Israel, that they bring unto thee pure oil olive beaten for the light, to cause the lamps to burn continually. Without the veil of the testimony, in the tabernacle of the congregation, shall Aaron order it from the evening unto the morning before the LORD continually: it shall be a statute for ever in your generations. He shall order the lamps upon the pure candlestick before the LORD continually.” — Leviticus 24:1–4

“Darkness, darkness, darkness. Death, death, death.” Reuben didn’t know what to say or do. For six months, his beloved priest and mentor, Elnathan, had been sinking deeper and deeper into depression. He had tried praying for him and with him. He had tried encouraging him with Messianic prophecies. He had even risked mild rebuke. He had tried to relieve him of stressful duties. He had tried everything, and still Elnathan moped around, muttering over and over, “Darkness, darkness, darkness. Death, death, death.”

Reuben was doubly worried today because it was Elnathan’s turn on the Golden Lamp rota. The Golden Lamp was the second of three pieces of furniture behind the curtain in the Tabernacle’s Holy Place — the other items being the Table of Shewbread and the Golden Altar of Incense. The Golden Lamp had to be kept burning before the Lord continually, and this was what was stressing Reuben. It was Elnathan’s turn to refill the oil to keep the lamp burning, and yet Elnathan could hardly look at the Holy Place, never mind enter it and perform his duties. And if Elnathan didn’t replenish the oil, and the Golden Lamp went out, what would happen? Would God’s judgment fall? Would God’s presence withdraw from the Tabernacle? Would Elnathan be punished?

Deep darkness

Reuben approached Elnathan’s study-tent, hoping he might find his old friend in a better frame of mind today. Surely God would give enabling grace today. But, as he opened the tent door, the sobbing sound sank his heart. Then the familiar lament: “When, oh when will the light shine again? When, oh when will life return? As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my meat day and night, while they continually say unto me, Where *is* thy God? Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me.”

Reuben fell to the floor and lay beside his broken-souled mentor. “Elnathan, sir, please come to the Tabernacle. It’s your turn to re-fill the oil of the Golden Lamp.”

“No. I can’t do that,” answered Elnathan. “I’m not fit to do that. I am so dark inside. It’s I that needs to be re-filled and re-lit.”

“But, sir,” pled Reuben, “perhaps God will shine into your heart through the Golden Lamp. Is it not worth a try?”

“Oh Reuben, you are a godly young man. Why do you bother with such an old, unworthy sinner like me? I should be teaching and encouraging you in the faith, and instead you are teaching and

encouraging me in the faith. What a state I'm in! But, you're right. I'm not going to get light and life lying here, am I? I should do my duty. Help me up, and bring me the horn of oil."

Two hours later

At last, Reuben sensed some movement. It had been ages since he had pushed Elnathan beyond the curtain and into the Holy Place to refill the Golden Lamp with oil. As the curtain was swept aside, out bounded Elnathan — a changed man! "Light, light, light! Life, life, life!" he exclaimed. "Reuben, Reuben. Wait until I tell you what I've just experienced. You were right. The Lord shone into my dark heart through the Golden Lamp. Oh, but of course, you've never seen the Lamp. Let me describe it and then I'll tell you what happened.

The Lightgiver

"The Golden Lamp is about the size of a small child and is made of fine gold — about seventy-five pounds in weight. The golden base has one main stem. Halfway up this main stem, six other stems branch out, making seven stems in all. On the end of each stem are small oil bowls each filled with high-quality oil and a burning wick. Our fathers taught us that the use of fine gold in the Tabernacle usually symbolizes deity. The fact that there are seven stems and seven lights supports this, as God often uses the number 'seven' to depict perfection and completeness. This perfection and wholeness is underlined by the gold being of one piece. So, we've always believed that the Golden Lamp was a picture sermon about God, the divine Lightgiver.

"However, our gracious God revealed something more to me today. As I re-filled the oil in each cup, the Holy Place began filling with light. So I prayed, 'Lord, lift up the light of Thy countenance upon me. Shine Thy light into my dark soul. Show me Thy salvation.' Then, while gazing at the Lamp, God revealed the Messiah to my soul. He showed me that one day the Golden Lamp will come alive. The divine Lightgiver will come to this earth. And He will not only enlighten the Holy Place; He will be the inextinguishable light of the whole world! Those who follow Him will not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life. He will dispel the darkness of ignorance, error, and impurity, and replace it with the light of knowledge, truth, and purity. Oh, Reuben, light, light, light!

The Lifegiver

"But that's not all. As the Holy Place and my own soul brightened, I examined the Lamp more closely than ever before. And I saw that the seven branches of the Golden Lamp were decorated with intricate patterns and shapes resembling the three stages of tree-life — bud, blossom, and fruit. The main trunk (three to four feet high), the six branches, and the ornamentation all together gave the impression of a beautiful, fruit-bearing tree. Of course, my memory went back to the Tree of Life, sadly forfeited by our first parents' sin. But before I plunged into despair again, the Lord showed me that this Golden Tree also looked forward and depicted the Messiah. Reuben, the Golden Tree will come alive when the Messiah comes. He will be heavy with the bud, blossom, and fruit of the Spirit — love, joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance, and more. He will be a Tree of Life whose leaves will be for the healing of the nations. Reuben, He is life, life, life!"

A New Song

Reuben could hardly believe the transformation in his dear friend. God had graciously blessed him with two marvelous insights into the person and work of the Messiah, revealing Him as the Lightgiver and the Lifegiver. In doing so, He had replaced Elnathan's darkness and death with light and life. The two friends embraced and walked home praising God with a new song in their mouths: "O send out thy light and thy truth: let them lead me; let them bring me unto thy holy hill, and to thy tabernacles. Then will I go unto the altar of God, unto God my exceeding joy: yea, upon the harp will I praise thee, O God my God. Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope in God: for I shall yet praise him, who *is* the health of my countenance, and my God."

Questions:

1. Study Zechariah 4 and identify parallels with this passage; then consider how those parallels point to Jesus Christ.
2. What causes "darkness and death" in the life of a believer?
3. What should you do when your own soul feels dark and dead?
4. In what practical ways can Christians be lights in the world (Matt. 5:14; Eph. 4:8)?
5. How do we increase the brightness of our light (John 8:12)?
6. What does the Golden Lamp teach us about heaven (Rev. 21:23)?
7. What does oil symbolize in the Bible?
8. Jesus was filled with the Spirit without measure, and anointed with the oil of gladness above His fellows (John 3:34; Heb. 1:9). What did that mean for Him in everyday life?
9. What fruits of the Spirit are still in the bud or blossom stage in your life? How can you grow them beyond that to the fruitful and useful stage?
10. Read what happened to Belshazzar in Daniel 5:5 when he mishandled the Golden Lamp (KJV: "candlestick"). What does that teach us?

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TABERNACLE BIBLE STUDY (7)

The Incense Altar

“And thou shalt make an altar to burn incense upon.” — Exodus 30:1; cf. vv. 1–10; 37:25–29



Jerusha loved her priest, Elnathan. Every week, she looked forward to his Tabernacle Catechism Class. She especially liked the way he used simple words and tried to make each of the lesson points start with the same letter. She enjoyed the challenge of memorizing the points on her way home so that she could tell them to her family after supper on Saturday evenings. But today she couldn't believe her ears. Elnathan introduced his lesson on the golden altar of incense by saying, "I have seven points all beginning with P." How would she ever remember seven P's! Elnathan seemed to read her mind and said, "I'm sure some of you are thinking, 'How will I ever remember seven P's?' Come close, my beloved children, and I will give you the secret formula. Here it is: Seven P's — the palace is positioned on propitiation so that prayer will be a perfume of perpetual power." Jerusha scribbled down the secret formula and wondered what it could possibly mean.

"First," said Elnathan, "think of the Tabernacle as a palace. As you know, we have passed by many nations in our wilderness wanderings. Most of those nations have royal palaces for their kings. And if you walked through their palaces, you would find candles, incense sticks, and slow-burning oils filling the rooms with various fresh fragrances. These sweet aromas are expressions of honor and homage to their kings. As Jehovah is Israel's King and as the Tabernacle is His Royal palace, the place He resides in, it is fitting that we should express our honour and pay our homage in a similar manner. So, in our Tabernacle, we have the golden altar of incense. And, remember, this earthly Tabernacle is only an example and shadow of heavenly things. Just think how many expressions of honour and homage must fill the heavenly Tabernacle of our King. Children, let us constantly raise our minds from the stench of this God-defying world and think upon and look forward to the sweet fragrance of a God-honoring heaven."

“Second, consider the golden altar’s position. As you know, it is made of acacia wood, covered in gold, and crowned with a gold rim and four gold horns. It is about a foot and a half square and three feet high. It is located in the Holy Place just before the veil of the Most Holy Place and the Ark of the Covenant, Jehovah’s throne. So, in contrast to the brass altar of burnt offering which is here in the outer court, the golden altar of incense is ‘before the Lord,’ or ‘before the throne’ (Lev. 4:7; 1 Kings 9:25). “And, children, like every other piece of Tabernacle furniture, this altar is a picture of the promised Messiah’s person and work. In particular, it tells us that the Messiah will not only have a work on earth before men (the suffering pictured by the brass altar), but He will also have a work in heaven before the throne. We will talk more about this later, but I must say it greatly comforts me to think that the Messiah will not only come to earth for us, but will also be in heaven before the Lord for us.

“Third, we see here propitiation. We see this in various ways. The fire on this altar is kindled with the coals taken from the altar of burnt offering, where the sin offering is consumed (Lev. 16:12, 13; Num. 16:46). Also, the High Priest makes an atonement for the golden altar once every year on the Day of Atonement to cleanse and reconsecrate it (Ex. 30:10; Lev. 16:18, 19). Further, the blood of the sin offerings is put on the horns of it (Lev. 4:7, 18). So, there is a very close connection between the brass altar and the golden altar, the work of the former being the basis for the work of the latter. “Do you remember how Aaron’s ungodly sons, Nadab and Abihu, were judged by God because they offered strange fire before the Lord (Lev. 10:1-2)? Some think that this was because their incense was not burned on fiery coals taken from the brass altar of atonement. My dear children, learn from this that propitiation must come before anything and everything. We cannot offer anything acceptable to God that has not been cleansed by blood. And I think that this also suggests that the Messiah’s sacrificing work on earth for us will be the foundation of His work in heaven for us.”

“Fourth, the incense is an emblem of prayer. When it is my turn to burn incense on the golden altar in the holy place, what is happening outside the curtain? Yes, that’s right, the prayer meeting is going on. Children, prayer is the true incense. Just as the smoke of the incense ascends to heaven and to God, so prayer rises up to God not just our prayers but also the Messiah’s. What an encouragement to pray!”

“Fifth, think a little of the perfume. How does God describe the incense? It is ‘sweet’ (30:7). It is ‘tempered together’ which means that the ingredients were broken up and beaten small so that it mixes together well (30:35). It is ‘pure’ (30:35). It is ‘most holy’ (30:36). That doesn’t sound like a description of our prayers does it, children? Most of us feel that our prayers are the exact opposite — sour, disorganized, unclean, and unholy. That brings us again to our future Messiah. Can we not hope that He will be the incense altar, that His prayers will be sweet, perfectly put together, pure, and holy? And not only that, but prayers offered in His name will also be sweet and acceptable to God. That is certainly my hope as I fall on my knees each night.”

“Sixth, this daily offering of incense is perpetual (30:8). It goes on and on. When it is my turn to offer the incense on the altar, the sweet fragrance lingers on me for days. Also, when the Tabernacle moves on, the coals and incense are carried separately so that the incense can continue ascending to heaven. This teaches us that we are to pray without ceasing, that we should have the fragrance of prayer about us every day. But, above all, it encourages us to think that the Messiah will ever live to make intercession for us.”

“Seventh, we see power in the golden altar — in two ways. There are the four golden horns (which are biblical symbols for power) pointing to the north, south, east, and west. And there is the golden crown or rim (signifying royal power). This encourages us to think of the power of prayer — yes, even ours — but especially of the Messiah’s prayers for His worldwide Church. The golden crown suggests that the Messiah will pray as a powerful king. Children, let His powerful royal prayers support your weak beggar prayers.”

“Now does the secret formula make more sense? Let us end our lesson with prayer: Covenant Lord, we thank Thee for the golden altar of incense and all it teaches us about prayer, especially the Messiah’s prayers. And, although these children cannot see the golden altar, may they live to see the Messiah and hear His prayers. Look on the face of Thine Anointed, Amen.”

Jerusha ran back to her family tent repeating the secret formula again and again. She burst in the front door and said triumphantly: “Seven P’s: the palace is positioned on propitiation so that prayer will be a perfume of perpetual power.” “What are you talking about, Jerusha?” asked Deborah, her surprised mother. It was then that Jerusha realized that remembering the points was the easy part. Explaining what they meant — that was another matter...

Study Questions:

1. What does Malachi 1:11 look back to and point forward to?
2. Which verses in Luke’s Gospel link the golden altar of incense with prayer?
3. Read Revelation 5:8 and 8:1-5. How does the golden altar of incense help you to understand these passages and be encouraged by them?
4. Old Testament believers were helped to pray by the symbolism and imagery of the golden altar (Ps. 141:2). New Testament believers have also been similarly helped, as the following quote from William Brown shows: “From before the heavenly throne He is now looking down lovingly upon all His believing people, inviting and encouraging them to offer up their prayers, and assuring them that He Himself will present them, and secure gracious answers in the bestowal of rich and soul-satisfying blessings. Are you one of His believing people? If so, bend your ear and listen to His encouraging voice as it comes rolling down from the golden altar: ‘Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.’” Try keeping the golden altar in mind the next few times you pray. In what ways did it help your prayers?
5. In the light of the following poem by Eddis, what connections do you find between the golden altar and 1 John 2:1? Thou standest at the altar, Out of Thy hand the incense Thou offerest every prayer; Ascends before the throne, In faith’s unclouded vision Where Thou art interceding, We see Thee ever there. Lord Jesus, for Thine own.
6. Arthur Pink wrote: “Unutterably solemn is it to contemplate Christ at the brazen altar there made sin for us, suffering, enduring judgment, bowing His head beneath the awful storm of

God's wrath. But unspeakably blessed is it to behold Him at the golden altar, risen from the grave, alive for evermore, maintaining the interests of His people before God's throne, presenting them in all His own excellency and preciousness." At what points in our Christian experience do we need Christ to be our brass altar? And when do we need Him as our golden altar?

7. Which chapter in John's gospel most clearly presents Jesus Christ as the golden altar of incense?

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TABERNACLE BIBLE STUDY (8)

The Covenant Ark

Exodus 25:10-22

THE ARK OF THE COVENANT

A large, dark shadow moved across the canvas. The heavily breathing figure paused outside. The tent door was pulled back. The sun streamed in momentarily. Eyes re-adjusted and focused on the mysterious visitor. Silence. "Good morning, my dearly beloved children. My name is Ben-Levi, and I am the High Priest of Israel. Thank you for inviting me to your catechism class today. I hear from your teacher, Priest Elnathan, that you've almost completed the Tabernacle module. Isn't it amazing how much the Tabernacle teaches us about the Messiah we long for? Most of my catechism priests ask me to teach the Ark of the Covenant lesson because, as the High Priest, I alone am permitted to see the Ark. And even I am only allowed to see it once a year. Now, I know children like pictures and so I'm going to draw the Ark with these root-dyes on this goatskin. Look at my brushes. They are made out of a horse tail which an old Bedouin sold me last year!" The children began to relax. The High Priest was so friendly and kind — not at all like they feared.

THE COVENANT

Ben-Levi wrote four large capital C's on the goatskin. Beside the first C, Ben Levi wrote *Covenant* and underneath he drew two stone tablets. "Beloved children of Abraham, many years ago, at Sinai, Jehovah entered into a covenant with our ancestors. We have a record of this in the second book of Moses [Exodus], chapters 19 – 23. Sadly, many Israelites, past and present, see this as a legalistic covenant. They think they can be saved by keeping the law contained in the covenant. But —please listen closely, children — they forget that divine grace and divine provision formed the foundation of this covenant. At the very beginning of the covenant, the stress is on all that Jehovah did for our nation when delivering us from Egypt (Ex. 19:1– 4). It is only after emphasizing the powerful divine initiative that Jehovah then sets forth the appropriate response of obedience (Ex. 19:5 – 25). As if to underline

this, even the Ten Commandments, which summarize God's requirements, begin with words of divine salvation: 'I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage' (Ex. 20:1). Please, please grasp this, children. Whatever else you get from this class, get this: the divine redemption comes before the divine rules. Let me sum up the covenant in two words — *relationship* ('I will be your God and you shall be my people') and then *rules* ('Therefore, thou shalt... thou shalt not...').

"Not surprisingly, these two covenantal ideas — relationship, then rules — are prominent in the Covenant Ark. Indeed, we might say that it was so named because nowhere else in our national life are these two covenant ideas of relationship and rules so clearly expressed. The Ark is the highest expression of Jehovah's presence with us and, as we shall see, it contains the laws which guide our relationship to Him.

"But, however wonderful this is, we must always remember that this is but a picture of something, or should I say, someone, even greater than this. I'm sure Elnathan has been teaching you to look through the Tabernacle pictures to the coming Messiah pictured in the Tabernacle. We don't know exactly how, but we have a hope that the Messiah will be a kind of living Covenant Ark. He will, in some mysterious way, embody both Jehovah's presence with His people and Jehovah's precepts for His people. Please, precious children, believe this and put all your hope for heaven in this.

THE CHEST

"The second C is *Chest*. Let me draw it. It is a wooden box, covered with gold. It is 4 ½ feet long, 2 ½ feet wide, and 2 ½ feet high. Inside it is a copy of the commandments God gave to our forefathers at Sinai (Ex. 25:22). There are two other items in the box — Aaron's rod (signifying priestly lead manna (signifying God's provision in the wilderness)).

"The presence of the commandments in the Ark explains why Moses also called it 'the ark of testimony' (Ex. 25:22). The two tablets of stone testified to the holy nature of God and His demands upon us as a people. By always putting it at the front of our marching column we are saying that we will follow Jehovah's testimony wherever and whenever it leads (Num. 10:34–36). It led us when the Jordan parted (Josh. 3) and when the walls of Jericho 'fell down flat'" (Josh. 6).

"And don't you think then that our Messiah will do all this and more? Will He not have Jehovah's perfect law in His perfect heart? Will He not testify in an even greater way to the holy nature of Jehovah and His demands upon His people? Will He not go before His people? Will He not lead them through the wilderness of this world and across the Jordan into the promised land of heaven? Will He not bring down the walls and idols of His enemies? Oh yes, children, He will do all this and much, much more. Put your trust in Him, and in Him alone.

THE COVERING

"The sun is setting; I must hurry on. The third C is *Covering*. If all we had was just a chest with the law in it, there would be no encouragement for sinners like us to approach Jehovah. Witnessing to our guilt and proclaiming our condemnation, the law could only thunder, condemn, and terrify.

“But, there is a covering for the law! The law in the ark is covered with a golden lid, a slab of pure gold (Ex. 25:17– 21). Some priests call this covering or lid the ‘mercy-seat,’ which explains its function. However, the literal translation is simply ‘covering’ or ‘lid.’ Being the same size as the chest, it fits perfectly, completely hiding the law contained in it. And just to be sure, a golden rim encircles the edges of the ark to make sure that the lid stays on.”

“However, children, just hiding the law out of sight is not enough. The law of Jehovah needs to be satisfied. So, once a year, on the Day of Atonement, I enter the Most Holy Place alone and sprinkle the golden lid with the sacrificial blood of atonement, so making the lid the ‘mercy-seat.’ For me, that golden lid is the most important item of furniture in the whole Tabernacle. I wish I could draw it better than this.

“On this golden, blood-spattered mercy-seat, Jehovah meets with and communes with us (Ex. 25:22). As such, it is His throne here on earth, a throne which speaks not only of Jehovah’s just demands, but also of His merciful provision. He is able to dwell among sinners because He sits on a blood-sprinkled throne of grace. On this throne, then, meet the most contrary forces: law and mercy, righteousness and peace, God and sinners.

“Oh, children, I can see more and more clearly, every time I go in to the Most Holy Place and every time I teach this subject, that the Messiah will be our golden lid, our blood-spattered golden lid, our mercy-seat. He will not only cover God’s demands upon sinners but also satisfy them. In Him will meet the most contrary forces: law and mercy, righteousness and peace, God and sinners. He will be our throne of grace to which we all can approach to find grace to help in time of need.

THE CHERUBIM

“As usual, I have spoken too long and the poor *cherubim* —our fourth C — will have to be squeezed into a couple of minutes. Let me quickly draw them. On either side of the mercy-seat were two golden cherubim (Ex. 25:18). Cherubim are usually associated with the administration of God’s justice. For example, in Genesis 3:24, they bare the flaming sword of vengeance and judgment in the aftermath of the first sin. However, in the Most Holy Place, they are disarmed and their posture is not one of righteous hostility but of subdued wonder. They bow their heads as they gaze in holy contemplation upon the blood-stained golden mercy-seat covering the law of God. And, most amazingly of all, the empty, man-sized space above the mercy-seat and between the Cherubim is often filled by a symbol of the glory of God, the glory-cloud which we call the Shekinah (*lit.*, the dwelling).

“Two quick lessons from this. First, we believe that the redemption of the church is a matter of research and study, wonder and amazement to the angels of God. Second, and gloriously, we believe that the Messiah will come to fill the man-sized space; that He will shine forth from between the Cherubim as the luminous and splendid glory of God.

“As you run home to your parents in the fading light, pray that He who dwells between the Cherubim (Ps. 80:1) would shine into your life. And as you fall on your knees tonight, remember the adoring Cherubim and join them as they adoringly ponder the mystery and the wonder of salvation for sinners such as yourself.”

Questions

1. The core of God's covenant is "relationship then rules." How is the Christian experience affected by over-emphasizing relationship at the expense of rules? And also rules at the expense of relationship?
2. Compared to an Old Testament believer, what extra motives does the New Testament believer have to live a life of thankful obedience?
3. Read 1 Samuel 5 and 2 Samuel 6:11-12. What does this teach us about the consequences of our response to the Lord Jesus?
4. Paul uses "mercy-seat" language to encourage converted Jews to pray to God through Jesus Christ (Heb. 4:16). Will this study of the Covenant Ark increase the number and boldness of your prayers?
5. Peter tells us that the sufferings and glories of Christ are things which "the angels desire to look into" (1 Pet. 1:11, 12). How much do you yearn to study your salvation through a crucified Christ?
6. In Revelation 11:19, we read, "And the temple of God was opened in heaven, and there was seen in his temple, the ark of his testament." What does this mean?

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TABERNACLE BIBLE STUDY (9)

The Ripped Veil

Exodus 26:31-33



Elnathan the priest entered the Holy Place with the oil to replenish the golden lampstand. As his eyes adjusted to the smoky, dimly lit room, he saw a shadowy male figure beside the thick veil which guarded the way into the Most Holy Place. The man was slightly bent over and seemed to be running his hand over the curtain material, as if examining it closely. He was muttering and sighing, maybe even praying. Elnathan coughed gently and who turned round but Ben-Levi, the High Priest! But why was he here, and why did he look so perplexed and puzzled?

“Shalom, Ben-Levi, are you well?” enquired Elnathan.

“Oh, Elnathan, you surprised me,” stuttered Ben- Levi. “Have you been standing there for long?”

“No, sir. I’ve just come to re-fill the lamp oil. But why are you here? Is there a problem with the veil? And...you’re crying! Ben-Levi, what’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry, Elnathan, I’ve been here for hours — most of the night, in fact. Just after falling asleep, I had a most disturbing dream. I was in the Tabernacle’s Holy Place, and as I approached the heavy curtain guarding the way into the Most Holy Place, it ripped right down the middle, from top to bottom. Elnathan, it was so real, so vivid, that I ran down to the Tabernacle to check.”

“Ripped? But that’s impossible, Ben-Levi,” Elnathan assured him. “Only you can touch the veil, and you only do it once a year on the Day of Atonement, when you enter the Most Holy Place and sprinkle the blood upon the Ark and the mercy-seat (Lev. 16:2–3). None of the priests would dare to even touch the veil, never mind rip it.”

“I know, I know. I was just so worried because God explicitly told us to make an especially thick and substantial veil so that the ark was always covered (Ex. 40:3). And it is my responsibility to ensure that no one ever sees within the veil. Look at the embroidered cherubim barring the way. Do they not warn anyone even thinking about looking or entering, ‘No entry! Stay out!’?”

“Of course they do, Ben-Levi. No Israelite would even think of touching that veil or looking inside. We have always taught our classes that God designed the veil to conceal from sight and prohibit entry. But you taught us also to tell our classes that the veil was temporary, that a time would come when the veil would be removed, that at that time the Messiah would open up a new way to God for everyone, not just once a year, and not just for the High Priest.”

“That’s why I was so perplexed, Elnathan. I wondered if that wonderful day had come. When I awoke from my dream, my heart was pounding. I thought, is God revealing to me that this is the day when the concealing and the barring will be over? I threw on my robes, ran through the camp, quickly washed in the brass laver, sacrificed a lamb from one of the pens, and entered the Holy Place. My eyes scanned the veil from top to bottom. No rip. I examined it all over with my hands. No rip. And since then, I have been here wondering, pondering, praying for understanding.”

Elnathan edged forward and embraced his distressed mentor. “Ben-Levi, you are a good and godly man. I know that you yearn for all Israel to experience the access to God which you enjoy on the Day of Atonement. And I know that you yourself wish you could enjoy that access every day and not just once a year. But that time is not yet. We must wait in faith and patience. Maybe we will live to see it, maybe not. But maybe your dream gives us a bit more light on how the veil will be removed.”

“What do you mean, Elnathan?”

“Well, in your dream the veil was ripped without human hand. I’m thinking that perhaps that indicates that whenever the veil is removed, it will be an act of God alone. It won’t be you or me, or anyone else, but God alone will open up the wider way to Himself.”

“Elnathan, that is a very beautiful thought. God has really blessed you with an ability to see the principles behind the pictures.”

“You are my teacher, Ben-Levi! Did you have any thoughts yourself?”

“Well, I’ll tell you what my mind was working on. What came to me was ‘mourning.’ You know how we rip our robes when we mourn the death of a loved one? I wondered if the ripping of the veil would be associated with the death of the beloved Messiah we look for and long for. What do you think, Elnathan? The sacrifices point towards His suffering and death. Maybe it will be His suffering and death which finally open up the way to God for all!”

Ben-Levi’s voice trembled as he spoke, and Elnathan sensed the sacred divine presence in their midst. These were holy moments.

“Oh Ben-Levi, what a day, what a day it will be when the veil is removed and I, and all, will be able to see the glory of God in an unprecedented way!”

“Yes, I know; instead of ‘Keep back!’ it will be ‘Come to Me!’ Instead of ‘Let us draw back!’ we will say ‘Let us draw near!’ Instead of one priest allowed, all sinners invited. Instead of once a year, 24/7/365!”

Ben-Levi’s words faded as tears began to run down his face. Elnathan could hold back his own emotions no longer, and they both sank to their knees, in the Most Holy Place, overwhelmed with messianic hope and anticipation. As one, they both instinctively prayed, “Maranatha! Come, Lord!”

Study Questions

1. What did the Holy Spirit intend to teach with the “second veil” (Heb. 9:3–8)?
2. It was a veil, not a wall, made of material, not brick. What hope did that give to the Israelites?
3. In the light of Matthew 27:50–51, what did the veil represent? Especially, what did the ripped veil picture?
4. Charles Spurgeon commented on the ripped Temple Curtain: “It is not fanciful to regard it as a solemn act of mourning on the part of the house of the Lord. In the East men express their sorrow by rending their garments; and the temple, when it beheld its Master die, seemed struck with horror, and rent its veil. Shocked at the sin of man, indignant at the murder of its Lord, in its sympathy with Him who is the true temple of God, the outward symbol tore its holy vestment from the top to the bottom.”
 - a. How much do you mourn over the ripped human nature of Christ (Luke 23:48)?
 - b. In addition to using the death of Christ, how else can we “rip” our own hearts (Joel 2:13)?
5. What was God saying about the Tabernacle and Temple system when He ripped the veil upon the death of Christ? What kind of person could benefit from hearing that message?
6. How did the ripping of Christ’s human nature, the separation of His body and soul at death, open the way to see into the glory of God in an unprecedented way?
7. Unwarranted entry into the Most Holy Place resulted in death (Lev. 16:2). When the High Priest lifted the curtain and passed into the Most Holy Place once a year, the people stood outside with trepidation, waiting for his return. Jewish tradition says that latterly the Jews attached a rope to the foot of the High Priest so that if he perished inside they might remove the body with minimal risk to themselves.
 - a. What emotions would have been experienced by the High Priest and the people when he entered the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement?
 - b. What are the emotional consequences of the ripped veil (Heb. 10:19–20; Heb. 6:19)? “Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh” (Heb. 10:19–20).

- c. What are the practical consequences of the ripped veil (Heb. 10:21–27)?
8. Spurgeon said: “The rent is not in one corner, but in the midst, as Luke tells us. It is not a slight rent through which we may see a little; but it is rent from the top to the bottom. There is an entrance made for the greatest sinners. If there had only been a small hole cut through it, the lesser offenders might have crept through; but what an act of abounding mercy is this, that the veil is rent in the midst, and rent from top to bottom, so that the chief of sinners may find ample passage!” Can you think of someone to encourage with this quotation?

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