

Worship by God's Design - Studies on The Tabernacle

Midweek Teaching Series

Part 5 - The Blueprint for the Tabernacle

Read: Exodus 26: 1-10, 31-37

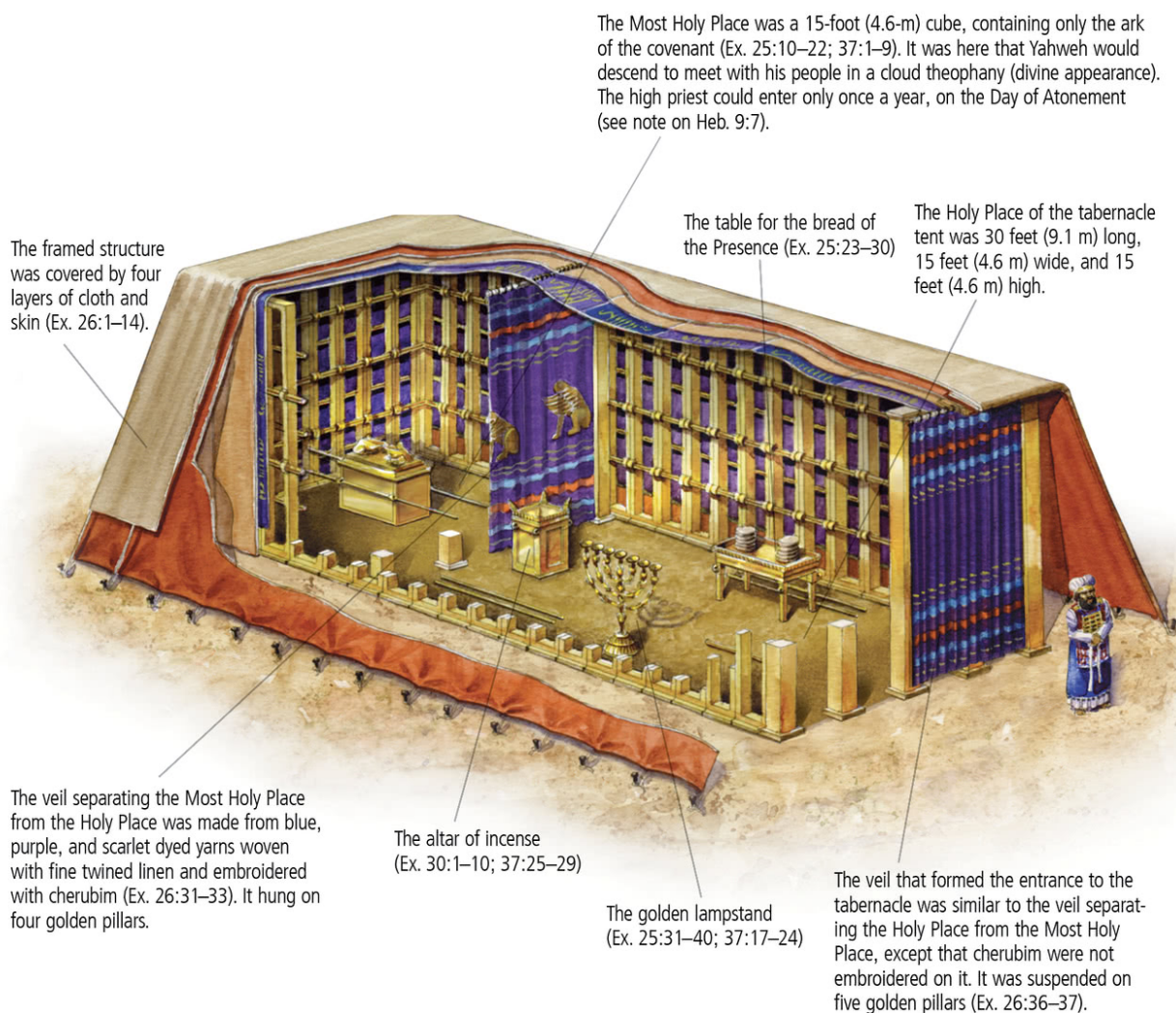
After telling Moses what goes inside the tabernacle, God proceeds to tell him how to make the tent of meeting itself. The many instructions about curtains and coverings—including the sacred veil that separates the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place (vs.31-35)—show that access to the tabernacle was limited. Although this was the place for people to meet with God, it was shrouded in numinous mystery, giving the Israelites a constant reminder of God's holy majesty.

Exodus 26 divides into three sections, detailing the work to be completed:

vs. 1-14 — The Tabernacle Curtains

vs. 15-30 — The Tabernacle Frame

vs. 31-37 — The Tabernacle Veil



The Tabernacle Curtains

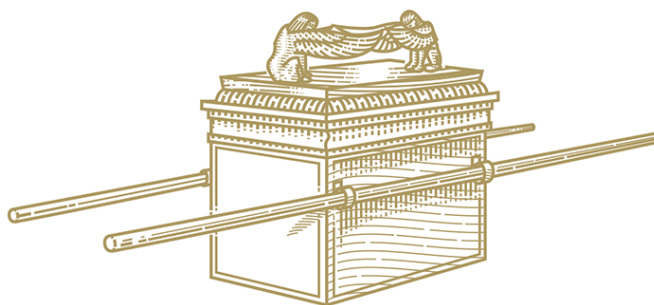
The blueprints in Exodus 26 make clear that the tabernacle was a tent. The Hebrew word translated “tabernacle” actually means “dwelling place,” so God was going to dwell in a tent among His people, who also dwelled in tents. Yet the directions for the tabernacle structure indicate that the Lord’s tent was much larger and more ornate than the tents that housed the Israelites. Exodus 26: 1-14 describe the curtains made of cloth, animal hair, and animal skins that made up the tabernacle. These curtains have a four-layered structure, with the tabernacle proper consisting of one layer and sheltered from the elements by three other layers. Verses 1-6 describe the curtains of the tabernacle, and the text tells us that they were quite beautiful,

made from **fine twined linen and blue and purple and scarlet yarns** (v.1). These were the colours of royalty, so the tabernacle was designed to resemble a kingly palace, the only place fitting for the King of creation to dwell. Blue also recalls the colour of the sky, reminding the Israelites of God's heavenly throne. In Psalm 2:4 we read about the Lord on his throne,

He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.

Into the tabernacle curtains were worked images of cherubim, again pointing to the sanctuary as the place of God's throne on earth, for cherubim attend the Lord as He reigns over all. We read of this picture of the cherubim in Ezekiel 10: 3-5,

Now the cherubim were standing on the south side of the house, when the man went in, and a cloud filled the inner court. And the glory of the LORD went up from the cherub to the threshold of the house, and the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was filled with the brightness of the glory of the LORD. And the sound of the wings of the cherubim was heard as far as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when he speaks.



Because Eden was guarded by cherubim after the fall (Genesis 3:24), it is likely that the tabernacle was also intended to be a reminder of the garden of Eden, which was the original place where God dwelt with his people. The Lord made mankind to worship Him in His garden temple, and the tabernacle was the new sanctuary where the Lord would be worshiped after the fall.

Exodus 26: 7-14 tells us that three layers of curtains were draped over the tabernacle itself. These would have protected the beautiful linen curtains of the tabernacle from rain and other environmental threats. But they also made it so that the Israelites could catch only the barest glimpses of the tabernacle's beauty, since most of the tabernacle was shielded from view by these outer layers of curtains. The tabernacle provided some access to God for the Israelites, but it was a greatly limited access.

The Tabernacle Frame

Curtains alone cannot form walls without some kind of framing or support, so the tabernacle needed frames over which the curtains could be draped or stretched. Verses 15-30 give us the directions for the tabernacle's frame. From the dimensions given in these verses, where one cubit equals about eighteen inches, we see that the tabernacle was shaped like a rectangle with the dimensions forty-five feet long, fifteen feet wide, and fifteen feet tall. It had framing only on the north, south, and west sides (vs.18-22), telling us that the tabernacle faced east. Priests entered the tabernacle from the east side and moved west through the structure. This orientation of the tabernacle recalls the story of Eden, where God placed cherubim at the east of the garden to keep people from returning and eating of the Tree of Life. we read about this in Genesis 3:24,

He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

To access the Tree of Life again, humanity would have had to enter Eden from the east and move west, just as someone would enter the tabernacle from the east. When the priests entered God's presence in the tabernacle, it was as if they were returning to the presence of God in the garden where our first parents walked with Him.

As we have already seen in part 4, and now confirmed in verse 33, the tabernacle was divided into two sections, the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. We don't find the dimensions of these sections in the book of Exodus, but taking the proportions from Solomon's temple in 1 Kings 6 and applying them to the tabernacle, which was half the temple's size, we can reasonably conclude that the Most Holy Place was fifteen feet long, fifteen feet wide, and fifteen feet high. In other words, it was a perfect cube that pointed to

the Lord's own perfection, as He manifested His presence most clearly in the Most Holy Place, between the cherubim on the ark. The Holy Place measured thirty feet long, fifteen feet wide, and fifteen feet high. It was further removed from the perfection of God's presence and thus was less perfect in shape than the Most Holy Place.

Like the ark of the covenant, the frame for the tabernacle was made from acacia wood covered in gold, and the frames were inserted into bases made of silver to hold them upright. Such precious metals were fit for God's palace on earth.

The Tabernacle Veil

The final section of Exodus 26 describes aspects of the inside of the tabernacle as well as the screen that covered the entrance to the sanctuary. In verses 31-33 we find instructions for the inner veil that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, and like the curtains for the walls of the tabernacle, it was made from blue, purple, and scarlet yarns, **with cherubim skilfully worked into it** (v.31). The text does not give the dimensions of the curtain, but it was likely about fifteen feet high and fifteen feet wide. It took ten curtains coupled together to form the walls of the tabernacle, but the inner veil was a single curtain. It was hung on **four pillars of acacia overlaid with gold**, stretched across the width of the tabernacle to divide it into two rooms, the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. This means that moving past it was difficult, requiring the priest to move at least one of the edge pillars. The challenge of moving the veil to get behind it into the Most Holy Place protected the priests who ministered in the Holy Place. It was a fitting obstacle since the Most Holy Place could be entered only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, and then only the high priest could go behind the veil and minister before the ark of the covenant. More detailed instructions of this can be found in Leviticus 16. The ark and its mercy seat were housed in the Most Holy Place, while the table of showbread and lampstand were located in the Holy Place, as we saw in part 4.

On the east side of the tabernacle, at its entrance, was a screen made of blue, purple, and scarlet yarns but without images of cherubim (v.36). This was effectively the tabernacle's door, and it was hung from gold-covered pillars of acacia wood in bronze bases. The other pillar bases in the tabernacle were made of silver. Since the bases for the entrance curtain were farther away from God's presence in the Most Holy Place, a metal less valuable than silver (bronze) was used. This showed Israel that the farther that one is from the Lord, the farther that one is from true glory and beauty.

Application for Today

At the end of Exodus we read these words as the Tabernacle is completed,

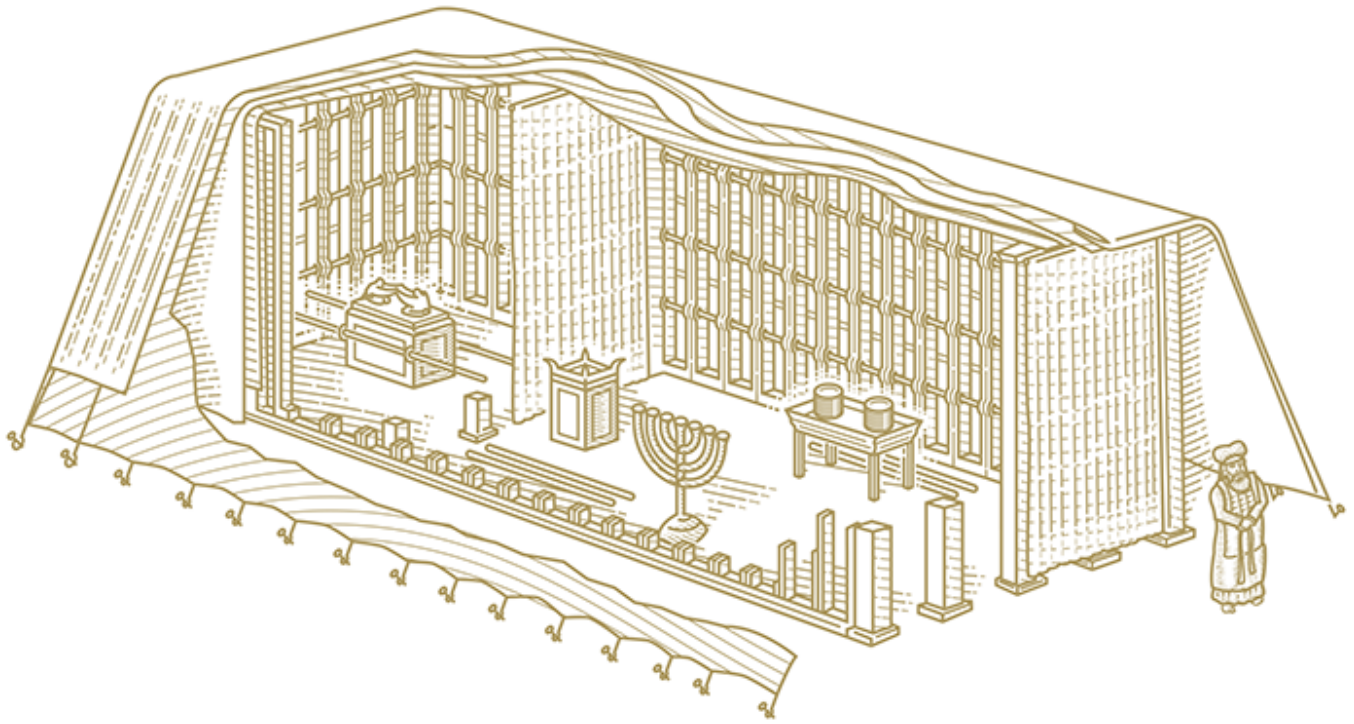
Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.

Exodus 40:34

Considering our almost complete picture of the tabernacle, the scene at the end of Exodus takes on a new significance as the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. For the first time since the garden of Eden, Israel would live with God dwelling in her midst. At the end of Exodus, something was accomplished: the tabernacle had become **the dwelling place** of God. However, something more needed to be accomplished; it was not yet a place where any of the people (including Moses) could meet with Him—it was not yet a **tent of meeting**. If the greatest prophet in Israel's history could not enter the presence of the Lord, how could Israel become a kingdom of priests to mediate the Lord's presence to the surrounding nations? This was the instruction given to God's people in Exodus 19:6,

...and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.

For this to happen, they needed the book of Leviticus and its teaching about the priesthood and the sacrificial system. Only with these could the way into God's presence be opened.



As we consider the frame and curtains of the tabernacle it is clear just how special a place of meeting it was. Everything was put in place so that people could meet with God on his terms. The restrictions on access to his presence that we find in the tabernacle veil and entrance screen show us that we should never take approaching God lightly. We have freedom and boldness to enter His presence through Christ, but this is not arrogance. We must always come to God in humility, remembering that He is Creator and we are His creatures.

The tabernacle continues to be a reminder to us of the perfection of God. His perfection is an important quality to remember, for it gives us confidence that He is in control and doing exactly what is right even when things do not seem to be going well for us. Let us never forget that God is perfect in all His ways. As the psalmist tells us in Psalm 18:30,

This God—his way is perfect; the word of the LORD proves true; he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him.

But this isn't the only perfection the Bible speaks of. We too are being perfected so that we will be ready for eternity. The writer of Hebrews tells us in Hebrews 10:14,

For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

Questions for Further Study

1. Why is it important to understand the tabernacle in the context of the garden of Eden?
2. How does the image of the perfection of God in the design of the tabernacle increase your vision of who he is?
3. How can greater understanding of the blueprint of the tabernacle draw you closer to God as you live for him?