

Worship by God's Design - Studies on The Tabernacle

Midweek Teaching Series

Part 6 - The Tabernacle Court

Read: Exodus 27: 1-19

Having spent so much time looking at the structure and furniture of the Tabernacle tent itself, we now zoom out and look at the whole court of the Tabernacle and the fixtures it contains. By way of overview, here is a summary of the court:

The tabernacle courtyard was 150 feet (46 m) long and 75 feet (23 m) wide, totalling 11,250 square feet (1,045 square meters).

The two fixtures, other than the Tabernacle tent, within the court were the bronze altar and the bronze basin. Much detail is also given about the perimeter of the court and the importance of the outer curtain.

The Bronze Altar

Sacrifice has been an essential part of the worship of God from the very beginning. God's clothing of Adam and Eve with animal skins after the fall has often been seen as a reference in Genesis 3:21 to an atoning sacrifice to cover the shame of their sin. Not long after this, Abel offered animal sacrifices from the best of his flock in Genesis 4:4. By substituting a ram for Isaac when Abraham went to offer up his son, the Lord established the principle that He would accept the life of another in place of a death He commanded. The ancient Israelites sacrificed the Passover lamb and painted its blood on their door frames to escape the judgment of God as He exercised it in Egypt in Exodus 12. To keep the old covenant, the Israelites offered up oxen to the Lord.

Animal sacrifices would continue in Israel once the old covenant was sealed, as the book of Leviticus makes clear. Before giving the instructions for the sacrifices themselves, however, God gave directions for the altar on which these sacrifices would be offered. We find these instructions in our passage between verse 1 and 8, which tells us the plans that the Lord gave for the bronze altar that would sit in the courtyard of the tabernacle and also explains how to make the various utensils necessary for conducting sacrifices.

Exodus 27 tells us that the altar was a large, flat square measuring about seven and a half feet high that was positioned on top of a base four and a half feet tall. It featured four horns, one on each corner, and it was made of acacia wood covered in bronze. The horns helped keep the meat of the sacrifices from falling off the sides of the altar, and later people would flee to the altar and cling to its horns in the hopes of escaping death at the hands of another. 1 Kings 1: 49-53 tells us,

Then all the guests of Adonijah trembled and rose, and each went his own way. And Adonijah feared Solomon. So he arose and went and took hold of the horns of the altar. Then it was told Solomon, "Behold, Adonijah fears King Solomon, for behold, he has laid hold of the horns of the altar, saying, 'Let King Solomon swear to me first that he will not put his servant to death with the sword.'"

Solomon does spare Adonijah's life, not because of the altar, but because he proves himself a worthy man. But the significance is the symbolism of the altar. As the animal sacrifice on the altar saved the Israelites from sin, but it was seen as a place of salvation.

Additionally, the Israelites were to make pots, shovels, basins, forks, and fire pans of bronze for collecting and disposing of ashes, and manipulating the meat of the sacrifice on the grill. The top of the altar was a bronze grating, and under it was placed what was apparently a ledge made of solid bronze fashioned like a



net. This may have been where the burning wood for the sacrifice was placed. Like the table of showbread, the altar had rings through which were inserted poles for the purpose of carrying it while Israel was traveling. Given the reality of sin, the people needed a place to offer atoning sacrifices wherever they set up camp.

Sacrifice is demanded even under the new covenant. We do not offer repeated sacrifices as the old covenant believers did but trust in the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. Having trusted in Christ, we offer ourselves as living sacrifices, dedicating ourselves wholly to God in all that we think, say, do, and feel. As Paul writes in Romans 12:1,

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

The Bronze Basin

Cleanliness is a major concern of the law of God, with the book of Leviticus containing many regulations for washings that could restore someone to a state of ceremonial cleanliness, enabling that person to join in public worship. If ritual cleanliness was important for the ordinary Israelite, it was particularly necessary for the priests who led worship and represented the people before God. Exodus 30:17–21 tells us that the priests maintained ceremonial cleanliness by washing in a bronze basin.

The bronze basin stood in the court of the tabernacle *between the tent of meeting and the altar*. Unlike other pieces of furniture used in Israelite worship, the bronze basin is not described in detail. Exodus 30:17–21 tells us only that there was to be a basin made of bronze, filled with water. Without specific instructions the Israelites had some discretion in designing this place of washing. There is also no explicit instructions for how the priests were to wash themselves. For instance, we do not know if they poured water over their hands or dipped them in the water, dried themselves with towels, and so forth. Probably the exact practice of washing varied from time to time and from place to place where the tabernacle was set up. The priests had to wash their hands and feet, signifying a thorough cleansing of their limbs and thus the actions of worship performed by them.

We do not know exactly how the priests washed themselves, but we do know that priests who did not wash themselves risked their own lives. Verses 20-21 confirm,

“When they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to burn a food offering to the LORD, they shall wash with water, so that they may not die. They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die. It shall be a statute forever to them, even to him and to his offspring throughout their generations.”

Here the connections of dirt with sin and cleanliness with purity are important. The pollution of physical uncleanliness is often used as a metaphor for spiritual impurity, so the removal of dirt from the body was a way to portray the necessity of an inward cleansing from sin and its corruption. Psalm 51 sings of this and says,

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

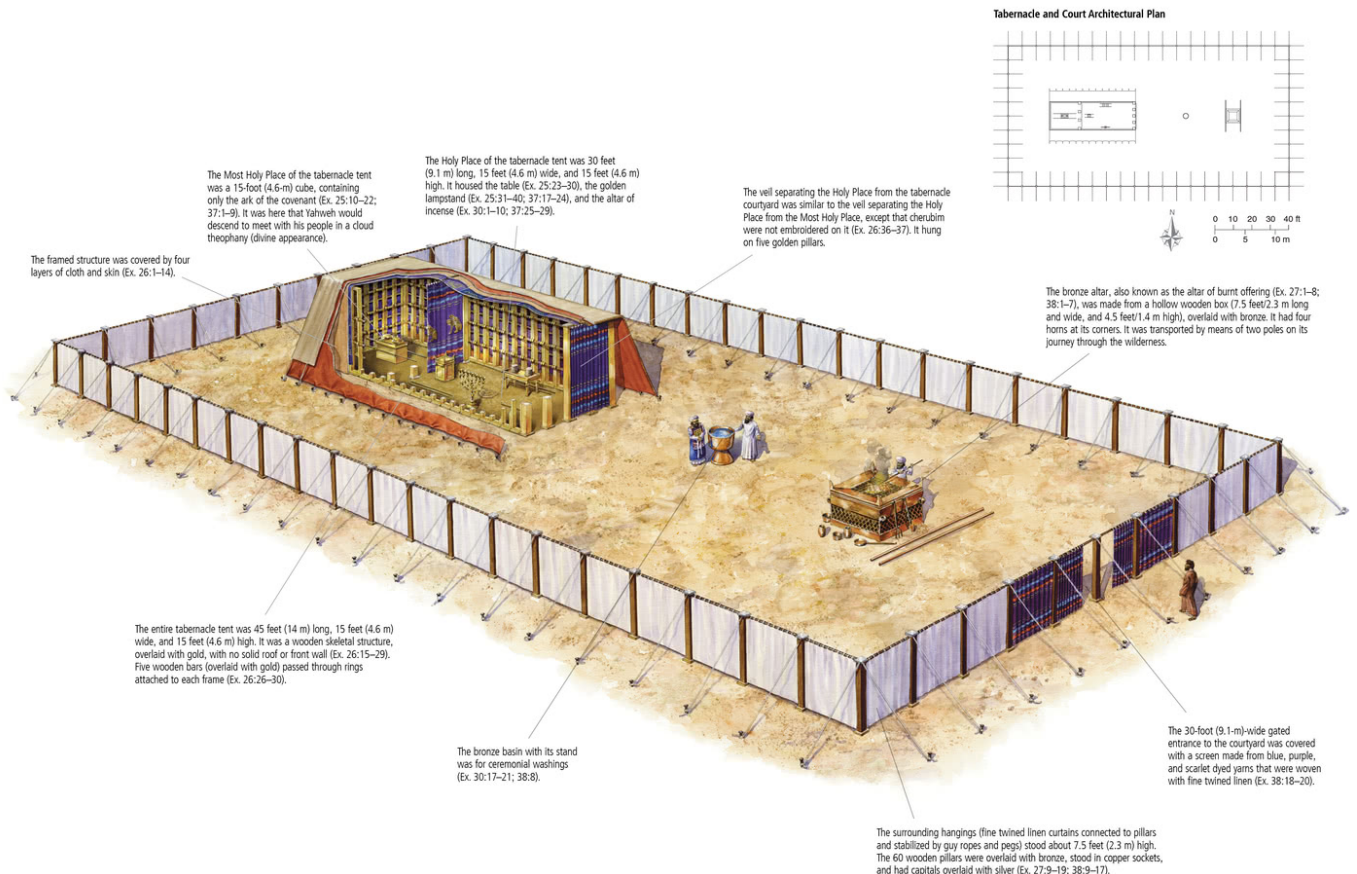
Psalm 51: 2-3, 7

The worship of God deserves the best we can offer physically. Yet external cleanliness is nothing without spiritual purity. Our hearts and minds must be washed clean of sin so that we can dedicate ourselves properly to the Lord. Ultimately, only the blood of Jesus can give us such cleanliness as John writes in 1 John 1:7,

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

The Tabernacle Courtyard

Not every Israelite could enter the tabernacle, but only the priests, who came from Aaron's family, but that did not mean that ordinary Israelites were completely barred from worshiping at the house of God. They had to bring their sacrifices to the tabernacle, where they would be offered on the altar outside the tent of meeting. There, the animals and grains would be burned, and the priests and sometimes even the worshipers would eat part of the sacrifice, depending on the offering. Leviticus 6–7 explains this in more detail. In keeping with the fact that tent dwellers cook and eat their meals outside their tent homes, the sacrifices and eating did not occur in the tabernacle. Instead, all this occurred in the outer courtyard of the tabernacle complex, and this is what is described in verse 9-19 of Exodus 27.



This passage test us that the courtyard was enclosed by a fence of fine linen curtains measuring one hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide, and five cubits high. In modern measurements, this means that the dimensions of the courtyard were 150 feet long by seventy-five feet wide, and the border was about seven and a half feet high. The tabernacle proper was about fifteen feet tall, so it was visible even outside the courtyard. Pillars, probably made of acacia wood, held up the curtains that made up the courtyard fence, and these pillars were inserted into bronze bases and had silver hooks for the curtains. The text does not specify the colour of most of the fence, but it does say that the curtain that served as the gate of the courtyard was made of blue, purple, and scarlet yarns, embroidered with needlework. This meant that it looked like the tabernacle curtains except that it did not have images of cherubim. Probably the curtain that served as the gate to the courtyard was closed only at night and kept open during the day for the worshipers to come and go.

The courtyard provided limited access to God's presence, and John Calvin comments on the theological significance of the Israelites' being able to enter the courtyard but not the tabernacle. He writes:

It is the court of the people which is here referred to, where they consecrated the victims, offered their prayers, and were reconciled to God. In this manner the condition of mankind was shown to the Israelites, by their being forbidden to enter the Temple, whilst at the same time they were reminded that men, although unworthy outcasts, are received by God, if only they seek Him simply, and with due humility, mindful of their own unworthiness.

Although ordinary Israelites could not enter the tabernacle proper, God's giving them access to the courtyard shows His desire that all His people come near. He has provided us with greater access to Himself under the new covenant, so we are to take advantage of our privilege to draw near to Him in prayer and fellowship through Christ. Our God wants to be close to us. As Hebrews 10: 19-22 tells us,

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Application for Today

It might seem that the details of the Tabernacle court aren't relevant in God's design for worship. But each part of the Tabernacle as a whole is dependant on the other parts. The Tabernacle isn't made up of separate parts, but is a whole. The blood from the animals sacrificed on the altar would be sprinkled over the Mercy Seat to make atonement for sin. Before entering the Tabernacle the priests has to cleanse themselves, demonstrating the necessity of being right before God.

This continues for us today, even though we don't offer animal sacrifices or undertake ritual cleansing. We are received by God through the blood of his son Jesus. This doesn't mean we can approach God in a manner unworthy of our calling. We worship him with sincerity. As we come to worship, particularly public worship, we should be in a right frame of heart and mind. The psalmist tells us in Psalm 24: 3-4,

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully.

The beautiful entrance to the Tabernacle court shows us that God welcomes us, but it is on his terms. These terms aren't arduous, but loving and merciful. When we worship we worship the creator of all things, the one who gives life and the Saviour of the world!

Questions for Further Study

1. How seriously do you take your approach to worship of God?
2. What changes do you need to make so that you can approach God in a better frame of mind and attitude of heart?
3. How can greater understanding of the Tabernacle court and its fixtures draw you closer to God as you live for him?