

SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT

EX. 40:1 And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying,

2 On the first day of the first month shalt thou set up the tabernacle of the tent of the congregation.

3 And thou shalt put therein the ark of the testimony, and cover the ark with the vail.

4 And thou shalt bring in the table, and set in order the things that are to be set in order upon it; and thou shalt bring in the candlestick, and light the lamps thereof.

5 And thou shalt set the altar of gold for the incense before the ark of the testimony, and put the hanging of the door to the tabernacle.

6 And thou shalt set the altar of the burnt offering before the door of the tabernacle of the tent of the congregation.

7 And thou shalt set the laver between the tent of the congregation and the altar, and shalt put water therein.

8 And thou shalt set up the court round about, and hang up the hanging at the court gate.

9 And thou shalt take the anointing

oil, and anoint the tabernacle, and all that *is* therein, and shalt hallow it, and all the vessels thereof: and it shall be holy.

10 And thou shalt anoint the altar of the burnt offering, and all his vessels, and sanctify the altar: and it shall be an altar most holy.

11 And thou shalt anoint the laver and his foot, and sanctify it.

34 Then a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.

35 And Moses was not able to enter into the tent of the congregation, because the cloud abode thereon, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.

36 And when the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the children of Israel went onward in all their journeys:

37 But if the cloud were not taken up, then they journeyed not till the day that it was taken up.

38 For the cloud of the LORD *was* upon the tabernacle by day, and fire was on it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys.

NOTES

God's Glory in the Tabernacle

Lesson Text: Exodus 40:1-11, 34-38

Related Scriptures: Exodus 29:38-46; 1 Kings 8:1-11;
Hebrews 9:1-14; Haggai 2:1-9; Revelation 21:22-27

TIME: 1446 B.C.

PLACE: Sinai desert

GOLDEN TEXT—"Then a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Exodus 40:34).

Lesson Exposition

SETTING UP THE TABERNACLE— EX. 40:1-8

Modern readers may perceive the tabernacle details as boring, but these details told Israel a vivid story about God's holiness and their sin.

The tabernacle (Ex. 40:1-2). Moses erected the tent that would contain all the other items on the first day of the first month of the Jewish year, a significant date in the Old Testament. The waters of the Flood dried up on the first day of the first month (Gen. 8:13). The temple was consecrated on the first day of the first month (2 Chr. 29:17). Ezra also began his return from the Babylonian Exile on the first day of the first month (Ezra 7:9). The consecration of the tabernacle, then, marked a new beginning in Israel's history.

The inner sanctuary (Ex. 40:3). After Moses set up the tent, he was to set up the remaining items, starting from the innermost part of the tent and working backward. He would begin with the inner sanctuary, or Most Holy Place, which contained the "ark of the testimony."

It was likely called the "ark of the testimony" (or ark of the covenant) because of what it contained. By Exodus 40, the ark had been designated as the storage place for key items that served as a witness to the Lord's covenant relationship with Israel (cf. Ex. 16:33-34; 25:21; Num. 17:10).

The ark's covering also served as the seat from which God spoke to Israel (Ex. 25:22; 30:6; cf. Num. 7:89). Cherubim's wings overshadowed the ark, guarding it in a way that recalled the cherubim who guarded the entrance to the Garden of Eden.

Just in front of the ark, a curtain ("vail") shut off the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place. Its role was to keep the ark hidden (Ex. 40:3, 21). If God's glory was to dwell atop the ark, people could not simply approach it whenever and however they wanted (cf. 33:20-23).

Only the high priest was allowed behind the veil, and that only happened on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). As cherubim overshadowed the ark itself, so cherubim woven into the veil symbolically guarded the way to the ark.

The outer sanctuary (Ex. 40:4-5). On the other side of the veil was the outer sanctuary, or Holy Place, where the priests ministered. A priest walking into the Holy Place from the outer court would have seen a table on his right, a lampstand on his left, and the altar of incense directly in front of him, just before the veil to the Most Holy Place.

The table held food offerings of bread, which the priests were allowed to eat (Lev. 24:6; cf. Deut. 18:1). A shared meal was considered a symbol of peace between two parties (cf. Ex. 24:9-11). The table reminded the priests that even though they stood only a few feet from the Lord's presence over the ark of the covenant, He was at peace with them through the sacrificial system He set in place.

On the opposite side of the Holy Place stood a lampstand with seven lamps decorated by almond blossoms (25:31-40). An important clue to the lampstand's purpose comes from Zechariah 4, where an angel identified a lampstand with seven lamps as the seven "eyes of the Lord" watching over the earth (vs. 10).

The Israelites may have recognized that symbolism of the lampstand even before Zechariah's vision. In Hebrew, the word for "almond" sounds like the verb "to watch." In Jeremiah 1:11-12, God used that wordplay to assure the prophet Jeremiah that He was watching over ("hastening") His promises to make sure they would happen. The lampstand's almond-flower pattern, then, reminded the Israelites of God's ever-present watchfulness over them and over the whole world.

Directly in front of the veil, the altar of incense was the closest the regular priests ever got to the Most Holy Place. The priests burned incense on the altar every morning and evening, which may have signified the priests' intercession for the people (cf. Ps. 141:2).

The priests also used it for sin offerings for themselves. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest sprinkled blood and burned incense on the altar just before entering the Most Holy Place (Ex. 30:1-10).

Just as the veil shut off the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, so a different curtain shut off the outer court from the Holy Place. The screen on the door visibly reminded the Israelites that only priests were allowed to enter it.

The outer court (Ex. 40:6-8). Outside the tabernacle was another altar, bigger than the altar of incense. Whereas the altar of incense was for the sin offerings of the priests, the altar of burnt offering was for sacrifices offered by all the people of Israel.

The "laver," or water basin, provided a place for the priests to ceremonially wash their hands and feet either right before offering a burnt offering on the altar or right before entering the tabernacle. This basin emphasized the need for cleansing from impurity before entering into God's presence.

Finally, God commanded Moses to set up the screen through which the people would enter the outer court. The stage was set. The visual story of sin's unrelenting curse and God's unapproachable holiness was ready for Israel to view.

ANOINTING THE TABERNACLE— EX. 40:9-11

But first, every item in the tabernacle, along with all the priests who would serve in the tabernacle, had to be anointed with oil. The purpose was to set the tabernacle apart as a holy place in which God could dwell. Many of the tabernacle's furniture pieces would have been common items outside of the tabernacle context. The word for "ark," for example, was also used to identify the box in which the Israelites transported Joseph's bones

from Egypt (cf. Gen. 50:26). The word for “table” simply referred to a dining table. Lampstands were likewise everyday items for the Israelites.

Apart from God’s grace, the tabernacle was nothing more than a tent containing ordinary household items. By commanding Moses to anoint everything in the tabernacle, the Lord declared that the tabernacle would be set apart for holy use.

FILLING THE TABERNACLE— EX. 40:34-38

God’s overpowering presence (Ex. 40:34-35). After Moses did all that God commanded him, the pillar of cloud that represented God’s presence (cf. 13:21) descended and filled the tabernacle with His glory. God had fulfilled His promise to Moses that His presence would go with Israel! But in an unexpected twist, no one—not even Moses—was able to go near the glory cloud in the tabernacle.

Even though God had graciously come down to the camp of Israel, something else still needed to happen for Him to truly fulfill His purpose of intimately dwelling with His people. The book of Leviticus would be God’s immediate answer to the problem, but for now all Israel was left to marvel from afar at the beautiful yet terrifying glory of God’s presence.

God’s guiding presence (Ex. 40:36-38). The cloud of God’s presence not only demonstrated His unparalleled holiness but also served as a guide for Israel. God had been leading Israel in pillars of cloud and fire since their wilderness journey began (13:21-22). Now the tabernacle became the headquarters of that leadership. Whenever the cloud rested on the tabernacle, the Israelites knew they were to camp in that place. But as soon as the cloud lifted, that signaled Israel to pack up camp and start moving again.

This arrangement ensured that Israel understood their complete dependence on the Lord. They were not to make one move without His guidance. It also ensured Israel’s protection. The Sinai desert was no easy place for an entire nation of people to survive. But despite the harsh conditions, Israel could rest in the knowledge that not a single one of their most vulnerable members—whether old men, widows, or little babies—would be without God’s guidance and protection.

—Matthew Robinson

QUESTIONS

1. What was significant about the date of the tabernacle’s consecration?
2. Why was the ark called the “ark of the testimony”?
3. What was the role of the veil between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place?
4. How might the table in the Holy Place have given the priests confidence about God’s relationship with Israel?
5. How does the vision of Zechariah 4 help us understand the significance of the lampstand in the tabernacle?
6. What truth did the water basin emphasize to Israel?
7. Why did Moses have to anoint everything in the tabernacle?
8. Who was able to approach the tabernacle after God’s glory descended on it?
9. What two functions of the glory cloud do we see in Exodus 40:34-38?
10. What did God’s guidance in the wilderness accomplish for Israel?

—Matthew Robinson

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Even the most specific, seemingly boring details of God's Old Testament instructions teach us something important about God and His plan (Ex. 40:1-8; cf. Heb. 9:1-14).
2. Like the ordinary pieces of furniture in the tabernacle, our ordinary lives have been consecrated for God's glory to indwell (Ex. 40:9-11; cf. 2 Cor. 4:6-7).
3. God's primary intention in His plan of redemption is to dwell among His people (Ex. 40:34).
4. Not even the holiest believer can approach God apart from Christ's sacrifice and mediation (vs. 35).
5. We should not make a move apart from God's guidance (vss. 36-37).
6. We depend on God's presence to protect us during our journey as wandering exiles in this world (Ex. 40:38; cf. 1 Pet. 1:17).

—Matthew Robinson

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. Why do the tabernacle instructions often seem boring to Christians today?
2. In what specific ways does the New Testament present Christ fulfilling each of the elements of the tabernacle from Exodus 40:1-8?
3. Why was Moses unable to come near God's presence in the tabernacle even though he had previously spoken with the Lord "face to face" there (40:35; cf. 33:7-11)?
4. Where does God's glory reside today (cf. John 1:14; 2 Cor. 4:6-7)? How should that affect the way we live and witness to others?

—Matthew Robinson

Golden Text Illuminated

"Then a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Exodus 40:34).

The tabernacle reminded the Israelites that God was with them. This manifestation of God's glory on it reassured the Israelites that God would faithfully guide and protect them throughout their journey in the wilderness. The glory of the Lord filling the tabernacle highlighted the central role of the Lord's presence in the Israelites' lives.

The tabernacle symbolized a bridge between the divine and the human, allowing for communion between God and His people. It also emphasized the importance of approaching God with reverence and purity.

The significance of the tabernacle extends beyond its original historical context. In the New Testament, we see Jesus Christ fulfilling the purpose of the tabernacle. Jesus became the ultimate dwelling place of God's glory among humanity through His incarnation. He became our Great High Priest (Heb. 4:14), who could enter the heavenly tabernacle and offer the sacrifice that once and for all satisfied the holiness of God.

Jesus came to us so that the glory of God could live among us. He now invites believers into the presence of God to experience that glory. At the same time, God calls His followers to be holy and set apart, just as the tabernacle was holy and set apart. As the tabernacle was a physical representation of the glory and holiness of God, so believers are now a spiritual representation of the holiness and glory of God to the world.

—Matthew Robinson