

Exodus 26:31–28:14 – Separating What’s Important

God finishes specifying the Tabernacle, including the veil, the curtain, the altar, and the courtyard. He then adds a curious detail – that the lamp should stay lit 24/7, even on the Sabbath. That raises some difficult issues.

Lastly He details the clothing for the priests, highlighting their role as holy representatives of the people.

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Thank you.

Exodus 26:31–28:14 – Separating What’s Important
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1 Exodus 26:31-37 (ESV)

“And you shall make a veil of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen. It shall be made with cherubim skillfully worked into it. And you shall hang it on four pillars of acacia overlaid with gold, with hooks of gold, on four bases of silver. And you shall hang the veil from the clasps, and bring the ark of the testimony in there within the veil. And the veil shall separate for you the Holy Place from the Most Holy. You shall put the mercy seat on the ark of the testimony in the Most Holy Place. And you shall set the table outside the veil, and the lampstand on the south side of the tabernacle opposite the table, and you shall put the table on the north side.

“You shall make a screen for the entrance of the tent, of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, embroidered with needlework. And you shall make for the screen five pillars of acacia, and overlay them with gold. Their hooks shall be of gold, and you shall cast five bases of bronze for them.”

The description of the tabernacle doesn’t mention one standard of the tent making craft – cross-pieces. The tabernacle has to have poles running from side to side connecting the frames. Without these cross-pieces holding the sides apart, the tension of the fabric would pull the sides inward and the whole thing would collapse. This is as obvious to a tent-maker as specifying that the linen for the veil must be woven into cloth. Many details like that are omitted here.

That helps clear up something in this passage. The text says, “*you shall hang the veil from the clasps,*” but the pillars don’t have clasps. *And you shall hang it on four pillars of acacia overlaid with gold, with hooks of gold, on four bases of silver.* Also, these four pillars are about 5 feet apart. Hanging the veil on just the pillars would be hard on the fabric. There are lots of possible solutions – and we cannot know exactly how this was done – but it’s hard to imagine that they would hang the veil from just the hooks on the pillars. Involving the cross-piece seems obvious.

The veil and its pillars are ornate and similar to the fabric and frames of the tabernacle. The *screen for the entrance of the tent* and its *five pillars of acacia* are slightly less elaborate, signifying less holiness.

The veil that separates *the Holy Place from the Most Holy* and the *screen for the entrance of the tent* digitize the levels of holiness. Being just inside the veil is totally different from being just outside it. The same for the screen. Yet, walk from one end of the *Holy Place* to the other and you’re still in the *Holy Place*. Permission to be in these places is carefully fenced. Just wandering in could be fatal.

It’s the same with Christianity. You’re either a believer or you’re not. Thus, 1 Corinthians 11:27 fences communion, severely warning non-believers against partaking. Just wandering in could be consequential.

But there is a big difference. Getting into the Tabernacle’s *Holy Place* takes a lifetime of study and advancement. Becoming a Christian takes but an instant. What a shocking and glorious thing that is! Praise God for the marvelous way the gospel works. It’s intricate in the details, but simple in practice.

You don’t have to understand the details to join.

2 Exodus 27:1-8 (ESV)

“You shall make the altar of acacia wood, five cubits long and five cubits broad. The altar shall be square, and its height shall be three cubits. And you shall make horns for it on its four corners; its horns shall be of one piece with it, and you shall overlay it with bronze. You shall make pots for it to receive its ashes, and shovels and basins and forks and fire pans. You shall make all its utensils of bronze. You shall also make for it a grating, a network of bronze, and on the net you shall make four bronze rings at its four corners. And you shall set it under the ledge of the altar so that the net extends halfway down the altar. And you shall make poles for the altar, poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with bronze. And the poles shall be put through the rings, so that the poles are on the two sides of the altar when it is carried. You shall make it hollow, with boards. As it has been shown you on the mountain, so shall it be made.”

This is the bronze altar, which Exodus 38 calls the altar of burnt offering – not to be confused with the altar of incense described in Exodus 30. This altar will be outside the tabernacle, in the courtyard that will be described in the next passage. (See also Exodus 40:6.)

The altar has a bronze grating to hold the fire that’s not unlike the charcoal grates in barbeque grills. *You shall also make for it a grating, a network of bronze, and on the net you shall make four bronze rings at its four corners.* The altar is accompanied by ash pots and other fireplace tools. *You shall make pots for it to receive its ashes, and shovels and basins and forks and fire pans. You shall make all its utensils of bronze.* Bronze is appropriate here because its melting temperature is well above a thousand degrees.

Experts disagree on the details of what this altar looked like. Modern depictions vary.

<http://www.bible-history.com/art/baltar9.jpg>

<http://www.templebuildersministry.com/wp-content/uploads/images/brazen-altar.jpg>

http://www.divinerevelations.info/tabernacle/bronze_altar.jpg

But as with the other furnishings, Moses didn’t have to figure this out from the specifications; he got to see exactly what it should look like. *As it has been shown you on the mountain, so shall it be made.*

The exact designs of the tabernacle and its furnishings are lost to history. That’s probably intentional, given man’s propensity for idolatry. Idolatry runs deep in the human psyche.

Think not? Just read the slobbering fawning that accompanies any description of Carroll Shelby’s cars.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/01/automobiles/collectibles/shelbys-cobra-at-50-still-an-icon-of-sex-and-power.html>

People tend to focus on people things; it’s how we’re wired. Ask the LORD to help us shed our tendency to give people and things superstar status, and instead to help us keep our focus on Him.

That’s one of those prayers we could say every day for the rest of our lives.

3 Exodus 27:9-19 (ESV)

“You shall make the court of the tabernacle. On the south side the court shall have hangings of fine twined linen a hundred cubits long for one side. Its twenty pillars and their twenty bases shall be of bronze, but the hooks of the pillars and their fillets shall be of silver. And likewise for its length on the north side there shall be hangings a hundred cubits long, its pillars twenty and their bases twenty, of bronze, but the hooks of the pillars and their fillets shall be of silver. And for the breadth of the court on the west side there shall be hangings for fifty cubits, with ten pillars and ten bases. The breadth of the court on the front to the east shall be fifty cubits. The hangings for the one side of the gate shall be fifteen cubits, with their three pillars and three bases. On the other side the hangings shall be fifteen cubits, with their three pillars and three bases. For the gate of the court there shall be a screen twenty cubits long, of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, embroidered with needlework. It shall have four pillars and with them four bases. All the pillars around the court shall be filleted with silver. Their hooks shall be of silver, and their bases of bronze. The length of the court shall be a hundred cubits, the breadth fifty, and the height five cubits, with hangings of fine twined linen and bases of bronze. All the utensils of the tabernacle for every use, and all its pegs and all the pegs of the court, shall be of bronze.”

A fillet is a band around the pillar to attach the hook to the pillar.

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fillet>

The court of the tabernacle is too large to have cross-pieces. Fortunately, there’s no fabric stretching across to pull the pillars inward – but there’s still wind. How do they keep the pillars from blowing over?

Exodus 35:18 mentions, *“pegs of the court, and their cords.”* So, it seems that the pillars were steadied by guy-wires.

Most importantly, at 7’6” (5 cubits) high, the courtyard walls blocked people from seeing anything other than the roof of the tabernacle. The goings on inside aren’t for show.

This sets a standard that will continue forever.

Phony religions are all show. The truth is not.

“But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.” – Matthew 6:5-6 (ESV)

Pray for your pastors. Most of what they do is in secret – so they get little praise (in this world) for their efforts. Lift them up to the LORD for a special blessing.

Specifically, ask God to encourage them by letting them see something of the difference they are making in someone’s life. Pastors endure a lot of discouraging things.

The occasional glimpse of why it’s all worth it is the fuel that keeps them going.

4 Exodus 27:20-21 (ESV)

“You shall command the people of Israel that they bring to you pure beaten olive oil for the light, that a lamp may regularly be set up to burn. In the tent of meeting, outside the veil that is before the testimony, Aaron and his sons shall tend it from evening to morning before the LORD. It shall be a statute forever to be observed throughout their generations by the people of Israel.”

Every indication (here and in Leviticus 24:1-4) is that the lamp is to burn all night every night – including on the Sabbath. This is clearer in The Amplified Bible and in The Complete Jewish Bible. Both may be researched here:

<http://www.biblegateway.com/>

Obviously, *Aaron and his sons* will have to work hard to *tend it from evening to morning before the LORD*. Keeping seven oil lamps burning may not seem like hard work but pulling an all-nighter to do it definitely qualifies.

So, this new statute provides a special case exception to the law against working on the Sabbath. That’s not a problem, since God is the lord of the Sabbath.

This is important background for when Jesus claims to be the lord of the Sabbath.

“For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.” – Matthew 12:8 (ESV)

And he said to them, “The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.” – Luke 6:5 (ESV)

The Pharisees who were questioning Jesus in these passages were well aware of Exodus 27:20-21 and its implications. Jesus’s reply shocks them. Not only did He make an airtight logical argument against their objection, but that argument is based on a claim that He’s God Himself.

Before, they had a relatively minor complaint about His doing work on the Sabbath. Now they’re confronted with a claim that is either blasphemy or the most wonderful news they’ve ever heard.

If keeping the seven lamps burning is an exception to keeping the Sabbath, are there others? Yes.

And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”— so that they might accuse him. He said to them, “Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” – Matthew 12:10–12 (ESV)

Jesus’s point is, “Don’t be silly.” While keeping the Sabbath is very important – and many of us need to give this more attention – it can still be taken to extremes. An argument can even be made that you shouldn’t dial 911 on the Sabbath. Clearly, that’s nuts – and anything but honoring to God.

How should you keep the Sabbath? What’s not allowed? This is a good topic to discuss with your pastor.

5 Exodus 28:1-5 (ESV)

“Then bring near to you Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the people of Israel, to serve me as priests—Aaron and Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty. You shall speak to all the skillful, whom I have filled with a spirit of skill, that they make Aaron’s garments to consecrate him for my priesthood. These are the garments that they shall make: a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a coat of checker work, a turban, and a sash. They shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother and his sons to serve me as priests. They shall receive gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen.”

These are uniforms!

They seem to be the earliest uniforms in human history. They predate by over a thousand years the terracotta army that was buried with the first emperor of China. The terracotta soldiers weren’t dressed exactly the same anyway. There is no evidence of any other uniforms near the time of the Exodus.

These uniforms have one purpose – holiness. *They shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother and his sons to serve me as priests.* These uniforms are not designed to be warm, or comfortable, or waterproof. They might be all of those things too, but that’s just a happy coincidence.

These uniforms are to separate the priests who serve in the tabernacle from everyone else. In a sense, these uniforms provide an extra layer of security. God doesn’t want just anyone wandering in to the tabernacle. These uniforms make it obvious who belongs and who doesn’t. That’s why they are made of the same material as the tabernacle.

We keep coming back to the same basic theme – God designs how He will be worshipped. That design is for His purposes, not ours. If He wants us to worship Him by standing on our heads, He would say so.

Fortunately, He doesn’t specify anything that impractical. Still, worship isn’t designed for practicality.

Many holy things are impractical. Turning the other cheek is impractical. Grace is impractical. Loving your enemies is impractical. Jesus dying for our sins is impractical.

If God was practical, we’d be in a whole lot of trouble.

Kingdom priorities aren’t always practical, but the other extreme can be worse. We’re not called to be stupid. How can we know when God wants us to be impractical?

Ask! If God wants you to do something unusual, He won’t just drop subtle hints. Ask the LORD to clearly show you what His will for you is.

If His reply scares you or confuses you, it’s OK to ask for a confirming sign. Gideon did.

6 Exodus 28:6-14 (ESV)

“And they shall make the ephod of gold, of blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and of fine twined linen, skillfully worked. It shall have two shoulder pieces attached to its two edges, so that it may be joined together. And the skillfully woven band on it shall be made like it and be of one piece with it, of gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen. You shall take two onyx stones, and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel, six of their names on the one stone, and the names of the remaining six on the other stone, in the order of their birth. As a jeweler engraves signets, so shall you engrave the two stones with the names of the sons of Israel. You shall enclose them in settings of gold filigree. And you shall set the two stones on the shoulder pieces of the ephod, as stones of remembrance for the sons of Israel. And Aaron shall bear their names before the LORD on his two shoulders for remembrance. You shall make settings of gold filigree, and two chains of pure gold, twisted like cords; and you shall attach the corded chains to the settings.”

An ephod is like an apron.

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ephod>

It’s the golden apron here:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:PLATE4DX.jpg>

The ephod is impressive enough, as befits this holy uniform, but the onyx stones are the key. When a priest enters the tabernacle, he’s not doing this for himself; he’s entering on behalf of the whole nation of Israel. This is symbolized by the names of the twelve tribes inscribed on the onyx stones.

One of the key concepts of Christianity is the priesthood of all believers. We effectively enter the tabernacle when we pray. That’s why it’s important for us to pray for others.

Of all the people you should pray for, your teachers probably need it most. Every teacher should be intimidated by the prospect of impacting the faith of others. I know I am.

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. – James 3:1 (ESV)

Pray especially for the teachers and youth leaders in your church. Their importance cannot be overstated. Ask them what their prayer requests are. I’ll bet they give you more details than you expected.

You can pray for me too (and all the other writers at Ailbe). I get stuck a lot trying to figure out what to say. The amazing thing is, the more stuck I get at first, the better the devotional ends up.

Thank God I get unstuck.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What are the absolutely necessary steps in becoming a Christian?
2. What are some ways that we are idolatrous?
3. When should a “work” not be kept secret?
4. What should be strictly avoided on the Sabbath?
5. Have you ever felt called to something impractical or extreme?
6. Who is the most important teacher in your life right now?

Items for prayer: