

EXODUS—WEEK 20

THE TEST



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Cover Picture is Moses' Descent from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments by Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680) on display at the Royal Palace, Amsterdam

God specifies, in great detail, the design of the giant tent that is the tabernacle. Having specified the key holy furnishings in the previous lesson, He now specifies the place where they'll all reside.

He's tapping into the talents of His people, while forcing them to give up all of their treasure. This is a test.

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Thank you.

Exodus 26:1–27:8 — The Test
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1 Exodus 26:1–6 (ESV)

“Moreover, you shall make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine twined linen and blue and purple and scarlet yarns; you shall make them with cherubim skillfully worked into them. The length of each curtain shall be twenty-eight cubits, and the breadth of each curtain four cubits; all the curtains shall be the same size. Five curtains shall be coupled to one another, and the other five curtains shall be coupled to one another. And you shall make loops of blue on the edge of the outermost curtain in the first set. Likewise you shall make loops on the edge of the outermost curtain in the second set. Fifty loops you shall make on the one curtain, and fifty loops you shall make on the edge of the curtain that is in the second set; the loops shall be opposite one another. And you shall make fifty clasps of gold, and couple the curtains one to the other with the clasps, so that the tabernacle may be a single whole.”

So, when all these pieces are joined together, they become a single cloth, 40 cubits by 28 cubits (60’ x 42’). How does this make a tabernacle?

The tabernacle is a huge tent with a wooden frame. This fabric forms the ceiling of the tent, plus covers the outside of the frame.

The frame is described in the next readings. It’s approximately 30 cubits long by 10 cubits wide by 10 cubits high (45’ x 15’ x 15’). If you drop a 60’ x 42’ piece of fabric over this like a tablecloth, you can almost completely cover the top, two sides, and one end, leaving the other end open for the entrance.

So, this covering hangs almost to the floor on both sides and one end, but barely reaches the edge of the “table” on the other end. Of course, you’d never want a tablecloth to be that far off center, but it makes perfect sense here.

That’s the basic design. More layers of covering will be added to make it waterproof, but they will follow this geometry.

Sometimes God’s instructions are general principles, and sometimes He gives specifics. The tabernacle design is specific. Why does this particular task need to be exactly specified while other things don’t?

This is an exciting question because the answer would give us insight into God’s priorities. This could allow us to serve Him better, or at least alert us to what’s most important.

Unfortunately, this question is as difficult as it is exciting. We do have some clues though. This parallels the difference between the Old and New Testaments. The presence of the Holy Spirit gives us liberty.

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. — Jeremiah 31:33a (ESV)

It’s a tremendous honor to be given flexibility in how to serve God. However, the responsibility is scary.

We who teach will be judged with greater strictness. — James 3:1 (ESV)

2 Exodus 26:7–14 (ESV)

“You shall also make curtains of goats' hair for a tent over the tabernacle; eleven curtains shall you make. The length of each curtain shall be thirty cubits, and the breadth of each curtain four cubits. The eleven curtains shall be the same size. You shall couple five curtains by themselves, and six curtains by themselves, and the sixth curtain you shall double over at the front of the tent. You shall make fifty loops on the edge of the curtain that is outermost in one set, and fifty loops on the edge of the curtain that is outermost in the second set.

“You shall make fifty clasps of bronze, and put the clasps into the loops, and couple the tent together that it may be a single whole. And the part that remains of the curtains of the tent, the half curtain that remains, shall hang over the back of the tabernacle. And the extra that remains in the length of the curtains, the cubit on the one side, and the cubit on the other side, shall hang over the sides of the tabernacle, on this side and that side, to cover it. And you shall make for the tent a covering of tanned rams' skins and a covering of goatskins on top.”

This section describes the second through fourth layers of covering to go over the tabernacle. There are many distinctions to note. Curiously, the word “tent” is used here for the first time. However, the previous section seems to describe a flat roof. That’s hard to imagine for a tent as it would pool rainwater. Also, the description of the frame in the next section doesn’t include a ridgepole, so we can’t be sure that the roof wasn’t flat. Still, these people made a lot of tents, and standard tent-making things can be assumed.

The second layer is slightly larger than the ornate first layer. That may be for protection or may be to leave room for a ridgepole or some other spacing between it and the first layer. The second layer is made of goat hair, which was a standard tent material in Old Testament times due to its durability and rain-repellent properties. Nowadays the only goat hair fabrics we see are exotic types such as angora and cashmere, but back then, all types of woven goat hair were common.

The last two layers are only briefly mentioned. No details are given, but the goal is obviously weather proofing. Such a short description provides latitude for things like a ridgepole to help the drainage. Note: the word for the last layer’s material is difficult to translate. The ESV says, “goatskins.” The New King James says, “badger skins.” The NIV says, “hides of sea cows.”

Yes, there are sea cows in the Red Sea.

The Israelites were expert tentmakers, and they were on the move, so it’s not surprising that the tabernacle is basically a tent. God often calls us in areas where we are skilled. That’s why there are many excellent spiritual surveys designed to help you discern what your gifts are.

We shouldn’t just ask God to show us what we should do, but also show us who we are to **be**. Who is God calling you to be? What gifts and talents has He given you? Where might that be leading?

You’re important.

3 Exodus 26:15–30 (ESV)

“You shall make upright frames for the tabernacle of acacia wood. Ten cubits shall be the length of a frame, and a cubit and a half the breadth of each frame. There shall be two tenons in each frame, for fitting together. So shall you do for all the frames of the tabernacle. You shall make the frames for the tabernacle: twenty frames for the south side; and forty bases of silver you shall make under the twenty frames, two bases under one frame for its two tenons, and two bases under the next frame for its two tenons; and for the second side of the tabernacle, on the north side twenty frames, and their forty bases of silver, two bases under one frame, and two bases under the next frame. And for the rear of the tabernacle westward you shall make six frames. And you shall make two frames for corners of the tabernacle in the rear; they shall be separate beneath, but joined at the top, at the first ring. Thus shall it be with both of them; they shall form the two corners. And there shall be eight frames, with their bases of silver, sixteen bases; two bases under one frame, and two bases under another frame.

“You shall make bars of acacia wood, five for the frames of the one side of the tabernacle, and five bars for the frames of the other side of the tabernacle, and five bars for the frames of the side of the tabernacle at the rear westward. The middle bar, halfway up the frames, shall run from end to end. You shall overlay the frames with gold and shall make their rings of gold for holders for the bars, and you shall overlay the bars with gold. Then you shall erect the tabernacle according to the plan for it that you were shown on the mountain.”

A tenon is a post that sticks out of a piece of wood so as to fit into a hole. These frames aren't solid boards but wooden trusses. They're as strong but lighter. The tenons on the bottom of each frame fit into holes in two silver bases. This suggests that each frame is two strong verticals connected by cross-pieces.

The striking thing about all this is that the tabernacle seems to be consuming most, if not all, of the plunder the Israelites received from the Egyptians. Much of it is either made of gold or overlaid with gold. How much gold could they have? Now add the 96 solid silver bases to support the frames. All this must weigh tons. At 40 pounds each, the bases alone would come to almost 4000 pounds (2 tons).

They're being asked to give of their excess, but it's still a mighty test of faith. Silver and gold do strange things to people. Letting go will be an act of worship that'll change them.

Letting go is central to serving Jesus as Lord. We must let go of our dreams, our treasures and, most importantly, control. Our silver and gold aren't our metals; they're our plans. Life for the Israelites was already so uncertain that they didn't have much of that to let go of. So, the silver and gold were what they could cling to. But we cling to our vacation plans, our financial plans, and plans for our children's future.

Amazingly, God usually lets us keep our plans, but when He doesn't, we whine and pout. Ask God to help you see what's really important. We should thank Him for the plans we get to keep and let go of the rest. Think back on the times when God not giving you what you wanted turned out to be fortuitous.

Praise the LORD for these “trials” and “setbacks.”

4 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 come tumbling down. 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 (and the clasps mentioned in verses 6 and 11) 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 would be consequential.

But there is a big difference. Gaining access to 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.

5 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 is like the charcoal grates found 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.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=Y_lhnprEyzc

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>

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/cars/2024/06/18/what-is-a-427-shelby-dragonsnake-and-why-is-it-being-built-once-again/73924491007/>

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. “Help us keep our focus on You.”

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Do you prefer flexibility in how you serve the Lord, or would you rather just be told exactly what to do?
2. Have you ever felt a calling far away from what you think your aptitudes are?
3. What is the thing you won't let go of?
4. What are the absolutely necessary steps in becoming a Christian?
5. What are some ways that we are idolatrous?