

TUTORIAL

1.31

God told the Israelites to build the Tabernacle

See Tutorial 1.6 notes for overall instructions.

The portions of Scripture referred to in this tutorial are: ***Exodus 24:3, 12, Exodus Ch 25 - 29, 32, Leviticus 16.***

Last time

God gave His Law to the Israelites to describe His expectations for them under the Covenant. The substance of the Law was summarised in 10 overarching Commandments as a preface. Viewed against the backdrop of God's holy and righteous character, it soon became obvious that as individuals and a community the Israelites were not able to perfectly fulfill even one commandment, much less the entire Law. What was true for them is also true for all human beings.

The commandments in stone

We noted before how readily the Israelites agreed to the concept of a contract with God. Now, when Moses comes back with the Law, the terms of the contract, they again unanimously concur that they'll do everything God has commanded. At God's direction, Moses goes up the mountain once again and this time God gives him a copy of the commandments engraved on panels or – the traditional way it's expressed in English - “tablets” of stone...a permanent record of His perfect standards. (Exodus 24:12)

God was graciously going to live among His people

During this time on the mountain, God also gave some astonishing news. Though the sovereign Spirit God, Creator of the universe, He was graciously going to live among the Israelites. They were bound to Him now by the Covenant and He was going to be part of their community. Because at this point – and in the foreseeable future - they were a nomadic people, His place, like theirs, would be transportable. In essence a large meeting tent – traditionally translated “tabernacle” in English.

This would not just be some community centre with people idly coming and going or hanging about waiting to talk to Him. It would be a special place that in every detail of its construction and furnishing would speak of His holiness - unapproachable by sinful humans. As we've come to expect from His Narrative, God was not going to ask anyone else to come up with the design of the Tabernacle, its furnishing, or the objects it would contain. He would describe what He wanted in very specific detail to Moses who was to carefully pass on His instructions.
(Exodus Ch 25 – 27)

God knew that the Israelites' self-confidence in their ability to follow His Law and fulfill their side of the Covenant was misplaced. Despite being God's chosen people, like all humans since the Fall, they were sinners – it's who they were. They would also choose to sin constantly – it's what they did. And they would consistently fail to live up to God's holy character and standards (as the Law shows) – it's what they were unable to do.

As the Narrative records, God had given sinful humans a way to approach Him. Previously this was done as individuals or family groups. Now that He's relating to them as a nation under the Covenant with a more permanent, special presence among them, the tabernacle would provide a formalised way for them to approach Him. It would serve the needs of the 2 million plus people to sacrifice animals in recognition of sins and shortcomings. It would also provide a central focus for their corporate worship of Him as their God and Divine Ruler.

God gave specific instructions for the Tabernacle

As mentioned, the construction had to be such that the Tabernacle could be erected, dismantled, moved considerable distances and assembled again. The materials God told them to use for the outer surfaces were basically the same as their own tents – fabricated from animal skins and hair. The layout would be simple...an outer courtyard (46m x 23m) surrounding the main tent or pavilion (about 14m x 4.5m). This was made up of two rooms, separated by a thick curtain that would serve as a reminder of the impenetrable barrier of sin that separates people from God's presence.

The first room, the larger, was called the Holy Place. It gave access to a second, inner room, half its size - the Most Holy Place. This was the most important place in the Tabernacle, indeed in the entire community. It was God's sacred place, set apart for Him. Of course God is Spirit, and unlimited by physical confines of space, but because of His grace He was willing to come and have a personal presence among His people. A special wooden chest covered in gold was to stand inside the Most Holy Place. Traditionally translated "ark" – relating to protection of contents...hence the ark of the flood

and the ark the infant Moses was floating in. This golden chest would contain the Law – the terms of the Covenant, so it was called the ark of the covenant. Then above that, covering the law – the lid of the chest – was the atonement covering, or place of mercy – where wrongs are made right. This was where God's presence, the bright light of His glory, would be focused. The symbolic and very real implications are enormous.

God had chosen them as His people. He had been willing to draw up contractual terms under which He would be with them and bless them as a community. But He knew full well they would be unable to fulfill the terms of the Law. They would offend His righteous standards continually. No attempt of theirs to atone - to pay - for their offences would be acceptable. But His grace and commitment to them was such that He would make a way of atonement, He would specify how an appropriate, humble approach would allow Him to show mercy to His people, rather than annihilating them as they deserved. The Law was there, carved in stone, unchanging, definitive, implacable. But His grace and mercy would make a way to cover over the sins of the people, temporarily holding off God's righteous anger and judgment...until the promised Deliverer, in fact, would come and provide a permanent solution.

The ark of the covenant was the only object in the Most Holy Place. The other objects God specified for the Tabernacle and outer courtyard facilitated the individual and communal approach to God for the atonement – the covering – of sins. A large altar - a place for burning offerings – made of brass, stood in the outer courtyard. Here a person, aware of their sin and need for forgiveness, would bring specified animals to be sacrificed. Before it was killed and burned, the individual would be required to place their hand on the head of the innocent animal, humbly asking God to accept its death in place of their own.

Other decorations, furnishings and objects functioned as practical and symbolic reminders of God's holiness and grace. They also provided powerful analogies of things which would only be fully appreciated later, in the unfolding of God's Narrative.

A priestly line was instituted

God told Moses that a line of priests was to be instituted to serve God and the community. They would oversee the Tabernacle and officiate in the sacrificial system. Aaron, Moses' brother, was to be the first of the high priests with his sons functioning under him. The office would be passed down through succeeding generations of the family. (Exodus Ch 28, Leviticus Ch 16) One of the high priest's exclusive and most important functions would be to enter the Most Holy Place one day each year - the day of atonement. He would take the blood of an animal into God's special sanctuary and sprinkle it on the atonement covering - the lid of the Ark of the Covenant. If God's instructions

were carried out precisely, He promised to withhold the punishment of the sins of the Israelite community for that year.

The people made a golden calf

It was immediately evident that these extensive measures for atoning for individual and communal sin would be desperately needed. (Exodus Ch 32) While Moses was still on the mountain receiving all the specific instructions for the Tabernacle and the priestly system, the Israelites had already violated the conditions of the Covenant, and in the most grievous way.

When Moses took much longer than expected, a golden calf had been made as an idol or cult image, and was being venerated as the god that had brought them out of Egypt.

Clearly, it was going to be totally impossible for them to fulfill God's law and satisfy His perfect standards. Any confidence they had in themselves to carry out their side of the Covenant was entirely misplaced.



DISCUSSION POINTS

God told the Israelites to build the Tabernacle

1. How do you feel about the fact that God, the holy and all-powerful Creator, was willing to come and live in the middle of the nomadic Israelite community? Would you agree that the evangelical tradition most of us come from is very focused on personal applications and how God relates to us as individuals? In light of that, make any observations you care to about the picture here of God relating to His people as a community.
2. The Biblical narrative describes God giving very detailed instructions about every aspect of the Tabernacle's construction. Does this seem to be at odds with a view of God as eager to have a genuine relationship with humans? Is God, after all, rather hung up on the trappings of religious form? Describe in your own words why you think He gave all those precise specifications. What bearing does any of this have on your relationship with Him?

3. How does it make you feel to think about God's commitment to these people despite Him knowing very clearly that they would not fulfill their side of the bargain. And His willingness to provide for the atonement - the covering over - of the people's failures and shortcomings...their sins? Share anything you care to about how this adds to what you've observed from the Narrative so far of God's grace.