

Series Title: Why Does Tabernacle Furniture Matter?

Target audience for series: Students (6th-12th grade) from a church background who are familiar with the more recognized passages and narratives. The content needs to be accessible for middle school students, but with enough depth to challenge high school students.

Part One: Understanding the Big Story

Learning goal: To provide a broad overview of the Pentateuchal narrative. Students will recognize the key movements that precede Exodus 25 and how the institution of the tabernacle functions within the overarching narrative.

We are going to start a three-week series on the tabernacle. If you're not familiar with this word "tabernacle", it was essentially a large portable tent used by the Israelite community during the Exodus period when they were wandering in the wilderness. Later in the biblical narrative it would be replaced by a more permanent structure, the temple. The tabernacle complex was the main hub for all of Israel's ritual and worship practices.

Admittedly, this is probably the last place that you would expect to find anything that is relevant and meaningful to you and your faith because this whole section that we are going to look at reads kind of like—have you ever built Legos before—it reads like one of those instruction booklets. A step-by-step blueprint for how to design Israel's sacred worship space. There are a bunch of detailed instructions about materials, furniture, and measurements. However, what my hope is through this series is that you are able to understand why this passage has been included in scripture. Out of all the things that God could have chosen to include he thought that this was important for us to know.

Now how many of you have you ever been to see a movie at a movie theater and halfway through, you realize that that the large soda you ordered has created a problem. You really need to go to the bathroom, but at the same time, you understand that even missing a couple minutes of the movie could have disastrous consequences. Why? Because a movie is essentially a visual drama. It is a sequence of interconnected scenes and movements which together tell a story. The director has carefully selected which material to include, and by default, what material does not make the final cut. What that means is that each individual scene is incredibly important. And so what do you do? You make a mad dash for the bathroom, and hopefully you have a friend who can fill you in on what you missed.

We need to have this same understanding (and urgency) when we read the Bible. Each scene has been carefully selected, arranged, and positioned in a way that communicates a unified story. Thus, we should approach it with the same sense of urgency that we would a movie at the theater. If you were to show up to a movie halfway through, you would expect, and rightfully so, to be completely lost. In the same sense, we cannot jump into a passage of Scripture without first taking into consideration everything that came before. As we begin this discussion about the tabernacle, you will be hopelessly lost if you have not first taken the time to understand the story up to this moment. So, let's briefly recap Genesis and the first part of Exodus.

The story of Genesis begins with God, who over the course of seven days, takes a space that is described as wild and waste, formless and void, and creates all manner of life and order and

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goodness. And at the climax of this creation event, God fashions a man and a woman in his own divine image and invites them to be partners in ruling over the newly created world. He places the man and the woman in a garden, called Eden, which represents a sacred space where God and the humanity exist in relationship with one another. But you know the story, what happens? The man and the woman, rather than submitting to God's leadership and standard for good and evil, they choose to make that decision for themselves. They choose to do things their own way. Consequently, they introduce a destructive cycle of sin and death into the world. They are exiled from the Garden and more importantly, separated from a relationship with God—though not before God reveals that a future descendant of the woman, a wounded victor, would come to defeat evil at its source.

In the following chapters of Genesis, we find a repeated cycle of human selfishness, rebellion, and wickedness. Instead of introducing blessing, the humans corrupt and vandalize God's good creation. Even the best and most promising individuals, like a Noah, make selfish and stupid decisions, and fail miserably. It quickly becomes clear that if there is any chance of the reclaiming the Garden state, it will need to come from a different source, a different avenue. That brings us to Genesis 12.

In Genesis chapter 12, God makes a covenant with one man, Abraham, and his family. They are to be recipients of a special land through which they will become the vehicle of his blessing to the world and ultimately restore what was lost in the Garden. As the narrative follows Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (who is later renamed Israel), there are few bright spots here and there. The majority of what is recorded, however, demonstrates that this family is not immune to making a lot of really selfish and stupid decisions. It all climaxes in the final movement of the book of Genesis, the Joseph narrative.

The descendants of Abraham, which is now the family of his grandson Jacob and his twelve sons, does not resemble anything remotely close to a blessing. They are an extremely dysfunctional family. However, through God's divine initiative in Joseph's life, a story of treachery and evil becomes the very channel of God's redemptive act in this family's life. Then the story of Exodus ends, kind of on a cliffhanger, with the family of Jacob living in the land of Egypt, far away from the land that God had promised to Abraham.

That brings us to the book of Exodus, which picks up the story a few hundred years later, Jacob's descendants or the Israelites (as they are now called), number close to a million. There is one major problem, though. Not only are they still not in the land which God promised to Abraham, but they have actually become slaves to the Egyptians. The first part of the Exodus narrative is about how God brings the Israelites out of Egypt through the leadership of Moses. Many of us are familiar with this part of Exodus: the 10 plagues, water turning to blood, frogs, boils—very painful, the death of the first born, the crossing of the Red Sea, we have heard these things stories before.

However, I have a hunch that few of us are familiar with what happens next. Moses brings the people to Mount Sinai (this is the same location where God first called him from the fiery bush). And in chapter 19, Moses and the Israelite community have an encounter with God. Verse 20 says that God came down to the top of the mountain, and this raises an interesting point, because

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isn't it true that is God everywhere at once? How can the biblical author talk about God going anywhere, as if he can travel from one location to another? Isn't he already there? Do you see the dilemma? Well, what is true in the biblical story is that God is omnipresent—existing everywhere all at once. At the same time, it is also completely possible for his existence or presence to be experienced in varying degrees. Consider this illustration (which is not perfect by any means, but might give us the language to talk about what is a very difficult concept): most of you have a phone, and your phone uses specific radio frequencies, what we call cellular data, to communicate. Now, you know that there are different levels of connection. There are some locations where you have service, but it's a weak connection, maybe a bar or two. There are other places where you get a much stronger connection. This might be a helpful way to think about God's presence. Even though he is omnipresent, it is not to the fullest extent or degree, and that is completely by design as we will see momentarily. When God shows up at Mt. Sinai, the encounter is not a friendly, warm, and fuzzy experience, it is actually really terrifying. Let's read in Exodus chapter 20:18-21:

¹⁸Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off¹⁹ and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." ²⁰Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin." ²¹The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

So there's a problem, because this community is supposed to be God's chosen instrument to reclaim that Eden blessing—where God and humanity existed together in relationship. Now when the moment finally comes to meet God, his presence, which is a good thing, has actually become dangerous and they cannot get close to him. Human sin and selfishness have created a rift. What is this solution? That is precisely what the tabernacle and its furniture are all about. In the following chapters, Moses goes up onto the mountain to receive the blueprints from God for how to design the tabernacle. This is how the Israelite community is going to have a relationship with God.

That concludes the first part in our series. We did not really cover any ground as far as the actual tabernacle goes. My hope, though, is that you are able to recognize how it fits into the larger story, because that is the key to understanding what the tabernacle is all about.

Part Two: The Ark

Learning goal: To address the rich symbolism of the ark and its function within the Israelite community. Specifically, students will learn about the biblical practice of atonement and how this ritual foreshadowed Jesus.

When we read the Bible, the first thing we need to recognize is that its contents are ancient—over two-thousand years old. Reading the Bible is like traveling to a foreign country. What that means for you and for me, who are trying to read these books over two-thousand years after the fact, is that we need to adjust our expectations accordingly. You would not travel to a foreign country and expect that everyone would speak your language, or eat the foods that you do, or even use the same form of currency that you do. In the same way, it should not be my expectation that everything I read in the Bible is going to immediately accommodate itself to me and my way of thinking about the world.

And if you read your Bible, you already know what I am talking about. There are times when you are reading the Bible and you find points of connection. In these moments, the Bible is interesting, it is insightful, it makes sense of your experience and your situation in a way that nothing else can. Then there are these other times, when you try to read your Bible and it is the completely opposite experience—it's confusing, it's dry, and you feel like you are getting nothing out of it. I want you to know that you are not alone in your experience. Even though the Bible is God's word, that does not mean we are going to immediately understand every part of it.

Today, we are going to begin talking about the tabernacle and its furniture. Have any of you ever read this passage before? How was your experience, good or not so good? Probably not so good. This is one of those passages that takes a little more work to understand, but when you do, you realize that there is so much going on here and it is just awesome!

So turn with me to Exodus chapter 25. This is where we are going to start today. And a couple things just to note before we get into it. I want to talk about how this passage has been designed and arranged because it actually affects how we read it. A scholar by the name of David Dorsey¹ noticed a reoccurring pattern in chapters 25-31. It is arranged in groups of seven. First, we get a description of seven items in the tabernacle. Then we get a list of the clothing worn by the priests and there are seven different items. After that is the dedication process for the priests, a seven-step process. Finally, you get a list of seven more items that are for the tabernacle. What this means is that the author is not trying to give you a detailed instruction manual so you can reconstruct your own tabernacle. This is not IKEA. In fact, if you tried to follow the instructions here and recreate the tabernacle, you would run into all kinds of issues because a lot of information has been left out. Rather, the author is trying to teach us something about the tabernacle. The number seven is supposed to function like a hyperlink that immediately takes us back to the seven-day creation account and the garden of Eden. The tabernacle is like a mini-Eden. It is a highly ordered space that will be taken care of by God's chosen representatives. More importantly, though, it is a space where God's presence is going to dwell in a way that is both very personal and relational. Let's start reading in verse 1:

¹ Dorsey, David A, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 77.

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¹ The LORD said to Moses, ² “Speak to the people of Israel, that they take for me a contribution. From every man whose heart moves him you shall receive the contribution for me. ³ And this is the contribution that you shall receive from them: gold, silver, and bronze, ⁴ blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, goats’ hair, ⁵ tanned rams’ skins, goatskins, acacia wood, ⁶ oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, ⁷ onyx stones, and stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece. ⁸ And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. ⁹ Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.

Right away we get a list of materials that are to be used in the construction of the tabernacle and what is important to recognize is that these things are all extremely costly. And notice where these materials are coming from? Generous donation. The tabernacle is not an afterthought, it is a priority for the Israelite community. Let’s continue reading:

¹ “They shall make an ark of acacia wood. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, a cubit and a half its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height. ¹¹ You shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and outside shall you overlay it, and you shall make on it a molding of gold around it. ¹² You shall cast four rings of gold for it and put them on its four feet, two rings on the one side of it, and two rings on the other side of it. ¹³ You shall make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. ¹⁴ And you shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark to carry the ark by them. ¹⁵ The poles shall remain in the rings of the ark; they shall not be taken from it. ¹⁶ And you shall put into the ark the testimony that I shall give you.

The first item in the list is a small box that housed the stone tablets on which the terms of the covenant were written. And it is kind of a happy coincidence that our English translations decided to call this box an ark, because it is not the same word that was used back in Genesis 6. Noah’s ark and this ark are two different Hebrew words, yet there is no doubt that the author intended that we would make a connection between these two different boxes. I want you to look back with me at Genesis 6:14 and notice the parallels and symmetry of language.

¹⁴ Make yourself an ark of gopher wood. Make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. ¹⁵ This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark 300 cubits, its breadth 50 cubits, and its height 30 cubits. ¹⁶ Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above, and set the door of the ark in its side. Make it with lower, second, and third decks.

Both arks are made out of wood. Both are covered inside and out, one with pitch the other one with gold. Finally, given the dimensions, both are rectangular in shape. The box that was in the tabernacle had a similar meaning and purpose to the box from Genesis 6. Both operated as vehicles for God's grace and mercy. Let’s continue, verse 17:

¹⁷ “You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its breadth. ¹⁸ And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. ¹⁹ Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end. Of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its

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two ends. ²⁰ The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be. ²¹ And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. ²² There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel.

Okay, so we are going to spend the majority of our time that is left talking about the mercy seat. It is worth noting the two creatures that are a part of its design—the כְּרֻבִים. These creatures existed at the boundaries of heaven and earth and function kind of like bodyguards or bouncers. For us, as the readers, we have already encountered these creatures before back in Genesis 3. After the man and the woman were exiled from the garden, God placed these creatures at the entrance. Here are the ark, they presented a visual reminder, this space was in close proximity to God's presence—something that should not be taken lightly.

Alright so let's talk about the mercy seat. The actual Hebrew word is כַּפֹּרֶת and it is only used to describe this specific item. The translation mercy seat is somewhat misleading and comes from the King James tradition. The כַּפֹּרֶת was a large golden slab that served as a cover for the ark. Its name actually comes from the verb כָּפַר which means “to atone for”. A better translation might be the “atonement lid”. Which raises the question, what is atonement? Well dear reader, you are not going to learn about that until the next book, Leviticus. The author is assuming that we have already read through the entire Pentateuch. Remember from last week, the first five books of the Bible were written as one book which was to be read and reread. So what is atonement about?

Let's say you stole my phone and you felt guilty. According to the law, it was your responsibility to not only return the item that you had taken but also to add fifteen percent of its value. Additionally, you would be required to take an innocent ram from your flock and bring it to the tabernacle. Once there, you would put your hand on the ram while the high priest slit its throat in front of you. It is pretty gnarly when you think about it, but it was a very powerful image the seriousness of sin. The priest would then burn the ram on the altar that was in the outer court and offer it to God as your replacement. In that way it would cover for your actions. Now let's say it wasn't just an individual, but it was like the entire Israelite community that had committed some form of sin. For that situation, the law prescribed that not only was a ram to be offered in their place, but also some of the blood was to be sprinkled inside the tabernacle. What if it wasn't just the entire Israelite community, but also the high priest as well, who had committed sin. That is much more serious. For that situation, the high priest was to sprinkle blood not just inside tabernacle, but on the כַּפֹּרֶת. If this all sounds very meticulous, that's because it was.

God created the sacrificial system to remind Israel of their own sin and moral brokenness. It also impressed upon them his desire to exist in relationship with them and dwell within their midst.

Part Three: The Outer Court of the Tabernacle

Learning goal: This final message will walk through the items located in the outer court of the tabernacle. Students will see how the tabernacle is a reenactment of Israel's story and ultimately, of Jesus's story.

We didn't cover a lot of ground last week, and that is okay. The ark is probably the most significant piece of the tabernacle. Today we are going to talk about the items located in the outer room. We are not going to read through the entire section, because there is a lot of material. Instead, we will jump around and I will try to hit some of the more important points.

The outer room of the tabernacle contained three distinct pieces of furniture. The first is a tall table which held the bread of the Presence. To understand the significance of the bread, we turn to Leviticus 24:5, which gives us some more detail:

⁵ “You shall take fine flour and bake twelve loaves from it; two tenths of an ephah shall be in each loaf. ⁶ And you shall set them in two piles, six in a pile, on the table of pure gold before the LORD. ⁷ And you shall put pure frankincense on each pile, that it may go with the bread as a memorial portion as a food offering to the LORD. ⁸ Every Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange it before the LORD regularly; it is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever. ⁹ And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the LORD'S food offerings, a perpetual due.”

The second furniture item was a golden lampstand and it had a really unique design. Let's read about it, starting in Exodus 25:32:

³² And there shall be six branches going out of its sides, three branches of the lampstand out of one side of it and three branches of the lampstand out of the other side of it; ³³ three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower, on one branch, and three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower, on the other branch—so for the six branches going out of the lampstand. ³⁴ And on the lampstand itself there shall be four cups made like almond blossoms, with their calyxes and flowers, ³⁵ and a calyx of one piece with it under each pair of the six branches going out from the lampstand. ³⁶ Their calyxes and their branches shall be of one piece with it, the whole of it a single piece of hammered work of pure gold. ³⁷ You shall make seven lamps for it. And the lamps shall be set up so as to give light on the space in front of it.

The lampstand is described as having seven branches with flowers coming out of flowers. And according to Exodus 27:21, there was a specific set of instructions which accompanied the maintenance of this lamp:

¹⁷ 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.

That phrase, “evening and morning”, does that remind you of something that you might have heard before? How about Genesis 1:3,

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³And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Try to imagine, if you can, this picture. There is the lamp with seven branches and seven lights. It has been designed in such a way as to invoke all sorts of garden imagery: flowers, trees, etc. I almost forgot to mention the curtains that surround this room. There is actually a really lengthy description about what these curtains in Exodus. It is one of those things that when you are reading you might think, “Okay, why would this in any way be relevant for me, it is literally a set of curtains.” But take a moment to reflect on what these curtains might have looked like. They are described as interwoven blues and purples. Let’s recap: you have this seven-branched light and it has been positioned up against a curtain with deep hues of blue and purple. At this point, I think it is obvious the image that is being recreated. It is the creation story, the garden, the trees, the seven lights representing the seven days of creation, the blue curtain possibly picturing waters of the deep, God’s light shining for the first time, and the first morning and evening before any of the other heavenly bodies existed.

Later in Leviticus 24, we actually learn that there is an inherent connection between the light and the bread. The two pieces of furniture are positioned adjacent to one another. The resulting effect is that the light would shine perpetually on the twelve loaves of bread that are perpetually fresh. It is beautiful picture of God’s light, his goodness, and his life perpetually shining on the people of Israel.

There is one more piece of furniture in the outer room, a small golden altar which was used for burning incense. Like the lamp, the priests were given specific instructions to keep it burning every morning and every evening. In Psalm 142, a connection is made between the incense and the prayers of God’s people. So you have this perpetually burning incense which symbolizes the prayers of God’s people being offered up continually before him.

Now this is where we are going to land for today. Again, if you are reading Exodus, there are actually ten full chapters detailing the construction of the tabernacle and all of the various accessories inside. Obviously, we cannot cover it all. However, I hope this series has given you a reason and purpose to read through this passage of Scripture on your own. The tabernacle design is rich with symbolism and meaning. In a very real sense, it functioned as a visual reenactment of Israel’s story. I think it is important for us as we are thinking about the tabernacle to remember that in Exodus 25:9, God tells Moses that the tabernacle and all of its furniture—down to the smallest detail—were according to his pattern.

Consequently, that story has also become our story, except we know the rest of it. Flash forward to the New Testament, the Gospel of John, chapter one. John says that Jesus “dwelt” among us. The literal word is “tabernacled” among us. John pictures Jesus as a new tabernacle. Every aspect of the tabernacle is reflected in Jesus’s life and death. Now let’s turn to one more New Testament passage, Hebrews 9:1-14. This is the most comprehensive summary of the tabernacle and its fulfillment in Jesus:

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¹ Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness. ² For a tent was prepared, the first section, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence. It is called the Holy Place. ³ Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, ⁴ having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant. ⁵ Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail. ⁶ These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, ⁷ but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people. ⁸ By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing ⁹ (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, ¹⁰ but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation. ¹¹ But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) ¹² he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. ¹³ For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, ¹⁴ how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

Very practically for us today, there is a need to immerse ourselves in God's story, our story. As we reflect on the profound story that we find in the Bible, something amazing happens. This story begins to shape and change us. Jesus's story, what we often call the gospel, is not something that we move on from now that we are saved. It is the story that we should continually return to. We want the gospel to become integrated and reenacted in our lives. We should be reading about it, singing about it, talking about it, allowing it to shape every aspect of who we are.