

Meaning of Tabernacle by Zac Poonen

(Summary of Bible-studies given at a Conference in Bangalore India - December 26 to 28, 2000)

Reading: Exodus chapters 25 to 31; and 35 to 40.



The Old Testament tabernacle was to be a sanctuary where God could dwell in the midst of Israel ([Exod.25:8](#)).

It was also a picture of Jesus Who came in the flesh and 'tabernacled' among men ([Jn.1:14](#)). There are many things about the tabernacle that give us an understanding about God's dwelling with man and also about the church - God's ultimate dwelling place.

Exactly According To The Pattern

God was very particular that every part of the tabernacle should be made exactly according to the pattern that He gave Moses ([Exod.25:9](#)). God gave Moses specific instructions about the sizes of the different parts of the tabernacle and the materials to be used for each. Many Christians do not realize the need to do everything in the church and in their lives exactly as the Lord has commanded in His Word. They allow their human understanding to decide how far to obey God and where to modify His commands.

Moses had seen the construction of magnificent pyramids in Egypt. But he did not modify God's simple pattern of the tabernacle to make it more appealing to human eyes. In every detail, he constructed it exactly as the Lord had commanded him ([Exod.39:1-40:33](#)). That was why the glory of God filled it. If Moses had been given this pattern when he was 40 years old, he would perhaps have tried to 'improve' on God's pattern with his Egyptian wisdom! The tabernacle may have looked better then - but the glory of God would have been absent. This is what has happened in many churches.

God's thoughts and ways are far higher than ours ([Isa.55:8,9](#)). Those who do not realize this will always add their human ideas to God's commandments. Only those who are eager for the glory of God to be manifested will be able to find God's perfect pattern and will for their lives.

Our Lord lived His entire life on earth fulfilling minute details of Old Testament prophecies that had been made concerning His birth, life and death. He was careful at all times to fulfill everything that was written "in the Book" concerning Him ([Heb.10:7](#)).

There are many things we can learn from the way that Jesus - the first "body of Christ" - lived on earth. For example, He was born in an ugly cowshed and grew up in simplicity, having nothing about Him that was attractive to man ([Isa.53:2](#)). The second body of Christ (the church) is to be the same. Those in the church today who try to attract people through impressive buildings and music and programs etc., have not realized this truth.

At the end of our Lord's life on earth, He could say that He had finished the work that the Father had given Him to do ([Jn.17:4; 19:30](#)). Paul too lived in such a way that he was able to complete the entire course of God's plan for his life ([2 Tim.4:7](#)). If Christians don't bother to find out what the Lord wants them to do, but instead plan their lives, according to their own wisdom, the glory of God will not rest on their lives or their ministry.

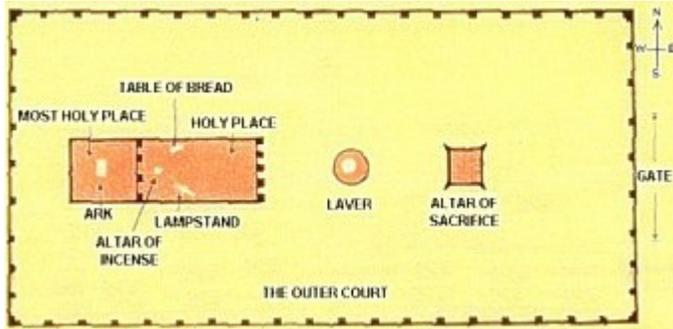
While human wisdom would have started with outlining the dimensions of the tabernacle first, before going into the smaller details, God began first of all by giving Moses the pattern for the ark of the covenant. The ark was a small piece of furniture to be placed in the smallest room of the tabernacle - the most holy place ([Exod.25:10](#)). But that room was where the glory of God was going to be present. And so that had to come first. This teaches us that everything in our lives must begin with God - even as the Bible itself begins with the words, "In the beginning God.....". We must consider God first in every decision that we take.

It was when Moses was alone with God on the mountain, fasting and praying for forty days that he saw the pattern for the tabernacle ([Exod.25:40](#)). People who are in too much of a hurry to wait on God or who care more for the opinions of men will never be able to understand the will of God.

God called Bezalel and Oholiab to build the tabernacle and He gave them supernatural abilities through the Holy Spirit to do this task ([Exod.31:1-3](#)). The power of the Holy Spirit is what we need too, to build the church today.

The Parts Of The Tabernacle

The outer court of the tabernacle was 150 feet long by 75 feet wide. A sheet of fine white linen - symbolizing the righteousness of Christ - enclosed it. That which separates those inside the church from those outside is not a different level of human righteousness, but the fact that those inside are clothed with the righteousness of Christ. The white linen also symbolizes the simplicity that should characterize the church. Babylon the harlot, on the other hand, is depicted in the book of Revelation as being grand and pompous in many ways - quite a contrast to the simplicity of the Bride of Christ (cf. [Rev.17:4](#) with 19:8).



There was only one entrance to the tabernacle – a 30-foot multi-coloured curtain on the eastern side of the tabernacle. This indicates that there is only one way to God and into the church – through Christ alone. No man can come to the Father but by Him ([John 14:6](#)).

One entered the tabernacle with his back to the sun (in the east), indicating thereby his rejection of the worship of the sun (that was common in Egypt and all over the world at that time).

In the outer court, the very first item was the altar of sacrifice – symbolizing the cross on which Christ died for our sins.

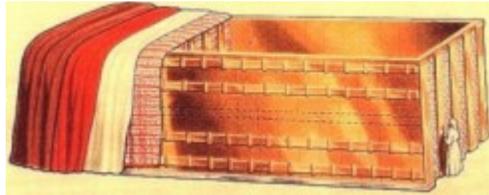
Beyond this was the laver – a large vessel full of water for washing – symbolizing both the "washing of water by the word of God" ([Eph.5:26](#)) and water baptism.

At the far end of the outer court was the tent, which had two rooms – the holy place and the most holy place. The tent was entered through a curtain at the entrance to the holy place. Between the holy place and the most holy place, was another thick curtain ("veil" – [Heb.10:20](#)).

All Israelites were permitted to enter the outer court. But only the priests could enter into the holy place. The holy place contained the altar of incense, the lampstand and the table of bread.

Into the most holy place, only the high priest could enter – and that too, only once a year, on the day of atonement, with the blood of the sacrifice. There the ark of the covenant was kept, covered by the mercy seat, and the glory of God was visibly present.

The Tent And Its Boards



The tent was 45 feet long, 15 feet wide and 15 feet high. Inside it, the holy place was 30 feet long and 15 feet wide. The most holy place was 15-feet square.

The tent was constructed with boards made of cheap acacia wood overlaid with gold. This symbolized Jesus being both God (gold) and Man (wood). It also symbolizes the members of the Body of Christ today who although human, have also been made partakers of the Divine nature ([2 Pet.1:4](#)).

Each board had two legs that sat in two silver bases for stability when resting on the desert sands. This symbolizes faith and obedience that should be found in each individual believer for stability in the desert of this world. Those who major on faith without obedience will be as unbalanced as a board with just one leg. Those who stress legalistic obedience without faith will be equally unbalanced.

These wooden boards were placed next to each other without any gap between them – symbolizing the close fellowship that God desires should exist between the members of Christ's body. Each board had four loops through which bars were placed, to hold the boards together. A fifth bar was passed internally (from end to end) through the middle of all the boards. These five bars held the boards close together and made them stable. This symbolizes that besides faith and obedience, we also need close fellowship with each other in the Body of Christ if we are to be stable Christians ourselves.

The Coverings of The Tent

The tent of the tabernacle had four coverings. The innermost covering was of fine linen with intricate designs woven into it, symbolizing the beauty of the righteousness of Christ. The second covering was made of goats' skins symbolizing Christ as the scapegoat who took our sins far away. The third covering was made of rams' skins dyed red symbolizing Jesus as our Substitute Who shed His blood for us. The outermost covering was made of badger's skins – which had a dirty brown appearance – which was always covered with the desert sand. So the most beautiful covering was visible only from the inside of the tent. The true beauty of a Christian and of the church is to be inward, not outward.

The badgers' skins symbolize "the reproach of Christ". Outwardly, the church will be misunderstood, dishonoured and reproached. In the world however, things are quite the opposite – beautiful on the outside but filthy on the inside.

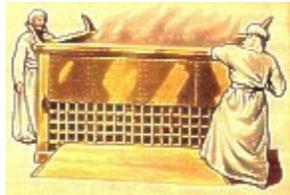
Jesus did not come to earth with an attractive outward appearance ([Is.53:2](#)). He was despised and rejected by the world. Only those who wanted godliness came to Him. It must be the same with the church. People should be drawn to the church, not by any worldly attractiveness that it has on the outside, but rather through the quality of its life and fellowship.

Those who belong to Jesus will go to Him "outside the camp of this world " and "inside the veil to fellowship with God" (See [Heb.13:13](#) and [10:19,20](#)). The vast majority of Christians however, live inside the camp and outside the veil!!

To go outside the camp means to be rejected by the world. If Jesus was misunderstood and called the prince of devils by people in His day, we the members of His family will be called by even worse names (See [Matt.10:24](#)). The reason why most Christians are popular with the world (unlike Jesus) is because they seek to please men and are diplomatic and compromising. It was not the worldly Romans or Greeks who opposed Jesus but religious Jews. The Jews hated Jesus

because He stood for God's truth without compromise. Opposition for Christians today too will come primarily from religious people – religious Christians and other religious people.

The Bronze Altar of Sacrifice



The first item in the outer court of the tabernacle was the altar of sacrifice, which was a hollow bronze enclosure placed on the ground. The sacrifices had to be placed on the ground inside the altar, for God had said that His altar was always to be one of earth (created by God and not constructed by any man - symbolizing Calvary's cross, an altar made by God Himself - [Exod.20:24,25](#)).

The altar was also not to have any steps going up to it, but only a sloping ramp - symbolizing the fact that there are no "steps to salvation" ([Exod.20:26](#)).

The altar was made of wood covered with bronze. Bronze stands for judgment. When the bronze became hot with the altar fires, the charring of the wood inside could not be seen on the outside. This symbolized the inner sufferings of Christ that no one could see ([1 Pet.4:1](#)).

Most Christians have seen only the external sufferings of Jesus on the cross. They have no idea about the inner sufferings that He endured during His earthly life, as He faced different situations and temptations each day ([Heb.4:15](#)). Jesus had no tears for His own sorrows. He wept only for ours. Godly men are also like Him. When Paul mentions a list of his sufferings in order to convince the Corinthians about his authority as an apostle, he never mentions anything about what he went through inwardly. But Paul's whole ministry came out of his inner sufferings.

The altar had four horns in the corners to which the sacrificial animals were tied, before they were slain. This speaks of the steadfastness with which Jesus set His mind to go to the cross ([Lk.9:51](#)). This steadfastness must be found in all of us too, to take up the cross every day ([Ps.118:27](#)).

The Bronze Laver

The laver of water in the outer court symbolizes the cleansing we receive by the word of God - as we hear and obey it ([Eph.5:26](#)). It also symbolizes water baptism.



God cleanses us by water first and then by the fire of the Holy Spirit - even as gold is cleansed both by water and by fire (See [Num.31:21-23](#)).

If we read and obey the old covenant, our life can become purified from many external forms of sin. This is how the Law cleanses us "by water". But Jesus spoke of sin as being a deeper issue than merely the external action. He said that those who looked at a woman with lust had actually committed adultery with her in their hearts ([Matt.5:27,28](#)). This is where the fire of the Holy Spirit cleanses us - from inward sin.

If we allow the Holy Spirit to lead us, He will show us even deeper levels of adultery than that. He will show us that admiring another woman's cooking over our wife's is also adultery! Adultery (like the love of money and many other sins) is like an onion that has many skins all the way to the center!

Washing by the word from external sins in the outer court will give us a good testimony before people. But if we do not go into the most holy place and let the fire of God cleanse us inwardly, we will never become truly spiritual. We will only remain as religious people.

The Golden Table of Bread



Inside the holy place there was a table on which 12 loaves of bread representing the twelve tribes of Israel were kept, which only the priests were allowed to eat. They ate the bread on behalf of all of Israel's tribes.

This represents Jesus as the Bread of life and also the Word of God as the bread by which we are to live ([Matt.4:4](#)).

There were twelve separate loaves in the old covenant, because Israel could not become one body. Each tribe retained its own distinctiveness. But in the new covenant, we have only one loaf of bread representing Christ's body at the Lord's table, because we are all one body, even though we are from thousands of tribes across the world.

We are all to partake of this bread, because each of us is to live by Christ our Head, through direct contact with Him, and not through leaders as it was under the old covenant.

The Golden Lampstand



The lampstand inside the holy place symbolizes the testimony of our life as well as of the local church.

The priests were to ensure that this lamp was always kept burning, indicating thereby that our public testimony must be brightly burning at all times.

In the old covenant, the lampstand was one, with seven branches. This symbolized Israel as one denomination with many branches.

But in the new covenant, we see (in the book of Revelation) that each church is represented as an individual lampstand, and that the Lord walks in the midst of them, as the Head of each lampstand ([Rev.1:20](#)).

This teaches us that new-covenant churches are meant by God to be independent units directly under the headship of Christ (unlike the tribes of Israel). But most churches today still follow the Old Testament pattern of being branches of a large denomination (one large lampstand).

Each lamp in the lampstand (symbolizing each member of a local church) was to burn brightly. Any member of a church who sins (whose light has died out), should set matters right and trim his lamp at the earliest opportunity. Otherwise, he should withdraw from his local church so that the Lord's testimony in that church is not dishonored in any way, because of him.

It is only as we follow God's pattern exactly that His glory can fill a local church.

The Golden Altar of Incense



The altar of incense inside the holy place represents prayer in Jesus' Name ([Rev.5:8](#)). Prayer is an expression of our dependence on God, and prayer in Jesus' Name (like this incense) is to rise up from our hearts to God at all times ([Exod.30:8](#); [Luke 18:1](#)). Our prayers ascend as a fragrance unto the Lord.

Moses was commanded specifically that this incense was to be prepared in a certain proportion only for the Lord and never to be made for any man ([Exod.30:37](#)). This symbolizes two things.

First of all, it symbolizes that we cannot pray to God in our own merit. The Name of Jesus is not a magic word (or a mantra) that we use to come before God. It implies that we come in the merit of the Lord Jesus alone. If we pray as those who deserve to get answers from God because of some imagined merit in us, then such prayers are not being offered in Jesus' Name. Prayer in the Name of Jesus implies that the only standing that we have before God is what we have in Christ. Those who consider themselves better than others or senior to other believers will find that God answers the prayers of others and not their own, because those others go to God without any merit of their own.

Secondly, this symbolizes that we must never pray for anything for our own benefit. Whatever we do, we are commanded to do for the glory of God alone ([1 Cor.10:31](#)). Jesus taught us to pray for the Father's name to be hallowed, for His kingdom to be established on earth and for His will to be done. Every prayer that we pray for ourselves should also be for the glory of God. This is the reason why the prayer of a righteous man is powerful - because he seeks God's glory alone in everything ([Jas.5:16](#)).

The Way Into The Most Holy Place

The tabernacle (the outer court, the holy place and the most holy place) was a picture of man - body, soul and spirit ([1Th.5:23](#)).

Just as the outer court was the only part of the tabernacle that was open and visible, our body too is the only part of us that is visible. The holy place and the most holy place are covered and invisible from the outside, just like our soul and spirit.

The most holy place, as we have already seen, was cubical in shape. The new Jerusalem is also cubical in shape ([Rev.21:16](#)). A cube has equal depth as it has height and width (seen in front).

This symbolizes that those whose depth (inner life) is not equal to their external life - the front that they project to others - cannot live in God's presence. God rejects hypocrites who give an appearance of spirituality to others, but who have no corresponding inner life (depth).

The word of God is like a sword that divides between soul and spirit ([Heb.4:12](#)). When we read God's Word, it first enters us through our body (our eyes or our ears). Then it should enter our soul (mind, emotions and will). It must instruct our mind and stir our emotions. But if it stops there and does not make us yield our will in obedience, then the Word cannot enter our spirit - and we will not grow spiritually.

For example: If we read in God's Word, that our heavenly Father will accept our prayers and offerings, only after we have asked forgiveness from those whom we have hurt ([Matt.5:23,24](#)), we may understand it and even be challenged by it. But if we do not actually go and apologize to the persons concerned, our spirit will still remain dead. This applies to every other word also that we have understood and been challenged by. It is only when we yield our will that the Word penetrates the curtain that separates the holy place (soul) from the most holy place (spirit).

Jesus came down from heaven not to do His own will but the will of His Father Who sent Him ([Jn.6:38](#)). We could say that He thus rent the curtain between His soul and spirit - by saying to His Father all through His earthly life, "Not My will but Yours be done".

This is where we are called to follow Jesus too. Many do not become spiritual because even though they understand God's will and are stirred by it, they do not give up their own will to do God's will.

When Jesus was in heaven with the Father, His will was the same as His Father's. But when He came to earth and took on a flesh like ours, He received a will of His own, which He had to deny in order to do His Father's will.

It would not have been easy for Jesus to submit to Joseph and Mary when He was a young boy, for He was perfect and they were not. But Jesus denied His own will and submitted, because that was the will of His Father for Him during those years.

This is the issue that many wives have to deal with, when they have to submit to husbands who are unsympathetic and disobedient to God. Likewise for brothers when they have to submit to elders in a church, with whom they disagree.

In Gethsemane too, Jesus did not want to drink the cup that the Father gave Him to drink, but He gave up His own will and finally drank the cup.

Denying one's own will and doing the Father's will is the secret of true spirituality.

Our spiritual life does not depend on our feelings. We can be tempted to "feel" discouraged when things are not going as we expect around us. But we can set our will to praise God - (1) because God is "the Blessed Controller" of all things in this world ([1 Tim.6:15](#)-Paraphrase), (2) because Satan has been defeated on the cross, and (3) because God has promised to make all things work together for our good.

Even when our prayers are not answered, we can still praise God and refuse to live by our feelings. Only if we continue consistently along this way, will we become truly spiritual.

If Jesus had not denied His own will consistently, all the days of His life, He would not have been a spotless Lamb. If He had done His own will even once, He could not have been a perfect sacrifice for our sins; and then the curtain into the most holy place would not have been rent either.

Jesus has inaugurated this new and living way now for us - so that we can walk on it every day ([He.10:19,20](#)).

This is not a door through which we enter, once for all. It is a way on which we have to walk all through our life. Only thus can we live in the most holy place at all times.

The Golden Ark of The Covenant



The most holy place contained the golden ark with the mercy seat as a lid on it. The ark of the covenant and the mercy-seat were together a picture of Christ as the Mediator of the new covenant between God and Man.

The mercy seat was where the blood was sprinkled on the day of atonement. It had two golden cherubs on it. Cherubs were the ones who guarded the tree of life in Eden with a flaming sword ([Ge.3:24](#)). That sword first fell on Jesus, when He died on the cross. But that sword fell on us too, for we too were crucified with Him ([Gal.2:20](#)). The only way for us to come to the tree of life (Christ) now, is by accepting this sword and allowing our self-will to be slain.

Inside the ark were kept the two tablets of stone (with the ten commandments written on them), a golden pot (with some manna) and Aaron's rod (that had come to life and budded).

Even though the manna came from heaven, when some Israelites kept it overnight, it bred worms and stank. But when the same manna was kept in the presence of God, it did not stink throughout the forty years in the wilderness. We learn from this that if we hold God's truth only in our minds, it will bring death. But if we hold it in humility in God's presence, it will remain fresh perpetually. There is an anointing and a freshness when a man who lives in God's presence preaches God's Word. But the same message, if copied and spoken by another, can be as dry as dead bones.



There was a time when people questioned the authority of Moses and Aaron (Num.16). God then asked each tribe to bring a dead tree-branch. These rods were kept overnight in God's presence. Aaron's rod alone budded during the night and brought forth fruit (Num.17). This rod was thereafter kept in the ark as a reminder to the people that God bears witness to His delegated authorities by bringing forth resurrection-life out of death. This rod also remained fresh for 40 years, teaching us that authority also remains valid only when exercised in the presence of God.

In the days of Samuel, some curious Israelites once lifted this mercy seat to see what was inside the ark and they were slain by the Lord immediately ([1Sa.6:19](#)). This shows us how dangerous and foolish it is to try to analyze the inner soul of Jesus - to try and explain how He could be both God and Man simultaneously or how He could have been tempted as we are as men, etc. We don't have to understand all this. All we need to do is believe what God has said in His Word.



The High Priest's Dress

Aaron the high priest symbolizes Jesus our High Priest. His outward dress consisted of three items.

First of all, a tunic made of fine white linen symbolizing the righteousness of Christ.

Over that he had to wear a blue robe, with bells and figures of pomegranates alternately hanging all round the bottom of the robe. Blue is the colour of the sky and speaks of heavenliness. The pomegranates symbolized the fruit of the Spirit, and the bells the gifts of the Spirit - both of which we need if we are to serve God.

On top of this robe, he had to wear an ephod, which was a multi-colored apron. The ephod had three items that came along with it:
(1) Two shoulder-plates having the names of the twelve tribes of Israel
(2) A breastplate having 12 stones that represented the twelve tribes of Israel
(3) The "Urim and Thummim" placed in a pocket of the ephod.



These three items symbolize Christ's power supporting us, His love caring for us, and His wisdom guiding us. These three are brought together in **2 Tim.1:7** as the virtues that the Spirit of God communicates to us today. gifts of the Spirit - both of which we need if we are to serve God.

The high priest had to wear a golden plate on his forehead (attached to his turban) that had these words engraved on it, "HOLINESS UNTO THE LORD". Thus Aaron was to bear the guilt found in "the holy offerings" of Israel (**Ex.28:36-38**). There is sin even in our "holy offerings"!

On the day of atonement (which was once a year), the high priest took off all these colorful clothes and went into the most holy place wearing only a simple white dress. When he came out of the most holy place, he had to put on his colorful clothes again before going in front of the people.

This symbolizes that when we go before the Lord, we must go in simplicity and humility and brokenness before Him. But when we come before the people, we must anoint our face, hiding our sacrifices and prayers and fastings from them.

Three Levels of Christian Living

The three parts of the tabernacle - outer court, holy place and most holy place - symbolize the following:

Three stages of growth:

(1) forgiven by God; (2) serving God; and (3) fellowshiping with God.

Three types of Christians:

(1) a carnal Christian; (2) a soulish Christian; and (3) a spiritual Christian.

Three ministries of the Holy Spirit:

(1) born of the Holy Spirit; (2) baptized in the Holy Spirit; and (3) led by the Holy Spirit daily.

Three attitudes towards God: (1) thanksgiving; (2) praise; and (3) worship.

(In thanksgiving, we think of God's gifts that we have received and been blessed by. In praise, we think of God's greatness and almighty power that are exercised on our behalf. But in worship, our focus shifts to God Himself, and we adore Him for Who He is.)

Three levels of light:

(1) human reason; (2) the teaching of God's Word; and (3) God's nature.

(All of us live our lives by the light and understanding that we receive from one of the above three sources. The light in the outer court and holy place was created light - the sun in the outer court and the lampstand in the holy place. But the light in the most holy place was the uncreated light of God's own presence.)

Three levels of fruitfulness:

(1) thirty-fold; (2) sixty-fold; and (3) hundred-fold.

(The good ground in the parable of the sower was also of three types, just as the bad ground was of three types (**Mark 4:1-8**). The measure of fruitfulness in the good ground depended on the measure of wholeheartedness).

Three levels of Christian maturity:

(1) babes; (2) young men; (3) fathers.

(Babes are dependent on others. Young men are zealous. Fathers are full of wisdom-**1 Jn.2:12-14**).

The way into the most holy place is through the rent curtain of the flesh that our Lord has inaugurated for us (**Heb.10:20**). The curtain does not have to be rent today, for it has already been rent. But every day we have many opportunities to walk this way and to live in the most holy place.

God's perfect will is that we should live every day in His presence. Many do not have a fresh anointing on them always, because they live either in the outer court or in the holy place. We must take up the cross daily if we are to enter through the curtain daily and live in the most holy place (**He.10:20**).

The way of the cross we must remember however, is a way and not a goal. Our goal is fellowship with the Father in the most holy place. So we do not major on the message of the cross but rather on the message of fellowship with the Father.

May we all live in that blessed fellowship all our days.

Amen and Amen.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

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