

The Tabernacle of Your Mind

a sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
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“Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the children of Israel, that they bring Me an offering. From everyone who gives it willingly with his heart you shall take My offering.... And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them. According to all that I show you, *that is*, the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishing, just so you shall make it.’” (Exodus 25:1-2, 8-9)

So begins the story of the construction of an almost incredible wilderness project, a completely portable and yet fantastically embellished sanctuary where the wisdom and power of God could be received and recognized by the people of ancient Israel. We sometimes think of it as a place of worship, and it is true that daily sacrifices and many other rituals were performed there, but more than this it was a place for the nomadic tribes of Israel that fully represented the Lord’s continual presence among them, no matter what they were doing.

It was essentially a very special and elaborate tent, but with an enclosed courtyard as well. Made with wood, leather, fabric and precious metals which, presumably, they either found in the Sinai Peninsula or brought with them from Egypt during the exodus, it consisted of three main areas or spaces. The first was a perfect cube of 10 cubits in length, breadth and height, that is, about 15 feet. To get a feeling for these dimensions note that the distance from what we call the altar, with the open Word, to the chancel rail is about 15 feet. The space between these two lecterns is also about 15 feet, and the peak of the arch above the Word is also about 15 feet. If you can imagine this space completely enclosed on three sides by wooden panels and on the fourth side and overhead by fabric and leather curtains you may have a sense of what this first room was like.

For one thing it was dark inside, since there were no windows, and the only way in or out was through the edge of the curtain. Still, the walls were stunning in every aspect, being made in panels a full 27 inches wide (demonstrate this), which meant they must have been *at least* two inches thick, and every board was overlaid inside and out with pure gold, and every one had two tenons at the bottom which were set in plates made of solid silver between the boards to hold them together. Further, each board had a series of five solid gold rings running along the length from top to bottom so that cedar rods or bars (also overlaid with gold) could be pushed through them on the inside to keep the panels aligned, and special rings were also made to hold the two back corners together at the top.

There are, of course, a lot of practical problems associated with this work, and scholars disagree on how to resolve them. For example, where would they have found trees large enough to make these boards, and how would a primitive people have cut them anyway? (There were no sawmills in the wilderness!) Well, just because tall, straight trees don’t grow in that region today doesn’t mean they never did, and assuming they did, and that they were, in fact, a unique variety of cedar, as is indicated in the text, one special characteristic of that wood is that whole logs can be split into very straight boards using fairly primitive tools. As for the gold and silver, you will recall that the people were told to “ask” and take from the Egyptians “vessels of silver and vessels of gold” when they left that land, and the Egyptians willing gave these up to them in order to be rid

of them following the ten devastating plagues. Now it says in Exodus that there were 600,000 men, not counting women and children, who left Egypt, so the amount of precious metal they carried with them could have been tremendous.

But here's the *real* point of it all. The story of this construction is deeply symbolic, and the symbolism relates precisely to the creation of a place within each human mind where the Infinite God of the universe can dwell and provide *life itself, instruction and guidance* for us in all the things that establish His kingdom on this earth and in the heavens.

The wooden panels represent what is called the merit of righteousness, that is, the credit that belongs to the Lord alone for all the good that anyone can do because HE inspires it, HE provides for it, and HE empowers us to do it. The gold overlaid on everything, including the rings and connecting bars, signifies the pure goodness of His love. And the silver of the bases used to hold the panels together signifies the truth of His wisdom providing order, connection and stability to everything above. Remember, this whole thing – and there is much more we have to review – was assembled and disassembled regularly and often as the people journeyed through the wilderness on their way to the promised land, a journey that took them 40 years! So the pieces had to be made “just so,” and carefully handled, protected and preserved for the purpose. All this is designed to communicate to us the tremendous importance of creating and preserving that special “place” in our minds for the Lord Himself to dwell, to motivate and to guide us throughout the journey of our lives.

Now it is a principle of intelligent design that everything about a building should reflect and embody some aspect of its use. So the walls and foundations, for example, are NOT designed until the core purpose is defined. And then everything follows as an extension of that core purpose. So it is significant that the first thing required and described in the plan for the tabernacle is *the ark of the covenant*, the precious gold plated BOX in which the Ten Commandments written on the two tables of stone were kept. We are not going to review the details of the ark today (we won't have time), but it will be obvious that this represents the core elements of all that the Lord provides, the very essence of His love and wisdom encapsulated in ten simple rules of life. But the BOX was kept in this very special, secluded place called “the holy of holies,” or sometimes “the inner sanctum.” WHY?

Well, first of all, it was protected there – protected from the wind, sand and grit of the elements outside, AND from possible abuse or defilement by the people themselves, since only the high priest was ever allowed to go into that place. The meaning of this is clear when we think about it: – there is a deep, secret place within each of our minds where God dwells with us, keeping us connected to Himself through the presence of His love and wisdom *no matter what we may think or do*. It is called in our teachings the celestial degree of the mind, the very inmost or highest level of human life, the place where God connects with us through His love – beyond thought, beyond reasoning, beyond corruption – although we certainly can make a conscious decision to pervert *its effect* on us. Furthermore, it's not *really* completely dark in there; it only looks dark when approached from the outside. The reason for this is that the eastern wall was a curtain made entirely of white linen, covered by a veil of multi-colored linen, both of which would have let some filtered light come in. Besides, the precious stones on the high priest's breastplate flashed with colored light, representing *interior perceptions* of the truth *from* His love *through* His Word, to communicate specific messages relating to our lives, and if we will receive

those perceptions it is important for us to be isolated, removed now and then from the distractions of the world and to have, as we might say, the curtains drawn.

Now again, if you will recall, the north and south walls of the inner sanctum extended another 20 cubits, or 30 feet *beyond* that special room to form another room called “the holy place.” To give an impression of the size of that space you can imagine it extending from the chancel rail back to about the mid-point between the two steel roof supports, near the next-to-last window, about 2/3rds of the way to the back of the church, the width being the same as before (roughly from the midst of each pew to the midst of the one on the other side), the walls being the same height as before. This whole area was also covered by the linen veil and curtain, with the addition of two more layers of sewn *leather* – one of ram’s skins and the other apparently of kid’s skins – across the roof and down the sides, providing a secure barrier against the elements. Great care was required in the manufacture of all these curtains, including another linen “gate” at the eastern end of the room to provide a private place for three very special activities.

Inside this relatively lofty, private space were three critical furnishings, a table for special bread, which was made fresh and placed there every day, an elaborate, solid gold, seven-branched lampstand, and an altar for burning incense. Again, the point of it all is the symbolism, and in this room we now see represented the *conscious* level of the mind, the level of understanding, will and determination, the level of thought, affection and the intent to act.

This room was a little brighter than the first, and being larger, included the ministry of priests other than Aaron who prepared and arranged the bread, tended the lamps and burned incense there every day. The bread (12 loaves, one for each tribe) with its table represents the good of love that we receive as a conscious affection for the Lord and His Word, a conscious acknowledgment of Him as the source of all good. The lamps, and specifically the *light* of the lamps, represents the truth of the Word that gives understanding to the thoughtful, rational mind. And the incense represents the whole sphere of innocence and co-operation that we offer to the Lord when we determine to do His will.

Interestingly, while the linen curtains that form the *inner* coverings of the holy place represent the simple truths of the literal sense of the Word, the leather skins forming the *outer* layers of the roof and walls correspond to the rational and philosophical arguments that are drawn from experience and worldly knowledge to support the truths of revelation and actually *connect* our thoughts and affections with the issues of practical daily life. For a covering is not only a roof or wall, it is also a boundary that defines the *relationship* between one place and another. So, like the curtains at the eastern ends of both rooms, it is not only a barrier, it is also a gateway or link. And the point here is that the activities of the conscious, rational mind (the middle area) *link* or connect the deeper realities of the Lord’s most holy presence within us to the practical realm of co-operation in the whole wide world of our daily lives.

So we come at last to the outer courtyard of the tabernacle which represents this outward life among others in the world. This space was as you would expect considerably larger than the gold-paneled rooms just described, and of course it had no roof, only walls made of linen hung from posts carefully erected all around the perimeter, set its bases of brass or copper and staked with ropes and special pegs. The wall was 50 X 100 cubits, thus 75 X 150 feet – roughly three times the length of the seating area of this chapel and nearly twice as wide – and five cubits

(about 7 ½ feet) high. The tent itself was centrally placed at the western end of the space inside, and at the eastern end near the entrance there was a large brass or copper altar for burnt offerings, that is, animal sacrifices, and behind that, a little to the south, was a two-level brass or copper basin called a *laver* which was used by the Levites, basically the priests' servants, to conduct the ritual washing of their hands and feet.

These sacrifices and the ritual washings both clearly represent the activities of our *natural* life in response to the promptings of the celestial and spiritual degrees within. To review, the Lord's deep and sacred, interior presence within us is represented by the holy of holies, not normally accessible by any conscious thought or reflection other than the knowledge and acknowledgment that He is there. Sometimes we get flashes of insight or perception from this holy presence, but for the most part it is the larger room, the holy *place* with its bread, its lights and incense that reflects the uses of the rational mind, consciously receiving His Divine love and wisdom in will and thought, and in determination to act. Now, finally, we have the sphere of outward life where we acknowledge in word and in deed that we must willingly give up, or sacrifice, our own thoughts and feelings about what is good, acknowledging that everything true and useful comes from the Lord, and where we must cleanse ourselves of the impurities of our sensual life so that we do not defile the goodness and the truth OR the uses that the Lord gives us to enjoy.

This is the natural plane of the mind – still within us, still part of us, but connecting us immediately with the world outside, with other people and events and things that give our lives meaning apart from ourselves alone and that contribute to the formation of mutually supportive communities in heaven and on earth. These communities may be likened to the families of the twelve tribes of Israel, all organized in their encampment around the tabernacle in a particular order, some on the north side, some on the south, some to the east and some to the west, all contributing their part to the unity of the whole and the fulfillment of every other part.

The story of the tabernacle of Israel is the story of how our whole mind is organized by the Lord and how it works to receive His love and wisdom. Today we have covered only the barest outline of this order and process, but hopefully it has been enough to illustrate the depth of understanding available to us in the symbolism of the Word, and to provide a framework within which we can recognize His inspiration, guidance and power.

But what is our responsibility flowing from all this? Can we *build* this tabernacle for the Lord, or is it *given* to us? What do you think? The PLAN is obviously God-given. But where will the materials come from? Who will assemble them? And who will use and care for the completed work? We know that the fullness, holiness and power of the Lord's Word is in the literal stories. Can we take THIS story and find ourselves in it, and most importantly, find the Lord in it so that we can see how to co-operate with Him? THAT is the ultimate goal, and that is the purpose of all the teaching about the tabernacle of ancient Israel.

Amen.

Lessons: Exodus 25 & 26: selections
 Children's talk on the Tabernacle

Psalm 27:1-6; Arcana Caelestia 9478-9479