

The Tabernacle: God's Dwelling Place Among Men

God made His objective with Israel known before the covenant with Israel was established. He declared that if Israel would obey Him, they would be to Him a "special treasure" and "above all peoples (Ex. 19:5)."

Furthermore, they would be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (19:6)." God would neither be one who was disinterested in the nation He created nor an absentee ruler who directed the affairs of His people from afar. Clearly, a unique and intimate relationship was the goal when God declared, "I will dwell among the children of Israel and will be their God (Ex. 29:45)."

If God is going to be among His people and direct their affairs, He should have a house suitable for His dwelling. This place could not be any common place. The whole earth, corrupted from early after the creation, would not be worthy for God's presence. Therefore, God's house would have to be a consecrated house, a dwelling place purified and set apart for holy purposes. Man would be inadequate to decide or provide for God what manner of house He should have; therefore, God laid out the plans for His own residence.

Tabernacle means literally "tent" and was so designed because it would be portable. It would be moved from place to place as the Israelites continued in their journey to the Promised Land, a journey that would be prolonged by forty years due to faithlessness. Later, the Tabernacle would be replaced with the Temple, an immobile structure that would be located in Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish nation. Both would be merely provisional dwelling places, each a shadow of the "greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation (Heb. 9:11)." The construction and function of the Tabernacle (Temple) would be rich with symbolism, preparing for the ultimate Tabernacle of God that would be established in the human heart. For the present God laid out an extremely detailed pattern for construction of the tabernacle and for service in it by His priests. Exodus 25-31:11 records those directions.

The precise plans for constructing and serving in the Tabernacle are not merely Divine caprice. Sometimes it is difficult to perceive everything that God intends in his work, but we can be assured that there is significant purpose in it all. Each element of the Tabernacle and its particular arrangement foreshadowed a future and more perfect reality. For example, the Bronze Laver, where the priests washed (Ex. 29:4; 40:30-31) prior to being sprinkled with blood (Ex. 29:10-21) as they were consecrated for ministry in the Lord's House, foreshadowed New Testament baptism where the sinner is cleansed in the process of receiving the atoning blood of the Son of God, sanctifying him for life in the Body of Christ. Another example is the arrangement of the Mercy Seat above the Ark of the Covenant which, among other things, contained the stone tablets of the Law, symbolizing that "mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13)."

There is inadequate space here to consider each element of the Tabernacle and the future reality of which it is a shadow, but these

examples once again illustrate the tutorial nature of those things that preceded the Christian era. The Tabernacle arrangement provided the place for God to take up residence with a nation of people. When the work was finished and all purification procedures were completed, the cloud that led Israel by day "covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle (Ex.40:34)." The High Priest would once a year enter into the Holy of Holies, the private chambers of the Lord located behind the Veil. There he would offer atonement for his own sins and the sins of the people. Thus, the Tabernacle served multiple purposes. It provided a place of residence on earth for the God of Heaven, the point of contact between God and a small portion of mankind, and a temporary solution for sin. But the Tabernacle did not complete the Divine objective. It foreshadowed the true reality when God would touch the hearts of men and make His dwelling place there; a blessing offered to all men through His Son, Jesus Christ, who would take away their sins permanently.

In the Tabernacle God came closer to man than at any time since the Creation. Yet, it was not as close as when, through Christ, He would dwell with men in their hearts, where true worship begins and ends. The ultimate goal of God's work with man is beautifully pictured in the Revelation of John where a loud voice from heaven declares, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God (Revelation 21:3)."