

Lesson 1: Introduction to the Tabernacle

Read: Exodus 24:12 - 25:9

In Exodus, God performed many miracles and rescued the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt (*circa* 1450 B.C.). In the passage, the Israelites had been wandering in the wilderness for a little less than a year. God summons Moses up to Mount Sinai to give him instructions regarding the building of a special structure called the tabernacle.

Upon completion, the tabernacle was a mobile tent with portable furniture that the people traveled with and set up wherever they pitched camp. The tabernacle would be in the center of the camp, and the 12 tribes of Israel would set up their tents around it according to tribe.

The tabernacle was a sign of God dwelling among His people. He appeared as a pillar of cloud over the tabernacle by day and a pillar of fire by night in the sight of all Israel. The people would not set out on their journey unless the cloud lifted. It was definitely a powerful visual statement indicating God's presence among them.

Discussion:

A visual dwelling

1. Where did God first meet with Moses? Were other people allowed to go and meet God there too? To the common Israelites, was God in the midst of them, or far away from them?

On Mount Sinai. Only Moses and Joshua were allowed up on the mountain. To the common Israelites, God was far away from them.

2. After Moses remained on Mount Sinai for 40 days receiving commandments from God regarding the tabernacle, the people did something completely out of line. Read about this event Exodus 32:1-10. What does this show about the people's nature and how they wanted to worship?

After ten generations of living in Egypt, it was not surprising that the Israelites mimicked the Egyptians in fashioning a visual idol of their own. This act of disobedience demonstrated their need to follow and worship a God who was visually tangible. They needed to see their leader meet with God in a concrete place of worship and not disappear far up on a mountain.

3. Tabernacle literally means "tent" or "dwelling." Read Exodus 29:45-46. Why do you think God chose to come close and live in the midst of Israel? What does this say about Israel as a nation?

God used the tabernacle to show His people that He chose to live among them. He did not remain far away, but came close. It also provided visual evidence of God's presence to the Israelites, which was both a comfort and a warning not to have other gods in their midst. To other nations, it showed that the God was with Israel, and that she was His chosen nation.

God was making a statement about His relationship with the Israelites. He had chosen them to be His special people to communicate to the world about Himself. Israel was an insignificant nation and its people had nothing in themselves to boast about, but that was why God chose them – so that it would be by His sovereign choice, not their own merit.

A lesson of unquestionable authority

4. Read Exodus 25:9 again. God was about to give some very specific instructions about how each component of the tabernacle was to be built, and here He told Moses to follow everything exactly as He commanded it (we will learn more about the details in subsequent lessons). What does this say about God's relationship with His people? What would have happened if Moses strayed from God's pattern?

All the components of the tabernacle are part of an intricate visual aid to illustrate God's relationship with His people. One aspect of this was God's requirement for complete obedience. The building of the tabernacle was not to differ from God's blueprint. These rules were not intended to burden the people, but to show God's unquestionable authority and holiness. They emphasized that people could only come to God on God's terms, not on their own. Any straying from God's commandments could result in death.

(Extra information – optional: In addition to the building of the tabernacle, the Israelites also were commanded to obey reverently in the way they worshipped. Any irreverence or ritual uncleanness could result from an individual being cut off from his people or in death. For example, the anointing oil for the tabernacle and the incense for the alter of incense – made from God's own prescribed formulas of spices – were both declared holy by God and could only be used for the purpose of the tabernacle; anyone else using the same formula for their own consumption would be cut off from Israel. The special garments for the priests were holy; if they did not wear the right clothing in serving the Lord, they could die. Also see Leviticus 10:1-3 for a related incident.)

A projection of God's redemptive plan

5. Read John 1:14. The word “dwelling” in this verse is the same word for “tabernacle” in the Old Testament. How does this verse relate Jesus to the Old Testament tabernacle? What does this tell us about the purpose of the tabernacle?

In John 1:14, God came in living flesh to “dwell” or to “tabernacle” among His people. Jesus Christ fulfilled the picture of the Old Testament tabernacle by walking upon the earth and living among people. He was living, visual proof of God’s presence among men. Not only so, but through His work on the cross, He provided people a way to worship and approach God. The tabernacle was a prophetic projection of Jesus Christ.

6. Read Revelation 21:1-4. As we can see, the theme of the tabernacle begins in Exodus and continues through the Bible to its last pages. In this passage, where is the tabernacle? What does this tell us about God’s plan regarding the tabernacle from the beginning?

In Revelation 21, God’s tabernacle was now among His redeemed people, in heaven. God’s plan was and is to dwell with His people. The Old Testament tabernacle was a visual aid to show the Israelites what it meant for God to dwell among them, and what that required for that (complete obedience). It was a projection of Jesus Christ, who was the true tabernacle and gave people access to God. In heaven, all those who believed in Christ will enjoy God’s presence among them in a true sense, not just as “a copy and shadow of heavenly things” (Hebrews 8:5).

Optional further reading: The tabernacle was a temporary structure and forerunner of the more permanent temple that Solomon built. For further information on Solomon’s temple, read 2 Samuel 7:8-13 and 1 Kings 5 and 6.