

Sermon 95, A Literary Tour of Yahweh's Dwelling, Exodus 25:10-40

Proposition: The furniture of God's dwelling reveals the kind of person He is.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this evening to the passage you've all been waiting for — the first installment of the tabernacle's furniture. I'm joking — but with a point. Why does the process of leaving Egypt, Ten Plagues and all, get 15 chapters — the same number as the instructions for building the Tabernacle? The answer, of course, is that both narratives are equally important. The exodus was incredibly important; it was the historically unparalleled time when God acted to free His people from slavery in Egypt! But the building of the Tabernacle is equally important, for it is the first time in history when God committed to live in a certain place with His people. The instructions to God's people on how to build the tabernacle take up seven chapters, and we are merely looking at the first of them tonight. We are going to look at four furniture items and see what they have to tell us about God and His relationship with His people.

As I've observed many times, you don't really know a man until you've been in his home. When you see how he lives, that explains a lot. That reveals a lot. That makes many other things clear. Well, in the same way, to take this tour of Yahweh's home, or tent, reveals to us things about Him that we couldn't learn in any other way. So let's dive in.

I. The Overall Points

If you look around the near east, you'll see that this Tabernacle is not quite unique. Portable tent shrines were well known in the region, and have been used into modern times in Arabia. In one Egyptian tomb was found an image of the jackal god with carrying poles attached, exactly like what's described for the Ark of the Covenant and the Table of Showbread. What does this mean? That God speaks in time and history, that He reveals Himself to real people in real time and real contexts. We would not expect Him to tell ancient Israel to build a structure analogous to a Walmart in which to worship Him. We would expect Him to tell them to build something that was rather comparable to the temples and tent shrines found in Babylon, Egypt, and the Hittite lands. The differences are where the meaning lies, and of course the great and all-subsuming difference is that there is no statue of the god in this Tabernacle. Yahweh cannot be represented by any engraving or work of human craftsmanship. He lives in the Tabernacle, all right, but He cannot be contained by it.

A. God Dwells With His People

Yes, God dwells with His people, just as the gods of the nations dwell in their temples. But Yahweh God is invisible, uncontained by the structures that humans build. The tabernacle could have been ten times bigger, or fifty times bigger — but as Solomon pointed out, heaven, and the heaven of heavens, cannot contain Him; how much less could any tent, no matter how large?

B. God Travels with His People

But though God is not contained by the tent, He is present in it, listening to His people, receiving their worship, and revealing Himself to them. And He travels with them. He goes with them. As we talked about last week, this is incredible. The junior partner is typically the one who has to travel, the one who has to make the sacrifice to get together. We visit our parents several times for each time our parents visit us. But here, God doesn't make Israel come to Him. He comes to them. The self-abasement, the self-lowering, is astonishing to behold. Again, even before we take the tour of what's inside God's house, we're already learning what He's like. The very fact that the God of the universe is living in *this* neighborhood tells us everything we need to know about the kind of King He is. He took it a step farther by sending His Son to be born in a stable. This is a God who associates with the lowly.

C. God's House Is Richly Furnished in Gold

Yet though He associates with the lowly, He doesn't embrace a drab aesthetic. Far from it. His house is richly furnished, with lots of gold-plated objects, costly colors and fabrics, and precious stones. The place of God's dwelling is beautiful, even sublime. We may rightly condemn the excesses of Baroque-era Roman Catholic churches in South America, but the fact remains that we often err the other direction, making our church buildings too plain, too spare, even (dare I say it) too ugly. Yes, the church building is no longer God's house; it is the house of God's house, if I may coin a ridiculous

phrase. In other words, we should be taking more care to decorate the temple than the temple's outer shell. We as a group are the dwelling place of God; we need to be beautiful and sublime, morally speaking. Is your life golden? Would anyone say "Yes, if God were going to dwell in a human being that's how the human being would talk, act, and look?"

Well, those are just three general observations that apply across the board, to the tabernacle building and all the furniture within it.

II. The Ark of the Covenant, vv. 10-16

But God starts His commands by describing the Ark of the Covenant and telling Moses to build it. This was a fairly small chest, maybe 3 ft. 9 in. by 2 ft. 3 in. But the point of the Ark is not in its dimensions, or in its materials. We don't know how it was gold-plated; I always assumed that it was dipped into a vat of liquid gold, but apparently it was more likely covered in gold leaf, or possibly had thin gold plates nailed to it. Examples of both kinds of gold-covered boxes have been found in Egypt.

A. God Keeps Covenant

Well, what does the Ark of the Covenant teach us? It teaches us that God keeps His covenants. If He enters into a pact with you, if He makes a promise to you, He will never break it. To show that He was serious about being Israel's God, He tied Himself to this little golden chest and called it "the chest of the covenant." And He kept it in His throne room. The Ark was, at the most basic level, a symbol of the covenant between God and Israel. He incarnated His covenanted presence with His people in this golden box. That's why it's called "the Ark of the Covenant." It's about the covenant.

B. God Keeps the Ten Commandments, v. 16

And inside the golden box were placed the original Ten Commandments, written with the finger of God Himself. This is mentioned twice, in vv. 16 and 21, so you don't miss it. The box holds the law; God literally keeps the Ten Commandments, protecting and guarding them in His box. Many ANE covenant documents were placed in the footstools of the gods inside their temples; this one is no exception. Though the ark is not specifically called Yahweh's footstool, based on the regional parallels it seems that we are to think of the Ark of the Covenant as being God's footstool. His throne was too big for the tabernacle; He is far too large for the universe. But under His feet, the Ark of the Covenant stands for His commitment to His covenant, the text of which is summed up in the Ten Words.

III. The Atonement Lid, vv. 17-22

The next item of furniture described is the atonement lid, the piece that goes on top of the ark and covers its contents.

A. God Covers the Law

What does this piece of furniture teach us? That God covers the law. What does that mean? That God perfectly obeys the law, and that the law is exactly the same size as His ways. But it means further that when the law accuses and says "These people have broken their end of the covenant," God says "That's covered. I've already covered it."

B. God Provides a Way of Atonement

This *kapporet* or "atonement cover," translated "propitiation" in the LXX, is the item that the High Priest used to make atonement for the people's sins annually. This lid, as a permanent piece of

furniture in God's house, speaks to the reality that He is committed to solving His covenant people's transgressions of the law. Atonement is not something that God does once in a while; He doesn't have to borrow a piece of atonement furniture from Baal; He keeps one around all the time.

Is that not glorious, brothers and sisters? Are you prepared to realize the greatness of the God who lives this way, thinks this way, and relates to you in this way? Right with the law, right with the covenant, sits the atonement lid, because God knew from day one that His people were going to break the law and violate the covenant.

C. God Speaks to His People through the Mediator

This atonement lid is an amazing piece of furniture, for not only does God use it to cover the law, to deal with breaches of the covenant, and to rest His feet on — He also uses it as a place of meeting. God's house has a "parlor," which in French literally means "speech" and refers to a room just for talking in. Well, this room is not just for talking in, but it is for talking in, and the atonement lid highlights that reality. There God will meet with Moses; there He will meet with the priest who represents Israel, and there He will speak to Israel.

What a glorious gift! God speaks to His people through Moses or his successor as Mediator. The people need no longer be ignorant, lost, cut off from their God. They have provision made right here by God Himself for their needs.

D. God Is Guarded by Cherubim

Furthermore, God is guarded by cherubim. The two golden cherubs on the atonement lid make it clear that this is a throne room piece of furniture. You've all seen it in the movies. What is a ubiquitous feature of throne rooms? Guards. The heavenly cherubim serve this function, as the cherub with a flaming sword standing outside the locked gates of Eden makes clear.

God spends a bit of space describing these cherubim, with their two wings outstretched. I'm not going to get into what their pose means, etc.; I don't know what it means. But their presence signals that you are in the royal presence. God, the king of heaven and earth, condescends to meet with His priest in His throne room, with two cherubim guarding on the side.

IV. The Table for the Bread of the Presence, vv. 23-30

The next item of furniture in God's house is a table, set with bread and dishes.

A. God Prepares a Table for Us

As Psalm 23 puts it so well, God prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies. He also prepares a table in His own presence. The ANE temples had a table for the god to eat from; Yahweh doesn't eat from this table.

B. God Feeds His People with His Own Bread

Instead, He feeds His people. That's not mentioned here, but Leviticus 24 makes clear that the bread is for Aaron and his sons to eat. The bread, called "the bread of the face/presence," is marked by its name as Yahweh's special bread. He doesn't feed His people with ordinary bread, but with bread that His face has shined upon for an entire week. The very bread of God's house, from the Lord's table, is for His people. Other gods have to be fed; our God feeds. The message is clear. The generosity of our Heavenly Father is beyond anything we would dare ask or think. It is real, it is glorious, and it is

ongoing. Every week, He feeds His people. I need hardly mention Jesus as the bread from Heaven that feeds the world; clearly all of that, all the symbolism of the Lord's Table, was already foreshadowed in the tabernacle.

V. The Menorah, vv. 31-40

The final item of furniture we'll look at today is the menorah, the famous seven-branched lampstand that remains a symbol of Judaism to this day. You're familiar with its shape; on top of it would be set lamps that burned olive oil in order to light the dim interior of the tabernacle.

A. The Light's On and Somebody's Home

What does the menorah mean? Again, before we look for the esoteric, let's try to look for the obvious. Just like a table means a place to eat and a cover called "the atonement cover" means "a piece of furniture with which to do atonement," so a lampstand means that the lights are on. This house of God isn't dark and empty. The lights are on, and Somebody's home. God is present; this is a warm, welcoming, homey place.

The house of God should not be dark and empty; it should be brightly lit and bursting with life. Solomon's temple had 10 menorahs; our sanctuary has six ceiling fans with four bulbs each, plus six spotlights at the front. We talked about this in terms of Eutychus' death too. Why does Luke mention that there were many lamps in the place? Not because he just likes random details, but because he wants to let us know that in Christian worship, the house lights are up. This is a theme, brothers and sisters. If you go into a church that keeps the sanctuary dark, go out again. That church has not picked up on the clear biblical testimony that our worship is a bright affair.

B. The Menorah

The menorah has at least three other symbolic meanings that I want to touch on briefly.

1. The Tree of Life

The first is its shape. It sure looks a lot like the drawings and carvings of the tree of life that we have found in the ANE. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is gone — but the tree of life is still found in the presence of God. The almond blossoms on the menorah underline its explicitly tree-like presentation.

In the presence of God is light. That's obvious. But that light is symbolically tied to the fruitful tree and to life itself, the life that comes from the tree of life. The light of the two trees that Tolkien speaks of has a deep symbolic resonance precisely because he ripped it off from the Bible's conceptual world.

2. The Church, Rev. 1

The second thing this menorah stands for is the church; Christ walks among the golden lampstands in Rev. 1, and John is told in so many words "The seven lampstands are the seven churches." In what way does the menorah symbolize the church?

3. The Light of the World

That's easy. It's a light. Jesus said that He was the light of the world, and He also called us, His followers, the light of the world. The two things go together. His light illuminates us; He is the sun, we the moon. We shine simply by reflecting Jesus' light out to the rest of the world. The church is

portrayed as a lampstand because we simply hold up Jesus and let His light shine out to the whole world.

In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. The Lord's table is lit up by the Lord who is the light of the world and perfect fulfillment of the menorah which is both light and tree of life.

Brothers and sisters, you've seen part of the furniture of your God's house. Does it make you trust Him more? Love Him more? Desire Him more? Jesus is all the world to us, and He is present in the tabernacle. Love Him. Bask in His light. Seek Him for atonement. Find the law perfectly kept and perfectly covered in Him. Eat with Him at His table, for He is also the living bread. Amen.