

Sermon 120, Building, Furnishing, and Servicing the Tabernacle, Exodus 36:8-39:32

Proposition: Israel carried out to the letter God's instructions for His dwelling place; how much more will Christ carry out God's will for His dwelling place!

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, as you may have heard, virtually no one has died on a commercial US flight since 2014. Flying is just about the safest thing you can do these days. Why is that? My friends, if there is a single word that explains this near-miracle, it is the word "checklist." Before any plane is allowed to get off the ground, every last system and feature on that plane is meticulously gone over and checked off. Nothing is left to chance in the maintenance, repairs, fueling, piloting, routing, loading, or anything else. It's all written down on a lot of clipboards and checked off piece by piece by the ground crew and pilots.

Why do I bring this up? Because we have looked verse-by-verse at the instructions for building the tabernacle. Now, we have this huge section, three chapters long, that describes in numbing detail how every last instruction was carried out. You may find this strange, uncouth, hard to follow — maybe you even skipped to Leviticus, and then on to Numbers, last time you got to this place in reading through the Bible. But here's the thing: worshiping God is important.

It's incredibly important. It's so important that it's worth checking to be sure that every element of it is in place. In short, this section of Exodus is the checked-off preflight checklist. Before the tabernacle can be put into service, before God can move into it, the checklist has to be completed. That's what this passage is about. What we'll see in it is that Israel carried out to the letter God's instructions for His dwelling place; how much more will Christ carry out God's will for His dwelling place!

I. Building the Tabernacle, 36:8-38

The first thing that the children of Israel built was the tabernacle.

A. Curtains, vv. 8-19

They made all the curtains and clasped them together to be the actual material of the tent.

B. Boards, vv. 20-34

They made the board frames over which the curtains would be stretched.

C. Veils, vv. 35-38

And they made the veils, one to hang between the holy place and the most holy place, and another to be the door of the tabernacle.

As we pointed out some months ago, the overwhelming impression of all these veils and all this fabric is that God is hidden deep inside the tent. He is not visible or even totally available. He is covered by all the veils. God is dwelling among them, but He is still distant from them. The tabernacle is not the ultimate and final version of His presence. It's a good step in the right direction, though.

II. Furnishing the Tabernacle, 37:1-38:20

The longest section speaks of the furniture of the tabernacle. Let's quickly review what we saw about each of these furniture items. Remember, we were looking for the obvious about each item.

A. The Ark of the Covenant, 37:1-9

The ark is the focus of God's presence in the tabernacle. It holds the tablets of the law, which define God's relationship with Israel — but it also is covered by the Mercy Seat, the place where atonement is made for the broken law. The children of Israel made this, the holiest item ever created by the hand of man. It represented the gospel — that God rules us by His law, but saves us by the atoning blood sprinkled in His presence by His high priest.

B. The Table of Showbread, 37:10-16

The table of showbread with the 12 loaves on it symbolizes the people of God basking in the light of His presence. It conveys the same message that the tabernacle as a whole does. That message is Immanuel, God with us.

C. The Lampstand, 37:17-24

The lampstand says that God is light and that in Him is no darkness at all. It was placed to illuminate God's dwelling place to say "The light's on and somebody's home," and to shine the light of God on the people of God.

D. The Incense Altar, 37:25-29

The incense altar symbolizes our prayers ascending to God. It was placed inside God's dwelling because God wanted His space to be permeated by His smell.

E. The Altar of Burnt Offering, 38:1-7

The altar of burnt offering straddled the path into the tabernacle, showing that there is no access to God without passing through the consuming fire. Without sacrifice, you can't enter His dwelling place.

F. The Bronze Laver, 38:8

Nor can you enter dirty. The priests had to be cleansed to enter the presence of God — yet another prefiguration of the cleansing work of Christ and of our baptism by His Spirit.

There is an intriguing note here about the radical sacrifice of the women who served in the tabernacle. We know nothing of how they served, but we know that they did serve, and that they sacrificed their mirrors to make the bronze basin.

Let me just say that in those days, a mirror was an extremely expensive and valuable object. If you've ever tried to look at yourself in polished metal, say a chrome bumper or a car door, you know that it's nowhere near as accurate as a flat glass mirror with silver backing — the kind that we keep in profusion in all our houses. The bronze laver was made from melted-down mirrors. How many mirrors must have been contributed to make such a giant bronze item? How much were Israel's women willing to sacrifice, how much must they have coveted the mirrors of their Egyptian mistresses which they got at the Exodus and now, a few months later, voluntarily turn in for the tabernacle? Brothers and especially sisters, marvel at the grace of God that changes hearts and reorders priorities.

G. The Courtyard, 38:9-20

The final part of the tabernacle structure was the courtyard, a large fenced area in which to sacrifice animals. The courtyard too emphasizes God's separation and distance from His people. If you put your house in the middle of a large fenced yard, are you saying "Hi, I want to be very friendly"? I don't think so.

III. Servicing the Tabernacle, 39:1-32

Well, though the structure itself and the furniture for it were prepared, there was more that had to be done.

A. Making the Priests' Clothes, vv. 1-29

The next step was to make the clothing for the priests. That was a ton of work; their clothes were for glory and for beauty. As we saw, the task of a priest is to repair and maintain man's relationship with God. These priests were constituted priests by their special holy garments, to the point where they are threatened with death if they attempt to be priests without these garments. Remember what Ex. 28:43 says about the priestly underwear? "And they shall be on Aaron and on his sons when they enter the tent of meeting, or when they approach the altar to minister in the holy place, so that they do not incur guilt and die. It shall be a statute forever to him and to his descendants after him." This is true not only of the underwear, but of all the robes.

Here's how I put it some months ago: "To approach God without being clothed in this glorious, beautiful garb is to bear your guilt and die. You cannot approach, cannot be priest,

without the right clothing. That's because the Levitical priesthood is derivative. These priests are priests by an extrinsic power, the power of clothing. But our great high priest is priest by an intrinsic power, the power of an indestructible life."

B. Defining the Priests' Task: Holiness, vv. 30-31

In particular, the task of the priest is to exist for God. He is to be holy, holy to the point where he is literally required to wear a label that says "Holy to Yahweh." The priests' purpose is to serve God by maintaining His relationship with His people. They exist for God; they do what God wants done.

So all the work was finished, brothers and sisters. We are even told the exact weight of all the metal used, in good bureaucratic fashion.

IV. Application

So what do we take away from this whirlwind tour?

A. God Had His People Build Him a Dwelling Place Among Them

First is the historical fact: God had his people build a dwelling place so that He could dwell among them.

B. God Described Every Detail of His Dwelling Place

Secondly, God described every detail of this dwelling place. He showed them exactly what He wanted, told them exactly what He wanted, and had them do exactly what He wanted. It was totally according to plan.

C. Now Christ Is Making Us into God's Dwelling Place

Now, brothers and sisters, Christ is making us into God's dwelling place. If you think the level of attention to detail in the tabernacle is impressive, think about the level of attention to detail in the church! Jesus is like Bezalel and Oholiab, only perfect. He does everything right; He has it all down pat. He is building, furnishing, and servicing His church.

Brothers and sisters, how do we build the church? By being living stones, coming to Jesus and letting Him fit us into the church. If you want to be part of the new temple which the LORD is building, come to church and let Him place you. He'll put you exactly where you need to be. He is building His church; just as the desert couldn't stop Israel from building the tabernacle, so the wilderness of this world and the gates of Hell can't stop Jesus from building His church.

Jesus is building us into a temple. Submit to Him; worship Him; and He will dwell in your midst. Amen.