
VIDEO LECTURE MODULE: BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

LECTURE 10: TABERNACLE

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The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

30 LECTURES

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4. Noah
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Lecture 10

TABERNACLE

Lecture Theme:

The Lord reveals himself as the God who saves his people in order that he might dwell in their midst—in this world and the world to come.

Text:

“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt [tabernacled] among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

TRANSCRIPT LECTURE 10

The descriptions of the tabernacle seemed foreign and unfamiliar to us. For that reason, many people are tempted to skim over all of the tedious details describing the tabernacle in the Bible, but that is a mistake. God has provided us with a vivid and graphic picture full of rich theology. When pausing to take a closer look, these Bible passages open up a window to see delightful and savory truths that Christians today must receive and rejoice over. Rather than seeming mundane, you’ll discover exciting displays of the glory of the Gospel.

What is the main point that God intends to teach us through the tabernacle? And how is that related to the Bible as a whole? Was Moses given a role in the design of the tabernacle? What theology do we derive from the components of the tabernacle? What theology do we learn from the order and sequence the priests followed in their service within the tabernacle? How did the tabernacle point forward to the New Testament and beyond?

Hermann Witsius, the 17th Century Dutch theologian, noted interestingly, “God created the whole world in six days, but He used forty to instruct Moses about the tabernacle. A little over one chapter was needed to describe the structure of the world, but six were used for the tabernacle.” That is interesting because nearly half of the Book of Exodus is not about the actual event of the Exodus, but [is] rather devoted to describing the design and construction of the tabernacle. Why is this?

Well, the Lord reveals Himself as the God Who saves His people that He might dwell in their midst in this world and in the world to come. The tabernacle teaches us about life with God. We study the tabernacle to understand the steps the Lord appointed for a sinful people to approach a Holy God. What we glean here will be traced through the remainder of the Bible. In order to understand the theology of the Bible, you must grasp what God revealed in the unfolding of this portion of redemptive history.

First of all, we need to look at God dwelling in the midst of His people because this is the main point, the main theme in this section on the tabernacle. We saw at the very beginning of Genesis, God dwelling with Adam. He walked with him in the cool of the day. At the fall, man was driven out of Eden, thrust out of God's presence, but God also gave promises that He would reconcile Himself to His people. We have watched the covenant promise unfold in the subsequent lectures, assuring us that God will dwell with His people.

Now, at Sinai, God provides further revelation about His purpose to dwell in the midst of His people, and He reveals the way in which this must be brought to pass. The tabernacle was the Lord's temporary dwelling place during the wilderness. The word "tabernacle" means tent, but it is a special tent set apart from all others. For that reason, it is called "the tent of the Lord" and "the tent of meeting." It was also called the "sanctuary" because it was the place of God's holy presence. Lastly, it was also called the "tent of the testimony." The Two Tables of the Law were called "the testimony," and they were placed inside the ark within the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle, thus, testifying to God's Covenant of Grace with His people.

The tabernacle was used from the time of the Exodus until the time of King Solomon when the tabernacle was replaced by the temple. The tabernacle was located at the dead center of the Israelitish camp with the 12 tribes camped around it in a God-appointed arrangement. It displayed vividly God dwelling in the midst of His people. This is clearly stated toward the beginning of this section of Scripture. In Exodus 25:8, we read, "And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them." This message of God dwelling among His people was connected to the heart of the covenant: 'I will be your God. You will be my people, and I will dwell among you.'

Notice the words in Exodus 29:45-46, "And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them: I am the LORD their God." The purpose of the tabernacle was to continue the Sinai experience of Jehovah dwelling in the midst of Israel. Why do I say that? Well, notice this parallel. At Sinai, we read in Exodus 24:15-16 these words, "And Moses went up into the mount, and a cloud covered the mount. And the glory of the LORD abode upon Mt. Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days: and the seventh day He called unto Moses out of the midst of the cloud."

Now, see the similar language with the tabernacle in Exodus 40:34, "Then a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle." The experience of God in the midst of His people at Sinai would be perpetuated through the tabernacle.

Secondly, we need to recognize a gospel pattern and the gospel content that is found in the tabernacle. This is the meat of the message. This is where we'll spend most of our time. Before we look at the details, notice that there is a divine prescription. Now, we saw with Abel that God must only be worshiped according to His own expressed prescription. This was further ratified in the Second Commandment where God tells us, "Thou shall not make unto thee any graven image." God is saying in that commandment, 'you're only to worship Me as I have appointed,' and this is repeated elsewhere in connection with the Moral Law.

In Deuteronomy 12:32, we have those words, "What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it." This biblical law of worship applies to all men throughout all the ages. We cannot add or subtract from the acts of worship that God specifically appoints for His people, even though what He specifies may differ and does differ in the Old Testament from the New Testament as we shall continue to see.

The tabernacle, not surprisingly, was constructed according to the pattern commanded by God, not Moses. Moses had no role whatsoever. In those chapters stretching from Exodus 25 to Leviticus 7, God supplied every single detail, so that it would be erected exactly as God commanded. We find in chapter 31, verse 11, the words, "According to all that I have commanded thee shall they do." This language is woven throughout. Nothing is allowed to man's imagination. All innovation and human creativity are strictly prohibited in God's worship.

But what exactly did He describe in this pattern? Well, that brings us to consider the theological content, and we're going to look at the individual parts of the tabernacle, the theological content found in the details God gives us to us. The provision and the arrangement of the various components and pieces of furniture revealed God's gospel grace, the way in which redeemed sinners have access to a holy God. We'll consider each piece in the order that a priest would have encountered them when coming to the tabernacle, thus, tracing the theological themes and redemptive content that God revealed. Both the sequence that the priests followed, as well as the individual pieces of furniture, convey gospel truth.

First of all, notice the overall picture. There was a large courtyard that was open to the sky, and it was surrounded by a fence made of white linen and curtains that were hung from pillars, and sockets, and hooks, and fillets. Inside that courtyard was the tabernacle, the tent of the Lord. But also inside the courtyard, outside the tabernacle itself, was the brazen altar and the bronze laver or basin. [The] inside [of] the tabernacle itself consisted of two parts. The large portion was the holy place; and the smaller portion, the inmost sanctum, if you will, was the Most Holy Place or the Holy of Holies. We'll consider the various parts in order, and we can only touch on the seven main items briefly. There's far more to learn from this in your future studies.

The priests would approach the fence of the outer courtyard, which demonstrated visibly God's separation and holiness from people. He would pass through the gate that was made of blue, purple, scarlet, and white curtains connected to four pillars of brass with brass sockets and silver hooks and clasps. And as he passed through that gate, the first thing that he would see upon entering the courtyard was the altar, the bronze or brazen altar. It would be immediately before him, and he would approach that.

The square altar with four horns on the corners was covered in bronze. It would have been beautiful, but it would have been more durable than, for example, something like gold. It was accompanied by bronze pans, and shovels, and forks, and so on. We're told that the fire on the altar was never allowed to go out. In order for a Holy God to dwell with His people, the first thing necessary is a sacrifice and an atonement for sin; hence, the first thing they come to is this bronze altar. God's justice has to be satisfied. Confession of sin has to be made. A substitute has to be provided for the atonement of sin. The priest could not go any further without this first.

Now, we'll discuss the details of the sacrifice in the next lecture, but this pointed to the need for the final and perfect sacrifice of Christ. It was pressed upon the mind of God's people. They needed the sacrifice of Christ, Who would shed His blood for the sins of His people. Without Christ's substitutionary atonement for all of the sins of all of His people, we would not have any access to approach God and no ability for Him to dwell with us.

Well, secondly, you would come to the bronze laver or basin, and it would have been filled with water in which Aaron and his sons washed themselves thoroughly, washing their hands and their feet before approaching the tent of the tabernacle itself. We're told that if they failed to wash and they went into the tabernacle, they would die.

This next step after the sacrifice symbolized ceremonially the need of washing or purification. They needed continual cleansing to enter into God's presence. We see here that those who come to God through the sacrifice of Christ, confessing their sins, need true cleansing, spiritual cleansing. In 1 John 1:7, we read, "And the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."

The tabernacle itself was in rectangular shape, and it was covered in four layers of fabric. The bottom layer seen from the inside when you looked up was fine linen of blue, purple, scarlet, embroidered with pictures of cherubims, angels. The outer layers were goat hair, then ram skins dyed red, and then an outer layer of waterproof skins. When entering through the curtain entrance into the first chamber of the covered tent of the tabernacle, which would have been called the holy place, that first section, you would see the table of show bread on the right side; now, the golden lampstand on the left side; and the altar of incense in the middle on the far side immediately in front of the veil into the Most Holy Place or the Holy of Holies.

So first of all, if you went to your left, you would come to the gold lampstand. This was made of one solid piece of pure hammered gold. It had a center column with three branches on each side making a seven-branched lampstand, similar to a tree. The lamps were to be kept burning with oil perpetually. It illuminated an otherwise dark room. When lit, the interior looked like a microcosm of heaven on earth. You would see cherubims on the walls and on the ceiling.

Those lampstands symbolize the light that shows the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, being described as the Light of the world in the Gospel of John (chapter 8 verse 12). It also represented the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit to reveal salvation. Natural man is blinded by sin and in the dark. In addition to the presence and salvation of the Lord, it gave light for service to the priests [who] were laboring in that place. So, we have the lampstand pointing to Christ and His salvation.

Across from it, you would have had the table of show bread, also called the bread of presence, on the right-hand side. It, too, was overlaid with gold, and it had a crown, a kind of frame of gold around it. On the table 12 loaves of fresh bread, two stacks of six, were placed there every Sabbath and, we are told, eaten by the priests.

The loaves symbolized the 12 tribes and provided a continual reminder of the everlasting promises and provisions of God's covenant.

The ritual of presenting the bread was called a covenant forever. They symbolized God's people in God's presence. The priests were allowed to feed upon them. We, of course, must be fed by the Living Word, by the Lord Jesus Christ, Who is, of course, the Bread of Life, as we see in John 6:35. He promised that those who feed upon Him by faith would never hunger, but that they would have eternal life.

The fifth item that we will consider is the altar of incense. I told you that when you came into that tabernacle, it would be seen in the far side of that first room. This altar with its horns on four corners was overlaid, again, with pure gold. The high priest burned special sweet incense, a recipe that was reserved for this purpose only. He burned that incense on the altar every morning and evening. Then, once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the horns of the altar were sprinkled with the blood of the sin offering.

What did this symbolize? Well, the incense represented the prayers offered before the mercy seat of God's presence. If you're singing at the beginning of Psalm 141, you'll see this. We speak about our prayers rising as incense before the Lord (verse 2). The Book of Revelation carries over this same ceremonial symbolism. In Revelation 5:8 and in chapter 8, verses 3 and 4, it speaks about, in those apocalyptic images, the prayers of the saints rising before the throne of God as incense.

All of that has its origin right here in the altar of incense, and it teaches us that God desires our prayers, and that He accepts our prayers through the mediation of the Lord Jesus Christ. These prayers rise before God's throne as a sweet-smelling incense to Him, just as the incense rose just before the ark of the covenant and the mercy seat in the tabernacle. It was before the altar of incense in the later temple, not tabernacle, that an angel appeared to Zachariah to announce that God had heard his prayers for a son, John the Baptist. We read that in the opening of the New Testament.

The sixth item is the veil. There would have been a large veil separating the holy place from the Most Holy place or the Holy of Holies, that inner chamber sanctum. Behind this altar of incense was the veil separating these two portions. It was a visible and symbolic barrier between God and man. It was made of very heavy woven cloth, and it was without an opening in the middle. The priest would have to go around at the side.

Once inside the Holy of Holies, the only item that was found there was the ark of the covenant. Now, the room itself was only about 15 feet by 15 feet. The high priest only entered this Holy of Holies once a year, one time a year, on the Day of Atonement to sprinkle blood on the mercy seat, an atonement for his sins and the sins of the people.

This is very important for understanding the significance of when the veil in the later temple was actually torn by God from top to bottom when Jesus died, symbolizing the ability of every believer to approach God directly through the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. You'll note the connection with this Old Testament imagery in Hebrews 4:16, "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy," remember the mercy seat? "and find grace to help in time of need."

Let's consider more the ark of the covenant itself and the mercy seat. This, after all, was the final destination within the inmost sanctuary of God within the tabernacle. It provided the central focus and most important part of the tabernacle as a whole. The ark, of course, was rectangular, and it's covered in gold in various place inside and out. But when you come to the ark of covenant itself, that ark is full of all the vivid descriptions that capture the presence of God. In Hebrews 9:4, we read that it contained "the golden pot that had manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant." The Israelites were forbidden to ever touch the ark of the covenant upon penalty of death.

The mercy seat was made of one piece of pure beaten gold, and it was set on top of the ark. It had two winged cherubims on each side of it, facing each other with wings that were outstretched above them toward each other. The ark chiefly symbolized, as I say, the presence of God in the midst of His people, thus, highlighting the primary purpose of the tabernacle as a whole. Elsewhere, it was called the throne of God. Again, a tiny, temporary picture of God's place in heaven. The transcendent God, Whom not even the Heaven of heavens can contain, condescends to come and dwell among His people, pointing, of course, chiefly to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, as we shall see in a moment.

With all these things in place, one more essential thing still remained, namely, the presence of God Himself. The Lord manifested His presence in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, which rested above the tabernacle directly above the mercy seat over the ark. God spoke to the high priest from above that mercy seat. God's presence led and directed His people through the wilderness. When the cloud or pillar moved, Israel moved. When it stopped, they camped until it moved again, but the message was clear: God was dwelling among them.

Lastly and very importantly, we need to consider the heavenly realities that are found in the tabernacle. The tabernacle was a temporary earthly picture of God's true abode. Since the tabernacle was a symbol of the Lord's home while He dwelt among His people, it had to be a true pattern of His real abode in heaven. We have already alluded to the fact that the tabernacle was an earthly picture of heaven. Remember the embroidered cherubim on the colorful cloth covering the ceiling and sides on the inside, and the cherubim over the ark of the mercy seat, and the reference to it as the throne of God.

The Old Testament saints understood that what was built was only a model or a pattern of something more glorious. Exodus 25 verses 9 and 40, for example, make this clear. It's described as a pattern. The real [thing] had not emerged, but the Book of Hebrews expounds this point at length, and I think it's worth us taking the time to quote those relevant passages. It's pointing to the fact that the tabernacle was patterned after God's true abode in heaven. It was a temporary picture of a heavenly reality.

Notice with me what we read in Hebrews 8:5, "Who serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things, as Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern showed to thee in the mount." Chapter 9:8-9, "The Holy Ghost this signifying, that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while as the first tabernacle was yet standing: which was a figure for the present time then present," imposed on them until the time of reformation, that is the time of the coming of Christ.

Chapter 9, verses 23 and 24, "It was therefore necessary that the patterns of things in the heavens should be purified with these; but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ is not entered into the holy place made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us." Lastly, in Hebrews 10:1, "For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect."

You see that? It is a picture. The tabernacle is a picture of heavenly things. Old Testament symbols are replaced ultimately with New Testament realities. We've noted several times that these Old Testament ceremonies were temporary. When Christ came, the symbols of the tabernacle and the temple were permanently put away, and the New Testament, in fact, forbids us to return to these ceremonial shadows. Why? Because we now have the real thing that they could only foreshadow. Great space is devoted in the New Testament to confronting the error of the Judaizers who wanted to bring back these Old Testament ceremonial symbols, and institutions, and ordinances. The apostles forbid it, confronted it.

Galatians 4:9, Paul says, "how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements." Colossians 2:17 speaks of the shadow of things to come, but the body is of Christ. Jesus Himself spoke of this in John 4. You see it again in the Book of Acts. You look at the whole section of Hebrews 8-10. They all carried the same message.

In the New Testament, Christ says that we must worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). It would be an affront to Christ [for us] to look to these shadows when His very Person has arrived. This is a far greater glory. So, the New Testament worship, which God commands, prescribes, appoints for His people, exhibits ordinances of far greater simplicity because the glory of New Testament worship is not in the earthly symbols of altars, and incense, and priestly service.

Our worship takes places in the very throne room of the heaven where we find our High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ. The glory is the presence of Christ. The glory is the presence of His Spirit among us manifest in our midst through simple ordinances like preaching, and reading, and prayer, and the singing of Psalms, and the sacraments. The tabernacle finds its fulfillment in the New Testament.

Let me just say briefly before we conclude, it's fulfilled, first of all, in the Lord Jesus Christ. In John 1:14, we read, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us," It's literally 'and tabernacled among us', "(and we

beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.” Christ has come. He is Emmanuel. He is God with us. The tabernacle pointed forward to the coming of Christ Himself.

The tabernacle is also fulfilled in the Christian. This is beautifully portrayed in 2 Corinthians 6:16, “For ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” There’s the language of the Covenant of Grace again, coupled with the language of the tabernacle. So, we see the Lord graciously dwelling in the midst of His people, within the individual Christian, but we also see the tabernacle fulfilled in the Church as a whole, as the people of God, the collective assembled people of God.

At the end Ephesians 2, we read, “In whom,” that is the Church, “In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.” We read elsewhere Jesus’ words that wherever two or three of God’s people assembled together for worship that Christ is there in the midst (Matthew 18:20).

Let me add one more thing: the tabernacle is fulfilled in the heavens themselves. As we’ve already noted, in both Exodus and Hebrews, the tabernacle served as a pattern, as an example, as a shadow, as a figure of the true abode of God in heaven.

Now, let’s bring this together by comparing two texts side by side to see how similar they are. Earlier, we referred to Exodus 29:45–46, “And I will dwell among the children of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them: I am the LORD their God.”

Now, fast forward all the way to the end of the Bible, Revelation 21:3, and notice the similar language, “And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.”

Both the tabernacle and the later temple served as the center of God’s presence with His people. The tabernacle and the temple are forever put away in the greater reality of the coming of Christ, but the spiritual truth that they symbolized, God in the midst of His people, continues to be the delight of every Christian. This forms the heart cry of God’s people as seen in the psalmist’s desire to dwell in the house of the Lord forever in Psalm 23:6. Why? Because God is present with them, and we meet with Him to behold His glory.

Psalm 27:4 says, “One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.” This runs all through the Psalms, this language. Notice Psalm 84, or think about David when he is in the wilderness as it’s described in Psalm 63.

Well, we continue to sing these songs as God’s people, and we sing them in light of their fulfillment in the eternal realities that they symbolize. We sing looking to Christ dwelling in the assembly of His people in the New Testament church, and we look with anticipation to being with Him in His presence in heaven. Preaching on the tabernacle involves preaching the theological content of the tabernacle.

The New Testament Christian looks through these symbols to their New Testament fulfillment and all that God revealed through them. We see the realities that they foreshadowed. Thus, it provides a beautiful opportunity to preach Christ and the Gospel. We’ve discovered in these temporary Old Testament symbols, pointers to heavenly reality secured in Christ. In the Covenant of Grace, God promised to dwell in the midst of His people in this world and in heaven to come.

In the next lecture, we will explore the Old Testament theology of sacrifice and find, once again, that the Old Testament is full of Christ and the Gospel of His grace.