

A Space for God

Devotional Reading: John 4:13-26
Background Scripture: Exodus 25-27

Exodus 25:1-9

¹ The LORD said to Moses, ² “Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from everyone whose heart prompts them to give. ³ These are the offerings you are to receive from them: gold, silver and bronze; ⁴ blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen; goat hair; ⁵ ram skins dyed red and another type of durable leather; acacia wood; ⁶ olive oil for the light; spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense; ⁷ and onyx stones and other gems to be mounted on the ephod and breastpiece.

⁸ “Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. ⁹ Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you.”

Exodus 26:1, 31-37

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³¹ “Make a curtain of blue, purple and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen, with cherubim woven into it by a skilled worker. ³² Hang it with gold hooks on four posts of acacia wood overlaid with gold and standing on four silver bases. ³³ Hang the curtain from the clasps and place the ark of the covenant law behind the curtain. The curtain will separate the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. ³⁴ Put the atonement cover on the ark of the covenant law in the Most Holy Place. ³⁵ Place the table outside the curtain on the north side of the tabernacle and put the lampstand opposite it on the south side.

³⁶ “For the entrance to the tent make a curtain of blue, purple and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen—the work of an embroiderer. ³⁷ Make gold hooks for this curtain and five posts of acacia wood overlaid with gold. And cast five bronze bases for them.”

Key Text

“Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.” —Exodus 25:8

Costly Sacrifices

Unit 1: Tabernacle, Sacrifices, and Atonement

Lessons 1–5

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Categorize the types of offerings that God specified.
2. Compare God's instructions to Moses with New Testament directives.
3. Write a prayer of gratitude for God's willingness to dwell with him or her today.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Many Spaces for God
- B. Lesson Context

I. Gift from the Heart (Exodus 25:1-9)

- A. Items for Construction (vv. 1-5)
- B. Items for Service (vv. 6-9)

Tools for a Task

II. Tabernacle Directions (Exodus 26:1, 31-37)

- A. The Curtains (v. 1)
- B. The Veil (vv. 31-35)

Memory Box

- C. The Doorway (vv. 36-37)

Conclusion

- A. Carrying the Presence
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Many Spaces for God

I love to visit old church buildings, especially those with oaken pews and stained-glass windows. When I was in Jordan, I visited the ruins of Petra, a sixth-century church built in the canyon walls.

But the church that stands out most in my memory was in a small village in the jungle of the Dominican Republic. I had been invited to preach at this little church while a friend translated. When we arrived, it was unlike any church building I'd seen before; I've had bigger sheds! The walls were wooden planks with daylight peeking through, the roof was made of tin, and there were no chairs—only wooden boards on tree stumps.

For as small a group as gathered there, it was a joyous assembly of God's people. I don't often experience worship like that in the United States. That day reminded me that praising the one true God can happen in any place. Today's lesson examines the construction of God's tabernacle, the specially designed place that God asked his people to create. God wanted to be in their midst.

B. Lesson Context

The narrative of Scripture as a whole can be summarized according to the ways that God mediates his presence to his creation. After banishing humans from the Garden of Eden, where God himself walked (Genesis 3:8), he set in motion a plan to restore the relationship that had been broken by sin.

God's rescue of Israel from the Egyptians was a major step in that plan. Two months later, God initiated a covenant agreement with the Israelites (Exodus 19). The Sinai covenant was given for God's people to be able to live with the divine presence in their midst.

Their breaking of the covenant didn't take long (Exodus 32:7-8). Even so, God continued in faithfulness as he brought the Israelites to the land of inheritance, the land promised to them as children of Abraham (Genesis 13:14-17).

In the context of today's lesson, Moses—living

more than 500 years after Abraham—had gone up Mount Sinai and entered the cloud of God’s presence (Exodus 24:15-18). During that 40-day encounter, God gave him instructions for a tabernacle, for the items to fill it, and for the ministry of the priests. These instructions span Exodus 25–31 (see lesson 3). God desired to grant access to his holy presence, but that required a systematic approach to prevent anything profane (not just sin, but also things ritually unclean) from entering the tabernacle.

I. Gift from the Heart

(Exodus 25:1-9)

A. Items for Construction (vv. 1-5)

1. The LORD said to Moses,

Since the Israelites arrived at Sinai in Exodus 19:1, *Moses* had been functioning as a mediator: taking messages from God down the mountain and returning responses from the people. The instructions came directly from God, and Moses did not alter the words. He received these words while on the mountain, hidden from the people’s sight for 40 days (Exodus 24:18).

2. “Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from everyone whose heart prompts them to give.

The phrase *whose heart prompts them to give* indicates that *the offering* God prescribed was to be voluntary. Worship through giving must be motivated internally rather than externally. This is analogous to the “cheerful” giver praised by the apostle Paul when he collected an offering (2 Corinthians 9:7).

God did not specify that the offering be taken up for the construction of a tabernacle—although that is what it would be used to build—but God said *bring me an offering*. As gifts, these offerings are directed first and foremost to God.

But why should the Israelites, as former slaves of Egypt, possess valuable items worthy of an offering? Before they left Egypt, they received valuable articles from their Egyptian captors (Exodus 3:21; 11:2-3; 12:35-36). God’s intervention made this possible (12:36). Thus, in a key sense, the offering given to God was surrendering those items that

God had helped the people receive in the first place, for this very purpose.

What Do You Think?

What steps do you take to ensure you cheerfully give to God (see 2 Corinthians 9:7)?

Digging Deeper

What obstacles prevent you from giving to God in this manner? How do you deal with these obstacles?

3. “These are the offerings you are to receive from them: gold, silver and bronze;

This verse describes the first of several kinds of things acceptable for the offering—and perhaps these metals come first because they were most valuable. Additional metals of iron, tin, or lead are not mentioned (Numbers 31:22).

The most valuable of the three was (and still is) *gold*; some form of that word occurs over 100 times in the book of Exodus alone. Gold was used in ways other than as a medium of exchange (money). Most tabernacle furnishings would be either overlaid with gold or made from pure gold (Exodus 25:11-18; 23-31, 38-39). More than four centuries later, King Solomon would add to or replace articles, also using gold (1 Kings 7:48-50); he minimized the use of silver (10:21).

Many other items would be made of *bronze* (Exodus 26:11, 37; 27:1-8; 30:17-21). Bronze is an alloy of copper and tin. That alloy was not created until about 500 BC, many centuries after the events of the text. *Silver* would be used mainly for the “bases” for supporting wooden beams of the tabernacle structure itself (26:19, 21, 25, 32).

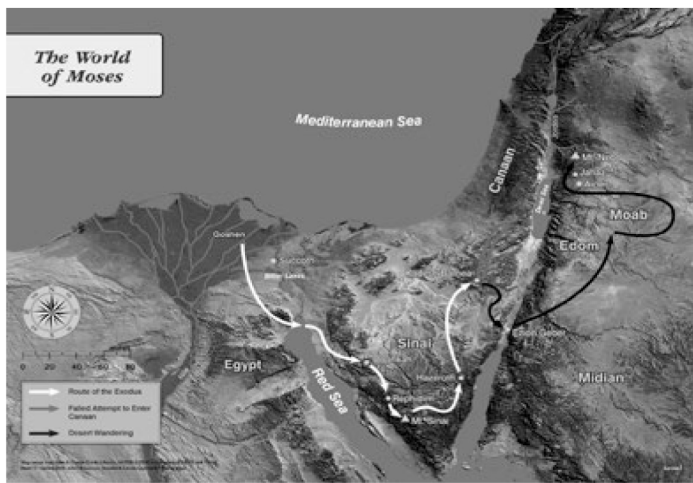
What Do You Think?

In what ways can your class pool your resources and talents to give an offering to God?

Digging Deeper

What steps will you take to make this offering a reality?

4. “blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen; goat hair;



Visual for Lesson 2. Display this visual as you review the people and places associated with lessons 1–3.

In antiquity, fabric dyes were not readily available and would need to be carefully sourced. A garment’s value was tied to the rarity of its dye, with *blue*, *purple*, and *scarlet* being among the rarest (compare Luke 16:19; Acts 16:14; Revelation 17:4; 18:12). These shades of violet or blueish-dyed wool would be created from crushed mollusks and certain plants. They would be used in the construction of artistic curtains (Exodus 26:31). With *fine linen* and *goat hair* (which could be spun into yarn), rare fabrics would enclose the tabernacle to create its walls and layers (26:7).

5. “ram skins dyed red and another type of durable leather; acacia wood;

Leather *dyed red* would probably be colored from a tanning process. The reference to *durable leather* comes from a rare Hebrew word that resembles the Arabic word for “porpoise.” Sea creatures inhabit the Red Sea and could have been hunted by the Egyptians for their fine hides. *Acacia wood* is useful for the construction of furniture and structural beams. Its wood is extremely dense and is a desirable building material.

B. Items for Service (vv. 6-9)

6. “olive oil for the light; spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense;

The two types of *oil* are for different purposes in the function of the planned sanctuary. Oil *for the light* was to be burned in the lampstand (Exodus

25:31-36). Since the tabernacle was to be without windows, light would come only from lamps. A depiction of the Jewish menorah is found upon the Arch of Titus in Rome, which shows a lampstand carried out of the destroyed second temple. It is possible—though impossible to be certain—that the original lampstand for the tabernacle followed this familiar design.

On the other hand, *anointing oil* would be used for just that purpose—not only on people but also on tabernacle furnishings (Exodus 30:22-33). It was perfumed according to the formula of 30:23-24 to contain “myrrh,” “fragrant cinnamon,” “fragrant calamus,” “cassia,” and “olive oil.” *Fragrant incense* was to be made according to a formula in Exodus 30:34, and it has “gum resin,” “onycha,” “galbanum,” and “pure frankincense.” When burned, the result would be a visible cloud of fragrant smoke. The formulations of the anointing oil and the incense were proprietary to God (30:33, 37). In the imagery of Revelation 8:3-4, the burning of incense symbolizes the prayers of God’s people as they rise to Heaven.

7. “and onyx stones and other gems to be mounted on the ephod and breastpiece.

Onyx are the only *stones* mentioned by name for *the ephod* and *breastpiece*, two items of the high priest’s attire (see lesson 3). The names of the other precious stones are listed in Exodus 28:17-20. The onyx stones were to be two in number, each engraved with the names of 6 of the 12 tribes of Israel (Exodus 28:9-11). Four rows of three precious stones each would be set in the breastpiece of the ephod, with “each engraved like a seal with the name of one of the twelve tribes” (28:21). The high priest would wear the names of all 12 tribes when he came before God’s presence and entered the Holy Place (see 28:12, 29-30).

8. “Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.

This short verse indicates the reason for these details: God wants to *dwell* with his people. So, he directed the people to construct a place suitable to that purpose: *a sanctuary*. This refers to the tabernacle (or to the holiest part thereof) and, much later, the temple. The layers of curtains as walls

and partitions would, on the one hand, clearly separate the sacred space of God from anything profane among the people. On the other hand, the sanctuary would announce God's presence, for it would be the most prominent feature of Israel's camp.

9. "Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you."

The pattern of this tabernacle and all its furnishings were prescribed by God alone. Some Bible interpreters think the phrase *I will show you* means that a Heavenly tabernacle or temple was shown to Moses so that the earthly tabernacle would be built in its likeness. In support of this, Stephen in Acts 7:44 calls the tabernacle to have been made "according to the pattern [Moses] had seen." Likewise, the writer of Hebrews 8:5 says that Moses made the tabernacle "according to the pattern shown" to him.

What Do You Think?

How would you respond to the claim that buildings such as temples or sanctuaries are necessary for the presence of God?

Digging Deeper

How do John 1:14; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16-18; Ephesians 2:21-22; and 1 Peter 2:5 inform your response?

Tools for a Task

When my grandfather died, he left behind a remarkable collection of tools. Although he wasn't wealthy, he had acquired so many flashlights, screwdrivers, gloves, pocketknives, and watches that I always wondered why he showed an interest in these items. Why would anyone need 20 screwdrivers?

It was the watches that captured my attention as a child. I remembered that he was always wearing one, always prepared to share the time when someone asked. Actually, that explains almost everything in his collection: he wanted to be prepared. Whether he needed to fix, open, or shed light on something, he was ready.

You might say that is what God was doing

when giving all these instructions for the tabernacle. The priests would need light, so God planned for them to have oil for lamps. The ark of the covenant would need a separate space, so God gave them plans for curtains and veils. The priests would need instruments for service, so God intended for them to use precious metals like gold—metals that don't tend to corrode. In a sense, all these instructions show a spirit of practicality and a concern for the details. You might look at your own life and the resources God has given you. What tasks have you been prepared to complete? What service does God ask you to render when you examine your tools and resources?
—J. H.

II. Tabernacle Directions

(Exodus 26:1, 31-37)

A. The Curtains (v. 1)

1. "Make the tabernacle with ten curtains of finely twisted linen and blue, purple and scarlet yarn, with cherubim woven into them by a skilled worker."

After describing the construction of the tabernacle's contents in Exodus 25:10-40, Exodus 26:1 begins with specifications of the tabernacle's construction itself. *Linen* is made from the fibers of the flax plant. The size of these *ten curtains* is noted in 26:2, not in today's lesson text). Regarding the rare colors of *blue, purple, and scarlet*, see commentary on Exodus 25:4, above.

The inclusion of *cherubim* is a new detail (compare Exodus 25:18). This might mean that the curtains were going to feature images of these beings woven in. Cherubim are angelic attendants of God. They are mentioned dozens of times in the Old Testament but never in the New Testament. The ark of the covenant was constructed to feature two cherubim of gold on its cover (25:18-20).

B. The Veil (vv. 31-35)

31. "Make a curtain of blue, purple and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen, with cherubim woven into it by a skilled worker."

The *curtain* mentioned in the verse before us is different from the "curtains" described in Exodus

26:1. While constructed of the same material and decorated the same way, this curtain has a unique function: it separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place within the tabernacle. The same word is later used for the dividing curtain in Solomon's temple (compare 2 Chronicles 3:14).

32. “Hang it with gold hooks on four posts of acacia wood overlaid with gold and standing on four silver bases.

The reason the curtain needed to be supported by *four posts . . . overlaid with gold* was so it could hang and serve as the necessary partition. These golden rods would nest into silver sockets (from the gold and silver that were given in the offering). The poles would be spaced to support the stretched curtain, which appears to be designed as one piece. Thus, the curtain had no gaps as it sectioned off the area of the presence of God. This is the same kind of curtain found in the temple in Jesus' day, and it would be torn from top to bottom at his death (Matthew 27:51).

33. “Hang the curtain from the clasps and place the ark of the covenant law behind the curtain. The curtain will separate the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place.

Here is the explanation for the curtain's use: it separated areas within the tabernacle. This division was to shield the area known as *the Most Holy Place* (which housed the very glory of God) from the area called *the Holy Place*. It was to be hung on *clasps* (connecting buckles or rings) that were attached to four pillars. Only a single item is designated for the Most Holy Place: *the ark of the covenant law*, which is another name for “ark of the covenant” (Numbers 10:33; compare 14:44). At first, the box would contain only the tablets of the covenant (Exodus 25:16, 23). Eventually, other items would be added as signs of God's provision (Hebrews 9:4).

God is never described as being in the box.

How to Say It

acacia	uh-kay-shuh.
cherubim	chair-uh-bim.
ephod	ee-fod.
tabernacle	tah-burr-nah-kul.

Instead, the ark is sometimes called God's “footstool,” perhaps meaning that God was (invisibly) pictured as enthroned in Heaven while resting his feet at this point on earth (1 Chronicles 28:2; Psalms 99:5; 132:7; Isaiah 66:1). The ark would be a focal point of Israelite faith until its disappearance at the time of the Babylonian exile.

34. “Put the atonement cover on the ark of the covenant law in the Most Holy Place.

The box itself was to be two and a half cubits by one and a half cubits, or the equivalent of about 45 by 27 inches (Exodus 25:10). Its acacia wood was covered in gold, but *the atonement cover* was a solid gold cover placed on the top (25:17). It is called “the atonement cover” because there, at that location between two golden cherubim, God promised to meet with Moses (25:22). God said, “I will appear in the cloud over the atonement cover” (Leviticus 16:2). And on the Day of Atonement—one day each year when the high priest would enter the Most Holy Place—the high priest was to sprinkle blood upon the atonement cover and make atonement “for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel” (16:17).

35. “Place the table outside the curtain on the north side of the tabernacle and put the lampstand opposite it on the south side.

The tabernacle faced east (Numbers 3:38). *The table* with incense and bread was to be placed on the side of the curtain that did not face inward toward the Most Holy Place. Likewise, *the lampstand* is designated for the south side. Nothing is said about the significance of the locations. Among other things, the table would hold 12 loaves of bread to symbolize the 12 tribes (Leviticus 24:5-9). This bread was to be eaten by priests since it would be replaced regularly as an offering to God.

Memory Box

On the top of my bookshelf lives a small box. My children could tell you some of its contents by heart: a wood carving from my trip to South America; silver coins I collected; two hospital bracelets that say “Father,” the ones given to me when my children were born—my proof that I

wasn't stealing a baby when my wife and I loaded each of them in an infant seat.

The ark of the covenant was a bit like a memory box. Every item added had a history. Of course, the Israelites did not handle the ark the way I handle my wooden box. Even so, I try to be sure that I've shown gratitude for all God has done.

If you were to fill such a box, what would it contain? How have you stewarded the memories of God's redemption in your life? —J. H.

C. The Doorway (vv. 36-37)

36-37. "For the entrance to the tent make a curtain of blue, purple and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen—the work of an embroiderer. Make gold hooks for this curtain and five posts of acacia wood overlaid with gold. And cast five bronze bases for them."

The tabernacle doorway was to have the same coloring as the curtains but would lack the interwoven cherubim decoration. The doorway was supported by five pillars instead of four, like the four holding up the internal curtain. The metal used for the *bases* was *bronze*, a lesser material than the silver bases within the tabernacle. The lesser value in the metal corresponds to the distance this doorway stands from the Most Holy Place. The closer to God's presence, the more valuable the materials so as to reflect the value of sacred space.

What Do You Think?

In what ways can art and architecture be a way for you to honor and worship God?

Digging Deeper

How will your congregation use art in its worship of God?

Conclusion

A. Carrying the Presence

If we miss the wider context, these instructions for an offering and construction of a tabernacle seem oddly specific. Today, there is greater cultural consciousness around the giving of the Ten Commandments than the building of a mobile sanctuary, but the irony is that the taber-

nacle was at the heart of the covenant as the most important blessing that Israel received: instructions to house the presence of God. As the people whom God had chosen to reflect his holiness, the ancient Israelites needed to live in such a way as to reflect their holy status. Otherwise, they would not be allowed to keep God's presence with them (Ezekiel 10).

The planning of materials, arrangement, and careful division of duties were necessary for this task. Without instructions, the people of Israel—who were by no means free of sin—could not have endured a holy God in their midst. But with the careful management of access, no one would haphazardly wander into the sacred space and look upon God enthroned above the atonement cover, for this would mean certain death (see a warning even to Aaron in Leviticus 16:2).

Thus, God is the ultimate planner. Not only did he plan the construction of a tabernacle, but he ensured that his people would have the necessary materials before they left the land of Egypt. Both in the Sinai covenant and in the new covenant, God can make a way for his presence to be with his people.

What Do You Think?

How has your understanding of worship changed because of this lesson?

Digging Deeper

What will you do in light of that change of thinking?

B. Prayer

Lord, may we recognize that you are holy, that your very presence is sacred. On our own, we would never manage to dwell with you. Thank you for making a way for your presence to be with your people, both in the tabernacle for ancient Israel and also in the person of Christ, who sent the Spirit to reside in our midst even now. We are grateful for your faithfulness to us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God wants to dwell with his people.