

The Mystery of the Tabernacle

by Scott Grant

'The Witch's Bridge'

Most people love a good mystery. I well remember the first mystery that I read: "The Witch's Bridge." I was in the seventh grade, and up until that point in my life I had very little interest in reading anything but the sports page. But for some reason, I started reading this book, and I couldn't put it down. As I neared the end of the book, the bell rang for Spanish class. At strategic moments during the class, while the teacher was looking away, I continued my reading. Such was my fascination with the story.

When we peruse seven chapters' worth of intricate details for the construction of the tabernacle in Exodus 25 through 31, it appears to us as a mystery, but one that doesn't capture our imagination. Probably no one could ever be accused of reading this section of Exodus during Spanish class. Perhaps it doesn't captivate us because in and of itself, it's a mystery without an ending. We get to the end -- if we even get to the end -- and we say, "Big deal."

But the story doesn't end with Exodus 31. Exodus 31 simply leads into the New Testament, which solves the mystery for us. The answer to the mystery, as it turns out, is Jesus Christ. In the various aspects of the tabernacle and its service, we see pictures of Christ. Apart from Christ, the meaning of the tabernacle is incomplete, because it was designed by God to be fulfilled by Christ. These chapters of Exodus, then, are like the intricate details of a well-written mystery. They heighten interest for the answer to the questions they raise. They therefore feature Jesus Christ, and lead us to him.

The mystery of the tabernacle features Jesus Christ. Christ is the main player, but he's not the only player. The other players are his followers, as they are related to him. Just as we see pictures of Christ, we also see pictures of ourselves. So as we read the "boring" details of the prescription for the tabernacle, we see ourselves in the story as well. We are part of the story!

The tabernacle, best as we can recreate it, appeared thus:

(sketch to be supplied)

As we study the details of the tabernacle, we enter into the realm of "typology." The Greek word for type is *tupos*, which comes from the verb *tupto*, which means "to strike." Christ, the reality, struck blows, so to speak, leaving impressions in the Old Testament, just as a typewriter key leaves an impression. Therefore, as we read these chapters of Exodus, we are examining the impressions that lead us to contemplate the one who struck the impressions. Sometimes, the New Testament explicitly declares how the typology was fulfilled; other times it does so implicitly. Let's examine the tabernacle and the New Testament's treatment of it.

The ark of the covenant (25:10-22)

Old Testament

The Lord was enthroned between the cherubim, just above the ark (1 Samuel 4:4, 2 Samuel 6:2). Thus, the ark symbolized God's reign on earth.

New Testament

Christ spoke much of "the kingdom of God," and he himself is the king (Matthew 21:5, John 18:36, Revelation 19:16).

Believers in Christ are enthroned with Christ (Ephesians 2:6) and will reign with him forever (Revelation 22:5).

The table of the bread of presence (25:23-30)

Old Testament

The bread was to be in the presence of the Lord, or before his face, continually (25:30).

New Testament

Christ is the bread of life (John 6:35) who himself is in the presence of the Father continually (Hebrews 7:25, 9:24).

Those who partake of the bread of life, Jesus, experience eternal life, and will be eternally in the presence of God (John 6:35-40).

The lamp stand (25:31-40)

Old Testament

The lamp stand provided for illumination.

New Testament

Christ is "the light of the world" (John 9:5) and "the true light that, coming into the world, enlightens every man" (John 1:9).

Jesus calls his followers "the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14) who should "shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

The tabernacle (26:1-37)

Old Testament

The Lord commanded that the tabernacle to be built so that he could "dwell among" the people (Exodus 25:8, 29:45-46).

New Testament

God dwells within Christ (Colossians 2:9), whose body is a temple of God (John 2:19-20).

In Christ, God became flesh and dwells, or, more literally, "tabernacles," among us (John 1:14).

The Spirit of the Father and the Son dwells within each follower of Jesus (1 Corinthians 6:19) and among the followers of Jesus (2 Corinthians 6:16), who together comprise his body (Ephesians 4:12) in whom his Spirit dwells. He will also dwell with his people forever (Revelation 21:3).

The veil (26:31-35)

Old Testament

The veil served as a partition between the most holy place and the holy place, the most holy place being where God dwelt (26:33). Only the high priest could enter into the most holy place, into the presence of God, and even he could enter only once a year to make atonement for the people (Leviticus 16:2, 34; Hebrews 9:7)

New Testament

When Christ was crucified, the veil of the temple was torn (Mark 15:37-38). The veil symbolized Christ's flesh, which was similarly torn, thereby enabling all his followers to enter into the presence of God (Hebrews 10:19-20).

The altar of burnt offering (27:1-8)

Old Testament

The altar is where animals were sacrificed repeatedly for the people's sins.

New Testament

Christ, the Lamb of God (John 1:36), offered himself up as the perfect, once-for-all sacrifice (Hebrews 7:27, 10:10).

Followers of Jesus are to offer up their bodies to God (Romans 12:1) and, as a sacrifice, offer up praise to him (Hebrews 13:15).

The priests (28:1-29:46)

Old Testament

The priests made repeated sacrifices for the people's sins, mediating between God and the people.

New Testament

Christ entered the perfect temple, the heavenly temple, and made the perfect once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of mankind, that sacrifice being himself (Hebrews 7:26-27; 9:11, 24; 10:11-12). He thus mediated between God and mankind.

Followers of Jesus are priests who, like Jesus, offer up their bodies to God and mediate between God and the world by proclaiming "the excellencies of him who has called you out of the darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

The altar of incense (30:1-10, 34-38)

Old Testament

The incense seemingly set off the tabernacle as a holy place (30:36), though David expressed the hope that his prayer would be counted as incense before the Lord (Psalm 141:2).

New Testament

The prayers of those who follow Jesus are like incense (Revelation 5:8), perhaps setting them off as holy places.

The basin (30:17-21)

Old Testament

The priests were to wash themselves to be ritually clean before proceeding into the tent.

New Testament

The blood of Jesus cleanses his followers from sin and unrighteousness (1 John 1:7, 9). Believers have been washed by Christ (1 Corinthians 6:11), have been cleansed by the word of Christ (Ephesians 5:26) and have had their bodies washed with the pure water of Christ (Hebrews 10:22).

The craftsmen (31:1-11)

Old Testament

Those who built the tabernacle were filled with the Spirit of God and were skillful, or wise, so as to build the tabernacle (31:3-6).

New Testament

Christ, filled with the Spirit of God (Mark 1:10, Colossians 2:9), who is the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24), builds not the tabernacle but the church (Matthew 16:18), which is a spiritual temple (Ephesians 3:19-20).

Followers of Jesus are God's craftsmen created for good works (Ephesians 2:10) who are gifted by the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 12:7-11) for the building up of the body of Christ, the spiritual temple (Ephesians 4:12).

Worship at the true tabernacle

As we see how the aspects of the tabernacle point to Christ, and how, because of him, some of the aspects point to our inclusion, how can we not respond by bowing down before Jesus and worshipping? He, not any earthly structure, is the true place of worship. And he dwells in each of his followers and among his followers. So he is not far from any one of us.

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