

The Book of Exodus

Lesson 19: The Tabernacle and Its Courtyard -- Exodus 26:1–27:21

Have you ever watched a tent go up? Stakes driven, ropes pulled taut, fabric stretched until a shapeless pile becomes a shelter you can walk into. There is something humble about a tent. It can be folded and carried. It moves when the people move. And that is exactly the kind of home God chose. The God who could not be contained by the highest heaven asked for a tent, so that He could travel with His pilgrim people through the wilderness. Exodus 26 and 27 are the instructions for that tent, curtain by curtain, board by board, post by post.

Slow down over the details and you will find they are not dull at all. Ten curtains of fine linen woven with cherubim, joined by loops and golden clasps. Boards of acacia standing upright in silver bases. And then the veil, that one heavy curtain of blue and purple and scarlet, hung to separate the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. Behind it sat the ark. Beyond it no ordinary person could go. That veil was a closed door with a quiet message written across it: a holy God dwells here, and the way in is not yet open.

Step out through the gate into the courtyard and you meet the bronze altar first of all, where the sacrifices burned. No one approached the dwelling of God without first passing the altar. Blood came before fellowship. And around the whole enclosure ran a wall of linen hangings, marking off holy ground from the common camp, with a single gate of entry. Even the oil for the lamp gets its instructions, beaten olive oil to keep a light burning before the Lord from evening to morning, continually.

Read it all as a people who have seen the veil torn. On the day Jesus died, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, and the message changed forever: the way in is open now. The tent was a shadow; Christ is the substance. He is the altar, the door, the light, the way through the veil into the very presence of God. So do not skim these chapters. Behind every loop and board and post, God is telling you how much it cost to bring you home, and how freely He now invites you in.

Group Discussion: The tabernacle had a veil that shut sinners out of the Most Holy Place and a bronze altar that had to be passed before anyone drew near. What were these features teaching Israel about the holiness of God, and how does the torn veil and the cross of Christ change everything for us (Hebrews 10:19–20)?

Personal Reflection: The courtyard had one gate, the dwelling one door, and the Most Holy Place one veil, all teaching that access to God is on His terms. Where are you tempted to seek your own way to God or to peace, apart from the one way He has provided in Christ?

Read Exodus 26:1–27:21

Study Questions

1. Read 26:1–14. The tabernacle was made of layered curtains, from fine woven linen with cherubim down to coverings of skins. What does the careful, God-given design of the dwelling, built exactly as He specified, reveal about how God is to be approached?
2. Read 26:1–6. Israel built the dwelling precisely to God's pattern, not their own taste. Where in your walk with God are you tempted to serve Him by your own design rather than according to His revealed will, and what would submission look like?
3. Read 26:31–35. A veil separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, where the ark sat. What was this veil teaching Israel about the holiness of God and about humanity's access to His presence under the old covenant?
4. Read 26:33 with Hebrews 10:19–20. The veil shut the way in; the New Testament says Jesus opened 'a new and living way... through the curtain, that is, through his flesh.' What does it mean for your daily confidence before God that the way into His presence is now open through Christ?
5. Read 27:1–8. The bronze altar stood in the courtyard, the first thing encountered, where sacrifices were offered. Why must the altar of sacrifice come before any approach to God's dwelling, and what does this order (sacrifice first, then fellowship) reveal about coming to God?

6. Read 27:1–8 again. No Israelite drew near to God’s tent without passing the altar of blood. Where are you tempted to seek nearness to God or peace of conscience while bypassing the cross, and how does this chapter call you back to the only true ground of access?
7. Read 27:9–19. The courtyard was enclosed by linen hangings with a single gate for entry. What does the one gate, the one appointed entrance into the holy enclosure, teach us about how God provides access to Himself?
8. Read 27:16. There was one gate into the courtyard, not many. When you think about how a person comes to God, are you content with the one way He has appointed in Christ, or do you quietly wish for other paths? What does honest reflection reveal?
9. Read 27:20–21 with Hebrews 8:5 and 9:23–24. The pure beaten oil kept the lamp burning continually before the LORD, in a sanctuary that Hebrews calls ‘a copy and shadow of the heavenly things.’ How do the tabernacle, the veil, the altar, and the continual light point forward as shadows to Christ and the heavenly realities, and why must we not bind this system on Christians today?
10. Read 27:21 once more, the lamp tended ‘from evening to morning before the LORD.’ Looking back over the curtains, the veil, the altar, the gate, and the continual light, name one specific way the Lord Jesus is forming you, through these chapters, to live as one for whom He is the altar, the door, the light, and the open way to God.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Hebrews 10:19–22, we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way He opened through the curtain; Matthew 27:50–51, at Jesus' death the temple curtain was torn in two from top to bottom; John 14:6, Jesus says, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'; Hebrews 9:1–14, the structure of the tabernacle and how Christ entered the greater tent by His own blood once for all; John 10:9, Jesus says, 'I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved'

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