

## TABERNACLE AND TEMPLE INTRODUCTION

Hello everyone. My name is Rosemary Bardsley. I have been writing and speaking for CWCI since the 1980s, and it's a task that I love – a joy, not a chore. My task, my *joy*, in this audio is to introduce you to your study of the tabernacle and the temple.

Although there are some of you who are looking forward to the study with joyful expectation, I'm pretty sure, in fact I *know*, there are some of you who are rather reluctant, or even puzzled... and your thoughts are something like –

- Tabernacle ... what's that? or
- What are we studying the tabernacle for? I'm not at all sure I want to do this! or
- Why study something that ceased to exist centuries, even millennia, ago?
- What's the point? It was all about the religious rituals of the Jews, and I'm not a Jew! I'm not supposed to do all those rituals, am I?
- And the temple? Even the Jews don't have a temple anymore!
- Why get ourselves bogged down in details of rituals that can no longer be practised?
- Aren't we supposed to focus on God and on his Son Jesus Christ? Isn't he, Jesus, the main point?

And such questions could go on and on ...

So my goal is to shed some light on where the tabernacle and temple fit in God's eternal purpose and in God's making himself known to us – in God's revelation of himself.

But, before that, here's a quick answer to the first question: *What is the 'tabernacle'?* It was a portable, tent-like, structure, rather mundane looking on the outside, but quite glorious inside. God told Moses to get the Israelites to build it while they were still camped at Mount Sinai, very soon after God had brought them out of slavery in Egypt.

So now let's get on with it, let's try to unpack the purpose and the benefits of studying the tabernacle and the temple.

When we come to consider the tabernacle we cannot study this topic as we would study a biblical book. We are not looking at a single book, written by a single author, to a particular people, at a particular time, for a particular purpose.

- **About the author:** We cannot say: 'So and so is the *author* of this book'. The tabernacle, though first described by Moses in Exodus, is mentioned by multiple authors in both the Old and New Testaments.
- **About the date:** We can say *when* instructions about the tabernacle were first given – to Moses, on Mount Sinai, shortly after the Red Sea miracle; these instructions, and the actual work of making the tabernacle, are recorded in Exodus 25 to 28 and 35 to 40. But this is not the only occasion on which biblical writers spoke about the tabernacle. We find multiple references to it in both the Old and New Testaments.
- **About the occasion:** We can say what the *circumstances* were when these instructions were *originally* given – they were given to a frightened bunch of newly liberated slaves with very little knowledge of the true and living God and almost no trust in God. But there are also other occasions and circumstances in which biblical references to the tabernacle and temple are significant.

- **About the kind of writing, the genre:** While we can say that the instructions for the construction, furnishing, staffing and rituals of the tabernacle were firmly embedded in the historical narrative of Exodus, we cannot say that the genre is history.
- **About the purpose:** While we can say that the instructions for the construction, furnishing and use of the tabernacle are part of the Law of Moses, we cannot say that the tabernacle is *only* law.

Indeed, the tabernacle is fundamentally a revelation of grace and Gospel. And this is the key truth – this element of grace and gospel - that makes the study of the tabernacle and temple both right and relevant for us as followers of Jesus Christ.

The tabernacle itself, and therefore the biblical references to the tabernacle, are –

- both history and prophecy,
- both law and gospel,
- both real and symbolic.

The tabernacle, as a physical object, represents a massive spiritual reality. Or, rather, we should say, it represents *four* great, inter-related spiritual truths. And, if we add to this the various furnishings of the tabernacle, and the various rituals performed in the tabernacle, we discover that there are additional powerful spiritual truths that are communicated here within this physical structure called the ‘tabernacle’.

**The four great spiritual truths** represented by *the tabernacle itself* are:

1. *God is present with his people.* This is the truth depicted by the presence of the physical tabernacle. This was immediately applicable to the Israelites when it was constructed. The tabernacle was a constant reminder that God was with them, that God was a God who was there.
2. The second great spiritual truth takes us into the New Testament and it is the truth *that in the incarnation of Christ, God dwelt among his people.* This is a truth prophetically symbolized by the tabernacle. In John 1:14 we read: *“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”* The word translated “made his dwelling” was previously translated “tabernacled”; it means to pitch one’s tent. Jesus Christ was God living among us. In Christ, God pitched His tent; He *tabernacled* among us.
3. The third great truth and again it’s a New Testament truth - *that God dwells in all who believe in Christ – the indwelling Holy Spirit of God.* This truth is prophetically symbolized in the tabernacle and temple. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:21, 22: *“In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”* Paul also wrote in 1 Corinthians 3:16 *‘Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?’* and in 1Corinthians 6:19 *‘Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit?’*
4. The fourth great truth is *the permanent presence of God with us in the new heavens and the new earth.* This is the ultimate, eternal reality reflected in the tabernacle: In Revelation 21:3 we read *‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God ...’,*

and in verse 22 John wrote '*I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.*'

So the tabernacle and the temple both speak of these four great truths –

- The presence of God with his people
- The incarnation of the Son of God
- The Holy Spirit living in all who believe in the Son
- The permanent, unimpeded presence of God with us in the new heaven and new earth.

In addition to these four great truths, **additional powerful truths** are revealed *by the furnishings, workers and rituals of the Tabernacle*. These include the following:

Firstly, God is holy – totally unique, one of a kind - the only God there is, the only God to worship, who can be approached and worshipped only in the way he himself has decreed.

Secondly, humans are sinners, disqualified and banned from entering God's presence.

Thirdly, God in his grace has provided:

A representative, mediatorial priesthood to act on behalf of sinners.

Substitutionary sacrifices by means of which atonement for sin can be made.

All of these were true for the people among whom the tabernacle was first erected.

But the New Testament makes it clear that the tabernacle and its furnishings and rituals (and also the later temple) were not themselves *the real thing*. They were mere shadows of a greater reality; they were but a copy of the real presence of God in heaven, of the real and eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ, and of the real and ultimate sacrifice of Christ –

Paul said in Colossians 2:16, 17 – '*do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.*'

Hebrews 8:5, 6 – '*they serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: 'See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.'*

Shadows, copies, derive their significance and power from an already existing reality. Without that reality, the shadows and copies would not exist, and they would have no significance.

- As a copy, the tabernacle, its furnishings and its rituals, affirm and reveal the real thing.
- As a shadow, the tabernacle, its furnishings and its rituals, demonstrate that there actually is something that is far, far greater. Something without which the tabernacle and everything in it would not even exist.

That *real thing*, that *greater reality*, is Jesus Christ.

The tabernacle and the temple and all of the associated rituals *existed only because* Jesus Christ, the Son of God, would one day come and live among us, would die as our substitute because of our sins, and would rise and return to the presence of his Father as our mediator. He is the grand, glorious, ultimate reality to which the tabernacle and temple point us.

Once we have seen *the real thing*, that is, *once we have known Jesus Christ* – Immanuel (God with us), our High Priest, our atoning sacrifice – then we can look at the Tabernacle and the Temple and say ‘Ah! Now I see! Now I understand!’

*That which many prophets and kings longed to catch just a glimpse of (Luke 10:23, 24); that which the Old Testament prophets searched diligently to understand (1 Peter 1:10 – 12); that which angels long to look into (1 Peter 1:12) – we now see revealed to us in and by Jesus Christ. He is the mystery hidden for ages in this tabernacle, in its furnishings and its rituals, but now, through his incarnation, life, death and resurrection, made known (Colossians 1:24 – 2:3).*

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There is also another deep truth represented by the tabernacle. Not only does it point us to the ultimate reality of the eternal presence of God with his people in the new heaven and the new earth, it also points us back to the beginning, back to Eden. There, before human sin entered, God was present with his people. From this original perfection, this original glory, down through the centuries of imperfection, and looking forward into the eternal perfection and glory, *the tabernacle bears witness to the glory and the grace of God*. It looks back to the glory and grace of creation. It looks forward to the grace and glory of the new creation. And it focuses on the centre – on Jesus Christ, our great high priest, our sin-bearer, the Beginning and the End, our Creator and our Goal, who ties our beginning and our ultimate destiny together. On Jesus Christ, in and through whom the glory of God and his immeasurable grace is made known. The tabernacle is all about him.

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But there are two great obstacles to our understanding the deep and glorious meaning of the Tabernacle:

- (1) that Bible teachers do not agree on the physical construction and appearance of the Tabernacle, and
- (2) that Bible teachers do not agree on the truths about Jesus Christ and salvation symbolized by the Tabernacle, its furnishings and related details.

Because of this broad disagreement we need to be very careful in our study of the tabernacle. It is possible to dismiss it as completely irrelevant to us. It is also possible to ‘find’ multiple symbols in the tabernacle where neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament finds them. If we are inclined to do this, it can give our human egos a bit of a buzz, but whether or not it is biblically right to do so is another question. Although it might dampen and insult our creativity and imagination, it is perhaps far wiser to limit ourselves to the symbolism affirmed by God in his word.

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The church has for many centuries held to a number of guidelines by which to study and understand the Bible. Three of these guidelines are particularly useful in our study of the tabernacle:

1. *The first guideline is to interpret a particular text in its context.* In studying the tabernacle and temple this means that we must understand the various contexts or settings in which the tabernacle and temple are mentioned in the Bible – the original instructions, the use, misuse or abuse of the tabernacle/temple and its rituals and practices in the history of Israel, and what the New Testament says about the tabernacle/temple.

2. *The second guideline is to remember the anticipation/fulfilment theme* that permeates and unites the Old and New Testaments, and to interpret each individual part in the light of this over-arching whole. The tabernacle and everything associated with it, *anticipates* the coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ *fulfils* all the meaning and message of the tabernacle. Related to this is the *newness* of the New Testament message, that sets it in clear contrast (but not *conflict*) with the Old: fulfilment surpasses (is much bigger than) anticipation, just as the reality surpasses (is much bigger than) and replaces the prophetic symbol.
3. *The third guideline is to honour the Christ-centeredness of the Scripture.* The bottom line is that the tabernacle is fundamentally about Jesus Christ. We honour the tabernacle most when we see Christ in it. He is the reality on which it depends. He is the truth that it proclaims.

Now that Christ has come and fulfilled all of the prophetic and symbolic meaning embedded in the tabernacle and its furnishings and rituals, it is both inappropriate and foolish (and perhaps even dishonouring to Christ) to *concentrate* on what the tabernacle/temple meant to the Israelites from Moses right through to the coming of Christ.

We are *Christians*, not Jews. Our aim in studying the tabernacle is not historical, nor is it to understand Judaism. Our aim is *Christological* – *that is, our aim in this study is Christ-centred.*

We look at the tabernacle, and everything associated with it, *only because* we want to know and understand more and more about Jesus Christ. That is the primary purpose and application of our study of the tabernacle. As Jesus told his Jewish antagonists: ‘You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me ... If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for *he wrote about me.*’ (John 5:39,46).

So when we’re studying what Moses wrote about the tabernacle, we are actually studying Jesus Christ because Jesus Himself said, Moses wrote about me. Again, a caution needs to be voiced: we need to be careful not to look for truth about Christ in various details of the tabernacle where the New Testament mentions no such significance. This has been done by some Christians. It has the potential to turn the tabernacle, which is a message of God’s grace in Christ, into a whip with which to beat ourselves and other Christians. It may be that God has embedded meaning in the detail; but where the New Testament itself does not tell us that meaning, we are wise to also keep quiet. If we speak where God remains silent we are engaging in mere human speculation.

Where neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament gives spiritual significance to the trivia of the tabernacle, we are well advised to likewise keep silent.

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So now, it’s up to you: will you begin your study of the tabernacle and temple with doubts and puzzlement? Or are you looking forward with joyful expectation, knowing that you are starting out on a journey of discovery of great and wonderful truths about our Lord Jesus Christ?

I pray that great joy will be yours as you work through this study. I pray that God our Father will give you wisdom and understanding, that your ears and eyes will be open to hear and to see him, that your hearts will be soft as you learn of his Son, here in this ancient tabernacle, and that here, even here, you will find rest for your souls – because here the grace and the glory of Christ is revealed, because here, in studying the tabernacle, we are looking beyond the shadow, beyond the copy, into the grand and glorious eternal reality of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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