

Overview of the OT Sanctuary

Experts have proven that one of the most successful methods of memorization is through picture association. The Lord uses this teaching technique because He knows that humans are extremely visual creatures. This is one of the main reasons Jesus taught with parables. Picture stories help people understand and remember the many abstract principles of salvation by associating them with visual images.

God first illustrated the plan of salvation immediately after Adam and Eve sinned by having them sacrifice a lamb. This process impressed upon the first couple the heinous results of sin and foreshadowed the ultimate death of the "Lamb of God" for their sins.

By the time the children of Israel had spent 400 years in Egypt serving as slaves to a pagan nation, the Lord saw that His people needed a complete re-educating as to the "big picture" of the plan of redemption-including their role and God's role in cleansing them from their sins and restoring them to His image.

This is why, when the children of Israel finally limped out of Egypt with scars on their backs and visions of the Promised Land dancing in their minds, God didn't immediately lead them north toward the Promised Land, but south toward Mt. Sinai. He was about to deliver to this infant nation one of the most powerful and enduring object lessons ever recorded. And He would do it almost entirely with symbols.

The Lord told Moses, "Let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8). Keep in mind that this earthly tabernacle was never intended to be an edifice to shelter God from the elements. Jehovah is not a homeless God. When Solomon was building the first temple in

Jerusalem, he said: "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?" (1 Kings 8:27).

This, then, is the key to the puzzle of the sanctuary. The structure and ceremonies were to serve as symbols to illustrate the sequence and process of salvation.

As we consider the sanctuary and its symbols, the best example would be from the first sanctuary - the one that Moses had the people construct in the wilderness. This portable tent was often called the "tabernacle." Moses did not simply dream up what he thought this structure should look like. In the same way God spelled out the precise dimensions for Noah's Ark, God gave Moses exact plans for everything in the sanctuary, even to the minutest detail of the accessories.

God's plan wasn't arbitrary either. He already had a real dwelling place in heaven where the plan of salvation was first conceived. The earthly sanctuary was to be a miniature model, or shadow, of the heavenly. God told Moses, "According to all that I show thee, after the pattern of the tabernacle [in heaven], and the pattern of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make it" (Exodus 25:9). Unlike any other building ever constructed, the sanctuary would be a three-dimensional, life-sized lesson book. Every component, from the largest curtain to the tiniest piece of furniture, had a symbolic meaning that helped the children of Israel see, experience, and comprehend the plan of salvation and the role of the heavenly sanctuary in a very practical way.

A Journey to God

Let's begin a brief tour through this unusual structure and learn a few basic lessons before examining the deeper meanings of the sanctuary system.

The sanctuary consisted of three principal areas: the courtyard, the holy place, and the most holy place. These three locations represent the three primary steps in the process of salvation known as justification, sanctification, and glorification, and they correspond with three phases of Christ's ministry: the substitutionary sacrifice, the priestly mediation, and the final judgment.

The holy of holies, the tabernacle's most sacred spot, represents the presence of God. The walls around the courtyard and the holy place vividly illustrate man's separation from God. "But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59:2). All of the sanctuary services represent a sinner's journey back to God. In the first three chapters of the Bible, sin enters the world and man is evicted from the garden of Eden. In the last three chapters, sin is eradicated and man is restored to the garden and communion with God.

Please keep in mind as we venture onto this holy ground that we are gathering only a few gems of truth. Volumes could be written on the sanctuary and its symbols without exhausting the subject.

The Door

The first thing we notice as we approach the sanctuary is that there is only one door. Not even a fire exit! Remember Jesus' words: "I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved" (John 10:9).

All that are saved are redeemed by Jesus alone. "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The only way to God is through Christ, the only door.

The Courtyard

The entire edifice of the sanctuary was surrounded by a courtyard made of linen curtains set up in a very specific orientation. It was twice as long as it was wide (150 feet long and 75 feet wide), and was to be set up with the one opening facing east. That arrangement ensured that the worshipers and priests who stood at the door had their backs to the rising sun instead of facing it like the pagan sun-worshiping religions of the day. God's people worship the Creator instead of the creation.

The Altar of Burnt Offering

Immediately upon entering the door of the courtyard sat the brazen altar of burnt offerings. The altar was actually made of acacia wood and overlaid with brass. Some have likened the wood portion to human works and the brass to Christ's work. Without the brass, the wooden frame would have been consumed by the fire during the burning of the offerings, just as we will be consumed by the lake of fire if we do not believe that Jesus' grace must eclipse our good works.

The Laver

Between the altar of burnt offerings and the tabernacle itself stood the laver. It was also made of brass and was filled with water for the cleansing of the priests.

The picture of sinners' justification became clear in the courtyard. Before God gave the Israelites His Law on tables of stone, He saved them from

slavery in Egypt by virtue of their faith in the Passover Lamb (symbolized by the altar) and baptized them in the sea (represented by the laver). God takes us just as we are and forgives our sins. When we accept Christ, confess our sins, and ask for forgiveness, our heavenly record of sin is covered by Jesus' blood.

The Holy Place

The actual tabernacle stood in the west half of the courtyard. It was divided into two compartments or rooms. While the width of the two rooms was the same, the length of the first room, the holy place, was twice as long as that of the most holy place. The walls of the central structure were made of acacia boards overlaid with gold and connected with silver hardware (Exodus 26).

All who entered the holy place to minister saw themselves reflected in the golden walls on every side, reminding them that the eyes of the Lord see all. "And he made a covering for the tent of rams' skins dyed red, and a covering of badgers' skins above that" (Exodus 36:19). The priests could look up and see that they served under a red skin. Likewise, Christians are a nation of priests that serve Jesus under His blood.

The holy place had three articles of furniture. We will review them one by one.

The Golden Lampstand

Just inside the holy place on the left (south) side, stood the golden menorah that had seven candlestick branches (see Exodus 25:31-40). They were not wax candles as we know them, but lamps fueled by pure olive oil. The priests trimmed the wicks daily, and refilled the bowls with oil

so that the menorah would constantly be a source of light for the holy place. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12).

He also said, "Ye are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). The olive oil in the lamps symbolized the Holy Spirit that illuminates the church. The lamp is a symbol of the Word, as well (Psalm 119:105).

The Table of Showbread

Opposite the lamp was the table of showbread on the north side. It was constructed of acacia wood and covered with gold (Exodus 25:23-30). On it were kept 12 loaves of unleavened bread (Leviticus 24:5-9). These loaves were symbolic of Jesus, who is the bread of life (John 6:35). They number 12 signified the 12 tribes of Israel and 12 apostles of Jesus who were to feed God's people with the bread of life-which is also a symbol of the Bible (Matthew 4:4).

The Altar of Incense

The altar of incense was located directly across from the door standing against the ornate veil that separated the holy place from the most holy place. Like several other items in the sanctuary, it was also made of acacia wood and covered with gold (Exodus 30:1-3). It was much smaller than the altar in the courtyard and contained a brass pot that held hot coals from the brazen altar of burnt offerings. It was here that the priest burned a very special blend of incense which filled the sanctuary with a sweet-smelling cloud, representing the prayers of intercession and confession of the believers sweetened by the Holy Spirit (Exodus 30:8).

The Holy Place represents the process of sanctification. This corresponds to the wilderness wanderings of Israel. The pillar of fire was their menorah,

and the manna was their showbread. The pillar of cloud was their cloud of incense.

Sanctification is the process in the Christian's life of learning to obey. It is made up of a series of justifications. Each time we sin we ask for forgiveness, and we are justified again. However, God offers more than forgiveness when we confess. In 1 John 1:9, He promises us that, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

It is that "cleansing from unrighteousness" that constitutes sanctification. The key ingredients in our sanctification are a devotional life in the Word, prayer, and witnessing. The sanctuary's bread, incense, and lamp represent these elements.

The Most Holy Place

The length of the most holy place equaled its width so that it formed a square. It was also as high as it was wide and long, making it a perfect cube-just like the New Jerusalem will be (see Revelation 21:16). The apartment contained only one piece of furniture.

The Veil

This veil, or curtain, separating the holy and the most holy places of the sanctuary has great significance, because it was this veil that tore at the very moment Jesus died on the cross (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). His death symbolized the end of the need for the exclusive Levitical priesthood to mediate between man and God.

The veil represents the body of Jesus (Hebrews 10:19, 20). It was only by passing through this veil that access was possible to the most holy place (Hebrews 4:16). The tearing of the veil symbolized the death of the Lamb

of God, which now permits the believer in His atonement immediate access to the most holy place through the new High Priest-Jesus Christ-the one and only Mediator between man and God.

The Ark of the Covenant

Inside the most holy place, or "holy of holies," was one piece of furniture-the ark of the covenant. This sacred box, also constructed of acacia wood and covered with gold, contained the tables of stone upon which God had written the Ten Commandments. Later it also contained Aaron's rod that had budded and a small pot of manna.

The lid of the ark was called the "mercy seat" (Exodus 25:17), and above it was the shining glory of the Lord, or Shekinah (which literally means "the dwelling"), radiating between two covering cherubs, or angels, on either end of the ark. This was a symbol of the throne of God and the presence of the Almighty in heaven. The walls of the most holy place were engraved with many angels, representing the clouds of living angels that surround the person of God in heaven (1 Kings 6:29).

How It All Works

The sanctuary shows how God deals with sin. Sin cannot be ignored. Its wages are death (Romans 6:23). The law can't be changed to make sinners not guilty. Sin's wages must be paid, either by the sinner in receiving eternal death, or by Christ on the cross. Let's follow a sin as it is confessed, and then processed through the sanctuary.

The Courtyard Ministry

When a sinner became convicted of sin by the Holy Spirit and wanted to confess it, he came to the door of the courtyard with a spotless animal (usually a lamb) to sacrifice. He laid his hands on the head of the innocent

victim and confessed his sin. This symbolically transferred his sin and its penalty to the lamb. Then with his own hand he had to slay the animal and shed its blood. This was to impress upon the repentant sinner that his sins would ultimately require the death of the spotless Lamb of God.

This was the part of the sinner in the sanctuary service. The priests, who represented the mediation of Christ between the guilty sinner and his God, did the rest.

After confessing his sin and slaying the lamb, the sinner went away forgiven, his sin covered by the shed blood of the victim. Of course the lamb's blood didn't cover the sin, but it represented the blood of Christ, "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

After some of the blood was caught by the priest, the rest was poured out on the ground at the base of the altar and the animal was burnt on the altar. The altar symbolizes the cross where Jesus was sacrificed for the sins of the world. His blood was spilt on the ground at the foot of the cross when the centurion pierced His side (John 19:34).

The blood of the lamb, symbolically bearing the guilt of the sinner, was then taken by the priest and transferred to the holy place of the sanctuary. However, the priest never went into the sanctuary without first cleansing himself at the laver. This washing is symbolic of baptism and is listed as one of the symbols for salvation. (Acts 2:38) The Israelites had to cross the Red Sea before they were free from the bondage of Egypt. "And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Corinthians 10:2).

So in the courtyard we pass through the fire and water. Jesus said, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5).

In the holy place the smoke of the incense rising from the altar represented the intercession of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name, making our prayers of confession acceptable to the Father (Romans 8:26, 27). Each day the blood, bearing the guilt, was sprinkled before the veil, thus transferring the guilt from the sinner to the tabernacle. There the guilt of the repentant sinners accumulated throughout the year until the Day of Atonement.

The Most Holy Place Ministry

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest took two perfect kid goats, and lots were cast over them to determine which one would be the Lord's goat and which would be the scapegoat (called Azazel in Hebrew). After confessing his own sins and those of his family, the high priest placed his hands on the Lord's goat and confessed the sins of the entire congregation which had accumulated in the holy place during the year. Then the Lord's goat was slain, and the blood was taken by the high priest into the most holy place and offered before the mercy seat of the ark where the presence of God dwelt.

The ark of the covenant contains some of the most beautiful and significant symbolism of God's entire plan of salvation. Inside the ark, between the golden bowl of manna, symbolizing God's providence, and Aaron's rod that budded, symbolizing God's authority and discipline, were the two tables of stone on which God's finger inscribed the law that has been violated by all men (Romans 3:23). The breaking of that law is sin (1John 3:4) and the penalty for sin is death (Romans 6:23).

Between the law which condemns us to death and the all-consuming presence of God is the mercy seat, or the lid of the ark. This arrangement illustrates that only Jesus' mercy saves us from being consumed by the fiery presence and justice of God. But Jesus' mercy isn't cheap. He bought

it with His own blood. He paid the wages of sin so He could offer mercy to all who will accept it.

Next, representing Christ as Mediator, the high priest transferred the sins that had polluted the sanctuary to the live goat, Azazel, which was then led away from the camp of Israelites. This symbolically removed the sins of the people and readied the sanctuary for another year of ministry. Thus, all things were right between God and His people once again.

A Broad View of Salvation

The plan of salvation is the theme of the entire Bible. The salvation of the children of Israel from Egypt follows this plan exactly. Egypt corresponded to the courtyard where justification transpired. God sacrificed all the firstborn of Egypt, representing those who will pay for their own sins. But the Israelites were allowed to substitute the blood of the Passover Lamb for their firstborn child, representing those who accept Jesus' payment. After the sacrifice came the cleansing. All of the children of Israel were "baptized" in the Red Sea (1 Corinthians 10:1, 2) symbolized by the laver.

This daily progress in character building is the process of sanctification. But what is the end result of sanctification? Eventually we come to the place where we would rather die than dishonor our Saviour by sinning. That is when the new covenant is fulfilled in us. "But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33). When God's law is our delight and pleasure and sin has no more power over us, then the process of sanctification is complete.

Atonement

For ten days leading up to the Day of Atonement, the children of Israel were to clean their camp, houses, bodies, and guilt by confessing every known fault. After the high priest went through the ritual of cleansing the sanctuary, God had a clean sanctuary and a clean people.

Now, as the real atonement is taking place in heaven, God's people must be purified again. In order to finish the cleansing of the sanctuary and bring His people to heaven, Christ cannot have any more sins confessed. The wicked will go on sinning, but they will bear their own sins and pay sin's wages in the judgment.

The righteous, on the other hand, will have gained the victory over sin through the blood of Jesus Christ. This takes place when they all have the new covenant experience, which takes the law from the stone tables and makes it an integral part of their hearts. At that time, Christ can finish cleansing His heavenly sanctuary and come for His bride because His earthly sanctuary-his people-have also been cleansed. He will have a clean sanctuary in heaven and a clean sanctuary on earth. Doesn't Jesus say that we are His temple (Ephesians 2:19-21; 1 Corinthians 3:16)?

Jesus Is the Sanctuary

This study could go on for hundreds of pages, but ultimately the central theme of the whole sanctuary system is Jesus. Jesus is the door, the spotless lamb, and our high priest. He is the light of the world and the bread of life. He is the living water in the laver and the rock upon which is written the law of God in the ark. His love is the gold shimmering throughout the holy place. It is His blood that makes it possible for us to approach the Father. Indeed, Jesus is the essence of the temple, for He

said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. ... But he spake of the temple of his body" (John 2:19, 21).

Have you made Christ your sanctuary? The Scriptures promise: "Behold, A king shall reign in righteousness, and princes shall rule in judgment. And a man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land" (Isaiah 32:1, 2).

"We might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us: Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil" (Hebrews 6:18, 19).

"Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16)