

# The Tabernacle (God's House)

by G.W. North

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*G.W. North's sermon explores the significance of the Tabernacle as God's dwelling place and its profound implications for redemption and worship in the life of Israel and modern believers.*

**Scripture:** Exodus 25:8, Exodus 29:43

**Topics:** "Redemption", "God's Presence"

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## Description

G.W. North emphasizes the significance of the Tabernacle as God's dwelling place among the Israelites, illustrating how it was meticulously designed according to divine specifications to reflect God's holiness and the redemptive relationship He established with His people. He explains that the Tabernacle served as a constant reminder of their redemption from Egypt and the system of atonement that followed, highlighting the importance of the lamb's blood in their worship and identity as a redeemed nation. North underscores that the Tabernacle was not just a physical structure but a profound symbol of God's desire to dwell among His people, requiring their obedience and devotion in its construction and worship practices.

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## Transcript

The Lord had planned that the house of Israel should be brought to and built in the land He had originally given to Abraham by promise, so He proceeded to lead the people there. The arrival there was delayed by many tragic events, during which the whole generation of responsible males that came out of Egypt was destroyed: this judgement of God spread out over forty years. When at last the judgement was complete, the nation came to Canaan and their home(-land) eventually fixed, God approached them about making Him a place for His abode.

His plan was that Israel in the land were to be God's house, His intention had been to dwell in His own tabernacle in the midst of them there. He had prepared them for this earlier when He halted them at Sinai soon after crossing the Red Sea. He gathered them to Him there and gave them His law, then He gave them instructions about making and erecting His tent, and after that told them who He wanted as His servants. This done He gave them elaborate commandments about the sacrifices and offerings He required and how they were to be offered to Him. This was the equivalent of ordering the food He desired, telling them in detail what He wanted - or His likes, and what He would not have - His dislikes. He even told them how to prepare it for Him, taking meticulous care that they understood Him aright. All was to be laid upon three 'tables' specially constructed for Him according to His designs. He called these

respectively the brazen altar, the altar of shewbread and the golden altar. These were to be sanctified entirely to His use.

Nobody was allowed to touch or even to go near these except the priests in their special anointed liveries. Everything and everybody that stood and served within the tabernacle was to be holy unto the Lord. Each article of furniture and every vessel had been carefully made and then placed and anointed according to His commands. Every vessel was holy, however menial its use. Some were of gold, some of silver, some were earthen vessels, some were unto honour and some unto dishonour, and all had to be fit for the Master's use. Some contained the precious blood for God, some carried meat for men, some carried ashes to desolation without the camp, some held dead sparrows, some held incense, some oil. Of different shapes and sizes and uses, they were made for a variety of reasons unto different ends; He had a use for them all, but all must be fit for the Lord's service.

Now almost all this was based upon a system of atonements devised by God for the benefit of His people. At first glance this system may appear very complex, certainly it was most exact. It was a method whereby, upon fulfilment of certain conditions, every person in Israel could be kept in favour and communication with God. While they were in Egypt it was unknown to them, for the system was only devised to function in connection with God's dwelling-place on earth. This was not in existence while as yet the people were still in Egypt. They had to be brought out of the world before there could be any house or law or any system of atonement. The blood of atonement(s) was never shed in Egypt, it was for God's house only. The blood shed in Egypt was the blood of redemption.

The blood of redemption was shed and used for a different purpose than the blood of atonement. Redeeming blood was far more fundamental to Israel than the blood of atonement, indicating purchase with a view to salvation from death and possession and ownership. Nothing of this is ever attributed to the blood of atonement; nowhere in scripture does God claim Israel as His because of atonement. He never says, 'I am thy Atoner', but He says, 'I am thy Redeemer.. .I have redeemed thee, thou art mine'

For this reason the Lord founded the whole scheme of atonements upon the fact of redemption. This is plainly brought out by the instructions He gave Moses concerning the inauguration of public worship following the consecration of the priests. Having fully installed these men according to God's word, Moses had to prepare the altar for God and the people. This involved a ceremony lasting a week: for seven days a sin-offering for atonement had to be offered upon it to God. By this He was insisting that the altar must be thoroughly cleansed through perfect atonement. Following that, it had to be anointed and sanctified wholly, and from that moment whosoever and whatsoever touched the altar must be holy. All this was done in preparation for the beginning of public worship in the house of the Lord; it was a clean, holy start.

Having established His house and His servants to His satisfaction, the Lord now proceeds to establish the order of worship for the people. Day by day continually two lambs were to be offered to Him, one in the morning and the other in the evening - 'throughout your generations', He said. So it was He founded everything to do with Himself and His people, His house and His worship, upon the lamb and his blood. The lamb first. Not all the other variety of animals and offerings. They had to do with atonement(s) for sin, but the lamb alone represented redemption. In common with other creatures, it was also used for atonement, but they never shared in the distinction of redemption with the lamb; that honour belonged to the lamb alone. By this the Lord was insisting that worship was for a redeemed people only: each day began and ended with the lamb. He showed them that the lamb was for a house. He called Israel His house. Whether it was for each house, or shared in Egypt between two houses or more because one

house was too small for it, the lamb and the house were joined for ever. In a wonderful way God had planned to keep this forever fixed in the sight of all Israel.

Properly viewed on the day of its erection the layout of the Tabernacle was nothing other than an adaptation of the historic events through which Israel had recently passed. God never said this was so, nevertheless it is plain to be seen. The Lord was very strict with Moses about the Tabernacle. First He took him up into the mount and showed him the pattern, so that Moses knew exactly how He wanted it. Up there with God, Moses studied the plan of the finished work with care, noting the position of each piece of furniture and its layout in relationship to each of the others. It was obvious to him that God had worked to a plan and was determined to have it carried out to the last detail.

It was obvious also that for the time being the Lord had set up His headquarters on Horeb. It was from there He had directed His campaign for the deliverance of Israel. This accomplished, He brought them right from Egypt to Himself at His headquarters in the holy mount. Having done so, He addressed Israel through Moses in marvellous language, likening the whole episode to the idea of a great eagle bearing its young on its wings to its mountain eyrie. Having arrived there, for the next nine to ten (lunar) months they were to rest from travel and devote themselves entirely to making the Lord their God a home. He wanted a tabernacle as they themselves had, but not according to human design. They were not allowed to make it as they wished. He was most precise in His specifications, asking of them the very best materials and their most precious possessions, and in their hearts He found a ready response.

Israel brought gold, silver, precious stones, brass, skins, linens, colours - all He asked - and lavished them upon Him with love. Then with all their strength and mind and soul they devoted themselves to Him and worked with skill and might until all was as God wanted. Following His instructions with meticulous care, under divine guidance every detail of the divine mind was wrought out to perfection until at last everything was assembled according to God's will. Their labours took up the whole of their time for the remaining months of the year. It was a kind of human gestation period; the Tabernacle was formed within the nation who gave it issue from God.

He always thought of Israel as His wife. Looking back later upon those first two or three months when He led them from Egypt, He said He remembered them as the time of loving espousal. It was a wonderful period to Him; wilderness journey though it had been, Israel had gone after Him; they loved Him, wanted Him, were prepared to follow Him anywhere. The kindness and love of those days was like the springtime of their first youthful awakening to pure love, and it lived in His heart. 'I have loved thee with an everlasting love', He could say, but His words spoken through Jeremiah were tinged with sorrow; not all His memories of them were sweet. 'My people have forgotten me days without number', He mourned; 'yet will I not forget thee', His faithful heart asserted through Isaiah. He had entered into the sacred covenant of marriage with Israel at Horeb and to Him it was unbreakable. There He had joined them to Himself in holy wedlock and there sowed the seed and thought of the Tabernacle, which eventually took shape before Him at the second year of their union.

The foot of Sinai was a scene of busy labour during those months of expectation. Supervised by Moses, the children of Israel, led by Bezaleel and Aholiab, wrought with affection and zeal to complete the sacred task, and over all the Lord watched from His mountain headquarters. He and they were awaiting the day when He could remove from Sinai into the home of love, and live in the midst of His people. Hopes were high as the day of completion drew near, and when finally all was finished and brought to Moses for inspection and approval he responded with a benediction; (perhaps also the entire congregation said a big

unrecorded 'Amen!') All had gone according to plan - the reproduction of the heavenly pattern was perfect.

The last two chapters of Exodus record the erection of the Tabernacle at Sinai; they seem to be full of the repetitive phrase, 'as the Lord commanded Moses' . Fifteen times in all, the testimony to Israel's faithfulness and obedience is recorded. God was pleased with them beyond words, and waiting only for the dawn of the first day of the year, they rose with one accord and assembled the Tabernacle. It was all done 'as the Lord commanded Moses'; he set it out in the order he had seen in the pattern God showed him in the mount; it was exact. Then the Lord descended from the mount. He came down to take up His abode in His new headquarters in the wilderness; thenceforward it was to be known as the Holy of Holies.

The Lord could dwell there because all was right. He had insisted on having His way. There was no other way He could dwell with men. The pattern was right and so was the finished product; He had worked it out to the last detail, His house spelled out the truth that had set Israel free; it told the story of redemption. That is why He had it laid out in this order; He had planned it, prepared a pattern or model of it, instructed Moses about it, furnished it to His taste, timed its erection, arranged for a retinue of servants and taken up His abode in it. All Israel knew He had come. He filled the place with the glorious cloud, baptising it in His sanctity, both revealing His presence to them and veiling Himself from their eyes at the same time. They needed to see it all, it was so reassuring to their hearts. They had seen the cloud and fire upon Sinai, it had hovered there night and day for months. The whole vicinity was lighted and warmed at night by its strange light and welcome warmth. It was the same cloud they had followed from Egypt, leading them on through the wilderness, keeping them in the way. Now its abiding presence assured them that God was in His temple in their Tabernacle.

Much more than they knew, it was the Tabernacle of the Congregation. It was the Tabernacle of Witness too; God had seen to that. Before He would take up His abode there He ensured it should ever be an undeniable testimony to them and their children after them. Whether or not they knew it, the Lord had ordered and laid out the major pieces of His house furniture in such a way as to tell the story of their deliverance. This is why He descended visibly in the cloud from Sinai to sit upon the Mercy Seat of the Ark. The operation He had mounted from Sinai was completed; He accomplished it in three major stages:

- (1) God's Passover in Egypt;
- (2) Israel's passage (passover) of the Red Sea;
- (3) Israel's meeting with God at Sinai.

Without informing Israel of the strategy behind His basic plan, the Lord had incorporated this into the layout of the Tabernacle.

Every adult Israelite knew that to approach God in His house he must come via the Altar and the Laver. True, he must be represented by a priest, but everyone knew that the priest in course of his ministry was really a substitute for another; the priest represented every man's clean, anointed, acceptable self moving into the nearer presence of the Lord. To make this possible, the Lord had the Altar and Laver placed outside the actual living apartment of His house, right in plain view so that everyone could see what was happening.

By the Altar at the dawning and departing of each day a lamb was slain; its blood, followed by its body, was placed upon the Altar table, one to be roast and eaten and the other to be drunk by the fire until

nothing of either remained. It was the perpetual reminder to them of their redemption from Egypt. Twice in every twenty-four hours God caused them to observe the sacrifice. He insisted that whether day or night all Israel should know that time only began for them and continued to be for them as a nation by redemption. It was a kind of re-enactment whereby God kept fresh before their eyes the most fundamental elements of their national existence. Unless they were a redeemed nation they were not a nation at all, nor the people of God; the Lord redeemed them by the lamb - its blood and its flesh - the whole lamb. The Lord was spelling out redemption to His people.

Next in exact order of redemption as laid out by God in His Tabernacle was the Laver. From the people's standpoint this stood between the Altar and God's holy place into which the priests entered to accomplish their service. By this Laver the second vital step of their recent experience was constantly displayed to them. When they had left Egypt heading for Canaan that solemn night twelve months earlier, the Red Sea lay between them and safety. Pharaoh and his host pressing hard on their heels pursued them to the brink of death in its waters, and God, to save them, opened up a way in the sea; the path lay through the mighty waters. So the Lord had the Laver placed next in order to the Altar - first the lamb and its blood, then the sea and its water - redemption - regeneration: Calvary followed by Pentecost: bought to be baptised, purchased to live unto God. By the Laver God was saying, 'through this baptism you have passed through death and resurrection into me all the priests passed into God's house on their behalf via the Laver; there was no other way.

The third major event emphasised by the symbolic realism of the Tabernacle was God's descent to the throne on the Ark. The stated purpose of God by redemption was to bring Israel to Himself at Sinai. Having accomplished this He gave them His Law, instructing Moses, the mediator of it, to place it in the Ark which immediately became the Ark of the Covenant. It was constructed to hold the Law and bear the Mercy Seat with its attendant cherubim in-turned to gaze upon the sprinkled blood and blazing glory. Upon its completion and erection the Tabernacle was ordered by Moses, with the Ark of the Covenant in the chief place; this he did first, for it was to be the throne of God in His private chamber. Gradually, placing everything else in position as he went, Moses withdrew, until at last the order completed he stood outside the courts of the Lord. Then the cloud, which until then abode on Sinai, covered the Tabernacle and the Lord's glory filled it. God had taken up residence in His house to complete the story of redemption. 'I have brought you to myself', He had said at Sinai, and there He and they tarried, wedded with intention to bring forth the Tabernacle of His abiding presence. All led up to this.

So it was that throughout their history the children of Israel had in their midst a permanent testimony to their original redemption. God had insisted on it. Whether in the wilderness or the land, in tent or temple, the pattern of redemption was ever before them; they were a redeemed people. God had brought them to Himself, and He installed into His 'house-testimony' this most fundamental method of salvation. He also developed a system of atonements based upon the same plan. He needed to do this because, by the Law He had given them, they had knowledge of sin; He gave it for that reason. He therefore provided for justification from sin by atonement, but this was only possible because of redemption.

This was made clear to them by the practice of morning and evening sacrifice. Each day and each night was heralded and bounded by redemption. Every day was a day of redemption; God was fixing it upon their minds, their lives, indeed time for them was only possible because of redemption. Their existence as a nation dated from the redemption, so each day must tell the same story, redeemed! The enforced limitations of the Levitical sacrifices show to advantage the difference between redemption and atonement. No sacrifice offered for redemption could atone for sin. God had laid this down firmly, that it

should be understood clearly right at the beginning. When the lambs were slain in Egypt and their blood sprinkled at the entrances to Israel's houses, sin was not in view. The blood and body of the lamb were for the entire family sheltering inside. What could not be eaten must be burned within the camp. They were an exclusive company, the people of the lamb. Sheep and sheep-keepers were an abomination to the Egyptians, they never ate lamb anyway; but Israel kept and ate sheep and became God's sheep. That is what redemption is all about: belonging to God exclusively - total possession by God; 'I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine'.

The episode at Sinai when God said He would destroy Israel was a most dreadful experience. It seemed almost impossible that God should even think of doing such a thing, leave alone saying it. Why should He bring a nation of people out of Egypt through the Red Sea to Himself, sustain them by a series of unprecedented miracles, give to Moses a law for them, and then threaten to kill them? Simply because they broke the basic law of redemption. The first 'word' of the Law, which was soon to become the foundation of their civilisation, was 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me'. That was the logical outcome of redemption; God first and God alone as God. But while Moses was assimilating this and other associated commandments, the people down below were making and worshipping a golden calf. They were destroying the first, second and third principles of the philosophy and doctrine of redemption, they had no understanding of it whatever.

Their behaviour was inexcusable. God was very angry; He had already told them they must not do these things and had also just written the commandment into stone to be a permanent prohibition to them. 'Thou shalt not make unto thee ..... Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God'. But Israel broke the lot. They were not blamed because they did not understand the principles of redemption, but for disobedience. Their attitude towards Him was intolerable. He did not expect them all to be philosophers or theologians, but He did expect them to be grateful enough to obey Him. But they would not, therefore He would slay them, and but for Moses' intercession would certainly have done so because of their total disregard of the basic principles of eternal life.

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