

Truth for Today

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Some Coverings of Scripture: Tabernacle Coverings 1 - The fine linen, blue, purple, scarlet and cherubim

It is remarkable that God only takes the first two chapters of the book of Genesis to describe creation, but then takes over eight chapters of Exodus to detail the tabernacle (Exodus 25-31, 35-40). The importance of this relatively small but beautiful tent is summed up in God's words to Moses, "And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8).

It seems to me that the structure, design and materials of the tabernacle illustrate, in a remarkable way, two journeys. The first journey is one that God makes - God comes down to man. The second journey is one that man makes - man comes to God.

The construction of the tabernacle does not begin with its foundations but with its central feature - the Ark. The Ark was the basis upon which God could dwell with His people. Once the tabernacle was constructed and erected, God comes down to dwell amongst His people. Once He has come down, the second journey - how man is brought into God's presence - is described.

The tabernacle was erected in the centre of the camp of the Children of Israel. The court of the tabernacle was 50 cubits wide and 100 cubits long (Exodus 27:9-12). The single gate or door to the court was on the east side. It is a great reminder of what Jesus said in John 10:9, "I am the door". It represents the seeker. The first thing you saw after entering the court was the Brazen Altar where sacrifices were made. These sacrifices prefigured salvation through the sacrifice of Christ. In the words of Ephesians 2:8 "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God." After the Brazen Altar there was the Laver. This was a large container of water where the priests washed. The Laver is an excellent illustration of sanctification. Once we are saved, the word of God is applied constantly to our lives. "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word" (Ephesians 5:26). In front of the Laver was the tabernacle itself. It was divided into the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. In the Holy Place was the Table of Showbread, the Golden Lampstand and the Golden Altar of Incense. This was the place where the priests ministered. It illustrates our service to God through the indwelling Holy Spirit. The Table of Showbread is about fellowship, the Lampstand is about fruitfulness and the Golden Altar of Incense is about the fragrance of worship. This is the priestly ministry described in Hebrews 9:6, "the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services."

Finally, in the Most Holy Place was the Mercy Seat which rested on the Ark of the Covenant. God dwelt between the Cherubim which emerged from the Mercy Seat. Under the tabernacle system only the High Priest was allowed to go into this place. Today Christ, our heavenly High Priest, upholds us before God, rather like the jewels representing the Children of Israel were over the heart of the High Priest as He served in the tabernacle (Exodus 28:29-30). And through Christ we have access into the presence of God: "Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus..." (Hebrews 10:19).

The Tabernacle provides beautiful illustrations of truths which are only fully revealed in the New Testament. The writer of Hebrews explains the illustrative character of the Tabernacle in chapter 8: Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle ... there are priests ... who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, 'See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain'" (Hebrews 8:1-5).

We have to be careful not overlook the detailed description given directly by God, as it is recorded by the Holy Spirit for a purpose. We also have to be careful not to be fanciful in our interpretation of Old Testament types but evidence the reasons why materials or colours, for example, illustrate certain things.

Fundamental to the tabernacle is the thought of God dwelling with His people and this thought is clearly expressed right at the end of the Bible: "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be

Some coverings of Scripture: Tabernacle Coverings 1 - The fine linen, blue, purple, scarlet and cherubim Truth for Today no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:3-4).

God coming down in Exodus starts with salvation, "And the LORD said: "I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians" (Exodus 3:7-8). But, as we have seen, this coming down develops into fellowship and communion, "And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8). This is fulfilled at the end of Exodus, "Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting, because the cloud rested above it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (Exodus 40:34-35).

At the beginning of Exodus 25 God asks Moses to instruct the children of Israel to bring an offering of materials so that the Tabernacle can be built: "Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: "'Speak to the children of Israel, that they bring Me an offering. From everyone who gives it willingly with his heart you shall take My offering. And this is the offering which you shall take from them: gold, silver, and bronze; blue, purple, and scarlet thread, fine linen, and goats' hair; ram skins dyed red, badger skins, and acacia wood; oil for the light, and spices for the anointing oil and for the sweet incense; onyx stones, and stones to be set in the ephod and in the breastplate. And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them. According to all that I show you, that is, the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings, just so you shall make it'" (Exodus 25:1-9).

Certain materials and images are repeatedly used in the tabernacle. These include fine linen, blue, purple, and scarlet and the embroidered cherubim. These five things present a very interesting combination. The coloured material is woven into the gate of the tabernacle, the entrance into the Holy Place, the first covering of the tabernacle, which you would see as you looked up, and finally the veil which separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. The cherubim were woven into the first covering of the tabernacle and the veil.

Let's look first at the materials in order:

Fine linen

Linen is one of the oldest textiles in the world, going back many thousands of years. It was sometimes used as currency in ancient Egypt. Egyptian mummies were wrapped in linen because it was seen as a symbol of light and purity, and as a display of wealth. Some of these fabrics, woven from hand spun yarns, were of high quality. Fine linen is first mentioned in Genesis 41:42 when Pharaoh clothed Joseph "in garments of fine linen". The priests, King David (1 Chronicles 15:27) and Mordecai (Esther 8:15) wore fine linen. It was a very expensive material and was worn by key characters associated with the salvation of God's people - Joseph, David and Mordecai. Later, in Revelation 19:8 it illustrates the righteous acts of the saints. The court of the Tabernacle was made from fine woven linen hung on bronze pillars and bases (Exodus 26:9). It illustrates the moral beauty of Christ.

Blue

Blue appears to be typical of what is heavenly. It is the colour of the cloudless sky. Indigo is among the oldest dyes to be used for textile dyeing and printing and was known to ancient civilizations such as Egypt. In 2011, Zvi Koren, a professor specialising in the analytical chemistry of ancient colorants, analyzed a 2,000-year-old piece of dyed fabric recovered from Masada, King Herod's Judean Desert fortress. The exact shade of blue used has been a mystery for centuries. The dye was produced from the secretion of the sea snail, still found on Israeli beaches, but the technique of producing the dye was lost some time after the Romans assaulted Jerusalem in AD 70.

Blue was also used in the priests' clothes and in Numbers 4:1-17 a cloth of blue was used to cover the Ark and other items from the Tabernacle when the camp was on the move. Mordecai's royal robes were blue and white (Esther 8:15). Interestingly the Children of Israel were instructed to put blue tassels on the corners of the clothes to remember all the commandments of the LORD and to do them (Numbers 15:37-39). Blue appeared to associate Israel with the God of heaven and His rule in their lives. In the tabernacle, it illustrates the heavenly character of Christ.

Purple

Purple was the distinctive colour used by the Roman Emperors who wore Tyrian purple trimmed in metallic gold thread. The badge of office of the Roman senators was a stripe of Tyrian purple on their white togas. Purple is a secondary colour made up of the primary colours red and blue. Purple has a long association with royalty and nobility. It was extracted from sea snails. It was very expensive and ancient historians reported that it fetched its weight in silver. Purple cloth was used in the furnishings of the Tabernacle and of Solomon's Temple (2 Chronicles 2:14; 3:14) and in the seat of his carriage (Song of Solomon 3:10). In Song of Solomon 7:5 the bride's hair is described like purple; the worthy woman of Proverbs 31:22 had clothing of fine linen and purple. Mordecai was also clothed with purple by Ahasuerus (Esther 8:15); Jesus was clothed in purple by the Roman soldiers (Mark 15:17, 20; John 19:2, 5). Lydia was a seller of purple in

Some coverings of Scripture: Tabernacle Coverings 1 - The fine linen, blue, purple, scarlet and cherubim Truth for Today Acts 16:14 and appeared to have many of the qualities of the woman described in Proverbs 31:10-31. It illustrates Christ's glory as King of kings and Lord of lords.

Scarlet

Scarlet or crimson was a dye obtained from insects. This deep colour is mentioned extensively in Exodus. In Leviticus it is mentioned in regard to cleansing. Scarlet was the colour of the cord that Rahab was told to display from her window if she and her family were to be saved when Jericho was destroyed (Joshua 2:17-21). Later in 2 Samuel 1:24, Proverbs 31:21 and Song of Solomon 4:3 it is associated with luxury and attractiveness. Then in Isaiah its vivid colour is used to describe the deep seated stain of sin: "Come now, and let us reason together," says the LORD, 'Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool'" (Isaiah 1:18).

When Pilate had condemned Jesus to be crucified "the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and clothed him in a scarlet robe, twisted a crown of thorns and placed it upon His head. Thus they mocked Jesus' claim to be a King, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews...'" (Matthew 27:27-30). In the tabernacle scarlet shows Christ as the suffering Messiah.

All of the colours have features that are attractive, enriching and of great value. At the same time they are sometimes used to describe negative things. This should not detract from their general positive character.

Cherubim

These angelic creatures were messengers of judgement. Cherubim and a flaming sword barred Adam and Eve from access to the tree of life. Cherubim were representative of God's righteous judgement: "Justice and judgment are the habitation of your throne" (Psalm 89:14). Perhaps it was these two aspects of God's righteous character that the two cherubim, made from one piece of beaten gold, represented (Exodus 37:7). These golden cherubim emerged from the Mercy Seat with outstretched wings. Their faces looked towards each other and downwards towards the Mercy Seat, where the blood was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement.

Their outstretched wings symbolised instant readiness to execute God's judgement. At the same time they looked at the blood sprinkled on the Mercy Seat to demonstrate that God's righteous claims had been fully met and justice was satisfied.

When Moses went into the Tabernacle of Meeting, God spoke to him from between the two cherubim. It was a place of communion: "There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the Testimony..." (Exodus 25:22).

The two cherubim represented justice and judgement (Psalm 89:14). But it was through the shed blood of Christ we have peace with God and discover that: "Mercy and truth have met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed" (Psalm 85:10).

Cherubim are next mentioned in regard to the ten curtains which were the first covering of the tabernacle (Exodus 26:1). The ten curtains were made of fine woven linen, and blue, purple and scarlet thread, into which were woven designs of cherubim.

In Exodus 26:31 the veil between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place is described as woven of blue, purple, and scarlet thread, and fine woven linen, with an artistic design of cherubim. In Exodus 26:36 the screen for the door of the tabernacle is also woven of blue, purple, and scarlet thread, and fine woven linen but without the design of cherubim. Also in the gate of the court which was twenty cubits and was a screen of blue, purple, and scarlet thread, and fine woven linen hung on four pillars in four sockets, (Exodus 27:15-17). The Ephod and the band of the Ephod, the Breastplate of Judgement worn by the High Priest, was also made of gold, blue, purple and scarlet thread, and the fine linen (Exodus 28:4-6). The High Priest's tunic and turban were made of fine linen thread.

Women who were artisans prepared all this material (Exodus 35:24-26). Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah is the first man described as being filled with the Spirit of God to design artistic works and to teach Aholiab the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. They were equipped to do the fine work associated with the Tabernacle, including tapestry in blue, purple, and scarlet thread, and fine linen (Exodus 35:3). Other gifted artisans worked with them. These materials are mentioned in regard to King David (1 Chronicles 15:27), the building of the temple (1 Chronicles 22:2-3), Mordecai in Esther 8:14-16, the woman in Proverbs 31:10-31. The key features of the fine linen, blue, purple and scarlet and the woven cherubim represent a beautiful and complex tapestry which would both attract and arrest those who saw it in its different forms.

First there was the gate which attracted and drew the onlooker towards it. Just as Jesus, in Luke 15, attracted those most distant from God to Himself. When I visit the great cathedrals of England I am amazed by the external and internal

Some coverings of Scripture: Tabernacle Coverings 1 - The fine linen, blue, purple, scarlet and cherubim Truth for Today splendour of these wonderful buildings. But the great doors of these building are like the doors of a prison. None of them say, "Come in." But the gate of the Tabernacle said just that. It drew rather than repelled. It was just the same in regard to the entrance to the Holy Place; it was colourful and attractive. It is interesting that there were four colours - white, blue, purple and scarlet. Just as there are four gospels. In the Gospel of Matthew we see Jesus the King - perhaps the scarlet. In Mark we see Jesus the servant who ultimately will be seen as the King of kings and Lord of lords: the Emperor - perhaps the purple. In Luke we see Jesus the man in all His moral glory - perhaps the fine linen. In John we see Jesus the Son of God from Heaven - perhaps the blue. The beautiful colours and the complex tapestry included in the tabernacle remind me, and many commentators, of the beauty and complexity of the Person of Christ as revealed in the four Gospels.

Once in the Holy Place, the colours appear on the ceiling and the design includes the cherubim. In all the golden splendour of that remarkable room lit by the golden lampstand the priest would see a beautiful ceiling within which was woven angelic beings associated with the righteousness of God. In front of the priest were the same colours, and cherubim woven into the veil which barred entrance into God's presence. Only Christ could meet God's righteous requirements and only by the sacrifice of Himself. This is demonstrated in Matthew 27:51, where upon the death of Christ the veil of the temple was torn from the top to the bottom. Under the tabernacle system the veil always remained. Distance always prevailed. But in Christ the distance is not bridged but removed. In the Tabernacle the cherubim always stood immovable looking down on the blood of sacrifices which could never take away sins. "But Christ after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool. For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified" (Hebrews 10:12-14). At the resurrection of Jesus, Mary saw two angels sitting one at the head and other at the feet of where Jesus had laid. Angels were created for service, for activity, to constantly do the will of God. But when Jesus fulfilled the great work of redemption the angels, who never sat down in the Tabernacle, sat down in the place where the resurrection of Jesus took place (see John 20:12).

All Old Testament illustrations have their limitations but this morning, as we have looked at the beautiful colours and features of tapestries God Himself designed, they give us a lovely insight into the glory of Christ's person and work and are worthy of further study. When the priest came out of the Tabernacle, the fragrance of the incense offered on the golden altar of incense would have remained on him. As we spend time in communion with the Person who loved us and gave Himself for us (see Galatians 2:20), may His features be seen in our lives and be a blessing to others.

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