

Built to Move

Inside the Tabernacle



“God did not merely design a sanctuary. He designed a sanctuary that could travel with His people.”

EPISODE STUDY & SHOW NOTES

Designed for listening, personal study, small-group discussion, and use inside Rooted Word.

Episode Overview

Key question: What exactly did God tell Israel to build, what would the Tabernacle have looked like, and how did Israel dismantle, carry, and rebuild it through the wilderness?

Big idea: The Tabernacle was a carefully designed, furnished, and portable sanctuary. Its materials, dimensions, craftsmen, furnishings, priestly service, transport system, and place in the camp all served one larger reality: God intended to dwell among His people and travel with them.

Primary passages: Exodus 25–31; Exodus 35–40; Numbers 3–4; Numbers 7:1–9; Exodus 40:34–38

Supporting passages: Leviticus 16; Leviticus 24:5–9; 1 Chronicles 15; John 1:14

Why This Matters

The Tabernacle was not an abstract theological diagram. Israel actually built it, worshiped around it, dismantled it, carried it, and rebuilt it. Looking closely at the physical details helps us appreciate the order, holiness, craftsmanship, and enormous logistical effort involved in God dwelling among His people.

1. Begin With the Blueprint

Exodus 25 begins with God calling Israel to bring materials for a sanctuary so that He may dwell among them. Moses is not given a vague idea and told to improvise. He is shown a pattern, and the later construction repeatedly emphasizes that Israel built according to what the LORD commanded.

Two sets of chapters

- Exodus 25–31 gives the instructions for the Tabernacle, its furnishings, priesthood, oil, incense, and craftsmen.
- Exodus 32 interrupts the instructions with the golden calf rebellion.
- Exodus 35–40 records Israel carrying out the instructions and repeatedly stresses obedience to the divine pattern.

A necessary caution

The episode intentionally distinguishes three categories: what Scripture explicitly states, what can be reasonably reconstructed from the measurements, and what we simply do not know.

- The exact modern length of the cubit is approximate.
- The outer-covering material translated as fine leather, porpoise hides, sea-cow hides, badger skins, and other terms is uncertain.
- Exodus does not give the basin's dimensions or the lampstand's height.
- Exodus does not tell us that the wilderness Tabernacle veil was several inches thick.
- The exact function and form of the Urim and Thummim cannot be reconstructed from the biblical text.

2. The Builders and the Materials

Bezalel, Oholiab, and Spirit-given craftsmanship

Exodus 31 names Bezalel and Oholiab and describes the Spirit of God giving wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and craftsmanship for the work. The project required woodworking, goldsmithing, metalworking, engraving, gem setting, spinning, weaving, embroidery, tailoring, and the preparation of sacred oil and incense.

One of the episode's practical observations is worth keeping: Scripture explicitly presents skilled craftsmanship as work empowered for God's purposes. Ministry is not limited to preaching.

Israel gave until Moses said stop

In Exodus 35–36, the people bring materials voluntarily and in such abundance that the craftsmen report they have more than enough. Moses then tells the people to stop bringing contributions.

How much metal?

Exodus 38 records totals of 29 talents and 730 shekels of gold, 100 talents and 1,775 shekels of silver, and 70 talents and 2,400 shekels of bronze. Ancient weight standards varied, so modern conversions are approximate. Using roughly 75 pounds per talent simply as a visualization, the project involved more than 2,000 pounds of gold, about 7,500 pounds of silver, and more than 5,000 pounds of bronze.

That material also creates a striking contrast with Exodus 32: Israel could use its gold to make a calf, or it could offer its gold for the sanctuary of the LORD. The same material could be directed toward radically different worship.

3. How Big Was the Tabernacle?

The courtyard

Exodus 27 describes a courtyard 100 cubits long and 50 cubits wide, with linen hangings 5 cubits high. Using the conventional estimate of about 18 inches per cubit, that is roughly 150 feet by 75 feet, with a surrounding curtain about 7½ feet high.

The entrance was on the east side and was about 20 cubits wide, roughly 30 feet, with a screen of blue, purple, and scarlet yarn and fine linen.

The sanctuary itself

Based on the frames and curtains, the Tabernacle structure can reasonably be reconstructed at about 30 cubits long, 10 cubits wide, and 10 cubits high - approximately 45 feet by 15 feet by 15 feet. The Most Holy Place is reconstructed as roughly a 15-foot cube.

A modular structure

The sanctuary used upright acacia-wood frames overlaid with gold, silver bases, horizontal bars, curtains, and layered coverings. The structure was not designed as a permanent stone building. It was designed to come apart and go back together repeatedly.

The 100 silver bases are especially striking. Exodus 38 associates 100 talents of silver with the 100 bases - approximately one talent per base. Under the episode's rough visualization, that would be around 75 pounds of silver per base.

4. The Curtains and Coverings

Inner linen layer

Exodus 26 describes ten fine-linen curtains woven with blue, purple, and scarlet yarn and cherubim. The curtains were joined into two large sections and connected with gold clasps.

Goat-hair layer and outer coverings

Above the fine linen were eleven goat-hair curtains connected with bronze clasps, followed by ram skins dyed red and a final protective outer covering made from the uncertain material called tachash in Hebrew.

What would it have looked like?

The ornate embroidered linen and cherubim were toward the interior. The exterior would have been dominated by the protective outer covering. The closer one moved toward the sacred interior, the richer and more ornate the visual environment became.

5. The Furnishings - One Object at a Time

Bronze altar

The altar in Exodus 27 was 5 by 5 by 3 cubits - roughly 7½ feet square and 4½ feet high. It was made of acacia wood overlaid with bronze, equipped with horns, a grate, utensils, rings, and carrying poles, and was specifically made hollow with boards for portability. Fire, sacrifice, ash, blood, and heat would have dominated the courtyard experience.

Bronze basin

The priests washed their hands and feet at the basin before ministering. Exodus gives no dimensions for it. Exodus 38 says it was made from the bronze mirrors of the women who served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. Ancient mirrors were polished metal, not modern glass.

Golden lampstand

The lampstand was hammered from one piece of pure gold and had a central shaft, six branches, seven lamps, and almond-blossom, bud, and flower ornamentation. Its height is not given. Exodus specifies one talent of gold for the lampstand and its utensils.

Table of the Bread of the Presence

The table was about 3 feet long, 18 inches wide, and 27 inches high. Leviticus 24 describes twelve loaves arranged before God and replaced each Sabbath. The old bread was eaten by Aaron and his sons in a holy place.

Altar of incense

The smaller gold-covered incense altar stood near the veil and was approximately 18 inches square and 3 feet high. Incense was burned morning and evening. Exodus 30 gives a sacred incense formula and explicitly forbids reproducing it for ordinary personal use.

Ark and atonement cover

The Ark was approximately 45 inches long, 27 inches wide, and 27 inches high, made of acacia wood and covered with gold inside and out. Its carrying poles were not to be removed, keeping the Ark transport-ready. Above it was the solid-gold atonement cover, or kapporet, with two cherubim. Episode 7 developed the theological significance; Episode 8 emphasizes the physical construction and portability.

6. Priestly Garments and Holy Boundaries

Exodus 28 says the priestly garments were made for glory and beauty. Ordinary priests wore tunics, sashes, head coverings, and linen undergarments. The high priest's garments were much more elaborate.

The high priest

- The ephod used gold, blue, purple, scarlet, and fine linen.
- Two onyx shoulder stones carried the names of Israel's tribes - six names on each stone.
- The breastpiece contained twelve precious stones, one for each tribe, so Israel was represented both on the high priest's shoulders and over his heart.
- The Urim and Thummim were placed in the breastpiece, but Scripture does not give enough detail to reconstruct exactly what they were or how they functioned.
- The blue robe had pomegranates and gold bells around the hem.
- The turban bore a gold plate marked HOLY TO THE LORD.

Two useful corrections

The famous story about a rope tied around the high priest's ankle so his body could be retrieved is not stated in Scripture. Also, on the Day of Atonement the high priest wore the special linen garments prescribed in Leviticus 16 rather than entering the Most Holy Place in the full jeweled ceremonial garments.

7. Moving Day - Numbers Explains the Logistics

Exodus teaches Israel how to build the sanctuary. Numbers 3–4 explains how to move it. The Levites were assigned distinct responsibilities.

Kohath - the sacred furnishings

The Kohathites carried the Ark, table, lampstand, altars, and sacred utensils. Aaron and his sons first covered the holy objects. The Kohathites then carried them, but they were forbidden to touch the holy things or casually look at them while they were being covered.

Gershon - the textiles

The Gershonites handled the Tabernacle curtains, tent coverings, courtyard hangings, entrance screen, cords, and associated textile work.

Merari - the structural pieces

The Merarites handled the frames, bars, pillars, bases, pegs, and structural cords - the heaviest parts of the portable sanctuary.

Six wagons, twelve oxen - but none for Kohath

Numbers 7 describes six covered wagons and twelve oxen. Gershon received two wagons and four oxen; Merari received four wagons and eight oxen because of the heavier structural load. Kohath received no wagon because the sacred furnishings assigned to them were to be carried on the shoulders.

Why Uzzah matters

This transport system makes the later death of Uzzah easier to understand. The Ark already had a prescribed method of transport: it was to be carried with its poles by appointed Levites and not touched. First Chronicles 15 later records David acknowledging that the Ark had not initially been moved according to the proper ordinance.

8. When the Cloud Moved, Israel Moved

Exodus 40 ends with the glory of the LORD filling the completed Tabernacle. The cloud became Israel's travel signal: when it lifted, they set out; when it remained, they stayed.

That meant an enormous coordinated process: priests covered sacred objects, curtains came down, frames were dismantled, silver bases were loaded, wagons were packed, the sacred furnishings went onto shoulders, the camp moved, and the sanctuary was built again when God stopped.

The Tabernacle at the center

Numbers 2–3 places the Tabernacle at the center of Israel's camp, with the Levites nearest to it and the tribes arranged around them. No hidden symbolic code is needed to appreciate the picture: God's dwelling stood physically at the center of Israel's communal life.

9. The Larger Biblical Story

Episode 7 asked how a holy God could dwell among sinful people. Episode 8 shows how carefully ordered the physical answer was: frames, bases, curtains, furniture, garments, washings, priests, Levites, wagons, coverings, and the cloud all served the larger reality of God dwelling among Israel.

John 1:14 then takes the story somewhere greater. The verb translated “dwelt” is *skēnoō* - to dwell, pitch a tent, or tabernacle. The God whose glory filled the wilderness sanctuary ultimately came to dwell among us in the person of Jesus Christ.

The point is not merely, “Look how complicated the tent was.” The point is the extraordinary lengths a holy God went to in order to dwell among the people He loved - and ultimately He did not merely send a better Tabernacle. He came Himself.

10. Apply

The physical Tabernacle presses several practical truths on us without requiring speculative symbolism.

- God cares about obedience, not merely sincerity. Israel was repeatedly told to follow the pattern God gave.
- Skill and craftsmanship can be used for the glory of God.
- Generosity becomes worship when God’s people freely give what God has entrusted to them.
- Holiness includes boundaries. Access to sacred things was ordered and not casual.
- God’s presence belonged at the center of Israel’s life, not at its margins.
- Where Scripture is silent, faithful study should be comfortable saying, “We do not know.”

Reflection

- What detail about the Tabernacle’s actual construction surprised you most?
- Why do you think Exodus repeats the construction details after already giving the instructions?
- What does the calling of Bezalel and Oholiab teach about craftsmanship and vocation?
- What does the contrast between the golden calf and the Tabernacle teach about worship and stewardship?
- How does the prescribed transport of the Ark change the way you read the Uzzah account?
- What do the Levite assignments teach about order, responsibility, and shared service?
- Why is it important to separate explicit biblical statements from reasonable reconstructions and later traditions?
- What changes when you picture the Tabernacle physically sitting at the center of Israel’s camp?
- How does John 1:14 deepen the significance of the Tabernacle story?

11. Pray

Ask God for the humility to obey what He has actually said, wisdom to distinguish Scripture from speculation, faithfulness in the work He has entrusted to you, reverence for His holiness, and gratitude that in Christ God has come to dwell among His people.

12. Further Scripture for Study

Exodus 25–31 - God gives Moses the pattern for the sanctuary, furnishings, priesthood, oil, incense, and craftsmen.

Exodus 35–40 - Israel brings the materials, constructs the Tabernacle, and the glory of the LORD fills it.

Leviticus 16 - The Day of Atonement and the high priest’s special linen garments.

Leviticus 24:5–9 - The twelve loaves of the Bread of the Presence and the weekly priestly rhythm.

Numbers 2–4 - The camp arrangement and the Levites' assigned responsibilities for transporting the sanctuary.

Numbers 7:1–9 - The wagons and oxen distributed to Gershon and Merari; Kohath receives none because the holy objects are carried on the shoulders.

1 Chronicles 15 - David corrects the earlier improper transport of the Ark and has the Levites carry it according to God's ordinance.

John 1:14 - The Word becomes flesh and “dwells” among us, using language that echoes the Tabernacle.

Closing Takeaway

The Tabernacle was built to move because God intended to move with His people. Every carefully measured frame, curtain, furnishing, covering, garment, assignment, and boundary served the reality of His presence among Israel. The wilderness sanctuary ultimately points beyond itself to the day when God came to dwell among us in Christ.

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