

(Devotional #36) *What is The True Gospel? – An Introduction Part 2:
The Temple Story*

For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. For it is written, “HE IS THE ONE WHO CATCHES THE WISE IN THEIR CRAFTINESS,” and again, “THE LORD KNOWS THE REASONINGS OF THE WISE, THAT THEY ARE USELESS, SO THEN LET NO ONE BOAST IN MEN¹” – 1 Corinthians 3:19-21^A

DIRECTIONS! YOU CAN'T MISS IT! Have you ever heard someone use that phrase after giving you a poor set of directions? I have and it is one of my pet peeves. I am not good at very many things, but I have an innate talent for giving accurate directions, and therefore I tend to be critical of people, who can't give clear, concise directions. More than not, I can count on **NOT** being able to find my destination if someone says, “**you can't miss it!**”! Trust me – ‘you **CAN** miss it,’ and if a set of directions contain that horrid phrase, you probably **ARE** going to miss it!

What is true in the realm of geography also is true in the realm of theology. It is all too easy to fall into the ‘**you can't miss it trap**’ when it comes to the mission of the church and the gospel. There is a reason for this: we have been indoctrinated by a world where we are rewarded on the basis of merit and punished for failure. I know this better than most people because I spent 35-years in sales. I worked in an environment where it was not unusual to have a white board on the wall of the lunchroom, and on that board were the names of all the salespeople. The receptionist's name was not there to broadcast the number of people she irritated on the phone that day. The CFO's name was not there to indicate how he was doing with respect to the company P&L ... but my name was there: **MILLER ... 12**, indicating how many **widgits** I had sold month-to-date. And the list was kept **IN ORDER**, so it was clear to everyone, who was first and who was last. Then at the end of the month, commission checks were issued. ‘**WINNERS**’ got paid more money than ‘**LOSERS**’! Then there was the problem of **QUOTAS**! Three months of not making quota and you were fired! **That is how MERIT operates!** Merit is everything in the sales world.

Here are two other examples of merit-based ‘*things*’ that require no explanation:

- **SPORTS!** – (**WINNERS WIN** and **LOSERS LOSE!** Note the linguistic connections!)
- **GRADES!** – (Think about how your parents' reactions differed if you brought home a ‘**D**’ versus an ‘**A**’ – **MERIT!**)

I think you get my point. The world operates on the basis of merit ... and so does the gospel ... with this one **HUGE DIFFERENCE** ... with respect to the gospel, **IT IS THE MERIT OF JESUS CHRIST** that matters, not yours! This is a hard concept to process because it runs contrary to how we have been conditioned by our world. It requires us to rethink everything we have been taught. We should not be surprised about this ... but we are. Isaiah hinted pretty strongly that the gospel is different when he recorded these words of the Lord:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD – Isaiah 55:8

One manner in which ‘*the ways of the Lord*’ differ from ‘*our ways*’ is with respect to merit. Paul tells us in Romans that Israel failed because she pursued a form of righteousness based on merit. The gospel is a stumbling stone ... so we should not be surprised there is widespread confusion².

God gives good directions! The best directions include a map, along with verbal instructions, so we should not be surprised that God gave us a map as part of His revelation of the gospel. Have you ever wondered how an artist might ‘*draw*’ the gospel with pen and paper? Would the draw-

¹ Ref., Job 5:13 and Psalm 94:11

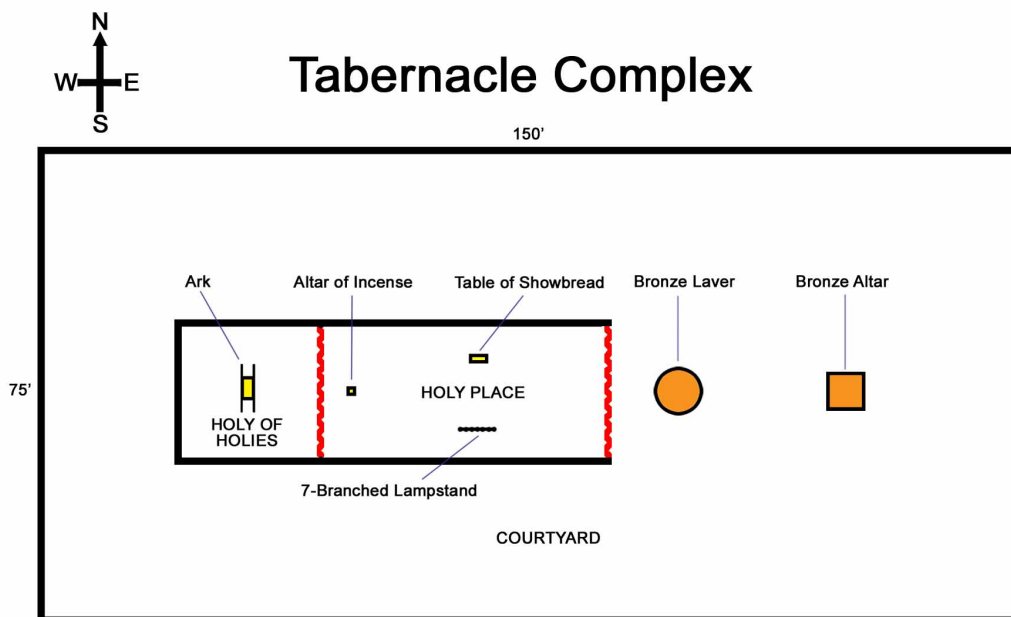
² See Romans 9:30-33

ing be a cross? It could be. What if the artist were asked to draw the gospel both historically and theologically? Well, the drawing still could be a cross ... but in this lesson I want to go back to 'a drawing' that predates the cross yet points definitively to it. And keep in mind, this is an illustration that was drawn by God's own hand.

This drawing had at least two names: (1) in its earliest form, it was called 'THE TABERNACLE, but later it came to be known as (2) THE TEMPLE. Though the tabernacle lacked the elegance of Solomon's Temple, the message it proclaimed – what the New Testament writers called, 'THE GOSPEL' – was identical. We can think of the Tabernacle as God's map to lead us to Christ³.

Let's begin thinking about the tabernacle as a matter of function. What purpose did it serve? Well, the main function of the tabernacle was to serve as the meeting place between God and man. It was the place where God's presence dwelled above the Ark of the Covenant. And associated with the tabernacle was a specific process by which sinful man could be brought back into the presence of God by means of a blood sacrifice.

Before Adam's Fall, the Garden of Eden served as a temple of sorts because it was there the Lord and Adam walked together. But after sin separated Adam and his descendants from God, something new had to be put in place if God and man once again were to have fellowship. To put this in context, the temple is a picture God drew of the gospel. It is the roadmap to the destination of reconciliation. It points us to the atonement Jesus accomplished on the cross, and it clarifies the relationship between grace and works. The gospel is the means by which God redeems sinful man and restores fellowship between believers and our creator. If this is true, then we should be able to look at the temple and see in it the very gospel we proclaim today in the Church Age. And it just so happens the elements of the gospel are present in the design of the ancient temple. Augustine correctly said: "The new is in the old, *concealed*; the old is in the new, *revealed*."



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³ I will be using the terms 'tabernacle' and 'temple' interchangeably. There is no difference theologically in the two. The only distinction is the historical timeline, and since we are considering the temple only in the context of theology, a timeline is of little consequence.

The first thing we notice about the ancient temple can be summed up by the term ‘*separation*⁴.’

Notice the physical divisions:

- **THE COURTYARD** was accessible to the Israelite worshipers.
- **THE HOLY PLACE** was accessible only to the Levitical Priests, and ...
- **THE HOLY OF HOLIES** was accessible only to the High Priest once a year on the Day of Atonement.

God dwelled in the Holy of Holies – *the holiest place* – but the Levitical Priests and the Israelites could not go there. The Levitical Priests could access the Holy Place, but the Israelites could not go there – they could go only into the courtyard of the temple.

The precursor to the temple was a tent – and its location with respect to Israel’s encampment is significant. When Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty-years, this tent was pitched in the middle of Israel’s campsite. Its central location symbolized God’s desire to live among His people. But the layout of the tabernacle, as it was called then, also depicted man’s fundamental problem: man was prevented from entering the presence of God because **GOD IS HOLY** and **MAN IS SINFUL**. So, think about this: the location of the tabernacle in the midst of Israel’s camp depicts God’s desire to bring man back into fellowship with Himself, but the layout of the tabernacle also illustrates the theological dilemma: *holiness and sin cannot coexist!* The Israelites could go into the courtyard, but only the Levitical priests could go into the Holy Place, and only the High Priest, once a year, could enter the Holy of Holies. In fact, a thick veil separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. It is as if God were saying to Israel – *(and to all of mankind)* – “*I put my tent in your midst because I want to bring you into My presence, but I cannot do it because I am **ABSOLUTE HOLINESS** and you are **SINFUL**, so I have separated Myself from you by this veil.*”

The overriding question that permeates any proper discussion of the temple is this: “*How can a Holy God dwell among an unholy people*”? The obvious answer is, ‘*man must be cleansed.*’ But how does this ‘*cleansing*’ take place? Perhaps we can find some answers by looking at the symbolism within the Temple.

Imagine you are the High Priest of Israel, entering the eastern gate of the temple and walking toward the Holy of Holies, where God’s presence *hovered* above the Ark of the Covenant. As you walk through the courtyard of the temple, you first encounter **THE BRONZE ALTAR**. Since as far back as Genesis 2:17, God made it clear that the price of disobedience is death⁵ (*both spiritual death and physical death*), you should not be surprised that the first symbol you encounter is the altar, a place where something must die. The first step toward reconciliation with God requires that something innocent be put to death in place of the guilty. This altar is where the sacrificial lamb was slain and burned as a whole burnt offering to the Lord, signifying the necessity of a substitutionary sacrifice. Since Hebrews 10:4 tells us that *the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sin*, the symbolism of the Bronze Altar must point forward to a better sacrifice – which it does – it foretells the crucifixion of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom John the Baptist referred to as “*the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*⁶.” Since we are seeking to define clearly the nature of the gospel, as you gaze at the Bronze Altar on your walk through the temple, ask yourself the question: “*Was the death of Christ on the cross for my sins an act of grace and mercy on His part, or did I earn my salvation on the basis of my own merit*”?

⁴ Read Hebrews 9:1-14 and 1 Peter 1:19.

⁵ See also Romans 6:23, where The Apostle Paul reasserts what God said in Genesis 2:17.

⁶ See John 1:29

The next item you will encounter as you walk through the temple is **THE BRONZE LAVER**, sometimes referred to as **THE BRONZE BASIN**⁷. The laver held the water the priests used for cleansing. It stood between the Bronze Altar and the entrance to the Holy Place. Once justification through the sacrificial lamb was accomplished at the altar, the priest still had to deal with the reality of personal sins. Yes, even priests commit sins! Whereas the altar foreshadows our justification by means of the death of Christ on the cross, **the laver points to the process of progressive sanctification**. Just as a believer, who is justified by faith at the cross, is saved in the sight of God, but must regularly fall on his knees and confess the sins that plague us daily, so the high priest must habitually wash from his hands the impurities life in this world brings upon him. If you want a New Testament passage that relates to this laver, it is 1 John 1:9⁸. We should think of the laver as the means of reestablishing and then maintaining fellowship with God, when by our own personal sins, we have lost the intimacy of that relationship.

Now, as we continue walking past the Bronze Laver, we enter **THE HOLY PLACE**. Here three furnishings catch our eye – and all three represent aspects of the life and work of Jesus Christ: (1) the golden table, (2) the golden lampstand (*a minora*), and (3) the golden altar of incense.

- On our right is **THE TABLE OF SHOWBREAD**. The table on which this bread was placed was made of acacia wood and overlaid with pure gold. Notice, the items in the courtyard of the temple were made of bronze, but now in the Holy Place, we see items of gold⁹. ‘Showbread’ means ‘the bread of the presence’ (of God). This bread symbolized ‘God with us (IMMANUEL¹⁰) in the Person of Jesus Christ.’ Jesus said, *“Truly I say to you, it is not Moses, who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is My Father, who gives to you the true bread out of heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world”* – John 6:32-33. Then Jesus said: **“I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE”** – John 6:35⁴.
- The next item in the Holy Place sits directly across from the Table of Showbread; it is a minora, **A GOLDEN LAMPSTAND**. Lamps burn oil and oil symbolizes the Holy Spirit¹¹. It is by the Holy Spirit we are empowered to speak the words of the gospel, boldly to the world. These words are ‘life-giving’ to all who will receive them. The minora gives visible light, while the gospel gives spiritual life. Jesus said of Himself: **“I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD”**¹² – John 8:12.
- The third item is **THE GOLDEN ALTAR OF INCENSE**. It sits near the veil that separates the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. This is a different kind of altar for unlike the bronze altar in the courtyard, here nothing dies. From this altar rises a sweet savor that fills the Holy Place, even reaching into the Holy of Holies. This sweet savor represents **THE WORK OF CHRIST** that is acceptable to the Father in every way. Paul writes in Ephesians: *“Walk in love just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma”* – Ephesians 5:2.

⁷ The Bronze Laver is known as ‘the sea’ in Solomon’s Temple; see 1 Kings 7:23-26; 2 Kings 16:17; 2 Chronicles 4:2-5, and Jeremiah 27:19.

⁸ *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleans us from all unrighteousness”* – 1 John 1:9.

⁹ The gold in the tabernacle represents Christ’s deity, while the acacia wood of the table and the altar represent His humanity.

¹⁰ See Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23

¹¹ See Luke 4:18 ... ‘Anointing with oil’ represents the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to do the work of God on the earth.

¹² See also John 1:4-9. Jesus is the light that shines in darkness and gives hope to a dark and lost world: John 9:5, 12:46; Ephesians 5:8-15, and 1 John 1:5-7.

Next in our journey through the tabernacle, we come to **THE HOLY OF HOLIES**¹³. The most fundamental meaning of the term, 'holy,' is not 'moral purity' but 'separation'¹⁴ (*transcendence*). This may come as a surprise but **THE VEIL** that separates the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies attests to the truth of the statement. **For man to know God and enter into His presence, GOD HIMSELF MUST ACT.** There is no alternative. Just as a man cannot 'reach out and touch the moon' with his physical hand, he cannot 'reach out and touch the face of God' of his own initiative. In all things pertaining to God and man, it is God who must take the initiative.

The Holy of Holies in the tabernacle – *and later in the temple* – was a place inaccessible to man by any means other than through Jesus Christ. When Jesus said, **"I AM THE WAY AND THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE; NO MAN COMES TO THE FATHER BUT THROUGH ME"**¹⁵, He meant what He said. This most sacred place was the earthly representation of the heavenly temple. An impenetrable veil¹⁶ separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple and from man himself. It symbolized man's separation from God because of the sin of Adam and the personal sins every man has committed. One day each year, on the Day of Atonement, a single man – the High Priest of Israel – was allowed in the Holy of Holies¹⁷, but only with a blood-offering.

When Jesus died on the cross, and God laid on Him the sins of the world, a most amazing event occurred; at the very moment of the Messiah's death: **"BEHOLD THE VEIL OF THE TEMPLE WAS TORN IN TWO FROM TOP TO BOTTOM; AND THE EARTH SHOOK AND THE ROCKS WERE SPLIT"** – **Matthew 27:51**. It is significant that the veil was rent from top to bottom rather than from bottom to top. Why? Because it demonstrated that the barrier separating man from God was torn down – **NOT BY MAN BUT BY GOD**. Our salvation comes to us from **ABOVE** not from anything man does here below. **And this is the way God illustrated the gospel for us.** The gospel is **GOD** doing the work and man responding to God's work in faith – and this should be the focus of the church ... declaring to the world what God has done.

The veil, now rent and no longer separating God-and-man because of the cross, once hid **THE ARK OF THE COVENANT** from the eyes of the priests. The Ark of the Covenant was the premier symbol in the tabernacle of the Lord Jesus Christ. All the other symbols point to His life and work, but the Ark of the Covenant is a picture of **THE RISEN CHRIST**, ascended and seated at the right hand of the Father. When we think of the Ark of the Covenant, even though it existed prior to Christ's crucifixion and ascension, we must think of the cross as an accomplished fact. We must look at it as our Father in Heaven looked at it.

But as for Me, I have installed My King upon Zion, My holy mountain – Psalm 2:6

Yahweh says to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies the footstool of Your feet. The LORD will stretch forth Your strong scepter from Zion, (saying), rule in the midst of Your enemies" – Psalm 110:1-2

THEN LOOKING FORWARD TO THE KINGDOM AGE:

At that time, they will call Jerusalem 'THE THRONE OF YAHWEH,' and all the nations will be gathered to it, to Jerusalem, to honor the name of Yahweh – Jeremiah 3:17^A

¹³ See Exodus Chapters 25-40 for a complete treatment of this very special place.

¹⁴ For a more thorough examination of 'holiness equals separation,' see my lesson entitled 'God as Wholly Other: A Study in Divine Holiness' here: <https://www.gracebiblechurch.org/adult-bible-classes/lessons/foundations/topical-lessons/>

¹⁵ John 14:6

¹⁶ This veil may have been as much as six inches thick.

¹⁷ Hebrews 9:1-14 describes the means of access for the priest to enter the room in which the presence of God dwelled. Entrance required a blood-offering. This blood-offering symbolized the Blood of Jesus, shed for the sins of the world, apart from which access to God's presence is eternally blocked.

The lid of the ark, or as it is called in Scripture, *THE MERCY SEAT*, was made of pure gold. Also fashioned of pure gold were the images of two angels, cherubs, wings outstretched and touching, symbolically guarding the holiness of God. It was upon this Mercy Seat that the presence of God hovered, and onto which, on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice,¹⁸ symbolizing the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ¹⁹.

Any study of the ancient temple can grow into the equivalent of a dissertation, which is not the intent of this lesson. Last week's lesson, along with this one, are meant to provide an introduction to our examination of the gospel – which will be the subject of our next few lessons.

I ask you, in closing this devotional, as we examined the layout, the furnishings, and the symbolism of the temple, did you see anything there that emphasized or pointed forward to human effort as an element of our salvation? Or was it obvious that God acted first, and in so doing, He alone made provision for the forgiveness of sins and the bestowing of eternal life? I believe it is clear that the elements of the temple depict the complete absence of human works. There is not one item in the temple that represents man's initiative or effort; everything points to God and what He has done for us, not what we have done or can do for Him. The worship of Israel was intended to focus on what God has done for His people, not what men may think they can do for Him.

The gospel is a message of grace. Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke frequently of something he called '*cheap grace.*' By this he meant '*grace without responsibility.*' The grace that brings salvation is free to us, but our salvation was not cheap to God; it cost Him the life of His Son – and we cannot afford to forget that fact.

As followers of Christ, we are commissioned to make disciples by proclaiming this gospel ... but to do so we must be clear about two things: (1) what the gospel is, and (2) what our commission is. Giving clarity to these two things will be the goal of this brief series.

¹⁸ See Leviticus 16:35 and for the New Testament application of the Leviticus passage, Hebrews 9:7.

¹⁹ "He (Jesus) entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves, but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption" – Hebrews 9:12