

# OpenTheo

## March 20th: Exodus 27 & Matthew 24:29-51

March 19, 2020



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The brazen altar, the courtyard, and the oil for the lamp. The coming of the Son of Man.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Exodus chapter 27. You shall make the altar of acacia wood, five cubits long and five cubits broad. The altar shall be square and its height shall be three cubits.

And you shall make horns for it on its four corners. Its horns shall be of one piece with it, and you shall overlay it with bronze. You shall make pots for it to receive its ashes, and shovels and basins and forks and firepans.

You shall make all its utensils of bronze. You shall also make for it a grating, a network of bronze, and on the net you shall make four bronze rings at its four corners. And you shall set it under the ledge of the altar, so that the net extends halfway down the altar.

And you shall make poles for the altar, poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with bronze. And the poles shall be put through the rings, so that the poles are on the two sides of the altar when it is carried. You shall make it hollow with boards, as it has been

shown you on the mountain, so shall it be made.

You shall make the court of the tabernacle. On the south side the court shall have hangings of fine twined linen, a hundred cubits long for one side. Its twenty pillars and their twenty bases shall be of bronze, but the hooks of the pillars and their fillets shall be of silver.

And likewise for its length on the north side there shall be hangings a hundred cubits long, its pillars twenty and their bases twenty, of bronze, but the hooks of the pillars and their fillets shall be of silver. And for the breadth of the court on the west side there shall be hangings for fifty cubits, with ten pillars and ten bases. The breadth of the court on the front shall be fifty cubits.

The hangings for the one side of the gate shall be fifteen cubits, with their three pillars and three bases. On the other side the hangings shall be fifteen cubits, with their three pillars and three bases. For the gate of the court there shall be a screen, twenty cubits long, of blue and purple and scarlet yarns of fine twined linen, embroidered with needlework.

It shall have four pillars, and with them four bases. All the pillars around the court shall be filleted with silver, their hooks shall be of silver, and their bases of bronze. The length of the court shall be a hundred cubits, the breadth fifty, and the height five cubits, with hangings of fine twined linen and bases of bronze.

All the utensils of the tabernacle for every use, and all its pegs and all the pegs of the court shall be of bronze. You shall command the people of Israel that they bring to you pure beaten olive oil for the light, that a lamp may regularly be set to burn. In the tent of meeting outside the veil that is before the testimony, Aaron and his son shall tend it from evening to morning before the Lord.

It shall be a statute forever to be observed throughout their generations by the people of Israel. In Exodus chapter 27 we find the instructions for the construction of the altar, the courtship courtyard, and the instructions to tend the lamps and to provide oil for them. The tabernacle, as we've remarked before, is the institutionalisation of the encounter at Sinai.

It's also a replay of the pattern of creation. The most focal point of Israel's religious practice was the altar. This was the outer altar, it's the altar of bronze in contrast to the golden incense altar that would be within the holy place.

Altars were always an essential element of worship. Within the patriarchal period we see several altars being constructed. And this particular altar would have been a square of around 7.5 feet or just under 2.5 metres and around 4.5 feet or 1.35 metres tall.

It was moved around by bronze poles inserted in the sides and when they set it up they

presumably set it up by filling the hollow wooden altar with earth and stones which among other things would have protected the structure from the fire upon it. The altar was likely placed on an elevation, although probably not a stepped one as we see in chapter 20 that's restricted. It was reminiscent of Sinai itself.

Of course this invites us to think of Sinai itself as an altar. The association works in both directions. In chapter 19 verse 18 the smoke from Sinai ascends like that of a kiln.

So Mount Sinai is like an altar and then the altar is like Mount Sinai. It's important to consider how symbolic structures work and how analogical reasoning works more generally. A lot of the logic of the tabernacle is based upon associations between things on different levels.

So there's an association between the tabernacle and heaven itself. There's an association between the tabernacle and Eden. There's an association between the tabernacle and Mount Sinai and all of those different associations are in play.

And the symbolic movements that occur relative to the tabernacle are all ways of negotiating those symbolic spaces too. So it's a re-entry into Eden. It's an entry into heaven itself in some sense.

It's an ascent of Mount Sinai. And thinking about it in this way will help us to understand a lot of the logic that underlies the sacrificial system. Things ascending to God from the altar then, among other things, related to things ascending Sinai.

It was also a means by which access to the tabernacle itself occurred. And so ascend Mount Sinai and then you enter into God's presence. Animals were not killed on the altar but they would be killed near the altar and then offered upon the altar.

It's worth remembering this fact because often we overemphasise the importance of killing as the element of sacrifice. We think that that is the element that really makes sacrifice work. It's the real logic behind it.

But it isn't really. The most important thing tends to be elsewhere. It's the presentation of the blood or it's the consumption of that up in fire.

Whatever it is, it's not narrowly focused upon the actual act of killing. The horns of the altar are also given particular importance here. One could go to the horns of the altar, as we see elsewhere, for refuge, among other things.

We see that in the story of Job as an example. The horns of the altar also had a part to play in certain ceremonies as blood would be placed upon them. And they obviously had symbolic importance for that reason.

We should also notice that the altar is bronze. We've seen already the movement from

gold to silver to bronze. That there is a symbolic movement from the most glorious to the slightly less glorious to the lesser glory still.

And here I think we're seeing that again. There's a decrease in the level of glory. It's an access to God.

It's not necessarily the most holy place where things are in gold. We should also remember that there was another altar, the incense altar, which was of gold. And that was in the holy place.

But maybe we should see an analogy between this altar and that altar on some level. The courtyard marks out sacred from profane space. It also represents the more general realm of the Israelites before the Mount of Sinai.

It's 100 cubits by 50 cubits. And perhaps some connection with the Ark should be considered, which was 300 cubits by 50 cubits. It's maybe a tabernacle-ization of the area of the courtyard.

So the tabernacle is a 30 by 10 dimension. And now you have the fusion of those two things. The courtyard and the tabernacle brought together.

Maybe that's part of what's going on. It's surrounded by linen hangings. And perhaps these represent clouds.

The positioning is something that a number of people have speculated about. And it seems quite likely that the Ark of the Covenant and the altar were at the diagonals of the two squares of the courtyard. So if you split the rectangle of the courtyard into two squares of equal size, and you drew diagonals for both of those squares, in the one, the centre thing would be the Ark of the Covenant, and in the other, it would be the altar, which again suggests some connection between those two things.

The third day of creation involves the separation of the land from the sea. And the third day in the formation of the tabernacle involves the establishment of the brazen altar, which presumably would have turned to green over time, maybe related to the grass of the third day of creation, the second part of that day. And the tabernacle court was that division of land from the sea of the general wilderness or the Gentiles.

This was a sort of space in which Israel was brought up from the sea of the more general nations, and brought into God's presence in some sort of land. The establishment of the court then divides the land beyond it from the land within, which is a sacred space rather than profane space. It's setting out, as it were, the boundaries of the sea so that it could not pass.

The final thing we have in this chapter is oil set up for lighting. The lamp in the tabernacle needs to be kept burning, and oil is important for this. Both morning and

evening Aaron and his sons had to tend to this task, and that tending to the light maybe represents something of the more general task of the priests and the Levites, in keeping the light of God's word burning in Israel, the light of God's presence.

And that light seems to have symbolic importance in places like 1 Samuel. In 1 Samuel 3, verses 1-3, Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord in the presence of Eli, and the word of the Lord was rare in those days, there was no frequent vision. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim, so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place.

The lamp of the Lord had not yet gone out. Now, there are three things there. There's the light of the word of the Lord, as God's word is heard in the voice of prophecy and in the voice of scripture.

There's the eyes of the high priest, his vision, his insight, his wisdom. And then there's the lamp of the Lord. And that three-fold connection I think is brought out in a literary level in 1 Samuel 3. I think here it's represented by the task of the Levites and the priests to tend to that.

This can of course be connected to the order of creation. The fourth day involved oil for the lampstand, which corresponds to the great lights created on the fourth day of the original creation. So you have the original light created on the first day, and then you have the light that's corresponding to that placed in the heavens on the fourth day.

Now, here I think we can also see a shift from a forming stage, where everything needs to be made according to the pattern, that's the phrase that recurs throughout the forming phase, to a new phrase throughout their generations. So this emphasis upon succession and delegation and filling. And there I think we've seen that movement, and this occurs on the fourth day of this new creation.

A question to consider. If you think about the process of moving from the entrance of the tabernacle courtyard, past the altar and into the holy place, what might the visual effect of that movement have impressed upon you about what it means to come near to God? Matthew 24, verse 29-31 Immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. From the fig tree learn its lesson. As soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near.

So also when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

But concerning that day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the sun, but the Father only. For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

Then two men will be in the field, one will be taken, and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill, one will be taken, and one left. Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake, and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant, whom his master will find so doing when he comes.

Truly I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that wicked servant says to himself, My master is delayed, and begins to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him, and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The language of the second part of Matthew 24 is arresting to us. It seems so extreme and cosmic that many people can't imagine it relating to anything other than the destruction of the entire universe on the last day. But it needn't be.

If we look in the Old Testament, and we're familiar with Old Testament language, we'll see many examples of this sort of cosmic language being used to speak of events in history. In Isaiah chapter 13 verses 6, 9-11 and 19 we read I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity. I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant.

And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pomp of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them. So this arresting cosmic language in this passage refers to the fall of Babylon, an event in history. But it's using the symbolism of stars and sun and moon.

These represent rulers. If we spoke about 50 stars falling from the heavens, people would know what we meant. Now, that cosmic imagery is more prevalent within the Old Testament and within the imagination of the ancient Near East, but we have it too.

We have it on our flags. We put stars on our flags. We put moons on our flags.

We have suns on some flags as well. They represent authority. They represent power and things that are secure in the heavens.

And those heavens being destroyed or rolled up, that's a sign of the world order being removed. Similar language can be found in Isaiah 34, verses 3-4. Again, the destruction of Babylon.

Their slain shall be cast out, and the stench of their corpses shall rise. The mountains shall flow with their blood. All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll.

All their hosts shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree. Further examples of such language can be found in places like Ezekiel 32 or Joel 2 and 3. One of the things that we should be alert to here is that the fall of Jerusalem is being described in the same sort of language as the fall of Babylon. It's become associated with that pagan city.

Jesus then moves on to discuss the coming of the Son of Man. Now when we think about the coming of the Son of Man, we think of a downward movement from heaven to earth. That tends to be the way that Christians think about this concept.

But it is the coming of the Son of Man into heaven itself that is in view here. And the background for this is once again in Old Testament prophecy. If we know our Old Testaments, much of this is not hard to read.

It makes a lot of sense. Jesus, throughout the Gospels, speaks like a prophet. He uses the language of prophets, the illustrations, the symbolism.

He uses the practice of prophets in a way that associates him with characters like Elijah and Elisha. He uses the parables of prophets. And here he uses the apocalyptic symbolism of prophets.

In Daniel chapter 7 verses 9 to 14 we read, As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool. His throne was fiery flames, its wheels were burning fire.

A stream of fire issued and came out from before him. A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The courts sat in judgment, and the books were opened.

I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed and its body destroyed and given over to be burnt with fire. As for the rest of the beast, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were

prolonged for a season and a time.

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven, there came one like the Son of Man, and he came to the Ancient of Days, and was presented before him, and to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. The sign of the Son of Man in heaven, the evidence of the Son of Man in heaven, the fact that we can see that he is in heaven, is the vindication of the exalted Son of Man by the dispossession of the wicked tenants.

This is the sign that he has been given the kingdom. They are removed from office. Christ also shows his power by using the Romans as his means of doing this.

And the result of this is that all the tribes of the earth will mourn. This is language that looks back to Zechariah chapter 12 verses 10 following. It's still focused on Israel, the tribes of the earth or the land.

This is not the world in general, it's the land, and it's Israel, the tribes that are in view here. And all of this is about establishing the new age of the kingdom. It's not about just the end of the world, it's starting something new.

The angels, or literally the messengers, are then sent out to gather from the four winds. This is a new beginning. It begins with a trumpet blast.

It's a new year of jubilee. And in that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who are lost in the land of Assyria, and those who are driven out to the land of Egypt, will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain at Jerusalem. That's Isaiah chapter 27 verse 13.

And Jesus is using the same sort of language here. He's also using the language of Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 1 to 4. And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will take you.

God is going to gather all his children together. It's going to be from four winds of heaven. It's going to be all the scattered Israelites who believe.

It's going to be all of the Gentiles who believe. We see that in Matthew chapter 8 verses 11 to 12. I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with



Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness.

In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Bear in mind the way that Jesus is picking up the same language here. He speaks then of the fig tree that's been connected with Israel earlier, in the sign of the cursing of the fig tree.

They will see these signs if they're faithful, and they will recognize that the time has come. And he assures them once more, this generation will not pass away until everything occurs, including the sun and the moon being darkened, and all these sorts of things. All of that is going to take place.

Heaven and earth may pass away, but his word will not pass away. Many people have wondered whether Jesus is a false prophet, and that he makes all these predictions about the end of the world, and they don't actually come to pass. And so the early Christian movement is about learning to live with the fact that their founders' prophecies did not occur.

But they did. They occurred in AD 70. And he's not a false prophet, but he's in the tradition of prophets like Jeremiah, who prophesied the destruction of the temple, and the exile.

Jesus is speaking with the same sort of language. And once we understand the language that he's using, and the world in which he's speaking, it makes sense. What he predicted came to pass.

And he emphasizes the absolute necessity of watchfulness. He gives the example of Noah and of Lot. Everything seems to be going on as it always has, and then suddenly everything changes.

In a single day, your entire world order, which you thought was so absolutely rock solid, completely collapses. And he uses this illustration of these people out in the field, or these people in a bed, or working in a particular context. One taken, another left.

For many Christians, this has been associated with the rapture. That the rapture is taking certain people up to heaven, and those who are left are going to face the tribulation. That's not what's being referred to here.

Rather, one taken is taken in judgment. Being taken is to face destruction. We should also maybe think of Matthew's attention to pairs and binaries coming in here.

There is a distinction between the watchful and the unfaithful servant. And maybe we are supposed to see that in the distinction between the one taken and the other left. That there are two different ways.

You don't want to be taken. So how are you going to ensure that? Well, by being watchful, by being the faithful servant that Jesus talks about. Christ will come as a thief in the night.

They cannot predict the time of the Son of Man's coming, but the signs will be there for the watchful and faithful servants, which they are called to be. If they are paying attention, they will recognise that his hour has come. And Jesus knows that many of his disciples will start to doubt.

His followers will start to wonder, well, 30 years have passed and we've not really seen any sign of this. We're all dying out, and he said it would happen in this generation, but there seems to be no evidence. And so many would doubt at that point, maybe fall away.

And we have evidence of that in places like 2 Peter, that that is a burning question at that stage in the Church's life. But it happens in that generation. Christ's word is fulfilled.

And we can find this hard to understand because we think of this fall of Jerusalem as an event just in a backwater country within the Roman Empire. But that's not what it is. It's the final collapse of the old covenant order, leaving the new covenant order to come into its own, the order of the kingdom.

Now they will no longer go to Jerusalem to worship. Its temple has been destroyed. There is no longer atonement to be found there.

Rather, they will go to Christ. He will gather his elect from the four winds of heaven. Jew and Gentile alike will be brought into the kingdom.

And this is a new world order that's set up. The whole of the existing world order, a world order centred upon Jerusalem and what God was doing with that people has been changed. And now something new has started.

The Church has been established in unrivaled significance as the place where God is working out his purposes. And that is established through the events of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70. This is not a minor event.

It's a radical change. A question to consider. The attitude of the disciples in the run up to the destruction of Jerusalem should be ours too.

Our worlds too will face their final reckoning. What are some of the ways in which Jesus' description of the sudden and devastating and unforeseen collapse of the world order and the watchfulness that shall characterise his disciples should inform our relationship to the world order that we inhabit in our own days.