

Text: Exod. 27:9-19, 38:9-20

Title: “‘What Is It?’ It’s the fence of the tabernacle.”

Time: 1/22/2023 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: My wife and I have enjoyed the show “This Old House” at times. One of the popular features of the show is their “What Is It?” segment, where one of the tradesmen brings out an unusual tool of his trade, for which the other three must guess its use.

On one of the shows, the tool had a base or ground, out of which came a short pillar, on which laid a long horizontal rod that had a flag on each end. The rod rotated clockwise around the base, and it turned out that this tool was designed to keep birds away from gardens. I guess the idea is that when a bird comes for your blueberries, this tool would gently whack it and make it fly away.

We have come to a tabernacle furniture piece that seems to have a similar mission – the courtyard fence of the tabernacle would keep people away from approaching the tabernacle proper, where the fence stood between them and God’s dwelling place.

The fence was five cubits or 7.5 feet tall, half the height of the tabernacle proper. It was 100 cubits or 150 feet long from east to west, and 50 cubits or 75 feet wide from north to south. On the east side of the fence, the Lord designed a gateway through the fence with a covering that looked very much like the door to the tabernacle and the veil to the holy of holies and ceiling inside the tabernacle.

The 100-cubit sides had twenty bronze pillars set on twenty bronze footings or groundings. The pillars were supported

by cords that were tied to bronze pegs. The 50-cubit sides had ten of these pillars. There is some discussion about whether there were 60 pillars in all or 56 with the corners doing double-duty. My understanding is that there were 60 pillars, and that on the long sides north and south, the twenty pillars supported 19 curtains or screens, and on the shorter side on the west, the ten pillars supported 9 screens. These screens would have been slightly different in length, and they were made of fine twisted linen.

Connecting the bronze pillars and their groundings to one another were silver crossbars, and the crossbars and the pillars had silver fasteners by which a curtain was hung between the pillars and under the crossbars. Every pillar also had a silver capital on its top.

So that is the fence of the courtyard of God's dwelling place on earth, the tabernacle. It is described in our passage to invoke in us the question, "What is it?", or at least, "What is it for?" and "What does it mean?" Why did God design the fence of the tabernacle the way He did? I believe a few answers are apparent and important for our lives this morning. We will think about three.

I. God designed the fence to teach us that there is only one way to come to God's dwelling place.

Illustration: I spent a good bit of time over the last months fixing the fence that surrounds the backyard of our house in Greer, SC. One of the nice things about that fence is that it keeps the overgrowth behind our house out of our backyard. That overgrowth has a lot of thorns on it, and it would be awful to have those thorns in our backyard. For the most part, fences are designed to either keep something out or to keep something in.

Application: The fence of the tabernacle, with its pillars, fasteners, and fine linen, is not the kind of fence you would erect to keep things out, nor to keep things in. If I had this kind of fence in our backyard, the thorns bushes would have made their way in without much trouble at all. Although the fence was high, it was not impregnable. Its purpose was neither to captivate, nor to defend.

What this fence did exceptionally well, however, is point out where the one gateway into the tabernacle was. In other words, the fence functioned a bit like a “One Way” road sign. God wanted His people to know that when you want to come to His house, there is only one gateway through which you can come. And all this is patterned after God’s dwelling place in heaven.

Jesus explained it this way in Matt. 7:13-14, “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat; because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.”

The gateway of the tabernacle did not have the fence’s linen screens. Instead, it had the same kind of covering as the door of the tabernacle, with its heavenly blue wool, its royal purple wool, and its blood-red scarlet wool (27:16).

As the promised Messiah, Jesus is the prophet who speaks from heaven and for heaven (the blue wool); He is the king who conquers His enemies and reigns on His throne (the purple wool); and He is the priest who offers Himself as a sacrifice for our sins (the scarlet wool). Accomplishing this work of mediation, He is the gateway to the presence of God. And He is the only such gateway.

Jesus clearly spoke of Himself as the only way to come to God: "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man comes unto the Father but by me" (John 14:6). Sinful man insists that there must be other ways. In his pride and unbelief, he believes he knows better than God, that he has a better way into heaven than the one God designed. He treats God's exclusive gateway as though it is an immoral thing.

What will your choice be? The true way is a narrow way missed by most. The false way has many on it today. Do you believe Jesus is the only way, the truth, and the life? Have you come to God by Him? Have you repented of your prideful unbelief and sin and turned to Him for salvation, believing that He was sacrificed for your sins? Or are you walking around the fence like so many others today, looking for your own way in?

II. God designed the fence to teach us that sacrificial death brings redemption.

Introduction: I mentioned that I have a fence because I want to keep thorn bushes out of our backyard. The Bible teaches that thorns came into the world after the fall of man into sin. So those thornbushes in Greer are a fitting analogy for something God will not tolerate in His house, our sin.

Application: For us, that is the bad news, but there is gospel good news in God's design of this fence with its bronze pillars and groundings and its silver crossbars, fasteners, and capitals. Bronze, you will remember, overlaid the altar of sacrifice and represented deity tarnished by death, the atoning sacrifice of Christ, God's Son, on the cross of Calvary for our sins.

Silver would have reminded the Israelites of redemption. The shekel of the sanctuary used for redeeming people and

other things was a silver shekel (Exod. 30:12-16). *To redeem* means *to buy back*. Redemptions in the religion of the Old Testament sanctuary reminded the people of Israel that they were redeemed from slavery in Egypt. God bought His people back when the Passover lamb was slain.

And all of this tells us that though we are born slaves to our sin, we too can be redeemed. We can be redeemed because the One who is our sacrifice paid the price of our redemption with His own blood in His death. Just like the bronze pillars support the silver capitals and crossbars and fasteners, so the death of our Redeemer supports our redemption from slavery to sin.

The Apostle Peter put it this way, "Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot: Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you, Who by him do believe in God, that raised him up from the dead, and gave him glory; that your faith and hope might be in God" (1 Pet. 1:18-21).

Do you rejoice in your redemption? Many hymns of the church rejoice in this accomplishment (Julia C. Corey):

"We praise you, O God, our Redeemer, Creator;  
in grateful devotion our tribute we bring;  
we lay it before you; we kneel and adore you;  
we bless your holy name: glad praises we sing.

"We worship you, God of our fathers and mothers;  
through life's storm and tempest our guide you have been;  
when perils o'ertake us, you never forsake us,

and with your help, O Lord, our battles we win.

“With voices united our praises we offer,  
our songs of thanksgiving to you we now raise;  
your strong arm will guide us, our God is beside us,  
to you, our great Redeemer, forever be praise!”

God designed the fence to teach us that He would send us a Redeemer. His bronze would be our sliver. His death would be our redemption. Have you been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb?

III. God designed the fence to teach us what our local church is for (1 Tim. 3:14-15).

Illustration: I just finished reading the Book of Ruth, which is about betrothal through redemption. Ruth is betrothed to Boaz by Naomi the way Paul sought to betroth the churches he served as a pure virgin to Christ (2 Cor. 11:2).

In the last chapter, Boaz pursues redeeming Ruth to be his wife according to the custom God had outlined for their special situation, but the right of redemption belonged to an unnamed relative who had the right before Boaz. When asked whether he wanted to redeem the land inheritance of Naomi, this man said he did. But when he learned that it included Ruth, he decided he did not want to do the transaction after all. Then Boaz stepped in and met the need.

Application: It struck me as I read this account again, that many believers are like that unnamed relative. They want the inheritance of eternal life and peace with God that comes with salvation in Christ, but when they find out that the transaction involves union with Christ's church, they

decide they do not want the transaction after all. They treat God's churches the way Ruth's unnamed relative did her.

Here in 1 Timothy 3, Paul uses a different analogy to emphasize the importance of what we are as a local church. He calls us the tabernacle when he says the church is *the household of God*. And he calls us the tabernacle's fence when he says that we are *the pillar and ground of the truth*. The truth we hold is the truth of the fence of the tabernacle, that there is only one way to come to God, and that way is through the death of the Redeemer.

As God's fence the church is made up of many pillars and grounds of truth, many local assemblies, connected by their common interest in redemption and their common mission to hold up the curtains. Every true local church that believes and teaches the Bible and preaches the gospel of saving grace is part of this fence. As believers, we must recognize the importance of each one to the survival of saving truth in our world, and we must recognize how interconnected we all are in this mission.

How have we treated the local church? Are we like Boaz or the unnamed relative? Have we joined in support of the mission of our church as God's pillar and ground of the truth? Are we a church that truly cares for our connection to our sister churches? I believe we can and must do better.

Conclusion: And so, the fence teaches us that there is one way to come to God, the gateway, Jesus Christ, who died sacrificially as our Redeemer. And it teaches us to stand as a local church, connected to sister churches and committed to the mission of declaring this gospel that our neighbors may be saved.

If we are to stand, we must rely on something other than our own power. What made the pillars and the grounds stand? Remember the cords and the pegs (24:19; 35:18). They held up the pillars on their groundings.

I believe they represent the love of Christ for His church, like the love of Boaz for Ruth. Just like the cords made the pillars secure, so the love of Christ secures us as His church occupying our place in His blessed gospel work. "I drew them with cords of a man, with bands of love" (Hos. 11:4).

We know also from Isaiah that the love of these cords is an everlasting love, in which our future is secure: "Look upon Zion, the city of our solemnities: thine eyes shall see Jerusalem a quiet habitation, a tabernacle that shall not be taken down; not one of the stakes thereof shall ever be removed, neither shall any of the cords thereof be broken" (Isa. 33:20).

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*