One of the most enlightening portions of the Bible is that which concerns the Jewish Tabernacle. The Tabernacle illustrates in a great, historic object lesson that God’s plan of redemption has been the same throughout the ages. Different times and ages have varied in their spiritual perception however, the central truths of God’s redemptive process have never changed. To an age that knew little about God, the Tabernacle showed the way to communion with God and foreshadowed the coming of the great high priest, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Tabernacle of the Old Testament was the worshiping place of the Hebrew people from the time of their wandering in the wilderness [around the 13th or 15th century B.C.] to the early days of the Hebrew kings [about 1,000 B.C.]. Later the figures and types of the Tabernacle were also built into the Temple in Jerusalem; they were the shadow of which Christ was the reality! It was as if a great light were shining from the future, casting the shadow of Christ over a thousand yea ahead of His time.

The fact that the Tabernacle typified the redemptive process of Christ is well established in the Scriptures. The book of Hebrews states concerning Christ that “we have such an high priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man” (Hebrews 8:1-2). Hebrews also states that the Tabernacle prefigured that which was revealed in its fullness in Christ Jesus.
Careful reading of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament -- especially chapters 8 & 9 -- will show the relationship between the Old Testament saints and the New Testament Christians. Overlooking the valuable lessons of the Tabernacle, one misses a great opportunity to fully understand and appreciate the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. The student of Scripture must understand that the principles of salvation have never changed. God’s plan of salvation was established “before the foundation of the world” and those who chose to be followers of God have observed its principles since time began -- whether it was Abel offering his “excellent sacrifice” at the beginning of history; the Israelites offering their sacrifices at the Tabernacle in the wilderness; or you and I accepting by faith the propitiatory work of Jesus Christ today. God’s plan of salvation for mankind has always been the same.

The Tabernacle performed a particularly special role in revealing God’s principles and plan of salvation, especially to the Jews. Too often the student of Scripture forgets that Christianity has its roots in Judaism. Jesus was a Jew, and all but one of the writers of the New Testament was a Jew. This makes it all the more important that we understand the relationship between Judaism -- [the Tabernacle sacrifices] -- and Christianity -- [the sacrifice of Jesus Christ]. The laws and history given in the Pentateuch -- [the 1st 5 books of the Bible] -- are the platform upon which the rest of the Bible stands. Misunderstanding in this area can lead to false teachings about God’s character and His plan of salvation.

Although the differences between worshipping God at the Tabernacle under the Old Testament Covenant and worshipping Him under the New Covenant are profound, the principles are identical. How else can one understand the Bible when it speaks of Christ’s death as from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8)? Also, in Romans 3:25-26,

Speaking of Jesus Christ [See verse 24] Paul writes, “Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.”

We see the efficacy -- [or effectiveness and value] -- of Christ’s death for Old Testament saints as well those of the New Testament. The same is expressed in Hebrews 9:15, “And for this cause He is the Mediator of the New Testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament -- [Old Testament] -- they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.”

For this reason, I believe the salvation experiences of the Old Testament saints were identical to ours today! Who can say they didn’t experience, at least, inwardly, the same shameful awareness of their sinfulness, the same contrite heart, and repugnance at
what is unholy and a dependence of God’s sacrifice for the atonement of their sins? Keeping this in mind, we can see there need not be any difference in God’s dealing with mankind, only the revealed stage of God’s plan of redemption has changed.

The writer of the book of Hebrews, speaking of the sacrifices of the Tabernacle, states, “And the Holy Spirit uses all this to point out to us that under the old system — [Revealed in the Old Testament] — the common people could not go into the Holy of Holies as long as the outer room and the entire system it represents were still in use. This has an important lesson for us today. For under the old system, gifts and sacrifices were offered, but these failed to cleanse the hearts of the people who brought them. For the old system dealt only with certain rituals — what foods to eat and drink, rules for washing themselves, and rules about this and that. The people had to keep these rules to tide them over until Christ came with God’s new and better way” (Hebrews 9:8-10 – From the Living Bible).

Even though God has used various means to express His plan of redemption, the requirement for man to appropriate it hasn’t changed. It has always been by faith in the propitiation of Christ’s accomplishments. The substantial rituals of the Mosaic laws with its observance at the Tabernacle never saved a soul! It only served to portray the reality of God’s reconciliation to His people and therefore served as a tangible way in which they could express their faith in the sacrifice God provided. Though the ceremonial aspects made their expression of faith more physical, it did not lessen the relationship they could have with God, for if the heart was not right and there was not a recognition of the divine intention, it availed them nothing.

While worship at the Tabernacle was central to the spiritual well being of the Israelites — (and only as we understand that God dealt with them as He does with us) — will we begin to see the tremendous importance of the Tabernacle.

Perhaps another reason few see the importance of the Tabernacle has to do with the general belief that it was used for only forty years when, in fact, it was used for 647 years! In addition, when the Tabernacle was no longer in use, Israel came to Jerusalem to worship God in Solomon’s Temple, which continued the exact same means of approaching God. Therefore, the nation of Israel from its birth to the death of Christ, a period of 1,700 years, approached God with the same system initiated originally with the Tabernacle in the wilderness. The fact that the Israelites used the Tabernacle and its system of worship for hundreds of years should certainly indicate its importance. Present day Christians may still glean something from a study of the Tabernacle, as the writer of Hebrews so wonderfully reveals.

Another factor that emphasized the Tabernacle’s importance was its location at the center of the camp and the position of the Levites, who camped nearby to guard against unlawful approach. The other tribes also camped around the Tabernacle but at a distance. The Tabernacle was also at the center of the nation during marches (Numbers 10:17).
The events surrounding the giving of the pattern for the Tabernacle also point to its importance. The pattern was given to Moses on his sixth ascent to Mount Sinai when God gave the law. Therefore, with the giving of a greater revelation of God’s law, there was also a giving of a greater revelation of God’s reconciliation with His people. This is a tremendously important fact that is often overlooked. It was also an important occasion for mankind; for God, in giving His moral standard to the Israelites, also gave them to the world. “What nation is there so great that hath statues and judgments so righteous as all these Jews” (Deuteronomy 4:8). These laws pertained to every aspect of their lives, guiding them in their infancy as a nation, setting them apart as a peculiar [treasured] nation, even to this day. It has taken other nations, apart from the Biblical revelation, many hundreds of years to understand the need of laws similar to those God gave the Israelites.

The Bible records how great these laws are, but, just as importantly, it reveals the result of neglecting them – which is God’s divine punishment. The seesaw relationship Israel had with God was always as a result of their obedience or disobedience to these laws.

Listen to Hebrews 3:8-19, “And since Christ is so much superior, the Holy Spirit warns us to listen to Him, to be careful to hear His voice today and not let our hearts become set against Him, as the people of Israel did. They steeled themselves against His love and complained against Him in the desert while He was testing them. But God was patient with them forty years, though they tried his patience sorely; He kept right on doing His mighty miracles for them to see. ‘But,’ God says, ‘I was very angry with them, for their hearts were always looking somewhere else instead of up to Me, and they never found the paths I wanted them to follow.’ Then God, full of this anger against them, bound Himself with an oath that He would never let them come to His place of rest. Beware then of your own hearts, dear brothers, lest you find that they, too, are evil and unbelieving and are leading you away from the living God. Speak to each other about these things every day while there is still time so that none of you will become hardened against God,
being blinded by the glamor of sin. For if we are faithful to the end, trusting God just as we did when we first became Christians, we will share in all that belongs to Christ. But now is the time. Never forget the warning, `Today if you hear God's voice speaking to you, do not harden your hearts against Him, as the people of Israel did when they rebelled against Him in the desert.' And who were those people I speak of, who heard God's voice speaking to them but then rebelled against Him? They were the ones who came out of Egypt with Moses their leader. And who was it who made God angry for all those forty years? These same people who sinned and as a result died in the wilderness. And to whom was God speaking when He swore with an oath that they could never go into the land He had promised His people? He was speaking to all those who disobeyed Him. And why couldn't they go in? Because they didn't trust Him” (Living Bible).

God’s justice demands punishment for disobedience. When penalty is not inflicted, it encourages rebellion. However, God desired to extend mercy to the Israelites. This had to be undertaken wisely. As good as laws are, once broken, they can only bring condemnation and demands the infliction of a penalty. Paul said, “If there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law” (Galatians 3:21). The principle involved here is that once a law is broken it can never justify, only demand that its penalty be inflicted upon the lawbreaker. This does not make the law bad at all. What law can justify once it is broken? The problem that confronted God was how He could extend mercy to the Israelites and, at the same time, uphold His law. To do this without consideration for His law would encourage rebellion.

Therefore, it is not difficult to realize the great importance of the Tabernacle because it was through the Tabernacle that God demonstrated, in shadow, how He would extend His mercy without abolishing His law. Through the Tabernacle, the Israelites had the Gospel preached to them: "For unto us was the Gospel preached, as well as unto them” (Hebrews 4:2). This is the most important lesson of the Tabernacle, and one that should continually be kept in view. Failure to see this central theme has possibly led to much confusion of God’s Word. The Gospel preached to them by object lessons — (through the Tabernacle; its priesthood; rituals; offerings and furniture) — was based upon the same principles found in the New Testament Gospel.

If the Tabernacle is to be a true type of the Gospel then the similarity between them must be real! God didn’t have two Gospels; rather, when Christ came He revealed the Gospel that was concealed in the “types and shadow” of the Tabernacle. This in no way moderated the salvation of the Israelites, for the law never justified them; rather, they were justified by faith just as we are presently. The only thing lacking in the Gospel preached through the Tabernacle was that Christ had not yet died as the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.