

## The Mission of God in the Tabernacle

### Exodus 35:1-40:38

Much real estate is given to the tabernacle in the book of Exodus. The tabernacle narrative stretches from 24:12 to 40:38. That's 16 chapters and some change. That translates to over 40 percent of Exodus devoted to the tabernacle. This bit of trivia is important to aid us in understanding the message of the book of Exodus. If someone asked you to tell them the story of Exodus, if you are like me, you would answer, *Exodus is about the plagues, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the destruction of Pharaoh and his army*. Probably, most of us would not say, *The message of Exodus cannot be understood apart from the tabernacle*.

This is the reason why out of a 6 sermon series through Exodus, 3 sermons will have been on the tabernacle section. If more space is given to the tabernacle by far than any other topic in Exodus,<sup>i</sup> what are we to learn from the tabernacle material?

This is an important question when you realize that much of the material in chapters 25-31 is repeated in chapters 35-40. There are some differences, but, largely, chapters 25-31 consist of instructions for building the tabernacle and 35-40 consist of the actual building of the tabernacle.

Why the extensive repetition, and what are we being taught in the tabernacle material? The same things I said about chapters 25-31 apply equally here. But there are some additional things we are glean from the completion of the tabernacle to help us know God better (in keeping with the theme of Exodus).

#### **1. The tabernacle is about the God who is present and forgives sin (chs 25-40; 40:34-38).**

The tabernacle is a further revelation of the God who is.<sup>ii</sup> The God who will be known will be present with his people. This tells us a lot about who God is. He is not only the God who is shrouded in the cloud on the Mountain so that even the base of the Mountain cannot be touched, He is the God whose glory presence settled in the tent right in the middle of the Israelite camp (40:34-38). Now every Israelite can come within 75 feet of the glory presence. That generation of Israelites lived under the cloud. So, He is the God who lives in the community of his persons and brings us into that community.

The arrangement of the tabernacle material is meant to be instructive. 24:12-40:38 form a chiasmus. We have the instructions for building the tabernacle (25-31), the interruption in the golden calf (32-34), and the construction of the tabernacle (35-40). This arrangement of the tabernacle material communicates the message of Exodus.

The tabernacle instructions in chapters 25-31 are largely repeated in chapters 35-40, with the golden calf narrative residing right in the middle. Without the calf narrative, we could not understand the tabernacle. It is in the calf that Israel's sin is finally brought into focus and dealt with. We are no longer dealing with the evil Egyptians and their oppressive scheme. We are dealing with the Israelites and their idolatrous hearts.<sup>iii</sup>

So the question of the book of Exodus is, *How can the Holy God be known by and live among a sinful people?* The tabernacle answers that question. On the mountain, God instructed Moses, *Let them build me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst* (Ex. 25:8). Then in 40:34-38, the glory cloud settled on the tent.

How the tabernacle answers the question of how a holy God can dwell among a sinful people is revealed in the golden calf narrative. He will forgive their sin. The LORD made himself known in that interrupting calf narrative as, *The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin* (Ex. 34:7). The tabernacle introduces us to the God who forgives sin.

We learn in the tabernacle material that God is holy, sin is a great offence to his holiness, and the basis of our standing before him is his grace. We know that the tabernacle is not the final answer to the issue of the holy God dwelling among a sinful people. Rather, the tabernacle points to the final answer.

The revelation of God in the Bible is progressive—we learn more and more of who he is and his plan of redemption until we get to Christ.<sup>iv</sup> The tabernacle is the clearest OT anticipation of the incarnation of the Son of God to be found. Christ is the tabernacle, he fulfills it in every way. He is the high priest, the sin offering and the God who is propitiated, the basin where we only need to wash our hands and feet after having passed the altar of burnt offering (cf. Jn. 13:1ff, cf. 1Jn. 2:1-2), the lampstand in whose light we walk, the incense and veil in his incarnation, and the God who is present within the veil and whose blood is sprinkled on the mercy seat.

## **2. The tabernacle shows us God desires obedience to his word.**

The meticulous repetition of the tabernacle material in Exodus 25-31 and 35-40 makes unmistakably clear that the building of the tabernacle is in obedience to the Word of God. The most repeated phrase (25 times) in chapters 35-40 is something to the effect of *as the LORD has commanded*.<sup>v</sup>

We could reduce the construction of the tabernacle to 9 base items: the tent, ark, table, lampstand, altar of incense, altar of burnt offering, basin, courtyard, and

priestly garments.<sup>vi</sup> Chapters 25-31 list those 9 items 1 time and give extended instructions for building them.

Chapters 35-40 list those 9 items 5 times (35:10-19; 36:8-39:30; 39:33-41; 40:1-15; 40:18-33).<sup>vii</sup> The purpose of the repetition of these lists seems to be to emphasize Israel's meticulous obedience to the Word of God.

I could give numerous examples of obedience from the text,<sup>viii</sup> but I want us to learn to the place of obedience in living before the God who is present.

### **A. Obedience is how we move forward in faith after repentance (covenant renewal) (35:1-3)**

The emphasis on obedience confirms Israel's repentance and the renewal of the covenant after the calf (34:9-10). In 35:1-3, Moses assembles the congregation with the calf and Israel's repentance (34:9-10) in the background by saying, *These are the things the LORD has commanded you to do* (35:1b). Then he repeats the Sabbath command which is the sign of the covenant. Chapters 25-31, the instructions for building the tabernacle, end with the Sabbath command (31:12-17), and chapters 35-40, the building of the tabernacle, begin with the Sabbath command. Between these 2 sections of text is the golden calf sin and Israel's repentance and restoration. It's like Moses is saying, *Ok, as I was saying before we were so sinfully interrupted.*

How do you move forward after sin? Moses seems to take up right where they were before their sinful detour. Wallowing in guilt and shame will accomplish nothing toward godliness and obedience. It seems our tendency is wallow in guilt, shame, and self-condemnation. Why don't we rest in the Scripture. *If we confess our sin, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteous* (1Jn. 1:9). *If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins...* (1Jn. 2:1b-2a).

If you are bound by the guilt and shame of former sin, whose voice are you listening to? The devil will entice you to sin, and then condemn you when you sin. People will remind you of your sin. But the Word of God says, *I will remember their sins iniquity no more* (Heb. 8:12; cf. Jer. 31:31-34; Ex. 34:6-7).

Obedience to the word is how you move forward from sin.

### **B. God gives us everything we need to obey (35:4-8,20-29; 36:2-7; 38:21-31)**

We will never lack the means to obey the word of God. Israel's obedience is shown by their contributions of the materials for building the tabernacle. The section on giving is bookended by the Lord's command (35:4) and Israel's

obedience (35:29). Although Moses is commanded to take contributions from Israel, the freeness of their giving is emphasized (35:5,21,26,29b). They gave so freely, they had to be commanded to stop giving (36:6-7).

Did you ever wonder where Israel got the riches necessary to give for the building of the tabernacle? Way back in Exodus 3 God told Moses, *I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty, but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians* (3:21-22). Then just before Israel left Egypt the text says, *The people of Israel had done as Moses told them, for they had asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewelry and for clothing. And the LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. Thus they plundered the Egyptians* (12:35-36).

The LORD gave Israel everything they needed to give to the building of the tabernacle. Why would the LORD give to Israel and then ask them to give? Because he wants their hearts. Giving is always about our hearts. Are our hearts with God and for God? God would dwell among his people. He has a mission in the world, and he involves his people in that mission. Our giving tells us if our hearts are after what God is about in the world.

Where your treasure is you will find your heart (Mt. 6:21). If your life is not bounded by God and his purpose, you will find yourself mastered by sin.

God gives us everything we need to obey.

### **C. Obedience must be done in the power of the Holy Spirit (35:10-19, 30-36:1)**

The LORD filled Bezalel with *the Spirit of God* to oversee the artistic design of the tabernacle (35:30-31). He also appointed Oholiab to help Bezalel (35:34), and he gave skill to every craftsman who helped (36:1).

The LORD gave Spirit-empowered skill the craftsmen needed to do what he commanded them to do. I want to say more about the Spirit later, but for now what I want to emphasize is the convergence of the Spirit and the Word (36:1).

The enabling of the Spirit flows along the channel of the Word of God. The Word of God is, itself, the creative work of the Spirit of God. We never have to wonder if the Spirit wants us to obey the Word. So if we follow an inner voice that tells us something contrary to the Word, that voice is not the voice of the Spirit but the voice of the enemy—no matter how reasonable it sounds.

While the filling of the Spirit in the OT is rare, it is the norm for the church, the new covenant people of God. Everyone of them has the Spirit (Rom 8:9). Not one of them can say, I'm not empowered to serve and obey.

The gifts of the Spirit serve the church. They are for the building and up-building and edifying for the body. The church is not to serve your gifts, your gifts are to serve the church. There was no innovation in the tabernacle; there was the sovereign design of the Spirit of God. In the church, we are called to pursue love and earnestly desire spiritual gifts to serve the church. We don't bring our agenda to the church or our strengths to the church primarily, but we ask, *What does the church need? Where is there any lack?* And then we pray for the gifts of the Spirit to empower us and our service to meet that need.

Spirit empowered obedience informed by the Word of God should be the common experience of the saints.

#### **D. Obedience is seen in the right worship of God**

In the instructions for the tabernacle, the LORD is defining how he will be worshiped, approached, and served. The tabernacle regulates worship. The golden calf teaches that we are not in charge of how God is worshiped. We are not free to conjure up our own approach to God. In the calf event, Israel totally ignored what God had revealed about himself. They were innovative.

That God must be worshiped rightly is the reason after the covenant is renewed Moses starts raising the issue of the Sabbath (35:2-3). The Word of God directs worship. The Sabbath was the sign of the Old Covenant because it anticipates the completion of God's mission. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Sabbath (Mt 11:28). In him, we experience the fulfillment of the Sabbath.

God must be rightly worshiped. This why we preach the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Only in him will you find rest for your souls.

#### **3. The tabernacle points to the new creation in which God will dwell with his people in unveiled glory presence**

We talked about this in the first sermon on the tabernacle, but I want to add to that by showing you the ways chapters 35-40 advance that idea.

The tabernacle unmistakably shows the mission of God. He relentlessly pursues his aim of his people being in his unveiled glory presence in the new creation. The unveiled glory presence was man's experience in Eden. Since the fall of mankind into sin, God has been pursuing the restoration of all things. Therefore, it is not surprising then that in the tabernacle is seen echoes of creation. Those echoes are

also pointers to where we are going, new creation. Types and shadows in the Bible typically have an historical fulfillment, a present fulfillment, and a future fulfillment.

### **A. Past Fulfillment**

The tabernacle historically was the meeting place of God and Israel.

Creation themes fill the book of Exodus. They are too numerous to mention. The point is, however, that the LORD is doing a creative work or rather a re-creative work in Exodus. The original creation was by fiat. The God commanded and it appeared. In his re-creative work, He please often to co-labor with his people. You can see this clearly in 39:32-43. Notice the bookends of that text (32, 42-43).

In Exodus, we hear the echo of the creation account. In Genesis 1:31, *God saw everything he made and behold it was very good.* In 39:43, *Moses saw all the work and behold they had done it; as the LORD has commanded, so they had done it.*

In Genesis 2:1, the text says, *Thus the heavens and the earth were finished.* 39:32 says, *Thus all the work of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting was finished.*

Genesis 2:2 says, *God finished his work which he had done.* 40:33 says, *So Moses finished his work.*

After the creation of man, Genesis 1:28 says, *And God blessed them.* When God finished all his work of creation, Genesis 2:3 says, *so God blessed the seventh day.* In 39:43, when the people of Israel had done all the work, *Then Moses blessed them.* This is the only occasion in Exodus when Moses blesses anybody (cf. 12:32).<sup>ix</sup>

One other echo of creation is the Spirit of God filling Bezalel and giving the skill, intelligence, knowledge and craftsmanship to make the tabernacle (35:30-31). This echoes the Spirit's creative work in Genesis 1:2. The detail, order, beauty, and reflection of the glory of God in creation is the Divine Artist's signature on his work.<sup>x</sup> The same Spirit brought those same qualities to the tabernacle through the agency of a man, Bezalel, the first Spirit-filled man in the Bible.

In the historical function of the tabernacle, we have a hint that not all is as it should be. When the cloud settled on the tabernacle and the glory presence of YHWH filled it, Moses was not able to enter the tent (40:35). The stated mission of the tabernacle is that the LORD may dwell in their midst (25:8). However, the tabernacle suggests that the LORD still cannot dwell directly among his people. That generation of Israelites lived under the cloud of YHWH's presence, but a level of separation remained because the problem is sin remained. Leviticus will

tell us how the tabernacle began to answer to issue of ongoing sin. Leviticus will prescribe the sacrifices necessary to deal with the separation. Yet, God intends to dwell among his people without a temple (Rev. 21:2-4,22). The reason in the new heaven and the new earth there will be no more temple is there will be no more sin (22:3-5).

### **B. Present fulfillment**

The present fulfillment of the tabernacle is seen in Jesus (Jn. 1:14) and the church (Eph. 2:19-20). Remarkably, John drawing on the tabernacle, said, the eternal *Word became flesh and dwelt (eskenosen) among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth* (Jn. 1:14). Again it was Spirit of God who prepared the tabernacle of flesh for the eternal Son (Lk 1:35). It was the Spirit of God who empowered his ministry (3:16-17) and raised him from the dead (Rom. 1:4).

In his death, he dealt with sin once for all. The veil of separation has been removed (Heb. 10:20). Now through him, we may draw near to God (Heb. 4:16; 7:19,25; 10:1,22).

It is the Spirit working through the Word that brings the church into existence for a dwelling place for God. Ephesians 2:22 says, *In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. As in the tabernacle, the Spirit of God builds the church, the new temple of God, fills and equips not just one but every member of the body to set on display the glory of God in the world.*<sup>xi</sup> He is the master designer who orders and beautifies the church with the glory of God.

### **C. Future fulfillment**

The echoes from one point of revelation to another—from the tabernacle to the incarnation to the new heavens and new earth—are unsurprising. The future fulfillment of the tabernacle is when all things are made new (Rev. 21:1-5). God's mission to deal with his people's sin and dwell with them with unveiled glory will be fulfilled. The whole world will become what the tabernacle only pointed to—the place where God dwells with his people.

<sup>i</sup> By comparison 6 chapters tell us about the plagues, 6 chapters introduce us to God and the plight of Israel, 2 chapters tell us about crossing the sea, 4 chapters tell us about the wilderness, and 5 chapters tell us about the law.

<sup>ii</sup> What are we being taught in the tabernacle material? The message of the book of Exodus is seen in its repeated emphasis that the LORD be known. This theme is written into the narrative in answer to Israel's question, *What is your Name?* (3:13) and Pharaoh's question, *Who is the LORD?* (5:2). Repeatedly, in all the LORD does, we hear the refrains *That you may know* (7:5,17; 8:10,22b; 9:14,29b; 10:2; 11:7b; 14:4,18) and *I am the LORD* (6:2,6,7,8,29; 7:5,17; 8:22; 10:2; 12:12; 14:4,18; 20:2).

<sup>iii</sup> They committed a *great sin*. Thus Moses said to Aaron, the people, and the LORD respectively (Ex. 32:21,30,31).

<sup>iv</sup> In some ways, however, the revelation of God almost seems regressive rather than progressive. In the Garden, God walks with Adam in the cool of the day. After the fall, occasionally, we see the LORD appearing to Abram, Jacob, and Moses. The more he reveals of himself, the more we see the mystery of his person and his distance from us. He appeared to Abraham as man, to Jacob as the Angel of the LORD, and to Moses in burning bush. Does that seem like progress? He leads Israel veiled in a cloud, and settles in the tabernacle behind the veil in a cloud. This is progress in knowing God because we come to see his holiness, our sinfulness, and the need of forgiveness to have a standing with him. We finally see Jesus, the incarnate, tabernacling Word of God appear (Jn.1:14) and fulfill the mission of the tabernacle.

<sup>v</sup> *The things that the LORD has commanded* (35:1); *the thing that the LORD has commanded* (35:4); *make all the LORD has commanded* (35:10); *for the work that the LORD has commanded by Moses to be done* (35:29); *in accordance with all that the LORD has commanded* (36:1); *the work that the LORD has commanded us to do* (36:5); *made all the LORD commanded Moses* (38:22); *as the LORD had commanded Moses* (39:1,5,7,21,26,29,31); *according to all that the LORD had commanded Moses* (39:32,42); *as the LORD has commanded* (39:43); *according to all the LORD commanded him, so he did* (40:16); *as the LORD had commanded Moses* (40:19,21,23,25,27,29); *as the LORD commanded Moses* (40:32). This phrase occurs 25 times in chapters 35-40 while only occurring two other times in the book (7:10,20 *Moses and Aaron did as the LORD commanded*).

<sup>vi</sup> Chart of Tabernacle in 25-40

Instruction fr. God on Mount	Fulfillment/Completion/Obedience—Moses Speaks				
25-31 Order of Instructions	35:10-19 Order of work to be done by craftsmen	36:8-39:30 Order of work done by craftsmen	39:33-41 Order of completion of work by people of Israel	40:1-15 Order of set up the LORD commanded Moses	40:18-33 Order of set up completed by Moses
25:10-22 Ark and mercy seat	35:11 Tent	36:10-30 Tent	39:33-34 Tent	40:2 Tent	40:18-19 Tent
25:23-30 Table	35:12 Ark, mercy seat, veil	37:1-9 Ark, mercy seat	39:35 Ark, mercy seat	40:3 Ark, veil	40:20-21 Ark, mercy seat, veil
25:31-40 Lampstand	35:13 Table	37:10-16 Table	39:36 Table	40:4 Table	40:22-23 Table
26:1-37 Tent	35:14 Lampstand and oil for light	37:17-24 Lampstand	39:37 Lampstand and oil for light	40:4 Lampstand	40:24-25 Lampstand
27:1-8 Altar overlaid with bronze	35:15 Altar of incense, anointing oil, incense, and screen	37:25-29 Altar of incense, anointing oil, and incense	39:38 Golden altar, anointing oil, incense, and screen	40:5 Golden altar, screen	40:26-28 Golden altar, screen
27:9-19 Courtyard	35:16 Altar of burnt offering	38:1-7 Altar of burnt offering	39:39 Bronze altar	40:6 Altar of burnt offering	40:29 Altar of burnt offering
27:20-21 Oil for lamps	35:16 Basin	38:8 Basin	39:39 Basin	40:7 Basin	40:30-32 Basin, Priests wash in basin

28:1-48 Priestly Garments	35:17-18 Courtyard	38:9-20 Courtyard	39:40 Courtyard	40:8 Courtyard	40:33 Courtyard
29:1-46 Consecration of Priests	35:19 Priestly Garments	39:1-30 Priestly Garments	39:41 Priestly Garments	40:9-14 Consecration of priests	
30:1-10 Altar to burn Incense					
30:17-21 Basin					
30:22-38 Anointing oil and incense					

<sup>vii</sup> The **first** list in 35:10-19 is a call for *all the skillful craftsmen to make all that the LORD has commanded* (35:10), and the 9 items are listed in summary fashion. The **second** list is more detailed and is the account of what *the craftsmen among the workmen made* (36:10-39:30). The **third** list (39:32-41) gives a summary of all that was made saying *the people of Israel did according to all that the LORD has commanded Moses; so they did* (39:32). The **fourth** list (40:1-16) is the account of the LORD telling Moses to *erect the tabernacle* (40:2). The **final** list (40:18-33) is the account of Moses actually assembling the tabernacle (40:18).

<sup>viii</sup> For example, look at the instruction for making the ark (25:10-22) and the actual construction of it (37:1-9).

25:10 *They shall make an ark;* 37:1 *Bezalel made the ark;*

25:11 *You shall overlay;* 37:2 *He overlaid;*

25:12 *You shall cast;* 37:3 *He cast;*

25:13 *You shall make poles;* 37:4 *He made poles;*

25:14 *You shall put the poles;* 37:5 *He put the poles.*

<sup>ix</sup> For the parallels with Genesis see Hamilton's commentary, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary*.

<sup>x</sup> Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit in Contours of Christian Theology*, 22.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.