

Exodus 35-40

Just a quick recap of where we have been in Exodus: while Moses was up on the mountain getting instructions from God that we call the 10 commandments, as well as specific instructions about how to make the Tabernacle, the people thought that Moses and God had abandoned them and created their own idol to worship. We saw how Moses had to restore order in the camp and organize an atonement for the people's sin. He also had to become an intercessor with God in order to save the people from God's wrath, which led to God single-handedly renewing his covenant with his people. We have been watching all year as God has first called his people out of slavery, making them truly his people, which was affirmed by this renewal of the covenant. We have also been watching as God has been teaching Moses how to lead these people; we see this especially in God establishing boundaries of how he wants to be worshipped and what you can and cannot ask of Him. Both of those strands – the formation of the people Israel and the leadership of Moses – will come together in these final chapters of the book. If you feel as if you have read portions of this passage we are looking at today, and if it feels as if much of the material is something I have already talked about – you are right! But this repetition is put here for a reason. So let's dive in.

Chapter 35 begins with Moses reminding all the people of Israel that God had commanded the Tabernacle to be built so He could communicate with them. It is a symbol of the forgiveness God extends by Moses coming to the people and commanding them to get started on the work of the Tabernacle. If God was not going to dwell with them, they would not have needed a Tabernacle. In some ways, this is a step towards the re-creation of the relationship that humans have with God, by having God dwell with humans again. If you are thinking about the initial time that humans dwelled with God in the Garden of Eden, that is exactly what the writer wants you to think about, as some of the language in this section consciously mimics that of the story of creation. God's plan all along was to reside with his people. That was interrupted when Adam and Eve sinned and were thrust out of the Garden. God works throughout Genesis to re-establish this relationship with people like Noah and Abram, but in Exodus, the point is that God is re-establishing his relationship with people by bringing them out of slavery and having them construct a place where they can be physically reminded of how much God wants to have this relationship.

But we don't just jump into the gathering of the materials and the assembling of the teams to do the work. God first wants to remind the people even as they embark on this important, God-given task, they need to do it within God's rules, by paying attention to the Sabbath: "These are the things that the Lord has commanded you to do. Six days work shall be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on that day shall be put to death." It may be significant that the last time we heard about Sabbath rest was 31:12-17, just before the story about the golden calf. It is almost as if the writer is saying, 'rewind, restart where we left off'. But why is it so important that it needs to be stressed?

One of my commentators suggested that we should read the whole book as a reflection on finding rest in the Lord. We begin Exodus with the Pharaoh "set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens...In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves" (1:11,

14). “The people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out [to God] for help” (2:23). “Then the Lord said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of the land” (3:7-8). We have seen God return to this idea of Sabbath rest often, when he reminds them about the promised land; when they are sent out to gather manna (that is, when they are in the inhospitable desert); when they are told about the 10 commandments; when they are told about laws about Sabbath and festivals in chapter 23; and then before and after the making of the golden calf. While we clearly are exempt from 35:3 (“you shall kindle no fire in all your dwelling places on the Sabbath day”), it is clear that the idea that God has commanded us to rest in him is important. We, who are inheritors of the covenant established under Moses, need to take care that we rest in God’s presence, as he often commanded the Israelites to do. I don’t know exactly what form this rest will or should take with you (and if your group is doing the questions, you can all talk about that when you answer question 1), but I do know that it is important to seek this rest and to be reminded of God’s desire that we enter into his rest.

We now turn to the contributions for the making of the Tabernacle, the utensils that God ordered to be made for the Tabernacle, and the priests’ clothing. God had previously detailed for Moses the materials and the fact that they were to be gathered by voluntary contributions, not by taxing the people. So the instructions are repeated to remind us that the worship of God must be done in a manner that He has decreed. And then we are told the “everyone whose heart stirred...and everyone whose spirit moved...all who were of a willing heart brought brooches and earrings and signet rings and armlets, all sorts of gold objects...and every one who possessed blue or purple or scarlet yarns or fine linen or goats’ hair or tanned rams’ skins or goatskins brought them...every skillful woman spun with her hands...all the men and women, the people of Israel, whose heart moved them to bring anything for the work that the Lord had commanded...as a freewill offering to the Lord.” (35: 20ff).

We then start to get the details about the construction: The people bring in their contributions – the gold, silver and other precious materials were likely those that had been plundered from the Egyptians, and remember that they had already torn off jewelry to make the golden calf. But God’s provision is abundant, and Moses has to tell the people – somewhat forcefully! - to stop bringing materials – they have more than enough. It is important to remember that although the people are bringing individual gifts, they are bringing them for the good of the community. And it is a good reminder to us that ‘God loves a cheerful giver’, and that our gifts go to the broad community for purposes that God has already laid out. Paul tells us that the Macedonian church had learned this lesson early, for they gave out of their deep poverty to help spread the word of God. I find it comforting that we are given a special notice about the women who gave so freely of their skills, energy and time to weave the many panels that were needed for the Tabernacle and the Tent of Meeting.

As instructed, Moses brought in Bezalel and Oholiab. Linda gave a really good talk about these craftsmen, so I won’t repeat what she said, but just remind you that they were given the “skill and intelligence to know how to do any work in the construction of the sanctuary...in accordance

with all that the Lord had commanded” – and that they brought in an entire crew so gifted. It is good to remember that the Lord brought to the task not only those people who had skills, but those whose “heart stirred him up to come to do the work”. God does give us skills, but we must respond, as they did, by acting on those gifts He has given us. After the story of the golden calf, it is good to read about the good that people are capable of doing.

By 36:8, we begin to have a repetition of the previous passage about the plans for constructing the Tabernacle, Tent of Meeting, and all the things that are needed to worship God. While there might be some cultural reason why this is included – in ancient texts you repeat things to underline their importance and also to make the text easier to memorize – it is likely that this extended passage is here for other reasons. The retelling of the detail reminds us about the specifics that God said he needed to see in the place where he was to meet with the Israelites and where they were to worship him; this recounting shows that the Israelites understand the importance of getting the details right, and that is what they are in the process of doing. In a strong manner, it emphasizes their obedience, and along with that, the blessings that come from obedience. The repetition also makes a marked contrast with how the golden calf was produced, in haste and to function as an object of disorderly worship. The only difference in the two texts about the Tabernacle is that we start with the tent, then move to the furnishings. There seems to be no significance to this, perhaps it is just because the weaving must have taken a lot longer than the making of the utensils.

There is one interesting addition in chap 38: 8: Bezalel “made the basin of bronze and its stand of bronze, from the mirrors of the ministering women who ministered in the entrance of the tent of meeting”. Commentators are not sure why mirrors are noted here – possibly they had a higher tin content to be reflective and so show that the basin and stand are made of very high quality bronze (bronze with more lead in it would be duller, although it would be easier to cast). But it may also underline the willingness of people to give up their little luxuries for God’s service. And who are these women? They are not part of the priestly workers, but they may have been the women who cleaned, brought in the wood for the sacrifices, cooked the meat for the priests – we’re just not sure, since they are not mentioned elsewhere, but it does my heart good to know that God had a place for women in his Tabernacle. The details further suggest that the Tabernacle, although it is a shadow of the heavenly places, was meant to show the beauty and excellence of heaven, at least as much as it could be shown by earthly materials.

The materials of the tabernacle are extraordinarily rich, for a tent that was pitched in the desert. Although we are not entirely sure how much a shekel or talent of this time period weighed, we are clearly talking about pounds of pure silver and gold. And the richness of the decoration stands in stark contrast to our church, and most Protestant churches. Why was it necessary to have such an abundance of fine materials? My commentators suggested that God wanted to impress upon his people “the glory and dignity of the Divine Majesty” and to emphasize the importance of service to Him.

A little further into the chapter, in v.21, the Tabernacle is called “the tabernacle of the testimony” – that is, this tent is the physical reminder (the ‘testimony’) of the covenant that God had made with his people, a reminder that He would dwell with them always. Although this tabernacle no

longer exists we are told that Jesus ‘tabernacled’ among us in Hebrews 8:2, 9:11 and for amazing reasons of God’s grace, our own bodies are tabernacles – promises that God dwells within us (2 Cor 5:1, 2 Peter 1:13). By Revelation 21:3, the promise of the tabernacle is fulfilled, for John heard in heaven, “A loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God”.”

By chapter 39 we have the repetition of the making of the priestly garments – and notice how often the phrase “as the Lord commanded Moses” is repeated in this chapter. There’s no need to repeat the details that were explained to us by Joy, only to close with “According to all that the Lord had commanded Moses, so the people of Israel had done all the work. And Moses saw all the work, and behold, they had done it; as the Lord had commanded, so had they done it. Then Moses blessed them.” (v.42-43) – the relationship between the people of Israel and the Lord has been reestablished, because this time they followed his instructions to the letter.

Chapter 40 assures us that everything was put up according to God’s instructions, with the addition of the information of how everything was consecrated, or made holy. Although all the ‘things’ of the Tabernacle are anointed with oil, Aaron and his sons must first be washed – if the image of baptism comes to your mind, it is likely what this means, before they are anointed or set aside as holy. Moses is brought forward here, especially in 40: 16-33, where it almost sounds like Moses did everything himself. But it is likely that this section is written to emphasize his role as leader of the Israelites, and indeed in 2 Chron 1:3, we are told that “Solomon went to the high place at Gibeon, for God’s tent of meeting was there, which Moses Yahweh’s servant had made in the wilderness”.

In v. 34 we find that a cloud descended on the tent, as the glory of the Lord came into the Tabernacle. This is the physical sign for all the Israelites that God had not abandoned them but had come to dwell with them. But it was also a reminder of how holy God is, because he had to have a cloud between them and his glory, besides the great curtain of cloth that already kept peoples’ eyes from seeing Him. Even Moses was not allowed to go inside the tent then. But the book ends on an upbeat note. “Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the Tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out”. That cloud and the pillar of fire by night was “in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys” as physical proof that God was with them.

And now, I will try (with the help of commentators) to remind us of what we have learned over this book that has taken us from Egypt to Midian, back to Egypt, to Mt. Sinai, with a glimpse into the heavens along the way.

First and foremost, Exodus, as the title tells us, is about a pilgrimage. It is a physical journey for the Israelites, but it is more importantly a spiritual journey about a people who are learning what it means to be people chosen by God. In this journey we certainly should be seeing ourselves: this is a people who were chosen for no reason that a human could come up with to be favored by God. They only call out to Him when they are suffering and in distress. He answers them, not in their own timing, but in His time in ways that they could see, feel, taste and but also in ways

that they could only accept by faith. On their journey they have experiences that test them, that make them wonder if God is with them or if He has forgotten them. They have to learn how to live in a community. They have to learn what sin is and how God is affronted by sin. They have to learn that God is holy and cannot be approached by any means other than the way that He has decided in the right way. They have to learn that the right way means an intermediary, an intercessor between them and God. This intercessor will tell them what God wants, but he will also put his own life on the line to bring the people back into favor when they sin.

Israel's persistent sin – the one that almost gets the covenant destroyed – is idolatry. We see this in the earlier chapter in their love of comfort (they want to return to Egypt for leeks and onions???), as well as worshipping a physical object. I don't know about you, but this part of the education of the people of Israel speaks deeply to me, as I persist in making things in my life idols – things that I seek above knowing and doing the will of God.

But another sin that Israel has to learn about more than once is their rebellion against the person that God appointed to lead them to the Promised Land. Israel rebelled against Moses more than once, but how often do I rebel against the Son of Man who is leading me to the Promised Land? The writer of Hebrews (and I recommend reading this letter, as the author clearly speaks about how the Tabernacle was just a foreshadowing of the life and death of Jesus) wrote in 7:25: "Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them". God and Moses knew he would not always be there to intercede for the Israelites, so God set up a system with a High Priest. We now know that this system was just a shadow of the role that Jesus undertook for us even when we did not yet know him, and that he undertakes for us every day.

Other themes that appear throughout the book that are relevant to each one of us believers; one is the way that the Israelites had to learn how to repent and throw themselves on God's mercy. This happens after they angrily confront Moses in Egypt at the beginning of the story but repent to follow his instructions during the Passover; and is shown in the great outpouring of gifts for the construction of the Tabernacle. Repentance, they have to learn, is the heartfelt sense of brokenness, and the taking of real steps to move away from their sin. But they learned, too, that each time they repented, they were met with unending mercy.

Finally, they had to learn about the holiness of God. We saw this at the beginning of the book when Moses was instructed how to approach the burning bush, then how the people were instructed to stay away from the slopes of Mt. Sinai, and finally how the cloud descended on the Tabernacle to warn them to stay away. Paul reminds the Corinthians (in 2 Cor. 7, 13, 14, 18) that "the ministry...which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was...But we are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away...only in Christ is it taken away...And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord." We have the privilege of seeing the Lord face to face and abide in his presence.

We learn some other, more concrete things from the examples given to us in Exodus. The first is the matter of obedience. The people of Israel had to be obedient in order to escape from Egypt, by putting the blood of a lamb on their doorways and they had to learn it again as they suffered the consequences of worshipping a golden calf. Some of this obedience was brought out in the last chapter as the Israelites learn to pack up their tents only when the cloud over the tent of meeting moves – they were not issued a bulletin, but had to remember to look towards the tent to see their marching orders. Just like the Israelites, we are called to obedience over the long term, whether we can see or feel the presence of God or not. Following God does not always deliver us from difficulties; just as the Israelites faced having no water, or having no food, or being at the mercy of their enemies, we, too, may be faced with physical and spiritual difficulties. But just as the Israelites were always delivered, so will we. It may not be on our timetable, it may not be in the way we choose, but deliverance is always there.

The other concrete thing we learn is the value of generous giving, or giving with enthusiasm. The people of Israel gave generously when they repented of their sin, realizing how much God had given them in the first place. As I learn to be a cheerful giver, may God remind me how much He has given me, in bringing me into a relationship with him through the work of Jesus on the cross.

We have thus seen how a (basically) rabble has been formed by God into a ‘kingdom of priests and a holy nation’. And from these Scriptures, which God has given to us to teach us about Himself, we see how this people is formed throughout the Old Testament. This telling of the history of the people of Israel is a telling of how much we, as individuals and a people, need a way to approach God, this holy God who cannot be approached because he is so holy. Moses was a mighty leader and a man who had God’s spirit rest upon him – we can admire him for his many good qualities. But ultimately, he failed. He never reached the Promised Land, and for all of his efforts, he could not permanently be the intercessor that the people needed. For that, we needed Jesus. And Revelation promises us that we have not seen the entirety of the fulfilled covenant that God made with Moses, for John saw “the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” and he heard “a loud voice from the throne [of God] saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.” (Rev 21)

Let’s pray:

Oh Lord God, we thank you for this time we have had over the past year to open your Word and meditate on the book of Exodus. We will admit that we have at times been confused, at times full of wonder, and at times full of awe as you have shown us how much you love your people and how much you want to dwell with us, even though we are sinful and not deserving of such mercy and love from you. I pray that we all have, over the course of this year, come to understand you and your love for us in a deeper way. I pray we have been light and salt to the women in our group through our discussions and prayers. I pray that we all have found that joy that makes us want to share this great news of your love and mercy with everyone around us; I pray that we have transformed hearts and minds as we have meditated on your word, and that your word is bound into our hearts and minds and so reflected in our daily lives, in our interactions with our families, our friends, our neighbors. I thank you for the teachers who have diligently searched

your word to bring us the good news of your love for us. I thank you for the women in our groups who have shared their prayer requests, their joys and their support for each other throughout the year. I thank you for the small group leaders and the leaders of the WBS who have worked so hard to uphold the women who have come, hungry for your word, hungry to see you face to face. And most of all, I thank you Lord for hearing us as we have cried out to you for wisdom, for strength in our various trials, for forgiveness as we have forgotten the great price you paid for us so that we may come to you and no longer have a veil between us and you. We thank you, precious Jesus, for making these Scriptures sing to us, and for you, Holy Spirit, for making them alive for us today.