

Studies in Exodus No. 42

Exodus 35-40

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The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

Chapters 35-40 are a repetition, sometimes virtually verbatim, of material from chapters 25-31. In those earlier chapters the *plan* for the construction of the tabernacle and the manufacture of its furnishings was given to Moses. In these later chapters that plan is executed in the actual construction and manufacture of those things. "The structure of command and implementation in mirroring language is common to the Bible and other ancient Near Eastern literatures." [Alter, 515] Consult virtually any commentary on Exodus and you will find that very little space is devoted to the final six chapters. The reader is continually referred back to comment given on the earlier version of the same material. In one of the commentaries I have consulted in preparing these messages on Exodus, six out of 233 pages are devoted to the last six chapters.

The few changes that are introduced into this second account of the tabernacle and its furnishings serve to place emphasis on Moses' faithfulness in doing precisely what Yahweh had commanded him.

35:1-3 Cf. 31:12-17. The reason, of course, why another repetition of the Sabbath commandment was required was that people might well think that work on such a holy thing as the Tabernacle itself would not need to be stopped for the Sabbath day. In any case, the Sabbath command *opens* this last section as it *closed* the parallel section in chapter 31. The stipulation not to light a fire is, in context, a reference to fires as would be lit for work, especially perhaps for the metalwork that had to be done for the manufacture of the tabernacle and its furniture.

35:4-9 No single individual could supply all that was needed for the building of the Lord's house of worship any more than any Christian today can supply all that is necessary for building up the church.

35:29 Vv. 10-29 remind us that not only materials, but time and talent were given to the building of the Tabernacle and by women as well as men. The stress, as we read in vv. 22, 26, and 29, was on the willingness of the giver. Then as now, the Lord loved a cheerful giver.

35:30 35:30-36:7 repeat 31:1-11 and concern the artisans put in over-all charge of the project. They also report the generosity of the Israelites in providing the materials necessary, so much material in fact that a command had to be issued not to bring more. A NT parallel would be either the Mary anointing the Lord with the very expensive perfume or the Philippian church investing so generously in Paul's ministry.

36:38 36:8-38 describe the construction of the tabernacle, that is the sanctuary and the tent over it, in a verbatim repetition of 26:1-37, only the persons and tenses of the verbs being changed.

- 37:29 Chapter 37 describes the manufacture of the tabernacle's furnishings, that is the furniture that was put in the sanctuary itself, the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place.
- 38:8 We don't know precisely what service the women rendered who "served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting." In any case, here is an organized body of women serving the church, a kind of "proto-WIC." Mirrors in the ancient world were made of polished metal, not glass, and were an Egyptian luxury item.
- 38:19 38:9-19 describe the construction of the courtyard and its furnishings, namely the altar and the laver.
- 38:31 38:20-31 detail the cost of metals used for the entire project.
- 39:31 Cf. chapter 28. A constant refrain in this chapter is that all was done "as the Lord commanded Moses." In fact, the refrain occurs seven times.
- 39:43 Yahweh had given to Moses atop Mt. Sinai the plan for the tabernacle and its furnishings. So, upon completion of the construction the entire work, in each and every part, was presented to him for inspection, to ensure that it had been constructed according to the master plan.
- 40:2 It was a year after the exodus (12:2) from Egypt and nine months after Israel arrived at Sinai (19:1) that the tabernacle was completed and ready to be assembled and put into use.
- 40:16 Yahweh then told Moses to put it all together and Moses did.
- 40:29 Moses was the first to offer offerings on the altar. You will notice as you read it that seven times in this chapter as well we have the refrain "as the Lord commanded him." Once again the emphasis is falling on Moses' faithfulness in executing Yahweh's commands to the letter. The tabernacle and its furnishings were manufactured precisely according to the instructions Yahweh gave to Moses on the mountain.

Read 40:34-38.

- 40:38 Despite his withdrawing somewhat from Israel, despite the fact that the Tabernacle, apparently, was pitched outside the camp and not at its center, Yahweh is still present with Israel and his presence is still made known to them.

The last word of Exodus is "travels" or "journeyings" as was the first word of the wilderness narrative in 13:20. It points not so much to the book of Leviticus and its regulations, that comes next; but to the resumption of the narrative of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness given in Numbers.

The Tabernacle, as we have seen, conveyed, among other things, three very fundamental facts. *First* there is the holiness of God, conveyed in a variety of ways: by the distance that separated

the worshipper from the sanctuary when he entered the courtyard; by the fact that the worshipper himself was never allowed to approach or enter the sanctuary proper, and by the fact that not even the priests could enter the Most Holy Place, only the High Priest could do that and only once a year. Yahweh was near, to be sure, but there was no familiarity with him on Israel's part. He was still, to some very significant degree, the *Deus Absconditus*, the hidden God. Even Moses was only given to see the periphery, or the edge of God's glory, because no man can see God and live. As Solomon would later say at the dedication of the Temple, "The Lord has said that he would dwell in thick darkness." [1 Kgs. 8:12] As Isaiah would say many years later, "Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Savior of Israel. All the makers of idols will be put to shame and disgraced." [Isa. 45:15-16] There was no image of Yahweh visible to anyone and the representation of his throne, the ark of the covenant, was hidden away, invisible to all but the High Priest and to him only once a year. In the ANE gods were visible. When Jeroboam became the first king of the northern kingdom of Israel he created golden bulls that everyone could see and come to worship. But there was nothing like this here. God was too great for that! In fact, when all was done as it should have been done and the Tabernacle was assembled, the glory of the Lord descended upon it and filled it and *even Moses* the Lord's faithful servant could not enter the sanctuary because of the glory of the Lord.

There is a great deal of God's majesty in the New Testament, to be sure. There is Peter, James, and John cowering before the transfigured Christ in Galilee; there is John fallen on his face as though dead before the glorified Christ in Rev. 1. But there is still a need for us – these 2000 years after Jesus ascended to heaven – to be reminded of the curtain that closed off from everyone the Most Holy Place, and the glory that Moses could see but the aftereffects of, and that so terrified Israel at Mount Sinai. One scholar, I think wisely, wrote this:

"[The Old Testament remains] to counteract a natural tendency of man. For God in the Gospel comes so near to us, and the love of God shown in the love of Jesus is so brotherlike, that only to realize it is to run the danger of forgetting reverence and growing very familiar with God.... O loving Spirit, open our eyes and give us back again something of the fear of God! For we shall never learn to love or serve Thee well until we have learned to reverence Thee more!" [G.H. Morrison in *Flood-Tide*, cited in *BOT* 378 (March 1995) 27]

That was one powerful message of the Tabernacle and its worship.

Second, God may be approached only by sacrifice. The entire ritual of the tabernacle depended upon the principle that communion with this Almighty God depends upon sacrifice. One must be reconciled to God before one can have communion with him. Sinners can come into the presence of this God and enjoy his favor *only if they are first reconciled to him* by the shedding of substitute blood, only if their sins are *covered*. Everywhere throughout the OT this reality lies at the foundation of all faith and life: God's forgiveness is granted to sinners through redemption, through sacrifice. It is no stretch at all, taking this material in the OT seriously, to gather that Jesus Christ is *the* sacrifice that redeems us from sin and death to which all the animals sacrifices pointed, anticipated, and prophesied through so many years beforehand.

Not so many years ago, I was walking with a longtime family friend near our Colorado mountain home and she asked me about all of this concentration on sacrifice, death, and blood in the Old

Testament ritual. It obviously troubled her. It seemed to her so barbaric. A friend had criticized the Bible for this and she hadn't known how to answer her. And if you have never been tempted to think the whole sacrificial system was barbaric, you haven't imagined what a hot summer day at the tabernacle or temple was really like. I remember, as a boy, watching branding and castrating being down by the rancher in our mountain valley. The air smelled of burnt flesh, the animals were bleating in pain and fear, the blood ran; it turned my stomach. Imagine if many animals were being killed and gutted on the spot, blood running in rivers, other animals were smelling the blood and acting out their fear, imagine the odor and the sound, and all under the hot Near Eastern sun.

One Scottish preacher recalls a sermon preached by another, the well-known Alexander Stewart of Cromarty.

“We heard him, scarce a twelvemonth since, deliver a discourse of singular power on the sin-offering as minutely described by the divine penman in Leviticus. He described the slaughtered animal – foul with dust and blood, its throat gashed across, its entrails laid open and steaming in its impurity to the sun – a vile and horrid thing, which no one could look on without disgust, nor touch without defilement. The picture appeared too vivid; its introduction too little in accordance with just taste. But this pulpit master knew what he was all the time doing. ‘And that,’ he said, as he pointed to the terrible picture, ‘that is Sin!’ By one stroke the intended effect was produced, and the rising disgust and horror transferred from the revolting, material image to the great moral evil.’ And, in like manner, This is the Lamb! This is the sacrifice! This is the Door! This is Emmanuel, God with us, and made sin for us!” [A. Whyte, *Bunyan Characters*, iii, 265-266]

And that is what I told my friend. The reason for that brutal, disgusting side of Israel's worship, what we nowadays hide carefully away in a slaughter house – not wanting to know what happens there or what the animals may suffer – is that this is a fair image – only an image, only a picture, not the real thing to be sure – this is a fair image of that suffering death that Christ had to endure for us and our salvation. We are always domesticating our sin and always making too little of its forgiveness. But a courtyard full of squealing, blood, and death will cure us of that mistake. In fact, our natural tendency to recoil from it, to find it distasteful, is the index of our difficulty in taking as seriously as we should the enormous guilt of sin and the terrible price required to take it away. When we are in heaven and if we ever look into hell, we will finally feel with a terrible and wonderful power what all that blood and death was meant to convey.

Third, there is the powerful ethical emphasis. What is unique in Israel's worship in the milieu of the ANE is that Israel was told what was in the temple, even the most holy place. In other ANE religions it was all dark and mysterious (even though many of the idols themselves were out in the open). But Israel could be in the Most Holy Place in her imagination. She knew what that room contained. She knew what the ark looked like and what it stood for. *And she knew what was in that ark*. The pagan religions had their sanctuaries, even a most holy place. But in their holiest place was another image of their god, a god to be manipulated by cultic acts. In Israel's ark was the law, the covenant with its stipulations. Ethics would determine the future, Israel's conduct – either in faithfulness or unfaithfulness to the Lord – would tell the tale, not acts of magic.

Here too is found the uniqueness of Israel's faith among the nations of the world. She was called to love and serve God. Not to feed him food, not to manipulate him with magic rites, but to keep his commandments, to live lives of purity, goodness, and love, as they trusted in him for their salvation. There is nothing like this in the world and the only reason our Western culture is so familiar with the idea of God caring about men and women living good and loving lives before him is because of the deep and widespread influence of Christianity on Western culture.

The great, high, holy, living God – far above the idols man creates for himself – with whom we can have communion only by means of atonement achieved through the death of a substitute – and whom we then must serve in obedience. *That is our Christian faith and our Christian life.*

We said many times during our studies in Exodus that the theme of the book is the presence of the Lord, delivering, guiding, and dwelling with his people. Now we conclude the book with that theme again emphasized. The glory of the Lord, the sign of his presence, has enveloped the sanctuary and will move with Israel from place to place as she makes her way through the wilderness.

And we have learned the same fundamental lessons that we will be taught in different ways in the later books of the Bible. First, the presence of the living God with us is not something to be taken lightly. It is to produce reverence, fear, joy and thanksgiving in us. Similarly, we are always to appreciate that we are not worthy of this privilege but enjoy it only because of God's redeeming love. And, finally, the way to maintain God's presence with us and to realize its blessing in our lives is to obey the Lord and to live according to his covenant.

In respect to this most important of all issues, whether we are with God or without God; whether we know his presence or do not know it, there are three different ways to characterize the human condition. There are those who do not know the presence of the Lord because they will not seek it on the Lord's terms. They hope to find it in some other way than by Christ's redemption and in the Lord's covenant. Then there are people who assume that they have the Lord's presence but are not, in fact, living according to God's covenant. They have willfully deceived themselves. They imagine that they have his presence but they do not. There are a great many such people in the world. Then there are those who are enjoying the Lord's presence because they are seeking, by God's grace, to live in faithfulness to the covenant God has made with his people.

We cannot face this teaching here in Exodus without the honest admission that the distinction it draws is between Israel's faith and the idolatries of the world round about her as well as between those Israelites who are faithful to the Yahweh's covenant with them and those who are not. This tri-partite division of mankind is found everywhere in the Bible. The tri-partite you often hear – the really bad, the really good and the big bunch in the middle who are partly good and partly bad – *that* tri-partite division of mankind is *never* found in the Bible. But this one is: unbelievers outside the church, unbelievers inside the church and true believers. This division is a version of the Bible's emphatic insistence that there are always only two kinds of people: unbelievers and believers. But you can find unbelieving both outside and inside the church. Unbelievers, those without the presence of God are always found both inside and outside the church. We have

learned that in Exodus. The Egyptians did not have the presence of the living God with them but then neither did those Israelites who accommodated themselves to the pagan worship round about them when they worshipped the golden calf at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

The message of God's glory, of the tabernacle full of God's glory, of the altar and the ark of the covenant in the Most Holy Place, is that God's presence may be known in one way and one way only. The message here, in all the symbolism of this house of worship and of the worship that was offered to God in it, is that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through him. There is no presence of God without redemption, there is no fellowship with a present God without a life of obedience to him. And there can be no obedience to him except the obedience of his covenant. Men cannot invent their own laws, obey them, and expect Yahweh to be pleased.

That is unquestionably the great message of this material and of this history and of this sanctuary and its worship. But because it comes to us in the form of an ancient narrative we can forget how explosive a message it really is. Every part of that message of the presence of the one, true and living God, of fellowship with him only through redemption, and of that way of life he requires of those he has given the gift of eternal life, I say every part of that message challenges the fundamental beliefs of hundreds of millions of Muslims, of Hindus, of Buddhists, and of Western pluralistic secularists of the sort we rub shoulders with every day. This message enshrined and embodied in the tabernacle and its worship is the sort of message that can get you killed in the Middle East and scorned in the circles of elite culture in the United States. But it most assuredly is the message of this part of the Bible and of the entire Bible. God, the high and holy one, is far above us. We are not worthy of him and have offended him greatly with our sin. God's presence is not available to anyone and everyone according to his or her lights. It is not at our beck and call. It can be known only through redemption in Christ and by faith and obedience. The pagan religions, through all their rituals, could not find Yahweh. Israel would not know him either if she were unwilling to trust and obey.

We human beings do not all take different routes but end up at the same place as so many will say today. God is not an experience or a feeling. Sincerity is not all that matters. Truth is not in the eye of the beholder. There is a living God, a God far greater than we can possibly conceive, and he bestows his presence when and where he will. He gives it to those who come to him in humble acknowledgement of their need to have their sins removed and who willingly consecrate themselves to that way of life that is pleasing to him. Everyone else, no matter what he says or thinks, is, as the Apostle Paul bluntly and simply put it, "without God." They do not think so. We know that. But they are without God. His presence is not with them. It is not with them in just the same way it is not with anyone in the Christian church who professes a certain faith in God but who has betrayed God's covenant and care not to live by its stipulations.

I know we must speak of these things wisely and winsomely. I know we must learn the thinking of those who are not Christians so as to be able to recommend the gospel to them. I know that there are many good things that can be said about people who are not followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. I know that there are many unpleasant facts that must be admitted about those of us who are followers of Christ. But I also know that the religious principle of Buddhism, Hinduism – I have seen its temples with its fertility symbols, and I have watched its practitioners take their

baths in the sacred Ganges – and Islam is quite similar to the pagan idolatries of the ANE, and so is the religious principle of modern secularism. It, too, is a man-made creation of idols.

But as Exodus concludes we must know this: that God's presence is found in one redemption and one redeemer, and in one covenant and one way of life. That iron must be found in our blood or we will be of no good to anyone. And for us to doubt this most fundamental of all facts – that Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to the Father but by him – is the worst kind of betrayal. It is a betrayal of the exodus itself – God's mighty redemption of Israel from bondage in Egypt, and so the still greater redemption accomplished by Christ on the cross – (as if Israel could have, by her own devices, made her own way to the Promised Land); it is a betrayal of God's covenant with its stringent requirement that we turn from all other gods – the pretend gods of this world, the man-made gods of religious invention – and follow the one, living, and true God who made the heavens and the earth and who left the vaunted Egyptian gods – the idols of human imagination -- prostrate and powerless before him; and it is a betrayal of the tabernacle, that house of worship and that way of worship that spoke so eloquently of the one name, given among men whereby we must be saved.

We know this. It should lie in our hearts as a living fire! It should motivate us to tell others of how they too may find the presence of the living God and it should drive us onward in our effort to live in the strictest faithfulness to the covenant God has stooped to make with us.