

“Exodus”

Fall Series 1

Lesson 9

“Exodus 39-40”

Objective: To examine the account of the exodus from Egypt and to learn as much as we can about the nature of God, His mercy and what He desires for His creation. We will seek to do this by examining the historical background of the Exodus account, the interpretive history of Exodus amongst both Jewish and Christian scholars, where helpful. We will seek to understand the message of Exodus for us as Christians living in the 21st century American context.

Materials: The Bible, Ancient translations, Commentaries, both ancient and modern, Books, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet, and other resources as may be appropriate.

Procedures

1. To explore the message God of hope that the original audience will have understood from this text.
2. To understand how this text has inspired, challenged, and educated people down through the centuries guiding them not only in their personal lives, but the destinies of governments and nations.
3. We will seek to find out how these beliefs have played a role in the history of Christianity and how they continue to impact our existence and service to Jesus Christ today.
4. We will provide a sheet to take home as a reminder of what has been examined and to provide additional opportunities for consideration of these truths and their application in our daily living out of our eternal destiny beginning now. This sheet can be used as a discussion guide for small group discussion. We have several groups using this effectively.

As we come to this final section of Exodus, the text is still focused on detailed instructions for the construction of the tabernacle, the vestments of those who will serve there, and the erection and setup of the tabernacle. Many simply avoid, or ignore this section of Scripture. Jonathan Sacks recites a conversation that he had with Tony Blair (who was at the time the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom) who was reading through Exodus and he described this part of Exodus as “...the boring bit ... the passage about the Tabernacle at the end of Exodus. It does go on, doesn’t it?”¹ I think this is largely the way most, if not all of us, initially see this portion of Exodus. If you are like most you either skim this section of text, or just skip it entirely. The question though is why would God devote so much space to something that by and large is going to be ignored, or even skimmed over? Another question might be of all the writings from antiquity to preserve, why preserve this when so much has been lost and left behind?

Here is the response that Jonathan Sacks, who was at the time of the conversation with Tony Blair the Chief Rabbi of the

¹ Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Exodus: The Book of Redemption* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2010), p. 290.

United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth of Great Britain (a role he held from 1991-2013). He says, "I agreed, using the analogy of the way politicians judge the significance of a press item, by talking about "column inches" - the length of a newspaper article. I explained to him the linguistic parallels between the biblical account of the making of the Sanctuary and God's creation of the universe, and then quantified the difference. The narrative of creation takes a mere thirty-four verses, while the account of the making of the Tabernacle takes some five hundred verses."²

He then goes on to describe to Prime Minister Blair the idea that the Torah describes two acts of creation: 1. God's creation of the universe (in Genesis). 2. The Israelites creation of the Sanctuary that travelled with them in the desert, which would become the prototype for the Temple in Jerusalem (in Exodus). The rabbi states that the connection between them is not accidental, or incidental. Just as it was the case that the universe began with an act of creation so too does Jewish history (the history of a redeemed people) begin with an act of creation. "The affect is to suggest that making the *Mishkan*³ was for the Israelites,

² Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Exodus: The Book of Redemption*, pp. 290-291.

³ i.e. Tabernacle.

what creating the universe was for God.”⁴ If you want to see more detailed comparisons of this idea then you might look to the books listed below by Jonathan Sacks though he by no means the only source of this idea.⁵

The ancient rabbis sensed that there was a connection between the creation of the universe, by God, and the creation of the tabernacle, by the Israelites. There is also the tradition that God rejoices in human creation as much He does in His own creative acts. There are a number of parallels between the creation of the universe and the creation of the tabernacle. One of the more striking is to be found in the figures that only appear twice in the Torah, once in the Garden of Eden, and a second time in the Tabernacle, namely the cherubim. “These were guardian angels who, after Adam and Eve were exiled from Eden, barred the way to the tree of life. In the Tabernacle, the cherubim were figures placed above the ark that contained the Torah - described

⁴ Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Exodus: The Book of Redemption*, pp. 199-200.

⁵ Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Exodus: The Book of Redemption*. Jonathan Sacks, *The Home We Build Together* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).

in the book of Proverbs (3:18⁶) as ‘a tree of life to those who grasp her.’”⁷

These connections would seem to suggest two things: That the Tabernacle was conceived of as a micro-cosmos, a symbolic representation of the universe created by God. There is also the idea presented here that the construction of the tabernacle served as a kind of repair of something broken long before. That which had been broken was the harmony between humanity and God, and between humanity and nature, after the sin of Adam and Eve. Before this happened, God had been an “intimate presence” in the midst of His creation.⁸ The very good creation of God was broken and with it the intimate relationship that this couple shared with the creator of the universe was also broken.

As a result of sin, the paradise that God had created was broken and separation was created between God and humanity. Now, however, the tabernacle sought to restore that closeness, with the construction of the tabernacle God was again close. **They should make me a sanctuary so I can be present among**

⁶ **She is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who hold her tight are happy.** CEB.

⁷ Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Exodus: The Book of Redemption*, pp. 200-201.

⁸ Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Exodus: The Book of Redemption*, p. 201.

them.⁹ Sacks says that, “In some sense, the Tabernacle represented paradise regained.”¹⁰ The goal is to restore the relationship between God and humanity and to begin the restoration and repair of all creation. Not only was God seeking to form the people of Israel into a nation suitable for his purpose of restoration, but also to restore relationship with all of His creation, which would begin with Israel first.

One phrase keeps being repeated over and over again throughout this section and that is the phrase “just as *YHWH* had commanded Moses” (בְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֶת־מֹשֶׁה - *kaasher tsivah YHWH eth-Mosheh* - It is repeated seven times in this chapter as well as seven additional times in the next).¹¹ At 39:42 there is a change in this formula made with an overarching statement that links to these seven statements focusing on carefully following the instructions given by *YHWH* to Moses: “The sons of Israel had done all of the work just as *YHWH* had commanded Moses.” Then at 39:43 when the inspection by Moses of the work is completed and he is satisfied that the instructions have been followed exactly

⁹ Exodus 25:8.

¹⁰ Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Exodus: The Book of Redemption*, p. 201.

¹¹ Exodus 39:1; 39:5; 39:7; 39:21; 39:26; 39:29; 39:32.

as *YHWH* specified, Moses responds¹² “just as *YHWH* had commanded, he (Moses) then blessed them.”¹³ “This finale is patterned after the Creation narrative of Genesis, in which the completion of the work evoked divine approbation followed by a blessing.”¹⁴

All of this leaves us with many questions and many challenges regarding God and His nature. One of those questions relates to the building of a dwelling place to house a God that is vaster than the hundreds of billions of galaxies that make up our universe. Is it not in some sense blasphemy to build an earthly home for God? The answer to this question would seem to lie in these last 2 chapters of Exodus. In chapter 39 seven times in the making of the priestly garments we are presented with the phrase “just as *YHWH* had commanded Moses.” This same phrase also appears seven times in chapter 40, describing the actual erection and setup of the tabernacle. In both of these cases the sevenfold

¹² John I. Durham, *Exodus*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, vol. 3 (Waco TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1987), p. 496.

¹³ Exodus 39:43.

¹⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, in The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 235. Cf. Genesis 1:31; 2:3.

repetition recalls the seven days of creation and the seven times God called creation “good.”¹⁵

All went well with God’s creation until God created the first humans and then grants them freedom. According to Sacks, “They are the first and to this day the only life-form endowed with the capacity to undo the work of creation, because humans, alone apart from God, have the gift of free will. All the good that humans do comes from this capacity of will - to choose to help others, for example. But so too comes all evil. When two wills clash, the result is often violence. All conflict comes from the collision of wills.”¹⁶ It is essential to our proper understanding of Exodus that it’s narrative be set in the context of the story of Genesis. Without this context a multitude of interpretations become possible and the text becomes like a ship without an anchor at the mercy of the winds of opinion. Anchoring the account in the context of the Genesis narrows the interpretive window and insures that it is firmly grounded within its proper context.

Beginning at chapter 40, Moses receives instructions to set up the Tabernacle and to put each of the items made in its

¹⁵ Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Exodus: The Book of Redemption*, p. 203.

¹⁶ Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Exodus: The Book of Redemption*, p. 203.

assigned place. “He personally is charged with this task because the entire enterprise is said to be based on a celestial image or prototype that had been shown to him on Mount Sinai.”¹⁷ In the instructions given in this chapter the directions are addressed to Moses alone. This is demonstrated in 40:1 as *YHWH* addresses Moses directly and then the verbs used there are all second person singular verbs. Moses acts as the responsible channel of communication for the vision that he saw on the mountain. This vision makes him particularly able to insure that the instructions of *YHWH* are followed precisely. At 40:9 there are instructions given to consecrate everything that is a part of the tabernacle and all that is in it by anointing it with oil. Everything in the tabernacle is meant to be sanctified and purified from the corruption of sin and it is at this point, at this liminal place (the tabernacle), that a connection will take place between the order and will of *YHWH* and the earth and its inhabitants who are currently still in a state of corruption and sin.

There are a great variety of views today held by Christians as to what God is doing, how He is doing it and what His ultimate

¹⁷ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, in The JPS Torah Commentary, p. 235. Cf. Exodus 25:9, 40; 27:8; Numbers 8:4.

goal is for the universe and its inhabitants. N. T. Wright points out that the early Christians did not believe in progress. They had no perception that the world was getting better and better under its own steam, or through the forces of evolutionary advance. They did not even believe that it was getting better and better under the steady influence of God. “But neither did they believe that the world was getting worse and worse and that their task was to escape it altogether. They were not dualists.”¹⁸ This is such a huge topic and so critical to our understanding of the mission of the church today and the plan that God has always had for His creation. Here in the midst of the “boring bit” of Exodus we find information that should compel us to realize that God has a clear and detailed plan for His creation. His arm is not too short, nor His power insufficient to fulfill that plan. His plan is not only to redeem that which had no part in creating the corruption and introducing sin, but to redeem even the agents that introduced that which was contrary to the plan and design of God, namely human beings.

¹⁸ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church* (New York NY: Harper One, 2008), p. 93.

Early Christians believed that God was going to do for the whole of the cosmos what He did for Jesus on the day of His resurrection. “This is such a surprising belief, and so little reflected on even in Christian circles, still less outside the church, that we must set it up step by step and how the different early writers developed different images that together add up to a stunning picture of the future for which, so they insisted, the whole world was waiting on tiptoe.”¹⁹ The imagery given in the designing of the Tabernacle and all of its fittings and accompaniments is a part of God communicating His plans to human beings. So often we focus on the detail and fail to see the “big picture.” It is like viewing a whale through a microscope, you might learn a great deal about the minute detail of the whale, but would you ever really ascertain the majesty and beauty of what a whale actually looks like?

For ancient Israel it was much more difficult to step back and view the breadth and scope of Scripture in the way that is possible on this side of the cross. This so called “boring bit” of Scripture is filled with important messages for those who are

¹⁹ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church*, p. 93.

willing to take the time and the effort to explore more fully the message intended by God for His community of faith. This amazing, detailed, and complex section of Scripture is intended to teach us that the God who created this world is all of these things, amazing, detailed and complex. He is amazingly complex, detailed, organized, loving, gracious, merciful, just, and powerful. The section of Scripture that we have here in Exodus 39-40 must be set within the context of all that came before it and it certainly sets the context for all that follows. This story tells us about the heart's desire of God, which is restoration of creation, and redemption and reconciliation with His image-bearing agents empowered with more power and influence than they could hope or even imagine.

Through the great forgiveness and power of God He continues to seek His goals through those who will trust and follow His great detailed plan of order, harmony, and peace. There is only one sovereign of the cosmos and it is *YHWH* not humanity. As great as are the capabilities that man has been endowed with, they are as nothing in comparison to those of God. He calls for His people not only to recognize and acknowledge this, but to live in

full acceptance of this. As Israel was called to follow the plan of God shown to Moses on the mountain so Christians are called to follow the plan of Jesus received on the mount of heaven itself. We are called to trust God, to put our hope in Him and to pour out our lives in service of His kingdom. We are called to walk as living images of the life of Jesus. He is our prototype, our model of what God has called human beings to be.

At Exodus 40:34 we are informed that “...the cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of *YHWH* filled the tabernacle.” This is an acknowledgement that *YHWH* would continue, with Israel, His plans of redemption and promise will continue to be worked out among the people of Israel. At this moment, God was once again dwelling in the midst of His people and yet the full restoration is not complete, there is more to do, and more to come. The presence of God would settle on the tabernacle and when it lifted the people would break camp and follow and when it remained they remained. The people trusted in God and they followed his directing. There is hope for a better future not through greater advances in science and technology, but through the hand of God, directing and guiding His people, by His

presence. *The Word became flesh and made his home among us. We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*²⁰

God has set before us His plan of “salvation,” His plan of restoration in the sending of His son Jesus Christ. We have seen the plan: The question remains, will we follow the plan and receive the blessing of God? A plan to literally restore His close and intimate presence into the midst of His creation and among His people, His image-bearers. God seeks this restoration and the fulfillment of this plan in love, mercy, and compassion. The question is, will we trust Him?

²⁰ John 1:14, CEB.

Synopsis

Chapters 39-40 are seen by most as the “boring bits” of Exodus. It is often the case that in such detailed sections of Scripture there are intensely important things for us to learn. Skimming over these sections of Scripture, or ignoring them leaves major holes in our understanding of the nature of God and what God wants us to learn from them. As is very aptly demonstrated by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks there is more to this passage than first appears on the surface. He points out the tradition sensed by the ancient rabbis that connected the construction and assemblage of the Tabernacle with the creation of the cosmos by God.

In making this connection new vistas and possibilities of understanding are opened to the readers. Exodus 25:8 clearly connects the goal of the Tabernacle with the desire of God to be “present among them.” This section connects the tabernacle with the desire of God to restore paradise (ultimately the ancient cosmos created by God), to restore creation that has been corrupted. In order for this to happen the carefully constructed plan of God is needed to correct the damage caused by mankind

and their sinfulness. Trust is a critical element: just as the Israelites are called to trust God in the construction of the temple there is the clear message that what was needed was for his free creatures to choose to trust in Him and demonstrate this trust in obedience to Him and His plan.

God seeks to dwell once again in the midst of His people. Early Christians understood that God would do for the entire cosmos what He did for Jesus on the day of His resurrection. In this understanding it is apparent that there is hope for all the cosmos, because of God, because a great, powerful, and merciful God seeks restoration of his creation, beginning with the source of its corruption, humankind.

Questions

1. Why do you think we might find some parts of Scripture boring today?
2. What do you think the purpose of Scripture is? Why do you think that?
3. Why do you think there seems to be so much concern in Exodus 39-40 with following the details from God so precisely? What lesson are we to learn from this?
4. Why do you think Jonathan Sacks sees a connection between the construction of the Tabernacle and the creation of the cosmos?
5. As you think about the goal of God for this universe, what is that goal, and why do you think that?
6. What difference does our understanding of the goal of God for the universe make in the way we live our life as Christians today?
7. What difference does it make that we understand that God wants to be “present” with us?
8. What are some of the ways that you have seen people seek to restore relationship with others?
9. What are some of the ways that you perceive this creation to be broken?
10. When someone gives you very detailed and intricate instructions about how they want something done, what does it say to you about that person?
11. Have you ever given someone instructions about how to do something and been surprised by the result? Why were you surprised?

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12. Of all that God has created why do you think He created only one being in His image?
 13. How do you think being created in the image of God relates to God's ability to create? Why do you think that?
 14. How do you see the fact that God granted us "freedom" being related to being created in the image of God?
 15. Why is context important?
 16. Do you think the world will get better? Why, or why not?
 17. What do you think the future holds? Why?
 18. How important is it that God and His creation be reconciled to one another? Why?
 19. What can we learn about the way we should live our life today from the example of Jesus Christ?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

It is important to know that God has, and still does have, a plan for His creation. Being aware of this fact means that God is still engaged with His creation. This is a central tenet of Scripture. This fact stands behind all that is conveyed in Scripture and stands as the core of its message. God seeks the redemption of that which is broken and that which was lost. What is your motivation for the things you do?

Where is God in these words?

God is in these words conveying not only who He is but what is important to Him. In these words we can see that God conveys that He has a plan and this plan is very detailed and complex. Often people have the perception that the word of God is simple and that it takes no real effort on the part of someone to understand His plan. When a part of Scripture seems too detailed, or requires too much work then it is often classified as boring, or just too detailed. When you go to the doctor do you want a doctor who learned all the details of anatomy, or one that was bored with it and simply skimmed that part of his training? Why?

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

Understanding that God has a plan for His creation means that He has a plan for us as a part of His creation. Conflict comes when two wills are in opposition to one another. Sin comes when we pit our wills against the will of God, when we do things that we want to do rather than what God wants us to do. What are some of the ways that you seek to determine the will of God for your life?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

The word of God is calling us to recognize our role in creation as His image-bearers. There is a tremendous focus in this section of Scripture on following exactly the plan of God. This focus would perhaps indicate that a part of the message here is to recognize the relationship that is meant to exist between God and His creation. What are some of the things that you think might be learned about God from this portion of Scripture?