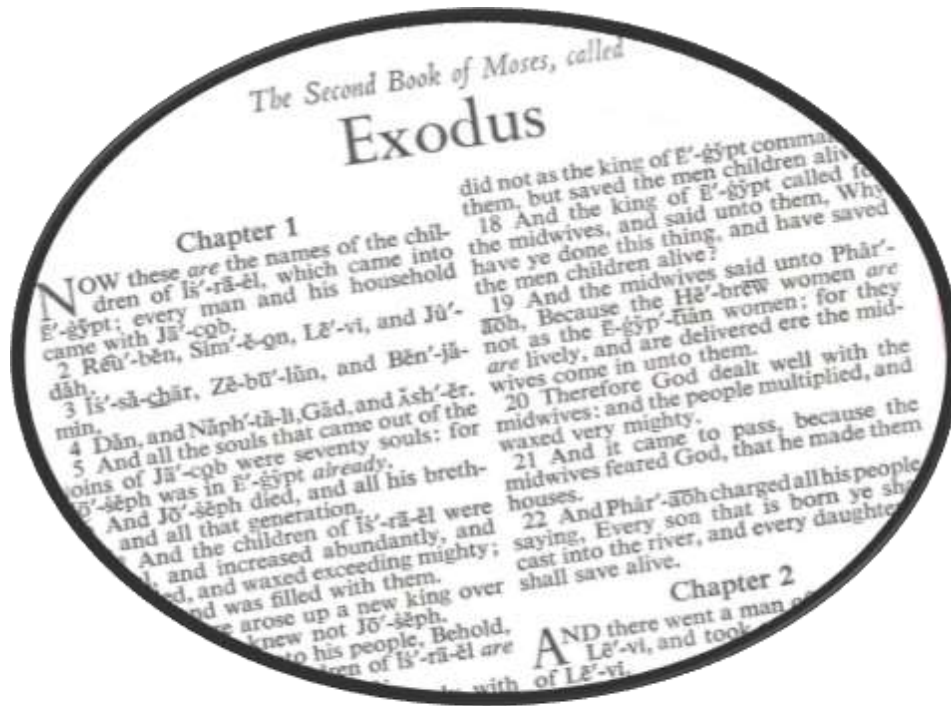


EXODUS – WEEK 26

REPRESENTING GOD’S HOLINESS



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Exodus 37:25–39:21 – Representing God’s Holiness

The design of the Tabernacle and the articles within are impressive. Everything is challenging to make. The clothing is even challenging to wear. It’s all to intimidate and humble the people.

Good. If it weren’t for sin, they wouldn’t need any of it.

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Thank you.

Exodus 37:25–39:21 – Representing God’s Holiness

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1 Exodus 37:25-29 (ESV)

He made the altar of incense of acacia wood. Its length was a cubit, and its breadth was a cubit. It was square, and two cubits was its height. Its horns were of one piece with it. He overlaid it with pure gold, its top and around its sides and its horns. And he made a molding of gold around it, and made two rings of gold on it under its molding, on two opposite sides of it, as holders for the poles with which to carry it. And he made the poles of acacia wood and overlaid them with gold.

He made the holy anointing oil also, and the pure fragrant incense, blended as by the perfumer.

Except for the ark itself, *the altar of incense* is the most important piece in the tabernacle. Its purpose is directly related to the ark. In fact, this altar is also known as the altar before the LORD.

And he shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the LORD, and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small, and he shall bring it inside the veil and put the incense on the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony, so that he does not die. – Leviticus 16:12-13

But the striking thing about *the altar of incense* is its association with death. As the verse above shows, proper use of this altar protects one from death. Improper use has the opposite effect.

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. – Leviticus 10:1-2

People can’t just walk up to God. Exposing our sinful nature to His holiness is fatal. The sacrifice of incense allows the priest, once a year, at the appointed time, to enter the holy of holies. It’s a delicate, dangerous operation.

The point of all this is humility. Nothing humbles like fear.

The expression, “God fearing Christian” can feel like some kind of false doctrine. It sounds incompatible with the fact that God is love. Is it legalism or something?

No. God’s holiness is naturally fearsome. His love, kindness, mercy, and grace are all painted on that background canvas. Unfortunately, Christians often lack the respect and humility that fear produces. Even mature Christians who understand this doctrine could use a refresher.

Ask the LORD to sharpen your sense of fear and awe. This doesn’t require a scary experience, though that’s one surefire method. The goal is merely to throw off that squishy “God is my copilot” mentality.

Thus, just praying about this may give you some fear to begin with. It’s the kind of prayer you might shrink from praying.

This leads to praying “delicately.” I have found that to be powerful and productive.

2 Exodus 38:1-8 (ESV)

He made the altar of burnt offering of acacia wood. Five cubits was its length, and five cubits its breadth. It was square, and three cubits was its height. He made horns for it on its four corners. Its horns were of one piece with it, and he overlaid it with bronze. And he made all the utensils of the altar, the pots, the shovels, the basins, the forks, and the fire pans. He made all its utensils of bronze. And he made for the altar a grating, a network of bronze, under its ledge, extending halfway down. He cast four rings on the four corners of the bronze grating as holders for the poles. He made the poles of acacia wood and overlaid them with bronze. And he put the poles through the rings on the sides of the altar to carry it with them. He made it hollow, with boards.

He 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.

The big mysteries in this section are all about the *ministering women* who donated their mirrors for the construction of *the basin of bronze*.

First off, what did their mirrors have to do with their ministry? That’s easy – nothing. The text doesn’t say they used their mirrors in their ministry. It just says they donated their mirrors.

Next, how can there be any *women who ministered in the entrance of the tent of meeting* when the tabernacle hasn’t even been built yet?

This is a reference to Moses’s tent being *the tent of meeting* (from Exodus 33:7).

So, apparently there were women who ministered outside that tent. We also learn from 1 Samuel 2:22 that after the tabernacle was built, women ministered there too. But what did they do? What was their function? It sounds important, but what was it?

We don’t have much to go on; there are no other references to these women or their service. The Hebrew word translated as minister here is “Tsaba.” In Numbers 4:23-43 and Numbers 8:24, it means Levitical service in the tabernacle. That’s pretty general but also pretty impressive. But they ministered before the tabernacle was built, so their ministry couldn’t have been some specific ceremonial function.

Whatever they did, it was important.

What’s important for us? We don’t do sacrifices anymore; Christ took care of that. So, what are the most important things we do? More to the point of this passage, what’s important in a church service?

Worship. Other things matter, but the weekly worship service is about worship. It’s not a performance, though excellence is a goal. It’s not an education time, though part of proper worship is preaching the word. It’s not a fellowship time, though that’s okay too.

But once a week we gather for worship. Everything else revolves around that.

3 Exodus 38:9-20 (ESV)

And he made the court. For the south side the hangings of the court were of fine twined linen, a hundred cubits; their twenty pillars and their twenty bases were of bronze, but the hooks of the pillars and their fillets were of silver. And for the north side there were hangings of a hundred cubits, their twenty pillars, their twenty bases were of bronze, but the hooks of the pillars and their fillets were of silver. And for the west side were hangings of fifty cubits, their ten pillars, and their ten bases; the hooks of the pillars and their fillets were of silver. And for the front to the east, fifty cubits. The hangings for one side of the gate were fifteen cubits, with their three pillars and three bases. And so for the other side. On both sides of the gate of the court were hangings of fifteen cubits, with their three pillars and their three bases. All the hangings around the court were of fine twined linen. And the bases for the pillars were of bronze, but the hooks of the pillars and their fillets were of silver. The overlaying of their capitals was also of silver, and all the pillars of the court were filleted with silver. And the screen for the gate of the court was embroidered with needlework in blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen. It was twenty cubits long and five cubits high in its breadth, corresponding to the hangings of the court. And their pillars were four in number. Their four bases were of bronze, their hooks of silver, and the overlaying of their capitals and their fillets of silver. And all the pegs for the tabernacle and for the court all around were of bronze.

The courtyard is one hundred cubits by fifty cubits (150’ x 75’) – just over a quarter of an acre. The tabernacle (45’ x 45’) sits in the back of the courtyard. So, the dimensions are similar to a typical suburban home with the house in the back of the lot – having a large front yard and no back yard.

Picture yourself standing in this courtyard. As a front yard for a home it wouldn’t be unusually large, but enclosed in a 7½ foot high fine linen curtain it feels spacious. In the rear, the tabernacle is an imposing presence, beautiful and solemn. In the front, there are two large pieces – the bronze altar and the bronze basin. They’re lined up down the middle, leading to the entrance to the tabernacle. They look almost like displays in a museum – rather isolated in this large courtyard.

But they’re not there for show. They are used to sanctify someone so that they may enter God’s house. It’s a fitting entrance for the LORD’s presence. This is the model of the heavenly courts David longs for.

How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God. ... For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness. – Psalm 84:1-2, 10 (ESV)

Our lives are a symphony of priorities. Finding time for a Bible devotional isn’t easy, but if you’re reading this, you do it. Then it’s back to the old grindstone. We don’t have time to long to be in the courts of the LORD. We’re too busy.

Ask the LORD to kindle that wondrous sense of longing for His presence, just like what David had.

4 Exodus 38:21-31 (ESV)

These are the records of the tabernacle, the tabernacle of the testimony, as they were recorded at the commandment of Moses, the responsibility of the Levites under the direction of Ithamar the son of Aaron the priest. Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, made all that the LORD commanded Moses; and with him was Oholiab the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, an engraver and designer and embroiderer in blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen.

All the gold that was used for the work, in all the construction of the sanctuary, the gold from the offering, was twenty-nine talents and 730 shekels, by the shekel of the sanctuary. The silver from those of the congregation who were recorded was a hundred talents and 1,775 shekels, by the shekel of the sanctuary: a beka a head (that is, half a shekel, by the shekel of the sanctuary), for everyone who was listed in the records, from twenty years old and upward, for 603,550 men. The hundred talents of silver were for casting the bases of the sanctuary and the bases of the veil; a hundred bases for the hundred talents, a talent a base. And of the 1,775 shekels he made hooks for the pillars and overlaid their capitals and made fillets for them. The bronze that was offered was seventy talents and 2,400 shekels; with it he made the bases for the entrance of the tent of meeting, the bronze altar and the bronze grating for it and all the utensils of the altar, the bases around the court, and the bases of the gate of the court, all the pegs of the tabernacle, and all the pegs around the court.

It’s curious that *the Levites* are under the direction of Ithamar, Aaron’s youngest son.

These are the names of the sons of Aaron: Nadab the firstborn, and Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. These are the names of the sons of Aaron, the anointed priests, whom he ordained to serve as priests. – Numbers 3:2 (ESV)

If Aaron himself isn’t going to direct *the Levites*, one would expect that job to fall to Nadab, his firstborn. Even with the foreknowledge that Nadab and Abihu would die, Ithamar still isn’t the oldest; Eleazar is.

This extends the LORD’s record of often picking younger sons over older ones. Seth, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and David are all examples of younger sons who became heirs to the promise.

God has this thing about bucking man’s rules.

Man’s rules aren’t a bad thing; they’re essential. The Declaration of Independence’s first specific complaint is that the king has refused to allow “*laws most wholesome and necessary for the public good.*”

<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>

Pray for the people who are charged with making laws – our elected officials. Usually, we think of this in terms of the president and other national figures. But let’s lift up the local ones we might actually meet.

Ask God to give them wisdom and patience, and to protect them from the forces that would do them ill.

5 Exodus 39:1-7 (ESV)

From the blue and purple and scarlet yarns they made finely woven garments, for ministering in the Holy Place. They made the holy garments for Aaron, as the LORD had commanded Moses.

He made the ephod of gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen. And they hammered out gold leaf, and he cut it into threads to work into the blue and purple and the scarlet yarns, and into the fine twined linen, in skilled design. They made for the ephod attaching shoulder pieces, joined to it at its two edges. And the skillfully woven band on it was of one piece with it and made like it, of gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen, as the LORD had commanded Moses.

They made the onyx stones, enclosed in settings of gold filigree, and engraved like the engravings of a signet, according to the names of the sons of Israel. And he set them on the shoulder pieces of the ephod to be stones of remembrance for the sons of Israel, as the LORD had commanded Moses.

This adds one detail to the description in Exodus 28 – how they make the gold threads. They hammer out and slice up gold leaf. This is the same kind of gold leaf used to overlay the table in Exodus 37:11. It’s an incredibly fragile material that’s made by hammering sheets of gold between layers of animal hide.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/237354/gold-leaf>

Cutting and weaving these solid gold threads requires extraordinary skill. Making clothing this way is an immense challenge.

And that’s just the point. The ephod is totally impractical. Just putting it on is frightening – one fall or snag and it’s damaged. Repairs can’t be done by just anyone. Like everything else associated with the priesthood, honor is coupled with intimidation.

The ephod is almost as precious as its function.

Nowadays, we don’t have anything like that – something so holy we’re afraid to even touch it. Given the human tendency for idolatry, something like that would be a problem anyway. We already excessively venerate ancient objects, such as the tons of pieces of the cross on display around the world.

Conversely, we often treat the things of God as if they are common. The one truly holy thing we should venerate is the word of God – the Bible. I don’t mean the paper and binding that you hold in your hands; I mean the words.

As you consider today’s passage, ponder the long and winding road of how those words got to you. Praise God for creating, inspiring and protecting the many saints who wrote, copied and translated it.

Every Christian should read the whole Bible straight through at least once.

Imagine trying to copy the whole Bible straight through.

6 Exodus 39:8-21 (ESV)

He made the breastpiece, in skilled work, in the style of the ephod, of gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen. It was square. They made the breastpiece doubled, a span its length and a span its breadth when doubled. And they set in it four rows of stones. A row of sardius, topaz, and carbuncle was the first row; and the second row, an emerald, a sapphire, and a diamond; and the third row, a jacinth, an agate, and an amethyst; and the fourth row, a beryl, an onyx, and a jasper. They were enclosed in settings of gold filigree. There were twelve stones with their names according to the names of the sons of Israel. They were like signets, each engraved with its name, for the twelve tribes. And they made on the breastpiece twisted chains like cords, of pure gold. And they made two settings of gold filigree and two gold rings, and put the two rings on the two edges of the breastpiece. And they put the two cords of gold in the two rings at the edges of the breastpiece. They attached the two ends of the two cords to the two settings of filigree. Thus they attached it in front to the shoulder pieces of the ephod. Then they made two rings of gold, and put them at the two ends of the breastpiece, on its inside edge next to the ephod. And they made two rings of gold, and attached them in front to the lower part of the two shoulder pieces of the ephod, at its seam above the skillfully woven band of the ephod. And they bound the breastpiece by its rings to the rings of the ephod with a lace of blue, so that it should lie on the skillfully woven band of the ephod, and that the breastpiece should not come loose from the ephod, as the LORD had commanded Moses.

What gives? The Urim and Thummim – which seemed central to the purpose of the *breastpiece for making decisions* when it was described earlier – aren’t even mentioned here.

Also put the Urim and the Thummim in the breastpiece, so they may be over Aaron’s heart whenever he enters the presence of the LORD. Thus Aaron will always bear the means of making decisions for the Israelites over his heart before the LORD.” – Exodus 28:30 (NIV)

Actually, this makes perfect sense. Here, the construction of the breastpiece is being described. The instruction in Exodus 28:30 wasn’t to make the Urim and Thummim; it was to *put* them in the breastpiece when entering the presence of the LORD. They already exist. We see this again in Leviticus 8:8.

And he placed the breastpiece on him, and in the breastpiece he put the Urim and the Thummim.(ESV)

The Urim and Thummim are for inquiring of the LORD when making important decisions. This reminds the people of their weaknesses and their dependence on God.

We should pray about any decision, but we make hundreds of them every day. Stopping to pray every time would be dysfunctional. What are we supposed to do?

Don’t stop. Pray without stopping to pray. Why be in contact with God one minute and out of touch the next? When you pray, don’t hang up. Spend the whole day with your eyes open.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, – 1 Thessalonians 5:16-17 (ESV)

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What about God do you find scary?
2. What's the key to excellent worship?
3. What heavenly thing do you most look forward to?
4. Can you see providence unfolding in our nation's history?
5. Was the preservation of scripture through the centuries a miracle?
6. How much do you sense God's presence?

Items for prayer: