

Exodus 35: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Exodus chapter 35 Moses assembled all the congregation of the people of Israel and said to them, 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 it shall be put to death.

You shall kindle no fire in all your dwelling places on the Sabbath day. Moses said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, This is the thing that the Lord has commanded.

Take from among you a contribution to the Lord. Whoever is of a generous heart, let him bring the Lord's contribution, gold, silver and bronze, blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, goat's hair, tanned ram skins and goat skins, acacia wood, oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, and onyx stones and stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece.

Let every skilful craftsman among you come and make all that the Lord has commanded, the tabernacle, its tent and its covering, its hooks and its frames, its bars, its pillars and its bases, the ark with its poles, the mercy seat and the veil of the screen, the table with its poles and all its utensils and the bread of the presence. The lampstand also for the light with its utensils and its lamps and the oil for the light, and the altar of incense with its poles and the anointing oil and the fragrant incense and the screen for the door at the door of the tabernacle.

The altar of burnt offering with its grating of bronze, its poles and all its utensils, the basin and its stand, the hangings of the court, its pillars and its bases, and the screen for the gate of the court. The pegs of the tabernacle and the pegs of the court, and their cords, the finely worked garments for ministering in the holy place, the holy garments for Aaron the priest, and the garments of his sons for their service as priests. Then all the congregation of the people of Israel departed from the presence of Moses. And they came, everyone whose heart stirred him, and everyone whose spirit moved him, and brought the Lord's contribution to be used for the tent of meeting, and for all its service, and for the holy garments. So they came, both men and women, all who were of a willing heart, brought brooches and earrings and signet rings and armlets, all sorts of gold objects, every man dedicating an offering of gold to the Lord. And everyone who possessed blue or purple or scarlet yarns or fine linen or goat's hair or tanned ram skin or goat's skins brought them. Everyone who could make a contribution of silver or bronze brought it as the Lord's contribution. And everyone who possessed acacia wood of any use in the work brought it.

[2 : 43] And every skilled woman spun with her hands, and they all brought what they had spun in blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen. All the women whose heart stirred them to use their skill spun the goat's hair. And the leaders brought onyx stones, and stones to be set for the ephod and for the breastpiece, and spices and oil for the light, and for the anointing oil, and for the fragrant incense. All the men and women, the people of Israel, whose heart moved them to bring anything for the work that the Lord had commanded by Moses to be done, brought it as a freewill offering to the Lord.

Then Moses said to the people of Israel, See, the Lord has called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. And he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, with intelligence, with knowledge, and with all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold and silver and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood for work in every skilled craft. And he has inspired him to teach, both him and Aholiab the son of Ahissamach, of the tribe of Dan. He has filled them with skill to do every sort of work done by an engraver, or by a designer, or by an embroiderer in blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen, or by a weaver, by any sort of workman or skilled designer. In Exodus chapter 35 to 40, what is given in the form of instructions in chapters 25 to 31 is repeated in the form of reports upon work that has been

executed. This section, however, begins with the Sabbath. This might be fitting for a section that's concerned with man's work under God. God's pattern of working, his six days of labour and his Sabbath, present us with the pattern of our own labour. And the Sabbath is also the sign of the covenant and a central point of the entire narrative. It's the feast to the Lord that they were looking for at the very beginning. It's rest from toil, liberation from slavery, a sign of all of these things. It's the centre of the Ten Commandments. It's the beginning of the case laws of the book of the covenant, and the ending of them. It ends the instructions for the tabernacle as the sign of the covenant. And this is just before the golden calf, and now it resumes on the same theme, the theme of the Sabbath. God has delivered his people from unending toil, and now he wants to bring them into his rest. And that principle of rest is at the very basis of everything that they must do. There is, however, an interesting addition in the law concerning the Sabbath here, which concerns not kindling a fire in all your dwelling places on the Sabbath day. And this has been understood in various ways. Some Jews understood it as not having any fire at all. But the mainstream view was not building up your fire. Often this will be seen in terms of the work that is taken to build up a fire. Now I think there's probably something more going on here. There is only one occasion in scripture where there is a death penalty applied for breaking the Sabbath. And that's in Numbers chapter 15 verses 32 to 36. Now that occasion is someone gathering wood in preparation for a fire, or for building up a fire.

And it's a strange connection with this particular command here. In Nehemiah, people are rebuked for trading on the Sabbath, but no one is subject to a serious penalty. So why is the fire so important?

There are many dimensions of the significance of a fire that may help us to understand the rationale here. So the fire is the sign of all domestic labour, perhaps. God started the first week by making a fire, by creating light. Until the modern day, every sort of light was formed by a sort of fire. And so God's creating light on the first day is the forming of a fire. And maybe that's part of what's in view. That that work that God started by making a fire is a work that we should not do on the Sabbath. Maybe that's part of it. The hearth is also the heart of the home. It symbolises the entire life of that realm. It's the centre of gathering and fellowship. It's the most basic and fundamental of all technologies. Fire is used to transform one thing into another. As something passes through the fire, whether we're cooking a meal or whether we're engaged in metallurgy, all of these things involve transformation through fire. It's the most basic technology.

[7 : 10] Just a few chapters earlier, Aaron said that he threw the gold into the fire and out came the calf. Beyond this, the fire was the centre of domestic labour. It was the place where meals were prepared and other things like that. It's often symbolically connected with the wife and the mother at the very heart of the home. And these elements of its symbolic importance might help us to understand why there is a law concerning the Sabbath and fire. It's also connected with God's own presence.

God is a consuming fire. God displays himself in the form of fire. A pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire. The ceremonial fire of God's presence is at the heart of the people and that is to be kept burning. And maybe the point is that we dim our fires and don't build them up while God's fire is built up on the Sabbath day. So God's presence is prominent on the Sabbath day and we reduce our presence for the sake of emphasising God's presence. The hearth of God's house rises up and the hearths of our houses are reduced so that God's light, God's fire would be most prominent on that day. The Sabbath ends God's week but it could be seen as beginning ours. Man's first day in the creation is a Sabbath and the first day anticipates the last day. Man is now functioning as a creator under God's direction. Man has been placed in the task of building this particular edifice, this tabernacle.

And so God is equipping man to engage in a creative work of a realm for his dwelling. Moses gives a commission to the people. First of all a commission to gather materials together to contribute to the building effort and then also a calling to participate in that building effort.

[8 : 59] The materials to be gathered are to be given from people's hearts. These are a free will offering. This is a popular building with a large number of contributors and a large number of creators. And in the construction people return with a host of contributions and skilled abilities and it's a building formed of people's hearts and skills and lives. Men and women freely contributing. We might reflect upon the contrast between the way that Pharaoh's heart was hardened but the people here are stirred in their hearts to give. It's a very positive sign also after the events of the golden calf

where they also contributed elements. They contributed the gold from their earrings.

One of the effects of all of this, the fact that people are contributing, it's a popular building effort, is that it's an externalisation of the people. The people are represented as they give to this building. They exercise their skills in constructing it and it can symbolise them. It's an externalisation of their life and their skills and their abilities and their persons. And God can dwell in their midst in that building in a way that symbolises him dwelling in them as a people. Bezalel and Neholiab are skilled and divinely empowered for their task. They're also divinely gifted to teach others. The Holy Spirit is overshadowing their work just as the Spirit overshadowed the work of the first creation. A question to consider. How could we contrast the construction of the golden calf and the construction of the tabernacle? Thank you.