

## International Sunday School Lesson Study Notes

**Lesson Text: Exodus 40:16-21, 29-30, 34, 38**

**Lesson Title: Beginning of the Tabernacle**

### Introduction

With Pharaoh's army and Egypt behind them the Hebrews followed their deliver, Moses, who was in turn led by God, the great Deliverer. They were God's people headed to the land promised to Abraham centuries before. The Israelites, some two million in number, have now been delivered and are free from bondage. Their journey begins in Exodus chapter 13 and continues throughout the remainder of the book. There are both positive and negative aspects of their journey. In delivering them God showed His people that He was not only the God who saves, but the God who stays close by for the whole journey.

In Exodus chapters 19-24, God led the people to the very mountain where He had earlier called Moses. At Mount Sinai they would be commissioned to obey God, follow His laws, and be a holy nation. The people quickly realized what God already knew, that sinful people can't obey the law of God in their own strength. So why did God give the law if He knew man couldn't keep it? First, the law reveals the holy nature and character of God. Without holiness, no man will see God (Hebrews 12:14). Second, the law reveals our sinfulness and points us to the only sinless One, Jesus Christ, from whom we receive our righteousness and salvation (Romans 7:7; Galatians 3:24). A stop at Mount Sinai to receive the law was a vital part of their journey.

Exodus chapters 25-40 are dedicated to the construction and operation of the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle was a place designed by God for sacrifice and worship and served as a place for God to dwell among His people for almost 500 years. The God of Israel who had redeemed the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt, revealed His holiness on Mount Sinai, and gave His people His law to live by, now condescended to dwell in their midst in the Tabernacle. What joy must have swept over Moses when he saw the plans for the Tabernacle that he was to build and heard that Jehovah God would dwell among the Israelites.

Compared to the massive pyramids and structures the Israelites had built while slaves in Egypt, the Tabernacle must have looked like a small and insignificant thing. Yet God chose a simple and movable tent in which to display His glory. Although the Tabernacle was simple, every aspect of it, from the brazen altar,

where sacrifices were offered for sin, to the work of the priest, who offered sacrificial blood on the mercy seat, pointed to God's redemptive plan. It all was a visible reminder to the people that they could only approach God through a blood atonement and a mediating priesthood. Everything about the Tabernacle is beautifully typified in the ministry of Jesus the Messiah who left His throne in heaven and dwelled among His people (John 1:14). In Christ we have a high priest, a perfect blood sacrifice, and access to God for all who put their trust in Him.

### **Set Procedure for the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:16-19)**

Exodus 40 brings us to the end of the beginnings in the Book of Exodus. A year after leaving Egypt, Israel was ready to begin her life as a nation. All the parts and pieces of the Tabernacle were assembled (Exodus 38-39). God then gave Moses the command for the first erecting of the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:1-2). No doubt the first set up was a challenge, fitting pole A into curtain B and hook F into ring C and on and on the assembly would go. Eventually, this task would become easier. But it would always be sacred and holy because once erected, God would commune with His people and His people would commune with Him.

#### Verse 16

"Thus did Moses: according to all that the LORD commanded him, so did he."

In Exodus 40:1-16 the Lord gave Moses instructions concerning the arrangements of the various parts of the Tabernacle. These instructions included how the Tabernacle was to be assembled following a deliberate order and arrangement. This included the consecration and setting aside of the holy things as well as the placement of furniture, the washing, dressing, and anointing of Aaron and his sons for their priestly work. Everything must be done according to God's word.

The words "Thus did Moses: according to all that the LORD commanded him," speaks of the exactness and completeness with which Moses obeyed the Lord. This verse is only 14 words but oh how important these words are. Seven times in Exodus 40 the Bible says that Moses did, "*according to all that the LORD commanded*" (Exodus 40:16, 21, 23, 25, 27, 29, 30). These words should be a reminder to all of us in God's service that we are not free to pick and choose when and what part of God's word we obey. Many well-meaning and sincere people have tried to do God's work their own way and then have asked God to bless it. But ministry doesn't work that way. We must find out what God wants us to do, and then do it as God says in order to glorify Him. If we obey His will and seek to

honor His name, then He will come and bless His work with His glory and presence.

### Verse 17

"And it came to pass in the first month in the second year, on the first day of the month, that the tabernacle was reared up."

Exodus 40:17-33 elaborates on Exodus 40:16 as to the fact that "according to all that the LORD commanded," Moses did. To show exactly how precise and obedient Moses was in following the Lord's directions, the Bible now tells us what Moses did and when he did it.

The Tabernacle was erected a year after the Israelites left Egypt. It was erected "*on the first day of the month...in the first month in the second year*" (Exodus 40:2). The "second year" is a reference to the "second year" from their exodus from Egypt. The raising of the Tabernacle on the one year anniversary of the exodus must have been a wonderful reminder of God's power and purpose for the nation.

The people arrived at Mount Sinai three months after they left Egypt and stayed there about eight and a half months. During those eighty days at Sinai, Moses was on the mountain forty days and another forty days were spent in covenant renewal (Exodus 24:18; 34:28). It is estimated that a little over half-a-year was spent gathering offerings, materials and construction of the Tabernacle.

### Verse 18-19

"And Moses reared up the tabernacle, and fastened his sockets, and set up the boards thereof, and put in the bars thereof, and reared up his pillar. And he spread abroad the tent over the tabernacle, and put the covering of the tent above upon it; as the LORD commanded Moses."

Moses started the erection process by putting together the tabernacle or tent of meeting itself. He "reared up the tabernacle" meaning he laid the bases. The foundation of the Tabernacle had 100 sockets (Exodus 26:18-25). The "fastening" of the "sockets" and "setting up of the boards" speaks of the framework. There were forty eight "boards" placed in the sockets, twenty on the north side (Exodus 26:20), twenty on the south side (Exodus 26:18), 6 on the west side (Exodus 26:22), and two corner boards (Exodus 26:23). The "sockets" or "bases" appear to have been simply laid on the flat sand of the desert, not "fastened" to it in any way. They were heavy pieces of metal and would remain where they were placed. The

"pillars" supported the veil, and also those at the east end, where the entrance was (Exodus 26:31-35; 36:37-38).

The "bars" is a reference to the crossbars designed to hold the "boards" in place. After the framework was in place Moses "spread abroad the tent over the tabernacle, and put the covering of the tent above upon it." The "covering of the tent" was made of skin and cloth. The "tent" was made of goat's hair (Exodus 36:14) and the outward "tabernacle" covering was ram's skins (Exodus 36:19). This was the holy dwelling place of God, representing his presence with his people. Moses set it up just the way God said. Everything was in its rightful place.

### **Special Places in the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:20-21, 29-30)**

#### Verse 20-21

"And he took and put the testimony into the ark, and set the staves on the ark, and put the mercy seat above upon the ark: And he brought the ark into the tabernacle, and set up the vail of the covering, and covered the ark of the testimony; as the LORD commanded Moses."

The "ark" of the "testimony" was the central or focal point of the Tabernacle. The "ark" was an oblong, wooden chest, overlaid "with pure gold, within and without" (Exodus 25:11). The "ark" was also known as The Ark of the Covenant. One of the special features of the "ark" was the two "cherubim" made of pure gold (Exodus 37:1-8). "The cherubims have wings that meet each other, and their faces look down on the mercy seat, the place where God will meet with Moses (Exodus 25:22; compare Numbers 7:89). The Israelites will come to envision the mercy seat to be God's 'footstool,' the place of His feet, while His throne is in Heaven itself (see 1 Chronicles 28:2; Psalm 99:5; 132:7; Lamentations 2:1). God establishes the sprinkling of blood on the mercy seat for forgiveness of sins (Leviticus 16:14-16). This foreshadows what Christ does for us (Hebrews 9; 1 Peter 1:2)" (*Standard Lesson Commentary 2013-2014*). The "testimony" was the two tables of stones containing the Ten Commandments and was to be placed "into the ark" (Exodus 25:16; 31:18) along with a "golden pot that had manna, and Aaron's rod that budded" (Hebrews 9:4).

"And set up the vail of the covering, and covered the ark of the testimony..." means Moses hung a "vail" on the four pillars between the holy place and the holy of holies, thereby covering or concealing the ark of the testimony from sight. There were three veils or curtains placed at different locations in the Tabernacle. Each one was made of fine-twined linen into which twisted threads of blue, purple and

scarlet were interwoven (Exodus 38:18). Although beautiful to look at the "vail" was not to be admired but acted as a barrier between God and man, shutting God in and shutting man out (Leviticus 16:2). The word "vail" means "to separate," and thus describes the ministry of the "vail."

The "vail" in the Tabernacle was a reminder that God is holy and man is sinful and sinful man just cannot come to God anytime or anyway. The "vail" is also a picture of our Lord's life and ministry. As the "vail" in the Tabernacle hid the presence and glory of God, so the glory of God was hidden during Jesus' earthly ministry by His flesh (John 1:1, 14, 18). At one point in His earthly ministry, Jesus revealed His glory to a few disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:2). At other times glimpses of His glory were seen in the miracles He worked (John 2:11; 11:40). Christ's glory was restored after His resurrection (John 17:5, 24).

Thank God the "vail" is no longer preventing man from having access to God. When Christ died on the cross "*...the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom*" (Matthew 27:51). Every born again believer can enter into God's holy and glorious presence because of the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

#### Verse 29-30

"And he put the altar of burnt offering by the door of the tabernacle of the tent of the congregation, and offered upon it the burnt offering and the meat offering; as the LORD commanded Moses."

The "altar of burnt offering" is more commonly known as "*the brazen altar*" (Exodus 38:30; 39:39). As the Israelite reverently approached the Tabernacle, drew back the "door of the tabernacle," or curtain, and entered its court to present their sacrifice, the "altar of burnt offering" was the first piece of furniture to be seen. The "altar of burnt offering" was a very simple box made of acacia wood, overlaid with brass, seven and a half feet square, stood four and a half feet high, and had four horns pointing outward at each corner (Exodus 27:1-2). As with all of the furniture in the Tabernacle, the "altar of burnt offering" was not Moses creation; God had revealed it to him on the mount.

The "altar of burnt offering" was the largest piece of furniture used in the Tabernacle and was always open to guilty Israelites so they could atone for their sin. It was upon this "altar" that the people "offered the burnt offering and the meat offering; as the LORD commanded Moses." It was at this "altar" that sacrifice for sin was made. Without sacrifice, there could be no atonement for sin (Leviticus

17:11; Hebrews 9:22). The Israelite brought the prescribed offerings without spot or blemish to the priests, who stood at the Tabernacle's door to receive them. After the sacrifice was killed and the procedures for that sacrifice were followed, the Lord was satisfied and sin was atoned.

Jesus Christ is the sinner's sacrificial lamb today (John 1:29; Revelation 13:8). He died on the altar of the cross to bear the judgment of God's wrath against sin on the behalf of all who will believe (Romans 4:25). The word "altar" means "high place." The lifting up of the sacrifice on the "altar" in the Tabernacle is a picture of Christ being "lifted up" on the cross for our sin (John 3:14).

### Verse 30

"And he set the laver between the tent of the congregation and the altar, and put water there, to wash withal."

Purity and cleansing was a vital part of the Tabernacle ministry. Moses also "set the laver between the tent of the congregation and the altar, and put water there, to wash withal." The "laver" was a large brass bowl on a stand (Exodus 30:17-21) that was constructed from the mirrors owned by the Israelite women (Exodus 38:8). The "laver" was never used by the congregation but was provided exclusively for the priest's purification. After handling the sacrifices brought by the Israelites the hands and feet of the priests were splattered with blood and soiled from the dust of the Tabernacle floor. Purification before and during service in the Tabernacle was mandatory for the priests who ministered before God.

Whereas the "altar of burnt offering" (Exodus 40:29) speaks of our Lord Jesus' sacrificial death *to save us*, the "laver" testifies that Jesus lives *to sanctify us*. It is only through the life of our risen Lord that we are cleansed and sanctified and meet for the master's use. The Apostle Peter reminds us, "*But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy*" (1 Peter 1:15-16).

*Note: It is interesting that the "laver" had no measurements, symbolic of the limitless cleansing power of God. While we are atoned for once through the blood of Jesus we need daily cleansing from our sins and defilement on this world.*

### **Sacred Presence in the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:34, 38)**

### Verse 34

"Then a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle."

With the Tabernacle erected, the curtain hung, the furniture placed and the order of worship established, it is time for the most important aspect of the Tabernacle. With the manifest presence of God what good would all the other stuff be? "Then" is a small but powerful little word that can sometimes indicate an extraordinary situation is about to take place. Such is the case with the word "then" in our text. Moses' obedience and attention to detail has resulted in this "then." In spite of everything that had been done up until this point to gather materials for the building of the Tabernacle and then putting it all together piece by piece as the Lord had commanded, there was something vital missing. Moses had done everything as God commanded and "*Moses finished the work*" (Exodus 40:33). Now it is time for "then."

Moses had done everything right. Everything was in its proper place. But there is something needed now that Moses cannot provide. The Tabernacle needs "the glory of the LORD." And only God can fill the "tabernacle." After Moses finished all his work "the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle." This was God's divine seal of approval on all the work Moses and the Israelites had done. The people had witnessed glimpses of God's glory through the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. They had seen a glimpse of His glory at Mount Sinai. Neither Moses nor the people had seen God's "glory" come down to earth and actually "fill" a literal place.

God's "glory" is the "sum total of everything He is." In our text His "glory" is "His manifest presence, or the weightiness of Himself in and around the Tabernacle." God's presence was so powerful on this occasion that "*Moses was not able to enter into the tent of the congregation...*" (Exodus 40:35). "The God of the exodus, the God of power, who made the heavens and the earth; the God of justice, who plagued the Egyptians; the God of love, who kept his covenant with Israel; the God of providence, who led his people through the wilderness; the God of truth, who gave them his law; the God of mercy, who atoned for their sins; the God of holiness, who set them apart for service, this great God was present in glory. When the people looked at the tabernacle, they could see that God was in the house" (*Exodus, Saved for God's Glory, Philip Graham Ryken, p.1160, par.2*).

Verse 38

"For the cloud of the LORD was upon the tabernacle by day, and fire was on it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys."

While Exodus 40:34 speaks of God's indwelling through the "cloud" of His "glory," this verse speaks of God's guiding in that the "cloud of the LORD was upon the tabernacle by day, and fire was on it by night" as long as they journeyed. Where the Lord dwells He also guides. The same glorious presence of God that prevented Moses from entering the Tabernacle is the same glorious presence of God that stayed with them and guided them. God's glory was not just for a "good service" in the Tabernacle. It was an essential part of the everyday life of the Israelites.

What a great encouragement it must have been to the Israelites to know that the God of all glory would be present with them all the days of their travel. The "glory" was actually "in the sight of all the house of Israel." They saw it and they knew the Lord was with them. He would guide them by his glorious light and defend them by his glorious power, leading them night and day until they reached the Promised Land. God saved his people for his glory; and by the glory of his presence, he would lead them to the goal of their salvation.

## **Conclusion**

No man has ever been involved in a building project more important than the one to which Moses was called. His task was to erect a Tabernacle where God would meet with His people. The Tabernacle was not a reflection of Moses' architectural or engineering ability. It was designed and built according to God's plan.

The Tabernacle, or any other building could never contain God but it was a place where God manifested Himself to his people. Our church buildings and places of gathering are only a reflection of the reality of the Christian life. As we entered in and out of our meeting places it is a public testimony of our need to meet with Lord as He manifest Himself among His people.

As you meditate upon the truths of this lesson today, commit yourself afresh to obedience to all God asks of you. Moses did "as the LORD commanded him" and that is still required of every child of God. Also, be sure and thank the Lord for His presence and glory which makes the Christian life one of purpose and joy. We need God's presence each and every day just as the Israelites needed the cloud to lead them forward in security and victory.



The value of the Tabernacle to the children of Israel cannot be overestimated. It was a vital part of the life of worship of the Israelites for centuries. It is also important to us today as God's redeemed children. Every truth concealed in the Tabernacle in the Old Testament is revealed in Jesus Christ in the New Testament. It was a type, a figure, of the Lord Jesus Christ, and of believers who are "*...builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit*" (Ephesians 2:22).

Amen.