

Sermon 121, Inspecting and Erecting the Tabernacle, Exodus 39:32-40:33

Proposition: The tabernacle passed the Mediator's inspection and was assembled on the first day of the second year after Israel came out of Egypt—teaching us that the Mediator builds the church, inspects the church, and blesses the church.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this morning to our next-to-last sermon on the book of Exodus. We began looking at this book nearly three years ago, if you can believe it — on Nov. 22, 2020. Since that time, we have seen some incredible truths both

doctrinal and moral. We have seen that Exodus is the book of the knowledge of God, symbolized by Pharaoh's opening question, "Who is the LORD?" And we have seen that God brought Israel from slavery to worship by way of the knowledge of Himself. Today, we come right up to the brink of the final climactic revelation in this book. God shows Himself to be faithful, the God who dwells with His people. What we will see is that, in accord with God's promise to dwell with Israel, the tabernacle passed the Mediator's inspection and was assembled —teaching us that the Mediator builds the church, inspects the church, and blesses the church.

I. Final Inspection, 39:32-43

The people finished building the tabernacle; they completed all the work. And then they brought it all to Moses for his approval. After all, he's the one who saw the plans on the mountain.

A. Israel's Obedient Role

There are two things highlighted here. First is Israel's role of obediently building what God wanted; the second is the Mediator's crucial role.

1. Israel Built Exactly as God Wanted, v. 32

Verse 32 tells us twice that Israel had done everything that God wanted, exactly as He wanted it.

2. Israel Made Everything Necessary for the Tabernacle, vv. 33-41

Then Moses lists yet again everything that was needed for the tabernacle. Have we forgotten? No. But as I said last week, this is like the pre-flight checklist. We go over it and over it because if there's anything more important than making sure the wings don't fall off, it's making sure that God is worshiped rightly.

3. Israel Built Exactly as God Wanted, v. 42

And so the narrator reassures us again in v. 42: The Israelites did exactly what God wanted. Yes, they really did.

4. Israel Submitted Unreservedly to the Mediator

Notice, too, the repeated "as the LORD commanded" — not "as the LORD commanded Israel," but "as the LORD commanded Moses." They submitted unreservedly to the Mediator. They did exactly what the Mediator asked them to do. They implicitly trusted that he accurately represented Yahweh to them. The lesson for us, of course, is to unreservedly trust the Mediator as well. Don't inquire whether God is somehow more or different than what you see in Jesus Christ. He isn't. Yes, the Father is not His Son, but His Son is exactly like Him.

B. The Mediator's Crucial Role

This crucial role played by the Mediator is highlighted in a number of ways in the passage. In other words, this isn't just a list. It's loaded with theological freight.

1. He Relayed God's Instructions, vv. 32, 42

First, the Mediator relayed God's instructions. We just looked at this point from the other side. Israel built exactly as Moses told them to do. But how did Moses know what to tell them? He heard it from the Almighty. Part of the reason God used him as mediator was because he was good at relaying instructions from God. He heard, and rather than forgetting, he understood and communicated accurately to God's people. Oh what a blessing, to have an accurate and faithful Mediator who hears from God and then says it to you in a way you can understand, without

terrifying you with overwhelming glory and everlasting burnings! And of course, brothers and sisters, we have that in Jesus Christ. He is the exact imprint of His Father's nature, but He is one of us. To hear from Him is to hear human instructions in a human voice.

2. He Inspected and Passed the Work on God's Behalf, vv. 33, 43

Well, God did not personally come down and inspect the tabernacle and its materials. If He were going to do that, He would probably have just created the tabernacle in Heaven and lowered it down to earth. After all, can you imagine having God Almighty inspect your work? There is no way. The most perfect human carpenter or machinist or chef could not make something to the Almighty's standards. We are sub-creators. We make things to within a certain tolerance — within a quarter of an inch, say. God does not make things within a certain tolerance. He can make exactly what He desires, down to the subatomic particles.

But the Mediator is the one who inspected and passed God's dwelling place. He saw that Israel had made it according to the pattern he had seen on the mountain.

3. He Blessed Israel, v. 43c

And so He blessed Israel. Moses perhaps pronounced the priestly blessing over them, or some other benediction that was a good word of God's favor.

What is the way to blessing? The way to blessing lies along the path of obedience to God and doing what He tells us, particularly with respect to His worship.

II. First Assembly, 40:1-33

Well, the tent has passed inspection. Now it is to be erected, assembled for the first time. Presumably, each piece was made separately. Now comes the moment of truth: will it all fit? Where would Israel find a flat space of sufficient size? The narrative does not get into that question. Rather than highlighting the place of assembly — somewhere at the foot of Sinai — it highlights the time of assembly.

A. First Assembly on the First of the First, vv. 1-17

That, of course, is the first day of the first month. Exactly one year after God told Moses that the Exodus would be the start of Israel's calendar, God kept His promise to dwell with them.

1. The Tabernacle Starts with the Ark, v. 3

There are some things to learn from the order in which the tabernacle's assembly is narrated. Again, we will not be looking for the minute details here, but only for the obvious. The first obvious thing is that the tabernacle is built around the ark of the covenant. You set up the tabernacle, and the first thing you do is put the ark inside. The ark is the focus of God's presence. It is the replacement for the image of the deity as found in Canaanite and Egyptian temples. And thus, the tabernacle is the home for the ark. The ark is also the thing that allows for God's relationship with His people to be maintained. It is the mercy seat, the place where the high priest atones for the people's sins. The first thing God wants in His house is a piece of furniture that allows His people's sins to be taken away. Wow.

2. The Tabernacle Is Ordered so God Can Dwell with His People, vv. 2-8

All of the furniture is arranged, not according to the taste of the current high priest, but according to the commands of the Almighty. This is God's house, and He wants it set up how He wants it

set up. The order is all about the furniture items that allow God to dwell with His people, really and symbolically. Thus, we have two altars, a table, and a lamp. On the table sit a dozen loaves of bread, basking in the light of the lamp as a symbol of Israel living in the light of God's presence. The altars provide for blood sacrifice and for the house to have God's proprietary smell within it. The courtyard gives privacy to the Almighty and also space for sacrifice to take place.

3. The Tabernacle Is Anointed for Holiness, vv. 9-11

We also see that the tabernacle is anointed. It is all set apart from common use to holy purpose through the application of the holy oil. It is, in that sense, the Anointed One — not a person but an institution that did for Israel of old what Jesus does for us today. The tabernacle was a vehicle for Immanuel — for God to be with His people.

4. The Tabernacle Is Serviced by Anointed Priests, vv. 12-15

Of course, the tabernacle by itself could not be the place of God's residence. It had to be serviced by anointed priests too. Thus, part of assembling the tabernacle is preparing the personnel who will run it. The tabernacle and priests together give us a more complete picture of who our Messiah is.

B. The Mediator Builds the Tabernacle, vv. 16-33

We see further that the Mediator is the one who makes the place for God to dwell, just as the Mediator today is engaged in building the church. The text goes out of its way to ascribe every major action in tabernacle assembly to Moses. He did it all, just as the Lord commanded him. Indeed, it repeats this refrain seven times to make it perfectly clear that Moses obeyed God perfectly, doing exactly what he was supposed to do.

C. The Priests Wash to Prepare for God's Presence, vv. 30-32

As part of that, he had to wash, and his brother and nephews had to wash, so that they would be ready to go into God's presence. They were to wash whenever they approached the altar and whenever they entered the tent.

III. Application

So how do we apply a text like this? The historical meaning is clear: Moses set up the tabernacle. The theological meaning is also clear: God dwells with His people through the Mediator's work. But there is more to say, based on some of the smaller points in the text.

A. Your Years Are Defined by God's Salvation & Dwelling Place

First, the fact that the tabernacle was assembled on (what we would call) January 1, year 2 after the Exodus, is significant.

1. The Exodus Begins Israel's Year, 12:1

As you recall, just before Passover Yahweh told Moses "this month shall be for you the beginning of months." The Exodus begins Israel's year.

2. The Tabernacle Begins Israel's Second Year, 40:1

And on top of the Exodus comes a second extremely significant event: Israel's second year opens with the erection of the tabernacle. God brings them out, then moves in among them.

3. Jesus' Birth Rightly Defines Our Years

What do we say about this? That the beginning of the year belongs to God. His salvation and His dwelling place are rightly associated with the beginning of each new year. We number our years from His birth, and rightly so. Don't let your years be defined by other things, and especially not by sin. Don't let the politicians tell you that the other party's disastrous policies are the defining feature of this year. Don't let your boss tell you that the number of years till you can retire is the defining feature of each year. Even the birth of your own children, as wonderful as it is, is the not defining feature of the year. The most important thing each year is that this year belongs to God. Your children or lack thereof, your country, your salary, your spouse — all of these find their proper place in subordination to God and His work of saving and dwelling.

4. Building God's Church Is Each Year's First Priority

We can also say that your biggest goal for the year should be to build God's church. The tabernacle was erected on January 1 to show us that the whole year is dominated by the tabernacle. God's presence with Israel is the most significant thing to happen in the second year after the Exodus. And furthering that truth, we can agree that the continued residence of God with His people is more important than anything else, than any piece of news no matter how hyped.

B. You're a Priest; Be Baptized to Enter God's Presence, 40:30-32

Part of how you build the church is by being baptized. A priest has to wash before coming into God's presence. You are a priest; have you been washed from your sin? Children, this is especially important for you if your parents have not had you baptized yet. You are here in God's presence; if you have not been washed in baptism, ask your parents how you can be baptized.

C. Build God's Dwelling Place by Obeying the Mediator

And all of us who are already baptized need to build God's dwelling place by obeying the mediator whom He has sent. That's how Israel built the tabernacle: they did what Moses told them.

D. The Mediator Blesses You when you Build God's Church, 39:43

You see, the Mediator blesses you when you build the church. When Israel did the work, Moses blessed them. When you do the work of investing in and building up your fellow saints, how much more will Jesus Christ bless you?

Brothers and sisters, the tabernacle was erected on the first day of the year under the Mediator's supervision so that God could dwell with His people. Will you make this year about dwelling with God? Will you listen to the Mediator and seek His blessing by sitting in His presence and learning to bear His yoke? When you do, He will bless you. Amen.