

Exodus: What We Mean When We Say God

Part 14: Make it Pretty, Not Just Useful

By Pastor Ricky Stephen

Exodus 25-31

A Land Without Imagination

There are expressions of Christianity that disdain imagination and creativity. Something that, biblically, does not make a lot of sense. Because the instructions for the Tabernacle in Exodus 25-31 show us something that is extravagant and beautiful.

Worship is an act of imagination. Not because it is based in fiction, imagination is our capacity to interact with the unseen.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple defined worship this way:

“Worship is the submission of all of our nature to God. It is the quickening of the conscience by his holiness; the nourishment of mind with his truth; the purifying of imagination by his beauty; the opening of the heart to his love; the surrender of will to his purpose--all this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable.”

God’s beauty purifies our imagination and true worship is an act of purified imagination.

In Exodus 25-31 we meet the God who wants to be with us, wants our hearts, and gives us the opportunity to do beautiful things for Him.

Camping with God

The pinnacle of our long section is found in Exodus 29:44-46. God summarizes after all these directions for building the Tabernacle saying:

“So, I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar and will consecrate Aaron and his sons to serve me as priests. Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. They will know that I am the LORD [Yahweh] their God, who brought them out of Egypt *so that I might dwell among them*. I am the LORD [Yahweh] their God.”

God gives the whole reason He took the Israelites out of Egypt and into the desert, right here: *so that I might dwell among them*.

God wants to go camping with Israel.¹

This is a theme running throughout scripture.

¹ Chris Wright, *The Story of God Commentary: Exodus*, 494.

“The Word [that is, God the Son, Jesus] became flesh and made his dwelling [tabernacled, pitched His tent] among us.” (John 1:14)

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, He ascends to send the Spirit. God goes from being ‘with us’ in the flesh to being ‘within us’.

“Do you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person; for God’s temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.” (1 Corinthians 3:16-17)

You are the tabernacle now. You are the temple now. You are the tent God has pitched in the world.

Finally, the final vision of Revelation, John sees in a vision the new Jerusalem and writes:

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Revelation 21:3)

“I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.” (Revelation 21:22)

Where He dwelt in us, in the final vision, we can go to dwell within Him.

Smells and Bells as a Way to the Heart

The Tabernacle is God being close, but also in some sense being distant. The Tabernacle was a layered thing—ark of the covenant in the holy of holies, holy place, then outer courtyard. Transgressing boundaries you weren’t cleared to go through would result in death.

In part, this is because of God’s holiness. Being in His presence requires being purified from sin by blood sacrifice.

But, also, it could be because God knows the people fear His presence.

In Exodus 20:19 the Israelites say to Moses:

“Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.”

Moses reflects on this again starting Deuteronomy 5:23. Moses tells them, effectively, I became your mediator because you were too afraid to see God for yourselves.

The tabernacle serves two purposes then. It is the way of dealing with sin and it is the place where Yahweh is wooing His people into a deeper relationship. Yahweh uses familiar cultic structures and practices to bring the Israelites in.

Yahweh is getting to the hearts of His people through their bodies.

Because, as James K.A. Smith says:

“Liturgies aim our love to different ends precisely by training our hearts through our bodies.”²

On the Importance of Blue Pomegranates

There are many different expressions of Christianity and how we choose between them is often based on what we value. Some value truth, some value goodness and others value beauty.

In the description of the Tabernacle, we are told Aaron’s robe is to have blue, purple, and crimson pomegranates on it (Exodus 28:33). These colors do not exist in pomegranates in nature.

The Tabernacle is an image of Eden, of creation redeemed. As such, it has natural symbolism—trees, a sea, and pomegranates—but in supernatural beauty.

And beauty seems to be one of the reasons Yahweh does things this way. The tabernacle was a center of sights, smells, sounds and tastes. Unfortunately, evangelicalism often downplays the senses in its expression of the faith. But some of us need permission to seek these things in our practice of Christianity.

As Christians, we are responsible for our connection to God. And knowing the way we connect best with God is for us to discover. Check out Gary Thomas’ book *Sacred Pathways* for help with this, you can even find a little quiz to help you understand how you connect.³

Make it Pretty, Not Just Useful

In Matthew 26, Jesus is anointed by a woman with a very expensive bottle of perfume—something like a year’s wages worth of perfume. The disciples are miffed and literally ask ‘why this waste?’ saying the money could have been given to the poor.

Jesus answers:

“Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. ¹¹ The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. ¹² When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. ¹³ Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”

(Matthew 26:10-13)

The Tabernacle was built off the donations of the people of Israel. God is giving them an opportunity to do something beautiful for Him. Because that’s what human’s do when we love something, we pour out our love extravagantly.

In our passage, we have the first ever use of the phrase ‘filled with the Spirit of God’:

² James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, pg. 25

³ Find a quiz from the book here: <https://www.csmedia1.com/paseodelrey.org/sacred-pathways-quiz.pdf>

“Then the Lord said to Moses, ²“See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, ³ and *I have filled him with the Spirit of God*, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills— ⁴to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, ⁵ to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts.”

God’s Spirit is described as filling someone to work skillfully to make beauty.

God wants to be with you, He wants your heart. So, maybe the Spirit is asking you:

What beautiful thing has the Lord put in your heart to do for Him?

Discussion Questions

Open Up:

Share a time when you experience God through something beautiful.

Dig In:

Read **Exodus 29:44-46**.

1. What does it mean to you to know God wants to be with you?
2. How do you think about traditions that engage the senses more? Things like incense, stained glass, images, etc.
3. Gary Thomas outlines nine primary ways people connect with God (see the list below and a link to descriptions), read this list and share which one or two speak to each of you most.
4. What beautiful thing do you feel called to do for God?

Gary Thomas’ Nine Pathways:

1. The Naturalist: connects through nature.
2. The Sensate: connects through the senses.
3. The Traditionalist: connects through religious structure and tradition.
4. The Ascetic: connects through silence, solitude, fasting, and lowering stimulation to the senses.
5. The Activist: connects through confronting evil and injustice.
6. The Caregiver: connects through caring for others.
7. The Enthusiast: connects through celebration, excitement, and the supernatural
8. The Contemplative: connects through adoration, contemplation and expressing their love to God.
9. The Intellectual: connects through theology, new concepts about God.