

God With His People: Law, Worship, and Divine Presence

SESSION 4

EXODUS 19–40

In this session, we explore one of the most pivotal moments in redemptive history: God's establishment of covenant relationship with His redeemed people at Mount Sinai. After delivering Israel from Egyptian bondage, God doesn't simply send them on their way. Instead, He invites them into an intimate covenant relationship, gives them His law as a gift to guide their community, and promises to dwell among them. This section of Exodus reveals God's heart—not merely to rescue, but to abide with His people forever.

Session Purpose and Vision

Redemption Leads to Relationship

God's salvation is never an end in itself, but the beginning of covenant partnership. Freedom from slavery becomes freedom for fellowship with the living God.

Obedience Flows from Salvation

The law comes after deliverance, not before it. Our obedience and worship are joyful responses to grace already received, not attempts to earn God's favor.

God Desires to Dwell with Us

The ultimate goal of redemption is not merely rescue but restoration of presence. God longs to make His home among His people, transforming them into a holy dwelling place.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, you will be equipped to:

1

Explain the Purpose of Mosaic Law

Understand how the law reveals God's character and guides redeemed community life

2

Describe the Theology of Worship

Articulate how worship in Exodus reflects both God's holiness and His desire for nearness

3

Understand the Tabernacle

Grasp how the tabernacle models both God's transcendent holiness and His immanent presence

4

Apply Covenant Theology

Translate these principles into effective ministry leadership in contemporary contexts

Covenant at Sinai and the Purpose of the Law

1. **The Foundational Moment at Sinai:** Exodus 19–24 records God's covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, where the redeemed nation enters into a binding relationship with their Deliverer.
2. **Redemption Precedes Revelation:** The sequence matters profoundly—redemption precedes revelation, meaning grace comes before law. God doesn't give commandments to slaves hoping for freedom.
3. **Grace Before Law:** He gives the law to freed people learning to live as His treasured possession, dismantling any notion that obedience earns salvation.
4. **Salvation, Then Sanctification:** This establishes the proper biblical order: salvation first, followed by sanctification.

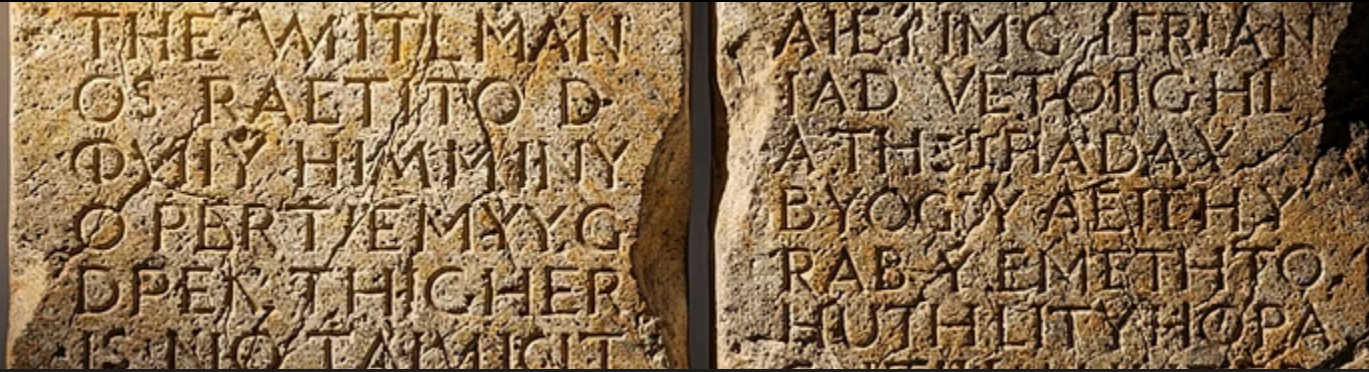
Law Given to the Redeemed

1

The chronology of Exodus teaches a crucial theological truth that reverberates throughout Scripture: Israel was already redeemed before a single commandment was given. The people standing at Sinai's base had already passed through the Red Sea, already been delivered by the blood of the Passover lamb, already experienced God's miraculous provision in the wilderness. They weren't receiving laws to become God's people—they were God's people learning how to live as such.

2

This order is essential. Obedience followed salvation, not the other way around. The law didn't create their relationship with God; it clarified and structured a relationship already established by grace. This foundational principle shapes all biblical theology and protects us from legalism's dangerous errors.



The Moral Purpose of the Commandments

Holiness in the law was never abstract or theoretical. It was intensely practical and deeply relational. When God commanded "You shall be holy, for I am holy," He wasn't demanding perfection divorced from relationship. Rather, He was inviting His people to reflect His character in every dimension of life—in how they treated the poor, resolved disputes, conducted business, and worshiped together. The law transformed abstract theology into concrete ethics, making God's character visible in human community.

Revealed God's Character

The law wasn't arbitrary—it flowed from who God is. Each command reflected divine holiness, justice, mercy, and love.

Shaped Communal Life

The commandments ordered Israel's society, creating a community that reflected God's values in economics, justice, and relationships.

Defined Worship

The law established how God's people would approach Him, maintaining reverence while enabling access.

Law as Revelation, Not Salvation

1

The Law Revealed Sin

One of Scripture's most important distinctions emerges here: the law revealed sin but could not remove it. This is Paul's argument in Romans and Galatians, but it's rooted in Exodus itself. The law served as a mirror showing Israel their need for grace, not a ladder by which they could climb to righteousness.

2

Grace Preceded Command

Grace preceded command—God rescued Israel before requiring anything from them. The law's purpose was diagnostic and pedagogical, not salvific.

3

Obedience as Response to Love

This means obedience was always designed to be a response to love, never a means to earn it. God didn't say, "Obey me and I'll rescue you." He said, "I have rescued you; now live as my people."

4

Protection from Works-Righteousness

This theological sequence protects biblical faith from morphing into works-righteousness, whether in ancient Israel or the contemporary church.

Overlooked Teaching Insight

Law as Gift

The law was given as a gift to guide redeemed people, not a burden to enslave them

Too often, both in ancient times and today, God's law is perceived as restrictive rather than liberating. But Israel didn't receive the law as outsiders trying to break in—they received it as children learning their Father's ways. The law was never meant to be a crushing weight but a gracious map for flourishing. When we present God's commands as joyless obligation rather than loving guidance, we distort the biblical message and make Christianity appear as one more religion of human achievement.

Illustration: The Map and the Destination



A Map Doesn't Create the Destination

Consider how a map functions: it doesn't create your destination or make the journey possible. Rather, it guides travelers who are already on their way toward a goal they've chosen. The map clarifies the route, warns of dangers, and helps prevent getting lost. But the map itself is not the journey, nor is following it what makes you a traveler.

2

The Law Guides, Not Earns

Similarly, God gave the law to guide a redeemed people, not to replace grace or earn salvation. Israel was already heading toward the Promised Land when they received the law at Sinai. The commandments showed them how to travel together as God's covenant community, but obedience to the law didn't make them God's people—God's gracious choice already had.

Personal Reflection: How Do You View Obedience?

Earning or Responding?

Many believers unconsciously treat obedience as a way to earn God's approval rather than a response to approval already given. Do you obey from gratitude or fear? From love or obligation?

When Commands Confront

Reflect on how you respond when God's commands confront your preferences. Does resistance reveal areas where you're trusting your wisdom over His? Or does obedience flow naturally from trust?

Grace Before Command

Ask yourself: Do I truly believe God's acceptance comes before my obedience? Or am I secretly trying to prove my worthiness through religious performance?

 PART TWO

The Tabernacle and God's Dwelling

Exodus 25–31 unveils one of Scripture's most beautiful revelations: God's passionate desire to dwell among His people. After establishing covenant at Sinai, God doesn't remain at a distance, thundering from the mountain. Instead, He initiates a remarkable plan—He will move into the neighborhood. The tabernacle represents the stunning truth that the God who created galaxies wants to make His home with redeemed humanity. Every detail of its design teaches theology: God is both transcendentally holy and intimately near, both dangerous and approachable, both other and Emmanuel.

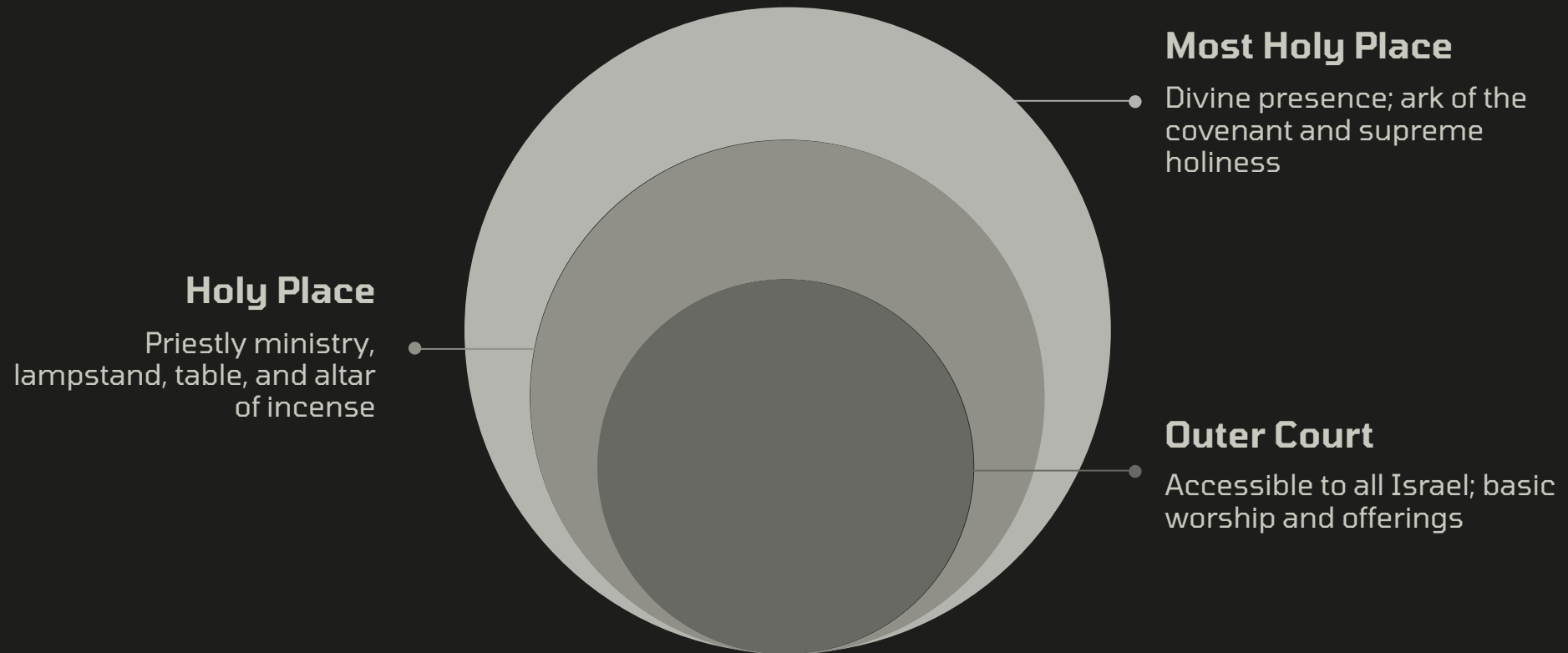
God's Initiative to Dwell with His People



Notice carefully who initiates the tabernacle. It's not Israel's idea or Moses' suggestion—God Himself designs the plan and gives detailed instructions. "Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst" (Exodus 25:8). This wasn't reluctant condescension but eager pursuit. God moved toward His people, not away from them.

This reveals the goal of all redemption: presence. God didn't rescue Israel merely to make them moral or prosperous. He redeemed them so He could live among them. The tabernacle embodies the ultimate purpose of salvation—restored fellowship between God and humanity. What was lost in Eden's garden begins its restoration in Sinai's tent.

Structure and Meaning of the Tabernacle



The tabernacle's design wasn't arbitrary—it was a three-dimensional theology lesson. The structure reflected increasing holiness as one moved toward God's presence. The outer court was accessible to all Israel, the Holy Place to priests alone, and the Most Holy Place only to the high priest once per year. Access was intentional and protected, teaching that God is both near and dangerously holy. Worship required acknowledging both His approachability and His transcendence. You could draw near, but not carelessly. You could approach, but not presumptuously. The tabernacle held reverence and intimacy in perfect tension.



Key Elements of the Tabernacle

1

The Ark of the Covenant

God's throne and mercy seat, where divine presence dwelt and atonement was made

2

The Bronze Altar

Place of sacrifice where sin was atoned through the blood of substitutionary offerings

3

The Golden Lampstand

Source of light in the Holy Place, symbolizing God's illuminating presence

4

The Table of Showbread

Twelve loaves representing God's provision for and covenant with all twelve tribes

Worship Designed by God



1

Divine Instruction

A crucial principle emerges in these chapters: God defined how He was to be approached. Human creativity and sincere intentions did not replace divine instruction. The materials, measurements, rituals, and roles were all specified by God Himself. This wasn't divine micromanagement but loving protection—God alone knew how sinful people could safely approach holy presence.

2

Obedience Over Preference

This means worship was shaped by obedience, not preference. Israel couldn't decide to worship however felt meaningful to them. True worship submitted to God's revealed will. This challenges contemporary worship, where personal preference often trumps biblical prescription. The tabernacle reminds us that worship is about God's glory, not our comfort.

Overlooked Ministry Insight

True worship submits to God's design rather than reshaping Him to fit ours. In an age obsessed with relevance and personal expression, this principle sounds almost offensive. Yet the tabernacle teaches that God determines the terms of engagement. We don't get to vote on how we approach Him or what pleases Him. Ministry leaders must resist the cultural pressure to make worship primarily about human experience rather than divine glory. When we redesign worship around what attracts crowds rather than what honors God, we've fundamentally misunderstood the tabernacle's lesson.

Submit to God's Design
Worship is shaped by revelation,
not innovation



Illustration: The Owner's Design

A Home Designed by Its Owner

Imagine you're invited to someone's home. You don't arrive and start rearranging furniture, repainting walls, or redesigning rooms according to your aesthetic preferences. That would be presumptuous and insulting. The host designed their home to reflect their taste, values, and needs—not yours.

The tabernacle was God's dwelling place among His people. He designed it because He was the Owner, not a guest. When we approach worship, are we acknowledging whose house we're entering? Or are we acting like the place belongs to us, subject to our redesign?

Personal Reflection: Your Approach to Worship

1

Evaluate Your Metrics

Many evaluate worship by comfort or enjoyment rather than faithfulness. Do you judge a worship service by how it made you feel or by whether it honored God? These aren't always opposed, but they're not identical either. Reflect on what you're really seeking when you gather with God's people.

2

Reverence and Intimacy

Does reverence guide your approach to God, or have you lost the sense of His holiness? Contemporary worship often emphasizes intimacy (which is biblical) while neglecting reverence (which is equally biblical). The tabernacle held both in tension. Can you?

3

Preference or Obedience?

Ask how often your worship is shaped by personal preference rather than biblical obedience. Do you gravitate toward worship styles that feel good or toward approaches that align with Scripture's pattern, even when they challenge your comfort?

△ PART THREE

Idolatry and Intercession

Exodus 32–34 narrates one of Israel's darkest moments and Moses' finest hour. While Moses communed with God on the mountain, receiving instructions for worship, the people below created their own version—a golden calf. This wasn't atheism but misplaced worship, substituting the invisible God with a manageable image. Yet from this tragedy emerges a stunning portrait of intercessory leadership as Moses stands between God's righteous judgment and Israel's deserved destruction. These chapters explore the roots of idolatry, the nature of leadership, and the power of mediation that ultimately points forward to Christ.

The Golden Calf: Misplaced Worship



The golden calf incident wasn't a rejection of Yahweh but a distortion of how to worship Him. The people said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 32:4). They weren't abandoning their Deliverer—they were recreating Him in a form they could see, touch, and control.

This reveals idolatry's fundamental nature: replacing invisible faith with visible substitutes. Israel wanted something tangible, something familiar from Egypt, something they could manage. True worship requires trusting God in His invisibility and sovereignty. Idolatry emerges not primarily from ignorance but from impatience and the desire for control.

The Roots of Idolatry



Spiritual Absence

Moses' prolonged absence on the mountain created anxiety and uncertainty among the people



Impatience

The people demanded something immediate and tangible rather than waiting in faith



Visible Substitute

They created an image they could see and control, replacing trust with certainty

Notice the pattern: perceived absence led to anxiety, anxiety led to demands for something visible, and visible substitutes replaced genuine faith. Idolatry often fills the silence of waiting. When God feels distant, we're tempted to create substitutes we can manage rather than trusting in His unseen presence. This is as relevant today as at Sinai—whenever we create versions of God more comfortable than the biblical revelation, we've fashioned a golden calf.

Moses as Intercessory Leader

1. **Moses' Mediatorial Role:** While Israel sinned, Moses emerged as a profound picture of mediatorial leadership. He stood between God's judgment and His mercy, pleading for the people despite their rebellion, even when God proposed destroying Israel and starting over with him.
2. **Courage and Humility in Intercession:** Moses' intercession required immense courage, as he stood before God's anger, and deep humility, as he identified with the sinful people rather than accepting personal privilege or a new nation descended from him.
3. **True Leadership Pleads for the People:** Moses demonstrated that true leadership means actively pleading for the people, not abandoning them in their failures. He rejected God's offer for personal advancement to advocate for his nation.
4. **Self-Sacrificial Intercession Prefigures Christ:** Moses' ultimate plea, "If you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book" (Exodus 32:32), was a self-sacrificial offer. This act prefigures Christ, the ultimate mediator who actually bore the judgment Moses only offered to bear.

Covenant Broken and Renewed

Sin Fractured Relationship

Israel's idolatry broke the covenant barely established, demonstrating the fragility of human faithfulness

God Renewed Through Mercy

Despite Israel's failure, God chose to continue the relationship, revealing His steadfast love

Grace Restored What Rebellion Damaged

The renewed covenant testified that God's purposes rest on His character, not human performance

The broken tablets symbolized broken covenant—human sin shattered what God had established. Yet God didn't abandon Israel. He carved new tablets, renewed the covenant, and reaffirmed His commitment to dwell with them. This sequence reveals the nature of God's grace: His covenant commitments don't rest ultimately on human faithfulness but on His own unchanging character. We break covenant repeatedly; He remains faithful. This anticipates the new covenant in Christ's blood, which cannot be broken because it depends on Christ's faithfulness, not ours.

Overlooked Pastoral Insight

We typically view idolatry as flagrant rebellion—intentional rejection of God for false gods. But the golden calf story reveals a more subtle and common pathway: spiritual distance leading to anxiety leading to substitutes. The people didn't stop believing in Yahweh; they just got nervous when He felt absent. This pattern explains much contemporary idolatry—when God seems silent or distant, we create more manageable versions of faith: religion without costly discipleship, grace without holiness, love without truth. Pastoral ministry must address the perceived absence that breeds idolatry, not just condemn the idolatry itself.

Distance Breeds Idolatry

Idolatry often follows perceived spiritual distance rather than open rebellion

Illustration: Filling the Silence

A man in a dark suit is sitting on a modern, light-colored bench in a large, bright room with floor-to-ceiling windows. He is looking out the window to the right. The room has a clean, minimalist aesthetic with dark walls and a polished floor that reflects the light from the windows.

When Communication Stops

In any relationship, when communication stops, assumptions take over. If someone you love goes silent for days, your mind fills the void—often with worst-case scenarios. You imagine they're angry, disinterested, or planning to leave. The silence becomes unbearable, so you create narratives to explain it.

Israel filled God's silence with a substitute they could control. Moses' forty-day absence felt like divine abandonment. Rather than wait in faith, they demanded something visible. The golden calf wasn't atheism—it was anxiety management. How often do we do the same, creating comfortable versions of God when He feels distant?

Personal Reflection: Your Response to Distance

What Substitutes Do You Create?

Many create substitutes when God feels distant—religious busyness instead of intimacy, theological knowledge instead of trust, ministry activity instead of communion. Reflect on what you turn to when prayer feels empty or Scripture seems silent. Are these healthy spiritual disciplines or anxiety-driven substitutes?

Strengthened or Weakened by Waiting?

Ask whether waiting has strengthened your trust or weakened it. Has spiritual drought driven you deeper into God or toward more manageable alternatives? Waiting is meant to mature faith, not undermine it. But that only happens when we choose trust over control during the silence.

Obedience and the Glory of God

Exodus 35–40 concludes the book not with dramatic miracles but with detailed obedience. These chapters record Israel's meticulous construction of the tabernacle exactly according to God's specifications. Then comes the climax: God's glory visibly fills the completed dwelling, confirming His presence among His people. This ending teaches that glory follows obedience, presence rewards faithfulness, and God delights to inhabit spaces prepared by willing submission to His word. The book that began with slavery ends with shekinah—God's luminous presence guiding His people forward into their calling.

From Obedience to Glory



Obedience

People precisely follow
God's instructions



Completion

The community finishes the
tabernacle



Glory

God's glory fills the dwelling



Guidance

God's presence leads Israel
forward

Notice the sequence in these final chapters. First, obedience is repeated and emphasized—the text deliberately recounts how Israel followed God's instructions precisely. Then the tabernacle was completed through communal effort. Finally, God's glory visibly filled the dwelling. The order matters: obedient preparation, then divine presence. God responds to faithful worship with abiding glory. Human obedience met divine presence, and worship became embodied rather than theoretical. This pattern extends throughout Scripture—God inhabits the praises and obedience of His people.

Course Summary: Exodus Trains Ministers

God Redeems Before He Instructs

Salvation always precedes sanctification. Grace comes before law. We obey from gratitude, not to earn acceptance. This order protects ministry from legalism.

God Forms Leaders Through Testing

Moses' wilderness training, Israel's trials, and the golden calf crisis reveal that effective ministry emerges from character forged in difficulty, not just gifting.

God Demands Obedience from Redeemed People

Redemption creates obligation. Saved people live differently. The law guides covenant community life. Holiness is the proper response to grace received.

God's Presence Empowers Effective Ministry

The glory filling the tabernacle teaches that God's abiding presence is both the goal and power of all ministry. Without His presence, our work is empty.

The Glory of God: Ministry's Ultimate Goal

Redemption's Goal

Exodus concludes with the shekinah glory—God's visible presence—filling the tabernacle and guiding Israel's journey. This is redemption's goal: God dwelling with His people. Not merely moral improvement or national prosperity, but restored presence. What was lost in Eden's garden is partially restored in Sinai's tent and will be fully restored in the New Jerusalem where God dwells with His people forever.

Our Ministry's Purpose

As ministers of the gospel, we must remember that all our preaching, teaching, counseling, and leading aims at one ultimate end: that God would be glorified among His people and that His presence would transform lives. Our calling isn't to build impressive ministries but to prepare spaces where God's glory can dwell. Like the ancient Israelites who carefully followed God's tabernacle instructions, we faithfully follow His word, trusting that obedient worship creates room for divine presence. May your ministry be marked not by human achievement but by God's abiding glory.