

THE TABERNACLE

Wild (Part 12) | Exodus 35-40

I

I read a story recently about a novelist and film writer named Laurence Stallings who took an unusual assignment one day as a sportswriter, covering a football game between UPenn and the University of Illinois. The year was 1925. On the field that day was a brilliant, three-time All-American, halfback from Wheaton named, Red Grange. While at Wheaton High School, Grange earned 16 varsity letters for uncommon performance in football, baseball, basketball and track. In 1923, he had led the Fighting Illini to the national championship. The next year, in a game against the highly vaunted Michigan Wolverines, Grange returned the kick-off 95 yards for a touchdown and then, in the next 12 minutes, scored three more times. No less an authority than ESPN would one day name Red Grange the greatest college football player of all time.

On this particular afternoon, Grange was not only in the game, he was redefining it. On an impossibly muddy field, the "Gallop Ghost" (as Red was nicknamed) floated across the field like some kind of supernatural entity. Gangs of opponents could not seem to bring him down as he broke loose for touchdown after touchdown after touchdown. Up in the press box, the veteran sportswriters were pounding at their typewriters, recording the stunning performance for the next day's paper. But not Laurence Stallings. Stallings was undergoing a mind-melt. Like no one else, his superb storytelling senses took in the magnificence of what he was witnessing and it blew his circuits. Pacing up and down the press box with his hands clasped to his head, Stallings wailed: ***"I can't... I can't write it! It's too big."***¹

I tell you this tale in part because the story that I'm going to try to cover with you today to close out this message series is BIG -- ***too big***, in fact, to do full justice to. You really have to study it for yourself. But I'm going to try to help orient you to it today by inviting you to go galloping with me across a sixteen-chapter field – from the end of Exodus 24 to the end of the whole book of Exodus at chapter 40.

When we pick up the story of Exodus this week, the man we call Moses – the uncommon individual whom God has chosen to lead his people toward the Promised Land has just had his own mind-blowing experience too. God has called Moses into a personal encounter during which the Lord will give Moses Ten Commandments that will become among the most influential precepts in all of human history. But even more dramatically and importantly, God will give Moses an up-close and personal experience of what scripture calls God's GLORY. We're told that when Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the **GLORY of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai**.

The Bible says that: **To the Israelites the GLORY of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain.** It was a ghostly cloud of flame and smoke that Moses entered and stayed in for forty days and nights. By the way, whenever the Bible mentions periods of “forty years” or “forty days and forty nights” – whether it’s the time Noah spent in the ark, or the Israelites spent in the wilderness or Jesus spent being tempted in the desert -- it’s usually a theological more than a chronological statement. It is shorthand for: “Enough time for God to accomplish his purpose.”

But back to this GLORY thing. When you hear that word “glory” what comes to mind for you? Today we often associate “glory” with the idea of “fame” or “credit,” as in the way a football player or other celebrity gets the “glory” for performing well. But when the Bible speaks of the **GLORY of the Lord**, it’s talking about something that’s almost **“too big”** to get one’s head around.

The word “glory” is simply how we describe the summary effect of all of God’s attributes -- grace, truth, goodness, mercy, justice, knowledge, power, eternity -- all that he is. In his book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, Rick Warren writes that GLORY is who God is: “[God’s glory] is the essence of his nature, the weight of his importance, the radiance of his splendor, the demonstration of his power, and the atmosphere of his presence. [It is] the expression of his **goodness** and all his other intrinsic, eternal qualities.”² By “intrinsic,” Rick Warren means that glory is to God as light is to the sun, or wet is to water. It’s in him and of him.

Human glory is not like that. Human glory is “extrinsic.” For example, if you take a member of the royal family and remove their robes and crown and give them only rags to wear and leave them on the streets for a several weeks, and then put them next to a beggar, you’ll probably struggle to know which is which. Why? Because there is no intrinsic glory. The glory that human beings have is granted to them by others.

“The glory that is God’s, however, is his in his essence. You can’t de-glory God because glory is his nature... It cannot be taken away. It cannot be added to. It is his being.”³ God’s glory is the most beautiful, awesome, re-orienting reality in the universe. To truly behold that glory is to have your life changed by it. In Exodus 33, Moses asked God: **Show me your GLORY.** My friend, John Ortberg inquires: “Have you ever asked God for that? If you were God, what would you show Moses? Would you show him thunder and lightning, a tremendous earthquake, huge galaxies, or special effects?” No, the Lord said: **I will cause all my GOODNESS to pass in front of you.** In other words, the most glorious thing about God is not his cataclysmic power or sin-searing holiness. “The most glorious thing about God is how good he is.” His stunning humility, his tremendous kindness and compassion, his grace and mercy, his generosity and perseverance, his redeeming love. This is God’s glory.

But, God continues, **you cannot see my face** (which I take to mean the total fullness of who I am), **for now one may see me and live**. Why is this so? I suspect it's because God's glorious goodness is **TOO BIG** for us if met unmediated. If we saw every bit of God, it would melt or explode us. It would be like downloading the contents of the universe's greatest heart or supreme mind into the circulatory or nervous system of an ant. It would destroy the creature. So, in his kindness, God mediates his nature to us. He hides Moses in the cleft of a rock, covers him with his hand to protect him, and gives him just a quick glimpse of the **back** of his glory.

We're told a bit later in chapter 34 that when Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the second copy of the Ten Commandments, the Israelites noticed that he had been changed by his encounter. **His face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord**. How wonderful would it be if when you and I emerged from our times of communion with God in this place or elsewhere that others noticed the glow of his glory reflected in our face? Do you ever see it in me or I in you?

I wish we had more time to dive into the detail of all these chapters but what's in here is **too big**. There's a story in chapter 32 where the Israelites get tired of waiting for Moses to come down from the mountain. Moses has been their main mediator with God and without him there, the Israelites start to forget the one great and glorious God. It's a good reminder that we need to be careful to focus much more on the Master than on the Pastor! In any event, the Israelites ask Aaron to make them some new gods. And, in a hugely stupid moment, Aaron says, "OK."

Why does Aaron do this? We're not explicitly told. Maybe he sees them as a restless mob who might lynch him. There's some indication in the text that Aaron thinks that if he appeases them briefly, he can bring them around again. Parents or bosses, have you ever been there? Either way, Aaron has the Israelites give them his gold jewelry, melts it all down, and fashions a golden calf – an idol that they begin to worship and party around. Remember, at this point in history, the Hebrew people aren't a bunch of well-educated stockbrokers, lawyers, and entertainment producers. 3,500 years ago, most everyone was a primitive pagan people.

Some time ago, I visited a church in Rome where I saw THIS more than life-sized statue. It was carved by Michelangelo. I'll never forget the emotional power, the artist conveyed. Michelangelo depicts Moses at the very moment he comes down from Mount Sinai. He has the stone tablets in his arms. You can see his head turning as he sees the Israelites worshipping the golden calf. You note his right knee turning, the muscles in his calf tensing, as he's about to spring up and go postal on this pagan festival. The betrayal of God is **too big**. Moses smashes the stone tablets on the ground. In chapter 34, he'll go up on the mountain again and get a second copy. Thank God for second chances. But, in the meantime, Moses unleashes a brutal judgment on the people for their unfaithfulness. It is a sober reminder of how God hates idolatry.

Idolatry among God's people is still a problem and not only in the ways you hear preachers typically railing against. You can probably think of many things you honor, seek, and serve above God. But as Lee Eclov observes: *"Our greatest threat may not be the little [golden] gods of TV and leisure, work or money, but the Great God — the Lord God Almighty, El Shaddai — minimized."* We may not deny God outright. *"But we too often let our view of God grow small, like our snapshots of the Grand Canyon or a Mt. Rushmore paperweight."* We must constantly work to recover and respond to the reality of a God whose **GLORY** is *too big* to be conveniently boxed and *too good* not to inspire us to change. That's our task every day. It's what it means to truly worship God.

God knows how fickle and distractable people are. He understands that without regular encounters with his glory, even the most earnest of us have a tendency to lose our focus or faith. And so, in the last chapters of the book of Exodus we see God laying the foundations of an almost mind-boggling plan. If you've been reading along in the book, then you know that one of the ways that God has been revealing himself to the Israelites and reassuring them that they are not forgotten by him out here in the wilderness is by holding regular encounters with Moses and his people at something called **"The Tent of Meeting."** It's a literal tent, set up outside the Israelite camp, where God shows up regularly and displays enough of his glory to steady and direct them. After the Golden Calf crisis, however, God enacts stronger measures.

While meeting with Moses on Mount Sinai, God imparts to him detailed instructions for the construction of a physical space called a **"Tabernacle"** intended to be a place where God and his people relate on a deep commitment level. The Tabernacle is a larger and more elaborate Tent of Meeting and even incorporates the original canvas structure into its architecture. You can read about the design of the Tabernacle in Exodus 25-31 and about its actual construction in chapters 35-40.

What is most important to know is that, like the Passover feast, the Tabernacle became one of the few great constants in Israel's ever-changing life. All of us need great constants in our ever-changing life. What are those constants in YOURS? For the children of Israel, the Tabernacle went with them. As they journeyed toward the Promised Land (you can read about the rest of the journey in the Book of Deuteronomy) they tore it down, packed it up, and rebuilt this huge tent. **Whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out... So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels.**

What I urge you to notice is that by God's command to Moses, this strange structure was filled with significant symbols. When someone entered the Tabernacle, the first thing they encountered was an altar, a place to offer up the sacrifice of an unblemished lamb. The Tabernacle reminded people that we come close to God only through a blood sacrifice that atones for our sin. The next symbol you would meet in the Tabernacle

was a washbowl. Every Israelite was invited to pass those cleansing waters in preparation for an encounter with the glorious God. Next to the washbowl was a table that held what was called the bread of the presence, a symbol of God's gracious provision for his people as they escaped slavery in Egypt and supplied them with manna in the wilderness. Illuminating the whole tent was a huge seven-branched lampstand (or menorah) made from the 75 pounds of solid gold that had been surrendered by the Egyptians as Israel left the land of their bondage. The lamp represented the light and life that God gives to his people. And in the inmost place in the Tabernacle, in that sacred place known as the Holy of Holies, was a wooden cabinet or Ark of the Covenant that contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments – the Word of God to people. This wooden symbol was also known as the mercy seat.

I hope you are taking all of this in, truly considering its meaning, and able to draw some rational conclusions. So, let me ask you this question. What do you think are the percentage chances that not just one or a few of these symbols and all of this language might come together one-thousand five-hundred years later in the life of a single person? To paraphrase pastor Knute Larson: When Jesus came into our world, he said a number of things that strangely line up with what we read in the Book of Exodus. He said: I am the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; I am the Living Water—drink from me and be washed by me; I am the Bread of Life; I am the Light of the World. I am the the Living Word – the divine Logos. I offer you a place at the mercy seat fabricated from wood.

Maybe that's all just coincidence. Like the mathematically improbable – if not impossible – circumstances that led to life on this planet. Like the billions of unique convergences that led to your life and mine and the fact that we are having this conversation today. But if that is not enough, here is one more remarkable confluence to think about. We conclude our study of Exodus today. We turn next week to another story – one the Apostle John summarized like this: **And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. And we beheld his glory (John 1:14).**

Do you know that the Greek phrase that we translate as “**made his dwelling**” is built on a much older Hebrew and Aramaic phrase? It literally means, “pitched his tent” or “tabernacled” among us. What John was declaring is that the glorious Being who came close to Israel and guided them on their journey decided to come closer still. This time, the divine Word entered the tent of human flesh. He tabernacled among ordinary people for 33 years. He did so that not just Israel but eventually all the world might behold his GLORY... might discover his life-changing GOODNESS. And I hope that as you journey with this people you are discovering it.

As we'll see when we return to start the Advent season next week, wise men and women still seek Him. And if you think this series has been **WILD**, I think you'll find the next one to be truly **MAGICAL**.

¹ Gerald Tomlinson, *Speaker's Treasury of Sports Anecdotes, Stories, and Humor*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990).

² Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, p.53.

³ *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, #573.