Welcome to our fourth presentation of the book of Exodus by Dr. Peter Enns. In this last presentation Dr. Enns will talk about the Tabernacle and its relationship to Heaven, the Sabbath, and also the Golden Calf. He will then relate this last part of the book of Exodus with the gospel and Jesus Christ. Dr. Enns:

Okay, the last thing that we’ll look at is the last thing that is in the book of Exodus which is the tabernacle. This concerns chapters 25 to 40 the last sixteen chapters of the book just about half. Actually it’s not all sixteen chapters it’s thirteen of the sixteen chapters. There is this incident tucked in the middle there, that famous golden calf incident which we can touch on in a minute and maybe say one or two things about.

I want to focus on the tabernacle though; I want to begin with the punch line and that is this: the tabernacle is more than just a place to meet God. It’s not just a church building where we can put up pews or baptistery or whatever we put in our churches. The tabernacle is not just a place to meet God; it is a piece of heaven on earth. Now we might read over this tabernacle section quickly, but I think the sheer mass of material, just the sheer number of verses and chapters, should make us stop and pause for a bit to look more closely to understand why is so much space devoted to it.

The section begins in chapter 25, and it goes through chapter 31 where we read about the list of instructions that go into the building of the tabernacle. Then starting in chapter 35 to chapter 40 those instructions are carried out. So you begin with the instructions for the tabernacle, and at the end those instructions are carried out. Then what is tucked in the middle is chapter 32 to 34 which is the golden calf episode. This is often times considered to be sort of an intrusion into this narrative as if it doesn’t really belong there. What’s it doing there? Stick it at the end. Why interrupt the tabernacle section of Exodus with this story? I think there are very good reasons for doing that and we can try to pick this apart just a little bit.

The instructions for the tabernacle are framed with a comment on the Sabbath. Let
me restate that: a discussion of the Sabbath, frames the Golden Calf episode. The Golden Calf episode, chapters 32 to 34. The first section you recall in the tabernacle section which ends in 31 are the instructions. The way that section ends is by a discussion of the Sabbath. Then you have the Golden Calf episode, chapters 32 to 34. Then you pick up the tabernacle discussion again in chapter 35, and the first thing that is mentioned is the Sabbath. That is an interesting arrangement. Why might that be the case? I think one is to show that we are just picking up where we left off. What happens in the Golden Calf episode? You all know that Aaron is either by his own will or he is forced into it by the people. He builds a calf, and that calf is then worshipped as Yahweh is worshipped as God, saying, “this is the God that brought us out of Egypt,” which of course is the wrong thing to do.

Moses is up on the mountain talking to God and the people are down there already, breaking one or two of the first two commandments. If this calf represents Yahweh, they are not really breaking the first commandment because it is not another God, but they are breaking the second commandment which is not to make idols. If it is to be thought of as another God then they are breaking the first two commandments but regardless whichever one they are breaking or both, they are not supposed to be doing that. That is such a heinous episode. But restitution is made and the way in which restitution is made is that Moses really talks to God and convinces him not to give the Israelites what they deserve.

Chapter 32 to 34 is, if I can put it this way, a story of grace. At least, on some level. God sees what they do and he has every right to wipe the Israelites out, to say I’m not going to take you to Canaan. I’m not going to do that. What happens then, is Moses steps in and he has an argument with God, and we see that in a couple of places, but the place that I think is most helpful for us is in chapter 32, beginning in let’s say verse 9. Let’s read from verse 9 through verse 14 and see what we see there. “I have seen these people,” the Lord said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.” Now what does that mean? Basically, it means that God says,
you’re okay. Let me get rid of these people then I’m going to start all over again with you. Now, that might be tempting on one level, but Moses doesn’t like that and he argues with God. Verse 11, “But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. ‘O Lord,’ he said, ‘Why should your anger burn against your people whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?’” Moses here, humanly speaking is reminding God of what he just did. He said, “You brought them out of Egypt by your great power, and mighty hand.” Verse 12, “Why should the Egyptians say it was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth? Turn from your fierce anger, relent and do not bring disaster on your people.” Here you remember, chapter 2 verses 23 and 25, how we saw at the very beginning, God brought the Israelites out of Egypt because he wanted to fulfill his promise to the patriarchs. Here Moses reminds God of that very same promise. He says, “Remember,” verse 13, “your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self; ‘I will make your descendants numerous as the stars in the sky, and I will give your descendants all this land. I promise them that I will be their inheritance forever.’ Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.”

So God intends to do something which is to destroy them, Moses steps in and says, don’t do that, and God listens to him. Now passages like this, and this is not the only place to find this sort of thing in the Bible, but this is a perennial problem, particularly for Christian theology, because we think that God is changing his mind, and that creates certain problems for us because God is supposed to know everything, he is supposed to be all powerful. He’s not supposed to be moved or persuaded. He is just God and God only does what he does. Ultimately if you’d ask me I’d say I think that’s absolutely true, but I’m very uncomfortable sort of just brushing these passages aside as though they have nothing really to say about God. Too often I think we feel comfortable talking about the way we think God really is. We read a passage like this and say, “Yeah, I know what’s going on here, but really God intended maybe to do this all along. He intended to forgive. He intended to bring Israel in to Canaan no matter what.” The fact of the matter for me is that I don’t know that. I don’t know what God intended to do
ultimately. All I know is what I read, what I have in front of me, and here in the pages of Exodus, God is presented as someone who was persuaded by Moses not to do something. This does not mean that I think God is wishy-washy or that God doesn’t know what he’s doing or he’s open to all these weird possibilities, or that he has to be convinced of everything he does. I’m not talking about that. All I’m talking about is what we see right here. We are not given here on the pages of Exodus the God behind the scenes all we see is the God of the scenes. When we pray our God is the God of Exodus 32:11-14. This is the God that we pray to as well. Because when we pray we assume, either implicitly or explicitly, that what we say can have an effect on what God does. When we pray we say, “O Lord, please don’t do this,” and then when he doesn’t do it or when he does something or doesn’t do something we thank him, we say Lord thank you for doing this. We speak to him as if he is interacting with us that there is a dynamic quality to God.

Now there are philosophical debates running around today about what God is really like. I have to be honest to you I don’t care about those things at all. That has no interest in me, nothing that I’m saying here has any bearing on the so called “Openness of God debate.” I know nothing about it and I’ll keep it that way. All I know is what we’re reading in Exodus and the God of Exodus is one who interacts with us. God is portrayed in a very human way in Exodus. I’m not going to try to get around that, I’m going to accept that and interact with Exodus on that on that level.

So what we have then is that God forgives the Israelites and they proceed as planned. That’s what I think is important theologically about how the first tabernacle section ends with the Sabbath, the second tabernacle section begins with Sabbath. It’s as if this horrible thing is happened which actually threatened to undo everything but because of the turnaround that God made through Moses’s argument, we’re not even skipping a beat, were starting where we left off and its okay.

The Sabbath connection is also important because there is as I mentioned before an important connection with creation as well in the tabernacle. The building of the tabernacle is an act of recreation culminating in a new 7th day of rest, or 7th day of worship. Now we can’t go into super amounts of detail here, although the text itself is so
detailed that it seems to want us to spend a lot of time talking about this. But I do want to focus and say a word about how the tabernacle is an act of recreation. That may even sound a bit abstract but maybe as we point out a couple of things it will become clear.

One thing is we can look at the curtains of the tabernacle itself. The curtains on the inside had cherubim woven into them. In gold, if I remember correctly, there were woven in a picture of cherubim, pictures of angels. When you’re inside the tabernacle and you look up you see a representation of heaven. You see a representation of where God dwells. Again this is why the tabernacle is the earthy representation of God’s dwelling. It’s meant to be understood that way it really is God's house. It’s not just a place where maybe you put up the gymnasium and play basketball and then worship on Sundays – there’s nothing wrong with that, but in the tabernacle it’s certainly not the case. This was holy ground in a way. That’s even worked into the architecture of the tabernacle itself. The tabernacle is heaven on earth.

Not to go too far afield here but even as the garden of Eden, the garden of Eden was also heaven on earth. In the same way that paradise was lost in Adam and Eve a part of that is now being gotten back. It’s fair I think to think of the tabernacle as a piece of heaven on earth as was the Garden of Eden. So this is a redemptive dimension to the tabernacle. It’s not just a building.

Also other commentators have picked up on the precise measurements of the tabernacle, this many cubits here, that many cubits there, and how if you look at an aerial view of the tabernacle it’s really made of two squares combined to make a rectangle. The one square is the outer court and the other square is the inner court the holy place. Then within that is the holy of holies. Commentators have picked up on those precise dimensions and suggested that these precise measurements reflect cosmic order amid chaos. So that’s another dimension to think of.

What may be more clear is the repetition of a phrase “the Lord said to Moses” and that is repeated seven times in chapters 25-31, that first tabernacle section where the instructions are given. “The Lord said to Moses do this, Lord said to Moses…” that, is repeated seven times. Now listen, the first six times that “the Lord said to Moses” is seen
in Exodus concerns the building of the tabernacle. The seventh concerns the Sabbath. Now for a long, long time, even around the time of Christ, or shortly thereafter, we have documented commentaries and Jewish sources, for example, very quick to pick up the fact that creating the tabernacle seems to have occurred in six acts with the seventh act being Sabbath rest. That’s just what happens in Genesis the creation of the world and I think that’s certainly the case. You can look at Exodus 25:1, 30:11, 30:17, 30:22, 30:34, 31:1. Those are the six times where “the Lord said to Moses” is mentioned. Then in 31:12 that the beginning of the Sabbath section is a comment on the Sabbath.

You also see that another connection along these lines is in Exodus 40:33, jumping ahead to almost the end of the book, Exodus 40:33 “Then Moses set up the courtyard around the tabernacle altar and put up the curtain at the entrance of the courtyard. So Moses finished the work.” Verse 33 is the last thing that is done in setting up the tabernacle. Again commentators have noticed that to say that Moses finished the work at least in Hebrew it’s more explicit, is what we read in Genesis 2:2 when God finished the work. So commentators suggest that this is another connection between the building of the tabernacle and all of creation.

So the tabernacle is an act of recreation. It is a microcosm of the cosmos. So if we look at it that way, and take a step back for a moment away from some of the details, but try to get the big picture. You have three elements that are prominent in the second half of Exodus. You have the tabernacle here, the Sabbath and the role it plays just now, and we see law. The tabernacle is holy space amid an unholy world. The Sabbath is holy time amid the time of the world, daily activities and weekly activities. The law is holy activity that God’s people are to be engaged in. All three are recreation principles. When you have the tabernacle, the presence of the tabernacle is a reminder that God is the creator and that he is redeeming something amid a fallen world. The Sabbath is a reminder that it’s God’s time and not ours, and he is redeeming the time and the law is an indication that the falling of humanity is also being redeemed. These are powerful redemptive, recreative symbols of book of Exodus. There is no more holy place to be in the universe than in the tabernacle on the Sabbath. You have the holy space and you have holy time
coming together and that is the place to be and that is where God dwells. That is why when the tabernacle’s picked up and moved, God moves with the tabernacle, and he doesn’t run around other places. That is where Israel meets God. That’s where his glory is.

It is also, I think, important for Christians to understand as well that all three of these three instances Tabernacles, Sabbath, law are recreation principles but we also can speak of these instances to be fulfilled in the coming of Christ. Exodus is a story of recreation because it is a story of redemption. We can say the opposite. Exodus is a story of redemption because it is a story of recreation. You pick up in the reading of the New Testament within the Gospels or within the letters of how much the gospel itself participates in these kinds of themes. We see Jesus, for example, who in John chapter 1, “The word became flesh and dwelt upon us.” Another way of translating that is, “the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.” Jesus is now the tabernacle. He is the holy space. He is the place where God dwells in his homeless, when Jesus is talking about the Sabbath, he doesn’t seem to have the most favorable things to say about the Sabbath, he doesn’t say it’s ridiculous. He basically says, “I’m here now, and the Sabbath is not the focus, I’m the Sabbath. Jesus doesn’t denigrate the law, he actually says “I fulfill the law” or “I am the law.” These three elements those are so important to the book of Exodus, Jesus pretty much claims and says “I am here now. You won’t be needing that anymore, at least not in the old way.”

There are also several instances in which Jesus in the Gospel, and Jesus’ redemptive work are described in Exodus in terms of creation language. Many of these places are very familiar to most people. For example, John chapter 1 where the Gospel begins, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” This is an unmistakable echo of Genesis chapter 1. What does that mean? Because with the Jesus here, there is a new beginning. This is what Paul picks up on as well in the 1 Corinthians chapter 15 and Romans chapter 5, when Paul says Jesus, he doesn’t say it the same way that John says it but says it in very similar way, Jesus, is the new Adam or the second Adam. Whereas the first Adam blew it and did not get it right. Jesus the
second Adam, comes and it starts all over again. This time it works because Jesus is obedient and we are obedient with him through faith.

But again the redemption of Christ is a way of talking about the recreation of the cosmos. I don’t think that it is stretching it too far. How does the book of Revelation end? The book of revelation ends through the new heaven and the new earth coming down and then in the very last chapter, “I looked and I saw the tree of life.” That is very instructive I think that is an unmistakable echo of Genesis in the tree of life.

The point of the Bible, if I can speak as rashly as that, is to get us back in to the Garden and not literally but spiritually and in actually a more concrete fuller way than Adam and Eve were. The Bible ends where it begins. It begins in the Garden with the departure and God’s plan and effort to bring his people through faith in his Son, the perfect Israelite, to bring his people back into the garden.

We likewise could look at 2 Corinthians 5 where Paul says, “if anyone is in Christ he is a new creature,” I think the King James puts it. Other translations put it better, “If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, the old is no longer effective the new is here.” Becoming a Christian means you were recreated in the image of Christ. You too are starting over. This is what we mean when we say, “Born again.” Maybe sometimes we don’t really understand the gravity of saying that. But we are saying that in Jesus we get to start all over again. When Jesus redeems us he is also recreating us. He is making us into new creatures.

So what we have then in Exodus is a story that is very old. It took place a long time ago. But even there we are seeing sort of that soundings and the beginnings of theological trajectories that I think by God’s design put there to understand him better. But not only to understand God better but to appreciate more fully to understand what God has done in Christ 1500 roughly years afterwards. That is, ultimately, I feel the culmination of the study of the book of Exodus is for Christians to better understand the gospel because that is where we confess by faith which is where all of this is heading anyway. So the study of Exodus as interesting as it is and as important as it is, is not an
end in itself. But if we understand Exodus better ultimately we understand the gospel better and understand Christ better and understand our place in that grand scheme.

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