

## The Tabernacle in the Wilderness

In Exodus Chapter 3, God commissioned Moses to deliver the people of Israel from Egypt where they had been enslaved. The narrative from that point on to Chapter 19 is the story of that miraculous deliverance. Most of my Sunday School readers are familiar with that story. In Chapters 19 to 24, that generation that walked thru the Red Sea on dry land with a wall of water on each side of them arrived at Mount Sinai to meet their God and enter into covenant with Him. But something happened there that evidently was not right. God's intent in taking that people to Himself is in 19:5-6, to be obedient vassals of the Creator God, serving Him as a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The text doesn't make this explicit, but it seems that God was going to dwell directly with His people in the same way He was with Adam in the Garden, and with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But when God called His people to come up Mt. Sinai to meet God, in terror they refused to go. So, and this is conjecture, God established a mediatorial role for Moses (and others subsequent to him), and gave a detailed Law to serve instead of Himself. A covenant was confirmed establishing the relationship but, interestingly, Moses set up the required altar at the foot of the mountain (24:4b), giving Israel safety. There's distance between God and His people. Then, curiously, the narrative, fast moving and thrilling up to this point, suddenly stops to provide about ten chapters (beginning at Chapter 25), ten heavily detailed chapters, instructing Israel how to build a tabernacle. Huh? What's this all about? This is important and we need to reflect deeply on it. Most people reading Exodus skim over these chapters. But we need to see why God has them in His Word.

A tabernacle is a portable Temple. The people were travelling from Egypt to the Land that God had promised them, and this Temple-like structure could be transported with them. It was to be a place where God would physically dwell with His chosen people. He would be right there with them, in their midst, to bless, guide, protect and instruct them. And there they would worship Him, which means to acknowledge His Person, His holiness, His glory, and to obey, trust and serve Him as instructed. And what a structure this is! It's not just an ornate pavilion or a specially designed tent. It's a transcendent place, totally unlike anything humans could or would design. It has to be such, because a God who is wholly Other is to reside there. This is a dwelling for God.

Let's notice a few things about these extraordinary chapters: First, God gave the instructions how He was to be worshiped. We don't "worship" God the way we think it should be done; we worship according to His specific revelation. Pagans worship their gods the way they want to. Second, although God is a Spirit, formless and infinite, He chose to dwell physically with the people He loved. See 25:8, "I will dwell among them." (Also 29:45-46.) There is great mystery in this: God dwells in heaven, yet He is omnipresent, and yet He is also (somehow) in this Tabernacle with His people. Third, the tabernacle was made using gifts from the people. In love, the people provided all the resources, skills and materials, needed for this unique place. Building the Tabernacle was itself an act of worship. One more (sad) observation, in the midst of all this lovely if exceedingly detailed text about building the Tabernacle, the Golden Calf episode takes place. Even as the Tabernacle is being built to house and worship their holy God, they break the covenant so as to worship an idol, just as pagans do. And God's response is grace. It will have to be grace for the entire history of this people because they are determined to fail -- exactly as Adam did. In other words, the story of Israel reprises the fall of humanity at the outset of creation and will characterize all history until . . . until God intervenes.

These chapters are saturated with a massive amount of detail, almost mind-numbing detail, first on how the Tabernacle was to be built, and then repeated when its construction was completed. Why? I suggest that the Tabernacle was an object lesson for the Israelites (and for us as well) that God has the sovereign right to stipulate in however much detail He deems necessary how we're to live and what kind of people we're to be. As Creator and Deliverer, He has the right to demand obedience to His instructions not only for worship but for all of life. The rest of Torah will have extensive instruction for Israelites and for their society. These Exodus chapters are here to make clear this unchallengeable fact: they were to obey God's will. It was for want of obedience that the Fall occurred in Genesis 3. Obedience to God, to His Word, is essential for a relationship such as is offered in the covenant. Let's clarify this further: Neither the Israel of then, nor we today, are invited merely to know information about God. What God places on offer is a personal, even intimate relationship with Himself, and that is only possible if there's love for God. And a loving relationship necessarily means obeying Him. Yes, we obey God out of gratitude for all He's done for us, and we obey Him out of fear as well, because He's dangerous. But gratitude and fear also occur within a personal relationship. The Book of Genesis had already made this clear to the people of Israel, to all the readers of Torah.

I see a glaring contrast between all the instruction in these chapters about the structure, its furniture, the priestly garments

and even the incense that was to be used and the simple altars that were used for worship in Genesis by the Patriarchs. There's also the fact that initially the nation was called to be a kingdom of priests yet in these chapters a special priesthood is created that excludes everyone else. Something has changed! I suspect that this Tabernacle is necessary in the same sense that mediators are necessary. The Israelites cannot have a direct fellowship with God. There must be distance between Him and His people. He is holy, but they are not. This unique place where He dwells among them maintains that distance, that holiness, that Otherness. And one more observation, easily lost in all the detail, is that everything had to be consecrated with blood. Animals had to be sacrificed to maintain holiness. There had to be loss of life, but by grace it could, in God's justice, be substitutionary loss of life. An animal had to lose its life (Genesis 3:21) to prevent God from destroying that first couple because of sin, and so death is necessary here in these chapters, and on-going, to deal with sin. The people wouldn't ascend the mountain to meet God, so He will descend and dwell with them in their camp, but hidden behind layers of magnificently structured protection and on the basis of blood.

We can't possibly discuss all that's in these chapters in the space of this lesson, but we can look at one verse that, in a way, epitomizes the Tabernacle, Exodus 30:37. "Do not make any incense with this formula for yourselves; consider it holy to the Lord. Whoever makes any like it to enjoy its fragrance must be cut off from his people." That which is sanctified is not for common or vulgar or selfish use. God is Other, transcendent and holy, and the place in which He dwells is holy. God was to be honored for Who He is. An Israelite was called to pursue life with God at its center, not for personal or self-centered purposes. Paul may have had this verse in mind when he penned 1 Corinthians 6:19, "your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God. . . therefore honor God with your body." The Tabernacle is proleptic of the great and wonderful blessing of the indwelling of the Christian by the Spirit of Christ, which is why we must be holy. These chapters extolling God's holiness and the holiness demanded of the Tabernacle help us understand the New Testament's demand for holiness. But the Tabernacle also anticipates something even greater, *far* greater, which is probably why so many detail-laden chapters are lovingly devoted to it: the future Kingdom when the glory of the Lord will fill the entire earth, when God Himself will dwell on an earth made into His sacred space, among His holy people.

But if the Tabernacle anticipates something greater in the future, it also reprises something very great in the past. Creation! The instructions in Chapters 25 to 31 mention gold and jewels (Genesis 2), cherubim (Genesis 3), and seven times, "And the Lord said," corresponding to the seven times that God spoke in Genesis 1. Moreover, the Tabernacle account concludes with mention of the Sabbath, as does the Creation account. And just as the Creation account ends with the Fall in Genesis 3, so does the Tabernacle account, the Golden Calf episode. The same details are repeated (Exodus Chapters 35-40), suggesting, perhaps, that another creation is to come in the future. In other words, this Tabernacle in Exodus represents a new beginning. God made Adam as His son (Luke 3:37), but now God is undertaking something totally new in taking the people of Israel as His son (Exodus 4:22) to fulfill His cosmic purposes, of which to glorify Himself is primary.

More: The Tabernacle text mentions "pattern" a couple of times (e.g., 25:9). Pattern? Hebrews reveals that the Tabernacle was constructed according to the pattern of God's heavenly dwelling. In other words, the Tabernacle replicated where God resided permanently in heaven. Consider: humans were made as the "image" of God, that is, as replicas of God's Person. And in the Lord's Prayer, we are to ask that God's will be replicated on earth as it is in heaven. The necessity of obedience replicates God's will on earth. So, why this replicating? It's my suspicion that what God is doing in this creation is expressing His goodness. What does "good" mean? It means a sharing of oneself on behalf of others. These "replicas" of God, His Person, His place, and His will, are how His goodness is intended to suffuse His creation. God is on mission to defeat evil and exalt His goodness. These replicas are how His goodness is revealed and made real in time and space. And God is glorified.

Let's conclude. Three things: (1) These chapters aren't here in the Bible as blueprints for Israel to use to construct a Tabernacle. They're here to instruct *us*. We need to read and reflect deeply on why God gave us these wonderful chapters about the Tabernacle. I've attempted that in this lesson, but as God is the author, I'm sure that there's much more here to delight and teach us about holiness. (2) We see Jesus in these chapters. He's the ideal, obedient Son who fulfills all Son-ship. He's the ultimate atoning Lamb to whom all prior sacrifices pointed; He purifies us and consecrates us to God, constituting all of us as priests to serve God. He's a greater Moses offering far greater revelation, a surpassing deliverance, and mediating a new and better covenant. In fact, He's the ultimate Mediator because He takes us to the Father (John 14:6). We may even imagine the Tabernacle anticipated His human body. (3) God called Israel and dwelt in their midst for a purpose. Everything God does is purposeful, and our lives therefore also are to be purposeful. Israel was to serve God by taking the knowledge of Him to the surrounding Gentile nations. Similarly, Christ dwells in us purposefully: To empower us to take the Gospel to the Gentile nations of the world. May we be faithful to our calling.