

THE GRAND ESCAPE.

No. 11. God in Residence.

Of course, the whole point of the regulations God set out for the Israelites, was that He Himself would be the central focus of their lives. To make this concept easier for them to accept was to have a visible place which would signify His enduring presence. And so, God called Moses up to Mount Sinai again; he was to be there for 6 weeks, writing down the plans for the Tabernacle – literally “dwelling place” - for God. Exodus chapters 25 to 30 set out detailed instructions for the installing and maintenance of Israel’s worship of God. The preface in chapter 24:9-11 is an enchanting story of God’s reaching out to His children; He told Moses to bring with him Aaron, Aaron’s sons and 70 of the nation’s elders. There they “saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. But God did not raise His hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.” Leaving Moses and his servant Joshua to take down God’s instructions, they returned home, aglow with the privilege that had been theirs.

As with the laws already given to Israel, the Tabernacle was a masterpiece of God’s commonsense. For a nomadic nation like theirs it had to be readily movable, virtually a tent. The inside walls were to be made up of 10 curtains of fine linen, embroidered with cherubim and gorgeous in blue, purple and scarlet, with outside a protecting cover of goat hair; over that, ram skins dyed red and yet another covering, impervious to the weather, of sea cow hides. The inside beauty was to reflect the glory of God, and preserved by weatherproofing. To hold up these curtain walls God specified a framework of acacia wood, darker and harder than oak, yet light to carry, plentiful in the Sinai Peninsula and avoided by wood-eating insects.

This Tabernacle wasn’t very big, about 14 x 5 metres, and one third of the inside space – the Holy Place - was curtained off to make the Most Holy Place. This latter, a perfect cube of about 5 metres, was a symbol of the Trinity, with its 3 faces all identical yet with different aspects, and still supporting each other to form one whole unit. Into this Most Holy Place God told Moses to place the Ark of the Covenant, which was to contain the stones on which God had written the Ten Commandments. The Ark was a chest made of acacia wood overlaid with gold and adorned with 2 cherubim facing each other, their wings spread out protectively towards the centre of the Ark. This actually was similar to shrines of other nations, with facing winged guardians shielding a sacred place. Other furniture included a bronze altar for animal sacrifices, an incense altar, a basin, a table and a seven-branched lampstand, both covered with gold.

In the middle of all these instructions there is an amazing insertion that speaks to us today. In Exodus 31:1-11 God tells Moses, “I have chosen Bezalel ... and I have filled him with the Spirit of God ...” What for? To preach a dynamic sermon? To lay down some important new law? No, to work with his hands, to use the skill, ability and knowledge endowed him by God, to make artistic designs and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship for the adornment of the Tabernacle! In verse 6 God continues, “I have appointed Oholiab to help him. Also I have given skill to all the craftsmen to make everything I have commanded you.” They would have had their hands full. There were all the curtains to be made and embroidered, the wooden frames to be constructed, the precious stones to be engraved and set into the breastpiece with gold filigree fittings, the priestly garments to be made and the Tabernacle furniture to be built and covered with gold. These were skills no doubt learnt during the slavery in Egypt! The important thing was that this was done with the guidance and help of the Holy Spirit! Exodus 37:1 shows us

the crowning privilege given to Bezalel; it was his consecrated hands that put together the wood, overlaid it with gold and made the 2 cherubim out of hammered gold to create the Ark symbolising the very presence of God in their midst. This same Holy Spirit is with us today in whatever way we serve our God; however lowly seems our task, done for His glory it becomes our badge of honour. Artists, remember that God too loves beauty!

A fenced-off courtyard kept the Tabernacle area sacrosanct. Unlike our churches today, it was not a place for God's people to meet for collective worship, but one where God met – by appointment – with His people. The priests alone had the responsibility of entering the sacred area to offer sacrifices of atonement for the people and to keep the lights on the lampstand burning all night. For this they had to use "clear oil of pressed olives"; the olives were crushed in a mortar and the pulpy mass was placed in a cloth basket for the oil to drip through the bottom, producing a clear fuel that burned with little or no smoke. No soot in the Tabernacle!

There were, however, 3 occasions each year when males were required to present themselves at the Tabernacle in order to celebrate a festival to God - Exodus 23:14-17. The first of these was the Feast of Unleavened Bread, or Passover, held in the month Abib and commemorating the escape from Egypt. The second was the Feast of Harvest, when they were to bring as an offering the firstfruits of their harvest 7 weeks later - also known as Pentecost. The third festival was the Feast of Ingathering, or Feast of Tabernacles, at the end of the year when all the crops had been harvested. These 3 festivals are mirrored today in our journey as Christians - Passover representing or salvation through the death of the Lamb of God, the Feast of Harvest celebrating the gift of the Holy Spirit to all believers, and the Ingathering pointing to the culmination of God's plan when all saints will be gathered together in the fulfilment of Heaven.

The garments and job description for the priests are given in great detail, particularly in chapter 28 with its category of significant accoutrements for Aaron as High Priest. On his shoulders, mounted in gold filigree settings, he had to wear 2 onyx stones engraved with the names of the sons of Israel. Hanging from these shoulder pieces was a breastpiece of gold and gorgeous linen mounted with 12 stones, each one engraved with the name of one of Israel's tribes. The breastpiece was anchored firmly to the High Priest's chest with braided chains of pure gold so that it hung close to his heart. The symbolism is rich and beautiful; as he entered into God's presence on behalf of the people, the High Priest took the people with him in his heart and on his shoulders, places of love and of strength, to mediate for them. And suddenly we think of the prophetic image of Christ given in Isaiah 40:11 – "He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart." Hebrews enlarges on this in chapter 8 – "We have such a high priest ... at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord."

Someone has said the New Testament is in the Old, concealed; the Old Testament is in the New, revealed. When in Exodus 24 the covenant with Israel was confirmed, Moses took some of the blood of the sacrifice and sprinkled it on the people, with the words, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you." In Matthew 26:28 Jesus said, "This cup is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Another lovely link is in chapter 23:20 - "See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared." We see an echo of this in John 14:2-4, "I am going (to my Father's house) to prepare a place for youI will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."

Unfortunately, 6 weeks was a long time for Aaron and Hur to keep the Israelites in order. In Exodus chapter 32 the people began to grumble at the long absence of Moses and demanded that Aaron make them some gods that would not keep scooting off up a mountain. Afraid of such mass displeasure Aaron told them to bring him their gold earrings, which he then fashioned into an idol in the shape of a calf. Placated, the people chanted, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." Remorseful, Aaron built an altar and declared, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord." But restraint had gone and the festival ended up in a vulgar orgy.

Warned by God Moses and Joshua descended the mountain. When they saw what was going on, Moses really flipped, dashing the Law-engraved stones to the ground with enough force to smash them to pieces. He grabbed the golden calf, ground it to power, sprinkled it on the water and made the people drink it. Still in a fury he slammed into Aaron with "What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?" Aaron's excuse was laughable in its stupidity – "I threw the gold jewellery into the fire and out came this calf!" Moses confronted the wildly running Israelites with a rallying call, "Who is for the Lord, come to me." It was the Levites, men from Aaron's own tribe, who responded and, under orders from Moses, went through the camp with drawn swords and killed about 3,000 people. At such a cost, order was restored. From that day the Levites were given the privilege of being caretakers of the Tabernacle and aides to the priests. And Moses, great leader that he was, went back up the mountain to plead with God for forgiveness for the nation. His courage was rewarded by God's gentle encouragement, in chapter 33 verse 14, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest," followed by one glorious glimpse of His glory as Moses sheltered in a rock.

We can be a bit harsh in our judgement of Aaron's weakness. Remember that, from the age of three, not long weaned from his mother, he was presented with a baby brother who was to steal the limelight completely. For the next 3 years Moses was groomed to be adopted by no less than Pharaoh's daughter, and when Aaron was at the age of six and fond of his young brother, that brother was snatched away into the privileged life of the palace while Aaron remained the only son in a slave's household. It is amazing that Aaron showed as much strength and faithfulness to God that he did, with quite strong support for his kid brother. We can be glad that at least he had the privilege of becoming the initial High Priest, and of being an ancestor of John the Baptist!

There was punishment for the Israelites in the form of a plague – perhaps brought on by their drinking the polluted water – but in chapter 34 we marvel at the grace and mercy of God as He ordered Moses to chisel out 2 more stones for God Himself to engrave once more the Ten Commandments. Back on Mount Sinai with the new stones in his hands, Moses was given an amazing experience of God. From verse 5 on, "the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him (Moses) and proclaimed his name 'The LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.'" It is this free forgiveness that sets Christianity above every other religion – LOVE is its base and essence. And that is the God of the Old Testament!

There is a delightful comment in verse 29 of chapter 34. When Moses went back down the mountain he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord. He looked so awesome that Aaron and the people were afraid of him and for their comfort Moses had to veil his face from them! Maybe you have seen this radiance on the face of some truly Godly person, who nevertheless is quite oblivious to this sort of "halo". In 2 Corinthians 3:18 Paul puts it another way – "We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." What a privilege!

From chapter 35 to chapter 40 God's instructions were put into effect. Moses told the people – everyone who was willing – to bring offerings of gold, silver and bronze, of blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen, goat hair, hides of rams and sea cows, acacia wood, olive oil, spices and gems, for the construction of the Tabernacle. The response from people who could not be very flush with riches, was extraordinary and finally had to be discouraged as there was more than enough. (You may have observed that Jews today, while shrewd businessmen, can be extremely generous.) Some brought materials and others brought their skills; all worked together in the excitement of the tremendous project that was melding the nation into one.

Do you inwardly groan when there is a call for a church working bee? Don't despise it; it is one of the most effective ways of bringing together the many and varied folk who otherwise may never get to speak to each other, and where even the shyest are secretly pleased to be able to help God with a mop and bucket.

At last the Tabernacle and all its furniture was complete. The workers came to Moses for his approval. Chapter 39:42,43, tell us "The Israelites had done all the work just as the Lord had commanded Moses. Moses inspected the work and saw that they had done it just as the Lord had commanded. So Moses blessed them." The Tabernacle was set up; it and everything in it was anointed with consecrating oil. Then Aaron and his sons were brought to the entrance, washed with water, dressed in their priestly robes and anointed with oil as their initiation into the priesthood that would last for the generations to come. The whole place was laid out as God had commanded and the stones with the Ten Commandments were placed inside the Ark. At last the work was finished.

It is rather significant that, as seen in Exodus 6:23, Aaron married Elisheba who was of the tribe of Judah. So their 2 surviving sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, foundation stones of the priestly line of Levi, had also in their veins the blood of the kingly tribe of Judah. Jeremiah 33:17 concludes an important Messianic prophecy with "this is what the Lord says: 'David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of Israel, nor will the priests, who are Levites, ever fail to have a man to stand before Me continually to offer burnt offerings.'" We see the fulfilment of this in Hebrews 7:24,25 - "Because Jesus lives forever, He has a permanent priesthood. He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them." And again in Revelation 1:15 - "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign for ever and ever." Jesus is forever our Priest and our King!

And after all the spiritual ups and downs, God blessed His people's work. Chapter 40:34,35 give us the triumphant climax; "Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle." By night this cloud was glorified by a fire burning within it.

This cloud was to be their signal; while ever it rested on the Tabernacle, the Israelites stayed where they were, but once the cloud lifted they knew they were meant to set out again for new pastures. It sounds so simple and perhaps we envy them for such direct guidance; remember that they did not have what we have, the very Word of God and the experience of His people down through the ages. The will of God is not so impossible to discern if we with Spirit-filled motives seek to follow it for His glory.

