

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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A look at the Tabernacle - That I may dwell among them

When I was a boy, three friends and I went camping on my uncle's farm on the edge of the Lake District. That seemed a tremendous adventure at the time! We pitched our tent that first evening and got to bed. The next morning, we were awake about half past five - too excited to sleep for long! We'd had breakfast and washed up by just after six o'clock - and there was a whole day to fill! What a special tent that was to us then!

This morning, and for the next three Sundays, we are going to look at another, but far more special tent - the Tabernacle in the wilderness, or "the tabernacle of the tent of meeting" as it is described in Exodus 39:32. The Israelites had been slaves in Egypt but had been brought out, redeemed by God to be His special people. Here they were in the wilderness, on their way to the Promised Land. God had just given the Ten Commandments to His servant, Moses. Now God speaks to Moses again. We'll read the words from Exodus 5: "Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the Children of Israel, that they bring Me an offering. From everyone who gives it willingly with his heart you shall take My offering... And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them. According to all that I show you, that is, the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings, just so you shall make it'" (verses 1-9).

God's initiative.

We're going to think, first of all then, about God's initiative. What a tremendous declaration from God this was! Listen to the words again: "that I may dwell among them". Here, for the very first time, God was proposing to dwell amongst His people. This had never happened before! It didn't happen in the Garden of Eden. There "the Lord God (walked) in the garden in the cool of the day" until the sin of Adam and Eve made that no longer possible - see Genesis 3. It didn't happen with Abraham, that "friend of God", as James 2:23 describes him. That great man of faith, Abraham, had his tent and his altar as he wandered through the land which God had promised him, but which he could not possess. God appeared to Abraham as he sat in his tent door in Mamre, but there was no dwelling place of God in that land. No, here for the very first time, God proposes to dwell amongst His people.

The Israelites hadn't even asked God to dwell with them. Perhaps they were too afraid to ask! This is God's initiative. He wants to be in the midst of His people. His heart will not be satisfied with anything less. Neither in Old Testament times, or in New Testament times, a holy God could only dwell with His sinful people on the basis of redemption, of blood that had been shed. The Israelites had been redeemed by the blood of the Passover Lamb sacrificed in Egypt. We, today, rejoice in the redemption that has come to us through "Christ, our Passover...sacrificed for us" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

So at the earliest possible moment, God proposes to dwell amongst His people! With what wonder and delight the Israelites must have listened to these words. Many years later, when the Tabernacle was being replaced by the temple, Solomon caught that same sense of wonder when he prayed at the dedication of the Temple: "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27).

As Christians, you and I share in an even greater sense of wonder. The apostle John writes of the Lord Jesus Christ coming into the world: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" John 1:14. In this verse, the word 'dwelt' can be translated 'tabernacled', or literally, 'pitched His tent'. Think of the wonder of that - the Son of God pitching His tent among us!

God's pattern

Secondly, we should notice that everything in the Tabernacle had to be made according to God's pattern. In verse 9, we read, "According to all that I show you, that is, the pattern of the tabernacle... just so you shall make it". If God was to dwell amongst His people, then everything in His house must be ordered by Him. Nothing was to be left to man's imagination. We need to underline those words, "just so you shall make it". Why was God so particular that everything should be made according to His pattern? After this broadcast, take time to read carefully through Hebrews 9. This important chapter is, if you like, God's commentary on the significance of the Tabernacle in the light of what we enjoy

in Christianity today. There we read, "It was necessary that the copies of the things in the heavens should be purified with these (that is, the blood of animal sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us" (verses 23-24). The various parts of the Tabernacle, then, are copies, or figures, of the much better things which God would later bring in, in Christ. (Incidentally, one of the key words in this epistle is 'better'. The epistle demonstrates how much better Jesus is and how much better the Christian blessings we enjoy through Him).

Hebrews 10:1 goes on to tell us, "The law (that is, the Tabernacle with its system of worship) is only a shadow of the good things to come – not the realities themselves". So the Tabernacle, with its furnishings and its sacrifices, is not just a boring piece of Jewish ritual. It has important lessons to teach us about our Christian blessings – these "good things" which have come to us today through Christ. We shall be looking at some of these lessons in the next three broadcasts. God's worship had to be offered to God in God's way. That was an important lesson for the Israelites then. It is still an important lesson for us today. We shall come back to this later in the broadcast.

God's workers.

So the Tabernacle was God's initiative, made according to God's pattern. But who would be capable at such an undertaking? We need, then, to look at God's workers.

In Exodus 31, God says to Moses, "See, I have called by name Bezaleel the son of Uri... and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship...I have appointed with him Aholiab...and I have put wisdom in the hearts of all who are gifted craftsmen, that they may make all that I have commanded you" verses 1-6. In chapter 35, we read, "All the women who were gifted craftsmen spun yarn with their hands, and brought what they had spun, of blue and purple and scarlet, and fine linen", verse 25. God would have His servants, men and women, specially prepared for this important matter of preparing a dwelling place for Him. Again, there would be no place for natural human ability. What these servants did, they did out of the ability given them by God. Today, the Lord gives spiritual gifts to His people so that they might serve Him. It has been well remarked, God's work, done in God's way and in God's time, will never lack God's resources.

The people's offering.

But in order to build the Tabernacle, God would use the gifts that His people brought to Him. He still chooses to do His work through His servants today, using the offerings they bring to Him. So we need to look at the people's offering.

When the Israelites left Egypt on that Passover night, they took with them their unleavened dough and their kneading bowls. As downtrodden slaves, they would have little else in the way of earthly possessions. But, as instructed by Moses, "they had asked from the Egyptians articles of silver, articles of gold, and clothing. And the Lord had given the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they granted them what they requested. Thus they plundered the Egyptians" (Exodus 12:35-36). After the ten plagues, it would appear that the Egyptians were only too happy to see the last of these Israelites!

But what use would gold and silver be in a wilderness? There would be no shops in the wilderness where the Israelites might spend their wealth! God would provide them with manna and quails in the wilderness. At the end of their wilderness wanderings, Moses would be able to remind them, "Your garments did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years" (Deuteronomy 8:4). They had need of nothing!

But even in Egypt, God had in mind that He would dwell amongst His redeemed people in the wilderness. And so He makes provision for His people that, as they leave Egypt, they are provided with the means whereby they will, when the time comes, provide the offerings necessary for the Tabernacle. No doubt, these Israelites would confess to God, as David did many years later, "But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly as this? For all things come from You, and of Your own we have given You" (1 Chronicles 29:14). God would never force His people to give to Him. His word to Moses was, as we saw earlier, "speak to the children of Israel, that they bring Me an offering. From everyone who gives it willingly with his heart you shall take my offering" (verse 2). How would the people respond to such an initiation as this? With a deep sense of wonder that their God was now to dwell amongst them, they gave, and gave, and gave again! So much so that we read, "So Moses gave a commandment... "Let neither man nor woman do any more work for the offering of the sanctuary." And the people were restrained from bringing, for the material they had was sufficient for all the work to be done - indeed too much". Think of that - to be told to stop giving! To have too much! How many church treasurers and missionary support groups would love to be in that position today!

I have to ask myself, How much am I responding to what God has done for me? God has given His only Son for me! He could give no greater and divine love would give no less! What am I giving to Him? And how am I giving to Him? Listen to how the apostle Paul can boast to his Corinthian friends about the giving of the Philippian church: "In a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing" (2 Corinthians 8:2 and 3). Further on, Paul writes to these same Corinthians, "God loves a cheerful giver" (9:7). Incidentally, that word 'cheerful' could literally be translated 'hilarious'. Do I give to God hilariously?

God's dwelling today

We need, finally, to think about God's dwelling today. The time came when the Tabernacle was replaced by the Temple, built by Solomon. That Temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and the Israelites were taken prisoners to Babylon. Some seventy years later, a remnant of the captivity returned to Jerusalem and the Temple was rebuilt. That Temple survived until King Herod rebuilt it, taking forty six years to do so (John 2:20). It was this Temple which Jesus visited, but which was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. And so, until recent years, the Jews have remained "without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred pillar" as the prophet, Hosea, foretold. Where does God dwell today? Paul could remind the Athenians, "God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth. Does not dwell in temples made with hands" (Acts 17:24). As Christians, we have been redeemed through the death of Jesus, as Peter reminds us: "You were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold...but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:18 and 19). Because of that, God now dwells in us!

Before the Lord Jesus was crucified, He promised His disciples, "I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth ... He...will be in you" (John 14:16 and 17). Jesus went on to promise, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make our home with him" (verse 23). Just think of that! God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - condescends to dwell in me! A little girl was once challenged, "How big is your God?" "Well", she replied, "He's so big that the heaven of heavens cannot contain Him, yet He's so small that He can come down and live within my heart!"

Not only is it true that God now dwells in each individual believer, but, in a special way, God dwells amongst His people collectively. The Lord Jesus has promised us, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). We might call this our church charter today. It is interesting that throughout the book of Acts, the word 'church' always refers to people, never a building. It is not the building but the people who worship there who form the dwelling place of God. Paul reminds the Ephesian Christians: "You...are being built together for a habitation of God in the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:22).

But, as Israel had to learn, we must worship God in His way. Jesus told the woman of Samaria, "The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him" (John 4:23). Worship today does not consist in physical sacrifices, of ritual and ceremony, but, as Peter reminds us, "You...are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). Those spiritual sacrifices, in which every Christian should be involved, include "the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name" (Hebrews 13:15). They also take in our material possessions, as Hebrews 13 continues, "Do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased" (verse 16). But, above all, they take in the whole of our lives. So Paul writes, "I beseech you therefore, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service" (Romans 12:1).

What is our response today to the wonder of God dwelling amongst us? How wonderful if, like the Israelites of old, we had to be restrained from bringing!

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