

## **THERFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE**

29<sup>th</sup> August 2004

Exodus 40 Filled with the Glory of God

### ***Exodus: What a year!***

So here we are at the end of the book of Exodus. It's taken us quite a while to get here, we started it in January 2003, and with a break in the middle to fit in Mark's Gospel, it's taken over a year of Sundays. That's about the same length of time that it took for most of the events in Exodus to take place – from the Burning Bush in chapter 3, right up to tonight's passage. What a year that must have been for the Israelites. What momentous events they lived through, what wholesale changes in their lives they experienced – none of them could have imagined what they would be doing in a year's time.

Moses first 80 years are glossed over quickly, equally split between his opulent life in Egypt as an adopted member of the royal family, and his austere life as a shepherd in desert exile. But once God appeared to him in the burning bush, the pace of events picked up markedly! It would have taken at most a few weeks to travel back to Egypt, where he immediately started his ministry.

We're not sure how long it took for the plagues of Egypt to be completed – but it was probably a matter of weeks too. And from the time they left Israel to arriving at Mount Sinai, it took a couple of months. Then there was a long period of waiting for Moses who went up the mountain to receive the Law; a short period where God dealt with them for their idolatry with the Golden Calf, and another 40 days waiting for Moses again. So they were probably at the foot of Sinai for 3 months before they started work on the Tabernacle, some five months after leaving Egypt. The work took another 7 months to complete – not surprising as it involved a lot of ornate craftsmanship – for the Tabernacle was finally ready exactly a year after the Exodus itself.

### ***People chosen to grumble?***

They had suffered ups and downs along the way; it has to be said that the picture we see of God's chosen people is not a rosy one. Whether they were in Egypt, en route to Sinai, or camped at the foot of the mountain, they were prone to complain against God:

- First they complained about the harshness of their treatment in Egypt, following Moses first appeal to Pharaoh to let the Israelites go.
- Then, after being miraculously released from their slavery, they complained that they would be killed by Pharaoh's army.
- Then, having been miraculously delivered through the Red Sea, they complained that they had no water to drink.
- Then, after God miraculously turned the bitter water sweet, they complained that they had nothing to eat.
- Then, God miraculously gave them Manna and Quail, they again complained that they had no water.

After God miraculously gave them water from the rock at Horeb, and after they arrived safely at Sinai, it seemed they finally accepted that God had their interests at heart, and committed to following him (Exodus 19:8):

*The people all responded together, "We will do everything the LORD has said."*

This led to another high point. Moses takes a quick trip up the mountain and comes back to tell the Israelites all that God has told him, the 10 Commandments, various laws to govern their society, and the marvellous promise that He will go before them into the promised land and allow them to possess it. Once more the people accept the terms of the covenant (Exodus 24:3):

*When Moses went and told the people all the LORD's words and laws, they responded with one voice, "Everything the LORD has said we will do."*

Then Moses, Aaron, Aaron's older sons and 70 leaders of the people return up the mountain, for an unprecedented meeting with God (Exodus 24:9-12):

*<sup>9</sup> Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up <sup>10</sup> and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. <sup>11</sup> But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.*

After such a high, you would think the Israelites would be cured of their rebellious streak. With all of their leaders so privileged to see God in a way no mortal had done at least since the time of Adam, you would think they were set for a golden era of closeness to God.

### ***A relationship ruined?***

It's not clear what role the priests and the elders played in the demand for idols, but it is clear they all failed in their duty to keep the people true to the covenant they had so recently affirmed. No wonder Moses was angry, and broke the first set of tablets when he returned from 40 days up the mountain!

The Golden Calf was their greatest low, a fundamental revolt against their saviour God. Yet this spiritual adultery was not the end of their relationship with God, though He would have been entitled to a divorce on the spot. They suffered the slaughter of 3000 people, killed by the Levites at Moses' command. And God himself sent a plague which we can only assume took more lives and caused more distress. But the people returned to their senses, mourned for their sin, and were not only spared God's wrath but were once again assured of God's presence with them when they moved into the Promised Land.

Moses returned up the mountain to receive another set of tablets, and again spent forty days in God's presence, and when he returned he was literally radiating God's glory.

Now the Israelites were prepared to do what God has told them, and they threw themselves enthusiastically into the task of making the Tabernacle, a process which as I mentioned must have taken around 7 months. I guess it was good for them to have something concrete and uplifting to focus on after their shameful idolatry – after all, there's no point moping about feeling sorry for yourself, particularly when you have been forgiven!

### ***Why not choose a better people?***

Have you ever stopped to ask why God bothered to choose such a fickle people in the first place? Surely there must be a better group of people to take as his own, a group who would be more faithful to him, who would at least give him the benefit of the doubt when they go through testing times, a group who would have the common sense to learn from past experience and to see the pattern that quickly emerged – which pointed to one unequivocal fact: that God would always look after them.

Well, the stark reality is that there were and are no people who would behave any better than this. Yes, there were one or two individuals who were more faithful than most, like Abraham and of course Moses too - though each of them also failed God at one or more points. But you will never find a large group which will consistently follow God with all their hearts. Yet still God chose them, cared for them, and even forgave them for their shameful rebellions.

What an encouragement this should be to us, who similarly fall short of God's standards, no matter how mature we think we are in our faith. God is not going to give up on us! He is not going to leave us to die in the desert! Neither is he going to hold our unfaithfulness against us, so long as we repent of it.

### ***The Shekinah Glory***

Now as we know perhaps all too well, much of the book is taken up with the Tabernacle. This was obviously a key part of God's design for his people, and I hope you have been encouraged by what we have learnt from studying it. Now, finally, they have completed its construction, and we have all but completed our studies!

There is a fittingly dramatic conclusion as God fills the Tabernacle with his glory.

Now of course the God who created the universe cannot fit within the confines of a small tent – Solomon realised this when he built the Temple (1 Kings 8:27):

*“But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!”*

Never-the-less, it was clear that God was present here in a special way.

This “Shekinah glory” is often mentioned in Christian or Jewish writing, although the word itself is not biblical.

As Simon Perry mentioned last week, the Hebrew word is from the same root as the word for Tabernacle – both meaning to dwell with someone. So the tabernacle was the place where God dwelt next to his people; and the Shekinah glory was a visible sign of God dwelling there.

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<sup>1</sup>The Holy Bible : New International Version. 1984; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996 (electronic edition.) (1 Ki 8:27). London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Now the pillar of smoke and fire was not a new sight for the people of Israel. Ever since they had left Egypt, since before they crossed the Red Sea, that pillar had been there to assure them of God's presence and to guide them in their journey through the desert (Exodus 13:21-22). Presumably, the thick cloud which covered Mount Sinai whilst Moses was receiving the 10 Commandments was this same cloud – it certainly marked the presence of God on the mountain.

Before the Tabernacle was built, Moses used to go out to a Tent of Meeting to meet with God, and again the pillar of cloud would come down to the entrance of the tent. It is mentioned specifically at two other points – once when Miriam and Aaron oppose Moses in Numbers 12, when the cloud comes down and Miriam gets leprosy; and once in Deuteronomy 31, where rather poignantly God summons Moses and Joshua to tell Moses that he is soon to die.

Strangely, nothing is made of the cloud after Moses death; it is not mentioned in Joshua or Judges as the land is conquered and settled. Maybe, once God led them to the borders of the Promised Land, such a sign of guidance was no longer necessary. Maybe, after Moses died, God was not so close to his people in the same way he had been with Moses – indeed, the incident with Miriam suggests this (Numbers 12:6):

*“When a prophet of the LORD is among you,  
I reveal myself to him in visions,  
I speak to him in dreams.  
<sup>7</sup> But this is not true of my servant Moses;  
he is faithful in all my house.  
<sup>8</sup> With him I speak face to face,  
clearly and not in riddles;  
he sees the form of the LORD.*

The next Shekinah reference comes when Solomon completes the Temple, in 1 Kings 8:10:

*<sup>10</sup> When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD.  
<sup>11</sup> And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple.*

This is very reminiscent of tonight's passage, where even Moses could not enter the Tabernacle because of the brightness of God's glory.

It would seem, then, that there are at least two levels of Shekinah brightness – a “normal” one, where Moses and others could enter God's presence; and an “ultrabright” one, when they could not.

The next mention comes in Ezekiel 10, where Ezekiel sees a vision of the cloud departing from the Temple, just before the exile into Babylon. There is no mention elsewhere of the cloud actually doing this, which makes me suspect that by this time the physical manifestation had, at least from the outside of the Temple, faded away. Perhaps this was a gradual process, so that few if any noticed that the cloud was getting smaller and less bright until it had disappeared from view completely. Perhaps this corresponded to the waning of Israel's dedication to God – a sobering thought.

It is entirely possible that the Shekinah remained as a physical phenomenon at the Mercy Seat above the ark, where God met with the High Priest once a year. Until, that is, this vision of Ezekiel's came to pass.

There is no mention of the Shekinah in the Temple in the New Testament, but there are of course references to bright lights – in the glory that shone round the angels at Christ's birth (Luke 2:9), and of course on the Mount of Transfiguration, where the bright cloud enveloped them. Curiously, a cloud obscures Christ from view as he ascends to heaven in the first chapter of Acts; and in Revelation 14 the Son of Man is seated on a white cloud when he comes to harvest the earth.

### ***Shekinah shenanigans***

Now some people make much of the Shekinah manifestation. There is even a curious apocryphal story, apparently backed up by the historian Josephus, of Herod raiding the tomb of David and Solomon:

*“Herod opened the sepulchre by night – looking for treasure in the tomb - and went into it, and endeavoured that it should not be known in the city, but took only his faithful friends with him... However, he [Herod] had a great desire to make a more diligent search, and to go further in, even as far as the very bodies of David and Solomon; WHERE TWO OF HIS GUARDS WERE SLAIN BY A FLAME that burst out upon those that went in, as the report was. So he was terribly affrightened, and went out, and built a propitiatory monument of that fright he had been in; and this of white stone, at the mouth of the sepulchre.(Antiquities 14.7.1, allegedly).*

Now that sounds a bit like Raiders of the Lost Ark, and does highlight a danger of becoming too obsessed with the Shekinah itself.

It is important to realise that this is a manifestation of God, it is not God. It's not like those sci-fi films where there's an ethereal shining life-form whose light darts around the screen! God is not limited to one place in his universe, and the idea that his Shekinah glory was lurking about underneath the Temple is frankly absurd.

Yet manifestations of God in a shining cloud are undoubtedly real, as are the shining lights accompanying angels and the transfiguration.

Imagine that you have a bright lamp, and place it behind a dark card. The light can't be seen, but of course it is still there. Then make a small hole in the card – light comes streaming out. But the hole is not the light; without the light itself, the hole is nothing; and the light, in fact, is everywhere on the other side of the card. Make another hole, and light comes through there too – and the first is just as bright. There's no point getting superstitious about the hole. It is nothing; the light source is what is important.

So, in a sense, this Shekinah glory is a bit like a hole in the fabric that separates our physical reality from the even more real spiritual one. Occasionally God opens a gap in that fabric, and from our side it is as though an immense and powerful light is shining from the gap.

No wonder there is no need of a sun in heaven!

### ***Shekinah in the heart***

The Apostle Paul mentions this glory cloud as one of the great advantages enjoyed by the nation of Israel; yet despite the evident superiority of the New Covenant over the old one, nothing like the Shekinah is seen today.

It is no coincidence that when John speaks of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling amongst us (John 1:14), the word he uses means to “pitch one’s tent” – for in Christ God was living with his people much more closely than when he was hidden in the inner tent of the old tabernacle.

You see, all the time God was Shekinah-ing amongst his people, he was pointing them to a greater truth that was to come. We have seen and commented on some of these spiritual parallels as we have gone through Exodus – Christ being the true Passover Lamb, Christ being the rock that was struck to give us the water of life, Christ being the true sacrifice which is necessary before we can enter the most holy place where God is.

We have also seen how the *nation* of Israel is a kind of picture of our own lives, how we tend to grumble and even rebel against God, despite the evidences of his love and care he has given us – and of course how God will forgive us and restore our relationship, through that sacrifice of Christ.

There is another quite striking parallel. You may remember that the tribes of Israel had a specific plan for setting up their camp – with the tribes arranged in a circle. And what was in the very centre of the circle? The Tabernacle of course, and at the heart of the Tabernacle was God himself.

This is a picture of the closeness of the relationship God really wants with us, his people. He does not want to live in a tent, or even a Temple, next door to us; he wants to live *within* us, in our very hearts. This was one of the great mysteries of God’s plan, as Paul says in Colossians 1:27,

*“God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”*

Isn’t that something amazing? There is no Shekinah glory in our churches and cathedrals today, not because God no longer lives with his people, but because he lives *in* his people! The gift of the Holy Spirit has changed the whole dynamic of our relationship to God. No longer do we need a priest to intercede for us. No longer is there a special place where God meets with man, accompanied by sacrifice and ceremony. Once we become a Christian, God himself makes his dwelling in our own hearts, enabling us to communicate with God through our prayers and through reading His word, whenever we want. Who needs a cloud when you have the Holy Spirit?

### ***Jesus at the Centre***

So many religious people spend so much time and effort trying to get closer to God, to live with him; when all along God wants to live with us! There’s a double truth here. Firstly, that it is God’s initiative and on God’s terms that we can enjoy such a close relationship with him. So whereas the religions of the world are all about us trying to find God, the message of Christianity is that God is dying to find us.

The second truth is that God wants to be in our lives where we are! Those who separate themselves off from everyday life so that they can be closer to God are missing the whole point. God does not want to dwell in some remote place away from the hustle and bustle of our lives – he wants to be in the very centre of the action.

Further, of course, he wants to be the very centre of our lives – for only then will our lives be complete. That is what we were designed for, and without God, there is, as someone said, a God-shaped hole in our lives.

There is no other sustainable way to live. We can skirt around the outskirts of God for a while, but it is not a comfortable place to stay for long. We can even allow God into our lives, but still keep him at arms length, while we continue to live more or less to please ourselves. But then the light of God in our lives grows dim, like that cloud disappearing from above the Tabernacle. God will still be there, in the depths of your heart; but the joy and vitality of that relationship will be gone.

Or we can allow God to be the centre of our lives. We can open all of our life to him, so that his glory fills our tabernacle. With God at the centre of our lives, we will be a link between the spiritual and physical worlds as we thought earlier; we can be a hole through which God's light shines into the world, attracting others to the light.

Benediction: Phil 2:12-16.