

Exodus 29:42-46 (William Joseph Lowe) 146861

The Dwelling-Place of God, Dwelling-Place of God, The (29:42-46)

It is of the greatest value to us spiritually to trace the ways of God through Scripture, and the corresponding exercises of heart produced by His Spirit in connection therewith. Unfolded gradually as they are in the history of His chosen people, we find in them at the same time God's thoughts and purposes more and more distinctly set forth, in view of Christ's coming. All bears witness to Him.

The ways of God toward man, however they may vary in form in succeeding dispensations, remain the same in principle. As vividly presented in the Old Testament history, they lay hold of our hearts and command our attention; whereas the doctrines which embody them are often but little apprehended, and, alas! are readily set aside as having but little application to our daily life and walk. Besides this, there is the danger of the mind rather than the heart and conscience being in exercise with doctrines. We need to preserve the character of the "little child," who learns at first not by doctrine, but by observation of persons and facts to which his attention is drawn. Hence the importance of the Old Testament, by which we discover how truth is coordinated, and in what manner it should affect the heart.

As soon as God had gathered a people around Himself in separation from the idolatrous nations, we find that His purpose was to dwell among them. This will characterize the eternal state (Rev. 21:3). It is also essentially true of Christianity (2 Cor. 6:16). The divine principle remains unaltered. It was first indicated in the song that Moses and the children of Israel sang at the Red Sea (Exod. 15:2, 13, 17); and it is definitely stated in Exod. 19:4 and 25:8: "I... brought you unto Myself," and, "Let them make Me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them." God's purpose is undeniable, both for them and for us (Eph. 2:22); and the practical question arises, How do our hearts respond to it?

But let us recall the facts. From Exod. 29:42-46, we learn what was the position and external relationship with God, into which the redeemed people were brought. After the consecration of the priests, and the institution of the daily sacrifice, we read: "This shall be a continual burnt offering throughout your generations at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation before the LORD, where I will meet you, to speak there unto thee [that is, Moses]. And there I will meet with the children of Israel, and the tabernacle shall be sanctified by My glory. And I will sanctify the tabernacle of the congregation, and the altar: I will sanctify also both Aaron and his sons, to minister to Me in the priest's office. And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will, be their God, and they shall know that I am the LORD their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them: I am the LORD their God."

Here we have God's thoughts in connection with the people He had brought out of Egypt. (Compare Isa. 43.) He would "dwell" with them, and "make Himself known" to them. In how much fuller measure and deeper blessedness this is to be realized by us now, through the Holy Ghost, we know; but we have to challenge our hearts as to the value we set upon these things, remembering that the history of the people of Israel was "written for our admonition" (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11).

In order to make the application more simple to us in our present position and circumstances, let us suppose that we meet the children of Israel after they have left Egypt and passed through the Red Sea, just as they are commencing the wilderness journey. Let us ask one of them, in the first place, "What are you doing here?" He would, no doubt, reply, "God has delivered us from Egypt, from Pharaoh's bondage, and we are on our way to the land He has promised to give us." That was God's purpose for them. He had brought them out of Egypt and He was going to bring them into the land promised to their fathers (Deut. 6:21-23). As has been often pointed out, in chapters 3, 6, and 15 of Exodus, there is no mention at all of the wilderness. They had left Egypt to go to Canaan. I take it for granted that all here are clear as to the application of this. Through God's infinite mercy we are redeemed from sin and Satan's power, set in Christ beyond death and judgment, and destined for heaven where Jesus is.

Let us now put a second question, and ask one of these Israelites, "What do you possess as a present portion while on the way to the promised land? Here you are in the wilderness, out of Egypt, it is true, but not as yet in the promised land; what have you got from God now?" Many a one absorbed, no doubt, with murmurs and complaints about the difficulties, dangers, trials, and disappointments met with by the way, could have given no satisfactory reply; but from a man of faith like Caleb, you would probably have received an answer in accordance with God's thoughts. "What have we now?" he would have said. "Surely we have God. God Himself is with us, and has promised to dwell in the midst of us."

The pillar of cloud betokening God's presence was ever over the tabernacle. They always had it in all their journeying, by day and by night (Numb. 9:15-23), the symbol of God's abiding presence over the tent in which He dwelt, marking out their path and going with them wherever they had to go (1 Chron. 17:5, 6). The tribes were arranged around the tabernacle, as we see in Numb. 2, three tribes on each side, and each one relatively near. Some, at least, of the tents of each tribe were in close proximity to the Levites, who encamped round the court of the tabernacle itself, and from their own tent doors could the people see the hangings of the court which enclosed God's dwelling-place. Of those who were farther off, some might be unable to see the tabernacle because of the intervening tents; but every Israelite could look forth and see the cloud with its descending pillar-cloud by day and fire by night resting upon the tabernacle in token that Jehovah was there in their midst. True, the pillar at night must have reminded them that God was "a consuming fire"; but, even so, grace and glory were the hidden basis of apparent judgment with its terrors. God is a "consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29), and always remains so. But while judging evil, He saves the sinner, acting in accordance with the manner in which He had revealed Himself to Moses in the bush at the "backside of the desert." (Exod. 3) The bush was a figure of Israel, failing, weak, worthless, but tried in the fire; it was not consumed. And why? For the very reason that God Himself, unchanged and unchangeable, was there, and there for them. In the last prophecy of the Old Testament, we are reminded of the same truth: "I am the LORD [Jehovah], I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed." Mal. 3:6. Is not this an immense blessing? - a very real thing for faith? We have to do with One who "abideth faithful," and "with whom is no variableness, neither

shadow of turning."

The people were tested by the law. In Exod. 20 are recorded the ten commandments. The chapter opens with "I am the LORD [Jehovah] thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before Me." The record of what God had done for Israel in sovereign grace and mercy, His work accomplished for them, lay at the basis of His ways and became the measure of their responsibility toward Him. They could not but own that they had known God thus, "long-suffering, and of great mercy," as the One who had delivered them from Egypt and from Pharaoh; and they were enjoined to have "no other gods."

Is it not striking to notice that, at the end of John's Epistle, after the fullest unfoldings of grace toward us through the revelation, in the Lord Jesus Christ, of the true God and the eternal life, we get a similar injunction?—"This is the true God, and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols." The knowledge in the soul of what God is as He has revealed Himself, is the spring of true piety, and that which determines the character of the practical walk.

When we reach Exod. 32, we find that the people had already broken out into open rebellion. God then says to them through Moses, "I will not go up in the midst of thee; for thou art a stiffnecked people: lest I consume thee in the way." Chap. 33:3. Moses pleads for them, and, in answer to his intercession, God declares Himself to be "merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin," while by no means clearing the guilty; and this from the very mountain whence, amid lightnings and thunder, had issued the fiery law. How beautiful to see Moses, who had laid hold of this declaration of God's ways, beseeching Him: "If now I have found grace in Thy sight, O Lord, let my Lord, I pray Thee, go among us" (34:9); "for," says he, "it is a stiffnecked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Thine inheritance."

God had given His verdicts as to the people, and He had declared Himself. The resource of the true soul is always and only God. God must needs go with them because of what they were—hopelessly ruined, irreclaimable, stiffnecked, and rebellious. In God was their only hope; He was their Savior and their strength. If He went not with them, as Moses said, they could not go.

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