

CHRIST AND THE DESERT TABERNACLE

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AND THE
DESERT
TABERNACLE**

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*Dedicated to the
tireless service of elders*

Wallace B. King

and

Carleton 'Bud' Winslow

CHRIST AND THE DESERT TABERNACLE

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In many ways this book is about the ultimate church-building programme. Though it begins with the blueprints for the tabernacle, these portions of Scripture are ultimately about Christ, the cornerstone, and the final dwelling place made out of living stones, the church. As I have reflected upon these texts, my mind has been drawn back repeatedly to my time in the pastorate at Geneva Orthodox Presbyterian Church (Woodstock, Georgia), where this book originated as part of a sermon series on Exodus. I have been reminded not merely of the Sundays when I delivered the messages but of my own small efforts to build, care for and protect the small section of God’s final dwelling place that Geneva represents. I did not work alone. The love, care, labours, prayers and ceaseless shepherding of my two ruling elders, Wallace B. King and Carleton ‘Bud’ Winslow, were indispensable. These two men gave up countless hours on behalf of the saints at Geneva. They continue to labour in this way to the present. Bud and Wally, thank you for

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J. V. Fesko

Escondido, California

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Introduction

I can remember sitting at the breakfast table, bleary-eyed, at six o'clock in the morning reading my Bible for family devotions. My parents had decided that we would read through the Bible in a year. Like most people in the church I found the opening chapters of the Old Testament to be interesting—the narratives had many fascinating and exciting accounts of the lives of the saints. Some of the narratives that come to mind are the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22) and the Red Sea crossing (Exodus 14). But soon after the Israelites emerged from the Red Sea and received the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), to my young and perhaps sleepy mind, the narrative came to a screeching halt when we began reading about the tabernacle. I can remember reading about the various pieces of furniture, the curtains, the priest's clothing, and thinking that there were too many details, and frankly, they were boring. To a child's mind, how can Pharaoh's army drowning in the Red Sea compare to a table with bread, or a washbasin? In one sense, my lack of interest of the Bible was understandable—I was a young child who did not know better. On the other hand, as a pastor I also know of people with whom I have discussed passages about the tabernacle who have told me that they find them uninteresting and often skip over them during their devotional reading.

In the pages that follow, I hope to be able to show readers, young and old alike, that far from being boring or uninteresting, the Old Testament tabernacle, and later the temple in Solomon's day, is a shadowy picture of Christ and the church. True, people are perhaps

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easily able to draw the connections between Jesus and the sacrificial animals, as Jesus is identified as the one and only true sacrifice who takes away our sins (e.g., Hebrews 8–10; 1 John 2:2); but beyond these obvious connections, the Old Testament tabernacle is literally an entire world of references, allusions and foreshadows of Christ and the church. One need not go very far to uncover the connections between Jesus and the Old Testament tabernacle—the New Testament reveals them to us. If you read about the Old Testament tabernacle in the light of the New Testament, you will never think the descriptions of the tabernacle and its furnishings are boring. Instead, you will be filled with hope and assurance, knowing that Jesus Christ, the true tabernacle, has come to redeem his people, living stones, and unite us to him, the one true foundation, so that we would become the eternal temple of the living God.

1

Building Materials

Read Exodus 25:1–9 (35:4–9)

Introduction

Whilst we are exploring the plans for the tabernacle, we must remember that we are looking at the shadows and types of the person and work of Christ. Jesus' relationship to the tabernacle is especially evident when he told his disciples, 'Something greater than the temple is here' (Matthew 12:6). But one of the most powerful statements Christ made was when he was walking through the Herodian temple complex and his disciples marvelled at the grandeur and immensity of the buildings. John tells us in his Gospel: 'Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking about the temple of his body' (John 2:19–21). We need to remember that Jesus is the ultimate embodiment of the temple—he is the chief cornerstone of the new temple, as the apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians (2:19–22).

This means that when we read of the tabernacle, we are looking at a shadowy picture of Christ and the church. We must keep this in mind, otherwise we might think that we are merely reading the instructions and account of the construction of a tent—and one to which the people of God have no connection. So let us turn to

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the first portion of the tabernacle, namely, the collection of the offerings for the tabernacle. As we reflect upon the narrative, we should pay particular attention to four things: first, the people gave of their possessions voluntarily and generously; second, Israel's offerings were for the construction of God's dwelling place; third, there was a good and bad use of the gold from Egypt; and, fourth, God was very specific regarding what materials were to be used in the construction of the tabernacle.

Instructions regarding the offering and materials

The initial instructions that Moses received were for contributions for the construction of the tabernacle. God told Moses to take up contributions, literally *offerings*, from the people. In other words, the people's offering was an act of worship. It was not merely a collection of needed materials, something like a trip to the local builders' merchants. What type of materials did God require for the tabernacle? It is obvious from the list that the very best types of materials were used, as they are listed in order of descending value: gold, silver and bronze (v. 3). God's plans also called for the use of blue, purple and scarlet yarns, which might not strike us as all that significant, especially in our own day when we can go to the local store and purchase yarn quite inexpensively.

When we consider, however, that twelve thousand murex snails were required to yield 1.4 grams of purple dye, all of a sudden the great value of these materials becomes evident. God also called for the use of fine linen, which undoubtedly came from Egypt, as with all of the precious materials Israel contributed towards the construction of the tabernacle. In addition to these materials, God's plans called for various types of animal skins, goats and rams, though some translations have porpoise (NAS) and sea cows (NIV).

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The divine plans also called for precious stones, particularly for the high priest's breastpiece on his ephod.

To what end were all of these materials to be used? God wanted Moses to have the people construct a tabernacle or sanctuary so that God could 'dwell in their midst' (v. 8). We will see in upcoming chapters that God also gave Moses specific commands regarding the construction of the tabernacle—Moses was to follow the instructions down to the smallest detail (v. 9). He should follow God's instructions precisely, because the tabernacle was a copy of the heavenly temple. The author of Hebrews tells us: 'For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf' (Hebrews 9:24). So, then, when we look at the temple, we should realize that we are not only looking at a shadowy image of Christ and the church but we are, in a manner of speaking, looking at a piece of heaven on earth.

Reflecting upon the nature of the materials

As we reflect upon this passage of Scripture we should look at three features of the text that give us a better understanding of our connection to the passage and how we understand its significance in our own setting.

Voluntary offering

First, the offerings were not forced but were supposed to be voluntary. God told Moses to take an offering 'from every man whose heart moves him' (v. 2). In the parallel passage in Exodus 35 Moses tells the people, 'Whoever is of a generous heart, let him bring the LORD's contribution' (v. 5). In other words, the offerings were supposed to be a response from the people of God. The

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offerings were not repayment for their deliverance from Egypt, nor were they an effort to purchase their redemption—such thoughts are alien to the text. Rather, their giving towards the construction of the temple was supposed to be an act of heartfelt gratitude and worship.

Certainly Paul's instructions to the Corinthians echo God's instructions to Moses: 'Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver' (2 Corinthians 9:7). As we know, the people were not obedient because while Moses was at the top of Mount Sinai receiving these instructions, they were at the foot of the mountain plotting rebellion. The people eventually asked Aaron to fashion a graven image of God. Nevertheless, once God had dealt with their disobedience and Moses brought the request to the people, they responded in kind—and gave generously:

'The people bring much more than enough for doing the work that the Lord has commanded us to do.' So Moses gave command, and word was proclaimed throughout the camp, 'Let no man or woman do anything more for the contribution for the sanctuary.' So the people were restrained from bringing, for the material they had was sufficient to do all the work, and more
(Exodus 36:5–7).

The people were told to stop giving because they had given more than enough for the construction of the tabernacle. Given the costly nature of the materials we see the depth of their generosity. Why did they give so generously? There are certainly many reasons, but one chief among them is that they were contributing to the construction of God's dwelling place.

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Construction of God's dwelling place

Ever since the Garden of Eden the people of God had been alienated from their covenant Lord. God removed Adam and Eve from the presence of the garden, God's first earthly dwelling place, the first temple. When he removed them, and barred their access to his presence, he promised of a time when their fellowship would be restored, when the seed of the woman would conquer the seed of the serpent.

Israel's redemption from Egypt and now the construction of God's dwelling place in the midst of Israel was a giant step forward in restoring that broken fellowship. This restoration, the longing to dwell in the presence of God, I believe, was undoubtedly a motivating factor in the generosity of the Israelites. The psalmist expresses this sentiment well: 'I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and will execute justice for the needy. Surely the righteous shall give thanks to your name; the upright shall dwell in your presence' (Psalms 140:12-13). Elsewhere the psalmist writes: 'For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness' (Psalms 84:10).

When we consider the generosity of the Israelites and the desire to dwell in the presence of the Lord, we should ask ourselves whether such behaviour marks us. In other words, are we generous in our giving? When we give our tithes and offerings, do we give generously knowing that it ultimately goes to the construction of the final dwelling place of God, the church? As the recipients of God's grace in Christ, do we give generously so that the gospel of Christ is preached in our own community, throughout our own country, and even throughout the world? As we know from the dominion mandate given to the first Adam, he was to fill the earth

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with the image of God and was supposed to extend the garden, the temple, to the ends of the earth. When Adam sinned, God himself took up the work he gave to Adam and told Abraham that through him all the nations would be blessed. God was going to accomplish the work of the dominion mandate—through his Son, the last Adam.

The last Adam took up the work of the mandate when he gave the church the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–19). We are to go into every nation with the gospel; and the church cannot go into the nations apart from generous giving. The church, the people of God, must give generously so that the church, the final temple, the dwelling place of God, is built. There is another observation upon which we should meditate, namely, the source of the precious offerings.

Using Egypt's gold towards the right end

Israel as a nation of slaves had no wealth. When God delivered them from their cruel Egyptian overlords, he gave them favour with their masters; this divinely given favour enabled the Israelites to plunder them: 'And the LORD had given the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. Thus they plundered the Egyptians' (Exodus 12:36). But for Israel there was a good and bad use of the gold and treasures of Egypt. The good use was obviously for the construction of the house of God, the tabernacle. The bad use was the creation of the golden calf—a graven image of God (Exodus 32:4). I think there is an important lesson here, namely, how do we utilize our finances and possessions?

We can very easily turn the money we receive from our jobs and investments, and our possessions, into an idol, when God has

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given them to us so we can contribute to the construction of the temple, or the church. This, of course, casts a different light upon our employment. Do we go to work so we can make more money? And while the financial support of our families is definitely an important, noble and godly goal (1 Timothy 5:8), do we also have a desire to contribute more to the construction of the temple, the church? This passage should certainly cause us to think of our use of money—do we worship it, or use it to advance the gospel of Christ? Last but not least, there is another element of this narrative that should draw our attention, namely, the specific instructions regarding what materials were to be used.

With what would the temple be built?

This narrative certainly highlights the specific kinds of materials that were supposed to be used to construct the tabernacle. In the New Testament Paul challenges the Corinthians regarding the nature of the materials they use for the construction of the church, the final temple:

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

(1 Corinthians 3:10–16).

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Now to be sure, this passage is primarily directed at ministers and how they will build upon the foundation of the temple, namely Christ. Yet, at the same time, the questions that Paul poses are relevant to us all.

Will we construct the temple, the church, in accordance with the specific instructions that God has given? Will we construct it with the wisdom of man or with the materials that God has prescribed: the preaching and teaching of the Word, and Christ and him crucified; the administration of the sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper; and fervent prayer? We can only build upon the foundation of Christ with the materials that God has prescribed, nothing less will do. We should, therefore, like Moses, follow the commands of the Lord and use only those things he has ordained for the construction of the temple, the church.

Conclusion

As we read this narrative, remember the following four elements. First, the people gave of their possessions voluntarily and generously, therefore, by God's grace in Christ, give generously to the church. Second, Israel's offerings were for the construction of God's dwelling place, therefore as God's people, we who have been united to Christ, our great foundation, must pray that Christ would enable us to be faithful in spreading the gospel to all the nations of the earth so that God's dwelling place would be built through the preaching of the word. Third, there was a good and bad use of the gold of Egypt, therefore we ought to use the financial blessings that the Lord gives us, not as an idol, but to advance the gospel of Christ. Fourth, and last, God was very specific in what materials should be used for the tabernacle, therefore we must build the church with the specific materials that God has commanded: the Word, the sacraments and prayer.