

BaptistWay: Finishing and moving on

May 15, 2015

- *The BaptistWay lesson for May 31 focuses on Exodus 39:32, 42-43; 40:1-2, 16-17, 32-38.*

When we began this journey many chapters ago, we imagined what fear can drive us to do. In fear of people, the new Pharaoh ordered the killing of Hebrew boys. In fear of God, Shiphrah and Puah defied Pharaoh's orders and spared newborn Hebrew boys. Much later, the Hebrew people were gripped by fear of people—in particular, the Egyptian army—when they felt trapped between the sea and that same army. Later still, the Hebrews trembled in fear of God when God's presence descended on Mount Sinai.

Throughout our journey through Exodus, we have watched people waver between fear of people and fear of God. A common denominator between the two objects of fear was the power differential between the Egyptians and the Israelites and between God and the people. We learned fear is proper in relation to God but is misplaced in relation to people. In fact, fear of God is what makes fear of people improper.

Now, we turn a corner

With the construction of the tabernacle, God's presence no longer was amidst the billowing storm and ferocious fire on top of the mountain. With the finished tabernacle, God's presence was now in the valleys and the plains in the middle of the people. With the completion and consecration of the tabernacle, God no longer stayed up in the pulpit or at the base of the steps leading up but now lived in the middle of the pews with the people. Pastors will do well to remember that.

Let's go back again

A few weeks ago, we considered the beauty of the tabernacle as a reflection of God's glory seen by the group of men who climbed the mountain to meet God (Exodus 24:9-10; 25:2-7). In Exodus 25:8, we learn God intended to move off the mountain and to "dwell among them (the people)." God then gave Moses detailed instructions for the tabernacle, its furnishings and the priestly attire (Exodus 25-30). Toward the end of these instructions, God reaffirmed, "I will dwell among the Israelites (in the tent of meeting) ... (for I) brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them" (Exodus 29:44-46).

Imagine living with hundreds of thousands of people in a large tent city. Refugees around the world have little difficulty imagining this. In the center of your tent city is a particularly nice tent, and in that tent lives God. Full stop.

In that particularly nice tent lives God. Right in the center of your tent city. Not Alexander the Great, not Ulysses S. Grant or some other famous tent-dwelling general, not any sort of president or emperor or human hero. God lives in that tent—by choice, by design. And God promises to go with us (Exodus 33:14-17; 40:34-38; Matthew 28:20). What wonder!

Yes, God lives in that tent, the God who plagued Egypt, the God who parted the sea, the God who shook the mountain. And this God wants to stay in the middle of us, and this God promises to go with us wherever we go. Do we really want something like that so close? All the time? How fearsome!

Familiarity breeds contempt

As we look beyond Exodus, we see the people became too familiar with God, maybe even comfortable. Because God no longer brooded at the top of the mountain, because God now lived in a tent just like the people, the people seemed to forget "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"

(Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 9:10). We see the people's contempt for God and Moses, God's chosen leader, demonstrated in their complaining, their disobedience and their lack of faith (The following chapters in Numbers provide enough evidence: 11-12, 14, 16, 20:1-13, 21:4-9; 25).

We frequently approach God too casually. We frequently take God's presence in our midst with too much familiarity. We once again have become more fearful of people than we are of God, bowing to people's peccadilloes, preferences and power than to God's. We have forgotten God's presence among us is awesome—in the old sense—grace. Have we taken grace for granted (Romans 6:1-2)?

Let us renew a right relationship

We are the tabernacle of the Lord, a dwelling not made by human hands. In us dwells the Spirit of God promised by Jesus Christ and given to us as a promise of his return (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19; 2 Corinthians 1:21-22; 6:16; Ephesians 2:21-22; Revelation 21:3). Let us, then, take heed of the lessons of Exodus. Let us regain a sense of awe, wonder and reverence—a right fear—in the presence of our God. Let us obey the Lord and walk in the ways of the Lord, that all may see God's presence with us and worship aright.

Questions for personal reflection

1. What is the "tabernacle" in your life? What is the place of God's sacred presence in your life?
2. How does seeing the "tabernacle" in the center of your life center you, lead you, ground you, inspire you?
3. How have you grown too familiar with God and lost proper awe and "fear of the LORD?"

4. How will you renew a right relationship with God?