Bible Study Notes on Exodus (1980)

# Introduction to Exodus

Exodus carries straight on from where Genesis ended, with Jacob's descendants settled in Egypt. But the people of Israel have no ultimate reason for being there. Their stay in Egypt can only be seen as a temporary interlude pending God's fulfilment of his promise to give the Israelites a homeland in Palestine. The first stage to this is to get out of Egypt, and chs. 1-18 relate how they escaped, under the leadership of Moses. Their destination was a mountain in Sinai where they were to worship God, and the rest of Exodus sees them encamped for a while there. There the relationship with God is sealed and God begins to give Moses his l;iw and to instruct him on how the Israelites are to worship God (chs. 1931). Meanwhile, however, they are building the golden rail', and thus they have to be rebuked and chastised, and their relationship with God re-established (chs. 32-34). Finally Exodus describes the building of the tabernacle. The story carries on in Leviticus, where the tabernacle worship is instituted.

The events recorded in Exodus are probably to be dated in the thirteenth century BC. The Tyndale Commentary on *Exodus* by R. A. Cole is very useful. It explains points of history, geography, etc. which there is no room to take up in these notes.

# Exodus 1:1-22

Who has the last word in the story of God and his people? Here they are subjected to exile (1-6), to hardship (8-11, 13, 14), and to persecution (15, 16). It might be expected that this would lead to this tiny ethnic group withering or being absorbed and disappearing without trace. But in fact they multiply (7), they multiply (12), they multiply (17-20).

How did it come about? Hardship can have the opposite effect to the one intended, as the growth of the Christian Church under persecution further demonstrates. Behind the chapter lies a promise of God repeated in Genesis, that Israel *will* become a great nation (e.g. Gen. 12; 46). God's promises are not stopped by the circumstances of history but are worked out in the events of history and the lives of his people.

But what of the end of the story? Pharaoh is not finished yet, and the chapter closes on a down note. Does God have the last word after all? When we are in the position of Israel here (22), we have to remember the experience of the earlier parts of the chapter. Our lives are lived under God's promise. We live in hope now not because the situation is hopeful (it may be hopeless), but because we have that promise, and because we have known God's promises fulfilled in the past.

**For thought:** 'Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength' (ha. 40:31).

# Exodus 2:1-10

We move from a very general picture of how things were in Egypt for Israel as a whole, to a particular example of how Egyptian policy affected one ordinary family. As so often, the Bible does not tell us about the feelings of the people involved. But it does not take much imagination to envisage the anguish of Moses' family.

Hebrews takes this story as an example of the daring faith which Christians should show (Heb. 11:23). Behind the actual actions of vs. 1-4 it sees not merely the distress of parents but the faith of believers. Perhaps they cunningly abandoned the baby where he would be likely to be found and taken pity on by some Egyptian woman with motherly instincts. But questions remain. What kind of person would it be? What would happen to him? How would he be brought up? All this had to be left to God.

The parents' faith, however, was vindicated. *Pharaoh* had ordered that Hebrew children be killed. Now *his own daughter* frustrated her father's will and preserved the one whom God would use to humiliate Pharaoh. The New Testament points out that this was the way Moses got his education (Acts 7:22). God can use every circumstance of our lives. Through these unlikely years God was preparing Moses for his life's work.

# Exodus 2:11-25

Here the scene is set for the story of the Israelites' escape from Egypt.

**The one who will lead them** shows that he is the kind of stuff revolutionaries are made of. Admittedly his first action on behalf of justice (11-15) may have been ill-advised, but it does reveal a genuine concern. But his second act with its happier consequences (17-21) shows that the story does not mean to commend inaction. Like his parents, he lives by faith (Heb. 11:24-27).

**The place where they will serve God**. The land of Midian is to be where God will meet not only with Moses but with all Israel. The years he spent there in exile add a further dimension to the complex personality of a great man of God. He is an Egyptian, yet not an Egyptian; an Israelite, yet not an Israelite; a Midianite, yet not really at home in Midian (11, 19, 22).

**The God who will meet them** (23-25). Israel's anguished groans (23) are hardly prayers - she is too low to pray. But God heard, God remembered, God saw, God knew - and did something about it. The relationship of God with his people continues (24) even if circumstances change (25). God's knowledge of today's world is no less detailed. Isaiah 63:9 is a commentary on Israel's situation here.

**For meditation:** God hears, God remembers, God sees, God knows. Apply this to your needs today

# Exodus 3:1-12

**God appears** (1-6). Just what Moses saw we do not know. But he saw something strange, he responded, and he met the living God. Paradoxically, however, when God appears to men, they characteristically find that while they are drawn to him and want to meet him, at the same time they feel compelled to draw back from him because of his awesomeness (5, 6). If we take the holiness of God seriously, we will know both reactions in our relationship with him.

**God commissions** (7-10). There is, no doubt, a thrill in Moses' heart when he learns what God intends (7-9). But there is also a solemnity about Moses' next discovery. God's action is not just something he can watch and enjoy, but something he has to be involved in himself (10). Special experiences of God, however private, are not an end in themselves. They are given because he plans to use us in some way.

**God promises** (11, 12). God does not rebuke Moses for shrinking from his calling. But nor does he give easy answers to Moses' objection. 'I will be with you': but what that will mean in practice is unstated. 'You will know that I sent you by the fact that you will succeed in bringing Israel here to worship.' Moses will not know this as an experienced certainty until it actually happens. In the meantime, he is challenged to live by a moment by moment trust. He is expected to walk by faith, not by sight. So are we.

# Exodus 3:13-22

Moses and Israel have reached a point of transition. They have known God as 'the God of the Father(s)' guiding the wandering clan. But now they are a nation and are beginning a new kind of life. And they receive a new revelation of God in connection with it.

The new name for God appears in most English Bibles as the LORD or GOD (in capital letters). But it is really a proper name. 'Jehovah' is the older English form but is a mispronunciation: probably it was read 'Yahweh'.

The name itself seems to have been known in some form before Moses' time, but now it is given new meaning (14). Yahweh is the God who is there, always making his presence felt on his people's behalf. The explanation of the name remains cryptic however. This reminds us that we can never know everything about God.

**For meditation:** *The LORD does not change (Mai. 3:6; see Heb. 13:8). This is our security when everything around seems to be changing. But there is a converse truth, that, when circumstances change, the way in which we discover the Lord's presence in them can also change. He is consistent, but our relationship with him is not inflexible, nor boring. He can be to us whatever we need as new situations arise. We should always be open to the possibility of God surprising us with new things.*

# Exodus 4:1-17

This extraordinary conversation between God and Moses carries on. The Lord of heaven and earth continues to try to persuade his prospective servant to accept that he, God, knows how best to fulfil his purpose and act in mercy towards Israel.

He does this by making three promises in response to Moses' objections. He promises Moses **the people's acceptance** (1-9). Moses has a mighty task, that of convincing the dispirited Israelites that the Lord is greater than their circumstances and that he has called Moses. But he is also given extraordinary abilities in connection with that task. We will look at these signs in more detail when we come to chs. 7-12. Moses\* gifts may be unique; but the Lord still calls people to respond with daring service. The final responsibility for the outcome depends on (i<>d\ power not our ability.

The Lord promises Moses **the words to say** (10-12). Here Moses' call is especially reminiscent of Jeremiah's (Jer. 1:6-10). (iod assures Moses, as he would later assure Jeremiah, that he himself can be relied on to equip a person for what he calls that person to.

The Lord promises Moses **a spokesman** (13-17). This is the only objection that the Lord rebukes. There comes a point when we have to stop worrying about possible problems and about our inabilities, and get on with the job the Lord calls us to.

**For thought:** *Moses was no saint. But the Lord could achieve his purpose through him just the same. The relevance of that for us is obvious.*

# Exodus 4:18-31

One theme that emerges here is the overcoming of various obstacles in the way of Moses' carrying out of the task that the Lord was determined he should take on.

Can Moses go with his family's blessing? Yes, he can (18). Is his life still in danger in Egypt? Not any longer (19). Can he be confident of success? Yes, though only because of the Lord's activity through him and alongside him (20-23).

Then, mysteriously, the Lord himself threatens to frustrate the plan (24-26). We cannot fully interpret the incident, but apparently some 'accident' or illness, recognised as the Lord's doing, threatened Moses' life. He is only saved through his son's circumcision. According to Genesis 17 the boy should have been circumcised as a baby, and this may be the point. Circumcision was *the* sign of belonging to God's people, and Moses had therefore neglected something of key importance.

But then, will Aaron really accept Moses? Yes, he will (27-30). And will the people respond? Yes, they do (31).

Being servants of God involves trusting God to overcome the obstacles to the fulfilment of his own purpose. It also involves avoiding setting up such obstacles ourselves.

**Prayer:** *Go before us, O Lord, in all our doings with thy most gracious favour, and further us with thy continuous help; that in all our works, begun, continued, and ended in thee, we may glorify thy holy name, and finally by thy mercy obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

# Exodus 5:1-21

Israel's oppression in Egypt parallels the experience of many peoples today; the fear of the oppressors when they feel outnumbered, their repressive responses to pleas for freedom, their unreasonable demands and unfair punishments, their affliction of the leaders of the oppressed, the frustration, demoralisation, and despair of the oppressed and their turning against each other.

Today's passage makes two things clear. One is that God is I he God of the oppressed and he is against the oppressor. This is not just true for Israel. His special relationship with her was only (he first stage to his enjoying a relationship with other nations. All were to seek the blessing received from him (Gen. 12:1-3). So if she found freedom from oppression in him, other nations might do so too.

The other thing is that freedom from physical oppression is not, however, God's only concern. The object of Israel's being free is so that she can hold a feast to the Lord in the wilderness (2, 3). It is to be a release from serving Pharaoh and an introduction to serving the Lord. Merely to be physically free from Egyptian bondage without the spiritual release of being called to serve the Lord would be a sad kind of freedom.

The first point made above implies that Christians should share the concern of others for the release of the oppressed. The second point shows one of the distinctive contributions Christians will make to understanding what real liberation means.

# Exodus 5:22—6:13

The story of Israel's experiences in Egypt has reached a very low point. The Lord says he is going to act (6:1). But is he?

The section that follows (6:2-7:7) summarises again the account of Moses' call, and his initial failure and frustration. It is a kind of recap of 3:1 -6:1, and provides a challenging response to the temptation to doubt whether the Lord is ever going to act. It reminds us that such experiences, when God seems to do nothing and the situation gets worse rather than better, have to be seen in the light of God's call, his promise, his word, and his character, as these have been revealed to us before.

Today's passage emphasises two aspects of this reminder. One is that the God who appeared to Moses was El Shaddai, the Almighty God, who had made his covenant of promise with Abraham (Gen. 17). That is still who he is, and Moses is challenged to believe he will keep those sworn promises.

The other is that he is now also identified as Yahweh (the LORD). Note how many times he says here, 'I am Yahweh'. New promises are added now that the people of the covenant are in special need. He will show himself to be the God who rescues, who delivers, who redeems, who does what is right by his people (6).

It is still only 'promises, promises'. For as God's people we do have to live by trust, not by sight, believing that what seems impossible will come about.

# Exodus 6:28-30; 7:1-13

The next four chapters tell of nine disasters brought on Egypt by the Lord, in an effort to get Pharaoh to release the Israelites. The story needs to be read as a whole: try to cast your eye over it today. Various themes run through the four chapters, and we will take up one each day.

The events have been seen as interlinked 'natural' disasters. But such explanations miss the point of the story. The emphasis is on the power of the God of Israel to do what he likes in Egypt. There is no other deity or power that can effect its will there: the Lord is in control.

Thus Pharaoh, for instance, is increasingly at a loss about what to do. Yet Pharaoh, the Egyptians believed, was supposed to be a god. The magicians are in touch with sources of supernatural power and can equal some of Moses' achievements (7:11, 12, 22; 8:7). But they cannot in the end compete (7:12; 8:18), as they admit (8:19), and eventually they are themselves affected by the disasters (9:11). The catastrophes themselves also show the Lord's control of 'natural' forces such as the Nile and the sun which were supposed to be divinities. Thus the disasters are acts of judgement on the Egyptian gods (7:4; 12:12). The Lord shows that he can play their game, and win.

When men attribute divine power and authority to anything other than God, they must eventually be shown to be mistaken.

**For thought:** *Where do men today locate that ultimate power?*

# Exodus 7:14-25; 8:1-7

The fact that this is more than a mere trial of strength between a constitutional ruler and a revolutionary leader is further illustrated by the way the story of these disasters is picked up later in scripture, especially in the Revelation to John. There for instance, the final 'seven bowls of the wrath of God' are described in terms of these disasters (Rev. 16). This suggests that one can see these as the expression of God's final judgement, which is already at work in history. It may be that this explains the emphasis on 'every' and 'all' at various points in the story (e.g. compare 9:6 and 19; 9:25 and 10:15), as well as its nastiness. Pharaoh is not merely an ordinary human being, but a figure of evil asserting itself against the Lord. What the struggle is about is whether men serve the powers of evil or serve the true God (see 7:5; 8:1).

So the arrogance of Pharaoh embodies the arrogance of all human power wielded in resistance to the authority of God. And the judgement which comes on this arrogance is already at work. All of us will at least at some time be in a position of power and control over others. We need to be specially conscious that we are ourselves under the supreme authority of God, so that we do not sin by pride and arrogance and so come into judgement.

# Exodus 8:8-32

One might have expected that the clear demonstration of the power of God which these chapters describe would have made it clear even to a leader who was quite pragmatic in his policies that il was wise to yield to the pressure of Moses and his God. The point is grasped by Pharaoh's magicians (19) and by his servants (9:20; 10:7).

From time to time Pharaoh seems to see the point himself and to acknowledge the Lord and his servant (8:8, 25, 28). But each respite leads to his going back on his permission to let Israel go. Why is he so blind to what is best for him?

The reason is expressed as 'hardness of heart', a key expression in these chapters. The'heart'in the Bible refers not so often to the emotions as to thinking and making decisions. So if Pharaoh's heart was hardened (19), this suggests he had a closed mind and a fixed will.

But why? Was it just part of his character - something inherited or acquired through the training given to the heir to the throne? However true this is, Pharaoh is seen as responsible for his own decisions. It is he who does the refusing when faced by Moses. Indeed, he had hardened his own heart, had closed his own mind, had himself determined to be firm before the pressure of Moses and the Lord (15, 32).

Our grasp of the influence of heredity and environment on people (and our understanding of the working of God's purpose, which we will consider tomorrow) should not lead us to cut down the importance of every man's personal responsibility for his character and his actions.

# Exodus 9:1-26

Today's passage speaks not merely of Pharaoh's heart being hard (7) or of Pharaoh hardening his own heart, but of the Lord hardening Pharaoh's heart (12).

It. is hardly a coincidence that the Lord only hardens Pharaoh's heart when for some time Pharaoh has been hard-hearted of his own will. In a sense, all God does is ratify Pharaoh's own inclination. The statement is thus similar to Paul's in Romans, where he describes God 'giving men up' to the consequences of their own turning from him (Rom. 1.24-32).

Yet the hardening process had been part of God's purpose from the beginning (4:21; 7:3). It was intended by him. It was to be his means of releasing his people, manifesting his glory, and taking another step towards the salvation of the world. Pharaoh makes his own decisions, fulfils his own inclinations, closes his own mind. But mysteriously at the same time he does what God wants him to do (see, too, Rom. 9:14-24, where Paul refers to Exod. 9:17 and the Lord hardening Pharaoh's heart).

It is difficult for us to understand this mysterious interrelationship of man's nature (his mind was closed), man's will (he closed his mind), and God's will (God closed his mind). But they do interrelate. Men are free, but they find that they further God's purpose whether they mean to or not. 'O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!' (Rom. 11:33).

# Exodus 9:27-35; 10:1-6

So far we have expressed the purpose of this series of disasters negative terms - they are designed to bring the judgement of God. But that judgement always has a positive side to it. Its aim is that God may be recognised as God and that glory may be given to him, as is right. It is that his people may rejoice in him and that sinners may be won to repentance.

This theme is expressed in Exodus by means of the recurrent phrase he (or you or they) may know that Yahweh (not Pharaoh or the Sun) is God'.

When Moses first met Pharaoh, Pharaoh had asked who this God was who demanded that the Israelites be allowed to leave Egypt (5:2). The Lord did desire that Pharaoh should come to recognise him, and this was the aim of the whole series of disasters (7:17). It was the aim of preserving the Lord's own people from the the plague of hail (9:29).

The Lord desired that the Egyptians in general should come to recognise him, too. This was the aim of the Exodus event (7:5). He desires, indeed, that the whole world should come to recognize him through this event (9:16), And in particular, he wants his own people to come to recognise him (10:2). Our own faith, too, should he deepened by the awareness of God's acts of judgenebt, which demonstrate that he is Lord.

**For meditation:** 'There is no one like the lord our God' (8:10). ‘The earth is the lord's (9:29).

# Exodus 10:7-29

Pharaoh squanders his last chance to bow willingly before the Lord. The story of his lost opportunities is worth reviewing.

His response to Moses' first plea for Israel's freedom (5:2) was perhaps understandable. But then the wonders started. After the second, Pharaoh asks Moses to pray for its reversal, though he soon forgets his word (8:8-15). Even when the magicians acknowledge the finger of God, Pharaoh does not (8:18-19). The fourth disaster extracts concessions, but they are soon forgotten (8:25-32). The fifth, like the fourth, affects only the Egyptians, not the Israelites, and the sixth specifically includes the magicians, but Pharaoh is not moved (9:7, 12). The seventh sees some Egyptians respond to Moses' warning, and sees Pharaoh acknowledging his sin - but only temporarily (9:20, 27, 34). The eighth sees his ministers urging him to face facts, but again he does so only temporarily (10:7, 16-20). The ninth takes him nearly all the way to submission; but he still seeks to keep control of the situation, and his concessions remain inadequate (10:24-29).

It is the story of a man walking wilfully towards a precipice, and a story which embodies something of the tragedy of human wilfulness. If there is any comfort in the story, it lies in the point drawn out by Paul, which we looked at yesterday. Even such a tragedy can somehow find a place in the purpose of God, and bear fruit there.

# Exodus 11:1-10

In vs.4-9 Moses is again confronting Pharaoh. Since 10:28, 29 rule out any further meeting (though the final disaster changes Pharaoh's intention - see 12:31!), these verses are probably the continuation of Moses' reply to Pharaoh in 10:29. If this is so, 11:1-3 may be telling us what the Lord had revealed to Moses a little earlier - it is the background to his continuing speech to Pharaoh

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There is no suggestion of deceit on the Israelites' part in asking for gifts (2). The Egyptians' generosity was remarkable, partly because of their regard for Moses, but behind that because the Lord made them generous (3). He was committed to Israel in a way he was not to Egypt. This is reflected also in the fact that the Israelites escape the slaughter of the first-born (though of course the Egyptians could have escaped too, if they had responded to the warning in vs. 4-8).

So God apparently favoured Israel in a special way. In one sense we ought not to try to defend this. He is free to do as he wishes (see Rom. 9:14-21). Yet we can see that God's favouring of Israel was designed not to end with her but ultimately to benefit the whole world.

We as Christians know God's special favour ourselves. It ought to provoke our love in return, and our concern for those who are not God's people *yet.* Otherwise we will find ourselves in the position of Israel: the God who let Israel plunder Egypt (12:36) lets Israel be plundered when she sins (Isa. 42:24).

**For thought:** *Of those to whom much is given, much will be required (Luke 12:48).*

# Exodus 12:1-20

It seemed like the end, but it was actually a new beginning.

It had seemed as if Israel was finished - Pharaoh would never let her go. But God declares that she will look back on this moment as the beginning of her life (2). Even the calendar will testify to the God who makes the end into a fresh beginning. He turns apparent dead ends into moments of creation to look back to.

It was an old festival, but it had a fresh meaning. Probably Passover and Unleavened Bread were familiar spring festivals for shepherds and farmers (see 5:1), as Christmas and Easter were old festivals taken over and given new meaning by Christianity. So now the Lord shows himself to be not only the God of nature who sees to the needs of flocks and crops each year. He is also the God of history who on this once-for-all occasion intervened in his people's life.

It belonged to the past, but it had to stay real in the present.

The trouble with once-for-all acts of God is that they can seem remote events in the past. Israel is called to remember this occasion each year and to relive it (11, 15, compare 39) to remind her that this was the event that made her what she was. It was a past event, but a living one because it made her what she was in the present. It is the same for us as we recall Christ's birth, death, and resurrection.

For thought and praise: *Christ our passover is sacrificed for us, and we keep the feast (I Cor. 5:7*—*8) - i.e. all life becomes henceforth festal (F. B. Meyer). What will we do to make life today a festival?*

# Exodus 12:21-36

Passover is an occasion of rejoicing. But it is also a solemn and dreadful occasion. As Pharaoh had once had Israelite children killed to devastate the Israelite people, so now the Lord does the same to Egypt as his act of judgement on her and as a step in the process whereby he brings salvation to the world.

Children are always bound up in the web of life with their parents. If their families prosper, if their parents care for them, then children are blessed. The other side of the same coin is that if the family suffers or the parents are unkind, then the children suffer. We cannot have one without the other. Yet One cannot but grieve at such terrible suffering.

Because it emphasises the justice of God's judgement, Exodus sees no unfairness here. The Egyptian first-born (who will actually, of course, have been mostly adults) share in the responsibility of Egypt as a whole for its attitude to Israel and to the Lord. If any among them have made their own response to the Lord, then they have a share in the new Jerusalem, along with the babies of Israel who were slaughtered earlier. There God himself will wipe away the tears of mothers of Egypt and mothers of Israel together, and there the leaves of the tree of life are for the healing of all the nations (Rev. 21:4; 22:2).

# Exodus 12:37-51

The account of Israel's actual departure from Egypt draws, our attention to four aspects of what it meant to be the people of God. Each of these is suggestive for the church, too.

**The people of God is a marvellously redeemed people.** Exodus has made quite clear the grimness of the Israelites' bondage in Egypt. From now on they will think of themselves as the nation that 'the Lord brought out of Egypt' (51). And however we understand the very high numbers Exodus gives, they imply the wonder of the Lord's increase, of his rescue, and of his provision.

**The people of God is a remembering people.** Eating unleavened bread is recalled (39) because Israel always ate unleavened bread at this time of year to commemorate her deliverance. Passover was a watchnight service for those later times (42), as at Holy Communion we remember what Christ did for us.

**The people of God includes a mixed multitude** (38). Many people were attracted by what the Lord did for Israel. That is good. But it can also be dangerous, for the mixed multitude can lead the people of God astray, as later stories will show. Israel is to be open to foreigners joining her, but to be aware of the difference between that and people merely being guests among them (43-49).

**The people of God is an army organised for battle** (41). It is quite a transformation that the demoralised slave-gangs should have become the hosts of the Lord, ready for battle (13, 18).

**For thought:** *What do these pictures of the people of God have to say to the church today ?*

# Exodus 13:1-16

Like other aspects of Israelite feasts, offering the first-born and abstaining from leaven at the spring festival has a double meaning. For the farmer, disposing of the old leaven at the beginning of the barley harvest suggests turning one's back on the past and enjoying God's fresh blessings. From now onwards, however, it has an extra significance, as another reminder of how the Exodus happened. (Leaven is not a symbol of evil in the Old Testament, as it is in the New.)

**Challenge:** *Are we prepared to turn from the good things of the past to the fresh blessings of the future?*

Offering the first-born and the first-fruits, too, acknowledges that God is the giver of 'natural' blessings, and that all of these really belong to him. Other nations even sacrificed their first-born babies to the gods, but the Lord allows these to be redeemed (13). Even, however, in the case of animals and produce it is a potentially costly sacrifice. God has the first before you discover whether there will be any others, and giving them to him expresses one's gratitude in the present. But now the Exodus brought home the Lord's right to the first-born in a new way. By dedicating their first-born to him, Israel acknowledged that they belonged to him doubly, both by creation and by redemption.

**Challenge:** *How do we remind ourselves of the way in which God redeemed us? What do we dedicate of first and best to God as Creator and Redeemer ?*

# Exodus 13:17-14:9

Having redeemed his people, God leads them on in their journey.

**He leads in ways that are unexpected** (17-20). They are told to avoid the main road, because God knows that on that way they will meet with the battle they are not yet ready for. (The 'Red Sea' is, in Hebrew, the Reed Sea, probably in what is now the Suez Canal area; and the 'wilderness' is not trackless desert but uncultivated steppe which can support flocks.)

**He leads clearly.** A column of cloud and fire guides them (21, 22); the symbol of God's own clear presence and guidance. The guidance comes through his explicit word too (14:1,2). Guidance for God's people today can be a problem. We do not normally follow pillars of fire, but on many occasions when we look for the spectacular we would do better to heed the explicit words we already have.

**He leads in ways that demand trust** (14). The Lord leads his people into an apparent cul-de-sac. We can only follow his lead if, we can trust him to turn an apparent cul-de-sac into the road to victory.

**He leads in the light of his own purpose.** It is this which ensures that his way is not a cul-de-sac. Exodus again describes the contrast between Pharaoh's plan and God's plan - and the way Pharaoh unwittingly furthers God's purpose as he implements his own decisions (5-9).

**For prayer:** *Lighten our darkness with your column of fire and grant us the presence symbolised for Israel by the cloud. Lead us in ways that are unexpected and puzzling if you will, as long as you are still fulfilling your good purpose for us.*

# Exodus 14:10-31

Like the death of the first-born, this account of Yahweh's destruction of the Egyptian army may horrify rather than thrill us. According to a Jewish midrash, after the drowning of the Egyptians the angels began to sing and the stars to dance, but 'the Creator of the world commanded peace. "My children drown in the sea, and you are dancing and singing?" For Pharaoh and all his hosts and his whole abomination are the creatures of God."And the Lord had compassion upon his creation" - so it is written.' The details may be fanciful but the insight is valid. Why is the point not made by Exodus? Not because the Jewish faith is insensitive - the story above is a Jewish one. But the Exodus shows that there are moments when judgement takes precedence over long-suffering. Wrath is God's 'strange work' (Isa. 28:21). It is not first nature to him. But it is a part of his nature. He is not soft over evil.

So the death of the Egyptians is the way of judgement for them as opponents of the Lord. It is also the way of salvation for their enemies, the Lord's own people (13). Two other theological points may be made about it. It is solely the act of God (14). We noted earlier, in connection with ch.5, the suggestion that Exodus provides the pattern for Christian revolutionaries today. If so, the pattern is to do nothing and wait for God to act! Finally, the death of the Egyptians is the ultimate proof that the Lord is God and that the power of Pharaoh and the Egyptian gods is nothing (17, 18).

# Exodus 15:1-21

Here is the people of God's response when he has redeemed them. It is **a response of praise,** in music, singing, and dancing (1, 2, 20-21), the Bible's first song of praise, to be sung also near the end of the story of man's redemption (Rev. 15:3). It begins as a joyful acknowledgement of what God has done for *me:* note the eight occurrences of T and 'my' in vs. 1, 2. Work through these and turn them into your own personal praise.

But the bulk of the song is **a response of testimony** (3-12). T gives place to 'he', the Lord. There is no reference to the singers or their feelings, or to Moses' own action, in all these verses. All the focus is on the actual deeds God himself has done. When we worship God we respond to what he has done. And when we praise God we at the same time give our testimony to him.

The song is also **a response of anticipation** (13-18). The acts of redemption God is still to do are present to the eyes of faith and hope. The God who has defeated the Egyptians can deal with the other little obstacles that separate his people from the place of promise. And this great victory is the guarantee that he will always reign (18).

Much later, the Jews in exile were tempted to doubt whether this was any longer true, and needed to be reassured that 'Your God reigns' (Isa. 52:7-10). This fact always needs to be the basis of our faith and hope, the content of our testimony, and the stimulus to our praise.

# Exodus 15:22—16:8

Israel's experiences on her journey from Egypt to Canaan are typical of the ones God's-people go through, and of the way she responds to them (see ! Cor. 10:1-13). So what does this journey through the wilderness teach us?

1. An experience of triumph and of proving the Lord's power and knowing his presence with us can often be followed by an apparent let-down (22).
2. The feeling of let-down can be compounded when we seem to find the solution, and it turns out to be a disappointment (23).
3. The calling of God's people in'this situation is to keep trusting him. But their natural reaction is to complain (24).
4. Often this complaint is expressed as a murmur against the leaders of God's people that is easier than outwardly complaining against the Lord himself (24)! In reality, however, such a complaint *is* against the Lord (16:8). tfe5 inj>>~ U
5. The wise leader knows what to do - he turns not in complaint but in heartfelt prayer to the God who (as Israel has proved already) hears the cry of the needy (25).
6. The Lord can meet his people's needs when they turn to him (25).
7. The occasion of disappointment and sin is, in God's grace, the means of his teaching us and of his revealing himself in a new way (26).
8. This means that on the other side of Marah there is always an Elim (27).
9. This, however, is no guarantee of automatic future success and the cycle always seems to repeat itself (16:1-8). The story continues tomorrow.

# Exodus 16:9-36

The Lord provides for his people throughout their wanderings (35).

**His provision is undeserved** (1-12). They have no particular deprivation to complain of, but they complain nevertheless. They laughably misrepresent life before the Lord redeemed them. They wish he never had redeemed them. Yet he provides for them all the same, and thus reveals remarkably his grace and his glory.

**His provision tests his people's obedience.** In a sense they want God to prove himself (and he does). But he turns the tables and, by the way he provides, makes them prove themselves. Will they accept his provision on his terms, day by day (13-21)? And will they trust him to provide for them on the Sabbath, when they do nothing at all to provide for themselves (22-30)? Does the knowledge that God will provide make us lazy? Or are we still too busy trying to do everything independently of him?

**His provision lasts as long as it is needed, and even afterwards is not to be forgotten** (31-35), because it shows that 'man shall not live by bread alone . . .' (See Deut. 8:1-3).

**For thought:** *In what ways can the chapter's description of the significance of the Lord's provision be applied to how he has dealt with you or with your church ?*

**For study:** *John 6 takes up the theme of 'breadfrom heaven' and looks at the significance of Jesus in the light of it. Consider the similarities and differences between the manna and the 'real bread from heaven'.*

# Exodus 17:1-16

The incident at Massah/Meribah confirms the strange and solemn fact that somehow experiences when the Lord proves himself (as he has in chs. 14-16) do not necessarily ensure that we trust him in the next crisis. Our response of trust has to be renewed on each occasion.

The battle with Amalek provokes two main questions. What was Moses doing on the hill? As his hand was holding the rod of God, or was on the Lord's banner (9, 16), he was hardly praying. He is rather the standard bearer; as Joshua directs Israel's army, Moses directs the heavenly forces that are also involved in this battle. There is a mysterious relationship between real human activity (the battle on the ground) and the putting into effect of God's will (active in heaven); Moses is here God's means of linking the two.

But isn't it unfair on Amalek (see especially v.14)? The Bible would not be afraid of saying that Amalek is simply wrong and guilty for attacking God's people. But Deut. 25: 17-19 suggests there was also something particularly nasty about his battle technique.

**For study:** *Psalm 95 and Hebrews 3-4 take up the theme of Massah/Meribah. What lessons do they suggest?*

**For thought:** *Is it significant that these two incidents happened at the same place? If so, how?*

**For self-examination:** *'Is the Lord among us, or not (7) ?' What do you think ?*

# Exodus 18:1-27

Jethro knew how to listen to Moses' testimony. At the

beginning of the Exodus story Moses had joined Jethro's family. At the end they are reunited. Jethro's responsiveness to what he hears of the Lord contrasts with Amalek's in the previous chapter. Here, in fact, are two possible responses to the acts of God. One is to ignore them or to try to squash them. The other is to be led to acknowledge the God who has acted.

Jethro could see what Moses' priorities should be in a way that Moses could not. But Moses, too, is open to learning. Note, indeed, that the man with direct access to God is willing to learn from someone else's natural common sense. The ordinary wisdom of human experience is assumed to be God's gift, and only the fool despises it.

Jethro did not stay with Moses. There is a sadness about the closing scene (27). In one sense Jethro leaves the people of God. But in another sense he will always belong to it.

For study: *Compare the reasons that led to the appointment of the judges here and the qualities Moses was to look for, with the ones referred to in the story of the appointment of the first 'deacons' in Acts 6:1-6. Are those who have pastoral and teaching responsibility in your congregation encumbered with other tasks which prevent them from fulfilling their responsibility ? How could they be relieved?*

# Exodus 19:1-15

At last Israel reaches her destination (see 3:12; 5:1). But the preliminaries to her meeting with God make it clear that it is a solemn thing to be the Lord's people. There is thus to be a moral and a ritual preparation for this meeting.

The **moral preparation** (3-8) involves setting before Israel the basic demand of the covenant relationship, to test whether she is prepared to take it seriously. The paragraph makes clear that under the old covenant as under the new the basis of the relationship between God and his people is what he has done for her. But the response to grace has to be commitment. The position of God's people (5, 6) is a privilege; but the emphasis is on God's lordship. We are his personal property. Our job is to concentrate on serving him, as priests do. We are a people dedicated exclusively to him. It is just as well that his service is perfect freedom! But in the light of subsequent events, there is a sadness about the words of commitment here.

The **ritual preparation** (10-15) gives outward visible expression to the need that God's people should be cleansed (10, 14), that they should take seriously the awesomeness of God (12, 13), and that they should be prepared to abstain even from the best of things of everyday life at times, in order to concentrate on him (15, see too, 1 Cor. 7:1-7).

**For thought:** *Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 2:9; and Rev. 1:6 apply vs.5,6 to the church. In what ways do you think you and your church have not yet fully entered into the privilege and the responsibility of being God's people, as the Old and New Testament passages picture them ?*

# Exodus 19:16-25

The description of the 'theophany' (appearance of God) here has led some scholars to infer that Mount Sinai was a volcano -but that is to miss the point of the description. Thunder, lightning, cloud, trumpet, smoke, fire, earthquake are not merely a combination of natural phenomena. They are heaven and earth's 'audio-visual aids' to bring home the awesomeness of this occasion. God himself is appearing! But they are only audio-visual aids. Exodus makes no attempt to describe God himself. It just hints at his wonder by telling us how awesome were the sound effects.

God's insistence that the people be warned yet again about coming up the mountain (24, 25) is a surprise after we reach what seems to be the climax of vs. 19, 20. It perhaps reminds us that the most solemn event still remains - when God's actual words are given (ch. 20).

In the New Testament, Hebrews 12:18-29 takes up this passage. At first glance it may seem to contrast the awesomeness of Sinai with the mercy of Christ. But actually this is not the point Hebrews makes. Rather it urges us to remember how awesome it was to come to the earthly place of God's appearing. As Christians we have access to God's heavenly abode: how much more awesome that is!

**For thought:** *How seriously do I take the awesomeness of the fact that I am in personal contact with the mighty God, the Lord Creator, the righteous Judge, the 'consuming fire'? Yet how great is his grace, that he speaks to me and his fire does not consume me!*

# Exodus 20:1-11

The commandments are demands that the Lord is in a position to make because of what he has done for Israel (2).

His expectations of her begin with **how important he is to be to her** (3). He has shown himself as the one who is on her side. There are lots of other 'gods' the people can worship. He does not spend time disputing over the theoretical question whether they exist, but lays down the law on the practical question of people's attitude to them.

He goes on to declare **how she is to worship him** (4-6). The fundamentally wrong thing about worshipping by means of an image (whether a physical idol or a mental picture) is that an image can embody nothing of the Lord's nature as the one who speaks and acts (see Deut. 4). An image is bound to convey too small an idea of God.

The third commandment concerns **how she uses his name** (7). **He** had especially revealed himself to Israel by his name Yahweh (Jehovah in the older translations). It would be tempting to abuse that special revelation by attaching the Lord's name to oaths that were not meant or to prayers of blessing or cursing that did not express his will.

The sabbath commandment regulates **how she spends her time.** She offers God a part of her time every week, as a token that her whole life belongs to him, because it was created by him.

**For thought:** *What demands, in these four areas, does God make of us, on the basis of what he has done for us in Christ?*

# Exodus 20:12-17

Generally, the standards demanded by the ten command­ments are rather basic. This reflects the fact that, like Old Testament law generally, the decalogue is law for fallen man. Israel has been redeemed from bondage in Egypt, but not yet renewed from within. It would be hopeless at this point in the story of God's plan of salvation to instruct her in the standards of the Sermon on the Mount. She needs some much more basic guidance for her life as a nation.

For she is a nation, and even the decalogue is God's law for a nation, a nation of fallen men. It asserts some of the fundamental principles that any nation needs to take seriously if the very fabric of its life is not to disintegrate. So God reminds Israel of how important to the stable ordering of society are the family (the commandment probably refers primarily to the attitude of adults to their parents - not that of little children), the right to life (the word for 'kill' refers to homicide), the sacredness of marriage, the right to property (not seen as an evil, as in Marxism), and the fair administration of justice.

However true this is, though, the tenth commandment, like the first, explicitly reaches beyond the externals of human life to the attitudes of the heart, and issues its challenge to the Christian believer.

**For reflection:** *Which of the commandments does my nation especially need to take to heart ? What can I do to encourage it to do so?*

# Exodus 20:18-26

The first commentary on vs. 18-21 is Deut. 5:22-33. Fear is really an appropriate response when God speaks - perhaps we take it too lightly. But God does not want our reaction to stop there. He tells us what he expects of us to test what we are, and to encourage us into obedience (20).

From God's side, Moses has already been called on to mediate between God and his people, because God's holiness is such that the people as a whole cannot be brought into contact with him. Now from the people's side also Moses is called on to be the go-between. The strain on the servant who accepts such a position is huge, as the story of Moses shows.

Chapters 20:22-23:19 itemise some of the Lord's expecta­tions, beginning with Israel's worship. Our worship is a response to the way God has revealed himself to us (22). It is a worship of him alone, with no multiplying of the objects or the means of our worship (23). It is an essentially simple affair, without the elaborateness which can lead to the outward form seeming to be all that matters (24a). It is a seeking of God's blessing as well as an attempt to glorify him (24b). It is reverent and pure (25, 26: the background of these verses is not clear).

For thought: (a) *In what ways does God's word to me currently test me or encourage me to obedience?* (b) *Are there mediators between God and his people now?* (c) *What lessons for our worship are there in these verses ?*

# Exodus 21:1-11

The circumstances in which a person might have to sell himself or members of his family into slavery are illustrated by 2 Kings 4 and Neh. 5. The rules to govern this practice which are set forth here are similar in general form to the codes of other contemporary eastern peoples: God does not speak to his people in isolation but in terms which are relevant to their situation.

There is clearly a tension between the acceptance of slavery here and the declaration elsewhere that all men are made in God's image and together serve him in the world (Gen. 1:26-28) and its condemnation of enslavement (Amos 2:6; 8:6). In a similar way there is perhaps also a tension between the New Testament's acceptance of the institution of slavery and its declaration that in Christ there is neither slave nor free and that there is no partiality in a Christian's attitudes (Gal. 3:28; Jas. 2). There is this tension because the Bible acknowledges that God's ultimate standards cannot be put into practice in the world. His law thus take account of men's hardness of heart. A nation's laws (even Israel's) have to deal with the real world.

But this provides no excuse for our failures or for our refusal to set our sights high. The law may regulate slavery rather than unrealistically prohibiting it; but it regulates it in such a way as to transform its essential nature. For a man, it is only a temporary commitment, almost a contract of employment (which may be so bearable that he volunteers for it on a permanent basis). For a woman, it means protection and guaranteed rights. The laws do pull society towards the vision of Genesis and the challenge of Amos, and it is at this point that they are distinctive. Deuteronomy 15 takes this further.

# Exodus 21:12-27

Murder is covered by one of the ten commandments. Verses 12-17 deal with acts that are 'as bad as murder' in the eyes of Israel's law: v.13 offers a qualification of the first law (the reference to God letting the man fall into his hand is another way of saying it was not humanly planned), to prevent revenge being taken when it was undeserved. But v.14 safeguards misuse of the qualification.

If the death penalty for these offences seems hard, two possibilities may be considered. It may be that the intention is to impress on the people the seriousness of the crime rather than to provide statutes for courts to implement. The other related possibility is that the real intent of the law is to act as a deterrent -to ensure that these punishments never have to be exacted. Whatever our final conclusion it is clear that God takes these offences seriously. It is worth asking whether our legal codes and attitudes place the same value on people.

The regulations covering other forms of bodily harm (18-25) are more down-to-earth and practical. They seek to be fair and just to both sides in various sad situations. The law concerning an eye for an eye sets a lower standard than Jesus did, but a higher one than Lamech (Gen. 4:23, 24) and a less discriminatory one than that of Babylonian law (which often treated the ruling classes less harshly than ordinary people). Once again, the Old Testament laws are seeking to maintain a realistic standard in a fallen world and to pull sinful men back a bit towards God's ideals. (Compensation would probably normally have been allowed, instead of actual physical disfigurement as a punishment.)

# Exodus 23:1-19

Verses 1-9 warn Israel against three related temptations. First, they urge, be impartial witnesses (1-3). There are particular warnings against conspiracy and against the subtle temptation of partiality to the poor. Then, be impartial neighbours (4, 5): we are not far away here from 'love your enemy'. Thirdly, be impartial judges (6-9). There was no paid office of judge in Israel; the judges were the elders of the community, so this exhortation is relevant to all men in their turn.

Verses 14-19 are concerned with religious observances. Verses 14-17 remind us that the heart of Israel's corporate religious life was not weekly worship, parallel to Sunday services in church, but the annual pilgrim feasts when all Israel was involved in a longer period of rejoicing, commemoration, worship and giving. (Verse 18 reminds us that what is holy must be treated accordingly. Verse 19b prohibits what may well have been a Canaanite magical fertility rite.)

It is striking to find laws about justice and laws about religion in the same chapter. Verses 10-13 underline the connection: the laws for the Sabbath and for the Sabbath Year themselves combine a religious and a humanitarian concern. Israel always refused to separate these.

**For thought:** *(a) What are the pressures on impartiality in your society? (b) What can your church learn from Israel's enjoyment of the annual pilgrim feasts? (c) How do religious and social standards need to be allowed to interact with each other more in your society ?*

# Exodus 23:20-33

The 'book of the covenant', as Exodus 20-23 is often called (see 24:7), closes with promises and exhortations regarding the covenant relationship between the Lord and his people.

**The Lord's promises.** He makes plans for his people, he goes before them, he protects them, and he makes sure they get to the place of his promise (20, 21). (Literally it is his angel who does this; but the Lord's name is in this angel - in other words, the angel is the means of the Lord himself acting). He fights their battles - nothing need stop them reaching the destiny he has in mind for them (22). He looks after their everyday needs - food and drink, health, fertility, and long life are his gifts (25, 26). Yet he does not do everything all at once, in case it is too much for his people (29, 30). He takes them gradually towards a mighty inheritance (31).

**The Lord's exhortations.** These are essentially all variations on the same theme. To keep their side of the relationship, the Lord's people have to listen to him, to do what he says, to be responsive to him, to be faithful to him, to avoid being led into the ways of other peoples, to make no covenant with them or with their gods, to avoid any risk of being influenced by them, He is committed to them (as his promises show). The question is, are they committed to him?

**For thought:** *Which of the Lord's promises to his people does he want me especially to trust in at the moment? And which of his exhortations have I got to face up to?*

# Exodus 24:1-18

Here is an utterly solemn moment. The Israelites once again commit themselves to God's ways (3, 7), reaffirming their response at the beginning of the Sinai story (19:8). The mutual commitment of God and people is sealed in blood (4-8). The leaders are granted a vision of God enthroned in splendour beyond the blue of the sky (9, 10) and they enjoy a fellowship meal with him (11). The whole people behold the fiery splendour of God settling on the mountain as the Lord meets with Moses (17). It is one of the most awesome scenes in Scripture.

We, too, are committed to walking in God's ways. Our relationship with him is sealed by covenant blood too, as each Lord's Supper reminds us. We, too, see the glory of God - in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). He eats with us too, and we with him (Rev. 3:20). We, too, recognise the presence of God, tabernacling in the world in Christ (John 1:14). Our response might well be, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord'. But his reply in turn is always, 'Do not be afraid' (Luke 5:8, 10).

*My God, how wonderful thou art,*

*Thy majesty how bright,*

*How beautiful thy mercy-seat*

*In depths of burning light!*

*How wonderful, how beautiful*

*The sight ofthee must be,*

*Thine endless wisdom, boundless power,*

*And aweful purity!*

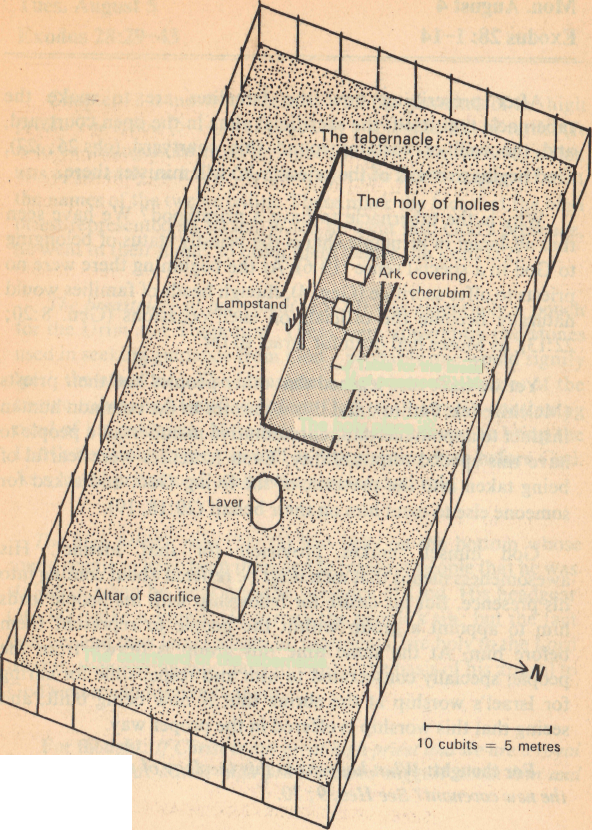
(F. W. Faber)

# Exodus 25:1-22

The building of the tabernacle dominates Exod. 25-40. You can see its main features from the diagram opposite. We must avoid being over-imaginative in giving symbolic meanings to different features of it, but it is fair to ask certain questions. If this is to be the place where God himself lives among his people (8), what is the significance for us of the fact that human giving is expected to make its building possible (2), that the materials to be used are so costly and beautiful (3-7), that God prescribes in such detail how it is to be built, and that it is a tabernacle or tent - a moveable, not a fixed, dwelling (9)?

# Exodus 25:23-40

Chapter 25 describes most of the furniture to be built for the actual tabernacle itself. The ark is simply an ornate box to contain the ten commandments, the 'testimony' to the basis of the relationship between God and his people. The cover of the box recalls the covering of sin through the sacrifices offered at the altar in the tabernacle courtyard. The cherubim are angel-like visible attendants to serve and honour the invisible God. The table for the bread laid before God's presence perhaps signifies the enjoyment of fellowship with him, as well as the people's acknowledgement that their daily bread came from him. The lampstand (the Menorah) provides light to illumine what would otherwise be total darkness. Each of these reflects aspects of our God and his relationship with us, too.



# Exodus 28:1-14

After prescribing how the Israelites are to make the tabernacle tent itself, the sacrificial altar in the open courtyard, and the wall of curtains round this courtyard (chs.26; 27), God begins to speak of the priests who will minister there.

Why is the tabernacle to have a priesthood? We have seen that all Israel in principle shares the priestly status of belonging to God in a special sense (19:6). At the beginning there were no priests to offer sacrifice (Gen. 4), though heads of families would naturally become the officials on such occasions (Gen. 8:20; 22:13), as Moses had been for Israel so far.

Yet we have also learned that other peoples had their priests (Melchizedek, Jethro), and this witnesses to the common human instinct to appoint certain representative members of a people to have this special responsibility. Even Israelites were fearful of being taken into the presence of the living God, and asked for someone else to meet him on their behalf (20:18, 19).

God himself makes provision for that instinct. His awesomeness means that men must be reticent about coming into his presence. But his desire for fellowship with his people leads him to appoint a group within the people to represent them before him. At the same time this group is drawn from the people, specially consecrated to him and responsible for caring for Israel's worship at the shrine that is now being built, and seeing that this worship is offered in the proper way.

**For thought:** *What happens to this theology of priesthood under the new covenant? See Heb. 9; 10*

# Exodus 28:29-43

Chapter 28 is mostly concerned with the garments of the high priest. *The ephod* (5-14) was probably a splendid kilt or tunic. (It is to be distinguished from the ephod referred to elsewhere, which was apparently an idol.) On it were set two stones engraved with the names of the twelve tribes. These mark the fact that the high priest represented all Israel. When he went into God's presence, he went in their name, to bring them before the Lord (12).

*The breastpiece of judgement* (15-30) was essentially a pouch for the Urim and Thummim. These were apparently two stones used in seeking guidance from God - probably one would signify 'yes', the other 'no'. The breastpiece, too, bore the names of the twelve tribes, and testified before God to all Israel's continuing need of his guidance. Note that the priest's job was to bring the Lord's decisions to men as well as representing men before God. As a 'royal priesthood' we have a similar dual role.

*The high priest's robe* (31-35) had bells on the bottom whose sound seems to have been intended to reassure people that he was still alive when he went into the presence of God. His headgear (36-38) is like a king's. He carries the people's sin; but the fact that he, and thus Israel whom he represents, are holy to the Lord (that is, they belong especially to him) is the basis of his appeal to God's mercy to forgive that sin.

**For thought:** *If Christ is our great high priest and we are a royal priesthood, what do the high priest's robes suggest about him and ourselves ?*

# Exodus 29:38-46

The bulk of ch.29 concerns the priests' ordination. These final verses turn to some of the permanent, daily features of Israel's relationship with God.

The people's offering of sacrifice is one such feature (38-42a). Morning and evening Israel is to offer a lamb to God, so that the smoke of this sacrifice is ascending heavenwards twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year. Note that this is a 'burnt offering'. Its primary purpose was not to atone for sin (as was the case with the sin offering) but simply to give something to God. Meat, bread, wine: God's people express their love and commitment by seeing that these elements of their everyday life were given to their Lord.

God's offering of himself is the other feature (42b-46). He will meet with them. For all the outwardness of the ritual just described, it belongs in the context of a personal relationship. He will speak to them, instructing, guiding, rebuking, forgiving. He will consecrate them, acknowledging as his own what is separated for his use. He will dwell among them: he is not only there for special occasions of meeting and speaking, but always. He will be their God: he is committed to the covenant relationship. And they will know that he is the true God. The object of his rescuing them from Egypt is achieved, he is permanently with them.

**For thought:** *In what equivalent ways can we make daily offerings to God comprised of the things of everyday life? And how does he offer himself to us?*

# Exodus 30:1-10

Chapter 30 describes further features of the tabernacle and its use: the incense altar (1-10) and the making of incense for it (34-38); half-shekel offerings, to be used for the tabernacle's upkeep (11-16); the laver in the tabernacle courtyard, for the priests' ceremonial washing (17-21); and the making and use of the oil for anointing (22-33).

The incense altar was in the tabernacle itself, in front of the holy of holies. It is to be distinguished from the larger sacrificial altar in the tabernacle courtyard, where offerings were made. The small altar in the tabernacle itself was only used for burning incense, morning and evening (and in a special rite on the Day of Atonement, see Lev. 16). The purpose of the burning of incense is not explained. It has been suggested that the sweetness of its smell was originally intended to counteract the odours of the many animals (live and dead) in the tabernacle area! But when the Bible refers to incense later, it commonly connects it with prayer (see Ps. 141:2; Luke 1:9, 10; Rev. 5:8; 8:3, 4). The point of incense may well, then, be that its ascending heavenwards and its sweetness of smell suggest that the prayers of God's people do reach him and find acceptance with him. Perhaps the automatic nature of this is a valuable visual aid for us. Naturally and inevitably the incense smells sweet and rises to heaven. As certainly and as invariably our prayers reach God's presence and are welcomed by him.

**For meditation:** *'When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints' (Rev. 5:8).*

# Exodus 31:1-18

We will come back to Bezalel and Oholiab when we look at 35:30-35. The instructions concerning the Sabbath (12-17) suggest three reasons for its observance. Although a Christian is not under the law, we have to ask ourselves how the principles expressed here find embodiment in our lives too.

The Sabbath is a mark of Israel's distinct!veness (13). It draws attention to the special calling the Lord gave her. It can make people ask questions - 'Why are they like that?' 'What lies behind it?' The outward sign, of course, needs to correspond to an inner moral and religious consecration to God.

The Sabbath is holy to the Lord (14, 15). Every day belongs to him, but this one he actually claims. It therefore cannot be used to do what is done every other day. On the Sabbath Israel can concentrate exclusively on God, as she cannot on other days.

The Sabbath is a pointer to God's creation (16, 17). It reminds Israel that her life was created by God. It is a sign of a creation covenant whereby God is committed to those he has created and they in turn are committed to him as their Creator. Furthermore, the Creator's pattern of work and rest is to be a model for the weekly lives of his creatures.

For thought: *The only reason commentators can think of for this law being placed here is that it reminds Israel that even building the tabernacle mustn't involve breaking the Sabbath. There has to be 'rest' even from the Lord's 'work', for the Lord's sake. Sometimes Christian workers are the worst at observing the Sabbath principle!*

# Exodus 32:1-14

There is a tragic and fearful irony about what was happening at the bottom of the mountain while Moses was at the top. God was speaking of the way he was to be worshipped; of the shrine with its altar made to his specifications (but no image of him, for that was forbidden); of the people giving their gold and other precious possessions for it to be made; of peace offerings and burnt offerings being sacrificed to him there; of Aaron's consecration as high priest; of his own promise to come to dwell there and enjoy fellowship with the people, in fulfilment of his purpose as the one who brought them out of Egypt . . . But trace in detail how all this has got turned upside-down at the foot of Mount Sinai (1-8). The perversity of the people of God so often emerges alongside his desire to come to dwell among us.

Moses' prayer suggests various challenges and encour­agements for our own. He does not rejoice in judgement even though he is exempted (9-11). He is bold in his challenge to God himself (1 la). He reminds the Lord of the purpose he has begun which he surely still wishes to complete (lib), of the discredit he is in danger of bringing on his own name (12a), and of the promise he has made in the past (13). He is not afraid to ask God to change his mind (12b), and God does (14); God's object in revealing his plans to us is to give us a real part in the decision-making process. Are there people or situations you know that demand urgent prayer of this kind?

# Exodus 32:15-35

The chapter closes with an even more moving expression of prayer than the one we read yesterday (30-34).

Between these two prayers, however, it is a harsher Moses. He breaks the stones inscribed by the very hand of God (15-19)-because the people's rebellion has broken the covenant that these stones symbolise. He makes a fearful drink from the material the calf was made of (20) - perhaps as a trial designed to reveal the ringleaders (see Num. 5:11-31), perhaps simply as the calf's final humiliation and destruction. He confronts Aaron, who is keen to reveal the pressures he was under but reticent about his own contribution to the affair (21-24). He challenges the faithful to punish the rebels (25-29) - a selective judgement, perhaps on the basis of who had been indicted by the trial, but perhaps just so that there was an act of judgement but not a total decimation of the people.

It is striking that the most profound men of prayer in Scripture are often also the ones who are most concerned for vengeance and judgement. This is true of the psalmists, of Jesus, of Paul, and of John in Revelation. We often find this harshness difficult, but it seems that those who get close to God's love and compassion also find that they share his active indignation at sin. Love and justice, judgement and forgiveness are two aspects to God's one character. A chapter like this one puts them alongside each other without resolving the tension between them. Justice is tempered by mercy (25-29) and mercy by justice (30-35). It is the cross that shows that they can be held together.

# Exodus 33:1-11

Here God promises that Israel will continue to enjoy a number of great blessings. He still leads her and he still takes her to the place of his promise (1). He still defeats her enemies (2) and he still provides abundantly for her (3). He still provides a place where people can seek him (7) and he still relates in a directly personal way with their leader (8-11). (Unless vs. 7-11 describe what happened after the tabernacle was built, they must refer to some simpler meeting tent which existed already.)

The solemn feature of the story, however, is that all this can be true, yet Israel is nevertheless deprived of the presence of God himself. She is 'stiff-necked', and God has, as it were, to keep his distance from her, for her own sake (3).

The mere fact, then, that we experience God's blessings in many ways does not prove that we experience his presence in fullness. In his mercy he may not withhold blessing from us. We nevertheless still need to be examining ourselves to see whether our sin is depriving us of a fuller experience of him.

For prayer:

Cast me not away from thy presence

and take not thy holy Spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of thy salvation

and uphold me with a willing spirit (Ps. 51:11, 12)

# Exodus 33:12-23

We continue to overhear the prayer conversation between Moses and God, and as we read it we may keep in mind the question, how do Moses' prayers suggest lessons we need to apply to our own prayers?

Note the boldness of Moses' prayers. First, for Israel he seems in effect to be praying for a reversal of the decision God announced a little while ago (12-17, compare 1-3). We thus see again that when God allows us to perceive what he is going to do, he does not necessarily mean us to take that as his final word. It is rather an invitation to discuss the matter. Secondly, for himself Moses prays another prayer of astounding boldness (18). God's glory is the visible splendour of his personal nature. Moses seeks the inspiration for his task which such a vision would bring.

Note the logic of Moses' prayers. He lays before God the reasons why he should do as Moses says. The requests relate to the calling God himself gave Moses (12a). They come from someone whom God has said he is committed to and whom he has begun to bless (12b). They relate to matters that will lead to a deeper knowledge of God (13a). And they ultimately concern the welfare of God's own people (13b).

And note the results of Moses' prayers. The plea for God to change his mind receives a straight 'yes' (17). The plea for a vision of God in his splendour receives a 'no, but' (19-23).

For thought: *We can be sure that if God says 'no' to our prayers, it is always 'no, but'. Are our prayers sometimes limited because we fear refusal?*

# Exodus 34:1-17

In vs.6, 7 there is a dictionary of words for human wickedness, drawn from experiences of everyday life. *Iniquity* is going astray or choosing the wrong road - the strange wilfulness that sees the right road but turns away from it. *Transgression,* or rather *rebellion,* is rejecting the authority of one who is over you - like a son rebelling against his father or a colony against the imperial power. The authority has issued many warnings, but found its subject *stiff-necked. Sin* is failing to hit the target you set for yourself - doing your best but finding that your best is not enough. The consequence of all these *is guilt:* we are on trial and have no way of finding acquittal.

Yet set alongside this dictionary of sin is a dictionary of words for God's love. He is *merciful* or *compassionate -* he has the feelings of a mother for a wayward son. He is *gracious,* and blesses for reasons that stem not from people's deserving but from his own nature. He is *slow to anger* or long-suffering. He shows *steadfast love* - the word refers to the kind of commitment that two people are bound to show when they have made lifelong promises to each other. He *shows faithfulness -* he is dependable, firm and reliable. And thus those who have no hope of acquittal, humanly speaking, actually find *God forgiving* them.

At the heart of the story of God's people's origins is the exposure of their sin. But as soon as there is a revelation of their sin, there follows a revelation of God's forgiving love.

For prayer: *Psalm 51:1, 2, which takes up these two sets of words.*

# Exodus 34:18-35

At the same time as the ten commandments are reinscribed (28), Moses adds another summary of God's requirements of his people (10-26) in the area that is particularly relevant after ch. 32. They centre on Israel's avoiding unfaithfulness to Yahweh and her showing positive and practical commitment to him. The way Israel did this is of little direct application to us. We must work out in similarly practical and down-to-earth ways what the equivalent dangers of unfaithfulness and expressions of commitment are for us.

The passage about Moses' face shining (29-35) explains that he had been with God and that his words had God's authority. The Old Testament faith is not merely man's attempt to reach God, but God's revelation to the man he admitted to his own presence. In the Gospels, the equivalent is the story of Jesus' transfiguration (Mark 9). That incident not only confirms the truth of Jesus' ministry, it is part of God's encouragement of Jesus for that ministry - and no doubt it was that for Moses too. For Paul (2 Cor. 3; 4), the differences between the two covenants are as striking as the parallels. Further, he makes it clear that the glory of God is not reflected by Moses and Jesus only, but by every believer (2 Cor. 3:18). But this only comes about by our sharing Jesus' cross (2 Cor. 4:7-12), which in its way was true in Moses' life, too.

**For thought:** *How far is it true of me? What does it mean for me to share Jesus' cross?*

# Exodus 35:20-29

After the solemn interlude of chs. 32-34, Moses begins to implement the instructions he was given in chs. 25-31 (the details of the implementation run through to Lev. 9). He begins where God had finished, with the warning about the Sabbath (35:1-3, see 31:12-17). Then he moves to where the Lord had begun, with his words about giving for the tabernacle (35:4-9, see 25:1-9). There follows Moses' invitation to join in the work that is to be done (35:10-19). Then Israel gives in response to God's bidding.

There are some obvious, but challenging, lessons in the description of their giving. Note *how they gave.* It was individual (note the repeated 'every one' of v.21). It stemmed from the way each of them was moved in heart and in spirit (21, 22, 29); but this was not mere 'spiritual feeling' - it was real, solid, countable, costly action. Note *what they gave.* They gave the best that they already possessed (22, 23, 27,28), and they gave the best that they could themselves make especially for the occasion (24-26). Thus each made a particular contribution, without which the work as a whole could not have been completed. Then note *why they gave.* They gave to make 'something beautiful for God'. And they gave because they had been specifically bidden to do so (4-9). There is no conflict between a clear instruction and freewill offering (29).

**For thought:** *How do I (and how does my church) need to learn from this passage about giving?*

# Exodus 35:30-35; 36:1-7

These paragraphs, and the ones that follow, make clear three requirements for the actual building of the tabernacle.

**The skills to do the work** (30-35). It is nice to find that the first spiritual gifts in the Bible are practical abilities in design, woodwork, metalwork, embroidery, weaving, building, and so on - and the ability to teach others in these practical crafts. How strange that Christians should often get the impression that only gifts such as preaching or evangelism or healing really 'count' in God's eyes!

**The raw materials to do the work** (2-7). The picture of the workers embarrassed at the over-provision of their need makes one smile wistfully. The giving of the people of God has not often been like this! The uncalculated giving of the forgiven prostitute shows that it comes about when we really love (Luke 7:36-50), and the abundant giving of the Philippian Christians shows that such generosity also brings a blessing to the givers themselves, our of God's own riches (Phil. 4:14-19).

**The faithfulness to do the work.** We omit chs.36:8-39:43 because they are virtually a straight repetition of material from chs.25 30. The difference, of course, is that now the detailed instructions are being put into effect, and repeating the exact words makes the point that the tabernacle was built exactly as the Lord had said. God's instructions are always to be followed like this. We are not at liberty to alter or omit anything we do not like. There is a blessing attached to such faithfulness too (see 39:43).

# Exodus 40:1-16, 33-38

The theme of precise obedience to specific commands is not yet completed: compare vs.1-15 with vs.16-33. But the climax of the chapter (and perhaps of the whole book) comes in the last paragraph. Rev. 21:3 would have been appropriate here! God revealed himself on Sinai (24:15-17) but his presence is not restricted to one place and is brought permanently into the very midst of God's people.

James Philip notes that the books of Genesis and Exodus thus embody the whole biblical story in a nutshell. The perfection of God's completed creation (which 39:43 recalls) had been spoilt by human sin. Man had been cut off from the presence of God, and Genesis ends with the people of God in bondage in Egypt. But Exodus begins by rescuing them from affliction and ends by restoring God's presence to them. And this granting of his presence is despite the fact that chs.32-34 show clearly how sin characterises them even as its characterises the world.

The two books also epitomise the Bible story as a whole by leaving us, having 'arrived', and yet not having arrived. There is much more of God's purpose (expressed in his promises) still to enter into, and the experience of the presence of God is only the beginning of a journey with God (34-38).

**For further study:** *(a) Review chs.25-40 so that you have the features of the tabernacle clear in your mind, (b) Reconsider the sense in which what God does in Christ is 'much better' (see Heb. 9-10).*