

## Freedom Means God Is Always Near

### Exodus 24:15-25:9 (AFBC 7/29/18)

#### Exodus 24:15-19

<sup>15</sup> When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, <sup>16</sup> and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from within the cloud. <sup>17</sup> To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. <sup>18</sup> Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

#### Exodus 25:1-9 Offerings for the Tabernacle

25 The LORD said to Moses, <sup>2</sup> "Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from everyone whose heart prompts them to give. <sup>3</sup> These are the offerings you are to receive from them: gold, silver and bronze; <sup>4</sup> blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen; goat hair; <sup>5</sup> ram skins dyed red and another type of durable leather; acacia wood; <sup>6</sup> olive oil for the light; spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense; <sup>7</sup> and onyx stones and other gems to be mounted on the ephod and breastpiece. <sup>8</sup> "Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. <sup>9</sup> Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you.

While we don't talk about it a lot, the Tabernacle is actually a big part of the Exodus story. It was a place of worship, the first house of God constructed by the people of Israel after they gained their freedom. Thirteen chapters in Exodus—that's about  $\frac{1}{3}$  of this book—are devoted to the building and furnishing of the Tabernacle.

It involved a huge investment of their resources, as well as their time. In Exodus 12, we learn that the Hebrews left Egypt on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the first month of the year. Chapter 19 tells us they arrived at Sinai on the third new moon after their departure, so about three months later.

But once they got to Sinai, they stayed put for eleven months. That's how long it took them to build and furnish the Tabernacle.

They were free people now—no longer enslaved. They left the abuses of Egypt behind them and began moving toward the

Promised Land. But they stopped along the way, taking almost a full year off, to construct this portable sanctuary for the Lord.

Why? What made this project so important?

The answer involves what, to the Israelites, seemed to be a big problem. God delivered them from Egypt. He brought them “as on eagles’ wings,” the Bible says, to Sinai. There, at this sacred mountain, they experienced the awesome presence of God.

They entered into a covenant relationship with God. They received the tablets of stone on which God had written the Ten Commandments. So Sinai was sacred ground. God... was there!

But they couldn’t stay at Sinai forever. This would not be their home. They were heading north to claim the inheritance God had promised their forefathers--Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Their ultimate destination was Canaan. As the old hymn says, they were “bound for the Promised Land!”

But they had a problem. How could they leave this place where God had been so real for them? God was present at Sinai, but would he still be with them when they left that mountain and moved on? Would they have to come back there in order to be close to the Lord? These questions were very real in their minds.

They were new at this. They still had the concept—or belief--that there were many gods. They thought that each of these gods had his or her own territory.

This was true for the gods of Egypt. It was true for the gods of other lands and peoples. So they assumed it must be true for their God, Yahweh, the Lord.

God seems to have dealt with His people where they were in their understandings—on this, and many issues, it seems. God gave Moses instructions for the building of a Tabernacle, which simply means “a dwelling”—but this dwelling place was for the Lord.

Since they were on the move, it had to be portable, so what we’re talking about here is a “tent.” The Tabernacle was a very elaborate tent that was carried by the people from place to place

as they made their journey toward the Promised Land. This elaborate tent served as a symbol of God's presence with them.

Yes, God was not just back there at Sinai. He would be with them wherever they went. This Tabernacle in their midst would be a constant reminder that God was with them.

When you read this lengthy description of the tabernacle, you discover that it's furnished in much the same way as any house would be in that part of the world. At the front entrance, there was a *lāver*, a basin of water where a visitor could wash his hands and feet. Every well-equipped home had one.

Inside, there was a lampstand, and a table for food. There were inner rooms that were not open to everybody. Because this was God's house, these items all carried special religious significance; and they were constructed of the finest and most precious materials available. Everything was first class!

Still, this was a properly furnished house—a house for the Lord--a special place for His people to come and meet with Him. And it was portable--it could be moved from place to place--again, a reminder that the Lord was with them... wherever they went.

Now, let's pause here for a moment and think about what this has to say to us. Our beliefs and understandings are somewhat different from theirs, yet there's something about the Israelites, with their Tabernacle, making their way to the Promised Land, that serves as a fitting symbol for us as we make our way through life.

There were things present in their lives that need to be present in ours if our faith is to serve as a reminder to us that "God is always near" wherever we go. We need to understand this too.

We have lots of portable things today, of course—but our faith needs to be portable as well. There's a wonderful freedom that comes to us when we're able to take our faith with us... wherever we go. So, how can we experience this freedom?

I. First, just like those ancient Hebrews, we need to know that **God is always near**. God wasn't just with His people at Sinai. He was always present with them—even when they were slaves in

Egypt—and He would continue to be with them in all places and circumstances in the future.

We need to know this, too. There are those who believe that God created this world—that He's the Master Builder of the Universe. After He completed the job, though, they believe God laid His tools aside and walked away.

This, in fact, was a wide-spread belief among the founding fathers of our nation. They were called Deists. We don't hear that label much anymore, but their legacy is still with us. We find it among people who see God as distant—disinterested or uninvolved--in His Creation.

God's word, though, tells us something quite different. God wants us to know He's with us always. He's with us now. He wants us to know and experience His continuing, sustaining, guiding, redeeming presence in our lives.

"But, pastor, every Baptist believes that," you say. "We all know that God is with us... all the time."

Well, maybe... but did you know that of the millions of Baptists who are on our nation's church rolls, nearly half of them are what's called "non-resident" members. That means they no longer live anywhere close to the church they joined "once upon a time." To even call them members—with some exceptions--is to tell a bit of a "story"—maybe a "once upon a time" story.

They're on our rolls, but they haven't stayed in touch. Although at some point in life, they experienced God's presence as part of this or some other church family, they've lost interest now. Maybe they no longer feel the need for church. They left their Mount Sinai, but seem to have forgotten that God is still with them.

We maintain their names on our church rolls, lest we offend somebody—and we feel that's the way church should be. I find it interesting, though, that our Baptist forefathers didn't play that game. If you moved out of town, you took your church letter with you. If you forgot it, they'd send it to you.

They had the good sense to know that “non-resident member” is a contradiction. Worshipping and serving God is what Christians do. This means we’re to be part of a family of faith—a body of Christ—wherever we are *now*, not wherever we *used to be*.

God is with us in this time and place. Having the freedom to be near God always means there’s no place we can be... without Him!

**II.** Which brings us to another aspect of this freedom we exercise to be in relationship with God: specifically, **God is always to be obeyed**. God makes this pretty clear.

God gave to Moses very detailed instructions on how the Tabernacle and its furnishings were to be constructed—their dimensions, what materials to use, and how these items were to be used in worship.

The Israelites did everything according to the pattern God had provided. Their close attention to every detail of God’s plan points to the obedience the Lord expects from us as well.

When our nation began, Baptists were only a small group; and in some colonies, they were persecuted. They valued their freedom too much to be part of a state church. They insisted that the church and state be kept separate, and they paid a price for their convictions about religious freedom.

But as those few Baptists began to spread across the frontiers of this land, they took their convictions with them. They were obedient to God, sharing their faith wherever they went.

Soon the landscape was dotted with little Baptist congregations that preached God’s Word and brought men and women into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

Friends, we need to take the Gospel with us. We need to find opportunities to share it with those who are lost and need someone to help them find their way to God.

There’s a strange silence about our faith that inflicts many of us when we go beyond these walls. Being obedient to God breaks that silence as we bear witness to the Christ who forgives and saves and makes our lives abundant.

God is with us out there, wherever we are. Our challenge is to be obedient to God always.

**III.** Which brings us to one other aspect of this freely-entered-into relationship: **God is always to be worshipped.**

The Tabernacle was carried along with the people wherever they went. It was set up whenever the people settled down. It was their portable sanctuary—their place of worship wherever they were... at the time.

The Bible tells us the tabernacle was as beautiful and well-constructed as the people could make it. It would in no way compare with the grandeur of the Temple that they built centuries later, but it was the very best God's people could do... given their circumstances.

Now, we can worship God anywhere. We don't have to be in some great cathedral or beautiful sanctuary. However, the way we furnish and maintain our places of worship does seem to say something about our love for God.

Some churches may have been guilty of getting too extravagant; but, then, isn't that the way love is? Love gets extravagant. By nature, it goes overboard at times.

We want only the best for those we love. In the same way, if we love God, we want our places of worship to reflect the love we have in our hearts for the Lord.

It's been my observation that the more a person is willing to give of himself or herself here—in worship and service and in the sharing of their time and resources—the more he or she is willing to give out there in the other areas of life: family, work, school, community. People who know, and love, and worship God, are givers, wherever they are.

A faith that is true to God's word and to the Spirit of Christ is never limited to any one place or day of the week. It's always alive and active. It's with us wherever we go, in whatever circumstances.

Authentic faith not only travels with us from place to place. It stays with us as we travel through those painful events and heart-rending moments of life.

Hurricanes, floods and tornadoes may leave us devastated, but our faith goes with us right through those disasters.

The doctor's diagnosis may turn our world upside down, but our faith sets us right side up again—and we're at peace. We know, come what may, that God's grace will be sufficient.

Maybe a loved one dies, and it hurts so bad we don't know how we can get through the pain, but we do—with our faith intact.

Or what can be even worse, the loss that happens when someone says to us, "I don't love you anymore; I've found someone else; I'm leaving."

We're hurt and embarrassed, and think our lives are over; but they're not. Our faith picks us up and sets us back on our feet—and, full of faith, we learn to live again.

The many evils that exist in this world can disrupt and seem to devastate our lives, but they cannot defeat those of us who know by faith that there is nothing that can ever separate us from God's loving Presence.

The Apostle Paul had faced hard times when he wrote to the church at Rome saying: **Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35, 37-39)**

It's this faith, this confidence in Christ Jesus, that sets us free—free to live our lives, free to face our darkest hours, with the blessed assurance that we are always in God's care, and that we ultimately have nothing to fear—come what may. Thanks be to God!