**Slavery and slaughter in Egypt**  Exodus 1

(Scripture quotes from the New King James Version unless otherwise stated)

The escape of the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt is enshrined in the stories, songs and sacraments of Jews, as well as Christians. In childhood we were told about the rescue of baby Moses from the river, about the ten plagues on the Egyptians, about the Passover, the crossing of the Red Sea and the Ten Commandments. All these stories come from the second book of Moses called Exodus. The first five books of the Bible, called the Pentateuch, were written by Moses.

The rise of various forms of biblical criticism and theological liberalism at the end of the nineteenth century, led to scholars questioning Mosaic authorship. When I began theological studies back in the seventies even evangelical scholars were talking about source criticism, and the JEDP sources behind various books of the OT. In a commentary published in 1971, I found a chart listing the sources for the first chapter of Exodus, and then stating that scholars did not agree as to which verse belonged to which source. Thankfully, all this ‘scholarship’ is largely a thing of the past. We hold that Moses wrote this book called Exodus. Moses refers to himself by name rather than in the first person, not because he was proud but because this was normal at that time. Besides, we are thankful that he does identify himself in this way because it makes reading much easier. While Moses wrote this book, he gives all glory to its true author, God.

The title ‘Exodus’ comes from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew OT. Exodus means ‘exit’ or ‘departure’. The Hebrew title is the first two words of the text- ‘now these are the names’. The ‘now’ indicates that this book is a continuation of the preceding book, Genesis. In Genesis 12 we meet Abraham, the man with whom God made a covenant, promising to make him into a great nation, a nation through which God would bless ‘all the families of the earth’ (Gen 12:3). The blessing of multiplication was part of the creation narrative (Gen 1:28), and it continues here with the descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob/Israel down in Egypt (1:7). The importance of multiplication or having descendants is highlighted in Abraham and Sarah having no children until very old, and in Isaac’s wife Rebekah having no children until the Lord enabled her to conceive.

In theological terms, the story of the Exodus is about redemption, about God delivering or redeeming his people from bondage. He did this through Moses, whom we see as a type of Christ. In the new covenant we have redemption from sin and death in Jesus, in the blood of Jesus Christ our Lord. Sacrifice and blood sprinkled on doorposts was central to redemption from Egypt, as remembered in the Passover. Jesus was crucified at the time of Passover as a sacrifice for our sins. It is difficult to understand or appreciate the cross of Christ apart from the history and theology we learn here in the Book of Exodus (John 1:29, 36, 1Cor 5:7).

In Exodus we also learn about the covenant God made with his people at Mt Sinai and the Ten Commandments or directions for living that he gave as part of that covenant. He also told his people how to worship him. We worship the same God today, the same covenant making and covenant keeping God, and the God who tells us how we are to worship him. The shocking story of the golden calf reminded God’s people then, and reminds us today, that God is not to be worshipped according to our ideas but according to his word.

I hope this brief introduction has stirred your interest in the Book of Exodus. We now turn to the first chapter and look at it under three subheadings: seventy go to Egypt, slaves, and slaughter of boys.

**1. Seventy go to Egypt**

Moses first writes about those who went down to Egypt. Back in Genesis we read about Jacob and his twelve sons; six from his first wife Leah and two from her maid, and two from his second wife Rachel and two from her maid (Gen 35:23-26). These sons married and had children and grandchildren by the time they moved down to Egypt (Gen 46). Joseph was already down in Egypt, where he had two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh.

In his providence God took Joseph to Egypt and made him second in charge in the whole land. Joseph saved his family during a terrible famine. Sixty-six persons, male persons, went down from Canaan and settled in the region of Goshen; adding Joseph, his two sons and Jacob himself, the total was seventy (Gen 46:26, 27). In Acts 7:14 Stephen speaks of seventy-five people going down, a number he got from the Septuagint which apparently added the living wives of the eleven sons who went down. Some think the number seventy is simply a round number or a symbolic number.

At the time of the Exodus, Joseph and all his brothers had died (1:6); Joseph died at the age of 110yrs (Gen 50:22). In fact another generation had probably died because the Exodus was four hundred years after they went down to Egypt, and Moses was eighty years old at the time of the Exodus. During the lifetime of Joseph the children of Israel enjoyed peace and prosperity, settled as they were in the fertile land of Goshen in the NE of Egypt. Because of language and religion they did not spread beyond this region, apart from Moses of course, who grew up in the palace of Pharaoh. They believed in large families because children are a blessing from the Lord (Ps 127). The Lord’s blessing was measured in their multiplication. Here in the land of Goshen the Hebrews or Jews multiplied to the extent that the Egyptians, especially their new king, began to worry. There is no indication of disloyalty or unrest on the part of the Jews, just fear of their increasing numbers.

**2. Slavery**

People who worship idols are not usually marked by wisdom. Wisdom from above or from God is peaceable and impartial, full of mercy and good fruits (James 3:17). The king who promoted Joseph to second in charge had access to heavenly wisdom through Joseph. Joseph advised him to store up food in preparation for seven years of famine, thereby saving the people. But Joseph died and now a new king arose ‘who did not know Joseph’ (1:8). This may have been the beginning of the Hyksos dynasty (c.1730-1570BC); these were Semitic foreigners, a politically powerful minority in Egypt. But some think it was Ahmose who ousted the Hyksos who was this new king.

The new king in Egypt, whoever he was, noticed the increasing population of the Hebrews and feared that in the event of war they might join the enemy (1:9, 10). Goshen was the gateway through which invaders from the north came into Egypt. But his fears about the Hebrews were unfounded; we could say they were provoked by Satan. His response to these fears was certainly marked by ‘satanic wisdom’. ‘Come let us deal shrewdly’ with these people, the new king said (1:10). What he did was turn hard-working, peace-loving people, who had been living in the land for over three hundred years, into slaves. He proclaimed a policy of racial and religious discrimination. He gave his men whips and set them as task masters over the Hebrews. He forced them to build huge store cities for himself, later called Pithom and Ramses (1:11). Archaeologists have uncovered various cities but cannot be sure they are these ancient cities.

But the more the Hebrews were afflicted the more they multiplied (1:12). The new king’s policy backfired! It was not a wise policy, as we indicated. Yet rulers still adopt similar policies today, persecuting and enslaving minority peoples in their land. Look at what China is doing, and the way India treats or mistreats its low caste people and religious minorities. Using slaves to work the cotton fields in America’s south seemed a good idea at the time, but not so today? Those who build a business or empire by forced labour are bound to fail because the people cry out and the Lord hears them (James 5:1-6).

Making the Hebrews slaves led to them multiplying even faster. The king’s answer was to treat them even more harshly. They were making bricks for these cities and hauling them into place in what was back-breaking work, and all they got in return was lashes across their backs (1:14, 2:11). Forced to work hard day after day, the lives of these Hebrews became bitter. They would remember this bitter bondage when eating bitter herbs in the Passover feast (12:8). We might also reflect on the bitterness of living in bondage to sin, a bitterness from which we are released in the redemption of Christ Jesus our Lord.

**3. Slaughter of infant boys**

The new king’s policy of beating the Hebrews as they sweated in brick pits was not working. They were having more children, not less (1:12). It is prosperity not poverty that reduces the birth rate. So this king came up with another policy, a policy akin to abortion. He did not have the ‘luxury’ of ultrasound machines to determine the gender of the unborn, and then selectively abort boys. He had to grab boy babies from the ‘birth stool’ and kill them. He instructed the midwives to selectively kill boys at birth (1:16); girls were allowed to live. In China and India abortions selectively murder girls.

The new king thought that murdering boys would slow the birth rate and also keep the Hebrews from forming an army. What a clever idea! Satan’s ideas often appear clever on the day. The king took two Hebrew midwives aside to explain his new policy and urged or ordered them to implement his policy (1:15, 16). We have been guessing with regard to the name of this new king, but Moses names these two women, thereby ensuring they are remembered rather than the king. One was called Shiphrah and the other Puah; the name Sapphira may be derived from Shiphrah (Acts 5:1). Some scholars worry that two midwives could not service a population of over six hundred thousand; and some dismiss the whole story. Moses’ point is that these two midwives feared God rather than the king (1:17, 21).

The midwives refused to obey the king’s orders knowing that God is the giver of life and the one who takes life away. Unlike the king, they were not going to usurp God’s authority. ‘Their reverence for life sprang from reverence for God, the life-giver, and for this they were rewarded with families’ writes Alan Cole. When the king realised they were not aborting or killing boys as they were born he called for an explanation. And the midwives gave him an explanation; they told him that Hebrew women are ‘lively and give birth before the midwives come’ (1:19). Was this true? Experts differ, with some disputing the biological basis of this argument, but we are not told, and do not know all of the circumstances at the time. What we do know is that the midwives were not about saving their own lives but about saving the lives of helpless babies. And we are told that God honoured their action and blessed them; ‘Because the midwives feared God he gave them families of their own’ (1:21 NIV). They may have been midwives because they themselves had no children. In any case, God blessed them with a family of their own.

Pharaoh’s effort to stop the Hebrews multiplying failed again. He abandoned his policy of selective quasi-abortion and came up with a new policy, a combination of genocide, infanticide, and gender discrimination- and some people applaud ancient civilizations! The king would slaughter all Hebrew baby boys. He gave the order that every son born to the Hebrews was to be thrown into the river (1:22). I have seen an infant girl extremely malnourished because she was not wanted, just as I have seen a newborn girl left in the field to die. The wickedness of this Egyptian king continues today even in our own country. Like the midwives we must take a stand against such evil.

Just how many Hebrew boys were thrown into the Nile we do not know. But we do know of one who, because of the faith of his parents, was saved from drowning in the river (Heb 11:23). God’s hand was upon Moses, not just because he was a beautiful child but because he had plans for this special child, just as he had plans for his own Son whom he saved from King Herod’s mass slaughter of boys under two years of age in and around Bethlehem (Mat 2:16).

**Miracle baby**  Exodus 2:1-10

Do you have a story about a so-called ‘miracle baby’? We hear of parents having a baby after ten years of marriage. I have heard of parents adopting a child because they were unable to have their own, only to then have two of their own children. The term ‘miracle baby’ belongs to Jesus of course. Mary conceived without ‘knowing a man’ and gave birth to her firstborn whom she called Jesus meaning ‘one who saves’. The birth of Jesus, rehearsed as it is in Christmas nativity plays, is the best known of birth stories in the Bible. The birth of Moses is another great story we tell our children. Even unbelievers tell their children this story because it is so moving, with a mother desperate to save her baby from the king’s men going around throwing Jewish boy babies in the river- maybe they don’t tell this part of the story in these days of ‘sanitising’ history! This precious baby is saved by none other than a princess, given back to his mother to nurse, before being returned to grow up in the king’s palace.

The story of Moses birth is so amazing that many, even Christians, say it is myth. A professor of OT wrote in 1971, ‘This narrative is legend and should be read as such, not as history’; I noticed on the flap at the back of this commentary that the writer died in 1972. This narrative, dear friends, is history, or as some put it, HIS-story. As those who believe in almighty God and in his works of providence, ‘His most holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions’ (Shorter Catechism Q11), we have no doubts as to the facts and historicity of this story.

It is interesting that none of the characters in this story are actually named at this point, apart from Moses. God is not named either but we are meant to see his hand orchestrating everything that happens, whether through ‘coincidence’ or through moving the hearts of the women involved in the story. It is also interesting, and somewhat amusing, to note that every effort of the Pharaoh to destroy the Jews was thwarted by women. First it was the God-fearing midwives, then the brave mother of Moses who hid her baby, and then the king’s own daughter, whose heart was moved with compassion. Our subheadings today are: ‘Child in danger’, ‘Compassion of a princess’, ‘Cared for by his mother’, and ‘Called Moses’.

**1. Child in danger**

A man of the house of Levi took a wife from his own tribe and she conceived and gave birth to a son. Nothing out of the ordinary so far. The man is later named as Amram and his wife as Jochebed (6:20). Amram was the grandson of Levi, so Moses was a great grandson. Amram died at the age of 137yrs. We also learn that Moses had a brother called Aaron who was just three years older (7:7). Here in today’s passage we are told of a sister, Miriam, who was probably in her teens when Moses was born.

The birth itself was normal but the circumstances were far from normal- although the circumstances facing girls conceived in China and India today as not so different. The sentence of death hung over Hebrew boys from the time of birth. A wicked king had given the order for all Hebrew baby boys to be thrown into the river, with the idea they would drown (1:22). Although movies produce scenes depicting such horror, the Bible does not record the death of any baby boy. What we are told about is the providential preservation of one special Hebrew baby boy.

Moses’ mother saw that he was a fine or beautiful child. She hid him for three months, presumably in her house. In the Book of Hebrews we are told about the faith of his parents (Heb 11:23), while Stephen spoke of Moses being ‘well pleasing to God’ (Acts 7:20). How the professor I referred to could say this story is myth when the NT speaks of it as history I do not know! Every baby is beautiful in the eyes of the parents but we are left in no doubt that this baby was chosen by God, even before his birth, to be his special servant. We all dream of what our children will become when they grow up. Will they be a prime minister or a sporting hero or make lots of money? I hope your dream for your child is that they will grow up to be a child of God, a man or woman able and ready to serve the Lord.

As the baby Moses grew it became increasingly difficult to hide him in the house. Maybe soldiers prowled the neighbourhood, or maybe the neighbours would betray the family. Was it that he cried louder? The cry of a new-born can be ear-piercing! Whatever the reason, after three months his mother decided that keeping him in the house was getting to dangerous, so she decided to throw him in the river! That was the order of the king! In casting her baby into the river she was careful to put him in an ark or tiny boat. And she was careful to put this tiny boat in the reeds at the edge of the river so it would not float away. His mother made a tiny boat of bulrushes in much the same way as she made baskets for use in her house. But because this basket would be put into the water, she coated it with pitch or bitumen, the stuff we use on our roads, and the same stuff that Noah used on the ark he built (Gen 6:14)- the word ‘ark’ in verse 3 is the same word used of Noah’s ark.

While Moses’ mother ‘cast’ him into the river, she had no intention of letting him die. Just how she intended to keep her baby alive we do not know. Because she placed him near the king’s palace she may have hoped someone kind from the palace would find him. If this was her prayer she soon received an answer. Remember what we read in the Book of Hebrews about the faith of Moses’ parents. Their faith was not without appropriate action. For their part, the parents told Miriam to wait by the river and watch what happened to the baby in the basket.

**2. Compassion of a princess**

The king of Egypt had a daughter whom we are calling a princess (2:5). She lived in a palace near the Nile. The Hebrews lived in the land of Goshen which may have been nearby. While Hebrew boys were being killed, Hebrew girls were probably being taken as house servants by the Egyptians. This princess had plenty of servants or maids, some of whom may well have been Hebrews. ‘The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river’ (2:5). Scholars cannot conceive of a princess bathing in a river; they suggest it was a ritual bath in the ‘holy’ Nile. Whatever sort of bathing it was she came to the river to bathe. After seeing women bathe in the Ganges I have no problem with this story, this history. It is amazing how they bathe while remaining covered with their sari! They bathe at the village well in the same way.

While the princess bathed, her maids walked along the bank. It was then that the princess saw the ark containing baby Moses among the reeds (2:5). She called one of these servant girls to fetch the floating basket. Opening the basket she saw baby Moses, ‘and behold, the baby wept’ (2:6); all so natural, but so dangerous! She knew it was a Hebrew child, not only because of her father’s edict but because of circumcision. Hebrew boys were circumcised when eight days old (Gen 17:12). If her heart was like that of her father she would have hurled the baby into the middle of the river. But no, God planned for this baby to be found by a woman with a compassionate heart. She probably took the baby in her arms and carried him to the shore. I am a bit out of my depth here, but was once told to put an abandoned baby into a woman’s arms and she would make it hers. Sure enough, that baby girl, now over thirty years of age, is still loved by that woman.

**3. Cared for by his mother**

In the continuing providence of God, the baby’s sister suddenly appeared on the scene. God’s mercies never come to an end (Lam 3:22). If she was not instructed by her mother what to do and what to say she must have been a smart girl. She would have been taught to pray and probably asked for words to say at this time (Luke 12:12). With her baby brother being comforted in the arms of the princess, Miriam boldly asked if she needed a wet nurse for the child, even suggesting a Hebrew woman for a Hebrew child. She knew exactly the woman to fetch, the baby’s mother!

The princes told her to go and fetch a wet nurse, and sure enough, Moses’ mother turned up to take her baby home. She would nurse her own baby until he was big enough to go and live with his adopted mother, the daughter of the Pharaoh. To add to the irony, the princes would pay her a wage to nurse her own baby (2:9)! The Jews love this story, and so do we! Maybe the Lord even smiled at seeing his plan for this special child being fulfilled- and the plans of the wicked king backfiring. Truly, God’s ways are higher than our ways and his thoughts higher than ours (Isa 55:9).

God was merciful to the faithful parents of baby Moses. And they were faithful in bringing up this child in ‘the training and admonition of the Lord’ (Eph 6:4). We do not know how many years it was before Moses went to live in the palace but it was enough to instil into the heart of this child a knowledge of the true and living God. Moses grew up knowing his heritage as a Hebrew and indeed, came to a faith of his own (Heb 11:24). Psychologists tell us how much children learn in the very early years of life, but we know this already from the Bible. While still on the breast, and before they can talk, they are learning vital things about life. The most vital thing to learn is the knowledge of God, of his greatness and his goodness, of his faithfulness and his love towards us in Jesus Christ our Lord. ‘Train us a child in the way that he will go and when he is old he will not depart from it (Prov 22:6).

**4. Called Moses**

After he was weaned, Moses went to live in the palace as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. Here he learned ‘all the wisdom of the Egyptians and became mighty in words and deeds’ (2:10, Acts 7:22). In his providence, God was educating and preparing Moses for a very special task. In his home he was taught the things of God, and in the palace the things of the world. This is the way to prepare your children for life in this world. Those words of Proverbs again: Train up a child in the way that he/she will go, and when he/she is old he/she will not depart from it.

Finally, Pharaoh’s daughter gave he adopted son a name. She may have done this earlier but it is now that we are told of her giving him the name Moses- the only mention of a proper name in this story. She called him Moses because, as she said, ‘I drew him out of the water’ (2:10). A similar word in Hebrew means ‘pulling out’ or even ‘deliver’. ‘But she would have given him an Egyptian name’ say the scholars; they note the suffix ‘mose’ on the names of various Pharaohs e.g. Thutmose and Ahmose. But the princess may well have heard this word or name from her Hebrew servants; she obviously thought it appropriate for this special baby that she drew out of the river. And the Lord was still working providentially because Moses would become the deliverer of the people of God through the Red Sea.

**Moses flees to Midian**  Exodus 2:11-25

It is a tradition extending down to the present day for royal sons or princes to undertake military training. Prince Harry trained in the British army and actually served in Afghanistan. Such training apparently prepares such men for their kingly duties- even if they are too old to lead an army by the time they become king. Moses was brought up as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter after he was old enough to leave the arms of his mother. We previously noted how vital those early years in the home of his Hebrew parents were. They were sufficient for Moses to identify as Hebrew when he grew up. In the palace his education continued, the best education available in the land in that day. Egypt was an advanced nation, as seen in its agricultural and building projects, undertaken with advice from Joseph in earlier years. Moses would have learned to read and write. Stephen tells us that Moses was, ‘learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptian, and was mighty in words as well as deeds’ (Acts 7:22). Although only one of many sons or grandsons of the Pharaoh, Moses may well have been tutored by him from time to time.

The Exodus story of Moses and the people of Israel continues with the words, ‘Now it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown’ (2:11). Stephen informs us that Moses was forty years old when he decided to visit his brethren, the children of Israel (Acts 7:23). Moses had somewhat of a split personality; he was a Hebrew on the inside and an Egyptian on the outside. But, taking a positive view, he was able to relate to both Hebrews and Egyptians. This, no doubt, was why God preserved him in the way he did. Even so, his initial attempt to relate to either was disastrous. His attempt to deliver his own people from oppression backfired badly. It took the Lord another forty years to prepare Moses for his ministry. If you read the biography of a man whose ministry God blessed, you will most likely find that after an initial boldness, God moulded them into the faithful and effective servant he wanted them to be.

In this passage we firstly note a murder, followed by a flight to Midian, then Moses living in Midian, and finally, the first mention of God in the Book of Exodus.

**1. Murder and flight by Moses**

Moses grew up in the sheltered environment of the palace, where the ‘pleasures of sin’ were paramount (Heb 11:25). One day God moved him to venture out to see how his brethren, the Hebrews, were getting along. He must have known that the Hebrews were being treated as slaves by the Egyptians, but up till now had not seen what slavery was like. In India students are taught about agriculture or health in the villages but are not actually taken to see a village. When I took them with me their eyes were opened to the reality of village life. I read that William Wilberforce got some members of parliament to actually visit a slave ship docked in London.

What Moses saw was a Hebrew slave being beaten by an Egyptian taskmaster (2:11). Moses was outraged. Stephen said that Moses ‘defended and avenged him who was oppressed’ (Acts 7:24). Was it just an acute sense of justice, or was it because of a sense of his own power, and even calling, that he avenged the Hebrew? (Acts 7:25) The text notes that it was one of his brethren even though Moses at that time identified as Egyptian. What happened the next day points to his intervention being from a sense of justice, of his being ready to defend the underdog or the oppressed? A sense of justice was required in a man who would later administer the law of God; but a man of violence was not what God required! Moses is not directly condemned for murdering an Egyptian, but his fear of being found out shows a realisation of his sin. Moses tried to hide his sin by burying the man he murdered in the sand (2:12). Thinking no one saw him, he went back to palace to eat and sleep. Hebrews were being beaten to death all the time, and had this man been a Hebrew the palace would have taken no notice.

When he went out the next day Moses saw two Hebrew men fighting. He spoke to the aggressor, asking him why he was hitting his fellow Hebrew (2:13). Moses knew about justice because justice is in the psyche or heart of everyone (Rom 2:1-3). The wisdom of Egypt did not teach him about justice, and it did not teach him about sin. It is the Bible that teaches, ‘In your anger do not sin’ (Ps 4:4, Eph 4:26). Moses’ anger led him to sin. The anger of the man hitting his fellow Hebrew led him to sin also. When Moses intervened, he turned on Moses saying, ‘Who made you ruler and judge over us?’ (2:14). No surprises in this response! It is the usual response from someone who is guilty, but a most foolish response to the judgment of God. What the aggressor said to Moses was, of course, prophetic. Moses would become the ruler or deliverer, and judge of God’s people.

When this Hebrew told Moses he had seen him kill the Egyptian, Moses was filled with fear and fled (2:14). He thought no one had seen him, but now realised he was mistaken and that his sin was probably known in the palace. Moses hid the corpse of the Egyptian but he had nowhere to hide from the inevitable fury of Pharaoh (2:15). Moses fled beyond the border of Egypt and into the desert lands of the Midianites.

**2. Moses in Midian**

We presume Moses did not go home to pack his bags. He had nothing when he arrived in this desert inhabited by nomadic shepherds, descendants of one of Abraham’s sons by his wife Keturah (Gen 25:1, 2). Tired and thirsty from his journey, he sat down by a well. Still concerned about justice, and with a sense of his own power, he helped some women get water for their flock, in much the same many as his ancestor Jacob. Jesus also met a woman by a well. She did not become his bride in the manner of the woman Moses met but she did join the corporate bride of Christ, the church (John 4:42). The woman Moses married was one of the seven daughters of the priest of Midian, a man called Ruel, or later, Jethro (2:18, 3:1). Scholars get concerned by these two names but it is not uncommon even today for men to be known by two names.

Moses records the details of this beautiful and true story of his marriage. Moses stood up to the shepherds and helped the women water the flock of their father Jethro. When they arrived home early their father asked what happened. They told him, ‘an Egyptian delivered us from the hand of the shepherds’ (2:19). No doubt Moses was still dressed as an Egyptian. Realising this man was a stranger, their father sent them to call Moses and give him something to eat. Moses was appreciative and stayed; some time later Jethro gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses in marriage (2:21). ‘Some time’ may have been some years because Moses spent forty years in the wilderness of Midian before the Lord called him to return to Egypt (Acts 7:30).

Moses had two sons (Acts 7:29). The first he called ‘Gershom’ saying, ‘I have been a stranger in a foreign land’. Even after marriage, and many years of looking after the flock of his father-in-law, Moses never forgot his brethren enslaved in Egypt. Again we reflect on the enduring influence and teaching of his parents in infancy. Moses never forgot his own people, or the God of his own people. His God never forgot Moses or his people, who continued to suffer at the hand of the Egyptians. God never forgot or will forget you either, which is why he sent Jesus to deliver you from bondage to sin.

**3. Mention of God**

The book of Esther is the only book in the Bible that does not directly mention the name of God, yet behind the whole story we see the providence of God. The story of Moses so far here in Exodus is the same, with no mention of God, apart from the midwives fear of God. This all changes in the closing verses of chapter 2. The children of Israel had been in Egypt for around three hundred and fifty years when Moses was born. He was born after a new king started persecuting them, forcing them to work on his building projects. Moses was born and adopted by the Pharaoh’s daughter. At forty he fled to Midian, where he married and had children, as we have just seen. It would be another forty years before he returned to Egypt to deliver the people of God, as we will see in the following chapters.

While Moses was in Midian, the king who was persecuting the Hebrews died (2:23). This meant Moses was free to return to Egypt, but it did not mean the persecution stopped. Most probably the persecuted people were praying before this, at least some of them, but now their prayers were more earnest; ‘They groaned because of their bondage’ (2:23). ‘So God heard their groaning’ (2:24). When God hears he acts; so we anticipate God coming to deliver his people from bondage, which is exactly what happens. When God hears your prayers he acts. If you are not praying you cannot expect God to help you. If sin in your life is stopping your prayers being heard then similarly, do not expect God to help you (Ps 66:18). But if you confess your sin, God will forgive and will hear your prayer from the heart.

When God heard the earnest prayers of his people in Egypt he remembered the covenant he made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (1:24). Not that he had forgotten this but the prayer of the people brought it to mind. God is not capricious and he does not act willy- nilly. He acts according to his covenant promises. Marriage is a covenant and we should always act according to the promises we make in marriage vows. We expect the police to act towards us according to the law, not as they feel like on the day! When God called Abraham he made a covenant with him. In that covenant he promised to bless Abraham and make him a great nation, and indeed to bless all the nations through his descendants (Gen 12). In brief, the covenant God made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was, ‘I will be your God and you will be my people’. What Moses saw did not look like God blessing his people, but here in these verses we are assured God had not forgotten his covenant people.

God heard their prayer and remembered his covenant (2:24). He then ‘looked upon the children of Israel and acknowledged them’ (2:25). Not that God had not seen the plight of his people in Egypt before this, but for God to ‘look’ upon his people means he is going to act. He will act according to his covenant, and in acknowledgment of the prayers he heard. God is not heartless. He is not a block of wood or stone. He is gracious and compassionate (Ex 34:6), and he is powerful to save. Through Moses, God will reveal his faithfulness towards his covenant people, and his power over the world’s most powerful man who was persecuting them.

God’s people were similarly groaning under Roman oppression when he sent a deliver like Moses. Jesus came to deliver his chosen people from an oppression worse than that of a Pharaoh or a Roman emperor; he came to deliver us from the oppression of Satan, the oppression of sin and death. Our world today is being oppressed by an unseen enemy called coronavirus, but know that another unseen enemy has been oppressing us since the day of Adam and Eve. This unseen enemy causes more suffering, and is more deadly than coronavirus, but we do have a ‘vaccine’ as it were. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin, and in the name of Jesus we can resist the devil, and see him flee from us (James 4:7, 1Peter 5:8-11).

**And the bush was not consumed**  Exodus 3:1-6

I grew up going to a village church which met in a building not unlike ours, but almost forty years older. The vestry was directly behind the pulpit, and the stained glass window of the vestry depicted a burning bush and the words, ‘The bush was not consumed’. You may have noticed our church, like most Presbyterian and Reformed churches, adopted this symbol. It was first adopted by the Huguenots or French Calvinists in 1583. They probably saw it as representing the fiery trials they were undergoing, yet believed they would not be consumed.

In the burning bush on Mt Sinai the Lord God appeared and spoke to Moses. The burning bush represents the presence of God. Fire continued to represent the presence of God in the wilderness. When the Lord came down upon this same mountain following the Exodus, they saw fire on the mountain (19:18). During their journey in the wilderness the Lord appeared in a cloud by day and a fire by night. Fire gives light, fire cleanses, and fire consumes. Our God is a consuming fire (Heb 12:29). The burning bush that Moses saw was not consumed because God’s presence is enduring. An ‘eternal flame’ is sometimes used to a memorial to a famous man or men.

After forty years in exile in Midian, Moses had an unforgettable encounter with the living God. This encounter is recorded in this chapter and into the next. We will look at the initial part of this encounter under the subheadings: Get attention, Ground is holy, God of your fathers.

**1. Get attention**

When Moses fled to Midian he settled into the home of Jethro, the priest of Midian. He married Jethro’s daughter, Zipporah, and had two sons. Jethro owned a flock, most probably a huge flock of sheep and goats; both are tough animals, able to survive in semi-arid regions. Having married into this family, Moses help in shepherding this flock. He did so for forty years, meaning he was now eighty years old. He may have remembered his people back in Egypt from time to time, but was otherwise settled and content in life. Are your feeling settled and content in your life? If so, are you ready to be called by God? When the Lord called me to the mission field, the director of the mission organisation actually said, ‘if you are not happy and content in the job you are doing, do not apply’.

One day Moses was tending the flock around the back of the desert or on the far side of the desert near Horeb, the mountain of God (3:1). The name ‘Horeb’ means ‘deserted place’; it is later called Mt Sinai. He was minding his own business in this deserted place when he noticed a bush on fire. Lightning could strike dry acacia bushes in the desert and they would burn up in an instant; not that Moses saw lightning strike this bush. What he did notice was that the bush did not burn up; ‘the bush was not consumed’ (3:2).

Moses turned aside to investigate, as God intended (3:3). This was a miracle or a miraculous sign, a sign of God’s power and indeed of his presence in this place, as we will see. Moses looked at the burning bush, as anyone would, but he also ‘beheld’ something out of the ordinary, something supernatural. God was getting his attention. Jesus performed many miraculous signs to get the attention of people in his day. Some saw and believed but many were blind to revelation of God’s power and grace in Jesus Christ. Do we see miraculous signs today? God can intervene in his creation if he so chooses but we have a book telling us of numerous divine interventions in the lives of people, especially the miraculous signs performed by Jesus. People explain these away and then have the audacity to ask God for a miracle, but as Jesus said, ‘if they do not hear Moses and the prophets’ or indeed Jesus himself, nothing will persuade them.

In a sense, God is intervening in our lives all the time through his works of providence. We have floods and high seas washing people’s houses away, and we have bushfires consuming houses, but do people stop to listen to what God is saying? One old man commented that Jesus says to build your house on the rock not on the sand. Do we take note of God’s revelation in the creation? Do we, like Moses, stop to listen to God when he speaks?

**2. Ground is holy**

We are told that the angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in the fire in this burning bush, but Moses did not know this as he moved towards this burning bush in the desert (3:2). Who is ‘the Angel of the Lord’? Not all versions capitalise the ‘a’ of angel as ours does. ‘Angel’ means ‘messenger’, but in this case and in others it turns out to be the Lord himself. It is God himself who speaks from the burning bush (3:4). This is a theophany.

In other theophanies God appears as a man. The Lord appeared to Abraham as a man at Mamre (Gen 18:1). He appeared to Joshua as a man, a commander of the Lord’s army, who told Joshua to take off his sandals because the place where he was standing was holy (Josh 3:13-15). He appeared to Moses as man on a later occasion (33:23). But here he appears without human form, apart from a voice. God appears in a fire, a symbol of power and especially of judgment. Moses was not fearful of this fire, but fire is often more than something that warms us or gives us light; fire can consume us. We have recently experienced devastating bushfires here in Australia. We have seen firefighters and police fleeing the inferno. Thankfully they did so because anyone who stood to fight the raging fire was consumed.

Here at the burning bush, and especially when God appeared again in what was like a volcano on this mountain, God’s presence filled Moses and the people with fear (3:6, 20:18). Do we know the presence of God in the same way today? Or are we too ‘chummy’ with God, as one commentator writes? Jesus was a baby in Bethlehem; he is loving and compassionate, as is the God who spoke to Moses (34:6). But let us not forget that he is also a consuming fire (Heb 12:29).

Fear of God is not just fear of judgment. Fear comes from understanding who God is, understanding that he is holy and just. The first thing God said to Moses after calling to him from the burning bush was, ‘take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground’ (3:5). The burning bush got Moses’ attention and he was moving forward to investigate this strange fire when the Lord warned him to stop. God’s revelation is not for the curious onlooker; he reveals himself to serious seekers. We do not know the extent to which Moses worshiped the God of his fathers, but we understand that he was taught about God in his infancy. God graciously reveals himself to Moses here on Mt Sinai, explaining that he is the God of his fathers, not just a God of fire!

Holiness has the sense of separation, as well as moral purity. The presence of the holy God meant the ground around the burning bush was holy. When standing on holy ground it is necessary to remove your shoes. After working in the dairy, we would always take off our boots before entering the house; my mother did not want dung from the dairy in the house! Shoes carry filth which is symbolic of sin. Removing shoes also makes us appear poverty stricken and even naked, which is how we must approach God. Proud people do not remove their shoes when asked to do so. We presume Moses removed his shoes when he hid his face from God (3:6). In the Bible the appearance of an angel always leads to men and women falling down in fear (Luke 1:12), although not in worship. How much more when that angel or messenger is the Lord himself (Gen 18:2, Josh 5:14).

Holiness was a key feature of the tabernacle and the temple, the place where God chose to dwell among his people and be their God (29:44-45). A curtain separated the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. As Jesus died on the cross this curtain was torn in two. In Jesus Christ we now have access to the throne of God which is in heaven. We no longer have holy ground or holy buildings, but God is no less holy and separate. It is that we are made holy in Christ Jesus. ‘Be holy because I am holy’ says the Lord (1Peter 1:16). Holiness continues as a key feature of God’s throne in heaven, as revealed in the vision given to John (Rev 4:8).

**3. God of your fathers**

God knew very well who Moses was; he called him by name (3:4), as he did the boy Samuel (1Sam 3:6). God knows you by name also! But did Moses know who was calling to him from the burning bush? God immediately revealed himself, not as a new God but as the ‘God of your father’ or fathers (3:6). The burning bush was not an invitation for Moses to imagine a new god, as some men have done after seeing or finding something strange, or simply having a dream, whether this be in ancient times or more recently. Islam is a comparatively recent religion based on a dream or vision of a man on a mountain. Hindus boast of their religion being ancient, of going back before the time of Christ. Christians who understand their religion as going back to the time of Christ are confounded by such claims. If we really understand Christ and the Bible, we will understand that Jesus, the God of the Bible, created the world. God is from everlasting to everlasting, the eternal One.

The God who spoke to Moses from the burning bush was not a new God. It was the God of his forefathers, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (3:6). God spoke to Abraham and made a covenant with him. He promised to give his descendants the land to which he led him (Gen 12:7). All Abraham had to live by was this covenant promise of God, although he knew about, ‘the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God’ (Heb 11:10). God’s covenant promise continued with Isaac and Jacob, yet to be fulfilled. Moses heard the voice of the same covenant God, the God of his fathers. God would reveal himself fully and finally in his Son, Jesus Christ.

Moses would later write about God creating everything that exists in six days, including Adam and Eve, the first human beings. He would write about Noah and the world-wide flood. God’s power is seen everywhere in the creation. Moses saw his power in the miracle of the burning bush that was not consumed. But God is not simply the God of creation, any more than he is simply the God of miracles. God spoke to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, calling them into a covenant relationship with himself. Now he is calling to Moses, reminding him of the covenant he made with his fathers. In his covenant with Abraham he promised to give his descendants the land from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephraim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites (Gen 17:18-21). We find these same names, or most of them, mentioned again by God as he speaks to Moses from the burning bush more than sixteen hundred years after he spoke to Abraham as a burning torch passed between the halves of sacrificed animals. God later spoke through Moses and the prophets until finally speaking through his Son, Jesus Christ, whom he sent into this world.

Not only is God from everlasting to everlasting, he is also unchanging, the same yesterday, today and forever (Ps 102:25-27, Heb 13:8). Not only is God eternal and unchanging, he is living and active in the affairs of his people, and indeed of all nations. God is not a parochial God, a God who confines himself to one place or one people. We are not like the Hindu man who told me that the land I was standing on was Hindu land, or others who say this is native land where the native gods should be worshipped. The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses says, ‘all the world is mind’ (Ps 50:12).

**God’s call and God’s promise**  Exodus 3:7-22

While tending a flock on Mt Sinai, Moses saw something amazing. A bush was on fire but it did not burn up and go out- it kept burning. He went to look more closely and heard a voice call his name. It was the voice of God. Moses saw a miracle and heard the voice of God. What happened next? Did Moses race off home to tell everyone he had seen a miracle? No. Miracles are not simply matters of amazement or something to boast about seeing. They are rightly termed ‘miraculous signs’, both in the OT and the NT. Miracles are for our instruction. In the burning bush God got Moses’ attention, and then spoke to him. God came down to speak with a man, a miracle in itself. He came to tell this man of his plan to redeem his people. He came to tell Moses of the part he would play in delivering God’s chosen people from bondage.

‘Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt’ (3:10). This call is the focus of the whole passage. This is the reason God came down to speak to Moses. He came to call him to a ministry. This call came with the promise, ‘I will be with you’. Our third point after, ‘God’s call’ and, ‘God’s promise’ is, ‘God’s name’, and our final point, ‘Go to the elders and the king of Egypt’.

**1. God’s call**

Why did God appear to Moses in the burning bush? He came down after he heard the cry of his people (3:7). He saw their suffering and their sorrow. When their suffering led to earnest prayer, God heard their cry. At the end of the previous chapter we saw that God, ‘heard their groaning’ and remembered his covenant’ (2:24). During their time in Egypt, particularly when they enjoyed the riches of the land, it seems some were attracted to Egyptian gods and ways of worship; despite their isolation in the region of Goshen. We know how readily they made a golden calf to worship, and how they longed for the rich and spicy food of Egypt. Joshua called for them to, ‘put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the river and in Egypt’ (Josh 24:14). Syncretism, the adoption of pagan ways, remains a curse upon churches today.

Harsh treatment at the hands of the Egyptians led the people of Israel to focus more clearly on the God of their fathers. They cried out to God and he heard their cry. So God ‘came down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians’ (3:8). They were powerless to save themselves. One woman prayerfully sought to save her son from the slaughter and God preserved Moses. It was this act of faith that led to the deliverance of the people. God is good at building upon simple acts of faith to bless his people. Even so, Moses attempted to deliver his people in his own strength and failed miserably. Moses ended up in exile, but he was not exiled from presence of God. A shepherd in the desert seems an unlikely man for God to choose to carry out a mighty deliverance; King David, of course, was taken from the sheepfolds. Moses had the benefits of an upbringing as a prince in Egypt, but while riches and education are sufficient for a political leader they are not sufficient for a leader in the church. Moses had to wait for the call of God.

The Lord appeared to Moses to call and commission him as his servant, as the man he would use to deliver his people out of bondage. The time had come for God to fulfil his covenant promise to Abraham, the promise to bring his people out of Egypt and into Canaan, ‘the good and large land, a land flowing with milk and honey’ (3:8). This is the first occurrence of this rather strange term. We have become somewhat familiar with it from reading our Bible, and readily associate the words with a land of plenty, a land of rich and tasty food. Grazing on the hills Canaan, sheep and goats would produce rich milk. Honey comes from bees of course, which found lots of pollen in these same hills.

God planned to deliver his people from slavery and bring them into a rich land of their own. What a contrast! Do you know the contrast? Do you know the blessing of being delivered from the penalty and power of sin into the presence and peace of the Lord Jesus Christ? Jesus said, ‘I have come that you may have life and have it more abundantly’ (John 10:10).

**2. God’s promise**

God’s call was met with a, ‘Please excuse me’. All too often God’s call is met with a, ‘Please excuse me God’. Have you ever said or thought such words? Have you turned down a request to serve the Lord in some way? This is not only about a missionary call. God’s call may be to seemingly small tasks in the ministry of his church. You may have said, ‘I am too busy’ - too busy to serve the Lord? You may, like Moses, have said, ‘I am not qualified’. ‘Who am I’ said Moses, ‘that I should go to Pharaoh’, then bring these slaves out of Egypt? (3:10). ‘This is not an existential question but an expression of disbelief’ (cf. Jdg 6:15). Moses was as qualified as anyone for such a task; he probably knew the new Pharaoh. His problem was faith, the lack thereof! The sign, ‘Do not disturb’ was hanging on the door to Moses’ heart! What sign hangs on your heart- ‘Do not disturb’ or ‘Here I am send, send me’ (Isa 6:8).

When God called Moses to go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt he also said, ‘I will certainly be with you’ (3:12); this is almost certainly a play on the name ‘YHWH’ writes Alan Cole. God also offered Moses a sign that he had sent him. What more could Moses want? The Pharaoh that wanted to kill him had died so he no longer faced the threat of death (2:23). Whatever dangers he might face in going to Egypt, the Lord would be with him. If he, or if we, truly trust the Lord, we will go to any place and into any situation the Lord calls us; we just mentioned the word unbelief.

The old hymn, ‘Trust and obey’, ends with the words, ‘What he says we will do, where he sends we will go; never fear only trust and obey’. Too many sing these words with no intention of going where God sends them! When God calls them they start asking, ‘Will I have a comfortable house with hot water; will I be able to get my favourite food; what about a school for my children? I went from eating rice a couple of times a year, and that in rice pudding, to eating boiled rice every second day! We remembered God’s words to Joshua, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you’ (Jdg 1:5, Heb 13:5), which is what God was saying to Moses when he called him here on Mt Sinai.

People often ask God for a sign regarding his call. When God called Gideon he responded like Moses saying, ‘I am the least in my father’s house’. And the Lord similarly promised Gideon, ‘Surely I will be with you’ (Jdg 6:15, 16). But Gideon then asked for a sign, and the Lord gave him a sign- a number of signs in fact. He gave a sign of fire and then the sign of the fleece. The sign God gave Moses was that he would serve God on this very mountain when he had brought the people out of Egypt (3:12). A sign not seen in the present puzzles many scholars, but this is the nature of faith. God’s sign in seen when we step out in faith. Signs do not replace faith, they confirm faith.

**3. God’s name**

Moses responded to God’s assurance, ‘I will be with you’, by asking God about his name. Some see this as another excuse but it seems like a genuine question. ‘What’s in a name?’ asked Juliet in the Shakespearean play ‘Romeo and Juliet’. ‘That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet’. This may be true, but personal names had meanings in the day of Moses, and indeed in Jesus’ day. The name ‘Jesus’, like the Hebrew ‘Joshua’ means, ‘One who saves’. ‘Moses’ means ‘drawn out’ or ‘delivered’ (2:10). What about the name of God? God has been called the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He has been called other names in Hebrew like ‘*El Shaddai*’ or ‘God almighty’, but these are not personal names; ‘by My name Lord (YHWH) I was not known then’ (6:3). Moses may not have understood the significance of his question, but God answers him and reveals his name, a new name for a new revelation of God.

God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM’ (3:14). He was to tell the children of Israel, ‘I AM sent me to you’. Did they, like us, say, ‘What sort of name is that?’ The name is not a noun but a verb, the verb ‘to be’: ‘I am’ or ‘I will be’. Verbs are doing words. This name ‘stresses God’s active existence’; God is the eternal existent One. It expresses continuity, God’s ongoing revelation of himself. Note that it is the name God gives himself. All other gods or idols are named by a human being.

In Hebrew, the verb ‘to be’ is YHWH - just the consonants. We often add vowels and say ‘Yahweh’, sometimes misspelled as ‘Jehovah’. In our Bibles the Hebrew, YHWH, is translated as ‘LORD’ in small capitals, as distinct from ‘Adonai’, an important distinction in Psalm 110:1. The name Yahweh or LORD tells us about the nature of God as the eternal, self-existent and unique One. This is the only place in Scripture where this name is explained so we should look at the context, namely that of God delivering his people out of bondage in Egypt. It is the name God told to Moses, who would go in faith and the power of God to deliver his people; a new name for a new revelation of God. Jesus referred to himself by the name ‘I AM’ when explaining to the Jews who he is (John 8:58). When he made this claim the Jews tried to kill him. The Jews were afraid to use this name lest they break the third commandment.

The Lord gave Moses a name to tell the children of Israel when he went down to deliver them. Saying the name, ‘the God of our fathers’ gave a sense of history and continuity, but the name ‘Yahweh’ revealed much more about the God of their fathers. It was the name they were to use ‘forever as a memorial to all generations’ (3:15). It is the name that continues in the Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord (John 8:58).

**4. Go to the elders and to the king of Egypt**

Having called Moses to go down to Egypt and bring the children of Israel out, and having answered his request for a name, the Lord gave Moses further instructions. He explained what he was up against, and how the Lord would strike Egypt and enrich his people even as they came out. Moses was to go to the elders and tell them how God had appeared to him after seeing their misery. God had ‘visited’ them, meaning he had come, had seen, and was now going to act. A visitation from God is a serious matter (Luke 19:44). Having visited and seen their plight, God said he would, ‘bring them up out of the affliction of Egypt’. Moses would convey to them what God had told him by way of answering their prayer (3:17, cf.3:8).

After meeting with the elders, as in tribal or family heads, Moses would go with them to meet the king of Egypt. God told Moses what he would say to the king, namely to let the Hebrews go a three days journey into the desert to sacrifice to the Lord. There was no deception here even though the Lord had predetermined that the king would not listen. The initial request was to allow the people of God, maybe just the men, to go outside Egypt with all its idols to ‘sacrifice to the Lord our God’ (3:18). When the king refused this simple request God would, ‘stretch out his hand to strike Egypt’ (3: 20). He would perform wonders or miracles in their midst, as signs of his superior power, until the king let them go. As the Lord moved to deliver his people, so he moved to judge the Egyptians who had persecuted them. In completing their salvation, he would judge other nations, namely those living in Canaan and similarly worshipping idols (Gen 15:14-16).

The Hebrews would see the mighty power of their covenant God as he brought the king of Egypt to his knees. ‘At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow… and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father’ (Phil 2:10, 11). They would also see the grace of God as he granted them favour in the eyes of the Egyptians. Every woman, every wife of a slave, was to ask her Egyptian neighbour for articles of silver and gold, and for garments for her children. Despite being slaves, they would leave with abundance. The word, ‘plunder’ reminds us of war. Like a warrior, God, through Moses, would lead his people in a mighty victory over the king of Egypt who represented the evil forces of this world. ‘I will sing to the Lord for he has triumphed gloriously!’ (15:1). Or as Paul writes, ‘Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1Cor 15:57).

**A reluctant prophet**  Exodus 4:1-26

The Lord God saw the oppression of his people in Egypt and heard their cry for mercy. So he came down and appeared to Moses in the burning bush on Mt Sinai. He came down to call Moses to the ministry of bringing his people out of Egypt (3:10). Despite his fear at hearing the voice of God and being told he was standing on holy ground, Moses was not ready to go as commanded by the Lord. A new Pharaoh had taken over so Moses was no longer a wanted man (3:23, 4:19). But he was content with his life as a shepherd in Midian: ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?’ he replied (3:11). This was false humility, not fear. The Lord assured Moses he would go with him and gave him a sign. God revealed to Moses a new name which he could tell to the Hebrews. They, or two of them, had of course, been critical of his attempt to deliver them in his own power (2:10).

God the Lord who appeared to Moses in the burning bush, told Moses what he was to do and say back in Egypt. But still he was reluctant to go. He failed to trust the Lord and His word. He lacked faith. It is not wrong to feel inadequate for the ministry to which the Lord has called you, but it is wrong to let fear obscure faith. When the Lord promises to be with you, you must go forth in the strength of the Lord.

Moses’ first excuse was answered in a most amazing way with God revealing himself by his personal name ‘Yahweh’: ‘I AM’ or ‘I WILL BE’. But Moses was still reluctant to obey. Here in chapter 4 he makes three more excuses, eventually making the Lord angry.

**1. What if they do not believe me?**

Despite divine assurance after asking to be excused, Moses continued rejecting the call of God. He expressed doubt that ‘they’, his own people, would listen to him if he went and spoke to them. The harsh words of the Hebrew slave he rebuked for fighting with his companion must have stayed with him (3:14). His parents may have died by this time but his brother and sister were still alive. He no longer identified as an Egyptian so why would they not listen to him after forty years, and after God had answered his request for a name? (3:13); some see that request as a second excuse but it appears to be a sincere question. His second excuse here in verse 1 is an expression of doubt, which is the opposite of faith.

The Lord patiently listened to Moses’ expression of doubt and fear. Doubt of course, leads to fear, and fear leads to doubt- they are a dangerous duo! With amazing grace, the Lord performed a couple of personal miracles to convince Moses of his power to convince the people of Israel, and even Pharaoh. Moses was carrying the staff or rod of a shepherd. There and then the Lord told him to throw it onto the ground (4:2, 3). When he did it turned into a snake which Moses ran from. The Lord then told Moses to pick up this snake by the tail, which he did and the snake turned back into his staff. When Moses did this as a sign to the Hebrews they believed (4:30, 31). This was the first sign Moses and Aaron did when they went to meet Pharaoh (7:10).

The second sign the Lord gave Moses was even more personal. When he put his hand into his coat it came out with leprosy, an incurable and dreaded skin disease. Repeating this action restored his hand to normal (4:6,7). Again he would repeat this sign before the Hebrews and they believed. The Lord gave Moses yet another miraculous sign to perform if the people still did not believe him. He was to take water from the Nile and pour it onto the ground; in doing so it would become blood (4:9). It is not clear of this third sign was necessary (4:30), but again, in the grace of God, it would become the first plague upon Egypt. When Moses struck the river with his staff the water turned into blood (7:20). When Moses did these signs before the Hebrews they believed; they listened and they worshipped (4:31). Yet Moses himself was not convinced by these signs of God’s omnipotence. He came up with yet another excuse.

**2. But I am a hopeless speaker**

Moses tried to excuse himself from the call of God a third time. First it was, ‘I am a nobody’, second it was, ‘No one will listen to me’, and now, ‘I am not qualified’. The Lord made him a ‘somebody’ by revealing His name to Moses, and then he showed him miraculous signs that would convince the people to listen to him. Now his excuse is, ‘I am slow of speech’, or ‘I cannot talk very well’ (4:10). A less educated person would struggle to come up with so many excuses! Speaking of education and lack of eloquence, we are reminded of the apostle Paul. The Lord called this top-of-the-class Pharisee through a powerful vision in which he heard the voice of the risen Jesus. But when called to preach to the Gentiles Paul did not make excuses. He admitted to a lack of eloquence but this did not hinder him in his ministry. Why? Because he spoke words given him by the Lord, namely the gospel of Jesus Christ and him crucified (1Cor 2:1-4). It was faith, not ability that Moses lacked.

Moses was trained to be an Egyptian ruler; not that the Lord reminded him of his qualifications. He had no trouble confronting the two Hebrew men who were fighting (2:13). What the Lord told Moses to remember was that it was He who gave Moses his mouth- as well as his ears and eyes (4:11). God gives us all our faculties and abilities that we might use them for his glory, not ours. He gave us lips to praise him and to tell of his glory (Heb 13:15, Ps 51:14). The old hymn, ‘Have thine own way Lord’ reminds us that God is the potter and we are the clay. The Lord again commands Moses to go (cf. 3:10) assuring him he will be with him, ‘with his mouth’, and will teach him what to say (4:12). Jesus gave the same promise to his disciples (Mat 10:19), which means it is a promise to you and me. Are you speaking words given to you by the Lord in whom you believe and whose Spirit dwells in your heart?

**3. Please send someone else**

Did the Lord give up on this reluctant prophet? No. Did he listen to Moses’ suggestion to send someone else? Yes and no. What we are told is that the Lord got angry with Moses (4:14). Moses saw the burning bush and heard the voice of God. He hid face in fear and ‘was afraid to look upon God’ (3:6). God revealed himself to Moses in a new name, ‘I AM’. He even gave Moses two miraculous signs, both for his own assurance and to assure the Hebrews back in Egypt. What more could Moses ask for? Nothing. ‘If God is for us who can be against us?’ (Rom 8:31). But still Moses objected to going as commanded by God. Actually, there is one thing he could have asked for- faith! As Solomon asked for wisdom so Moses could have asked for faith.

For the first time in the Bible we read that God got angry. Apparently some never read this far because they think God never gets angry. Or else they start in the NT, but again we read that Jesus got angry (Mark 3:5). The Lord got angry with one of his own people. The Lord is slow to anger but his anger is aroused by unbelief and disobedience (34:6). For us anger is dangerous because it leads to sin but God cannot sin- his is righteous anger.

To the question, ‘Did God listen to Moses?’ we said, ‘yes and no’. ‘No’, God did not give up on Moses, and ‘Yes’ he did agree to send him a helper in the form of ‘Aaron the Levite your brother’ (4:14). Aaron could speak well and was already on his way. The all-knowing God was ready to deal with Moses’ lack of faith. Aaron may have been coming to find Moses and tell him that it was safe to return home because the Pharaoh had died. Aaron and his sons would later be consecrated as Israel’s priests in perpetuity (29:9).

Moses made no more excuses. He finally accepted the call of God to go back to Egypt and tell the elders of God’s plan to deliver them from bondage. He accepted the will of God, which meant going to Pharaoh and asking that the people be let go on a three day journey into the desert to sacrifice to the Lord God of Israel. All God called Moses to do was go, and he would give him words to say, though now he would speak through his brother Aaron. God would tell Moses what to say, he would tell Aaron, and Aaron would speak to Pharaoh (4:15, 16). God would use their mouths to speak to the king of Egypt. They would be prophets of almighty God (2Peter 1:21). So Moses obeyed the Lord, returning with the support of his brother, and with his staff. Through his brother we would speak and with his staff he would perform miraculous signs.

**4. Israel my firstborn**

Moses was a son-in-law and servant of Jethro; as such he needed permission to leave the family home. His request was granted, with Jethro saying, ‘Go in peace’ (4:18). Jethro knew Moses had come from Egypt but may not have known much more of his family background. In calling Moses to go to Egypt, the Lord did not tell him the Pharaoh had died, but somewhere along the line the Lord did make this known to Moses (4:19 cf. 2:23).

Moses set out for Egypt with his wife and sons seated on a donkey (4:20). In Matthew 2 we read of another man taking his wife and son to Egypt. That son, unlike Moses’ son, had been circumcised on the eighth day. Moses took his staff and was ready to perform wonders before Pharaoh but had neglected something very important to God, namely circumcision of his son, probably his firstborn. Moses had two sons (4:20) but only Gershom has been named thus far in the account.

In the context of instructing Moses what to say to Pharaoh, the Lord suddenly ‘sought to kill him’, as in Moses (4:24). Moses was to tell Pharaoh that, ‘Israel is my son, my firstborn’ (4:22). The firstborn son inherited everything including the father’s blessing. Father’s treasured their firstborn son above all else. Moses was to tell Pharaoh to let Israel go that they might serve him, with a dire warning directed at his firstborn son and indeed all the firstborn of Egypt. This warning anticipates the tenth and final plague upon Egypt. A loving father will do all he can protect his firstborn son, and indeed all his children. Touching God’s firstborn was like touching the apple of his eye, like poking him in the eye!

Despite the stern warning given to Pharaoh about the life of his firstborn son, he would not pay heed to the word of the Lord spoken through Moses. The Lord would ‘harden his heart so that he would not let the people go’ (4:21). While it is true that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, and was personally responsible of all his actions, it is also true that God hardened his heart because God is sovereign over all his creation, including the thoughts and actions of every creature. As difficult as this truth is to understand and accept, the apostle Paul understood and accepted the truth of God’s sovereignty in election and rejection or hardening, and so must we (Rom 9:18).

On his way back to Egypt to begin the work God called him to do, Moses camped by some trees and a waterhole in the desert. The sovereign Lord suddenly struck Moses with a life-threatening ailment. Either he or his wife realised they had not circumcised their son according the covenant God made with Abraham. Although circumcision was widely practiced by many people of the ancient Near East, it has been suggested that Zipporah had some aversion to the practice. She was the one to act quickly in taking a flint to cut off their son’s foreskin, but other than this no blame is directed at her. She then touched Moses’ feet with this foreskin saying, ‘You are a husband of blood to me’ (4:25, 26). It is not clear to us what she meant by these words, but because of her swift action in circumcising their son the Lord let Moses live.

Moses and his wife would never forget this moment when the Lord was about to kill Moses. Never again would they fail to keep the terms of God’s covenant with his people. We must take seriously the promise we make when we confess our sins and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and when we bring our children forward for the covenant sign of baptism.

**Moses’ mission begins**  Exodus 4:27-5:21

When God spoke to Moses on the mountain he told him to go to Egypt, gather the elders of Israel, and tell them what God was going to do. The ‘Lord God of your fathers’ was going to bring his people out of Egypt and into the land. There was no promise that this would be an easy task. In fact, the Lord told Moses that the king of Egypt would not let them go until God had inflicted judgment upon Egypt (3:19, 20). So it should have come as no surprise to Moses that Pharaoh rejected his demand and request to let the Hebrews go into the desert to sacrifice to the Lord God of Israel.

God is good at telling his people what will happen in the future. He does so directly or through his prophets. For us today, such prophecy is found in the Bible. When Jesus says, ‘In this world you will have tribulation’, why are we surprised when trouble comes our way (John 16:33). When Jesus says there will be wars and rumours of wars, great earthquakes in various places, famines and pestilences, not to mention persecution, before he returns at the end of the age (Luke 21:10,11), why are we surprised when a deadly virus shakes the whole world? Or why are we surprised when Christians are persecuted? We know this story of God’s mighty deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt, the history of the Exodus, but for Moses this was not history; it was the prophetic word of God. Some people do not even believe this history; many do not believe the yet-to-be fulfilled prophecies of Scripture. What is your understanding of, and belief in, the history and prophecies of the Bible?

Moses’ lack of faith in God’s call was made obvious in repeated refusals to go to Pharaoh and bring God’s people out of Egypt. God got angry with him, but also graciously granted his request for a helper- in fact, for someone else to go! (4:13). God said he would send Aaron to be a mouthpiece for Moses after he complained of being ‘slow of speech’. Having a companion would be a great blessing as Moses set out on this mission to deliver the people of God. Jesus called twelve men to be with him in his mission to deliver us from bondage to sin and death, but in the end not one stood with him in his suffering. For a moment even God forsook our Deliverer because our sin made him abhorrent in the sight of God.

As Moses’ mission begins we will take note that the children of Israel were convinced, but the king of Egypt was not convinced, that chopped straw was not given, and that the chiefs of Israel blamed Moses and Aaron.

**1. Children of Israel convinced**

When the Lord met Moses on Mt Sinai he told him his brother Aaron was coming out to meet him (4:14). At the same time the Lord told Aaron to, ‘Go into the wilderness to meet Moses’ (4:27). Aaron went and met Moses on the ‘mountain of God’. It was a joyous reunion after forty years of separation. Moses brought Aaron up to date on all that the Lord had told him and the signs he was given to perform in Egypt (4:28). No doubt Aaron brought Moses up to date on the situation in Egypt. Together they returned to Egypt to meet with the elders of Israel and with Pharaoh. There is no further mention of Zipporah until Jethro brings her with their two sons to Moses after their exodus (18:2). If she went to Egypt with Moses he must have sent he back to Midian before their exodus.

Moses had expressed apprehension at meeting the children of Israel; they would want assurance that God had sent him (3:13). God gave him the name by which he would assure them, and also gave him signs by which they would be convinced that God had sent him. Moses and Aaron gathered the elders of Israel and Aaron told them what the Lord had told Moses, and did the signs before the people (4:30). And as the Lord had said (3:18), the people listened and believed that God had heard their cry because of their oppression (3:7). Upon believing that the Lord had ‘visited’ them and seen their affliction, they ‘bowed their heads and worshipped’ (4:31).

The affliction of the people had brought them to their knees in prayer, and now in worship of the Lord God of their fathers. It had not always been this way during the four hundred years of their stay in Egypt; they had not always feared the Lord and served him with sincerity and in truth. It was a case of affliction leading people back to the Lord, as the Psalmist said, ‘It was good for me to have been afflicted that I might learn your statues’ (Ps 119:71). May afflictions like coronavirus cause many to cry to the Lord and return to him in our day! This pandemic is certainly being felt like a plague upon the nations.

**2. King not convinced**

Moses and Aaron went as the Lord commanded them to tell Pharaoh what ‘the Lord God of Israel’ had given them to say to him (5:1). The Pharaoh knew the Hebrews worshipped their own God and not the gods and idols of the Egyptians, including Pharaoh himself. Pharaoh did not know the Lord God of Israel in any sense and was not ready to listen to him, but he would in the end. This was just the beginning of a ‘man versus God’ battle, a battle from which every man, woman and child should learn. Not all contestants are destroyed like Pharaoh, but no man ever has, or ever will, emerges victorious from such a battle. The apostle Paul emerged a totally changed man; God in his grace changed Paul from a persecutor to a preacher of the gospel.

As prophets of God, Moses and Aaron said to Pharaoh, ‘Let my people go that they may hold a festival to me in the desert’ (5:1 NIV). Pharaoh was not accustomed to being told what to do. He turned on Moses and Aaron, yelling at them most probably, ‘I do not know the Lord, nor will I let Israel go’ (5:2). They stood their ground, declaring that the God of the Hebrews had met with them. It is not easy to convince an unbeliever of the truth of God’s word or even the truth of God’s existence, but we dare not compromise on matters of truth. Moreover, we do not engage in so-called ‘dialogue’ or in shouting matches. Moses and Aaron quietly replied, ‘Please, let us go three days journey into the desert and sacrifice to the Lord our God’, the exact words the Lord had given them to say (5:3, cf.3:18). There is no reference to the Lord threatening them with ‘pestilence or sword’, but Moses had recently experienced divine displeasure at disobedience with regard to the circumcision of his son.

Pharaoh had no understanding of God or of sacrificing to God. He reckoned that if there was any sacrifice it should be to him! He saw this request as a threat to his authority and ‘divinity’. The Hebrews were his slaves; they were building his earthly empire. He ordered them all back to work (5:4). The previous Pharaoh tried, but failed, to stop the Hebrews multiplying by drowning their baby boys. He ended up making them slaves, a policy the current Pharaoh continued. He apparently thought a three day rest would lead to more Hebrew babies (5:5).

**3. Chopped straw not given**

The battle of ‘Pharaoh versus God’ had begun. Pharaoh not only refused the request brought by Moses and Aaron, he retaliated, as is the nature of proud and arrogant men, men who consider themselves a god. The very same day Pharaoh gave the order for his taskmasters or slave drivers to stop giving the slaves chopped straw for making bricks. Straw helped hold together the sundried clay bricks they were making. This straw came from the fields after harvest. In India wheat straw is chopped and given to animals as fodder so it can be expensive. It seems it was not easy to obtain in Egypt, certainly not by penniless slaves. Up to this point the government had been providing chopped straw. The nasty, defiant king would no longer provide this material, yet demanded the same quota of bricks be made. The slaves were forced to get straw from wherever they could (5:7, 8, and 11). They were forced to gather stubble instead of straw, which meant ripping old plants out of the ground after harvest (5:12). The king blamed Moses and Aaron for this harsh new policy. He told himself and the people that their wanting to go into the desert to sacrifice to their God was because they were idle and lazy.

**4. Chiefs of Israel blame Moses**

The Egyptian taskmasters had appointed foremen in their work gangs. When the king demanded the daily quotas be filled, even when straw was not provided, he held the taskmasters responsible. They in turn held the chiefs or officers of the Hebrews responsible. They reminded them of this responsibility by beating them (5:14). Understandably, these chiefs or foremen complained. They appealed to Pharaoh asking, ‘Why have you treated your servants this way?’ (5:15). They explained that the fault was not theirs but the taskmasters who had stopped giving them straw. Pharaoh responded by calling them idle and lazy: ‘Lazy, that’s what you are- lazy! (5:17 NIV). Their request to go and sacrifice to the Lord was labelled laziness.

Have you ever been called lazy for refusing to work on the Lord’s Day? Coming to worship is called, ‘A sacrifice of praise to God, the fruit of lips that confess his name’ (Heb 13:15). Your neighbours might regard coming to church as a waste of time, and your boss might call you lazy if you refuse to work on Sunday. In some places Christians who keep the Sabbath day holy are persecuted by the government. God commanded his people not to make servants or even animals work on the Sabbath (20:10). Having been forced to work without rest, without a Sabbath rest, the people of God in Egypt must have been so thankful for this command; at least until their focus turned to worldly wealth rather than worship. It is amazing that people actually choose to work seven days a week! As is sometimes said, ‘People are slaves to the mighty dollar’.

As these foremen came out of their meeting with Pharaoh they met Moses and Aaron (5:20). The meeting was not pleasant. Their mood had changed since hearing and believing what Moses and Aaron said about the Lord God coming to deliver them. They turned on God’s prophets saying, ‘Let the Lord look on you and judge’ you (5:21). They blamed Moses for making then like a stench in the nostrils or the sight of Pharaoh and his servants. Pharaoh’s politics, the politics of division, was working within the Hebrew camp. Would Moses endure such disappointment? Would he in turn blame the Lord for the apparent failure on day one of his mission?

We all like to ‘play the blame game’ as they say, but it is not a game. At the heart of this game is sin, sin which sadly and tragically leads to blaming God for our problems. What does God do when we blame him; who does not blame God? God sees this blame game for what it is, namely sin. With amazing grace, he sent his only begotten Son into our world to bear this sin in his own body on the cross. If we truly know the grace of God, we will bring our cares and concerns to him rather than blaming people around us. We will not start blaming God either but will, ‘cast our cares upon him because he cares for us’ (2Peter 5:7). We will confess our sin, knowing that ‘He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness’ (1John 1:8-9).

**Moses recommissioned**  Exodus 5:22-6:13

With a clear sense of God’s calling, and with a sense of excitement mixed with apprehension, we left home in 1983 to serve the Lord on the mission field. We had learned about culture shock and been prepared for it, but nothing prepared us for our first Christmas in India. We had people from our mission helping while doing language training but when we moved to our place of work we were on our own- or so it seemed. We moved into a cold, damp dwelling just before Christmas; it was a converted lecture hall with off-rooms. The ceiling was five metres high and the floor like that of a railway platform. We managed to get a chicken which we put in the electric fry pan we brought with us. It was half cooked when the power went off. I can’t remember what we ended up eating for Christmas dinner but I do remember sitting on the luggage barrels we brought, the only furniture in the ‘house’ apart from some rope beds for our three children. My prayer was, ‘Lord, why have you brought us to this place?’

The Lord told Moses to go to Egypt and bring the people out of bondage and into a land flowing with milk and honey (3:17). He sent Aaron to help him in this mission. When they spoke to the people they believed God had sent Moses and Aaron and they worshipped (4:31). But when Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh he was not so receptive. He rejected their request. In his anger he told his men to stop providing straw to the Hebrew slaves but demanded they turn out the same quota of bricks. When the Hebrews complained to Pharaoh he told them it was their own fault (5:16). The people then turned on Moses and Aaron, whose promise to deliver them had backfired badly.

Moses was back at square one, as we say, and even behind square one. The people were suffering more than ever. What would Moses do? Would he give up and go home? We certainly felt like doing this on Christmas day in 1983! As we continue this story of Moses and the Exodus we will look at this apparent failure of his mission, at the assurance ‘I am the Lord’, at the announcement to the people ‘I am the Lord’.

**1. Apparent failure**

Harsh treatment handed out to the Hebrew slaves led to harsh words directed at Moses and Aaron; ‘You have made us a stench to Pharaoh’ (5:21 NIV). Their hopes of deliverance were dashed. Their heads were no longer bowed in worship but lifted up against the God’s servants. Moses was obviously hurt by their harsh words; he could not deny the facts. The Lord sent him with the promise of deliverance but he had not delivered on his promise- as yet! Moses was upset and confused; although he should not have been given that the Lord had told him he would harden Pharaoh’s heart (3:19, 4:21). Thankfully Moses did not turn away from the Lord and return to his quiet life in Midian. We read that he ‘returned to the Lord’ (5:22). In this time of distress he turned to the Lord in prayer.

When Jesus spoke things that were hard to understand or accept, ‘many disciples turned back and walked with him no more’, but Peter said, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life’ (John 6:66-68). Is this how you feel? We will be learning about God’s covenant relationship with his people. We call God our Father, which means he loves and cares for us more than anyone else in the world; and only God can deliver. Did Moses consider this truth? He did return to the Lord.

Some think Moses was ‘complaining sharply’ and blaming God for the mess he was in, but this is not what we read. His questions state the facts and express his distress but otherwise appear sincere. Sure his ‘why?’ questions in verse 22 express doubt as to why the Lord had sent him, but doubts are okay when brought to the Lord; the danger of doubts is of turning away from the Lord in unbelief. The Lord who got angry with Moses and wanted him to send someone else (4:14) was not angry at Moses questions. He simply reminds Moses of what he had promised.

The Lord did not promise immediate capitulation by Pharaoh. In fact he told Moses that Pharaoh would not let them go until God stretched out his mighty hand against him (3:19, 20). The day of deliverance was near but was not yet. Moses was about to see God’s ‘strong hand’ strike Pharaoh and the Egyptians. ‘With a strong hand he will let them go, and with a strong hand he will drive them out of his land’ (6:1). As a ‘dynamic equivalent’ translation, the NIV has ‘my strong hand’ as in God’s strong hand; this seems to be the meaning although ‘driving out’ or ‘expelling’ could refer to the action of Pharaoh.

**2. Assures Moses that ‘I am the Lord’**

The Lord responded to Moses’ doubts, expressed in his ‘why’ questions by stating, ‘I am the Lord’ or ‘I am Yahweh’. Yahweh is the covenant name that God revealed to Moses on the mountain where he called him. This covenant name assured or reassured Moses that his covenant promises were unchanged and would be fulfilled because, ‘I am the Lord’. “‘I am the Lord’ is key to God’s message, not only to Moses but to the people” - our next point (6:2, 6, 7, 8).

As you may or may not know, I am a great fan of Colin Buchanan’s children songs. I am compelled to listen when our grandchildren are in the car! One of Colin’s songs is from Isaiah 46:9-10: ‘I am God and there is no other, I am God and there is none like me, I say my plans will stand, and I will do just as I please’. This song reminds us that God’s answer to our doubts can be found in the Bible. You may have noticed how the words of a Psalm are often words we want to say, and as you search the Scriptures further you will find the answer to your questions.

The Lord takes Moses back to Abraham and the covenant he made with Abraham. God revealed himself to Abraham as ‘*El Shaddai*’ or God Almighty, but was not known to the patriarchs by his name ‘*Yahweh*’ or ‘Lord’ (6:3). Scholars point out that the name ‘Lord’ is found in many places in the Book of Genesis but the patriarchs did not understand or ‘know’ the character of God revealed in this name to the depth it was revealed to Moses (3:14). Moses could not proclaim a completely new name lest the people thought he was proclaiming a new God. In the middle of last century, OT scholars made a big deal out of these two names, or actually the names ‘*Elohim*’ and ‘*Yahweh*’, as they tried to rearrange the OT for us.

In the covenant God made with Abraham he promised to give his descendants the land on which he was camped (Gen 15:18). Isaac and Jacob camped in Canaan until Jacob went to Egypt to settle with his twelve sons. When they were made slaves in Egypt they cried out to the Lord and the Lord heard their ‘groaning’ and remembered his covenant with Abraham (6:3-5). The God who called Moses and sent him back to Egypt was not deaf or blind, nor was he a God who changed his mind. The Lord, the ‘I AM who I AM’, both sees and hears, and is powerful to act. He is omniscient and omnipotent.

When the Lord acts he does so according to his covenant promises. He does not leave his people ‘hanging on a thread’ as it were, not knowing what he will do. He does not leave us like the woman who told me she was afraid her ‘partner’ of twenty years might leave her if she asked him to marry her. If they had a marriage covenant she would not, or should not, have been afraid of him leaving her. God does not break his covenant vows. He made a covenant with Abraham and with Moses, and he does the same with us. He made a new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ. All the promises associated with the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ are ours. In fact, we have the same covenant promise God declared to Moses here in verse 7: ‘I will be your God and you shall be my people’.

**3. Announce to the people, ‘I am the Lord’**

God told Moses to speak to the children of Israel declaring, ‘I am the Lord’, the same name declared to Moses himself (6:7, cf. 6:2). His last encounter with the people was not at all pleasant, but Moses went back to speak to them the words given him by the Lord (6:9). They did not lash out at him as before but were still not ready to listen; they were discouraged and depressed after being forced to make bricks without straw (6:9).

What did Moses say to his Hebrew brothers? He spoke the words given him by the Lord, just like the prophets after him who said, ‘Thus says the Lord’. Just as the Lord, Yahweh, reminded Moses that his covenant promises remained, so through Moses he reminded the people firstly, that he would bring them out from under the yoke of the Egyptians (6:6). Secondly, that he would rescue or deliver them from their bondage. The words ‘bring out’ and rescue’ point to the helpless situation faced by the Hebrews. Thirdly, the Lord promised to redeem them with an outstretched arm. The word ‘redeem’ points to them being held as slaves with a price on their heads. We will see that their redemption was contingent upon them putting blood on their doorposts. Here their redemption will be through the ‘outstretched arm’ of the Lord (6:6). Their redemption would come through ‘great judgments’; the Lord would judge their enemy, and his enemy, as he delivered them from bondage. ‘Deliverance for them was going to be redemption from the objective realm of sin and evil’. Our redemption in Jesus Christ comes with victory over Satan, sin and death.

Redemption from the cruel grasp of an evil Pharaoh would make them free people. What would this freedom look like? Would they simply be free to wander in the desert, doing their own thing? No! God would not only bring them out, he would also bring them in (6: 8, cf. 6:6). He would bring them into a land of milk and honey, the land he promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as a heritage (6:8). God promised his people a future, a glorious future in their own inheritance. Some people, like the prodigal son, can’t wait to get their hands on their inheritance, their earthly inheritance. Under the new covenant our inheritance is not on earth but in heaven (1Peter 1:4).

So God promised to bring them out of bondage and bring them into the land he promised their forefathers. We have seen five ‘I will’ promises thus far (6:6, 8). We come to two more here in verse 7, making a total of seven ‘I wills’. We come to the central promise of the covenant: ‘I will take you as my people, and I will be your God’ (6:7). What did this covenant promise mean? It meant that God would not leave them to do their own thing in their inherited land. He redeemed his people not just for their sakes but for his glory. The people forgot this in the days of the Judges, when it is said that every person did what was right in his own eyes (Judg 24:25). Too many Christians forget that God saved them for his glory, and that to glorify God we must obey his commands. God’s people were to remember from one generation to the next that the God who redeemed them with his outstretched arm is a covenant God known by the name Yahweh: ‘I am the Lord/Yahweh’. After bringing them out of bondage, Yahweh would establish the terms of this covenant relationship in what we call the Ten Commandments. Notice the preface to these commandments (20:2).

The old covenant has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, in the cross and the resurrection. The new covenant was instituted by Jesus as he joined his disciples in Passover, the remembrance meal of the old covenant. Jesus declared, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for you’ (Luke 22:20). The terms of the new covenant are, remember the Lord and obey his commands (John 14:23).

When the Lord told Moses to go back to Pharaoh (cf. 5:1) and tell him to let the people go, Moses explained that since the people did not listen to him Pharaoh would certainly not listen to him (6:10-12). He kept on about his ‘faltering lips’ although here it is literally ‘uncircumcised lips’ (6:12, cf. 4:10). ‘Uncircumcised carries the idea of something unfit or undedicated to the Lord’. The Lord was not about to take ‘No’ for an answer now that his work of redemption had begun. After reminding Moses of who he is, ‘I am the Lord’, and reminding him of his promises, the Lord gave him a command to convey to Pharaoh; the Lord was going to bring his people out of the land of Egypt (6:13). He was to say, in effect, what Isaiah said: ‘I am the Lord and there is no other, I am God and there is none like me…I say my plan with stand, and I will do all that I please’ (Isa 46:9,10 NIV).

**Certified as God’s servants**  Exodus 6:14-7:13

Wherever we go these days we are asked for ID. Banks require a hundred points of ID before recognising you as being who you say you are. In some places you have to give your father’s name as part of your ID. Moses came back to Egypt with a name by which he could identify God but what about his own name? Who was Moses? The people accepted him as one of their own; having his brother Aaron with him helped in this regard. We have been told about the birth of Moses and know that he is a Hebrew but have not yet been told his father’s name, and do not know which tribe he came from. These details are given in a brief pause within the story of the Exodus.

Moses’ and Aaron’s first encounter with Pharaoh backfired in the sense that Pharaoh made the lives of the Hebrew slaves harder. The Lord reassured Moses that, ‘I am the Lord’ and that his plan to deliver his people had not changed. Moses however, was reluctant to go back and command Pharaoh a second time to let the people of Israel go (6:10-13). This story will resume after we are told about the ‘ancestors of Aaron and Moses’. Our second subheading will be, ‘Aaron and Moses speak from God’, and our third, ‘Aaron’s miracle rod’.

**1. Ancestors of Aaron and Moses**

The genealogy begins with Jacob’s eldest, Reuben. It follows the genealogy already given in Genesis 46 until coming to Levi. Reuben was the eldest but he did not inherit the birthright. God acknowledges the traditions of men but is not bound by them. Simeon the second son is listed but he did not inherit either. He and the next son, Levi, were guilty of murder (Gen 34:25, 49:6); Levi was not allocated any land in Canaan. But the descendants of Levi were chosen by God to be his priests in Israel. Moses and Aaron were descendants of Levi.

In this genealogy we see that Levi had three sons, Gershon, Kohath, and Merari (6:16). It was the second of these, Kohath, who had a son called Amram, who married his aunt called Jochebed who bore Aaron and Moses (6:20). Levi lived to 137, Kohath to 133 and Amram to 137years. Moses went on to live to the age of 120years (Deut 34:7). The ‘Jo’ in Jockebed is thought to be a shortened form of ‘Yahweh’ or ‘Jehovah’ - also seen in the name ‘Joshua’.

It is unusual for women to be named in genealogies. Amram had a daughter Miriam who was older than Aaron and Moses but is not named here. But Jochebed and Aaron’s wife, Elisheba, from the tribe of Judah, are named (6:20, 23). Aaron’s sons, the fourth generation from Levi, are named, and even to the fifth generation with Phinehas, meaning ‘Ethiopian black man’ (6:25).

The focus is on the house of Levi, and particularly the line from Aaron, because this became the priestly line within Israel. Moses had sons but these are not named here. Moses was unique as a prophet and priest in Israel, until the coming of Jesus as prophet, priest and king. There was a line of priests and a line of kings but no line of prophets.

The genealogy ends with the assurance that these were the same men, the same Aaron and Moses, who were sent by the Lord to bring the children of Israel out of Egypt. They would bring them out ‘according to their armies’ or divisions (6:26, cf. 7:4). They were slaves but they would march out in an orderly manner, and in fact would be armed, at least with knives- they had to cut the straw. I recall seeing tribal men in Northeast India carrying large knives or machetes in their belt; these were used to clear the jungle and in their pre-Christian days to decapitate their enemies.

As the firstborn, Aaron is mentioned before Moses in verse 26, but in the next verse Moses is mentioned first because it was Moses, the second son, who God called to go to Pharaoh demanding that he let the children of Israel go. God’s choice is not bound by the traditions of men or by anything inherit within man himself. Obedience is all that the Lord required in his servants of old, and all that he requires of you his servant today.

The account resumes in verse 28 with the words, ‘And it came to pass on the day the Lord spoke to Moses in the land of Egypt’. No time line is given but these words take us back to where the story left off in verse 13. After the initial rebuff by Pharaoh, and Moses’ questioning, the Lord spoke to Moses reassuring him that his plan had not changed. In fact, he had told Moses that Pharaoh would not let them go (3:19). The Lord’s plan was to harden Pharaoh’s heart so as to judge him in the end; then the Egyptians and all the world would know that God is sovereign over all nations and all men, and know that, ‘I am the Lord’ (7:5).

God reminded Moses of his sovereignty saying, ‘I am the Lord’ (6:2). Moses conveyed this truth to the people but they were too discouraged to listen. When the Lord told him to again go to Pharaoh Moses objected saying he would not listen (6:12). We pick up the story at this point, after a brief review of this last interaction. The Lord had spoken to Moses saying, ‘I am the Lord’ and told him to go and speak to Pharaoh the words given him by God- ‘all that I say to you’ (6:29). But Moses objected saying he was of ‘uncircumcised lips’ (6:30, cf.6:12).

The account continues with the Lord telling Moses, ‘See, I have made you as God to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet’ (7:1). The battle line is clearly drawn. This was a battle between almighty God and a powerful, God-defying national ruler. Powerful, God-defying rulers today should take note. We see the same battle in Jesus going before men like Caiaphas, Herod and Pilate. They thought they had won the battle when they crucified Jesus, but he rose from the dead and they were left humiliated and ashamed, and were in time judged and condemned by God. These men in fact, were agents of Satan. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus continues to lead God’s chosen people out of bondage to sin and death, and into an inheritance kept in heaven. Is this what you believe? Are you one of God’s chosen people?

Moses could hardly refuse to go after being told he would be like God to Pharaoh! Moses knew the power of God, having heard his voice from the burning bush and seen wonders done by him. He was being empowered by God to speak to Pharaoh and perform signs and wonders in his presence (7:3). Actually, he would have his brother Aaron to speak for him and perform the wonders; Moses would be present ‘as God to Pharaoh’. God’s message to Pharaoh had not changed; let or ‘send the children of Israel out of this land’ (7:2). We have heard this many times and we will hear it many more times. Pharaoh probably got sick of hearing it but Moses and Aaron never got sick of telling it. They kept telling it because Pharaoh was not listening. How many times did you hear the gospel before listening and believing? We keep on preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ because some people still are not listening. We preach knowing that God has his chosen ones who will listen, and we rejoice in the Lord when they do.

Pharaoh did not listen because God hardened his heart (7:3). As we have said before, he hardened his own heart and was held responsible for his decision, but ultimately and sovereignly, God hardened Pharaoh’s heart (9: 12, 16, Rom 9:17). The Lord told Moses again that Pharaoh would not take any notice of his words but not to be discouraged by this because God’s plan was to show his power and great judgments upon an evil ruler and nation that was defying almighty God and persecuting his people, the apple of his eye. By his outstretched arm, God would bring, ‘My armies and my people, the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt’ (7:4) and the Egyptians would finally know, ‘I am the Lord’. Moses, the people, and now the Egyptians, we are told, would know, ‘I am the Lord’ (6:2, 6, 7:5).

‘Then Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded them’ (7:6); they obeyed the word of the Lord. Just a few words, even one word, but it had taken a long time to get to this point. The word is ‘obedience’, a word that is easy enough to say but not so easy to fulfil. If you say it easy to obey the Lord I might question if you really know what this word means! Many claim to be obedient but they are following their own rules not those of the Lord. Obeying the rules of others, and especially those of the Lord, is not easy for sinners like us. For a start, you will encounter disappointments like Moses, and then what? Moses was eighty when he went and spoke to Pharaoh; Aaron was three years older (7:7). If you think that it gets easier to obey as you get older, think again. We might get wiser as we get older, but we can get set in our ways; so set your heart on obedience while you are young.

**3. Aaron’s miracle rod**

Moses brought the shepherd’s staff or rod he had on the mountain with him when he returned to Egypt; God told him to do so and he obeyed (4:17). It appears that he gave this rod to Aaron to perform miracles before Pharaoh and his servants. Back on Mt Sinai, Moses threw this rod down and it became a snake, a sign to Moses himself (4:3). When he came to the people he did the same, a sign to the people, and they believed (4:30). Now the Lord told him to go to Pharaoh and do the same (7:9).

After much preparation and prayer, Moses and Aaron went in to Pharaoh a second time, as commanded by the Lord (7:10). The Lord had told them that Pharaoh would ask for a miracle, and what they were to do when he did. Moses and Aaron were ready to show Pharaoh a miracle. ‘Aaron threw down his rod before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent’ (7:10). The Hebrew word here translated ‘serpent’ is different to that used previously; it usually means ‘great sea creature’ (Gen 1:21, Ps 148:7) but appears here as a synonym of the usual word for snake.

The confrontation has resumed. The miraculous signs have started. Some refer to this as the first plague and conclude there were eleven plagues, but most see this incident as a private miracle, a preface to the plagues which impacted all Egyptians. Pharaoh responded by calling his wise men and sorcerers. As pagans, the Egyptians were superstitious and vulnerable to sorcerers and magicians. When people refuse to listen to God or his word they start listening to other voices, either their own, those of ‘wise men’, or those of the occult. One commentator says that today we could replace the word ‘magician’ with that of ‘scientist’; certainly, scientists are considered today’s ‘wise men’. Many people who close their ears to the words of the Bible are ‘all ears’ when a scientist speaks.

Pharaoh’s ‘wise men’ threw down their rods and they also turned into snakes (7:12). This may have been a conjuring trick, or it may have been by the power of Satan. Whatever it was, Aaron’s rod swallowed up their rods, a sign in itself of God’s supreme power. Even so, the effect of this miraculous sign was that Pharaoh’s heart grew hard and he did not heed them, as the Lord had said (7:13).

When Jesus came into the world he performed many signs and wonders. From his prison cell, John the Baptist asked Jesus, ‘Are you the Messiah?’ Jesus pointed him to the mighty works he was doing: healing the blind and the deaf, the lame and the lepers, and even raising the dead (Mat 11:5). But even when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead the people did not believe- they tried to kill him! Jesus said, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead’ (Luke 16:31). I hope you are not waiting for a personal miracle before you believe! There are such people, proud and arrogant people who, like Pharaoh, ask for a miracle before they will believe. The solemn answer of Jesus is, ‘No such sign will be given’ (Matt 11:39); God’s revelation is here in the Bible.

**God strikes Egypt: plagues of blood, frogs and gnats**  Exodus 7:14-8:19

The Ganges River is considered holy by Hindus. Living near to this river we saw thousands of devotees to various Hindu gods coming to take a dip in the holy waters of this river; they came from all over the country and the world. Hindu students were told to bring a bottle of this holy water from the Ganges home when they came on holidays. Some joked that they filled the bottle from a tap as they headed home! This holy water was used in various rituals around the home; certainly not for drinking, I hope! One summer was so hot I actually jumped into the river to cool off and came out covered in filth. The water villagers drank came from wells dug into the sandy loam soil away from the river. Deeper tube wells tapped into underground aquifers.

The Nile River was not unlike the Ganges. It is still there of course, fed by heavy rains around Lake Victoria and in the Ethiopian plateau, but the religion of the people has changed, and its waters no longer considered holy. It is still the ‘life-blood’ of the Egyptians with 95% of the population living within a few kilometres of the river.

We were introduced to the Nile when a new Pharaoh started throwing baby Hebrew boys into the river (1:22). When Pharaoh’s daughter came down to the river to bathe, she found a basket in which Moses had been placed by his mother (2:5). Moses is now eighty and back at the river to meet a new, but no less wicked, Pharaoh. Moses and his brother had already been to meet Pharaoh in his palace to ask that he let the Hebrew slaves go a three days journey into the desert to worship the Lord God of Israel (5:3). After some time they went again, this time performing miraculous signs with Aaron’s rod (7:210). The result was that Pharaoh’s heart grew hard, just as the Lord said.

The epic battle between Almighty God and the king of Egypt had just begun. We know that anyone who says in his heart there is no God is a fool (Ps 14:1). We know that God made man in his own image to worship God. But too many people ignore this truth. Like Pharaoh, they foolishly reject God and his authority over their life. If you are such a person, such a fool, you would be wise to learn from the fool called Pharaoh, and turn from your God-denying and God-defying ways.

With no word of encouragement, the Lord simply told Moses to go and meet Pharaoh yet again, this time in the morning by the bank of the river (7:15). Morning was when Pharaoh went down to the river, presumably to bathe, at least in a ritual manner. At sunrise you will see lots of Hindus standing waist deep in the waters of the Ganges performing ‘puja’ or worship to their gods. The Lord told Moses to again demand of Pharaoh, in the name of the Lord God of the Hebrews, that he let the Hebrews go to worship in the desert (7:16). But this time the demand came with a threat to turn the waters of the river into blood. This would be the first of ten plagues to strike Egypt. The second was a plague of frogs/toads and the third a plague of gnats/lice. The fourth and seventh plagues also begin with Moses going to meet Pharaoh in the morning; so we have three sets of three plagues and then the final plague.

**1. Plague of blood**

When the Lord told Moses to go and meet Pharaoh in the morning at the river bank, he took his special rod and went (7:14, 15). He was to again tell Pharaoh that he was sent by ‘the Lord God of the Hebrews’ conveying a request that he let God’s people go and worship in the desert (7:16). Because Pharaoh had not listened to previous requests, Moses delivered an ultimatum from the Lord: ‘Behold, I will strike the waters in the river with the rod in my hand and they shall be turned into blood’ (7:17). We are later told that water in all the rivers, canals, ponds and pools of Egypt would become blood; even water in buckets of wood and vessels of stone would turn into blood (7:19). The Hebrew text does not say ‘buckets’ but this is how most translate the original. Some translate ‘sap of trees’ and ‘springs in stony places’, and then proceed to be critical of the text saying that there were few trees or springs in Egypt.

Speaking of critics, there are those who try to tell us that this plague of blood was a natural event. Some will allow that it is a miracle of timing but not a miracle of water turning into blood. A common explanation is that at flood time a lot of red soil is washed into the Nile making it look red. But red dust does not kill fish and make the water stink. They then tell us that a particular algae made the water go red. But we know from recent fish kills in the Darling River that this happens in times of drought and low river flows. Some critics say the Nile was in flood and others that this plague happened during a drought!

It is interesting that the Egyptians started digging around the river for water they could drink (7:24). We know that polluted water is filtered as it passes through sandy soil but what about blood? There is no mention of the aquifers being affected by this plague. Moses makes this comment to confirm that every other source of water was undrinkable because it was turned into blood.

Moses also confirms what took place by telling us what the Lord told him to say and do when he confronted Pharaoh by the river (7:16-18), and then telling us what he told Aaron his prophet to do (7:19), and then telling us what Aaron actually did (7:20,21). They did just as the Lord commanded them: Aaron lifted up his rod and struck the water of the river in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and the water turned into blood (7:20). The fish in the river died and the water became foul and undrinkable because it had turned into blood. Moses went to Pharaoh in the morning and presumably struck the water that same day; certainly it was not something that happened over a period of days (7:25). We are not told how this plague ended or how long it lasted but the reference in verse 25 to seven days passing points to it having come to an end.

What was the effect of this plague of blood upon the people? We have just seen that the common people started digging for water to drink. The magicians, who had great influence on this superstitious king, were able to reproduce the miracle of turning water into blood, at least to the satisfaction of Pharaoh. Maybe they secretly cut themselves and through their tricks turned water into blood. Pharaoh chose to believe in their tricks rather than the power of Almighty God. He turned and went back to his palace with an even harder heart than before (7:22, 23). There is no mention of the Hebrews being affected by this plague but it is not until the fourth plague that the Hebrews are specifically exempted from the effects of the plagues with which their God was striking Egypt.

**2. Plague of frogs**

A week after the plague of blood the Lord sent Moses to Pharaoh yet again. His message was the same, and again we are told of the Lord speaking to Moses, of Moses speaking to Aaron and of both of them speaking to Pharaoh. The critics we have been referring to could not understand this sequence of events clearly set out in 7:1, 2; they tried to convince us that these steps represented different source material brought together in the final account.

The Lord told Moses to tell Pharaoh that if he refused to listen and let the Hebrews go, God would, ‘smite all your territory with frogs/toads’ (8:2). Among the many gods worshipped by the Egyptians was a frog-headed goddess called Heqt. In India they have a monkey god; temples dedicated to this god are full of monkeys and the smell is terrible. For some reason or other we do not see as many frogs as were once did but if you go to Queensland you will find millions of cane toads. I read that one toad can lay thirty thousand eggs in a season.

When the Lord spoke of smiting the Egyptians with a plague of toads he spoke of them entering houses, swarming into bedrooms and over their beds (8:3). I have slept with rats running around the rafters but thankfully rats do not jump like toads and frogs. Kitchens would also be invaded with toads jumping into ovens and breakfast bowls. Critics try to associate this sudden explosion of frog numbers with the Nile flooding, but again it is not easy to follow their logic because frogs do not breed in flood waters. Moses told Aaron to stretch out his rod over the streams, rivers, and ponds of Egypt just as he had done before but this time the effect would be a plague of frogs or toads covering the length and breadth of Egypt (8:5, 6). The text does not used the word ‘plague’ but this is what is pictured.

We again ask about the outcome. Again the magicians, by their ‘secret arts’, also made ‘frogs come up in the land of Egypt’ (8:7). Pharaoh was not exactly impressed- he wanted less toads not more! He asked Moses and Aaron to pray to the Lord to take the frogs away and then he would let the people go to worship in the desert (8:8). Did Moses and Aaron rejoice? Pharaoh acknowledged that their God had sent the frogs and said he would give what they asked but there was no rejoicing. The word of this wicked man proved to be worthless (cf. 8:15). We might compare the words of similarly wicked rulers in the world today! Besides, the word of the Lord, ‘I will harden Pharaoh’s heart’, was by now firmly planted in the mind of Moses. What the Lord wanted firmly planted in the mind of Pharaoh was that the God of Israel was the Lord God Almighty.

Moses agreed to pray for the plague to stop but cleverly asked Pharaoh to nominate a time. In this way he would know that the Lord not only sent the frogs but also took them away, ‘that there is no one like the Lord our God’ (8:9, 10). That night Moses cried out to the Lord and the Lord honoured Moses’ promise to Pharaoh; ‘the Lord did according to the word of Moses’ (8:13). This reminds us of the promise of Jesus that, ‘If you ask anything in my name I will do it’ (John 14:14), and of John declaring that, ‘if we ask anything according to His [God’s] will he hears us’ (1John 5:14). The next day, according to the time set by Pharaoh, the frogs died on mass, leaving the Egyptians with a huge, stinking mess to clean up. The wickedness of Pharaoh was like a stench before the Lord, a stench worse than a river of blood or piles of rotting dead frogs.

**3. Plague of gnats**

In our NKJV we have the translation ‘lice’ which is preferable, although the Hebrew word occurs only here and can refer to various small insects. Some prefer the translation ‘fleas’, ‘sand-flies’ or ‘mosquitoes’, but we note that they came out of the dust. These insects came upon people and animals all over Egypt (8:16, 17). Lice are difficult to remove from children when they get them in their hair.

The account of this the third plague is brief because no notice is given to Pharaoh and his servants. The Lord spoke to Moses and he told Aaron to strike the dust on the ground, and from this dust lice emerged (8:16, 17). Lack of notice may be the reason the magicians could not reproduce this plague; it appears they had no time to devise a trick. In fact, their advice to Pharaoh was that this plague upon their land was ‘the finger of God’ (8:19). To this extent there was some progression in the outcome from the plagues; the magicians were concerned about a power greater than theirs, a power that Moses and Aaron said was the Lord God of the Hebrews. But the heart of one man, Pharaoh, was unmoved. ‘Pharaoh’s heart grew hard, and he did not heed them, just as the Lord had said’ (8:19).

When Jesus was casting out demons some accused him of doing so by the power of Beelzebub or Satan. He explained that Satan would not be casting out demons, and that he was casting them out by the finger of God (Luke 11:20). Jesus was demonstrating the power of God, the supreme power of Almighty God, the power seen most dramatically in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Even as Paul preached salvation in ‘Jesus Christ and him crucified’, he also preached the resurrection as God’s assurance that he will one day judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:31). Even as God promised to deliver his people out of slavery in Egypt, he was bringing judgment upon a wicked, God-defying ruler and his followers.

**God strikes Egypt: flies, animal disease and boils**  Exodus 8:20-9:12

The current viral pandemic is shaking our nation, and the whole world, as never before seen by our generation. Many are losing jobs, children cannot go to school, some face delays in surgery and almost everyone has had their travel plans disrupted. Some are finding this stressful and distressing; never before have they been stopped from going where they wanted when they wanted. As prosperity increases, and godliness decreases, people assume greater control over their lives. The stress of not being in control, whether because of this pandemic or other reasons, is fatal for some.

The wisdom God teaches us is to wait upon the Lord, and make our plans in the knowledge that he is in control of all that happens in this world and in our lives. Such wisdom warns us against saying, ‘Today or tomorrow I will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell and make a profit’. It teaches us to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that’ (James 4:13-15). Is this the wisdom the Lord is teaching us in this current pandemic? Is he teaching us to wait upon him and search his will for our lives? If we know and trust the Lord we will not be getting stressed to the extent of those who are without God and without hope in this world (Eph 2:12). It is not more mental health services that we need in this present crisis but more preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ and widespread spiritual revival in our land.

Pharaoh, king of Egypt, epitomises human beings who think they are in control of everything in their life. He regarded himself as god- that was until he was confronted by the true God, the God of creation who continues to rule over his creation. Pharaoh had more power than most men; he had power to enslave people and to order genocide. Only a few men have such power today, but every person without God is similarly seeking control over their own life, their relationships and their future. Almighty God, through a series of plagues, showed Pharaoh who was in control. Let us humbly acknowledge the God of creation and of redemption before we are confronted by more plagues.

Today we come to three more plagues with which the Lord struck Egypt. He did so because of Pharaoh’s intransigence, his refusal to let the people of God go into the desert for three days to worship the Lord. We have seen three plagues already, a plague of blood, a plague of frogs, and a plague of lice. We have seen the magicians telling Pharaoh that this was the finger of God (8:19), but Pharaoh’s heart only grew harder. We will look at three more plagues that God’s servants, Moses and Aaron, brought upon the Egyptians: a plague of flies, a plague of disease upon livestock, and a plague of boils.

**1. Plague of flies**

When the Lord struck the waters of Egypt turning them into blood, Pharaoh just turned away and went home. When the Lord sent a plague of frogs Pharaoh hardened his heart after the frogs died. When he sent a plague of lice, Pharaoh’s heart became hard yet again. But the Lord was not about to give up on this God-denier, this man who thought he was greater than God. The Lord again told Moses to go early in the morning to the river to meet Pharaoh. He reminded Pharaoh of the word of God that had not changed: ‘Let my people go that they may worship me’ (8:20).

The alternative was another plague, a swarm of flies that would enter the houses of all Egyptians (8:21). The word ‘swarm’ actually means ‘mingle’ or ‘mix’, and the word ‘flies’ does not occur in the Hebrew text, but is rightly understood. Despite this lack of clarity in the text, some think they can identify the particular fly, and then proceed to tell us that the more temperate climate of Goshen was not suitable for this species of fly. Goshen was of course, in the northeast corner of Egypt but flies do not normally respect political borders!

What the text does tell us is that for the first time the Lord ‘set apart the land of Goshen’ so that his own people were not affected by this plague (8:22). By making this division, or literally ‘deliverance’ of his own people, the Lord would show Pharaoh that, ‘I am the Lord in the midst of the land’ (8:22). When God says, ‘I am the Lord’ he means he is Lord not only of the Hebrews but of all Egypt and all the world. The religious understanding of the time was that each land had its own god. Hindus still believe this, literally, while pluralists believe in each religion having its own god. Many today believe that they are their own god. To claim the universal lordship of Jesus Christ is regarded as arrogance- which means Moses was being arrogant!

Moses was speaking the truth, as revealed to him by God, and this truth would be recognised by Pharaoh and the Egyptians in the end. Jesus spoke the truth when he said, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me’ (John 14:6) and this truth will be recognised by every human being in the end. Moreover, Moses did not simply look up, see a swarm of flies and say ‘these are sent by the Lord’. He said to Pharaoh, ‘Tomorrow this sign shall be’ (8:23), and ‘tomorrow’ it came to pass (8:24). The plague came at a time set by God.

The next day dark clouds of flies swarmed across the land and into the houses of all Egyptians, including Pharaoh’s palace. ‘The land was corrupted/ruined because of the swarms of flies’ (8:24). This plague would have prevented people from working in their fields, or maybe worse if they were like march-flies or sand-flies. Whatever the details, this plague made an impact on Pharaoh. He told Moses to go and worship his God but only inside Egypt (8:25). Under pressure Pharaoh started bargaining with God- or so it seemed. The word of an evil man like Pharaoh could not be trusted, as Moses well knew, later warning him not to ‘deal deceitfully’ (8:29). Moreover, God does not bargain with human beings. In his grace he may relent of planned punishment but knowing that God’s ways are perfect, we dare not ask him to do something less perfect.

There was a reason behind the request for God’s people to be allowed to go three days journey into the desert: that reason is explained by Moses in verse 26. Basically, the Egyptians would riot if they saw the Hebrews sacrificing to God, in much the same was as Muslims riot if a pig’s head is thrown into a mosque, or Hindus riot if a cow’s head is found in a temple. Moses said that they had to go three days journey outside Egypt as commanded by the Lord (8:27).

Pharaoh finally agreed but only to them going ‘not very far away’- whatever that meant! His main concern was to get rid of the flies and he needed Moses to pray for this to happen (8:28 cf.8:3). In good faith, Moses agreed to pray for the Lord to remove the swarms of flies the next day but warned Pharaoh not to renege on his promise to let the people go. This wicked man was not acting in good faith of course; his word could not be trusted. The Lord heard Moses’ prayer and removed the swarms of flies- ‘not one remained’. But Pharaoh hardened his heart yet again (8:31, 32).

**2. Deadly disease strikes the livestock**

A fifth plague follows with no specific time frame given, although critics seeking a natural explanation for the plagues tell us that the flies came from the rotting frogs and then spread a deadly livestock disease called anthrax. Too many preachers adopt these assumptions as fact, but we must not go beyond the text itself. This fifth plague begins like the second, with Moses going to Pharaoh to tell him what the Lord God of the Hebrews demanded (9:1 cf. 8:1). If he refused to let the Hebrews go into the desert to worship, the Lord would strike the cattle of the Egyptians with ‘a very severe pestilence’. This disease would actually kill ‘all the livestock of Egypt’ (9:3, 6).

The domestic livestock of Egypt, livestock that was ‘in the field’, included cattle, horses, donkeys, camels, oxen and sheep. The economy of Egypt would be crippled even more than our economy is being crippled by the current pandemic. Products like milk and meat would disappear and transportation would cease. This plague, like some others, was probably directed at things worshipped by the Egyptians as their gods. We are aware of cow-worship by Hindus. The current pandemic is striking at various ‘gods’ worshipped by many in our society.

Pharaoh was warned that this plague on the livestock of Egypt would come at a time set by the Lord; ‘Tomorrow the Lord will do this thing in the land’ (9:5). And in keeping with the previous plague of flies, it would not extend into the region of Goshen because the Lord was making distinction between Egypt and Israel. Sure enough, the next day the Lord carried out his threat, and that without Moses using his rod. All the livestock of Egypt died but none of the livestock of the Israelites died (9:6). Pharaoh sent to check this out for himself. He would learn that the ‘finger of God’ (8:19) was directed at him and his people, but his heart became hard yet again (9:7).

The critics point out that if all the livestock had died in this plague there would not have been any to gather into the sheds before the hail (9:6 cf.9:13). But this is simplistic and there is no need to postulate that only ‘cattle in the field’ died from this pestilence; the Israelites may have sold cattle to the Egyptians as the beginning of their plundering the Egyptians (3:22).

**3. Plague of boils**

This sixth plague, like the third, is carried out without warning. And like the third plague, the magicians again rate a mention. The Lord told Moses and Aaron to go to Pharaoh with handfuls of fine ash or soot from a furnace and throw this into the air (9:8, 9). There is no indication of this being from a furnace used to fire bricks; bricks made with straw are not put into a furnace.

When Moses threw this soot into the air while standing before Pharaoh it blew across the land causing boils to appear on man and beast (9:10). We do not have to believe that this soot actually caused the boils. Are we not currently washing our hands repeatedly to remove any dirt lest we catch the invisible but deadly coronavirus? Job suffered from painful boils; we read of him scraping these with bits of broken pottery (Job 2:7, 8). In Deuteronomy, Moses warns the people of Israel that he will strike them with ‘the boils of Egypt’ if they disobey his commandments (Deut 28:27).

The boils of Egypt afflicted all the Egyptians. Moses tells how this plague affected the magicians in particular (9:11). The fact that they could not stand before Moses because of their boils points to the severity of this affliction. It also points to their humiliation but not that of Pharaoh. This proud and arrogant man was presumably suffering like his magicians but he would not humble himself before Almighty God. He again hardened his heart, or in this case we read that ‘the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh’ (9:12 cf. 8:15,32). People who continue to harden their heart to the gospel of Jesus Christ will one day find the Lord hardening their heart, and giving them up to a depraved mind, to futile thoughts and vile passions of the flesh (Rom 1:24-32).

**God strikes Egypt: plagues of hail and locusts**  Exodus 9:13-10:20

The Indian economy was among the fastest growing in the world- that was until the coronavirus pandemic. The latest news is that the Indian economy will shrink by 25%; their car sales are down 80%. Millions of migrant workers fled the cities when the government imposed a lockdown. The current Hindu nationalist government previously imposed policies of oppression upon Christians and other minority religions.

The economy of our state of Victoria is in turmoil because of a similar lockdown. In this once-thriving economy, spending is down 30%. This lockdown will cause the whole nation’s economy to contract by 6%. The treasurer referred to this as economic devastation. In 2008 Victoria passed a law allowing abortion up to 24weeks gestation, despite the clear teaching of the Bible. In 2010 it introduced teaching on homosexuality into state schools. Along with the rest of the nation, it legalised homosexual marriage in 2017, despite the clear teaching of the Bible.

God sent Moses and Aaron to the king of Egypt demanding he let the Hebrews go into the desert to worship the Lord. This king or Pharaoh had made the Hebrew people his slaves. When they cried out to God because of this oppression, he heard their cry and remembered his covenant with their forefathers. He sent Moses and Aaron to the king in response to the cry of his covenant people. The Lord spoke to Moses and he conveyed the message to Pharaoh. But Pharaoh refused to listen and let the people go, even after seeing miraculous signs performed by Moses.

The Lord afflicted Pharaoh and the people of Egypt with various disasters or plagues. He turned water into blood, sent plagues of frogs, lice and flies, as well as a disease which killed the livestock, and boils on man and beast. Thus far we have seen six plagues of increasing severity, although as yet people have not been killed. Initially, given sufficient notice, the magicians could reproduce the plagues but now they were telling Pharaoh that what he saw was the finger of God (8:19). This truth became apparent even before the land of Goshen where the Hebrews lived was exempted from the plagues. But Pharaoh was no longer listening to his own wise men. Why? Because, ‘the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh’ (9:12).

Egypt was a rich and prosperous nation, and a major world power before Moses and Aaron came along. It prospered under the leadership of Joseph, a man of God. It was after Joseph died that the oppression started. Using slaves in massive building projects could not go on for long, especially when these slaves were God’s special people. When Pharaoh arrogantly rejected the word of Almighty God most people knew that the end was near. Today we will see that not only his magicians but his servants in general urged him to give Moses what he wanted. Why? Because the economy of the land was being devastated: ‘Do you not yet know that Egypt is destroyed?’ (10:7).

We are being told that it will take years for our economy to recover from this pandemic- and there is still no end in sight! How many hard hearts are yet to suffer at the hands of the Lord? ‘Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing fro the living God… lest you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin’ (Heb 3:12,13).

**1. Heart of Pharaoh hardened**

We come to the seventh plague and the last group of three plagues. The first of each group begins with Moses rising early in the morning to ‘stand before Pharaoh’, most probably as he was going to the river to bathe (9:13). Moses repeated God’s demand that he, ‘Let My people go, and that they may worship me’ (9:13). This time the demand comes with the threat to ‘send the full force of my plagues’ upon you, ‘to your very heart’, your servants and your people- note the first use of the word ‘plague’ in the text (9:14). The threat was to strike the people directly- people will die.

It had come to this because of Pharaoh’s hard heart. But it was also the Lord’s sovereign plan that Pharaoh and all the Egyptians would know that, ‘there is none like me in all the earth’ (9:14). The Lord God of the Hebrews is not some local god to be compared to the gods of Egypt; he is the God of all the earth and all the nations. As God of all the earth, he could have struck Pharaoh and his servants already with a deadly pestilence and wiped them off the face of the earth (9:15). But God chose to let him live up to now despite his refusal to obey God’s word. We might say God was being patient and giving him another opportunity to repent. Indeed, God is patient and wants all to repent. But with Pharaoh, God’s purpose in letting him live was to show his almighty power and bring glory to his own holy name in all the earth (9:16).

Pharaoh hardened his own heart, but it was also true that God hardened his heart (9:12). God did this that all the earth would know that he is the all-powerful God that all people everywhere must fear. The apostle Paul understood this truth as being fundamental to the doctrine of divine election. He writes in Romans 9 of God choosing or electing Jacob not Esau before they were born. He goes on, ‘God has mercy on whom he wills and whom he will he hardens’ (Rom 9:18). He takes this text from Exodus 9:16 as an example of God, in his sovereign and eternal purposes, hardening a man’s heart in order to show to the whole world that he is Almighty God (Rom 9:17).

Pharaoh failed to understand God’s invisible attributes, his eternal power and Godhead revealed in the creation (Rom 1:20), or in the revealed word brought to him by God’s prophet. In fact, he rejected God’s revelation in the creation and worshipped created things, things that were now plaguing him. He actively rejected God’s word, repeatedly revealed to him. He set himself against the people of God, refusing to let them go. Leaders of nations like China and India, and especially North Korea, take note!

**2. Plague of hail**

After delivering this divine assessment of Pharaoh’s heart, and revealing God’s purposes in letting him live, Moses told Pharaoh of yet another plague that would strike Egypt if he failed to let God’s people go. Moses solemnly declared, ‘Tomorrow at this time I will send the worst hail storm that has ever fallen on Egypt’ (9:18 NIV). Hailstorms can be destructive and deadly. Some years ago a severe hailstorm damaged thousands of cars across Sydney. Most people took shelter but some suffered injuries as huge hail stones rained down. It is a wonder that more people were not hurt as they continued their game of golf or other outdoor activity during the storm.

The hailstorm to hit Egypt would be the worst in their history (9:18). Any person or any animal outdoors would be killed by the hail. Moses warned Pharaoh and his servants, and effectively all the Egyptians, of this impending hailstorm. They were given 24hours notice- a better forecast than we get even today! The question was, would they believe Moses and take action? Would they gather their livestock and their family into shelters, or would they ignore the word from God and watch their livestock and family members be killed (9:20, 21). The Hebrews in Goshen were again exempted from this plague (9:26). A division would now appear among the Egyptians, a division between people who feared God and believed the word of the Lord, and those who did not (9:20, 21).

When, at the appointed time, Moses stretched out his staff toward heaven, the Lord sent thunder and hail and fire/lightning. The hail struck the whole land of Egypt. Any person or animal not under shelter was killed. Crops and trees were shredded. Our fruit growers spend a lot of money putting nets over their trees to protect their crop from hail damage. In Egypt trees could not be protected but animals could be brought under shelter- if their owners believed the word of the Lord (Prov 12:10).

Thankfully, crops of wheat and spelt, both *Triticum spp*., were not destroyed because they ripen some weeks later than barley and flax/linseed. The latter were in head and bud respectively, so when flattened and shredded by the hail they did not recover like the wheat. But the next plague, that of locusts, will destroy even the wheat, leaving the nation of Egypt on its knees like never before.

The devastation must have been horrific because Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron saying, ‘I have sinned this time. The Lord is righteous, and my people and I are wicked’ (9:27). What a confession! Pharaoh finally admitted, ‘I have sinned’! But was he a changed man? No. It was just words to this man; his heart remained as hard as ever. His confession was just a ploy to get Moses to pray for the storm to stop (9:28). He promised to obey the demand of Almighty God to let the people go, but could his word be trusted?

Pharaoh was such a wicked man, but do we not see the same wickedness today? We still see people confessing sin and not meaning a word of what they say; we see people saying they are Christians when they are not, and people making promises they have no intention of keeping. Politicians are especially prone to such deception but they are only the tip of the iceberg. Of course, it is not fashionable to confess sin these days, but people still make bargains with God when they are desperate for something, and then forget all that they have promised.

Moses knew the word of this wicked ruler could not be trusted. He knew he did not yet fear the Lord (9:30) but he agreed to pray and ask the Lord to stop the storm. In so doing he further demonstrated that it was the Lord who sent the storm: ‘That you may know that the earth is the Lord’s’ (9:29, Ps 24:1). So Moses went out of the city, lifted his hands in prayer to the Lord, and the storm stopped. The wicked Pharaoh went back on his word as he hardened his heart even more against God and his word.

**3. Plague of locusts**

Yet again the Lord told Moses to go to Pharaoh, not because Pharaoh was ready to listen and let the people go but because the Lord had hardened his heart (10:1). He was doing this that Pharaoh, and all the world, would know that he is Almighty God, and that Moses and the Hebrews would be assured of this truth for generations to come (10:2). For the eighth time the Lord, through Moses, demanded that Pharaoh let the people go. If he refused, a plague of locusts would strike Egypt the next day. The plague locust still swarms across North Africa and Asia today. There was a plague earlier this year. We also experience locust plagues if the Plague Locust Commission fails to spray the hatching nymphs. I have seen locusts moving in dark clouds across Western NSW, devouring every green thing in their path. In Egypt, the recovering wheat crop would be decimated, along with everything else that escaped the hail (10:5).

Having delivered the ultimatum to Pharaoh regarding a locust plague worse than ever before seen in Egypt, Moses and Aaron turned and left (10:6). Interestingly, Pharaoh’s servants then pleaded with him to look at what was happening to their nation and let the Hebrews go. His wise men had told him, ‘this is the finger of God’ and now his servants are showing wisdom in asking Pharaoh, ‘How long shall this man be a snare to us? (10:7). Because of Moses, all their livestock were dead, and all their crops destroyed, or were about to be destroyed by a locust plague. But hard hearts make men blind to reality. Proud hearts do not see reality until it is too late. Men with proud hearts focus on one thing only- themselves, and their power to control everything. Is this not what we see with some political leaders as they deal with the current coronavirus plague? Is this not what we see with some church leaders as they preside over a crumbling church? Is this not what we see with men and women who preside over a crumbling marriage, with children crying out for grace and humility?

Pharaoh listened to his servants to the extent that he called for Moses and told him he would let the Hebrews go, but with conditions; he demanded to know just who was going (10:8). When Moses assured him that young and old must all go, along with their flocks and herds, Pharaoh angrily warned him that, ‘evil is ahead of you’ (10:10). Even as Pharaoh said, ‘Go, worship the Lord’, he changed his mind saying only men could go, and with these words drove God’s servants from his presence (10:11).

Moses went out and by the power of God brought a devastating plague of locusts upon the Egyptians. An east wind blew the locusts in from Ethiopia, where plagues are still common (10:13). The sky became dark as locusts covered the face of the whole land; no green thing was left. When a locust plague hit western NSW, I was driving a green Holden Ute; people joked that they would eat my car! Seeing no green thing left in Egypt, Pharaoh quickly called Moses to admit his sin against ‘the Lord your God’ and against Moses (10:16). He asked for forgiveness and for the Lord to take away the devastating and deadly plague (10:17). When Moses prayed, the Lord sent a strong west wind that blew the locusts into the Red Sea. But Pharaoh hardened his heart yet again and did not let the children Israel go.

By simply controlling the wind the Lord brought the locusts, and also removed them. By controlling the wind he stopped Jonah in his tracks. By controlling the wind he brought devastation to forests and homes across our land last summer- and also saved forests and homes according to his eternal purposes. The question for the Egyptians, and for us is, how long will we refuse to listen to the Lord and obey God’s word?

**God strikes Egypt: plague of darkness and plague of death** Exodus 10:21-11:10

Picture, if you will, a man standing waist deep in the Ganges River as the sun rises. He cups some water in his hands and prays as he pours this holy water out as an offering to the gods. He is worshipping the elements before returning to the idols set up in the temple nearby. If you go to India today you can see such a scene. The Egyptians regarded the water of the Nile as holy and also worshipped the sun-god.

Now picture the waters of the holy river turning into blood even as this man worships, and then thick darkness descending upon him even as he worshipped the sun. Almighty God was shaking pagan Egypt to the very core, shaking it like never before. He was doing so through his servant Moses as he struck Egypt with the first plague of blood and now the ninth plague of darkness, and all the plagues in between. Picture Pharaoh as the man standing in the river, standing there shaking his fists at Moses and the true God who was demonstrating a power greater that his own, and the man-made gods that he controlled.

The battle between Almighty God and this rebellious representative of mankind was coming to an end, a tragic end for man. This man not only represented mankind, he was an agent of Satan. This was a cosmic battle for all the world to see. God’s own people and people in all the nations would know that the God of the Hebrews is sovereign over all the nations, and for generations to come. We are still reading and learning from this epic battle even as we see its fulfilment in the cross and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, the Exodus, and the Passover in particular, are fundamental to our understanding of the cross and resurrection (Luke 22:15, 1Cor 5:7, 1Peter 1:19).

Why did the Lord send so many plagues upon Egypt? Have you ever asked this question? He could have struck Pharaoh down after he rejected the first request to, ‘Let My people go that they may worship me’ (5:1). It is also true that Pharaoh could have killed Moses, a threat he made after the ninth plague (10:28). With each plague God’s demand remained the same. Pharaoh at first refused to let them go, then demanded they go only a short distance, then that only the men go, and finally that the people go but not their animals (10:24). Pharaoh would learn that God’s word does not change, that God’s commands are not open to negotiation. Have you learned this or are you, like Pharaoh, trying to bargain with God? As you try to rationalise your sin, are you asking God to change his commands, to relax his demands - after all, so many people, even Christians, are not as good as you! With help from Satan and his agents, as in false teachers, you might convince yourself that a loving God would understand your situation and relax his demands just for you.

There would be no relaxing of God’s demand upon Pharaoh. The only change taking place with each repetition of his demand was the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. Pharaoh’s bargaining with God was not even genuine because he kept going back on his word. I hope you are not bargaining with God! Maybe you know people who are. It is a very dangerous thing to do. Such people are prone to forget the promises they made in the heat of battle, or think God will accept their excuses. God knows every heart in every detail and he does not forget any promise you make.

We come to the last two plagues. The ninth plague rightly belongs to the third set of three because, like the third and sixth plague, it strikes Egypt without prior notice: this is the plague of darkness. Moses briefly speaks to the people about asking for items of silver and gold from their neighbours before announcing the last plague, the plague of death upon all the firstborn in Egypt.

**1. Darkness**

The locust plague darkened the land and destroyed the crops of Egypt. With no harvest, the people faced famine. But Pharaoh was still not ready to humble himself before Almighty God. The Lord told Moses to stretch out his hand toward heaven, probably holding his staff, and bring darkness upon Egypt; Goshen was again exempted- ‘the children of Israel had light in their dwellings’ (10:21, 23). This darkness could be felt- it was ‘double darkness’. It was so dark that people could not see one another and could not move out of their houses. For three days everyone was groping about as if blind. Not only was this darkness an insult to the sun-god, it was a reflection of the spiritual condition of Pharaoh and his followers. This physical darkness reflected the spiritual darkness that had descended upon Egypt. ‘Professing to be wise they became fools’; ‘their foolish hearts were darkened’ (Rom 1:21, 22). California is a haven of intelligent people, just like Australia, yet they are facing blackouts during a heat wave. We may well face the same physical darkness next summer if we continue in the same path of spiritual darkness. I refer of course, to the worship of the creation rather than the creator, to the blind belief that we as humans control the climate and the destiny of planet earth.

Pharaoh was learning that Almighty God controlled both the bugs, visible and invisible, and the weather. God controls the wind, the rain and the hail. We now see that he also controls the sun, or at least the light it gives. Have you seen an eclipse of the sun? It is an eerie experience but the darkness is not total and it is only for a brief time. Scholars do not think this was an eclipse but many think a sandstorm caused the darkness. The reference to ‘darkness that can be felt’ gives rise to this idea (10: 21). Sandstorms or dust storms do blow across Egypt, as they do in Australia, but they do not blot out the sun to the extent detailed here. Complete darkness for three days cannot be explained by any natural phenomenon. Pharaoh was by no means a wise man but even he knew this was ‘the finger of God’.

Dense darkness for three days forced Pharaoh to call for Moses and grant his request to let the people go and serve the Lord (10:24). But this proud, hard-hearted man wanted to have the last word; he would not let them take their flocks and herds with them. His surrender to God was conditional. Too many people put conditions on following Jesus, their conditions. But there is only one way to follow Jesus, that of complete surrender of your heart and your life to him. ‘I surrender all’ is the refrain of a famous hymn, a hymn rarely heard today. Is this because so few actually surrender all to Jesus when they believe? Have you surrendered all to Jesus or is your faith conditional? Are there aspects of your life that will not surrender to anyone, even Jesus?

Moses was not about to worship the Lord without the sacrifices stipulated by God. He was not asking Pharaoh to give him animals but was demanding he allow them to take all their livestock with them to worship the Lord in the desert; ‘not a hoof shall be left behind’ (10:26). Moses explained that all were needed because the Lord had not yet revealed which particular animals were to be sacrificed. He was not prepared to compromise their worship just to please Pharaoh. He was intent on worshipping the Lord in the way He commanded, not in a way suggested or demanded by a man. The same challenge is being faced by many in the church today; are we worshipping according to God’s commands or according to what pleases man. Moreover, Moses knew that any compromise with a wicked man like Pharaoh, a man who heart was hardened beyond redemption, would prove futile. His refusal to compromise led to an angry outburst from Pharaoh; ‘Get away from me!’ (10:28). Pharaoh threatened Moses saying that the day he saw his face again Moses would die. The threat did not worry Moses. He agreed with Pharaoh, declaring this to be a prophetic word (10:28). The announcement of the tenth plague in the next chapter was probably part of this final meeting between Moses and Pharaoh. It is interesting that Moses did not pray for an end to the third, sixth or ninth plagues.

**2. Plunder**

When Moses and Aaron first went to Pharaoh saying, ‘Let My people go’, he responded by demanding they make bricks without being given straw. Presumably the Hebrews were still working as slaves for Pharaoh even after the Lord struck Egypt with nine plagues. As slaves they were not paid for their work. The Lord was about to right this injustice. They would not leave Egypt empty handed but with an abundance of silver and gold (10:2 cf.3:22); this would be easy to carry on their journey, although also a temptation (32:1ff).

The Lord told Moses he would send one more plague, after which Pharaoh would actively drive the people out of Egypt (11:1). Moses was to remind the people about plundering the Egyptians as they left. Every Hebrew man and woman was to ask their Egyptian neighbour for items of silver and items of gold. The Lord would move the Egyptians to give them whatever they asked for. They were not to steal but to ask, and the Lord would ensure their requests were granted. ‘Ask and it shall be given to you’ said Jesus (Mat 7:7). Those who did not ask were not given anything. Even though their neighbours had persecuted them, they would give them these precious metal items. We have seen how Pharaoh’s wise men, and then his servants, saw the ‘finger of God’ in the plagues that Moses brought upon Egypt. The Egyptians came to fear Moses as a man of God (11:3).

**3. Death**

As Pharaoh ordered Moses out of his sight, warning him never to come again lest he die, Moses warned Pharaoh of one more plague to come upon Egypt. The Lord himself would ‘go out into the midst of Egypt’ about midnight and all the firstborn of the land of Egypt would die’ (11:4, 5). Every family, from the king down, would see their firstborn die that night; even the firstborn of the animals would die. Various plagues had already afflicted the animals but as yet there had not been widespread loss of human life. Human life is precious to God but ultimately, ‘the wages of sin is death’ (Rom 6:23). Ultimately God must, and will, punish those who refuse to bow down and worship him as creator and Lord of heaven and earth. God will not be mocked. God will not give his glory to another.

The plague of death would not be upon old people; nor would it be a case of death to baby boys as the previous Pharaoh had declared. Nor would it be death to unborn children as we see in our society. This last plague would bring death to vigorous young men, the firstborn son in every family, the one to receive a double inheritance, the one destined to become the head of the family. Imagine the firstborn son in your family suddenly being taken from you by death. Imagine this happening in every house in your street, in every suburb in this city and in every city of this nation. The nightly news would not be about tennis or football! The whole land would be in shock like never before. This would be worse than whole families being wiped out with no one left to mourn.

The cry of the living in every home in Egypt would be deafening. It would be a cry never before heard in the land, or ever again in the future (11:6). It would be greater even than the cry of God’s people because of their slave drivers (3:7). Having said this, there would be homes in Egypt where the cry of mourners was not heard. In the homes of God’s covenant people no one would be disturbed; even the dogs in the land of Goshen would not be disturbed. Dogs of course, are easily disturbed at night; and their barking and howling can wake the whole neighbourhood. In this case it would be the wailing of the people that would wake the dogs. The whole of Egypt would erupt at midnight into a cacophony of wailing people and barking dogs, except in Goshen, so Pharaoh would ‘know that the Lord does make a difference between the Egyptians and Israel’ (11:7).

Having delivered this solemn message, the message of death at the hand of Almighty God, Moses ‘went out from Pharaoh in great anger’ (11:8). His anger was a reflection of the anger of the Lord, anger against sin, the sin of unbelief, the sin of proud and arrogant hearts. Beware the evil heart of unbelief, a heart hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb 3:12,13). Moses and Aaron had spoken to Pharaoh a dozen times and had performed wonders in Egypt ten times, including this last plague of death. They must have got tired of seeing this wicked man defy Almighty God and bring divine judgment upon his own people. But as we just said, God will not be mocked. God will not give his glory to another. He would not let Pharaoh escape divine judgment, and he will not let you escape divine judgment if you choose to mock Almighty God and give glory to another, be it yourself or any other created thing.

**The Lord’s Passover** Exodus 12:1-28

John the Baptist took Israel by storm when came along preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. He was the first prophet in Israel after a period of four hundred years, and also the last prophet in Israel. John had the duty of heralding the coming of the promised Messiah. One day he saw Jesus coming towards him and proclaimed, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29). Did the people understand what he meant? Do you understand these words, ‘Lamb of God’?

John, like every other Jews, celebrated the Passover every year. This feast goes back to the time when God delivered his people out of slavery in Egypt. The central part of Passover was the killing of a lamb, and the sprinkling of its blood on the door frames of their houses so that the Lord would not kill their firstborn son when he passed through the land of Egypt at midnight. The lamb was a substitute for the firstborn son; God provide a substitute sacrifice that kept death from the door of his special people.

Jesus was eating the Passover with his disciples when he was betrayed, arrested and crucified. At this Passover he spoke of ‘a new covenant in my blood which is shed for you’ (Luke 22:20). His disciples did not understand what he meant until after he was crucified, and indeed after he rose from the dead. The apostle Paul writes, ‘For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us’ (1Cor 5:7). The apostle Peter writes of our redemption as ‘with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish or without spot’ (1Peter 1:19). What does he mean by this reference to a lamb without blemish? To answer this question we must go back to the Book of Exodus where the Passover was instituted.

Beginning with Joseph and all Jacob’s family, the children of Israel dwelt in Egypt, in the region of Goshen, for over four hundred years. In the latter part of this period they were subject to slavery. They cried to the Lord and he sent Moses to deliver them from slavery. The Pharaoh, however, refused to let his slaves leave Egypt so the Lord, through Moses, afflicted Egypt with a series of plagues. The tenth and final plague would be death to every firstborn son of the Egyptians. Moses warned Pharaoh of this terrible plague with which the Lord would strike Egypt, even as he hardened Pharaoh’s heart against Moses and against the Lord himself.

Before the Lord struck Egypt with this final plague he told Moses and Aaron how to prepare for it, and how they were to prepare to leave Egypt for good. Our first subheading will be, ‘The Lord’s Passover’ our second, ‘The feast of unleavened bread’ and our third, ‘Take a lamb for your family’.

**1. The Lord’s Passover**

The plagues or disasters with which the Lord struck Egypt came to a head around the end of January- the barley was in head when the Lord sent a hail storm. After this came a plague of locusts and then darkness for three days. By the time of the final plague it was the month of Abib or Nisan, our March/April. The Lord told Moses that this would be the first month of the New Year for the Jews because they would begin a new life as a new nation under God at this time. This nation is for the first time called ‘the congregation of Israel’ (12:3). Our word ‘congregation’ or ‘church’ comes from this Hebrew word, translated ‘synagogue’ in the LXX but becoming ‘*ekklesia*’ or ‘church’ in the NT. Jews today celebrate New Year or Rosh Hashanah in September- marked in this year 2020 by the death of Justice Ginsburg in the USA. After the Exile the civil calendar replaced the religious calendar set in place at the Exodus. Months of course, were governed by phases of the moon.

On the tenth day of what was to be the first month for Israel, every man was to take a lamb for his household, including his neighbours if his household was small (12:3). The number of people was to be sufficient to eat a roasted lamb; considered by many to be ten adults. The household was larger than our nuclear families; married members would continue on the extended family and household servants were included in the number. If the number was still small, neighbours who were of ‘the congregation of Israel’ could join the family in this feast called ‘the Lord’s Passover’ (12:4, 11).

The focus of this feast was the lamb or kid chosen to be slaughtered and eaten by simultaneous gatherings of every Hebrew family. The lamb or kid was to be selected from the flock on the tenth day of the month and kept until the fourteenth, presumably the full moon. It was to be a year old male without blemish or defect (12:5). Many years later the prophet Malachi rebuked the people for offering blind and lame animals as a sacrifice (Mal 1:8). The Lord was offended by such sacrifices, but more than this, the Passover lamb was a ‘type’ that would later be fulfilled in the death of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the fulfilment of the ‘lamb without blemish’ (1Peter 1:19). We often call a one-year-old lamb ‘prime lamb’ because it is in the prime of life; Jesus was cut off in the prime of his earthly life at just thirty three years of age.

Why was the lamb kept for four days before it was slaughtered? Many think it was time to examine the lamb for defects, but I suggest it was a time of fasting before slaughter. Before killing roosters we would always put them in a cage without food for a day so they would not have a full gut when slaughtered. No one likes a gut full of half-digested food when they slaughter an animal, and certainly not when the gut or entrails are to be eaten, as was the case with the Passover lamb (12:9). On the fourteenth day of Nisan this chosen lamb was to be slaughtered at twilight- the new day began at sunset. Some think this took place in the doorway of the house but the instruction was only to take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the house in which they would gather to eat the roasted lamb (12:7,8); we later read of this blood being put in a basin and splashed on with a bunch of hyssop (12:22).

That same night, the fourteenth of Nisan, the lamb that was slaughtered was to be roasted and eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs inside the same house. Roasting served to burn off the fat, regarded as a delicacy in those days. They were not allowed to eat the meat raw or boiled (12:8). Everything was to be eaten, including the entrails. Anything not eaten was to be burned in the fire. We are quite fussy about which portions of meat we eat. I remember a feast in NE India in which a beast was slaughtered and cooked in the village. I am not sure what parts I ate, but only the hoof and horn remained; as a guest I was given choice pieces of fat of course! The significance of unleavened bread will be explained shortly. What about the bitter herbs? Things like endive and chicory may have been used to flavour their food. The bitterness of these ‘spices’ came to represent the bitterness of their life as slaves in Egypt.

The Lord not only prescribed what was to be eaten on the night of the fourteenth of Nisan, but also prescribed how it was to be eaten. The Hebrews would normally have left their shoes, outer coat and staff at the door and reclined to eat the evening meal, but not this time. Instead they were to be dressed and ready to move that same night: belt on, shoes on and staff in hand (12:11). This would be no leisurely meal but a case of ‘eat and run’. It would in fact, be their last meal as such for some time. They needed all their strength for the journey that lay ahead of them.

The blood on the door frame would protect those inside from death, death that would come to every home in the land when the Lord passed through the land at midnight (12:12). It was called Passover because, ‘when I see the blood I will pass over you’ (12:13). The blood would save them from the plague of death. The Lord was coming as promised to deliver his people, and at the same time destroy his, and their enemies. Pharaoh hardened his heart against God so he would be destroyed in this last plague- or at least his firstborn son. The gods that he worshipped would also be judged (12:12). Already the sun had been darkened, livestock destroyed by disease, and the weather shown to be under the control of Almighty God.

Neither Pharaoh and his army, nor his man-made gods, could protect Pharaoh and his fellow pagans from death. He and all who trusted in false gods would be judged by Almighty God whereas all God’s chosen people, at least those who believed and put the blood of the lamb on their doorposts, would be saved; yes, faith was involved in their salvation just as it is in your salvation. It was not that these people were more in number or more worthy of being saved but because the Lord set his love upon them and remembered his covenant with Abraham. Substitutionary atonement was the Lord’s provision for them.

**2. The feast of unleavened bread**

The Passover was the beginning of a week of eating nothing but unleavened bread (12:15). All leaven or yeast was to be removed from their homes on the first day. The first day was like a Sabbath- in fact, the whole week was like a Sabbath with no working apart from preparing food. The Lord made it clear to Moses and Aaron that the Passover and this week of eating unleavened bread was an ‘everlasting ordinance’, a memorial in Israel for generations to come (12;14, 17). It would serve to remind each generation of how the Lord ‘brought your armies out of the land of Egypt’ (12:17).

The importance of eating only unleavened bread, what we call flat bread, during this holy week is emphasised by repetition and by the warning that anyone found eating leavened bread or even having leaven in their home, was to be cut off from the congregation of Israel (12:15, 19). What was the significance of eating only unleavened bread? It takes time for yeast to work within dough, time they did not have on Passover night. As they left Egypt that night they were to take dough tied up in clothes strung over their shoulder (12:34). Dough would be relatively easy to carry, but with leaven in it, it would rise and go sour. Besides, cooking flat bread would have been easier during the journey. Coming at the end of barley harvest, new grain called for a new leaven, for a break with the past and a new beginning. In the teaching of Jesus and the apostles leaven came to symbolise evil (Mark 8:11, 1Cor 5:6-8).

**3. Take a lamb for a family**

Moses conveyed to the elders of Israel what the Lord told him about the ritual of Passover. He called all the elders or heads of families and told them to choose a lamb for their family and ‘kill the Passover lamb’ (12:21). Details about it being a one-year-old perfect male are not repeated. But Moses gives further detail about what was to be done with the blood of this lamb; the Jews of course drained all blood from an animal they killed for eating. He says that the blood, collected in a basin, was to be painted on the door frames of their houses using a bunch of hyssop. Hyssop is thought to be an aromatic plant from the mint family- maybe one of the bitter herbs? Having done this, they were to remain in their houses until morning (12:22); the sprinkling of blood was done after the animal was slaughtered at twilight and before midnight.

Moses goes on to explain why they were to remain indoors that night; specifically, inside behind the blood-sprinkled doorway. The Lord was going to pass through the land of Egypt striking dead the firstborn in every house not having blood on the door frame (12:23). This would be a most solemn night, a night like no other, and a night of judgment upon the wicked, but a night of salvation for those protected by the blood of the lamb. As the Passover lamb is a ‘type’ of Christ so this solemn night is a type of the last judgment, judgment based upon the covering blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29, Rev 1:5).

As the Lord told Moses to keep this ritual as an everlasting ordinance in Israel, so Moses told the elders to keep this as an ongoing ritual in their families ever after they came into the promised land (12:24, 25). Not that the ritual was efficacious in itself after the first occurrence; and it was only ‘until the antitype appeared (Christ’s sacrifice) that the type (the Passover) would persist’. Under the old covenant, Passover was to be kept as a memorial and instrument for teaching the next generation. Children asked what it all meant and parents were to tell them about that first Passover sacrifice and how the Lord delivered them from bondage in Egypt. The elders and people of Israel listened to Moses and at the end bowed their heads and worshipped (12:27, cf. 4:31). They went back to their homes to prepare the Passover precisely as the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron.

**The Exodus and Passover regulations**  Exodus 12:29-51

‘Just as the Lord had commanded… so they did’. In case you did not notice these words in verse 28 of this chapter, we find them again in verse 50. What amazing words: ‘Just as the Lord had commanded so they did’. Amazing because they come in the context of Pharaoh refusing to do what the Lord commanded. Pharaoh of course, was a heathen who did not know the Lord, but still he was required to obey the word of God. How much more were the Hebrews, who did know the Lord, required to obey him. But how often do people who know God not obey his commands! The Hebrews saw the power of God revealed as he punished Pharaoh and the Egyptians for their disobedience - thankfully they learned from what they saw. Yet many Christians reading this account of the plagues fail to comprehend the power of God to punish disobedience. Some think this is a different God to the God revealed in Jesus Christ- an act of disobedience in itself because they are not listening to what the Bible says! As sinners, being told we cannot do something seems to make us want to do it. We do not like being told what to do! Our infant grandson stops and looks at me when I tell him to pick up the toys; he as asking, ‘Will I or won’t I’ and ‘What will be the consequences’. For teenagers or adults one almost expects them to do the opposite of what you say. ‘You are too tired to clean your room my dear’ might get a better outcome than, ‘Please go and clean your room’. Do you expect your friends to actually do what suggest?

Whatever you expect and whatever your experience, know that the Lord expects and demands obedience. His ways are perfect so don’t be so foolish as to suggest a better way. ‘As the Lord commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did’; they did everything precisely as commanded by the Lord with regard to the Passover. The Lord has commanded how we are to live and how we are to worship him today, so let us obey his commands. Our first subheading is, ‘Plague ten’, our second, ‘Plunder the Egyptians’, and our third, ‘Passover regulations’.

**1. Plague ten**

The last meeting between Moses and Pharaoh was very heated; Moses departed in great anger after Pharaoh threatened to kill him. But before leaving, Moses warned him of one more plague, telling him that one day at midnight the Lord would pass through Egypt killing every firstborn son, from the palace to the place of the lowly female servant (11:4, 5). Before this happened Moses told the people of Israel how to prepare for this plague and for leaving Egypt. We later read that a ‘mixed multitude’ went with them, so presumably the details of the Passover became known to some outsiders. Some Egyptians believed what Moses said about the plague of hail and brought their animals under shelter (9:20).

As the people of Israel gathered behind their bloodied doorways to eat the Passover, and as the clock struck midnight, the Lord struck dead all the firstborn in the land of Egypt (12:29). No ‘unbloodied’ house escaped, from the house of Pharaoh to the house of the prisoner, and all the firstborn of the livestock. While all the previous plagues were the Lord acting through his creation, this was the Lord acting directly to strike young men dead in their beds. It was still night when Pharaoh got up and found his son dead (12:30). His servants did the same, and as they began wailing so every other house in Egypt was awakened with loud wailing; ‘There was not a house where there was not one dead’ (12:30). It was just as the Lord had told Pharaoh through Moses (11:5, 6).

Pharaoh wasted no time in calling for Moses and Aaron to tell them to go and serve the Lord as they had repeatedly requested (12:31). His threat to kill Moses the next time he saw his face was now a plea for Moses to bless him- but it was too late (12:32). The mighty ruler of Egypt had capitulated to the command of Almighty God. ‘His obduracy only made his inevitable submission the more painful and humiliating’. His people were suffering and the economy of the nation was destroyed. Now every firstborn son in the land was dead! If you think obedience is costly, consider the cost of disobedience!

This proud, hard hearted man was forced to surrender to Almighty God. His battle with God had just cost him his firstborn son. What would he lose next if he kept refusing to obey God? The people of Egypt were suffering because of their leader’s belligerent behaviour, as is seen all too often with leaders still today. As the Egyptians awoke to find their firstborn son dead they urged the Hebrew slaves to hurry and leave their land, lest they all end up dead (12:33). As the Hebrews left they gathered their unleavened dough and kneading bowls into clothes, which they threw over their shoulders ready to leave the land of Egypt.

**2. Plunder the Egyptians**

As the Egyptians were urging them to the leave, the Jews asked them for articles of silver and gold and clothing (12:35). ‘And the Lord gave the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians’, and so ‘they plundered the Egyptians’ (12:36). ‘Plunder’ refers to the spoils of war, which to some does not seem an appropriate word in this situation. What does it mean that the Lord made the Egyptians favourably disposed towards the Hebrews? They did not share Pharaoh’s animosity and hatred of the Hebrew; they had come to respect the people of God and fear their God. However, they feared more deaths if these people and their God stayed in Egypt, so they gave them whatever they asked for. Moses had prepared the Hebrews to specifically ask for silver and gold.

While the Hebrews and their Egyptian neighbours were not at war, their leaders were. So it was appropriate for the victor to plunder his defeated enemy. Moreover, there was an element of justice involved in this plundering. As slaves, the Hebrews had not been paid for their labour; justice was now being done. The Lord delights in justice and he is powerful to work justice in the midst of disasters and plagues. Did you read of the pay cuts being forced upon greedy CEOs as a result of this coronavirus plague? Maybe the plague will continue until there is more justice in our land and throughout the world.

Carrying this plunder, along with their bowls and unleavened dough, the children of Israel left the land of Egypt with their children and their livestock. They did not go along the main highway north but set out towards the desert (13:17); no one knows the exact location of Succoth (12:37). The number of men is given as six hundred thousand (12:37); if women and children are added the number would be over two million. Some scholars think this is an inflated number but they cannot agree on a better number. A more precise number of six hundred and three thousand, five hundred and fifty males 20yrs old and above is given in Exodus 38:26, and Numbers 1:46. It was certainly a huge gathering that left Egypt that day. Travelling on foot, they were a slow-moving caravan led by Moses and the elders, ‘all the armies of the Lord’ (12:41). The unleavened dough which they collected up to take on their journey sustained them because they could cook this into flat bread along the way (12:39). It is interesting how often unleavened bread is referred to in this account of the Exodus (12:15f, 34, 39). More details about the Passover lamb will be given shortly.

‘A mixed multitude went up with them also’ (12:38). This refers to people who were not ethnic Jews, not descendants of Jacob. Other minority people may have worked as slaves alongside the Hebrews and taken the opportunity to leave with them, along with some God-fearing Egyptians. Some of the mixed multitude may have come through intermarriage; Moses himself married a Cushite or Ethiopian (Numb 12:1). In Numbers 11:4 it was the ‘mixed multitude’ among them that lusted after the food of Egypt.

When the Lord made a covenant with Abraham he promised he would have a son and have descendants as numerous as the stars. He told Abraham that after four hundred years of affliction the Lord would bring his descendants out of Egypt (Gen 15:13). Moses informs us that the children of Israel had been in Egypt four hundred and thirty years, to the very day of their leaving Egypt (12:40, 41) - four hundred is a round number, like the six hundred thousand.

The night of the tenth plague was a night for the Hebrews to remember, and for the Egyptians to forget (12:42). They would remember the hand of God judging the Egyptians while delivering them from bondage. God had made a difference between the Hebrews and the Egyptians after the fourth plague and here again with the deadly final plague. It was God’s gracious provision of the Passover lamb, especially its life-blood, that saved or redeemed the Hebrews. We are not specifically told of Egyptians who put blood on their doorframes, or of Hebrews who failed to put blood on their doorframes, but the implication is that such actions were possible. It was by grace through faith, through believing the word of God and sprinkling blood on their doorframes, that they were saved from death that night. God ordained the Passover to be a solemn remembrance ritual of his great act of redemption that night. He ordained the Lord’s Supper as the ordinance by which we who believe that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin are to remember the fulfilment of the Passover and the redemption of our forefathers from Egypt.

**3. Passover regulations**

Celebration of the Passover by succeeding generations was ordained and regulated by the Lord as a memorial, not as a ritual that effected salvation. ‘All the congregation of Israel’ were to participate in the Passover but ‘no foreigner shall eat it’ (12:43, 47). No temporary resident or hired servant was to eat it either (12:45). A servant who was ‘bought’ could participate, but only after submitting to circumcision. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant and only those coming under the covenant God made with his people were permitted to partake of the Passover. Circumcision was the sign given to Abraham as the father of the faith. Abraham circumcised his son and all the men of his house (Gen 17:26, 27).

The exclusion of the foreigner, the temporary resident, and the hired servant was not based on their ethnicity but because of their faith, or lack thereof. The ‘stranger’, a different word to ‘foreigner’, who had made his home with the congregation of Israel and wanted to keep the Passover could do so provided he submitted to circumcision. No uncircumcised person was allowed to eat the Passover. But everyone who was circumcised ate it together, the stranger alongside the native born, as one under God and his covenant.

The Passover continued as a household rather than temple celebration. In the time of Jesus the people came to Jerusalem. His disciples asked Jesus, ‘Where do you want us to prepare for you to eat the Passover’ and Jesus directed them to a man who gave them a room in his house (Mat 26:17f). To the regulations already given about the lamb being one year old and without blemish, and to it being roasted and not eaten raw or boiled, a regulation that none of its bones be broken is added (12:46). Butchering usually involved the breaking of bones. Only if bones are broken can the carcase be divided up and taken to different homes, something that was not permitted with the Passover lamb. People were to come together to eat the Passover. The apostle John makes specific reference to the bones of Jesus not being broken at his death (John 19:36).

Under the new covenant instituted by Jesus, he is the Passover Lamb and the Passover supper has become the Lord’s Supper. In fulfilment there have been changes in that there is no longer an animal sacrifice because Jesus sacrificed himself once and for all on the cross. But other regulations of the Passover remain. It is no longer required that males be physically circumcised but it is required that we examine ourselves and that we discern the Lord’s body (1Cor 11:28, 29). It is not clear if this is a reference to the physical body of Jesus nailed to the cross and coming out of the grave, or a reference to the church as his metaphorical body, or both. Lack of discernment with reference to either will result in divine chastening or judgment (1Cor 11:30-32). Understanding baptism as the sign of the new covenant would require baptism before partaking of the Lord’s Supper. Eating together at one table, as was done in Egypt and by Jesus in Jerusalem, precludes the practice of dispensing the Lord’s Supper to individuals as is done by priests in the Church of Rome.

This account of the first Passover and the regulations given for future celebrations- as a memory of this time when God delivered his people for bondage in Egypt- come to an end with the words, ‘Thus all the children of Israel did; as the Lord commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did’ (12:50). Let us be discerning and doing as the Lord has commanded us in the sacraments and all our worship.

**Consecration of the firstborn**  Exodus 13

My diary lists the public holidays of various countries around the world. Most have a national day in which the founding of their nation or a significant event in the history of their nation is remembered. Many have religious holidays also, especially Christmas Day. In Western countries like ours many no longer celebrate this as a religious holiday but still enjoy a feast on Christmas Day. We continue the tradition of a hot roast dinner even what the weather is scorching hot!

The nation of Israel had two major festivals by which they remembered their deliverance from Egypt and their years in the wilderness. These festivals were given by God through Moses, and include detailed instructions. The Passover feast was followed by seven days of eating unleavened bread because their forefathers took no leaven with them when they left Egypt. The Passover lamb was eaten with unleavened bread. Details of the Passover meal were given in the previous chapter, as were details about the feast of unleavened bread (12:17). These details are repeated here in chapter 13, along with the command to tell the children what this feast remembered. They were not to celebrate without understanding, and certainly not to celebrate with misunderstanding, as is the case with Christmas in our day.

After telling the people to keep the feast of unleavened bread, Moses then makes a law about the firstborn being set apart, and thirdly, describes the pillar of fire and of cloud by which the Lord led them into the wilderness.

**1. Feast of unleavened bread**

The people of God left the land of Egypt after four hundred and thirty years. It was in Egypt that the Lord formed them into a nation, multiplying as they did from just seventy to over six hundred thousand. Their later years were difficult years because the Pharaoh made them slaves and refused to let them go and worship the Lord. But the Lord their God was stronger than Pharaoh: ‘By a strong hand the Lord brought you out of Egypt’ (13:3,9,14,16). Their deliverance was planned by the Lord and told, through Moses, to Pharaoh and the people. The people prepared for their dramatic exit from Egypt by killing a lamb, putting its blood on the doorframes and eating roasted lamb with unleavened bread and bitter herbs (12:8). This Passover feast was to be remembered every year within this ‘saved’ community in the month of Abib or Nisan.

Regulations regarding the Passover, regarding the lamb and particularly the people who could celebrate, were given at the end of chapter 12. Regulations regarding the feast of unleavened bread are given here in chapter 13 verses 3-10. At Passover, and for seven days afterwards, no leaven was to be kept in their homes and they were to eat only unleavened bread (13:6, 7). They were to continue celebrating this feast during the wilderness years, which they did not yet know about, and when they settled in the land of Canaan, which they did know about. Before they went to live in Egypt, they knew that Canaan was the land the Lord planned to give them. The Lord told Abraham that he would give this land to his descendants, and repeated this promise to Isaac and Jacob (Gen 15:18, 24:7). Joseph knew and believed this promise; he gave instructions for his bones, or his embalmed corpse, to be carried out of Egypt and buried in Canaan (13:19, Gen 50:25).

A letter to the editor of the newspaper made a cryptic comment about the term ‘road map’ that we keep hearing these days; we have an economic road map, a health road map, a climate road map, and so on. The writer asked what the destination of these road maps was. We don’t hear about a destination because there is no consensus as to where we are heading, apart from uncertainty; so we just talk about ‘road maps’!

God’s people knew their destination because God had told them. If you are travelling with God’s road map you know your destination- right! In knowing God you know his purpose for your life. You are no longer travelling in the dark, as it were, and going around in circles. The Lord has given you a future and a hope (Jer 29:11). The Shorter Catechism reminds us that, ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever’. It also reminds us of the resurrection, and of passing into the presence of the Lord.

The Lord was bringing his people out of the land of Egypt that he might bring them into the land of Canaan, the land he promised to their forefathers, a land flowing with milk and honey (13:5). This land was currently occupied by various pagan people groups whom the Lord was going judge, as in destroy, because of their sin. Just as their deliverance from Egypt was accompanied by divine judgment of the Egyptians, so their entry into Canaan would be accompanied by divine judgment of the Canaanites (cf. Lev 18:3). God would cleanse Canaan of wickedness and establish his people as a holy nation in a holy land. One day God will cleanse the whole world of sin. ‘He will judge the world in righteousness by the man he has ordained’, that is Jesus Christ our Lord (Acts 17:31). Jesus will come with a new earth and a new heaven, a new home for the people he has redeemed by his own precious blood.

The Passover and feast of unleavened bread were not only feasts to remember God’s past deliverance. They had a didactic or teaching function. Children who asked what the feast was about were to be told- told the truth (12:27, 13:8). We mentioned Christmas and the ignorance surrounding this feast. Christmas is not ordained as a feast in the Bible. For the church, Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper for us to remember him, his blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins. We must tell our children what this sacrament, and the sacrament of baptism, are all about. Too many partake of these sacraments in ignorance.

The Jews continue celebrating Passover, but like so many Christians are ignorant of its meaning. Some take the words of Moses about, ‘a sign on your hand’ and, ‘between your eyes’, literally (13:9, 16). You will see pious Jews in particular wearing what Jesus called ‘phylacteries’ (Mat 23:5). God’s law is to be in your heart, in your mind and in your mouth (13:9, Jer 31:33). The feast of unleavened bread was a memorial feast. Celebration of this and other feasts, including the weekly Sabbath, was meant to keep the eyes of God’s people focussed on him; marks on your forehead or hand are like the notice board that declares, ‘Unsee this’. Our life should be like a notice board declaring the power and grace of God- ‘Unsee Him’.

**2. Firstborn set apart**

In the opening two verses of this chapter the Lord tells Moses to ‘Consecrate to me all the firstborn’. In verse 12 we see this command repeated and further details given; ‘consecrate’ means to ‘set apart’. What is this command all about? The Lord declared that the firstborn, or whatever opens the womb of both man and beast, belonged to Him (13:2). The last time we read about ‘the firstborn’ it was the firstborn sons of the Egyptians being put to death by the Lord (12:29). The firstborn sons of the Hebrews were saved because of the blood on the doorframes of their houses, so the Lord called for these ‘firstborn’ to be set apart for him. The firstborn of domestic animals were also killed in the final plague, so they were included in this setting apart. This was another reminder of the Lord delivering them out of bondage in Egypt by the strength of his hand (13:14, 16).

In a sense, the death of the firstborn in Egypt was a ‘forced’ sacrifice to the Lord. Pharaoh refused to acknowledge the true God when Moses asked for the people to be allowed to go into the desert to sacrifice to the Lord God. The apostle Paul reminds us that, ‘at the name of Jesus every knee should bow… to the glory of God the Father’ (Phil 2:10). Those who refuse to accept the sacrifice of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins will pay with their own blood because, ‘without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness’ (Heb 9:22). We call Jesus our Redeemer because his sacrifice as the ‘Lamb without blemish’ was for our redemption.

The first picture in the Bible of a sacrifice and/or redemption of a firstborn is found in Genesis 22. Abraham was about to sacrifice his son when God provided a sheep as a substitute. Though child sacrifice was part of pagan worship, it was never part of worship ordained by God. The firstborn of the livestock belonged to the Lord and so was to be sacrificed as a burnt offering to the Lord, but firstborn sons were to be redeemed (13:13, 15). The firstborn sons of God’s people were redeemed by the Passover lamb. The firstborn of donkeys were also to be redeemed with a lamb because, as unclean animals, donkeys were not fit for sacrifice. If no lamb was sacrificed for the firstborn donkey it had no redemption and was to be killed (13:13).

After a period of purification following the birth of a child, Hebrew mothers were required to bring a one-year-old lamb to the temple for a burnt offering, and a young dove or pigeon (Lev 12:6). When Mary did this she bought her firstborn called Jesus with her to the temple. As Luke records this event for us, he reminds us of the command regarding firstborn males being holy to the Lord (Luke 2:22-24). But we also read that the Lord took the Levites ‘instead of every firstborn’ as his own possession: ‘The Levites shall be Mine’ (Numb 3:12, 13).

The principle of redemption continues as a central principle of the gospel. When Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper he spoke of ‘the new covenant in my blood shed for you’ (Luke 22:20). Paul says that, ‘Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law’… ‘That we might receive the adoption as sons’ (Gal 3:13, 4:5).

**3. Pillar of fire and of cloud**

The last part of this chapter returns to the actual exodus, to the huge caravan of Hebrews leaving the land of Egypt. Pharaoh let them go with their flocks after the death of his firstborn son, although we will later learn that he changed his mind. The Hebrews were heading out of Egypt but not by the most direct route to Canaan, ‘lest the people change their minds and return to Egypt’ (13:17). That ‘highway’ led through Philistine territory where they might be attacked. The Lord led them by ‘the way of the wilderness’ which led to the Red Sea or Sea of Reeds (13:18). Places like Succoth and Etham are named but can no longer be located.

With no road to follow, how did the people know the way? The Lord led them! How did he lead them? He went before them as a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day (13:21). The fire gave light that enabled them to travel by night and avoid the intense heat of the day. If they travelled by day the cloud protected them from the direct blaze of the sun. What a wonderful provision from the Lord. Even before we ask or think, the Lord knows our needs and supplies them, ‘according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus’ (Phil 4:19).

The pillar of fire and of cloud were more than God’s provision; they were indications of God’s presence with his people. He was not going to leave them or forsake them but would bring them into Canaan just as he had promised. Do we not have the same promise in Jesus Christ our Lord? ‘For I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day’ (2Tim 1:12).

**Between the devil and the deep sea**  Exodus 14:1-14

Pharaoh’s fight with God was a long, drawn out battle. This arrogant ruler, regarded by himself and his nation as a god, refused to bow his knee to Almighty God. God could have struck him dead before the first plague but in his eternal purposes he would demonstrate to his people, and to the pagan world, his mighty power in judgment and salvation. Such judgment was again demonstrated when wicked men crucified God’s only begotten Son but God raised him from the dead and exalted him to his own right hand in glory. Such power will yet again be demonstrated when Jesus returns to this world in judgment; he will say to the ‘goats’ on his left, ‘depart from me you cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels’ (Mat 25:41). Pharaoh is in that everlasting fire with the devil, and with everyone else who similarly refuses to worship and glorify the God of creation and redemption, redemption in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Pharaoh hardened his heart against God and refused to obey him. We are then told that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart as he continued refusing to let God’s people go. We thought that the last plague, in which God struck dead all the firstborn sons of the Egyptians bringing Pharaoh to his knees before God, was the end, but this was not the case. He let Moses and the Hebrews go, but in this chapter we see Pharaoh chasing them into the desert in order to get them back. Why? Because God continued to harden his heart saying, ‘I will gain honour over Pharaoh and all his army’ (14:4).

At the same time as he was hardening Pharaoh’s heart, God was leading his people out of Egypt, going before them as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He led them into the wilderness towards the Red Sea (13:18). To the outside world, including Pharaoh, it appeared as if they were, ‘Confused in the desert’. Our second subheading is, ‘Chased by the Egyptians’, and our third, ‘Cry of terror’.

**1. Confused in the desert**

The Lord did not lead his people by the most direct route to Canaan because it passed through the land of the Philistines, people who might make war (13:17). Instead he led them into the desert towards the Red Sea. They were to camp at a place called Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea (14:2). The first name is Egyptian but the second, Migdol, is Hebrew meaning ‘watchtower’. Their camp was opposite a hill called Baal Zephon, a Canaanite name, and by the sea. None of these places can be located today despite the best efforts of archaeologists. Nothing archaeologists have found in either Egypt or Canaan has shown any inconsistencies in the Bible anyway.

God was not only keeping his people away from a war zone by leading them into the desert; he was also leading Pharaoh and his army to their destruction. He told Moses that Pharaoh would learn of their travels and think they were confused; he would think they would be trapped between the desert and the sea (14:3). Pharaoh’s heart had not changed despite all the plagues sent by God, including the plague of death that took his own son. And God had not yet completed his judgment upon this proud, hard-hearted man. God told Pharaoh himself that, ‘For this purpose I have raised you up that I may show My power in you, and that My name shall be declared in all the earth’ (9:16, Rom 9:17).

The name Pharaoh stands alongside the name of Judas, ‘the son of perdition’ (John 17:12), and others, as men whose judgment in this world brought honour to the name of God. God was intent on gaining ‘honour over Pharaoh and all his army’ (14:4), honour in all Egypt and in all the world. We and millions of others continue reading this powerful story.

**2. Chased by the Egyptians**

On Passover night, when Pharaoh awoke to find his son dead, he sent Moses and the Hebrews out of Egypt (12:32). Now he was chasing after them to get them back. Why? Pharaoh’s question, ‘Why have we let Israel go from serving us?’ points to a realisation that he had just lost his entire labour force. All his building projects would come to a halt without slave labour. Pride drove him to chase after his slaves to get them back. ‘Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall’ warns the wise man of Proverbs (Prov 16:18). Pharaoh was not listening to wisdom; he was listening to Satan. Satan tried to trap Jesus into an act of pride, but Jesus do not listen (Luke 4:9).

Pharaoh forgot the death of his son so quickly, as his heart turned back to himself and his own power and glory- and his need for slave labour. He ordered that his chariot be made ready, along with six hundred other special chariots and all the chariots of Egypt (14:6, 7). The whole Egyptian army took off after the Hebrews, and soon caught up with them because the Hebrews were travelling on foot, and were camped in the desert by the sea. They had left Egypt in triumph and were not expecting the Egyptian army to come after them.

**3. Cry of terror**

The Hebrews thought they had seen the last of Egypt and the Egyptians, the last of oppression and slave labour. They went out with boldness and rejoicing, knowing that the Lord had delivered them, and that the Lord was with them; they could see the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire at all times. Life in the desert would not be easy but at least they were free. They were not ready for what they saw as they were camped by the Red Sea. The text says, ‘They lifted their eyes and beheld the Egyptians’ (14:10). They must have been looking back rather than forward to see the Egyptians coming; and their eyes were not lifted high enough to see God. The apostle Peter was looking around at the raging waves and was afraid, before turning to Jesus and crying, ‘Lord save me!’ (Mat 14:30). On another occasion the disciples were in a boat when a storm suddenly hit. They came to Jesus crying, ‘Lord, save us. We are perishing!’ Jesus said, ‘Why are you so fearful, O you of little faith?’ (Mat 8:25, 26).

When the children of Israel saw the Egyptians they was terrified. They knew how wicked and cruel Pharaoh and his men were. Here they were wedged between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea. They were ‘stuck between the devil and the deep blue sea’ as we say. Or in another saying, ‘stuck between a rock and a hard place’. They saw no way out, no way of escape- until the Lord showed them a way. All they could see was the Egyptians on one side and the sea on the other. They could fight the Egyptians, and die, or flee into the sea, and drown.

Psychologists talk about the fight or flight response when people face danger. These are real responses and recognised in the Bible, but the Bible gives us another option. We can cry to the Lord because he is with us wherever we are; there may or may not be anyone else present or powerful enough to help. The Hebrews wisely took the third option of crying to the Lord (14:10), but did they pray with faith?

Back in Egypt the Hebrews cried out to God because of their bondage, and God heard their cry (2:23, 3:7). It was because of their cry that God sent Moses to deliver them from this oppression. And here they were out of Egypt and free. They had seen the works of God in the plagues he sent upon the Egyptians, and in their own deliverance. They were again in a helpless situation and cried to the Lord for help. Would the Lord again answer their cry and deliver them from the Egyptian army bearing down on them?

How fickle people can be- people like you and me! One moment we can be the best of friends with someone, and the next bitter enemies. One moment we can be trusting in God and the next doubting him. One moment the Hebrews we crying to the Lord and the next they were complaining. The Hebrews went out with ‘boldness’- they were triumphant in their freedom from bondage. When they saw the Egyptian army they became afraid, so they cried to the Lord as they did before. But the next moment they were complaining to Moses, the servant of God. With fear and bitterness they asked, ‘Why did you bring us up out of Egypt?’ (14:11). With sarcasm they asked, ‘Was it that there were no graves in Egypt?’ They dragged up the past, reminding Moses that they just wanted to be left alone, to suffer and die in Egypt (14:12). They displayed all the hallmarks of complaining: blame someone else, drag up the past, and speak of dying. They cried to the Lord, presumably for help, but expected to die in the desert that day. Was this a show of faith?

‘Faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see’ (Heb 11:1 NIV). The Lord had promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that their children would return to Canaan. They were carrying the bones of Joseph because he believed this promise. But here in this moment of trouble they forgot this promise and all the works of the Lord they had seen in Egypt and started complaining. They lacked faith. Like the apostles, they should have been crying to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’ (Luke 17:5). Faith comes by hearing, hearing and believing the promises of God. Faith is lost when we forget the word of God. When we forget about God we have only ourselves, our finances and our friends to trust in. The Hebrews has no friends to help them, and no weapons with which to fight the Egyptians.

Did Moses remember how the people criticised him when he first spoke to Pharaoh, and Pharaoh responded by making their lives harder- bricks without straw. At that times Moses asked the Lord what he was doing (5:22). When they turned against him here at the Red Sea, Moses spoke to reassure the people of the Lord’s presence and power, and indeed of his promise. Thankfully, Moses did not forget God’s promise to bring them out of Egypt and into the land of Canaan. Knowing God’s presence, God’s power and God’s promise Moses told the people to ‘stand still and see the salvation of the Lord’ that very day (14:13).

With the Egyptian army on one side and the sea on the other, how was the Lord going to save them? Moses could not tell them how but he could tell them when- today! The Lord would save them from their enemies and he would do it today. Today is the day of salvation! Stop complaining. Stop delaying. Look and see the salvation God has worked for you in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Moses knew that in delivering his own people, God was judging the Egyptians. Killing every firstborn son was not the end of God’s judgment upon this nation of idol worshippers and persecutors of God’s people. The army of strong men and the deadly weapons in which the Egyptians trusted, and which the Hebrews feared, would not be seen tomorrow or ever again. With such words Moses comforted people filled with fear, and with bitterness towards him (14:13).

Don’t be afraid. Stand still and look to the Lord. The Lord will fight for you. With few but powerful words, Moses reassured the people of God. The Psalmist spoke similar words saying, ‘Be still and know that I am God, I will be exalted among the nations, and I will be exalted in all the earth’ (Ps 46:10). Do you remember this verse? It is a great verse to keep in your mind and your heart.

The Lord was not just delivering these people because he felt sorry for them. The Lord has not just saved you, if you are saved, that you might have a happy, trouble-free life. For sure, the Lord is gracious and compassionate, and the Lord set his love upon you, but ultimately he saved you that he might be glorified in all the earth, as well as in heaven. You are not the central focus of heaven, God is. You are not the central focus of this church, God is. You are not the central focus of your home, God is. You are not even the central focus of your life, God is. God saved you for his glory, and you should be living to glorify his holy name.

**Crossing the Red Sea** Exodus 14:15-31

The Book of Exodus in the Bible is so called because it records the exodus of the Hebrews, the descendants of Jacob or Israel, from Egypt. Their exodus was a dramatic event, preceded as it was by divinely sent plagues upon the Egyptians, and then the crossing of the sea on dry ground. This event is firmly implanted in the tradition of the Hebrews, and in our tradition as Christians. No less than five of the Psalms sung by the Jews in their worship, and that we continue to sing today, refer to the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea. The prophets also refer to this event (Isa 51:10), as does the apostle Paul (1Cor 10:1).

There is no real evidence of this event in extra-biblical records, and understandably so. No one, including the Egyptians, makes detailed records of their defeats; besides, the hierarchy of the Egyptian military regime were all drowned in the Red Sea. Do note that the record we have in the Bible of the Exodus includes the mini- rebellion of the Hebrews at the Red Sea (14:11-12); this is not a political record but a divine record of history, an eyewitness account written by Moses under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

To briefly recap where we are in this history, or in the movement of God’s people out of Egypt, they are camped by the Red Sea. They have escaped slavery in Egypt and the Lord has led them to this place; six hundred thousand men, plus women and children and livestock. They are referred to as an army (12:41), but they carried no weapons apart from sticks and knives. Having his heart further hardened by the Lord, Pharaoh changed his mind about letting his slaves go and chased off after them with his huge army of chariots and horsemen.

From their camp by the Red Sea, the Hebrews looked back and saw this huge army bearing down on them (14:10). They were terrified and cried to the Lord and to Moses. Their cry was not that of people who trusted in the Lord to help them, not a cry of faith. Moses however, was a man of faith. He patiently urged them to, ‘Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord’ (14:13). He believed the Lord would that day save them and destroy the Egyptians; ‘The Lord will fight for you; you need only be still’ (14:14 NIV).

After telling the people not to be afraid and to stand still, Moses then told them, or the Lord told Moses to tell them, to go forward (14:15). What was ahead of them? The Red Sea! Pharaoh thought they were confused and lost to be in this place. They thought they were trapped between this huge army and the sea. But the Lord told them to move forward. The Lord heard their cry and was providing a way of escape, as unlikely and miraculous as this might be.

Have you ever felt trapped in a place with no way out? Maybe it was in a financial trap, a health trap, a relationship trap. Maybe you are in such a predicament at the present time, trapped between a rock and a hard place? Maybe you are facing a temptation more than a trial. In recalling the trials and temptations of our forefathers, including this one at the Red Sea, the inspired apostle Paul promises us, ‘God is faithful… who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make a way of escape’ (1Cor 10:1,13). Have you seen God being faithful to this promise? Do you believe he can, and will, provide a way of escape for you when you cry to him?

The Lord told Moses what he was to do as the people moved forward, and what the Lord would do in response to their faith. They would see the Lord become a wall behind them, they would see the waters of the sea divide, and see the waters of the sea return.

**1. A wall behind them**

The Lord told Moses to lift up his staff and stretch it over the sea and divide it so the people could go through on dry land (14:16). This was God’s plan to save his people. The second part of his plan was to destroy the Egyptian army, consisting of Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen, in the same sea. In this way God would bring glory to himself in the land of Egypt, and in all the nations (14:17, 18). Everything the Lord does is for the purpose of bringing glory to himself. He saved you to bring glory to himself and he destroys the wicked to bring glory to himself. He will ultimately be glorified in heaven and on earth and under the earth, or in the entire universe. This will be when Jesus Christ comes again in power and great glory (Phil 2:10, 11).

The Lord was present with his people in the desert, leading them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (13:21). The pillar of fire gave them light to travel by night. The pillar of cloud went before them by day, presumably giving them protection from the hot sun. If you have ever driven in a fog or passed through a cloud as you ascend in an aeroplane, you will know how difficult it is to see when in a cloud. Thankfully, pilots can ‘see’ through clouds with their instruments, but the Egyptians had no such technology. The first thing the Lord did to help his people was miraculously move the cloud from before his people to behind them: ‘The Angel of the Lord… moved and went behind them; and the cloud did the same (14:19). It became a wall of darkness between the Egyptians and the Israelites. This darkness brought the advancing Egyptians to a halt. It was as if night fell upon them, a very dark night (14:20).

While darkness engulfed the Egyptians, the Lord gave light to the camp of Israel. The Lord’s presence brought darkness to the Egyptian camp and light to the camp of Israel simultaneously (14:20). In light of the miracle that follows, this miracle is rarely considered but it looks like a miracle to me- darkness in one place and the light of day just a short distance away. In this way the Lord kept the Egyptians from harming his people all that night (14:20).

**2. Waters of the sea divide**

In obedience to the Lord’s command, Moses stretched out his hand over the sea and the Lord sent a strong east wind all that night, a wind that pushed back the waters of the sea and made a dry sea bed. The people of God then walked through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on each side (14:21, 22). To make sure we understand, and maybe to make sure doubters don’t fiddle with the text, we read this again in verse 29- a wall of water on their right and on their left. And we read it in many other places in the Bible, as previously mentioned. Despite this, critics, many who claim to be Christians, Christians who don’t believe in miracles, try to fiddle with the straightforward history of the Bible.

Some critics say the strong east wind was a natural phenomenon so this was a miracle in timing, like the plagues- although the death of the firstborn was hardly a natural occurrence at a specific time! Nor was this dividing of the water in any way a natural phenomenon. Hyatt writes, ‘In our view, that which happened was a combination of natural forces, the strong east wind and a storm, and their own effort in military encounter with the Egyptians’. The Bible says nothing about a military encounter. This critic continues, saying that the sea, ‘may have been in fact a marshy lagoon’. He does not explain how a ‘marshy lagoon’ became a wall of water on the right and on the left. As one listener shouted after the preacher spoke about the Red Sea being just a puddle: ‘Praise God who drowned the whole Egyptian army in a puddle!’

**3. Waters of the sea return**

We are not actually told that the Hebrews crossed over safely at this point in the account, but it soon becomes clear that they did. The focus turns to the Egyptian army that chased after Moses and the people of God in the early morning (14:23, 24). Presumably the pillar of fire moved forward with the Hebrews and the pillar of cloud also moved forward, so the Egyptians also moved forward into the sea. It was at this time that the Lord looked down and threw the Egyptians into confusion (14:24). Did the Lord send a storm to turn the dry ground back into mud so that their chariots got stuck in the mud, or did their wheels fall off for some other reason? (14:25). With their frontline war machines falling apart, the Egyptians panicked. They feared that the gods were against them, specifically the God of the Hebrews. They had seen the Lord God fight for the Hebrews back in Egypt. In confusion and terror, the Egyptian military started to flee out of the sea.

‘Then the Lord said to Moses’ (14:26). The Lord was orchestrating this wonder of wonders, this mighty deliverance of his people from Egypt and from the pursing Egyptian army. And he was not yet done with his mighty work. What he told Moses to do was to again stretch out his hand, this time that the waters would come back upon the Egyptians (14:26). Moses did as he was told and the Egyptians army was drowned in the sea. Modern men, including many Christians, do not believe in miracles- they are superstitious but do not believe in the supernatural. Moreover, they do not like the idea of a God who punishes the wicked. They imagine their own ‘domesticated God’, a God who loves but never punishes. The idea of God drowning the Egyptian army is not compatible with the God they have ‘domesticated’ for themselves. Maybe this is why critics do not seem to bother with this part of the account of the crossing of the Red Sea.

The Lord was not just stopping the Egyptians from attacking his people; he was judging the Egyptians in a ‘glorious’ manner, in such a way that the whole world would fear God. We know that news of this event reached the city of Jericho before the Hebrews did (Josh 2:10). In the morning the sea returned to its full depth, ‘so the Lord overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea’ (14:27). Pharaoh’s death is not directly noted but if ‘no one remained’ then he must have perished along with his whole army (14:28). Again, the words of the Bible are made clear by repetition.

Finally, we read that the Israelites, ‘saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore’ the next morning (14:30). They themselves had crossed over on dry ground and were all safe on the other side. But they saw their enemies dead along the shore of the Sea. They saw proof of the great power of the Lord before their very eyes, power to deliver and power to judge and destroy. They saw and they believed. They saw and they feared the Lord (14:31). As just mentioned, the pagans in Jericho heard this story and also feared the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, the ‘God who in heaven above and on the earth beneath’ (Josh 2:11).

Millions who have heard this story believe it and fear God. For some, the fear of God leads them to the cross of Jesus Christ where they confess their sin and rejoice in the salvation of God, not unlike the rejoicing heard in the Israelite camp that day. But there are also lots of people today who are less believing than the pagans in Jericho. They use their God-given intellect to try and undermine the truth of this account of the Exodus. They believe without question what is written by ancient writers, as long as it is not found in the Bible. No matter what the scholars and sceptics say, this story remains unchanged in the Holy Scriptures, where it is read by many more than will ever read what the critics write. Besides, those who read and believe that the Lord God by his mighty hand delivered his people through the Red Sea and destroyed the Egyptians in the same Sea, will find blessings that will never be found by sceptics and unbelievers. Have you found such blessings?

**Song of victory and a future** Exodus 15:1-21

Through the leadership of Moses, and the mighty hand of God, the children of Israel escaped oppression in Egypt. They escaped into the desert. But when they saw Pharaoh and his army chasing after them they thought their ‘uprising’ had failed. They told Moses it would have been better if they had stayed in Egypt (14:12). They felt they had not counted the cost of leaving Egypt, and were ready to turn back. It seems they had forgotten the plagues God sent upon the Egyptians. If it wasn’t for Moses urging them forward, forward to the Promised Land, they would have gone back (13:5, 14:14, and 15).

Too many people who escape the clutches of sin turn back when the going gets tough. The apostle Peter likens them to a washed pig returning to the mud (2Peter 2:22). They forget what the Lord did for them at the cross. They take their eyes off the Lord, something clearly seen in their lack of interest in the means of grace. They look back, lusting after old days, or look around lusting after the things of this world. Sometimes they are not taught the whole counsel of God. They are taught that when they accept Jesus Christ they will have no more troubles in life. The whole counsel of God includes teaching about the return of Jesus, about the resurrection and the final judgment, and about a future in heaven (Mat 16:26, 27). Do you know your future as a child of God?

The chapter we are looking at today is a song composed by Moses and sung to the Lord by the Hebrews after they crossed the Red Sea and saw God drown the entire Egyptian army in the Sea. It is a victory song, the first song or psalm of any length in the Bible; Moses also wrote Psalm 90. The Hebrews were celebrating victory over their enemy, over Pharaoh who had kept them in bondage for many generations. They rightly attributed their victory to the Lord, to Yahweh. The focus of the first part of the song is, ‘Brought out of Egypt’, and the second, ‘Bring into Canaan’. In between is a section, just one verse, which we will title, ‘Bow to Yahweh alone’. At the end of the song is a verse in prose recapping the destruction of the Egyptians and the liberation of the Israelites, and then a response from Miriam the prophetess and the women.

**1. Brought out of Egypt**

This is the first song we find in the Bible. Upon reflection, this is the first time the children of Israel were free to worship the Lord, and the first time their hearts were full of joy and thanksgiving. The desert must have come alive as Moses led the six hundred thousand men of this newly saved community in song- and the women joined in (15:20). They were praising God for their freedom, freedom from slavery and freedom to worship the Lord. They were singing to the Lord because of what he had done for them.

In seeing what God had done they learned of his strength, of his power to save and to destroy, and of his love for them, his steadfast covenant love. They had nothing with which they could repay the Lord; in fact they would never be able to repay him. But they could bring a sacrifice to the Lord, and this they did in the ‘sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips giving thanks to his name’ (Heb 13:15). A song of praise was the most appropriate way to respond to God’s great salvation, and remains the way we respond to our salvation in Jesus Christ our Lord. Do you enjoy singing praises to your God and Saviour?

Another aspect of this song of praise is that it complements, and actually repeats what we have been told in the previous chapter. I hope you listen to the words we sing as we worship and find that they complement the readings and the sermon. The Lord knew how quickly people forget history, as well as the temptation to ‘revise’ history. Songs are easier to remember and recite and because of the use of imagery they powerfully convey truth.

We see the opening lines of this song repeated by Miriam in verse 21. We find the second verse of this song in Psalm 118:14: ‘The Lord is my strength and song, and he has become my salvation’. In his almighty strength, the Lord delivered his people out of bondage in Egypt. In their helpless and hopeless condition they cried out to God and he sent his servant Moses to bring them out. The one who held them captive had to be thoroughly defeated in order to free them; who knows how far Pharaoh would have gone to get back his slaves! His intentions are expressed in verse 9.

When Satan tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and they sinned, he felt victorious. He saw them cast out of the presence of God. But God told the serpent or Satan that the seed of the woman would crush his head (Gen 3:15). Through Moses, God crushed the head of one of Satan’s warriors, Pharaoh. The first verse of this song declares the triumph of God the warrior in destroying his enemy: ‘The horse and its rider he has thrown into the sea’. The following verses tell of this victory in similar words: ‘They sank to the bottom like a stone’. Through one greater than Moses, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God would crush Satan for ever (1Cor 15:25, 57).

Those the Lord drowned in the depths of the sea were not innocent bystanders; they were men who rose up against the Lord (15:7). God does not tolerate rivals, much less any who exalt themselves against him. His wrath is real and his wrath is deadly. Striking all the firstborn of the Egyptians was but a taste of his wrath. Moses and the Hebrews saw God’s destruction of all who rose up against him (15:7). By pursuing God’s people with evil intent they were fighting against God.

Anthropomorphisms are employed to describe the actions of God. His ‘right hand’, ‘glorious in power’, ‘dashed the enemy in pieces’ (15:6) such that debris and dead bodies littered the shores of the sea. The east wind that blew all night dividing the waters is called, ‘the blast of your [God’s] nostrils’ (15:8). It dried out the sea bed or ‘heart of the sea’, making it firm, even as the waters were ‘heaped up’ on each side (15:8). Arrogant Egyptians chased God’s people thinking they could frustrate God’s purpose. They boasted of what they or ‘I’ would do- I will pursue, overtake, and divide the spoil (15:9).

But all this boasting was silenced in a moment. The Lord blew with his wind making the waters cover and drown the Egyptians: ‘They sank like lead in the mighty waters’ (15:10). Back in verse 5 they sank like a stone. Such is the vivid imagery of poetry. Such also was the reality of the Lord’s destruction of the Egyptians. The Lord fights for his people, and when he does he is victorious. Let no man or idol think they can outsmart or overpower Almighty God, the God who spoke this world into existence and who blew upon the sea and drowned the Egyptian army.

**2. Bow to Yahweh alone**

After the Fall, and after God’s judgment upon the world through the Flood, God spoke to Abraham telling him to go to Canaan. Canaan was inhabited by idol-worshipping people. Abraham had little to do with the Canaanites although Lot went to live with them in Sodom. Isaac and Jacob continued on a sojourners in Canaan until Joseph was sold as a slave into Egypt. The descendants of Abraham worshipped the God of Abraham; they were warned not to marry Canaanite or pagan women.

Down in Egypt the people grew in number and became a significant people group. They worshipped the God of their forefather Abraham, the God who revealed himself to Moses as Yahweh. The Egyptians worshipped various gods, bowing down to their idols of wood and stone. The Hebrews were aware of these foreign gods; at Mt Sinai they got Aaron to make a god modelled on what they saw in Egypt.

Even so, the crossing of the Red Sea was a most decisive event in the lives and the worship of the Hebrews. It was here that they became a nation under God, a people group who worshipped Yahweh as the all-powerful God of all the earth. The powerful king of Egypt and his gods were defeated and destroyed at the Red Sea. Yahweh was now feared in all the earth. And rightly so because he is the only true God. All other gods are the imagination and the handiwork of human beings.

In this historical and cosmic context the words of verse 11 ring out loud and clear. Moses asks in rhetorical questions, ‘Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you- majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?’ God later declared through Isaiah, ‘I am God and there is no other, I am God and there is none like me’ (Isa 46:9). Our grandsons are learning these words from the Bible, words that will set them up for life as children of the true God, we pray. The apostle Paul makes it clear that ‘there is no other God but one’- ‘one God and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we live (1Cor 8:4, 6).

Moses and the Israelites became practical monotheists here at the Red Sea. Their God, Yahweh, has no rivals in all the earth. This was a huge departure from accepted opinion of the day, a day in which each nation had its own god. Such thinking still exists; militant Hindus say that the land of India is Hindu land, to the exclusion of all other religions. The idea of many gods is still present in our society; in fact pluralism is stronger than ever. Telling someone that their god is not real is labelled ‘hate speech’. Children are taught about different religions and different gods and told to choose which they will follow; even some Christian parents do this. But the Bible teaches us that there is only one God and one Lord Jesus Christ. Will you teach your children this truth? Will you teach them the wonders done by God at the Red Sea, as well as the wonder of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ?

**3. Brings into Canaan**

The second part of Moses’ song focuses on the future, a future based on the past, on the mighty work of God just witnessed. Prophets speak in the ‘prophetic perfect’ tense as if the future has already happened; such is the certainty of God’s promise. In steadfast love God had led his people to this place, and he would lead them on to their ‘holy habitation’, to the land he promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the land of Canaan. ‘Mercy’ or ‘steadfast love’ and ‘redemption’ are key words for God’s people to take hold of- along with the word ‘purchased’ (15:13, 16). Our God is a God whose love never fails, a God who is all powerful to do what he says. He is the unchanging God who reigns forever and ever (15:18).

The Hebrews had a long way to go before they reached Canaan. They would encounter hostile people along the way, people who trusted in the gods of their territory. But God assured Moses and his people that these hostile nations would hear about the God who destroyed the Egyptians, and fear him. Nations all the way to Canaan, nations like Edom and Moab that these people knew nothing about as yet, would be overcome with fear and dread because of their God (15:14-16). These people were God’s treasured possession, people whom the Lord had ‘purchased’ (15:16); this is another key word as mentioned, a word similar to ‘redeem’.

‘Remember your congregation which you have purchased of old, the tribe of your inheritance which you have redeemed’, are words that we sing in Psalm 74:2. Paul tells the congregation at Corinth that they are ‘bought with a price’ (1Cor 6:20, 7:23). It ‘cost’ God the blood of his only begotten Son to redeem them, and us, from slavery to sin and death. We are no longer slaves to sin but we are slaves to God and to righteousness.

God was bringing his people into the land of Canaan where they would be a holy nation, a nation to praise and glorify his holy name. Moses refers to Canaan as ‘the mountain of your inheritance’, the place where God has made his own dwelling; he even uses the word ‘sanctuary’ (15:17). The land of Canaan would be the holy land of God’s holy people- ‘holy’ means set apart to God. The mountains and the sanctuary may have a more specific focus on the temple that would be built by Solomon, and to God’s presence in the centre of this temple. What a glorious future these Hebrews had, now that they were divinely delivered from slavery and death. What sort of future do you have now that you are delivered from sin and death through the blood of Jesus Christ? Do you see a glorious future in the presence of God, in the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God (Rev 21:2)?

**Testing at Marah**  Exodus 15:22-27

Are you familiar with the term, ‘mountain-top experience’? Have you ever had a mountain-top experience? When we go to a Christian camp or retreat, and enjoy a feast of fellowship and fine teaching, we feel like we are on a mountain top- or so it seems when we return home and sink back into the routine of daily life. I find every Lord’s Day a mini-mountain-top experience; I return home feeling rather flat after being with the Lord and with you his people on the mountain top.

I say mini-mountain-top experience because we have just read of the people of Israel seeing the Lord divide the sea for them to cross over, and then drowning their enemies in that same sea. Can you imagine a more awesome display of God’s power to save his people and destroy his enemies? The cross and the empty tomb of Jesus Christ are even more awesome, of course. The power of the resurrection is something the apostle Paul contemplated continually (Phil 3:10). This is the truth that makes our worship on the Lord’s Day a mountain-top experience.

The same chapter that records the triumphant Song of Moses records trouble and testing at Marah in the desert. Let us look at the closing words of this chapter under these three headings: triumph, trouble and testing.

**1. Triumph**

‘I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously!

The horse and rider he has thrown into the sea’ (15:1, 21).

This is what Moses and the children of Israel sang as they stood on the shore of the Red Sea, having just passed through on dry ground. They escaped years of persecution in Egypt after he Lord sent plague after plague upon the Egyptians, forcing Pharaoh to let them go.

God led them into the desert until they came to the Red Sea, but Pharaoh and his chariots came after them. They cried out to the Lord and it was then that they saw his great salvation; they saw the sea divide for them to cross over. When they looked back they saw the Egyptian army disappearing under the water. Moses, and then Miriam, led the people in this song of triumphant joy.

What lay ahead of the people as they turned their eyes towards the Promised Land? Moses led them through the Red Sea and they were now in the Wilderness of Shur (15:22). They would head down the eastern side of the Red Sea towards Mt. Sinai. A large company that included women and children would travel slowly, especially in the desert- maybe 20-30kms a day. After three days they had not found any water and were getting thirsty. They had brought unleavened dough with them and maybe some water but these supplies were running out. The desert was dotted with water holes and oases, and thankfully they came to a water hole at a place called Marah.

**2. Trouble**

At this place called Marah, some 100km down along the Suez Gulf, they found a well. Water at last! But when they tasted the water it was bitter; ‘Marah’ means ‘bitter’ (15:23). We are not told what made this water bitter, but it was a huge disappointment for these people, and led to them complaining against Moses, yet again. We will find these people complaining against Moses, and effectively against the Lord, on numerous occasions as he leads them towards Canaan. After seeing the salvation of the Lord we might have thought their cry would be a prayer of faith; instead it was a cry of complaint against Moses. The water was bitter and their hearts became bitter as they turned towards Moses demanding, ‘What shall we drink?’ (15:24).

When the apostle Paul reminds us of this and similar incidents during the wandering of God’s people in the wilderness, he concluded, ‘Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall’ (1Cor 10:12). We read of Christians who have done wonderful things, but rarely of Christians who have become bitter in times of trial because they have nothing to write about! The record of the Bible is not so selective; we read of very dark moments in the life of Job, although he did come through in the end. We fear for Christians who believe that becoming a follower of Christ means no more troubles in life. There are many who overlook the wilderness wandering of God’s people and think that deliverance from Egypt landed them directly in the Promised Land.

Let me assure you from Scripture that in this world you will have trials and tribulation. It was Jesus who said as much, and added, ‘but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33). The Psalmist actually says, ‘It was good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn your statutes’ (Ps 119:71). No affliction or suffering is easy at the time but we should remember that the Lord promises to provide a way out (1Cor 10:13). The Israelites had seen God provide such a way, the way of the Red Sea, just three days before! Even so, are you going to criticise them for their lack of faith as they complained about the bitter water at Marah?

Our ever faithful and forgiving God spoke to Moses when he interceded for the people, just as he had done back at the Red Sea. The Lord showed Moses a tree which he could throw into the well to make the water sweet (15:25). We do not know what was making the water bitter, or how this tree made the waters sweet; no doubt many have searched to find such a tree. What we do know is that in this way the Lord made the water at Marah potable for the people to drink.

Again the Lord came to the aid of his people; the Lord saved the day as it were. Have you ever experienced the Lord saving your day? I hope you turn to the Lord in the day of trouble and don’t start blaming others. The fact that you are here today proves that the Lord delivered you from that trouble. Maybe you are facing some new trouble at present. Are your trusting in the Lord to deliver you from this trouble or affliction, in his way and in his time?

James tells us to be patient and not to grumble against one another (James 5:8, 9). He speaks of the farmer waiting for rain and a harvest. He tells us to remember the perseverance of Job. Patience and perseverance are in very short supply in the life of many today, but you the believer are called to be different. Why? Because James says that the Lord is compassionate and merciful, and his coming is near (James 5:11). ‘Why are you downcast, O my soul?’ the Psalmist asks of his own soul. The answer comes, ‘Hope in God for I shall yet praise Him’ (Ps 42:5, 11). ‘Without hope and without God in this world’ is the apostle’s diagnosis of the life of an unbeliever (Eph 2:12). Let it not be his diagnosis of your life!

**3. Testing**

‘The Israelites moved from triumph to trouble. Now they move from trouble to testing. Marah, the place of bitter water, was a place where the Lord tested his people (15:25); note that a new paragraph begins half way through verse 25. The Lord was testing his people to see what was in their hearts (Deut 8:2). He was making a statute or ordinance for them. Would they obey him and be blessed, or would they disobey and miss out on God’s blessing- effectively, be cursed. This is what God did way back in the Garden of Eden.

Adam and Eve were in the garden. They had the blessing of God. It was not exactly heaven because they were able to be tempted and able to sin. As we know, they failed the test and were thrown out of the garden. The Israelites were still outside but God had come to deliver them from slavery in Egypt. He had come to form them into a people who would worship him and glorify his holy name. He made a covenant with these people upon whom he had set his love. He wanted these people to love him, to love him to the exclusion of all others, to love him in sickness and in health, to love in good times and bad times.

How do we know if someone loves us? It is not unusual to test that person in some way- and that before you marry them! For you the believer, are you sure that the person you plan to marry is a believer? If that person refuses to come with you to worship, or keeps making excuses, you will doubt their faith. You cannot force anyone to believe, and you cannot force anyone to love you. Love cannot be forced or demanded. Not even God forces love because that would be contrary to the very essence of love. What God does is demand obedience as the evidence of our love for him. And so he gave commands or statutes to test the people of Israel.

Did the people of Israel love the Lord after all he had done for them? Then let them show their love by obedience to his commands or statutes (15:26). Jesus said, ‘If you love me you will obey my commands’ (John 15:23). Disobedience demonstrates a lack of love. Disobedience demonstrates a lack of appreciation for all that the Lord has done for us, and a lack of belief in what he will do for us. We have the anti-type of the Exodus in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Lord’s challenge to the Israelites was to trust and obey the Lord who redeemed them with his outstretched arm and promised to bless and keep them as they journeyed all the way to the Promised Land. Let them believe and not doubt that the Lord was powerful to bless and keep them.

‘Trust and obey’ are the words of a well-known hymn; they are words that aptly describe the life of a true Christian. These two attributes of a Christian’s life go together of course; it is a failure to trust God, in other words unbelief that leads to disobedience. Disobedience leads to the judgment of God because disobedience of God’s commands is sin. Obedience on the other hand leads to blessing. God promised his recently redeemed people that he would not put on them any of the diseases that he put on the Egyptians- ‘For I am the Lord who heals you’ (15:26). What are the diseases God put on the Egyptians? What we read and what these people saw were the plagues. Some of these were sickness but the term ‘disease’ probably had a wider meaning in this context. Turning the water into blood was particularly relevant here at the bitter waters of Marah.

Likewise, the promise of healing has a wider meaning than that of healing every individual of every sickness. If we are to think of the individual, it is more likely that this is a promise of life-giving water referred to by Jesus in John 4. There is nothing more healing than the gift of life, eternal life in Jesus Christ. Such healing involves the forgiveness of sin. Forgiveness of sin and healing of the land are promised by the Lord in 2Chronicles 7:14: ‘If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land’.

And so the Lord led his people to Elim (Elim means ‘large trees’), where there was twelve wells of water and seventy palm trees; in Israel there were twelve tribes and seventy elders (15:27). There was an abundance of wells for water, and of palm trees for fruit, a wonderful provision from the Lord.

**Daily bread from heaven**  Exodus 16:1-21

How much food do you have stored in your cupboards? Enough for a week or a month? You will have enough toilet paper for a month I am sure! Did you panic when you saw the supermarket shelves emptied of toilet paper? Many feared a life without toilet paper! It would be good to reflect on our own society before we start looking at the society of Hebrews that Moses led out of Egypt, and at their fear of starvation. They had no supermarkets or barns from which to source food for their family. We might also reflect on the lives of millions today, on daily labourers buying a couple of potatoes, an onion, and a tomato for dinner on their way home from work.

Three days after their triumphant escape from slavery in Egypt, the Israelites became thirsty. They complained to Moses, who threw a tree into the well at Marah to make the bitter water sweet. They moved on to Elim which had twelve wells and seventy palm trees (15:27). After some weeks they moved down the coast and came to the Desert of Sin- it was six weeks since they left Egypt. The name ‘Sin’ is thought to be related to ‘Sinai’, and is to be distinguished from the Desert of Zin much further north.

The bread or dough they had brought from Egypt had long since run out. If they enjoyed dates from the trees at Elim these also were running out. They were travelling with flocks and herds but we are not told if these were used for food. What we are told is that the people, ‘the whole congregation of the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron’ once again (16:2). With high drama they expressed fear that they would die from hunger. Our first subheading is ‘Fear’, our second, ‘Faith’, our third, ‘Follow’ and our fourth, ‘Fulfilment’.

**1. Fear**

Just six weeks after seeing the hand of Almighty God deliver them from misery in Egypt and from the army of Pharaoh, these people were looking back with fondness for the meat and the bread they ate back in Egypt (16:3). Never mind the whips and the beatings from their taskmasters; never mind their baby boys being thrown into the river to drown. All this was forgotten in their craving for food.

Our ability to glorify the past is matched only by our ability to complain about our present circumstances. ‘Remember the good old days’ and, ‘Things were never as bad as they are today’ are common sayings. They are dangerous sayings if it is believers looking back to their days as an unbeliever. Unbelievers spend their time looking back because they have nothing to look forward to. As believers we remember the past, we remember the grace of God in salvation and in many acts of mercy towards us, but we also look forward, trusting in God to continue in his grace towards us.

In the Song of Moses the Israelites sang of looking forward to the land of milk and honey, the land of Canaan to which the Lord was leading them and their family. But there is no mention of Canaan in this complaint against Moses, only the mention of Egypt.

**2. Faith**

Fear is natural and God understands our fears. But what God desires is faith. He wants his people to trust him in every aspect of life. How could these people not trust God after seeing him divide the Red Sea for them to cross over? What did God have to do in order to get his people to trust him? What indeed! What will it take for you to trust in God and not fear the future?

We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. God gives us the faith to believe that in the blood of Jesus Christ we have forgiveness of sin, but this is not the end of faith. We are saved by faith that we might walk by faith: ‘For we walk by faith not by sight’ (2Cor 5:7). Moses is commended as a man who walked by faith: ‘By faith he passed through the Red Sea as by dry land, whereas the Egyptians attempting to do so, were drowned’ (Heb 11:29). By faith Moses said, ‘Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord’ (14:13). Moses had grown in faith since the Lord called to him from the burning bush. The Lord had tested him many times, and he was doing so again as the people complained here in the Desert of Sin.

Testing is part and parcel of growing in faith. Moses was tested, the people of Israel were being tested, and you will be tested by God (16:4). He tests us to see what is in our heart (Deut 8:2). He tests us to make us stronger in faith. You will experience trials, ‘that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honour and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ’ (1Peter 1:7). Hunger in the desert was the second of many tests that the Lord would send upon his people as they journeyed towards Canaan.

God wants his people to trust him in any and every circumstance of life. When we fear, and when we complain as these people in the desert did, we are not honouring God as we should. Fear arises in our heart when we doubt God’s ability to help or provide for us, or when we doubt his love and willingness to do so. This is why our faith is so important to God, as well as being important to the life we live. Faith is essential if we are to ‘glorify God and enjoy him forever’.

The Lord heard their complaint against Moses and he answered them by saying to Moses, ‘Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you’ (16:4). The Lord would test the people firstly, by having them go out and gather a certain amount each day, and secondly, by gathering twice as much on the sixth day (16:4, 5). Would they pass these tests? Let us wait and see. In the meantime Moses tells us more about the ‘miracle of the manna’.

Moses and Aaron told the people that in the evening they would know that the Lord had brought them out of Egypt, a fact they seemed to have forgotten, and in the morning they would see the glory of the Lord (16:6, 7). In the evening the Lord would give them meat, and in the morning plenty of bread to eat (16:8). Moses reminded the people that the Lord heard their complaints against him and that their complaints were actually against the Lord (16:8).

Is this not a warning to us that complaints directed at our leaders are heard by the Lord? Let us remember the protest of Moses and Aaron: ‘Who are we?’ to do anything (16:7, 8). What can our political leaders do for us? Very little! Yet so many cry to them instead of crying to the Lord for help. So many put their trust in princes, in human beings who cannot save, despite the word of the Psalmist (Ps 146:3). It is amazing that political leaders are being blamed for bushfires, drought and floods, not to mention pandemics. Is there any such thing as an ‘act of God’ anymore? Earthquakes and volcanoes maybe?

In response to their complaints about food, the Lord was going to send them meat in the evening and bread in the morning. But he was also going to show them the glory of the Lord. The congregation was called to, ‘Come near before the Lord’ and ‘look toward the wilderness’ to ‘behold the glory of the Lord appear in the cloud’ (16:9, 10). They were being led by a pillar of cloud in the day, and would soon see a thick cloud descend on Mt Sinai which indicated the presence of the Lord (13:21, 19:16). Three of the apostles saw the glory of the Lord in a cloud that descended on the Mount of Transfiguration. May we never forget God’s glorious and powerful presence near us? As if from the cloud, the Lord again spoke to Moses, telling him to tell the people that they would eat meat at twilight and bread in the morning (16:12). Moses had already done this, according to verse 8.

**3. Follow**

‘So it was that quails came up in the evening and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp’ (16:13). The Lord was faithful to his promise and provided food for his people. Quails are small birds that fly low over short distances and roost on the ground. Apparently flocks of quails are not uncommon in this region but the number and the timing, not to mention the continuous supply for forty years, cannot be explained as a natural phenomenon. Much less so can the manna be explained as something natural, like the excretion of scale insects; note the focus on the manna rather than the quail in this account. The manna was something unknown to these people; they said, ‘What is it?’ They had never seen it before, let alone eaten it! It appeared in the morning and melted when the sun got hot (16:21). Moses said that the small round substance like hoarfrost on the ground was ‘the bread which the Lord has given you to eat’ (16:15). We later read that it was ‘like white coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey’ (16:31).

The Lord was testing the people to see if they would walk according to his law (16:4). He was testing their faith or trust in him. Faith or trust is seen in what we do, in our obedience to God’s commands. We cannot say, ‘I have faith but you have works’ (James 2:18). Would the people obey the command of God to gather just one omer for each person, and not keep any of the manna overnight (16:16, 19)? An omer was about two litres. It seems that some gathered more than this amount but when it came to measuring the amount collected they all had the same amount, the amount necessary to fill their stomach (16:18). On the basis of this divine intervention, the apostle Paul tells believers to share what they have been given by the Lord with others so that there is equity, at least in terms of food, clothes and shelter (2Cor 8:14,15).

The Lord promised to supply manna every morning but would they trust him to do so? Would they obey this command and avoid the urge to store the bread up in barns (16:19, cf. Luke 12:16-21). No! They would not trust the Lord in this matter. They tried to hoard the manna. But this hoarded manna bred maggots and stank (16:20). These people, like us, only felt secure when they had lots of treasure laid up on earth. Jesus said to lay up your treasure in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy (Mat 6:20). Beware that your stash of toilet paper does not get flooded! Soggy toilet paper is only good for compost!

**4. Fulfilment**

‘Give us this day our daily bread’ are words that we often pray because they are part of the Lord’s Prayer. But do we understand what we are saying, given what we are reading here in Exodus? Do we worry about not having food to eat tomorrow? Our worries are probably about not having money for the rent, for a house, or for our retirement, not for something as basic as food, and that for tomorrow! But we should see each new day as a gift from God, and indeed, each meal as the Lord supplying our needs (Phil 4:19). We should focus on living and serving the Lord today, not worrying about

tomorrow; let us leave tomorrow in the Lord’s gracious and mighty hands (Mat 6:34).

The Lord allowed his people to hunger, and fed them with manna in the desert, to humble them and teach them that ‘man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’ (Deut 8:3). When in the desert and hungry, Jesus quoted these words to Satan who tempted him to turn stones into bread. Jesus went on to declare himself to be the word of God, and indeed, the ‘bread of life sent down from heaven’ (John 6:35); he said this after miraculously feeding the five thousand.

Just as God fed the multitude in the desert, so Jesus fed five thousand on the mountainside in Galilee. He did so that people might believe that he is the giver of life, that he is the true bread ‘who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world’ (John 6:34). Is your focus on the bread on your table every morning and evening, or on the ‘bread of life’ in your heart who gives you eternal life such that you will never hunger or thirst again?

**Weekly Sabbath rest** Exodus 16:22-36

Last year we rarely, if ever, heard the word ‘lockdown’, the word that is in the headlines almost daily this year. People have been told not to go out of their homes because of corona virus, except to get food. In China doors were welded shut and food brought to the homes. Shops have been shut and businesses closed and machines left idle for weeks and months. Everyone has effectively been forced to rest.

Something similar happened in Israel in 586BC. It was the exile rather than a viral pandemic that brought lockdown to the land of Israel and city of Jerusalem. The Lord sent all the people out of the land, in part so that the land could enjoy her Sabbaths: ‘As long as she [the land] lay desolate she kept Sabbath, to fulfil seventy years’ (2Chron 36:21).

The Lord declared a Sabbath rest for his people when they came into the desert after the exodus from Egypt. He told them not to go out of their place on the seventh day but to rest and eat the extra food given by the Lord on the sixth day. Few people in our land , including most Christians, pay any regard to the Sabbath day ; here declared to be holy to the Lord (16:23,25). Does this not make the Lord angry? It did in the day of Moses. And is not almighty God able to ‘force’ a Sabbath rest, either by a pandemic or sickness or other means? When will people realise that working seven days a week is not profitable in the long run. ‘What will it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul’ said Jesus (Mat 16:26).

**1. Sabbath rest**

We come to the first occurrence of the word ‘Sabbath’ in the Bible, although not the first occurrence of the concept of rest on the seventh day. The Hebrew word ‘*sabbat*’ is found in Genesis 2:2 where it means ‘to rest’ or ‘to cease’; God ‘rested on the seventh day from all his work of creation. So Sabbath means rest and Sabbath day means a day of rest. God rested on the seventh day and blessed and sanctified this day (Gen 2:3). If every other day of creation was a 24hour day, as the biblical text indicates, why would the seventh day be any different?

Here in the desert of Sin where God sent bread from heaven for his recently redeemed people, he told them not to gather manna on seventh day but to rest. When the Lord later included a Sabbath rest in the Ten Commandments he gave the reason, ‘in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth and the sea and all that is in them and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it’ (Exod 20:11). So the indication is that the Sabbath day was in place not only before Sinai but before the giving of manna in the desert. We might add that despite conflicts with legalistic Jews regarding what could and could not be done on the Sabbath day, Jesus did not rescind the Sabbath day command any more than he rescinded the other commandments. And nor did the apostles do away with the Sabbath day; all they did was move it to the first day of the week after the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1Cor 16:2).

The Lord heard the people of Israel complaining of hunger, and graciously gave them bread in the mornings and meat in the evening, manna and quail respectively. In doing so he tested them regarding their readiness to trust in him and obey his commands (16:4). The first test was to go out each morning and collect only the daily quota of manna. But some collected more and tried to keep it till the next day. This made Moses angry (16:20). Manna kept overnight got maggots and stank.

The second test was that of collecting twice as much on the sixth day and none on the seventh (16:5). To add to the miracle of the manna itself, that kept overnight on the sixth day did not get maggots and stink. The people were told to cook the food as usual, the double portion, on the sixth day for eating on the seventh day because this was a day of rest or the Sabbath day. They were told not to go out looking for manna on this day of rest (16:29).

**2. Sabbath holy to the Lord**

In the book of Deuteronomy Moses records for a second time the giving of the Ten Commandments. The commands are the same but the reason given for the Sabbath day command is different. The people were to remember that they were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord had brought them out with his outstretched arm and ‘therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day’ (Deut (5:15). As slaves in Egypt these people had little rest. They may not have been given a day off each week, although many heathen nations do follow a pattern of one day rest in seven. The bazaar near to where we lived in India was closed on Sundays. Escaping bondage from Egypt they became bondservants of the Lord, who gives a day of rest each week.

Moreover, this day was a day to remember what the Lord had done for them in bringing them out of cruel bondage in Egypt. It is called ‘a holy Sabbath to the Lord’ (16:23). It is a day set apart for God’s people to remember his great salvation, a day for God’s people to worship the Lord. As mentioned, the Exile was a time for the land to ‘enjoy her Sabbaths’ (2Chron 36:21). Prior to the Exile the Sabbath was not observed. When the exiles returned, Nehemiah demanded that the gates of Jerusalem be shut on the Sabbath so people could not go to work in their fields and traders could not come into the city to sell their wares on the Sabbath (Neh 13:17f). The Sabbath day is a day of rest and worship according to Scripture.

**3. Sabbath command broken**

The Lord provided bread from heaven daily, enough for each person’s daily need. But on the sixth day he gave twice as much, enough to cover the need of two days. He did this so that they could rest on the seventh day (16:29, 30). The commandment regarding the Sabbath was a blessing not a burden. But some of the people still went out to gather manna on the seventh day- but they found none (16:27). Why? Why do they go out on the Sabbath day? Did they forget the command? Did they think they knew better than Moses or the Lord? Or did they think they could get a bit extra? Were these the same people who gathered more than the allotted quota, only to see the manna get maggots and stink?

The Lord was graciously supplying the needs of his people but some of them were intent on being greedy. Greed or covetousness led to them breaking God’s command and indeed to breaking the holy Sabbath. The Lord of course was not pleased, but no punishment is recorded (16:2). These foolish people would have been embarrassed searching for manna on the Sabbath and finding none.

I say again, what I have said many times, why are some people so determined to work on the day the Lord has given as a day of rest? The people of Israel realized that there was nothing at to gain by looking for manna on the Sabbath day. In rebuking the returned exiles for building fancy houses for themselves whole neglecting the house of God, the prophet Haggai spoke of earning wages to put into a bag with holes (Haggai 1:6). The tax man is good at punching holes in your pocket when you work on the weekend. Your monetary gain from working on the Sabbath day will be far less than the losses incurred by your family, your soul and even your health.

The command to keep the Sabbath day holy as a day of rest and worship is not something God wrote on tablets of stone for the Israelites alone. He gave this command to his people before he gave the Ten Commandments. It is in fact, a creation ordinance which he set in place in the newly established holy nation of people he redeemed. God has not changed and his commandments have not changed. If Jesus said, ‘I did not come to destroy the Law or the Prophets but to fulfil’ and that ‘not one jot or tittle will pass from the Law until all is fulfilled’ (Mat 5:17, 18), who do you think you are to declare the Sabbath command obsolete? When it is fulfilled it will be eternal rest not eternal work! (Heb 4:9). So let us get a taste of heaven by enjoying rest and worship each and every Lord’s Day.

**4. Sample of manna for posterity**

In the concluding verse of this great chapter in the history of God’s people, Moses give a few additional details regarding the manna from heaven. Firstly he tells us that the people called this substance that they collected from the ground around their camp each morning ‘Manna’ (16:31). There is nothing fancy about this name; it is simply Hebrew for, ‘What is it?’ We have already mentioned that it was white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey. It seems the people could bake it into cakes or even boil it up like porridge (16:23).

Secondly, Moses gave the order to preserve some of this manna for future generations to see. An omer-sized jar was filled with manna and set before the Lord (16:32, 33). This meant putting it I not the Ark of the Covenant when this was built. It was put into the ark, along with the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments and Aaron’s rod that budded (Heb 9:4). Imagine if this ark was still around today and we could actually see this manna! When people stared worshipping this object, as people are prone to do, the Lord got rid of it. But for generations a jar of manna was kept as proof of God’s miraculous provision of food for his people during their forty years of wandering in the desert.

Moses actually records this detail here in verse 35, maybe by way of his later editing of his own account of the Exodus. They ate manna until they came to border of the land of Canaan (16:35). Presumably, after this initial disobedience, no one was as unbelieving or greedy as to gather more than their daily quota, or to gather manna on the Sabbath day. It is Joshua who records the day the Lord ceased sending manna: ‘Then the manna ceased on the day after they had eaten the produce of the land; and the children of Israel no longer had manna but ate the food of the land of Canaan that year’ (Josh 5:12). Even though we grow our own food or buy it from the supermarket with money we earn, Moses warns us not to forget the Lord, our great and gracious provider. It is the Lord ‘who gives you the ability to get wealth’, as any sick or cripple person will assure you (Deut 8:18).

**Water from the rock**  Exodus 17:1-7

Water is basic to life in all its forms. People get excited when they discover water on the moon or another planet because water means life is possible. The Creator of life knows this of course. The combination of two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen makes this amazing substance called water. Water naturally exists in three states: solid, liquid and gas. It exists in the air as gas or vapour, which condenses into a liquid as rain, or freezes to ice as hail or snow. While trekking in the Himalayas we ran out of water but melted snow in the saucepan to get water. There was no snow at Sinai. In the desert, water mostly comes from wells. At Marah the people of Israel found a well but the water was bitter. They complained to Moses saying, ‘What shall we drink?’ The Lord was testing them to see if they would trust him to provide for their needs.

In the Wilderness of Sin the Lord sent them manna to supply their need for food. But before long they had again run out of water; they had come to a place called Rephidim in the region of Mt Sinai. It was the Lord who led them to this place, and after all they had seen the Lord do in delivering them from slavery in Egypt, and in giving them bread from heaven, they might have trusted the Lord to again provide them with water. But they turned to Moses demanding, ‘Give us water that we may drink’ (17:2) and complaining, ‘Why did you bring us out here to die of thirst?’

Why were they complaining to Moses? Only the Lord could give them water to drink. They were actually testing the Lord with this insolent and unbelieving demand (17:2). ‘Beware brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God’ (Heb 3:12). When we pray, asking the Lord to help us in some way, let us do so in faith. If we ask amiss, if we ask without faith or with selfish motives, we will not receive (James 4:3). On the other hand, ‘the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective’ (James 5:16 NIV).

As psalm singers we are familiar with the Hebrew words ‘Meribah’ and ‘Massah’ as found in Psalm 95. The story behind this psalm is the story we are looking at today. So I will used these two words as subheadings, with our third subheading being, ‘Moses strikes the rock’. In addition to Psalm 95, a number of other psalms remind us of how the people tested the Lord in the desert (Ps 78:18, 106:14), while Psalm 105:41 recalls the water gushing out of the rock at Horeb.

**1. Meribah**

As mentioned, Meribah is a Hebrew word in which the root ‘*rib*’ or ‘*riv*’ means ‘to contend’ or ‘to quarrel’. Moses called the place where the people argued with him over the supply of water, Meribah (17:7). You may recall this name from a similar water-from-the-rock incident at a place called Kadesh much later in their journey from Egypt to Canaan (Numb 20:13). The people quarrelled with Moses about water, drinking water, this substance that is basic to life. People often become desperate when they are thirsty. With temperatures above 40 degrees for weeks on end in India, village people sometimes start fighting over access to water. I ran a project installing tube wells for village people- most were thankful. When commissioning the hand pump I would speak about the true water of life, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus told the woman at the well that he would give her living water if she asked (John 4:10). The apostle Paul spoke of Christ supplying the water of these people in the desert: ‘They drank of the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ’ (1Cor 10:4 NIV). I hope you are not worried about this reference to Christ being with the people of Israel in the wilderness. The incarnation of Christ is just that, the Word become flesh; Christ, as the second person of the Trinity, is from everlasting to everlasting.

The people were thirsty and wanted water to drink. They wanted to quench the thirst felt in their bodies, but the Lord was looking to satisfy the thirst of their souls. Moses could not satisfy either thirst. The people turned to Moses because he was physically present with them, but he was just a man like them. Moses was a prophet of course, and as such he called upon the Lord to help. He got somewhat frustrated when the people kept complaining. He heard no word of thanks when the Lord gave them manna and meat, and before that water to drink.

Here at Rephidim their complaint became bitter; they were on the verge of stoning Moses (17:4). Stephen (Acts 7:58), the apostle Paul (Acts 14:19), and our Lord Jesus Christ himself (John 10:31) all faced stoning at the hands of God’s people, the very ones to whom they had been sent. After all Moses had done in leading them to freedom they were ready to stone him. They had learned nothing about the power and covenant love of the God. They believed nothing with regard to the promises of God. God promised to lead them all the way to the land of Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey, but all they could see was death in the desert from thirst (17:3). Oh you of little faith, why do you doubt? This incident was all about faith, about the Lord testing their faith in him- although they had become so bitter and arrogant that they were actually tempting or testing the Lord (17:2).

**2. Massah**

The word ‘*Massah*’ means ‘to test or tempt’. In naming this place Massah, as well as Meribah, Moses understood the people as asking, ‘Is the Lord among us or not’ (17:7). It is not unusual for doubters to ask for a sign or a dream to confirm the word of the Lord. When Jesus miraculously fed the five thousand, the people came to him asking him to perform a sign. They in fact pointed to the fathers eating manna in the desert (John 6:31). They were as unbelieving as their fathers! Jesus performed signs and wonders and still they did not believe. We must not start doubting God’s word and asking for personal signs and wonders. The Bible is the inspired and authoritative word of God so let us read it and believe it. The Bible is the full and final revelation of God so let us cling to the truths and promises that God has given us in the Bible.

God tests us in order to make us stronger in the faith (1Peter 1:6-7). We must not resort to testing God. It was Satan who tempted Jesus to put God to the test, and Jesus rejected this suggestion saying, ‘You shall not tempt/test the Lord your God’, quoting the words of Deuteronomy 6:16 which refer to this very incident at Massah (Mat 4:7). Jesus rejected Satan’s final temptation saying, ‘It is written, you shall worship the Lord your God and him only you shall serve’ (Mat 4:10). We are called to trust God and worship him, not to test him with regard to his ability or willingness to supply our needs.

**3. Moses strikes the rock**

Despite the people’s bitterness and readiness to rebel against Moses, and against the Lord, the Lord heard the cry of Moses and answered him. We might wonder what would have happened to them if they had actually stoned Moses! The Lord answered Moses telling him to go before the people, taking with him some of the elders of Israel (17:5); apparently some of the elders supported Moses. He was to carry his special rod with him, the rod with which he struck the waters of the Nile, turning them into blood (7:20). Carrying his rod, and with the elders and the people following, Moses was told to go to the rock in Horeb, strike the rock, and see water gush out for the people to drink (17:6). Horeb is another name for Mt Sinai; presumably this rock was near this mountain.

The Lord spoke to Moses saying, ‘Behold, I will stand before you there at the rock in Horeb’ (17:6). How would the Lord appear to stand before Moses? Presumably he would appear in the cloud that appeared when they left Egypt, the cloud which symbolised God’s presence among his people. Was it these words that led the apostle Paul to say that Christ was the rock with these people in the desert? (1Cor 10:4). The people thirsted for water to drink and the Lord was about to give them such water. Let them know that the Lord loves them and is powerful to give them water to drink, and let us know that the Lord loves us and is powerful to give us not only water to drink but living water to quench our thirsty souls, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Does your soul, like that of the psalmist, thirst for God, the living God (Ps 42.2)? Have you found Jesus Christ to quench this thirst?

Moses did as the Lord commanded- he struck the rock in Horeb and water came out. The people’s thirst was satisfied, but their souls were left barren and dry. There is no mention of thankfulness or of worship; indeed, this miraculous provision would soon be forgotten. The name of this place makes no mention of the Lord providing water in the desert. The name or names refer to the contention or quarrelling of the people and to their testing or tempting of the Lord their God. In their time of need they were doubting the Lord’s presence among them; ‘Is the Lord among us or not’ (17:7). Can you recall a time when you doubted God’s presence with you? Have you learnt from such a time, learnt to trust in the Lord and not doubt? I hope you have learnt to trust in the Lord, and are continuing to do so. You, like me and like other believers might still succumb to doubts and fears, but let these times be few and far between.

In conclusion, we might think about the rod with which Moses struck the rock at Horeb. It was not a magic rod but was a symbol of God’s power. Some see Moses as using the gift and talent given him by God. They speak about us being an instrument in God’s hand, like the rod in Moses’ hand. They say we all have spiritual gifts that we can use to help others. This is true, although we should say the gifts given to us by God to use for his glory. We are instruments in God’s hands, ‘instruments of righteousness to God’ (Rom 6:13), instruments to bring glory to God not to ourselves. As a servant of God, Moses was about to be stoned to death, not applauded by fickle and rebellious people.

**Moses, Joshua and the Amalekites**  Exodus 17:8-16

Have you ever taken part in chain prayer? At a student camp the leaders made up a roster for chain prayer. A small room was set aside with no furniture apart from a mat on the floor on which was placed a pad and pencil. I felt obliged to sign up; I was assigned the hour after midnight. On the paper people wrote prayer points, often the names of campers who were not believers. I really struggled to keep awake and keep praying, but the Lord was pleased to bless many souls in this camp.

The Bible tells us to ‘pray without ceasing’ (2Thes 5:17), to ‘pray always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit’ (Eph 6:18). The early church ‘continued steadfastly in the apostle’s teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayers’ (Acts 2:42). On one occasion many of them were gathered in Mark’s house for prayer. James had been murdered by Herod and Peter was on death row. But ‘constant prayer was offered up by the church for Peter’ (Acts 12:5, 12). You know the story of Peter’s miraculous escape from prison that night, and how the Lord reunited him with his praying brethren. Truly, the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective (James 5:16). So we must pray and keep on praying. In group prayer we can all pray for the same thing, even if some, like a friend of mine, saw this as repetitive and unnecessary. Don’t you enjoy hearing others pray? The Lord certainly enjoys hearing them pray, and he enjoys hearing you pray.

One commentator writes, ‘Prayer is often a battlefield where we fortify ourselves to endure, where we deal with our temptations, where we engage the devil and fight his efforts to divert us from God’s way, where we link ourselves with God and struggle for clear vison to see, and strength to do, the will of God’. The story of the Israelites fighting the Amalekites is an illustration of the reality of this battlefield, a physical battle as well as a spiritual battle. Yes, we understand that Moses was holding up his hands in prayer, not some sort of military signal or declaration of a curse upon the enemy.

‘Victory over the Amalekites’ or something similar is the usual title given to this passage of Scripture. I have included the name Joshua in the title because I will be asking who won the victory, Moses who was praying or Joshua who was fighting. Our subheadings will simply be, ‘Joshua’, ‘Moses’, ‘Amalekites’ and, ‘Written record’.

**1. Joshua**

The Israelites were camped at Rephidim in the Desert of Sin. They had not yet reached Mt Sinai, where the Lord gave them the Ten Commandments; these we the basis of the covenant he made with these people whom he redeemed from bondage in Egypt. This vast company of over six hundred thousand men was moving through the desert towards Sinai and would later turn north towards the land of Canaan. Deserts are inhospitable places but the Lord had recently supplied these people with ‘bread from heaven’ and water from the rock.

We pray when we need food, clothes or shelter, but many of our prayers are about other people, particularly people who are not kind to us, people we might even regard as our enemies. So it was that the Israelites went from hunger and thirst to being attacked by enemies- although we do not hear them complain to Moses in this instance. They ran into people in the desert who were very unfriendly; it is thought the people of God may have been encroaching upon an oasis or fertile plain that these people regarded as theirs. The Amalekites were a nomadic group of people who lived in the Negev and in the Sinai peninsula- more about their origin and their future later.

When Israel came under attack from the Amalekites, Moses called upon Joshua to quickly muster an army and go to battle against the Amalekites. This is the first we hear of Joshua, the man who gives his name to the sixth book in the Bible. Joshua, whose original name was Hoshea, was from the tribe of Ephraim (Numb 13:8, 16). He stood out as a man of faith when he, along with Caleb, opposed the negative report brought by the other ten leaders who went to spy out Canaan. He became Moses’ assistant and successor (24:13). Joshua’s army was not well equipped but neither was the army of the Amalekites, not compared to the army of the Egyptians- that was! Still, it was war and the battle was fierce, although causalities are not recorded. What is recorded is that Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword (17:13).

**2. Moses**

Where was Moses when Joshua went out to fight the Amalekites? Why did he not lead the army of Israel into battle? For one thing, Moses was rather old by this point in time, probably twice the age of Joshua. His advancing age is shown in the story itself with him getting tired from standing with his arms in the air- although this can be tiring no matter what our age! Moses may have been too old for the army but he was not too old to pray; and let no one discount the contribution of a man or woman who is a ‘prayer warrior’ as we say. Moses was as much a warrior as Joshua, a prayer warrior.

As Joshua went off to the battlefield Moses went to the top of the hill with the rod of God in his hand (17:9). He took Aaron, who was even older than Moses, and a man named Hur with him up this hill. Jewish tradition has Hur as the husband of Miriam but there is no evidence for this; he again appears as Aaron’s assistant in Exodus 24:14. There on the hill Moses held up his hand, presumably the hand with the rod of God in it. This rod symbolized the power of God or the power of the Spirit of God. The next verse speaks of Moses hands in plural, so we can picture Moses with both hands in the air. Holding up his hands was directly related to the success of Joshua in battle. When his hands were lifted up Joshua prevailed but when Moses’ hands came down the Amalekites prevailed (17:11).

Have you ever seen such direct answer to prayer? We referred to the early Christian’s prayer for Peter in prison, and then finding him knocking at the front door in the middle of the night. They could hardly believe what they saw; they were not expecting such an answer, certainly not one so immediate (Acts 12:15, 16). They learnt, and we must learn, the power of prayer or more correctly the power of God to answer our prayer. We must learn to be prayer warriors like Moses and like the early Christians. As missionaries we were often aware of people back home praying for us. This is why I love missionary prayer notes and try to pray for missionaries and other servants of the Lord every day.

Did Joshua see Moses in the distance with his hands raised in the air? Maybe not, but he was told later (17:14). Moses was there on the hill with the rod of God in his hand. No, we are not going to equate this rod with people carrying a cross or other image. Hold up your hands for sure, or get down on your knees. Humility and faith in God are required, not faith in some inanimate object. Psalm 134, a psalm that we sing almost every week, refers to standing in the house of the Lord at night with hands lifted up, and the apostle Paul writes of lifting up holy hands in prayer (1Tim 2:8).

Seeing that Joshua prevailed when Moses had his hands up and retreated when his hands were down, Aaron and Hur got a stone for Moses to sit on and then they stood on each side of Moses holding up his hands (17:12). They did this till the end of the day, until Joshua returned in victory over the Amalekites. Are you holding up your hands in prayer for someone who is battling the enemy at this time? Maybe it is someone who is sick, someone out of a job, or someone whose marriage is under attack. Maybe it is someone who does not yet know the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord. God wants people like Joshua to be on the frontline as it were, but he also wants people like Moses who are faithful in prayer. If you can engage in both tasks all the better but be sure to engage in one!

**3. Amalekites**

One of Esau’s grandsons was called Amalek (Gen 36:12) and on this basis some scholars write of the Amalekites being of Edomite origin. But the Amalekites are referred to in the time of Abraham long before Esau was born (Gen 14:7)! Whatever their origin, the Amalekites seem to be included in God’s curse upon the tribes that lived in Canaan. Their unprovoked attack upon the people of God, and that upon the weak and weary at the rear of the camp, angered the Lord (Deut 25:18). They were people who showed no fear of God, unlike another nomadic tribe called Midianites. Even after forty years Moses reminded the people of the prophecy given at this time about the Amalekites.

The written record of this event that we will look at shortly contained a prophecy about the Amalekites: ‘I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven’ (17:14). The Lord was going to judge the Amalekites and wipe them from the face of the earth, but not immediately. They would continue to make war against God’s people for generations to come (17:16). In fact, they seemed to have a particular hatred towards God’s people, not unlike some people groups today; remember the communists of the now extinct Soviet Union and the current China. Saul and David would fight the Amalekites and wipe them out, although that great hater of God’s people called Haman was probably a remnant Amalekite (1Sam 15:32-33, 30:1-20, Esther 3:1).

**4. Written record**

This story comes with a footnote telling us that Moses wrote this story in a book or scroll as a memorial - we assume Moses did as the Lord commanded him. Many scholars say Moses could not have written the Book of Exodus, or the other four books of the Pentateuch, but here is internal evidence that he did. I don’t know who they think wrote these books if Moses didn’t! Moses was there, and at the command of God wrote this interesting and inspired account. Sure, there was oral history also handed down but this was based on what was written, as indicated in this text. Moses was told to ‘recount it in the hearing of Joshua’ (17:14). Even though he was part of this story, Joshua was to listen to the record, as was every succeeding generation down to us today. Joshua needed to know that Moses was on the hill with his hands held high in prayer while he fought the enemy. Joshua must not get the idea that he won the battle in his own strength. ‘Not by might nor by power but my Spirit says the Lord’ (Zech 4:6).

On this hill in Rephidim Moses built an altar to the Lord. Abraham made a practice of building altars at significant places. The altar was in itself a memorial called ‘*Yahweh nissi*’ or, ‘The Lord is my banner’ (17:15). An army carries its flag or banner high after victory. Moses wanted the name of the Lord lifted high as the people rejoiced in victory over their enemies. Is the Lord your banner of victory over sin and death? Are you carrying high the banner of the Lord as you praise him for the victory you have in the Lord Jesus Christ?

**Moses reunited with his family**  Exodus 18:1-12

While growing up in this church I received as a prize a book about Moses. That was many year ago and I can no longer find this book among the many on my shelves. Many books have been written about Moses, and we even have movies about this amazing man of God. In the mercy of God he was saved from death to grow up in the house of Pharaoh, but as a young man (40yrs old) he fled into the desert of Sinai. When called by God to go back to Egypt and deliver the oppressed people of God he was most reluctant. He eschewed any leadership role. Eventually he obeyed the Lord, and went to Pharaoh asking that God’s people be allowed to go into the desert to worship ‘the Lord our God’.

Through Moses God sent plagues upon the Egyptians, forcing the hand of Pharaoh to let the people of God go. Moses led the people through the Red Sea and saw the Lord drowned the Egyptian army in that sea. Moses proved himself as the leader of this new nation. Through Moses the Lord provided the people with water to drink and bread to eat as they trekked towards Mt Sinai, reaching this place two months after leaving Egypt (19:1).

We have not heard anything about the immediate family of Moses since his wife Zipporah quickly took a sharp stone and circumcised their son (4:25), maybe their second, here for the first time called Eliezer. It seems that she went back to her father’s house while Moses went on down to Egypt. Zipporah was a Midianite; her father Jethro was a priest of Midian. Midian was a son of Abraham through a concubine. He was sent away to the other side of the Jordan River and became the father of a large tribe of nomadic desert dwellers. Some Midianites moved south into the Sinai Peninsula. In chapter 17 we saw Moses fighting against another tribe of desert dwellers, the Amalekites. The Midianites, at least those led by Jethro, were friendly towards the Israelites- Moses their leader was his son-in-law! Even so, in the time of the Judges Israel suffered at the hands of Midianite raiders.

In Exodus 18 we get further insight into the family of Moses as he was reunited with them at Sinai. We do not agree with liberal scholars, and indeed with Allan Harman, that this chapter is chronologically out of order. The reference to ‘the mountain of God’ in verse 5 refers to Mt Sinai or Horeb, but this does not mean this incident must have come after the giving of the law in chapter 20. The rock that Moses struck to get water is called ‘the rock in Horeb’ (17:6). They had left the Desert of Sin and come to Rephidim, which may well have been near Horeb. Our first subheading is, ‘Joyful reunion’ and our second, ‘Jethro worships Yahweh’.

**1. Joyful reunion**

Jethro, also called Reuel, was a nomadic grazier. He didn’t live in a city or even in a house; he lived in a tent in the land of Midian (2:15). He had seven daughters, one of whom he gave to Moses in marriage. As priest of Midian he was probably head of a group of families or tribe. Despite a heritage in Abraham, the Midianites were polytheists. Jethro speaks of ‘the Lord being greater than all the gods’ (18:11); although, as we will see, his belief appears to change at this time. We previously suggested that Zipporah his daughter, and Moses’ wife, may have objected to the Israelite practice of circumcising boys at just eight days of age (4:25, cf. Gen 17:12).

Despite the isolation of desert life, Jethro had ‘heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel his people’ (18:1). News of the plagues in Egypt, and particularly of the crossing of the Red Sea, had spread among the nations such that God’s name was feared among the nations. Jethro had also received news that Moses was back in the land of Midian. So he took Zipporah and her two sons to find Moses her husband- they were camped at Mt Sinai (18:5).

The reunion was a joyful occasion although the greetings focus more on Moses and his father-in-law than on his wife and children. Even so, we are told about their two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. In those days names carried meaning; names could even be prophetic. We might wonder about the child bearing a name referring to some historical event in the life of the father, although we do find children named with reference to the circumstances of their birth. I heard of a child born at a bus stop being called ‘bus-stop’- that was in, you guessed it, NZ! If you follow cricket you will hear interesting names among the Indian team. When I heard the name ‘Samson’ I knew this man was not a Hindu, and similarly with the name ‘Washington’.

Gershom was the name of Moses first son. ‘*Ger*’ in Hebrew means ‘alien’ or ‘stranger in a foreign land’ (18:3 cf. 3:22). Moses was reflecting on his life away from his family and his people back in Egypt. When his second son was born his circumstances were changing. It was probably after the Lord spoke to him from the burning bush and he was on his way back to Egypt. The Lord promised to deliver his people from bondage and bring them into the land of Canaan (3:8). So Moses called his second son Eliezer meaning, ‘the God of my father was my help’ (18:4). We are not told the ages of these boys but there is no mention of them having wives when they are brought to meet their father at Mt Sinai. In fact, there is scant reference to them at all after this time. Moses loved his family but he loved the Lord more. He was focussed on doing the will of God not on setting up a dynasty through which his name would be remembered. There were already indications that the young man Joshua would be Moses’ successor (17:9, 2:13).

**2. Jethro worships Yahweh**

Jethro heard that Moses was back in the land of Midian. He must have sent a message to Moses saying he was coming with the family to meet him because, ‘Moses went out to meet his father-in-law’ (18:6, 7). When the two men met they did so in the typical oriental way- they bowed and kissed each other. Moses had returned as the leader of a new nation despite having no land as yet. But he acts with humility and respect as he meets the man who long ago took him in as a stranger, and the man who remained his father-in-law. As priest of Midian, Jethro was also a leader and he likewise shows humility and respect towards Moses. In this meeting they asked each other about their welfare; ‘*shalom*’ is the word they used (8:7).

After this public greeting, Moses and Jethro went into a tent, the tent of Moses, for further catching-up (18:8). Moses told Jethro of all that the Lord had done for his people in delivering them from the wicked and cruel Pharaoh, and from the hardships of their journey through the desert. Jethro knew that God had called Moses to return to Egypt, promising to deliver his people from slavery, and now he learned firsthand that God had indeed fulfilled this promise. Jethro rejoiced upon hearing this good news, news of ‘all the good which the Lord had done for Israel’ (18:9). Like the psalmist, he was singing the praises of God; ‘Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits’ (Ps 103:2). And like the apostle Paul he could say, ‘God works all things together for good to those who love God’ (Rom 8:28).

Two words, ‘good’ and ‘delivered’, stand out in Jethro’s response to the report of Moses (18:9). God is good in that he is faithful to his promises. To ‘deliver’ his people from the hands of a powerful king means he is all-powerful. As such God stands head and shoulders above all other gods. ‘Now I know’ said Jethro, ‘that the Lord [Yahweh] is greater than all other gods’ (8:11). Jethro acknowledged, and probably worshipped, other gods up to this point in time. He was not introducing Moses to Yahweh, as some critics suggest! He was acknowledging Yahweh as greater than other gods, and indeed as the only true God. It is not possible to worship Yahweh while continuing to worship other gods because Yahweh, the Lord, is a jealous God.

Jethro said, ‘Blessed be the Lord who has delivered you’ (18:10). Moses spent forty years in the desert living with Jethro and his family. He would have shared the beliefs of his fathers, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Above all he would have shared his experience of God speaking to him from the burning bush promising that through Moses he would deliver his people from slavery in Egypt. Jethro now saw and heard of this promise being fulfilled, and proceeded to bless or worship the Lord.

Jethro demonstrated the sincerity of his belief by taking a burnt offering to offer to God (18:12). This is how the people worshipped God; an animal was slaughtered, put on the altar and completely burnt. This practice was later enshrined in the law of Israel as a way of homage and thanksgiving, or to expiate sin. Such an offering was fulfilled in the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ. It was a blood sacrifice to atone for sin. Jethro had other sacrifices to offer to God (18:12). These were not burnt up but contributed to a meal which was shared with fellow believers, namely Moses, Aaron and all the elders of Israel. They ate bread together with Moses father-in-law before God. This meal was an indication of Jethro’s acceptance into the people of God- only Moses and Aaron knew Jethro before this point in time. Such meals were a common practice when making a treaty of some kind. Meals were not shared with the enemies of God’s people and of God.

The entry of Jethro into the people of God was a significant event. He was not a descendent of Jacob; he did not belong to any of the twelves tribes of Israel. He was first of numerous Gentiles or foreigners who by profession of faith entered into the holy nation of Israel. Recall the confession of Naaman the Syrian: ‘Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; now therefore please take a gift from your servant’ (2Kings 5:15, 17).

The closing words of this chapter refer to Jethro going away to his own land (18:27), but we are later told of his son Hobab joining the children of Israel when they set out from Sinai towards the land of Canaan (Numb 10:29-33). Jethro must have died in the meantime- his son-in-law was well over eighty by this time. Moses prevailed upon Jethro’s son to show the way through the desert and he also assured him that as the Lord blessed Israel so he would bless the family of his father-in-law Jethro. Again we are not told directly but presume that Zipporah and their two sons joined Moses on the journey to the Promised Land.

Just as Moses was God’s instrument of blessing to his wider family, may you and I be God’s instruments of blessing to our wider family- to our immediate family first, to our spouse and our children, but then to the wider family. Let us keep praying for them, and as we have opportunity let us tell them of God’s blessing upon our lives and share the gospel of Jesus Christ with them. As we gather as families at this time of the year let us be faithful witnesses of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

**Moses accepts advice from Jethro**  Exodus 18:13-27

If you come to India with me one day I will show you the peacock throne which is the centrepiece of a great outdoor auditorium in the Red Fort at Delhi. The Mughal emperor sat on this throne hearing and judging matters brought to him by his people. This was common practice among rulers of old. Deborah would sit under a palm tree and the children of Israel came to her for judgment (Jud 4:5). Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life; he was a circuit judge (1Sam 7:15-16). As king, David sat as judge for the people of Israel. His son Absalom exploited delays in cases being heard by David or his deputy (2Sam 15:3). This practice began with Moses who although originally rejected as ‘ruler and judge over us’ became ruler and judge after he led the people out of slavery in Egypt.

We have read of the people coming to Moses when they had no water and no bread to eat. It becomes apparent that they came to him with many other less important matters, matters like property and personal relationships; although no real estate was involved at this time. Jethro, his father-in-law, noticed Moses spending all day dealing with judgments and disputes for the people of Israel. Jethro came to visit Moses when he reached Rephidim, which was not far from Mt Sinai. Moses respected his father-in-law and shared with him all that the Lord had done in bringing the children of Israel out of Egypt. His testimony, it seems, led Jethro to a monotheistic faith, faith in the good and all powerful God of Moses. We draw this conclusion from the words and worship of Jethro.

The day after bringing a burnt offering to the Lord and sharing a fellowship meal with Moses and Aaron, Jethro watched Moses take his seat to judge the people of Israel. From morning till evening they lined up waiting for their dispute or request to know the will of God to be heard (18:13). As the priest of Midian, Jethro knew the demands of leadership and of being priest and judge for his people. When he saw how Moses was wearing himself out and testing the patience of the people, Jethro came forward to offer some advice to his son-in-law. Our first subheading will be, ‘Advice given by Jethro’ and our second, ‘Advice accepted by Moses’.

**1. Advice given by Jethro**

Jethro came to Moses after seeing him sit all day judging the people and asked, ‘What is this that you are doing for the people?’ (18:14). He questioned why Moses alone sat judging all the people. Moses did not at first get the point of Jethro’s question. He said he had to sit all day because the people kept coming to him all day. It did not occur to him to delegate some of his duties to other men- until Jethro suggested this. Moses was the undoubted leader of the people, although he faced challenges from Miriam and Aaron, and later from Korah (Numb 12, 16). Like Jethro they accused Moses of taking too much responsibility, but unlike Jethro they were confrontational, wanting to take the leadership away from Moses.

Moses was called and empowered by God for the task of delivering his people out of slavery in Egypt; no one could deny this after the exodus. The Lord told Moses he would be God’s mouthpiece, despite his reluctance (4:11). Moses was God’s prophet, a man called to ‘make known the statutes of God and his laws’ (18:16). The written law had not yet been given by God but various laws and statutes were being taught by Moses to this newly-created nation of God’s people. Even so, with many cases there was as yet no established law or statute by which judgments could be made. Judgment had to be made by a judge enquiring of God.

Jethro did not question Moses’ divine calling to be sitting as judge for the people. The first piece of advice he gave Moses was, ‘You shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and show them the way they must walk’ (18:20). Jethro was not telling Moses he was too old or otherwise incapable of doing his job. He was telling him that his job had become too big for him to continue doing it alone. Moses had not seen this. He was so busy sitting every day, except the Sabbath, making judgments for the people that he failed to see he was getting exhausted, and the people were also getting exhausted and impatient waiting to be heard (18:18).

If a business cannot serve clients in a timely manner it is time to employ more staff. If courts cannot deliver judgments in a timely manner it is time to get more judges. A business owner who insists that he alone can do the job will not see his business grow. A judge who insists he alone can make proper judgments will either burn out or face revolt from the people. In the church leaders also have to delegate duties and responsibilities. Too many churches are a one-man-band, be it the minister or maybe an elder or even a retired minister running the show. Delegation not only prevents burn out, it is beneficial to the growth of the organisation or church. Risks are involved, and those delegated may not do the work exactly as you the leader would do it, but no one person can do everything for very long. The time had come for Moses to delegate some of his responsibilities. This was the advice Jethro offered Moses.

Delegation must be done carefully and prayerfully. Jethro asked Moses to listen to him and prayed that God would guide him in this matter. He advised Moses to continue to ‘stand before God for the people’, and to bring their difficulties to God (18:19). But he should choose other men to assist him in dealing with these matters, specifically with more mundane matters. Who was to choose the relative importance of matters? We will look at this shortly, but firstly we will look at the choosing of men to assist Moses.

Jethro’s advice included not only the number of judges Moses should select, but also the characteristics or qualifications of such men. Prayer has been made and now care must be taken in the selection of these judges. Firstly, they must be ‘able men’ (18:21); able for what? They must be able to listen to the people bringing their concern, and listen to the statutes and wisdom of God. They must be willing and able to stand humble before God and before the people, ready to judge without fear or favour- fear of men that is! The second qualification is, ‘such as fear God’. They must be men who humble themselves before the Lord as Moses did (Numb 12:3).

Thirdly, they must be ‘men of truth’. Men of truth are hard to find in many societies because the gods people worship are not gods of truth. When Israel turned away from the Lord, the prophet Isaiah spoke of truth being ‘fallen in the street’ (Isa 59:14). Without truth justice fails. Sadly truth has ‘fallen in the streets’ of our cities as many cast aside the God of truth. Truth is no longer absolute but what you say it is, or what the majority says it is. Moses was advised to choose men of truth, men who knew and practiced the truth.

The fourth and final qualification of the men Moses was to choose was ‘haters of covetousness’ (18:21). Covetousness will come up in the Ten Commandments (20:17). Covetousness was of great concern to the apostle Paul (Rom 7:7f). Covetousness is the strong desire or lust for things you do not have, or cannot have; the commandment speaks of your neighbour’s house, servant and animals, and then of his wife. Covetousness is like greed. Despite covetous men being ruled out of positions of leadership in Israel, such men are readily accepted in our society where people who covet the position of others are called ambitious, and those who covet another man’s wife are called clever. Men or women who show no fear of God, who love lies and lust after the things of this world, and who are often least able to perform the task at hand, are often chosen to lead in our society and even in the church. But Moses was to avoid such men as he looked for leaders in Israel.

You, like me, may be surprised to see such qualifications here in the OT. You will be familiar with the qualifications listed in 1Timothy and Titus for leaders in the church. And you may be surprised at the parallels between the OT and the NT in this matter. Jethro calls for ‘able men’ and the apostle Paul calls for men ‘able to teach’ (1Tim 3:2). Jethro calls for men who ‘hate covetousness’ and Paul calls for men who are ‘not covetous’ and ‘not greedy for money’ (1Tim 3:3). Paul also calls for men who are blameless, self-controlled, respectful and worthy of respect. Men who fear God will be men like this.

When, in Deuteronomy 1, Moses recalls appointing ‘wise and knowledgeable men’ as heads of different sized groups, he does not mention Jethro giving him this advice. He admits that he was not able to ‘bear your problems and your burdens and your complaints’ (Deut 1:12). He told the people to choose suitably qualified men and he would appoint them as heads or judges within each tribe. He warned these men not to show partiality or favouritism, and not to fear the rich or powerful because, ‘the judgment is God’s’ (Deut 1:16). I wonder how many of our judges consider their judgments as judgments of God. I hope that judgments made within church courts are considered in this way by all concerned.

Having chosen suitably qualified men, Jethro told Moses to put them in charge of judging groups of ten, of fifty, of one hundred and one thousand (18:21). Judging a group of ten seems rather small but some judgments can be made within the household. This hierarchy of judges or courts would ease the load being carried by Moses. Small matters could be dealt with in the lower courts (18:22). Jethro does not detail what are small matters and what are great matters, although he later refers to hard or difficult cases (18:26).

Again in the NT we find a similar hierarchy of judges or courts in the church. Jesus said that if you have a dispute with your brother take the matter to a couple of witnesses if you cannot settle the matter yourself (Mat 18:15f). And if the dispute is still not settled, take it to the church. He reminds us that ‘where two or three are gathered in my name I am there in the midst of them’ (Mat 18:20). In our church or denomination we have three courts; parallel to the fifties, hundreds and thousands recommended by Jethro? Each of these must open and close with prayer. We have a session, a presbytery and a synod. Matters that cannot be settled by a session are referred to presbytery and then to synod if the matter is difficult. Was Jethro the first to advise such a system of church government? We often have the same men at each level but the size of the court increases.

**2. Advice accepted by Moses**

Jesus said that if a person did not accept the ruling of the church they were to be treated like a heathen; that is excommunicated. Moses was not listening to the ruling of a body of elders but to his father-in-law Jethro. If he was not such a humble man Moses would have rejected Jethro’s advice; many leaders do not like being given advice. But ‘Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said’ (18:24). Willingness to accept advice is a mark of any good leader. Moses’ work load was greatly reduced when he appointed judges and made them heads of a hierarchy of courts in Israel. Difficult cases continued to be brought to Moses but smaller matters were handled by the ‘able men’ he appointed as assistant judges (18:25). Moreover, the people would have been pleased to have their cases heard without undue delay.

May we carefully and prayerfully delegate responsibilities and duties in our church, and may our leaders be men qualified according to the advice of Jethro and the apostle Paul. And may we, each one, respect the decisions made by such leaders as being the will of God.

**Moses at Mt Sinai**  Exodus 19:1-9

Some years ago we studied the book of Deuteronomy, the second giving of the law. Today we are looking at the first or original giving of the law in the book of Exodus. We come to the central chapter of this book and in many ways its climax. Moses led the people that God had redeemed from slavery in Egypt to Mt Sinai where they have a true mountain-top experience. God came down onto this mountain in fire and smoke, and Moses went up at the call of God. On this mountain the Lord spoke to Moses giving him the law-code by which this holy nation would be governed.

Three disciples of Jesus went up another mountain where they similarly heard the voice of God from a cloud (Mat 17:5). They were with Jesus, the Son of God, who had come down to live among the people of God. Jesus is the fulfilment of the law given through Moses, and of the promises given through the prophets (Luke 24:27).

The first half of Exodus covers some eighty years, from the birth of Moses to his arrival back at Mt Sinai; he had spent forty years in this region after fleeing Egypt. The second half of Exodus, along with all of Leviticus and up to chapter 10 of Numbers, covers less than one year. The children of Israel spent eleven months camped in the desert at Mt Sinai.

Here at Mt Sinai the Lord made a covenant with them: ‘I will be your God and you will be my people’. A covenant is an agreement, a legal agreement signed off on by two parties. As the initiator of this covenant however, God established its terms- he wrote it. The terms of this covenant included the Ten Commandments, the so-called moral law, as well as other ‘ceremonial laws’ concerning the priesthood and worship. But there is also a lot of moral law outside the Ten Commandments. All the law, both moral and ceremonial, pointed to and was fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Mat 5:17), which is why Jesus announced a new covenant in his blood shed on the cross (Luke 22:20).

**1. Camp at Mt Sinai**

It was two months to the day when Moses and the children of Israel came to the desert of Sinai. At Rephidim they demanded Moses give them water and the Lord graciously gave them water from the rock at Horeb, another name for Sinai. So they came to this place where the Lord spoke to Moses from the burning bush. Moses must have remembered the Lord promising at that time that when he had brought the people out of Egypt he would worship God on this mountain (3:12). After all the plagues that God sent upon the Egyptians, and the great deliverance at the Red Sea, Moses learned to trust God and obey his words, even if the people were not yet ready to do so.

Although a number of sites for Mt Sinai have been suggested, it is widely accepted that it was what is today called Jebel Musa, ‘mountain of Moses’ at the southern tip of the Arabian peninsula. I understand that you can get a guided tour of this mountain. I have not visited but a check of the internet shows a barren hill, or mountain by our standards, at 2,300m. Over a million Israelites camped before this mountain. Our text says that ‘Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain’ (19:3). It seems he did not go all the way up at this time because some time later the Lord, ‘called Moses to the top of the mountain’ (19:20).

**2. Carried on eagles’ wings**

As Moses went up the Lord called to him from the mountain (19:3), giving him a message to convey to the people, to the house of Jacob and the children of Israel. Moses was God’s prophet, as well as judge and leader of the people. The Lord told him to remind the people of how he had brought them out from bondage in Egypt. He pictures this great deliverance with a beautiful metaphor, saying, ‘I bore you on eagle’s wings and brought you to myself’ (19:4).

We are familiar with the sheep-shepherd metaphor but this one expresses their deliverance even more powerfully. I don’t know what particular eagle flew in this desert region but we have wedge-tailed eagles in Australia. They are huge birds, kings of the sky as the lion is king of the jungle. Eagles soar in the heights but their eyes are powerful, as are their talons or claws. They dive from the heights to pick up rabbits, lambs or small dogs. They carry these far away to their nests. In a similar way the Lord came down, scooped up his people and carried them into the desert, well away from Pharaoh’s reach- although he destroyed Pharaoh and his army in this great deliverance. The Lord continued carrying his people through the wilderness. In the Song of Moses at the end of Deuteronomy, Moses again speaks of the Lord carrying his people like an eagle does its young (Deut 32:11).

The eagle not only carries prey to its nest, it carries its young to safety. In this metaphor the Lord carries his people to himself (19:4). Nothing can stop this powerful and majestic bird, this king of the skies, once it is airborne. Its young are completely safe as the eagle carries them on its wings, as it were. The children of Israel were told never to forget how the Lord had saved them out of bondage in Egypt. They did forget of course, just as we so easily forget the Lord Jesus who delivered us from sin and death. Dementia is a terrible disease, but spiritual dementia is the worst of all, and the most dangerous! Which is why we keep singing, ‘Bless the Lord O my soul and forget not all his benefits’ (Ps 103:2).

**3. Covenant declared**

Psalm 25 is one of my favourites, and not only because the old metrical version was sung to the tune ‘Dennis’! When they were doing the new version I suggested that rather than ‘with them his covenant he will share’ in verse 14 it should be ‘with them his covenant he will declare’. When God made his covenant with Abraham he told him to ‘get out of your country’ and then declared what he would do to, and through, Abraham (Gen 12:1-3). There was no negotiation. The almighty, all-loving and all-wise God does not negotiate with creatures he made from the dust. This is why we use the word ‘covenant’ rather than ‘agreement’ or ‘contract’. It is likened to a treaty that a conquering king makes with his defeated enemy; a suzerain- vassal treaty. God had just set the children of Israel free. They owed him everything, but he owed them nothing. Yet the Lord demanded from them nothing, apart from obedience to his commands, commands which like his creation were ‘all very good’.

‘Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant’ (19:5). God established the covenant and he would never go back on his word, but the people would cut themselves off from the blessings of the covenant if they failed to obey the commands. We spoke of God’s covenant with Abraham; this remained at the heart of this Mosaic covenant, as seen in verse 5 and 6. When Abraham obeyed the word of God, God reaffirmed his covenant with him (Gen 22:16-18).

Through Moses, God promised the people three things. Firstly, ‘You shall be a special treasure to me above all people’ (19:5). Just as God chose Abraham so he now chose the children of Jacob, one of Abraham’s grandsons- Esau was not chosen. Understand it or not, like it or not, God chooses according to his own sovereign purposes (Rom 9:6-13). He reminded these people that it was by grace or love alone that he chose them (Deut 7:7).

Moses reminded them when they were about to enter Canaan that they were ‘a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth’ (Deut 7:6). It was not that God was giving up on other people; all were sinners before God. ‘All the earth is mine’ he says through Moses (19:5). All people are sinners and as such are under divine judgment. What God was doing in choosing Israel was bringing blessing to all the nations through them. He promised this to Abraham and delivered on this promise in the Lord Jesus Christ, the seed of Abraham, of Jacob, of Judah and of David. The Lord’s focus was not just on Israel but the whole of humanity, and indeed of the whole of his creation.

God’s second promise was related to the first: ‘You shall be to me a kingdom of priests’ (19:6). This newly formed nation had God as their king; in fact God is the king of all nations. This nation that he chose was to be a kingdom of priests to the whole world. Priestly status bestowed upon all Israel meant they were God’s representative for, and to, all other nations. Priests represent the people to God, and God to the people. They are intermediaries, a role which Jesus alone performs under the new covenant; we no longer need or should have a class of priests in the church. The Bible, and hence the Reformers, teach the priesthood of all believers in that all true Christians represent Jesus to the world, and pray for those around that they might be saved (1Peter 2:9).

God’s third promise, which is again related, was to make Israel a ‘holy nation’ (19:6, Deut 7:6, 1Peter 2:9). God is holy and his people are called to be like him. Holy means ‘set apart’ with ‘divine’ moral qualities. God’s holiness became a compelling moral demand upon his people: ‘You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy’ (Lev 19:2, 1Peter 1:16). When the people obeyed God’s holy law their conduct would be holy and they would witness to the whole world the holiness of God. The Lord had not only called them, and us, out of slavery, but out of darkness, the darkness of sin and death, and brought us into his marvellous light (1Peter 2:9). We are to reflect this light into the world.

The holy God has only holy people in his kingdom. Holy people are those who obey his holy law. Having said this, something stopped the people from obeying God’s holy law, that something being sin. God was setting the law before the people knowing that they were as yet unable to obey it; even Moses sinned and was not allowed to enter the promised land (Numb 20:12, Deut 32:51). ‘What the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering’ (Rom 8:3). The law was our tutor or guardian to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith’ (Gal 3:24).

**4. Call to the elders and people**

Moses obediently conveyed to the elders the words given him by the Lord on the mountain (19:7). He called upon them to obey the voice of God and keep his covenant commands. They had not yet heard the commands but they remembered what God had done for them and promised to obey. ‘All the Lord had spoken we will do’ they declared (19:8); famous last words we might say! Within days they had failed to keep this promise (32:1f). Years later Joshua would hear a similar promise, even after reminding them of their repeated failures to keep God’s commands. He warned them, ‘He is a holy God. He is a jealous God’ (Josh 24:18, 19).

Failure to obey God’s commands about worshiping idols and foreign gods continued through the period of the Judges and into the years of the Monarchy. It continued right up until ‘the word became flesh and dwelt among us’ (John 1:14). We now have a new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ. Under the terms of this covenant we are given the Holy Spirit; we have the power to obey God’s commands.

But are we doing so? We see marriage vows being broken all the time, and it is no better with the vows made to the Lord. Have you forgotten the day when you made vows to the Lord, to love and serve him all the days of your life? The church is the new Israel, the new holy nation, called to reflect the light of Jesus to the world around us. Are you as a member of the church being faithful to your calling and your promises?

**Preparing to meet with God**  Exodus 19:9-15

How do you prepare for worship each Lord’s day? When I was young I would change from my farm clothes in to my ‘Sunday best’. I see most of you do the same. When in lockdown and joining online worship from home it felt strange not getting dressed up- or did you still get dressed up? In some churches people ‘dress down’ to go to worship, which seems strange to me. Of course, preparing for worship is not simply about the way we dress. We should be preparing our hearts because God looks on the heart. Samuel told the people to prepare their hearts for the Lord (1Sam 7:3) because worship is a matter of the heart not just dressing up and performing some ritual. Yet the way we dress is an indication of our attitudes towards worship; we do not dress down when we go to see the king.

Worship does not begin the moment were enter the church building. We look forward to this moment long before we get here. The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter XXI section 8, tells us as worshippers that, ‘after due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand’ we are to join in worship. When I was a student living in the city rather than on the farm, I would attend lectures and study all week, including Saturdays until midnight. When it came to midnight I felt a sense of relief and joy because Sunday was a day of rest and worship. I slept in a while on Sunday morning but never so much as to miss worship- I was always in bed shortly after midnight on Saturday. You might understand my amazement if you tell me you were still in bed when it came time for church at 11am on Sunday morning.

Samuel said, ‘prepare your heart for the Lord’, which means you must be awake and alert to say the least. Bible reading and prayer will help in such preparation. The apostle Paul tells us to examine ourselves before we come to the communion table (1Cor 11:28). Jesus himself said that if you are in dispute with a brother go and be reconciled to him before you come to the house of God (Mat 5:23, 24). Moses told the people gathered at Mt Sinai how they were to prepare for a meeting with God. They were meeting God under the old covenant so we are not obliged to follow the same practices but we are obliged to learn from this portion of Scripture. God had not changed, and we as human beings have not changed, but we do relate to God and worship him under the new covenant established by Jesus Christ our Lord. Our subheadings today are: ‘Coming in a cloud’, ‘Consecrate yourself’, and ‘Controls at the mountain’.

**1. Coming in a cloud**

Moses and the children of Israel reached Mt Sinai three months after escaping enslavement in Egypt. Moses knew this mountain as the place where the Lord spoke to him for the burning bush. Moses went up the mountain but there was no burning bush. This time the Lord spoke to Moses from a cloud, a thick cloud (19:9). It does not seem to be the pillar of cloud by which the Lord led them; rather it was a thick or dense cloud. But both clouds represented God’s presence with his people.

The significance of this dense cloud was that the people would hear when the Lord spoke to Moses and so believe what Moses said (19:9). The denseness of the cloud points to a storm cloud, and the sound they heard was like thunder. The voice of God is often likened to thunder or vice versa (19:19, Job 40:9, Rev 4:5). The closing words of verse 9 appear to refer back to verse 8.

**2. Consecrate yourselves**

Israel was to be a holy nation because God is a holy God (19:6). Holy means ‘set apart’ or in some ways ‘untouchable’, as we see here with the Lord warning the people not to touch the mountain of God. Holiness in some ways means ‘unseeable’; all that the people saw was a thick cloud. The holy God does however speak. The people would hear his voice and Moses would tell his words to the people. The God of Israel was the opposite of the gods of the Egyptians and the Canaanites which could be touched but could not speak. Tragically people prefer gods that they can see and touch. One day I watched people kissing the toe of St Peter as they entered St Peter’s church in the Vatican; the stone toe was almost worn away from people kissing it. That church was filled with all manner of relics and carved images. No one gave me a tract, nor did I hear anyone reading the Bible.

‘God’s being was carefully safeguarded at Sinai, for his holiness precluded any presumption’- so wrote Arthur Cundall in an excellent little study guide on Genesis and Exodus. Note the word ‘presumption’. We must not presume what the Lord likes in worship. He tells us what he likes, and does not like. He does not like presumption! We will have more to say about what is acceptable in worship later.

When the Lord called to Moses from the mountain he probably recalled the time when God called to him from the burning bush. Moses was curious and set off to see this great sight but God stopped him in his tracks telling him to take off his shoes because he was standing on holy ground (3:5). The ground was holy because God had come down upon it. I am not going to tell you that you are standing on holy ground but do remember that you are here in the presence of the same holy God. We worship Jesus who walked on this earth as a man, and was seen and touched, as well as heard, by many people (1John 1:1); but he now dwells in ‘unapproachable light’ (1Tim 6:16). Is it not presumption to have a mug shot of some Jewish man on your wall and think it is Jesus, or a crucifix in your home thinking that Jesus is still on the cross?

Through Moses the Lord told the people to consecrate themselves in preparation for meeting with God (19:10). The word ‘consecrate’, like ‘sanctify’, means ‘to make holy’. It means to make yourself clean both inside and out, because nothing unclean can enter the presence of the Lord. It means to focus your whole attention upon the Lord. Pictures, carved images or other artwork only detract from our focus upon the Lord, who is seated on the throne in heaven in his risen glory.

The first thing Moses told the people to do was wash their clothes (19:10). They had not done this for some time it seems. Water was often in short supply but the rock at Horeb or some other supply gave ample water to wash their bodies and their clothes (cf. Lev 16:28, 17:15). It is true that the Lord looks on the heart (1Sam 16:7) but it is also true that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1Cor 6:19), and your dress reflects the status of your heart. When a Hindu lady threw all idols out of her house and started worshipping Jesus she looked like a different woman, as did her children; she washed and combed their hair, as well their clothes.

The second thing Moses told the people to do was abstain from sexual intercourse with their wives (19:15). Sex with one’s wife is not a sin but under later ceremonial law it did make a person unclean. The apostle Paul speaks of abstinence for a time of prayer (1Cor 7:5). Focus upon one’s wife gives way to focus upon the Lord during times of worship. Again we might contrast pagan worship with its ritual prostitution.

The Lord gave a specific time frame for this consecration. They were given two days in which to prepare themselves; they were to be ready on the third day to meet with God (19:11). The disciples spent two days behind locked doors mourning the death of Jesus and on the third day the risen Jesus appeared to them. Some, especially Peter, would have been reflecting on things he had said or not said to Jesus. I spoke earlier of preparing for worship each Lord’s day; at the very least keep this one day to prepare, to come and listen to God’s word, and to reflect on what you have heard.

**3. Controls at the mountain**

When the day came for the Lord to come down upon Mt Sinai in a thick cloud the people were warned not to move forward and touch the mountain. They would see the cloud and hear the voice of God; this alone made them tremble in fear (20:18). Holiness, as we have said, means separation. The people were to consecrate themselves or make themselves holy, but the holiness of God was something above and beyond these tokens of holiness. We must always remember that God is in heaven and we are on earth, that God is the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy (Isa 57:15). God was showing great grace and condescension in coming down upon this mountain to meet with his chosen people.

The punishment for disobedience, for breaking through the boundary to touch the base of the mountain or climb up the mountain, was death. Does this seem rather severe to you? God is serious about his holiness and the holiness of his people. His demand was simple and clear: ‘Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death’ (19:12). We are not told of anyone doing this. Certainly no one could plead ignorance because this command is repeated a number of times later in this chapter.

It was some time later that the Lord sent fire to devour Nadab and Abihu, two sons of Aaron, after they offered ‘profane fire before the Lord’ (Lev 10:1-2). In the early days of David’s reign as king in Israel, the Lord struck dead a man called Uzzah after he reached out and touched the ark of God as it was being transported to Jerusalem (2Sam 6:7). ‘By those who come near me I must be regarded as holy’ says the Lord and, ‘before all the people I must be glorified’ (Lev 10:3). Are you always reverent when you come into the house of God to worship him?

Any person or any beast that came too close when God came down upon Mt Sinai was to be stoned to death or shot with an arrow (19:13). If anyone touched such a person they themselves would be contaminated and rendered unclean. These two methods of execution kept the executioner free of contamination. This was a strong warning against presumption in worshipping the Lord. It was not an excuse to stay away. When the trumpet or ram’s horn sounded long and loud the people were to move near to the mountain where they would see the thick cloud and hear the voice of the Lord their God. But Moses alone would go up to receive the words of God.

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us of this strict order given by Moses not to touch Mt Sinai; he even quotes the verse we are reading (Heb 12:18f). But he points out that under the new covenant we have not come to a mountain that can be touched but to Mt Zion and to the heavenly Jerusalem. With Jesus as the mediator of the new covenant, a mediator superior to Moses, we come to God the judge. God has not changed; he is still the same holy God that came down on Mt Sinai. But when we are cleansed in the blood of Christ we can come boldly to the throne of grace (Heb 4:16), yet still with reverence and awe.

**The Lord comes down on Mt Sinai** Exodus 19:16-25

In Australia we have no active volcanoes, and earthquakes are few and far between; the Newcastle earthquake was back in 1989. In Japan, on the other hand, earthquakes are common, so people build light framed houses with paper-thin walls. I have not experienced an earthquake or a volcano but you may have. Just over a year ago a volcanic eruption in New Zealand killed twenty-two people.

Jebel Musa on the Arabian Peninsula, the place believed to be the Mt Sinai of the Bible, is not an active volcano but when Moses arrived there, after leading the people out of Egypt, he writes of smoke, and of the whole mountain quaking greatly. To be specific, he writes of these phenomena occurring ‘because the Lord descended upon it’ (19:18). The all-powerful God of creation is able to make the earth shake, literally as well as figuratively, and able to set mountains on fire in what appears to be a volcano.

There was no missing or mistaking the coming down of the Lord on Mt Sinai, and there was no forgetting such a revelation of the majesty and power of the living God. This revelation was to test the people that they might reverence God and not sin (20:20). There is no missing or mistaking the hand of almighty God in the creation that we see, or in the cross of Jesus Christ that we read about in the Bible. Our subheadings today are: ‘The Lord comes down’, ‘the Lord calls Moses’, and ‘the Lord calls Moses and Aaron’.

**1. The Lord comes down**

The Lord gave Moses and the people two days to prepare for his coming down upon Mt Sinai (19:11). On the third day the people awoke to see and hear what looked and sounded like a huge thunderstorm on the mountain: they saw and heard thunder, lightning and a thick cloud (19:16). The people also heard the loud blast of a trumpet or ram’s horn, a signal for the people to gather near the base of the mountain- being careful not to touch it of course (19:13). ‘Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God’ (19:17). The people were familiar with the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire as representing God’s presence leading them through the desert, but this was a new and different revelation of God’s presence. In this theophany or appearance of God we will hear the Lord speaking.

This appearance of God made the people tremble in fear (19:16). I was entering the surf a few weeks ago when lightning flashed across the sky, followed by a loud ‘boom’. The children fled the water and I was close behind. My mother was scared of lightning and thunder; she, and the dog, would flee to the innermost room of our house. I hated thunderstorms because lightning often struck the transformer on a pole near the dairy, which meant milking the cows by hand! Storms are dangerous. People are killed by lightning and by falling trees.

In this theophany and others recorded the Bible, the voice of God is likened to thunder. The ‘still small voice’ heard by Elijah at Mt Horeb can, and maybe should be, translated as ‘a thunderous voice’ according to Allan Harman and others (1Kings 19:12). Elijah had fled to Horeb where the Lord appeared to him in a gale force wind, an earthquake and then a fire. In the Revelation of John, lightning and thunder, along with hail and an earthquake occurred whenever the seventh angel appeared (Rev 8:5, 11:19, 16; 18). The coming down of the Lord upon Mt Sinai was not in judgment but it was a powerful prelude to the giving of the laws by which God would judge his people.

The next chapter picks up on this scene, the chapter in which the Lord gives the Ten Commandments to Moses. The people trembled, fearing they would die as they saw and heard thunder and lightning and the sound of the trumpet, along with fire on the mountain and felt shaking of the ground (20:18). In addition to a loud and lively thunderstorm descending on the mountain, Mt Sinai started to smoke ‘because the Lord descended on it in fire’; the smoke went up like smoke from a furnace (18:18). This reads like a volcanic eruption. If so, people who came closer than permitted may well have gone up in smoke before they could be stoned to death!

‘And the whole mountain quaked greatly’ (19:18). The people were standing out in the open so were not in danger of being killed by crumbling houses, but it was a frightening experience nevertheless. Jesus specifically refers to ‘great earthquakes in various places, and famines and pestilences’ prior to his return on the clouds of heaven with the great sound of a trumpet (Luke 21:11, Mat 24:30, 31). His death on the cross was accompanied by darkness at midday, an earthquake, and rocks splitting (Mat 27:51).

In the Book of Hebrews the writer reminds us of this scene described by Moses here in Exodus 19. He writes, ‘You have not come to a mountain that cannot be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words’ (Heb 12:18, 19). This writer believed every detail of what Moses writes here, describing this terrifying sight, as he reminds us of the new covenant in which Jesus, not Moses is the mediator. Through Jesus we come to Mt Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem and into the presence of God the judge of all (Heb 12:23). We come with reverence and awe, yet with boldness, because on the cross Jesus bore the wrath of God that was upon us, and he rose again victorious over death and the grave.

**2. The Lord calls Moses to the top of Mt Sinai**

When Moses and the children of Israel arrived at Mt Sinai, ‘Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain’ (19:3). But this time, with a thick cloud and lighting and thunder and smoke and fire on the mountain, ‘the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up’ (19:20). With the trumpet blasting louder and louder, God answered Moses ‘by voice’ or with words (19:19). He called him to the top of the mountain. Did the people hear the voice of God in words- most likely (19:9)! But they did not hear what the Lord told Moses when he was on the mountain. As mediator and prophet, Moses conveyed God’s words to the people.

When Moses reached the top of the mountain the Lord told him to go back down (19:21). He sent him to warn the people not to cross the border that had been placed around the, mountain. They must not ‘break through to gaze at the Lord’ (19:21, 22). They were not to let curiosity get the better of them. The Lord again spoke of the people consecrating themselves; this time ‘priests who come near the Lord’ are included (19:22). Critics point to confusion in the text but Moses himself reminded the Lord that he had already done this; he had already set bounds around the mountain to consecrate it (19:23). The priesthood had not yet been established but the judges or elders appointed by Moses had a priestly function.

**3. The Lord calls Moses and Aaron**

Moses was summarily dismissed by the Lord after telling the Lord that he had already warned them against forcing their way onto the mountain. ‘Away! Get down and come up with Aaron’ he was told (19:24). This dismissal came with yet another warning about the people breaking through the boundary and coming up to the Lord. This time the priests are included in the prohibition (19:24); as mentioned, no priests had yet been consecrated for the community. There is no indication of any physical barrier being set up to stop the people breaking through although the border was made clear for all to see. Maybe stones were placed as markers along this line, but we are not told. What we are told is that not once, not twice, but three times, Moses warned the people not to cross this barrier for any reason, certainly not to gaze upon the Lord.

This chapter ends abruptly with Moses going down to speak to the people- actually the abruptness comes in the next chapter which begins, ‘God spoke all these words’ (20:1). In some ways chapter 24 follows on from the end of chapter 19 but this later chapter is more of a formal ratification of the Mosaic covenant. We understand that God gave Moses the Ten Commandments when he was on the mountain alone in the midst of the thick cloud and the storm, the fire and the smoke. The Lord told Moses to come up with Aaron (19:24) but in the next chapter Aaron is not mentioned (20:21). Further on, we read that Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights (24:18) and that God ‘gave Moses two tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God’ (31:18). When Moses delayed coming down the mountain Aaron was with the people guiding them in the making of a golden calf (32:1).

What do we learn from what we have read today? We learn that the Lord will not have his people making their own rules regarding the manner in which they approach him in worship. We have spoken previously of carved images and pictures which people think are helpful in worship despite the clear command of God, ‘You shall not make for yourself a carved image’. In defending the use of icons in the Orthodox Church one scholar writes that these, ‘create reverence in worship, instruct those who are unable to read, and serve as an existential link between the worshipper and God’. He admits that the Hebrews ‘objected vehemently to any kind of picture’ and that the icons his church uses originate in Egypt. The Reformers believed it best to teach people to read rather than use pictures! And they sought to obey the commandment given by God.

The command about carved images, like the Sabbath day command, is given in great detail, and with a reason: ‘For I the Lord your God, am a jealous God’ (20:5). Yet these two commands were widely broken by the Jews, and are still widely broken today by Christians. Few Christians consider what the Reformers have given us in the ‘regulative principle’ for worship. This is set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith chapter XXI and section 1: ‘The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation or any other way not prescribed in holy Scripture’.

Many churches operate on the principle that anything not contrary to what is written in Scripture is permissible in worship, but this is a totally different principle. Still other churches, and many Christians, don’t even think about their worship being acceptable to God. Worship that gets people in the door, and gets money in the bag, is all that matters. We must never let our worship be focussed on the lusts of the flesh, the lust of the eyes or the pride of life (1John 2:16). Such lusts are at the heart of pagan worship, and tragically at the heart of some Christian worship today.

**The Decalogue**  Exodus 20:1-2

Many years ago I visited a hill tribe in Northeast India. They had heard the gospel less than one hundred years before and believed in Jesus on mass. I was invited to share Christmas with these converted head-hunters. They still carried their bush-knives in their belts for the purpose of cutting through the bush. As animists, they once worshipped the spirits of their ancestors; now they worshipped Christ alone. But they still wanted to remember those who died, just as we do. A tradition was to drag a huge stone from the river down in the valley up into the village. When I arrived on the scene all the men were tugging on a very long rope tied to this stone. The women were bringing drinks and food. It was hard work, and slow, but eventually the stone was set up in the village in remembrance of one who had died. All present would have remembered that day, and the person who died, when they saw that special stone.

When the Lord, by his mighty outstretched arm, delivered his chosen people out of bondage in Egypt he wanted them to remember him. They did not set up stone memorials in Egypt or at the Red Sea or even in the desert because they were not staying in this region (cf. Joshua 4 -the crossing the Jordan). They would remember what God had done in stories and songs. Above all, they would remember God’s revelation of himself at Mt Sinai and the words he spoke to them; they ‘saw no form’ (Deut 4:12). We remember loved ones with pictures but this is very recent. We build memorials but not always. We might have letters they have written, but above all we remember words they spoke to us, especially words of love.

The people of Israel saw no form of God but they heard his voice and his words when he came down upon Mt Sinai in what we call a theophany. Any representation of God would be false because they saw none; besides, God is spirit. The second commandment prohibits the making of any carved image for the purpose of worship, yet before long they were making a golden calf (Exod 32); and people are still making images that they say help them in worshipping God. Since God is spirit we must worship him in spirit. Since God has spoken we must worship him according to what he has spoken to us. If we would read and listen to the words of God we would learn that his is most powerful, most holy and most loving; pictures or images are no help in learning about God.

We come to chapter 20, the central chapter in the Book of Exodus. Here we find the Ten Commandments, or what Moses called the ‘ten words’ or Decalogue: ‘And God spoke all these words’ (20:1). We are later told that these were ‘written with the finger of God’ on ‘two tablets of stone’ (31:18). Moses did not carry these stones up the mountain seeking God’s approval of laws he had drawn up. Nor did he find these tablets in a cave. Moses received them from God on the mountain and carried them down to the people. This was the law code attached to the covenant God made with the people he had just saved from slavery, and made a holy nation.

By way of introduction to the Decalogue, we make a number of points, namely, remember, response, reverence, and relevance.

**1. Remember**

In chapter 19 we saw Moses and the people he led out of Egypt reaching Mt Sinai. Previously on this mountain God appeared to Moses, speaking to him from a burning bush. As the people gathered at the base of this mountain, strictly warned not to touch it, they saw the Lord descend upon it in fire, along with smoke, clouds, lightning and thunder. The people trembled in fear of almighty God. These people would never forget what they saw and heard that day, just as they would never forget what they saw at the Red Sea, how the Lord led them through that sea on dry ground and then drowned the entire Egyptian army in it.

It was through the grace and power of God, and this alone, that they escaped oppression and death in Egypt. God choose them not because of anything they had done but because of his love, and because he remembered his covenant with Abraham (Deut 7:8); they must never forget the Lord who saved them. In the preface or preamble to the Ten Commandments that we find here in chapter 20 the Lord reminds them that he is the one who saved them (20:2).

But it was not just the things they had seen that they were to remember. It was not just the sight and sound show that they saw at Mt Sinai that they were to remember. They were to remember the words they heard as they stood at the base of Mt Sinai, the words of the God who came down on this mountain and spoke to them through his servant Moses.

**2. Response**

In saving his people out of bondage God showed himself to be more powerful than the gods of the land of Egypt. He showed himself to be sovereign over all nations. How would the people respond to this demonstration of electing love and of saving power? Were they now free to make their own way in the desert, free to make and worship their own gods, like other nations? They tried this when they made the golden calf- and God got very angry (32:10). The Lord redeemed them as a people for himself. He expected them to be grateful and to glorify his holy name.

The apostle Paul describes the response expected of them, even as he describes the response expected of us who have been saved in the precious blood of Christ. ‘Therefore, I urge you brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God- this is your spiritual act of worship’ (Rom 12:1). Like us, they could not repay God for such great redemption. Remember, God owns the cattle on a thousand hills; he owns the whole world (Ps 50:10). What they could do was be the people God called them to be, a special people, a people belonging to God. What they could do was worship God and reverence his holy name.

The people had already responded to God’s covenant promise and his call for them to obey his voice (19:7). The Lord was now telling them the terms of his covenant, telling them what they must do in order to be the holy people and holy nation he declared them to be.

**3. Reverence**

Holiness is at the heart of the Decalogue: ‘Be holy, as I the Lord am holy’ (Lev 11:44). God was setting these people apart to be his witnesses to the fallen world. In the Lord’s covenant with Abraham he said he would bless him, and in him bless all the families on earth (Gen 12:3). This covenant promise continued in the Mosaic covenant, and indeed into the new covenant, the covenant to which we as members of the church belong. Our calling, like the calling of the Israelites, is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. To do this we must listen to, and obey, the voice of our covenant God. We must love the Lord our God and fear or reverence his holy name.

The first four of the Ten Commandments focus on the holiness of God. We will look at these individually another time but these four were probably what Jesus had in mind when he answered the question of the scribes about the greatest commandment (Matt 22:37) : ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind’. God is the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end in everything we do. He is the true and living God- there is no other. All who worship other gods have departed from worship of the true God. God gave them up to worship gods of their own making.

The God who showed his love and power in saving these people from bondage in Egypt is also a jealous God (20:5). He will not give his glory to another (Isa 48:11). You teach your children not to be jealous, so how come the Bible says God is a jealous God? Some say it means zealous rather than jealous. But should not a husband be jealous for his wife? Will he not get angry if she is adulterous? He will if he truly loves her.

God will not have his name profaned or treated in an unholy way. To make an image of the likeness of anything we see in the heavens or on the earth is to profane the exalted being and name of the Lord. God is not a man and he is not part of his creation, so how can anything in creation be taken to represent God. Any image, whether a representation of another god or a representation of God or his Son, Jesus, is an abomination to God. The image does not enlighten anyone; it blinds worshippers to the truth.

The fourth and final reference to the holiness of God is his holy day. ‘Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy’ (20:8). We spoke of this covenant being a continuation and development of God’s covenant with Abraham. We could go back even further to Adam and the Garden of Eden. Adam had not yet sinned but was similarly bound by a demand for obedience. Adam was made by God is his own image. After six days of creation God rested on the seventh day and called it a holy day; Adam was to do the same. This day comes into prominence with the giving of manna in the desert (16:23). It is now ‘set in stone’ literally in the fourth commandment of the Decalogue, but has been in place since the creation.

The sovereign God of creation, and more recently of redemption, is a holy God. His being is holy, his worship is holy, his name is holy and he has his own holy day established since creation. Great men may have one day a year set apart to remember them- there is a Martin Luther King day in the USA; our great God has one day every week set apart to remember him! The creation, his creation, is actually mentioned as the reason for this command here in Exodus 20:11. This is the second commandment to have a reason attached. Most of the commands are what are called ‘apodictic’, laws that are abrupt and absolute, with no reason given.

John Murray adds to the sanctity of the Sabbath day, the sanctity of work or labour because the seventh day comes after six days of labour. God ordained for all men, and for all time, six days of work and a seventh day of rest, a day set apart to remember the God who created everything and sustains everything still today. He is the God who redeemed these special people from bondage in Egypt, the same God who has redeemed you from sin and death in the blood of Jesus Christ.

The second table of six commandments focus on what we call the horizontal, on relationships between human beings. Jesus, and then the apostle Paul, summarised this second table as, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’ (Mat 22:39, Rom 13:9). In fact, Paul did not include the fifth commandment here, leading some to conclude a 5-5 split in the commandments. God created marriage and families as a reflection of his own fatherhood, and a desire for children that honour and obey him. No other ‘god’ has ever been referred to as ‘Father’.

Scholars like to refer to other ancient law codes, especially those of the Hittites, and it is true that such codes prohibit murder, adultery, stealing and lying. They stipulate penalties upon any found guilty of breaking such laws, just as in our civil law code. Note that the Decalogue does not stipulate penalties, although this will be soon be done. But in the Ten Commandments the motivation is reverence and awe towards a gracious God rather than punishment.

The second table is also about holiness or sanctity, the sanctity of life, the sanctity of marriage, God’s institution for the propagation of life, the sanctity of property and the sanctity of truth. Looking at these commandments from this perspective shows how they reveal the holiness of God, God who is truth, God who is the giver of life and every good and perfect gift. ‘The Ten Commandments express his character and define his requirements’.

The final commandment is certainly not found in modern law codes, or in any law code for that matter. It refers to the heart which no man can judge- but God can. It is this aspect of the law that Jesus highlights in the Sermon on the Mount. ‘You shall not murder’ is the command, but Jesus says that to be angry or to verbally abuse a brother is an offence before God (Mat 5:21, 22). Similarly, to lust after a woman is to be guilty of adultery. His analysis of the law disturbed the legalistic Jews and disturbs legalists today. There are still people like the rich young ruler who claim to have kept all the commands, until they come to the tenth, ‘You shall not covet’ (Luke 18:21, Rom 7:7-12).

**4. Relevance**

The Ten Commandments are no longer regarded as law in our society although they form the basis of the law we have inherited. Our civil law no longer prohibits the worship of other gods or the taking of the Lord’s name in vain; it no longer regards the Sabbath day as holy and no longer upholds the sanctity of marriage or respect for parents. Even the sanctity of life and the sanctity of the truth are under threat. The sanctity of property may be all that remains! This may be progress to some, but the fruits of this ‘progress’ are hard to find.

The further society departs from the commands of our creator God, the closer we approach corruption and chaos. In the end of course, it is not our laws by which you and I will be judged but God’s law. God’s law is holy, ‘the commandments are holy, just and good’ (Rom 7:12).

**Exclusive and acceptable worship**  Exodus 20:3-7

‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’ (Gen 1:1). The first words of the Bible tell us two things: Firstly, that nothing existed before God. Hinduism with its hundreds of gods is thousands of years old but the true and living God is from everlasting to everlasting; He exists outside our perceptions of time. Secondly, the God of the Bible created everything that exists in this world and the entire universe. ‘There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things’ (1Cor 8:6). This means that if there are other gods they must be part of God’s creation. Lumps of wood or stone fashioned into some sort of creature are clearly part of God’s physical creation.

In 1Corinthians 8 the apostle Paul speaks of ‘so-called gods’. In Romans 1 he speaks of men and women who turn away from the true God as being given up by God to worship created things rather than the creator, and as ‘exchanging the truth of God for the lie’. There is a spiritual being created by God who regards himself as another god- his name is Satan or the devil. Jesus told Jews who rejected him, and thus rejected God as their Father, that, ‘you are of your father the devil’ (John 8:44). As we meditate on these profound truths, let us turn to the first of the Ten Words or Decalogue God gave through Moses to the people he had chosen and delivered from bondage in Egypt.

**1. No other God**

The first commandment is, ‘You shall have no other gods before me’ (20:3, Deut 5:7). Through the prophet Isaiah God declared, ‘I am God and there is no other, I am God and there is none like me’ (Isa 46:9). The apostle Paul declared, ‘There is one God’ (1Cor 8:6). This is the reality but there is another reality, namely sinful hearts in the people created in the image of God: ‘All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’ (Rom 3:23). Sin is rebellion against God, and in that rebellion man has set up ‘fake’ gods, to use popular terminology. When enough people support a lie or ‘fake news’ it becomes an accepted fact- it never becomes truth. And so whole people groups accepted their king, or idols they made, as gods; they worshipped created things rather than the creator! In the time of Moses each people group or nation had its own god or gods, and it is much the same today. Hindus believe only their gods should be worshipped in India, which they call Hindustan, the place of Hindus. It is the same in Pakistan except their god is called Allah. The Muslim religion however, declares its god to be over all nations.

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and of Moses, showed his power over all nations and their gods when he defeated the gods of Egypt and destroyed Pharaoh, while delivering his own people. This all powerful God of grace had previously saved Noah and his family through the Flood. He had previously called Abraham to get out of his country, and he obeyed. God made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants. He came to deliver these people from slavery in Egypt after some four hundred years. They did not know God but it is not certain that they adopted Egyptian gods. Moses asked God for a name he could use when telling these people that God had spoken to him in the burning bush. What name could Moses use? Something more specific than ‘God’ was needed. So God gave Moses a specific name: ‘I am who I am’ or Yahweh. It was ‘Yahweh your God’ who spoke the commandments.

The first commandment recognises that other so-called gods are worshipped by people who do not know that there is only one true God (1Cor 8:7). The Egyptians worshipped other gods, as did the Canaanites, but God’s people were not to do so. They were to give these gods no place in their lives or their worship. ‘No deity, real or imagined, is to rival the one true God in Israel’s heart and life’. Some translate ‘before me’ and others ‘besides me’. In verse 5 we read that God is a jealous God; like a jealous husband he will tolerate no rivals. He will not have his people worshipping other gods in what is called spiritual adultery.

Isaiah tells us that God ‘will not give my glory to another’ (Isa 48:11). Whenever you give glory to another, or even take glory to yourself, you are taking glory from God your creator. You are falling short of the glory of God. Has anyone or anything ever been more important to you than God? Too many have put their wife or husband or children before God. Jesus said that his followers must ‘hate’ father and mother and wife and children, and their own life (Luke 14:26), that hatred being relative to their love for the Lord. Too many have put money before God, but Jesus said you cannot serve God and mammon or money. Are there other things that come before God in your life, some goal or desire that you cling to? Such things are not sinful, unless they become more important than the Lord himself. Covetousness is condemned in the tenth commandment. Paul calls covetousness idolatry (Col 3:5).

When Jesus declared the first commandment to be, ‘Love the Lord you God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind’ we should take note of the word ‘all’. Note also how Jesus puts the Mosaic command in the positive, telling us to love God; the more we love God the less we will look to other ‘gods’. Our love for God is the proper response to his love for us, to his delivering us from bondage to sin and death through the death and resurrection of His beloved Son. He has made a new covenant with us in the blood of Jesus Christ. It is not hard to love the one who loves you beyond measure, is it?

**2. No carved images**

The second of the ten words is, ‘You shall not make for yourself a carved image… you shall not bow down to them or serve them’ (20:4, 5). Roman Catholics and Lutherans combine the first two words, and then divide the tenth in order to keep ten. Why, you might ask? They appeal to church fathers and church tradition of course, and prefer the account in Deuteronomy where verses 6-9 are ‘all one breath’. Notice that in Deuteronomy, coveting of the neighbour’s wife comes first so they divide it off from other coveting to conveniently make two commandments. But clearly, the first command concerns the object of worship, and the second the manner of worship. If the second command is directed at other gods it becomes the same as the first.

The first commandment declares that God is one and the second tells us how we are to worship, or rather how we are not to worship the true and living God. We are not to worship in the manner that pagans worship their gods. All over India there are idols, often placed in a glass box with a burning candle or light. In south India Catholic churches have the same thing except an idol of Mary is put in the box. Some preachers think we can learn about worship from the heathen. But this command forbids idolatry in any and every form, including, and especially, representations of any person of the holy Trinity.

Charles Hodge wrote, ‘Idolatry consists not only in the worship of false gods, but also in the worship of the true God by images’. I found this quote in a spiritual classic of the twentieth century, ‘Knowing God’ by James Packer, first published in 1973. In the 1993 edition Packer includes additional notes to chapter 4, a chapter about the second commandment. It is significant that this chapter drew the most criticism. People argued that worship of God requires ‘Christian aesthetic expression through visual arts’, that imagination is part of our God-given nature, and that ‘images (crucifixes, icons, statutes and pictures of Jesus) do in fact trigger devotion’. Packer takes a conciliatory tone but still argues that, ‘images treated as representational rather than symbolic begin to corrupt the devotion they trigger’. The command does not prohibit art itself, just religious representational art and images being bowed down to and used in worship (20:5). Many also point to the bronze serpent made by Moses (Numb 21) but fail to read on to see Hezekiah destroying this object when the people started burning incense to it (2Kings 18:4).

Obedience to the second commandment, so it seems, risks undermining worship in many, many churches. Many who mouth this commandment, as they do the Sabbath command, give no heed to it. ‘They honour me with their lips but their hearts are far from me’ (Isa 29:13). The Lord hears what we say in worship, and also sees into our hearts. He does not delight in innovative ways of worship; he delights in worship according to his revealed will.

The Lord said not to make an image of anything in heaven or on earth or in the water- no birds, beast or fish images, and no human images that we bow down to. God revealed himself to Moses without form, so any image of God would be a lie (Deut 4:12). Similarly, images of Jesus are a lie. We know he was a man like us, but we are all different- to use a picture of someone else on your passport is fraud! Besides, how can we portray Christ’s deity in a carved image or picture? It is no wonder that the use of carved images has led to the corruption of worship so widely found today, and not only in Roman Catholic churches.

Packer heard the plea, ‘What harm is there in using images if they help the worshipper focus on God?’ He responded with two comments. Firstly, images dishonour God for they obscure his glory. Any image is less than the created thing it represents, a ‘thing’ made by God: only man is made in the image of God and this refers to man’s heart or soul not his body parts; God is spirit. What about Jesus you say, he came in human form. But as Packer points out, and as we have just said, any image or picture of Christ will ‘inevitably conceal most, if not all, of the truth about the personal nature and characteristic of the divine Being whom they represent’. Aaron made a golden calf or bull, probably based on what he saw in Egypt, to represent the power of God. But such an image was an insult to God’s almighty power. We read that God got very angry (32:10). ‘In a similar way’ writes Packer, ‘the pathos of the crucifix obscures the glory of Christ, for it hides the fact of his deity, his victory on the cross and his present kingdom’. He compares the crucifix to the golden calf because both conceal divine truth. Isaiah writes, ‘To whom will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to him’ (Isa 40:18). The answer is none, so let us not try! Packer’s second point is that, ‘Images mislead us. They convey false ideas about God’. Images are not harmless; they are harmful and dangerous. Aaron’s golden calf incited the people to eat and drink and dance like the prophets of Baal (32:6). Similarly the crucifix, used as an ‘aid to worship’, has led to morbid scenes of self-flagellation and worship that ignores the risen Christ.

**3. Reason and consequence of breaking the command**

The second commandment comes with a reason, and with a consequence for breaking it. ‘I the Lord your God am a jealous God’. God is not only jealous of other gods being worshipped before him, he is jealous for acceptable rather than corrupted worship. He regards worship from those who make images as coming from those who hate him (20:5). When people think they can improve on the manner of worship God himself has ordained, God is offended and rejects their worship. ‘To obey is better than sacrifice’ (1Sam 15:22). God rejected Aaron’s idea of worship in no uncertain terms.

The consequences of corruption in worship are much the same as corruption in doctrine; corruption of one leads to corruption of the other. Not only is individual worship corrupted but those around us are affected, especially our children. Roman Catholics know the importance of teaching children so they are corrupted early. When the Lord says he visits the iniquity or sins of the fathers upon the children it means that children are lead astray; no one is punished for the sins of their father (Deut 24:16). In Israel the whole nation was led astray by the worship of idols and suffered the consequences of disobedience (cf. Deut 28:15f). Reformist kings like Hezekiah and Josiah helped delay the Exile. We thank the Reformers of the sixteenth century for leading the Protestant church back to this commandment.

Those who obey this second command, and all the commands, show their love for God (20:6). ‘If you love me you will obey my word’ said Jesus (John 14:23). Remember, your worship is a declaration of your love, or hatred, towards God and his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Is Jesus pleased with images of him hanging on the cross? Who decided that such images or idols were acceptable? Jesus gave us the Lord’s Supper by which we are to remember him, and that is all. The Lord is gracious and merciful towards those who love him and keep his commandments (20:6). His mercy far exceeds his punishment (James 2:13). God punishes to the third and fourth generation but shows mercy to a thousand generations (20:6). Remember, God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth, in ways commanded by God not in ways devised by men.

**Holy name**  Exodus 20:7

Do you like your name? Have you thought about changing your name? Some people change their name when they want to take on a new identity. Criminals do this, but it may be that your parents were foolish enough to give you a name that people made fun of. I have met a young man called Hitler Singh; that was in village India! Maybe your name is from another language. I think the cricketer ‘Siraj’, a common Indian name, was being called ‘Shiraz’, the name of a wine, by ignorant fans at the SCG. He, understandably, took offense at this misuse of his name.

Our name is so much a part of our identity, even if it has no inherent meaning. Your parents gave you your name, and no doubt considered various possibilities, and hopefully potential corruptions of your name. A friend of ours is called Thomas, a seemingly incorruptible name, but his surname is also Thomas, so he got called T-squared. Often there is a desire to keep a certain name in the family. Families attach a certain honour to their name. In some societies to bring dishonour to the family name is punished by death.

Sometimes the meaning of the name is considered. For the Hebrews names had inherent meaning. The name ‘Jesus’ means ‘one who saves’. The name reveals the character and/or mission of the person. But how do parents know the character or mission of their child? Well, with Jesus it was not Mary or Joseph who gave him his name. An angel told Mary what to call her Son (Luke 1:31), and an angel of the Lord told Joseph to call his name ‘Jesus’ (Mat 1:21). God revealed His name to Moses at the burning bush. It is not for any human being to give the Lord God, or his Son, a name.

The third commandment warns against misusing ‘the name of the Lord your God’ or ‘taking the name of the Lord your God in vain’ (20:7). No one likes their name being misused because their name is their identity- we call this slander. God, whose name is holy, declares in this commandment that he will hold personally responsible anyone who misuses his name, and God does not make vain or empty threats. People who misuse the name of God in ignorance are still responsible, although this command is directed at the people whom God has just declared to be a holy nation (19:6). God defends his holy nation, and he defends his holy name.

The name ‘God’, or ‘*Elohim*’ in Hebrew, is the most common name we find in the Bible: ‘*El*’ means ‘God’; ‘*Elohim*’ means ‘God the creator of all that is’ (Gen 1:1). ‘*El elyon*’ means ‘God most high’ (Gen 14:18). There are many such names in the OT. When God called to Moses from the burning bush he identified himself as, ‘The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’ (3:6). He spoke of seeing the suffering of his people in Egypt, of hearing their cry, and coming to deliver them. When Moses asked God for a name by which he could identify God he was given the name ‘Yahweh’ which means, ‘I am who I am’. This was a unique name, a personal name revealing God as sovereign, self-existent and eternal. It is interesting that Jews were afraid to utter this name- which is the best policy if you do not know God!

This commandment is another ‘You shall not’ command. Those who worship other gods and make images for the purpose of worship are prone to associate power with the name they give to their god- repeated chanting of the name, often with increasing fervour, is a feature of their worship- see the prophets of Baal (1Kings 18:26); Hindus find drugs a help in such worship. Jesus warned against ‘vain repetition as the heathen do, for they think they will be heard for their many words’ (Matt 6:7).

On the positive side, this a command to reverence God’s name, or as Jesus taught us to pray, ‘Hallowed be your name’. If we focus on honouring God’s name we will not be tempted to take his name in vain. Even so, let us see in how we and others might profane or dishonour the name of our God, and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Firstly, there is frivolous use, then false oaths, false prophecy, and phoney conduct.

**1. Frivolous use**

Frivolous use ranges from what we just said about vain repetition all the way through to cursing in the name of God or Jesus or Christ. Vain use of God’s name means empty use, use of God’s holy name in any way that does not bring honour to God. When you use God’s name remember he is listening and will either be pleased or offended. Why is this so hard for people, even Christians, to understand? When people mention my name I hope they do not do so with a curse! Certainly the king or the president is concerned about this. We address kings as ‘your majesty’, and presidents as ‘Mr President’. If a king heard you slander or ridicule his name you would be in trouble. So it is with the king of heaven and earth, the sovereign, all-powerful God.

‘Whosoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him, the stranger as well as the one who is born in the land. When he blasphemes the name of the Lord he shall be put to death’ (Lev 24:16). I included the whole verse so as to include the reference to ‘the stranger’. This command, like all the others, is for all people because there is only one true God; all ‘strangers’ have turned away from God to worship idols. We are not going be like the Muslims and execute people for blasphemy (as they judge blasphemy), but let us reverence the name of God and remember, ‘Our God is a consuming fire’ (Heb 12:29). Do not be like Esau, that profane person who sold his birthright for a bowl of stew (Heb 12:16), or in modern terms ‘treated God’s name like dirt’.

You are familiar with people cursing in the name of God or of Jesus. They are breaking this command. You have heard people using the name of God or of Jesus as an expletive, or in a flippant or unnecessary way. Why do people find it necessary to use God’s name in expressing surprise? Hollywood does not allow the F-word to be used but it revels in using God’s name in vain. When your children listen to Hollywood they will start doing the same, unless you stop them. The man on the radio was using the word ‘Jeez’, and then broke into ‘Jesus Christ’- I turned him off. If you hear someone using the name of Jesus as a curse, tell them that this is the name of someone you love, someone who died to save you from sin and death. Using the F-word in every sentence is a sign of a very limited vocabulary. In a similar way, using God’s name unnecessarily is a sign of ignorance and depravity, with a fearful expectation of God’s judgment (James 5:12).

Some use the term ‘Gosh’ all the time- which is very close to ‘God’. People use these words when there is no need to use any word. Jesus said, “Let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’, and your ‘no’, ‘no’. Anything more is from the devil” (Mat 5:37, James 5:12). And remember what Jesus said about vain repetitions in prayer. Be careful whenever you use God’s name, in ‘rushed’ prayers and even in saying ‘grace’.

To use God’s name lightly includes jokes about God, or even about heaven and hell. God, heaven and hell are all realities, solemn realities not to be joked about. Coarse joking has no place in the life of the believer (Eph 5:4). Jesus tells us not to swear ‘by heaven, for it is God’s throne’ (Mat 5:34). If we say ‘God bless you’ let us say it with understanding, not like politicians and pagans! Ask what the hearer understands by this blessing. Realising that Hindus have many gods, I started saying ‘Jesus bless you’ to Indians.

**2. False oaths**

Oaths are very serious in the Bible, and to some extent in our society. To take an oath, ‘to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God’, and then tell a lie is the serious crime of perjury- sadly, not uncommon today. To break a marriage oath, sadly also not uncommon, is not regarded in the same way anymore. In the Bible to break any oath is a serious matter; ‘You shall not swear by my name falsely’ (Lev 19:12). When the high priest put Jesus ‘under oath by the living God’ (Mat 26:63), Jesus responded by telling him the truth. Jesus never told a lie of course, and the ninth commandment rules out false witness. Jephthah is famous, or infamous, for swearing a foolish oath or vow in the middle of a battle (Judges 11:30, 31). But Jesus did not approve of oath taking, swearing by heaven or hell or in the name of God. James wisely pleads, ‘But above all my brethren, do not swear either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath, but let your ‘yes’ be yes, and your ‘no’, ‘no’, lest you fall into judgment’ (James 5:12).

**3. False prophecy**

Knowing the name of a god gave people a sense of power. The prophets of Baal felt knowing his name, and shouting it at the top of their voices, they could get him to act. If Elijah walked into some churches today he might say the same thing as he did to these prophets of Baal! To some the name of God is like a talisman and they use it as if it had magical powers. To be sure, God’s name is powerful, but not a power to be used at our pleasure.

Some Christians are like children who feel a sense of power when they know the name of their teacher, or the name of the man dressed up as Santa Claus, as long as it is not their father! Knowing God’s name these Christians use it in the way pagans use their god’s name, in divination or magic. Remember the seven sons of Sceva trying to exorcise demons in the name of Jesus (Acts 19:13). Too many preachers and self-declared prophets presume upon the name of the Lord, with disastrous results. Such a ‘prophet’ told a young man that he was to marry a certain girl because God revealed this to him. The young man obliged, but after a year or so they were divorced, a disaster for all concerned and a reprehensible use of God’s holy name.

You will have come across Christians who tell you that God told them to do this or that. Have you asked how God told them? The only words we have from God are in the Bible. Sure he can move us by his Spirit to apply what is written, but to claim he has spoken to you is false. You may claim God has told you to marry a certain girl, but what if God has told her something different? Do not make false claims on what God has said; if it written in the Bible then you both must accept it of course.

Furthermore, in a church meeting someone may claim to have ‘a word from the Lord’; further discussion and even prayer ceases. But how can you be sure the word is from the Lord? ‘If we use God’s name to ascribe a false sense of authority to our ideas, plans or opinions, we violate the third commandment’ writes Kevin DeYoung.

**4. Phoney Christian life**

So far we have looked at this commandment as it applies to what we say. But we can also profane or blaspheme the name of the Lord by what we do. The Israelites were warned not to let any of their children pass through the fire to Molech, nor profane the name of God (Lev 18:21). When the people of God were thrown out of the land they went to the nations who said, ‘These are the people of God, and yet they have gone out of the land; they profaned the name of the Lord’ (Ezek 36:20).

When our conduct or our worship brings dishonour to the name of the Lord we are guilty of breaking this commandment. If we take the name ‘Christian’ yet act in a way that brings shame to the name of Christ, we are rightly called phonies or hypocrites. And God will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain, whether it be through words or actions.

In closing, let us look to the positive side of this commandment. The less time we spend listening to the world, the less likely we will be to hear and then misuse the Lord’s holy name. So let us spend more time listening to God’s word. ‘Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him’ (Col 3:17). And remember that one day soon, ‘at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow…, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father’ (Phil 2: 10-11).

**Holy day** Exodus 20:7-11

A manual for instruction of members of the Church of England written one hundred years ago concludes a section on the Lord’s Day with these words: ‘If there is one thing to which may be attributed the blessing of God upon this church and realm through the past centuries it is the national observance of the Lord’s Day’. I did not find this sentiment expressed in the book of a popular writer within the evangelical branch of this church today. To be sure, he did not renounce observance of the Lord’s Day as the Christian Sabbath but writes of its humanitarian focus, even suggesting it was a mandate to work- ‘six days you shall labour’.

Observance of the Lord’s Day as a day of rest and worship has been slowly undermined since Griffith Thomas wrote this manual for church members. As with other aspects of the lives of church members (divorce for example), it is not clear if secularism, or liberal theology in the church, is to blame- probably both. Can this rise of antinomianism in the church be turned back? With prayer, yes, but we must also ditch liberal theology and teach the truth of the Bible. We may not live to see such reform, but the concluding words of Griffith Thomas regarding the Lord’s Day are: ‘Let us take care that we hand on unimpaired to future generations this priceless blessing of God’.

**1. Remember the Sabbath day**

‘Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it because in it he rested from all his work which God had created and made’ (Gen 2:3). A pattern of six days work followed by a day of rest was established by God from the beginning of human history. In the same chapter of Genesis we read about the other creation mandate, marriage. In six 24hr days God made everything, and everything was ‘very good’- indeed it was perfect. On the seventh day God rested, pleased with what he had created. He declared this day holy. The one and only holy God declared a holy day for all his creation.

Yet some Christians tell us that the pattern of six days work and one day rest was not established until Sinai. They say that outside Israel different patterns were adopted, but give no historical evidence (see NKJV study Bible). Some Christians of course, do not even believe the six days of creation to be 24hr days so this seventh day becomes an extended period of time. Moreover, because no morning or evening is mentioned they say this rest day is every day since the creation. But the truth is exactly what is written, namely, ‘on the seventh day God rested’; the Hebrew word ‘*sabat*’ or ‘Sabbath’ means to cease or rest. There is no mention of Saturday being the seventh day or Sabbath. While there is no reference to ‘the Sabbath’ until Exodus 16, Noah followed a seven day or weekly pattern (Gen 8:10), as did Laban and Jacob (Gen 29:27).

Here in the Decalogue, in the fourth commandment, we read, ‘Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy’ (20:8). We remember things we have already been told. These people had been told about the Sabbath day when God sent manna from heaven, if not before (19:23). God rested from sending manna on the seventh day and he told them to rest from collecting the manna on the Sabbath.

In remembering the Sabbath day to keep it holy, the people were to remember the creation story, and in particular how God reflected on the goodness of what he had made, including human beings (20:11). God set this day apart from the other days, calling it holy and blessing it. How can a day be blessed? Those who remember to keep it holy will tell you of the blessings they receive from the Lord.

The second thing they were to remember on the Sabbath day was how God delivered or redeemed them from slavery in Egypt. This is the reason given for keeping this commandment in the Book of Deuteronomy (Deut 5:15). The Sabbath day became a day to remember what their holy God had done both in the creation and in their redemption. They would remember the power of God, the outstretched arm of the Lord, and the redeeming love of the Lord- he carried them on eagle’s wings (19:4).

In Exodus 31 the Sabbath day is called a sign of the Mosaic covenant but also a perpetual covenant (31:17). As Christians we are under a new covenant but this does not mean the covenant sign has disappeared. The sign of God’s covenant with Noah was the rainbow that existed before, and after, God made it a covenant sign. Keeping the Sabbath day as holy to the Lord was a sign before God, and before the nations, of the holiness of this community of God’s people, besides being a test of obedience for this new nation. In many ways this became the touchstone of obedience to the whole law. Gaffin writes, ‘To keep the Sabbath is itself an act of confession, a confession that God is Lord over our time… and this, as much as anything, is the significance of the weekly Sabbath’. Are you making such a confession?

The Sabbath continued until the Exile when God sent his people out of the land so the land could enjoy her Sabbaths (2Chron 36:21). It continued after the Exile when Nehemiah strictly enforced a Sabbath rest (Neh 13:15f). It continued into the NT; Jesus was born into a Sabbath-observing community. Jesus had much to say about the Sabbath but never declared it finished; as part of ‘the Law and the Prophets’ it is fulfilled in Jesus, but will continue until his second coming (Mat 5:17, Col 2:16-17, Heb 4:8-10). Moreover, Jesus warned against ‘breaking one of the least of these commandments’ (Mat 5:19, James 2:10). To say Jesus never affirmed the Sabbath command, as many do, is simply not true. Why would he say, ‘The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath’ (Mat 12:8) if he had declared an end to the Sabbath? What Jesus declared was God’s intention from the beginning, namely, that the Sabbath day be a blessing not a burden.

Why was the Sabbath command like a touchstone, or as we read, a sign of the covenant? It is a test of our belief in God’s power and his love. What happened when God sent the manna? Some went out to gather it on the Sabbath despite the command given by God through Moses. Why? Because they did not believe the word of God. They may have been the same people that had gathered more than their daily quota, and tried to store it up. It was their descendants who Nehemiah condemned for wanting to sell and buy on the Sabbath. Are you one of their descendants also? Are you able trust God that he will provide for all your needs, and the needs of your family, even as you rest on the Sabbath? Or do you say, ‘I must work on the Sabbath in order to give the best to my family’?

The Sabbath command is one of only two positive commands in the Decalogue. Does this surprise you? It does not begin, ‘Thou shalt not’, but with a call to remember or observe this special day. Do not twist the command to say it is about work rather than rest- it is about both. How foolish to say it about the rich working and the servant class being given rest. The Sabbath is for you, whoever you are, for your children, for your servants if you have any, and for your animals if you have working animals. It is even for the stranger who is in your house; in other words for Gentile as well as Jew, for non-Christian as well as Christian (20:10). As the Westminster Confession of Faith chapter XXI section 7 states, this command is ‘for all men in all ages’.

**2. Keep the day holy**

To keep the Sabbath holy we are to rest from our regular work just as God rested from his work of creation. Is this difficult to understand? Is this difficult to do? Apparently so! What exactly is work you might ask, as the Pharisees did before making rule after rule defining work? Our Confession refers to ‘duties of necessity and mercy’ being allowed on the Sabbath (Westminster Confession of Faith XXI section 8). Jesus’ disciples picked heads of grain on the Sabbath because they were hungry, and Jesus himself healed a sick man on the Sabbath as a work of mercy; and Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath (Mat 12:8). Some works are by nature necessary. Doctors and nurses care for the sick, firemen put out fires and dairy farmers milk their cows. In our homes we prepare food and wash dishes as works of necessity.

Sabbath rest does not mean lying in bed all day. If we have been engaged in physical work we can enjoy sleep, but not for the whole day. If we are engaged in mental work we also need rest from the stress of such work. We need to ‘turn off’ both body and mind from our regular work. But turning off from work does not mean turning on the TV or putting on football boots. God admired his work of creation and we should do the same. The Hebrews thanked God for their redemption and we should do the same. Have you noticed how many Psalms praise God for his creation and also for his redemption? We have an even greater redemption to remember, redemption in the precious blood of Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Lord calls us to gather together on this day to worship him and to ‘encourage one another, all the more as you see the Day [Judgment day] approaching’ (Heb 4:25). Our Confession says that after due preparation of our hearts, the Sabbath is to be ‘taken up, the whole time, in the public and private exercises of worship, and duties of necessity and mercy’ (Chapter XXI section 8). The more we appreciate God’s work of creation, and love him for our great redemption, the more we desire to spend time in worship and in fellowship, encouraging one another in our walk with the Lord. If you want to spend other days in worship then do so, but do not in this way try to justify neglect of the holy Sabbath.

Finally, why do we observe Sunday rather than Saturday as the Sabbath or Lord’s Day? The significance of the Sabbath is that it comes after six days of work- it is every seventh day. Do note that our days are governed by the rotation of the earth on its own axis, our months are governed by the phases of the moon (or once were), and our year is governed by the rotation of the earth around the sun. But what governs our week? Nothing in the creation itself; it is only the act of God himself in resting on the seventh day and blessing this day.

When did Saturday become the seventh day? In the NT the Jews kept the Sabbath on Saturday, and believers from this background continued to do so as they attended the synagogue. But they also met on the first day of the week, probably because Jesus rose from the dead on this day. Soon the church was meeting regularly on the first day of the week to remember Jesus, as well as God the Father (Acts 20:7, 1Cor 16:2). They called this the Lord’s Day, and we continue to observe this day as what the Reformers called the Christian Sabbath. We do so looking forward to the ‘promised rest’, not in Canaan but in heaven itself.

**Focus on the family- children**  Exodus 20:12

Family is at the heart of human society. It is especially at the heart of Christian society or the church. One writer attributes the survival of Judaism during the atrocities of Nazi Germany to their strong family bonds, a feature of their religion. Fathers, mothers and elders are respected because children at taught respect from a young age. In the Christian religion it is the same, or should be. Sadly, worldly philosophies have impacted the church such that even Christian families have become dysfunctional because children are not taught the commands and the wisdom of the Bible.

Our enemy, Satan, knows the centrality of the family to the life and witness of the church. He does all he can to destroy the family unit, often attacking the marriage itself but also the relationship between parent and child. The atheistic rulers of communist Russia, and of China today, target the family unit in their effort to destroy religion. Children are taken from parents and put in State-run institutions to be indoctrinated in atheism. The atheists in the UN are undermining family with charters asserting the rights of the child. Other secular institutions are similarly eroding the rights and responsibilities of parents. Politicians pass laws making it illegal to smack your own child, to stop your own child taking drugs, or stop them having a sex change. Indeed, they have promoted all manner of immoral conduct among children, judging parents incapable of raising their own child. More than ever we need to study the Bible and take a stand upon the commands of God if we want our family to be blessed, and God to be glorified.

The fifth commandment brings us to the second table of the Decalogue, to the commands that focus on our relationships with our neighbours and with one another; what the Larger Catechism calls our duty to man. Despite what we have just said, even pagan societies accept some of these commands. But neither we nor they are able to abide by these commands unless we first accept and obey the first table, unless we know God as our creator and redeemer. It is Jesus who teaches us about true love, about self-sacrificing love (1John 3:16). The fifth commandment, like those that follow, is for all people. Calvin spoke of three uses of the law, firstly to reveal sin, secondly to restrain evil, and thirdly as the rule of life. May our meditation upon God’s holy law prove helpful to you in regard to one or all of these uses of the law? We will now consider this command and then the promise attached to it.

**1. Honour your father and mother**

I was about to say ‘parents’ but the text is ‘father and mother’, and for good reason. Both father and mother were instrumental in giving you birth, as ordained by God, and both should be instrumental in your physical and spiritual nurture. The Puritan, Thomas Watson writes some gems regarding this and other commandments. Here is one: about parents he writes, ’You conveyed the plague of sin upon them [your children], therefore endeavour get them healed and sanctified’. You are responsible to teach those to whom you have given birth, although the focus of commandment is your responsibility towards those who gave you birth: ‘Honour your father and your mother’.

This commandment is about your human father, but we also have a heavenly Father. Jesus tells us to pray, ‘Our Father in heaven’. There are many parallels in these two ‘father’ relationships, just as there is between the husband-wife relationship and the Christ-church relationship (Eph 5). Father relationships focus on honour and obedience; marriage relationships focus on love and commitment. What does it mean to honour someone? Calvin says honour requires three things: ‘reverence, obedience and gratitude’.

This commandment is the second and only other command stated in the positive; we had ‘remember the Sabbath day’ and now, ‘honour your father and your mother’. But this command is unique in that it is the only command with a promise, which we will look at in a moment (Eph 6:2). This commandment takes us back to the creation, to the days before the Fall. God told the man and woman he created to be fruitful and multiply. God also ordained marriage of course (Gen 1:28, 2:24, Mat 19:4-6). Marriage and family are creation ordinances, which is why it is that they are the basis of human society. Every deliberate attempt to modify or destroy this unit is sin, serious sin, sin that God has punished and will punish- just look around!

Jesus summarised the second table of the Decalogue in the words, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’. Even so, this command is not actually about love but about honour. The Bible does not teach love for mother or father as such; it teaches honour and obedience. Parents of course, love their children, and children love their parents, but not before learning obedience and respect. Out of love a father disciplines his child but the child finds this painful not loving! (Heb 12:6,11). Eventually your child will love you because you disciplined them, not because you failed to do so.

Children must, in the first instance, be taught to honour their father and mother. Commentators often ‘jump the gun’ as it were in extending this command to all authorities in the church and in the community. The Larger Catechism does the same; the answer to Q124 states, ‘not only natural parents but all superiors in age and gifts… in place of authority, whether in family, church, or commonwealth’. Certainly it is tragic to see children not respecting the minister or elders in the church, not respecting teachers or the police, but it all begins in the home, not in the school as so many think.

The basics of honour and obedience must be taught before the child starts school. Parents must not regard disrespectful words or actions from an infant as funny. The other day my wife chastised our three-year-old grandson for speaking to me disrespectfully; ‘Don’t speak to Poppy like that’ she said. Are you not embarrassed at seeing a child cursing a parent in public? But if we don’t teach them, how will they know? Do not accept the advice of worldly experts and UN charters who tell you the child is born perfect and adults are to blame for their bad behaviour. Children sin because they are born with a sinful heart. Adults are also sinners and often teach bad behaviour, which is why we must listen to the commandments and to Jesus, and learn what behaviour is pleasing to God.

‘A child left to himself brings shame to his mother’ (Prov 29:15). This is exactly what the fifth command is about. You will find a lot of other wisdom related to this commandment in the Book of Proverbs so read it. My plea to start young is not only based on my wife’s teaching, it is based on the Proverb: ‘Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it’ (Prov 22:6). Discipline is taught by God’s own example (Prov 3:11, Heb 12:6, Rev 3:19), and in other Proverbs: ‘Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of correction will drive it far from him’ (Prov 22:15). Men may make it illegal to smack your child, but God has not. God has made it a sin for children not to honour their father and mother. This command is not directly aimed at parents of course, but at children. Because the commandments are generally aimed at adults some think this command is about looking after elderly parents, which is true of course, and we will touch on this shortly. But children turn into adults, and if they are not taught to respect their parents when they are young they will not do so when they are adults, will they? Parents are responsible for the training and nurture of their children.

**2. Children obey your parents in the Lord**

The apostle Paul refers to the fifth commandment as he gives this instruction to members of the church (Eph 6:1). To honour our parents we must obey them, just as to honour God we must obey God. Paul tells fathers to bring up children ‘in the training and admonition of the Lord’ (Eph 6:4), echoing the wisdom of Proverbs. He specifically tells fathers not to ‘provoke your children to wrath’. You do this when you fail to set boundaries for your child or when you fail to adhere to the boundaries you set. If the rules of your workplace change every day you get frustrated, so do not keep changing the boundaries you set for your child. Why does Paul add the words, ‘In the Lord’? You are teaching your children what is in the Bible; you are teaching them the commandments. You are not saying, ‘Do this because I say so’ but, ‘Do this because the Lord says so’, or because the Bible says ‘obey your parents’. ‘Children obey your parents in all things for this is pleasing to the Lord’ (Col 3:20). By implication, not listening to our parents displeases the Lord.

Moreover, as the child is taught to obey his/her parents they are taught to obey God’s commands. The father-child relationship must reflect the heavenly father-believer relationship. If children dishonour their parents they will dishonour the Lord, with disastrous consequences- just look at the sons of Eli the priest. And contrast if you will, Jesus, who was obedient to Joseph and his mother (Luke 2:51). Jesus was perfect, but still he obeyed his imperfect parents.

**3. The promise**

Thomas Watson spoke of the negative consequences of not obeying this command in another couple of gems: ‘Disobedient children stand in a place where God’s arrows fly’ (Prov 30:17), and, ‘Nothing shortens life like disobedience to parents’. Scripture similarly speaks. In Deuteronomy 21, parents are told to take a persistently disobedient son to the elders at the city gate; they would condemn him to death by stoning. The law said, ‘Everyone who curses his father or mother shall surely be put to death’ (Lev 20:9). Some years ago I heard of such a youth being taken to the police by his parents. In prison he was murdered by other inmates. The Lord was compelled to deal with the wicked sons of Eli because this father failed to do so (1Sam 2:22f), and it was the same with Absalom.

Disobedience brings its own sorrows of course, but more importantly it brings the wrath of God. The command itself however, focuses on the blessing that comes from obedience rather than the curse that comes from disobedience. The promise attached to this command is, ‘that your days may be long upon the land the Lord your God is giving you’ (20:12). The Lord was giving them the land of Canaan. Long life in this land was seen as a blessing from God. To be removed from this land by premature death or by scattering was a sign of God’s punishment or curse for disobedience (Deut 28:15, 64-66).

This command can be taken individually or corporately. We have just seen that Eli’s disobedient and disrespectful sons did not enjoy long life in the land. In the corporate sense, God expelled all the people from the land because of their many sins, including contempt for fathers and mothers (Ezek 22:7). In the context of the new covenant, the apostle Paul writes of the promise attached to this command: ‘That it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth’ (Eph 6:3). There is no essential difference except that the focus is no longer upon the land of Canaan but upon this earth. We do not have to ‘soften’ the apostle’s words by saying, ‘this phrase really has to do with abundant life’ (DeYoung); it has to do will abundant life and with long life.

We have focussed on the importance of teaching children to obey and honour their mother and father, and we have seen how this teaching impacts other relationships that call for obedience and respect. We also mentioned that this command extends to adults with aging parents. Many societies, including a Christian society, respects the elderly and values their wisdom. What about our society? ‘Elder abuse’ is heard as widely as ‘child abuse’, and a Royal Commission into our treatment of the elderly recently concluded. Why? Because many elderly parents are not being cared for properly. Paradoxically, laws are being passed that encourage those suffering terminal illness, usually old people, to commit suicide. Too many children put their parents in a nursing home and forget about them. They say they are too busy in their job. They are more concerned about making money than with caring for elderly parents. I rarely see family visiting those I minister to in a nursing home, and few speak of children visiting them. My wife visits an old man living in his home on our street. A nurse also visits but he rarely sees his children.

It is right that members of the church care for widows and the elderly, but this commandment demands children respect those who gave them birth by caring for them in old age. The apostle Paul condemns the person who does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his own household, as being worse than an unbeliever (1Tim 5:8). Let me conclude with a paraphrase of Proverbs: train them up when they are young and when they are old they will not depart from your teaching.

**Sanctity of life** Exodus 20:13

Have you felt challenged or guilty while listening to sermons on the Ten Commandments? Have you examined your life to see if there are any other gods in your life besides Jesus? What about keeping the Sabbath day holy? What about honouring your father and mother? If so, I am sure you are not feeling guilty about the sixth commandment, ‘do not murder’. People who break this command are put in prison- right? You might join the rich young ruler in telling Jesus, ‘All these I have kept since my youth’ (Matt 10:20). You know what murder is; everyone knows what murder is, and agree that it is wrong and should be punished. We no longer practice capital punishment but we do put murderers in prison.

Is this all there is to say about this commandment? Should we not see what Jesus had to say about it? What Jesus says in his Sermon on the Mount stops us from patting ourselves on the back and quickly moving on to the next commandment? Should we not ask why it is wrong to murder another human being? What do we mean when we talk about the sanctity of life? We have talked about the sanctity or holiness of God’s name, God’s day, and now we have the sanctity of life. This is the basis of this command, but what does it mean? Our first point is, ‘made in the image of God’, our second, ‘murder’, our third, ‘modern conundrums’, and our fourth, ‘Sermon on the Mount’.

**1. Made in the image of God**

If you believe what is written in the Bible you will believe that in the beginning, in fact on the sixth day of creation, God made man, male and female, in his own image (Gen 1:27). On this day God made every animal that exists, some that bear resemblances to the man he made, but only man was made in the image of God. God breathed into man, and only man, the breath of life (Gen 2:7). Reading on, we find that God gave man dominion over all other living things. God gave man a soul such that he could have a relationship with God, as Adam did in the Garden.

You may have heard all this many times before but we must keep on telling this to ourselves, to our children, and to everyone, because the theory of evolution that is so pervasive in our society contradicts this truth. This theory tries to tell us that we are just another animal species competing for the limited resources of this earth. Some say that animals have a soul, and others that man does not have a soul. This theory in fact, contradicts itself in many ways. Sanctity of life is not taught by evolutionists, which is why some advocate the ‘mercy killing’ or murder of individuals whose life they judge to be unbearable or useless. Hitler was quite consistent in this regard. Darwin proposed the ‘survival of the fittest’. He also saw certain races of men as sub-human. Hitler, along with men like Peter Singer, are consistent in upholding Darwin’s theory of evolution.

The sanctity of life as taught in the Bible extends to every race, to every individual within every race of human beings. Every human life is given by God and is precious in his sight. God himself defends the poor and the weak, the widows and orphans, and those whom some consider an unacceptable burden in modern society. He is a father of the fatherless (Ps 68:5). Innocent blood cries out to the Lord (Gen 4:10).

**2. Murder**

The sixth commandment is rightly translated, ‘You shall not murder’ because the Hebrew word is ‘*ratsach*’, and not ‘*harag*’ the more commonly used word for killing. When Moses explains this commandment he differentiates between premeditated and unpremeditated or unintentional killing, between murder and manslaughter (21:12-14, Deut 19:4). Judgment for killing was undertaken by the ‘avenger of blood’, usually a relative of the victim. The killer could flee to any of six cites of refuge set up in the land. In this city the elders would listen to witnesses and decide if the killer was guilty of premeditated murder. If so, he would be handed over to the ‘avenger of blood’ to be put to death, but if not he could remain in the city, safe from the avenger of blood (Num 35:9-34, Deut 19).

Unintentional killing could be the result of an accident. If the head of your axe flew off and struck someone in the head, killing them, you would not be put to death for murder- unless you were negligent and knew your axe was dangerous (Deut 19:5). Moses speaks of the owner of a dangerous ox or bull being guilty of murder if he knew his ox was dangerous. We might compare the owner of a dangerous dog that mauls someone to death. We, rightly, have laws about duty of care, but also laws about manslaughter, the accidental killing of another human being. Our laws originally came from the Bible of course.

Unintentional or unpremeditated killing could be the result of self-defence. Moses refers to a thief breaking in to steal your property being struck and then dying, a case of what we call self-defence (22:2). In Africa burglars do not hesitate to kill. If you strike a thief and he dies you are not necessarily guilty of murder. Murderers sometimes plead self-defence, giving juries the challenge of deciding between murder and manslaughter. The difficulty in any murder case is that the victim has no voice. In other court cases the voice of the victim can sway the jury, but this is not possible with murder; so a murderer may be given a lighter sentence that someone guilty of another crime.

The Law of Moses had only one penalty for a convicted murderer, namely death- a life for a life (21:23). Such a penalty goes back to the time of Noah: ‘Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God he made man’ (Gen 9:6). This verse confirms what we said earlier about the sanctity of life being the reason for this commandment, and for the death penalty for murderers. Capital punishment is not murder but a defence of the truth that man is made in the image of God. Governing authorities ordained by God are given ‘the power of the sword’ on behalf of God (Rom 13:4). They can raise an army to defend their people in time of war.

**3. Modern conundrums**

Malcom Muggeridge is reported as saying: ‘It took only one generation to transform a war crime into an act of compassion’. I presume he was referring to euthanasia and Hitler’s policy of ‘liquidating’, along with the Jews, men, women and children whose lives he considered useless; in other words, the disabled and the elderly. This, as we have seen, is consistent with Darwinian teaching about the survival of the fittest. Secular humanists and evolutionists have long advocated euthanasia or mercy killing or death with dignity in our society, and take credit for such laws getting passed- although often expressing reluctance to go down this path themselves. In fact, very few people ask their doctor to kill them. Euthanasia laws are being used by family to get rid of diseased or demented parents. They say they are relieving suffering without specifying whose suffering, theirs or their parents.

Not only the elderly or terminally ill are choosing euthanasia, or what is rightly called assisted suicide. Too many healthy young people are choosing this pathway to end their suffering. Our society is rightly concerned about this plague. How can there be so much despair in a prosperous society like ours? What is the answer? We are not likely to find one while ever we pass laws encouraging one group to commit suicide and another not to commit suicide! Sanctity of life as taught in the Bible includes all people. This is the answer, dear friends, and leaders, and politicians, looking for the answer to the problem of suicide.

We are discussing suicide because it comes under this command about murder, the taking of an innocent life. We find suicides in the Bible, men overwhelmed by shame and defeat taking their own life. Look no further than Judas or King Saul. Job suffered more than these men but he did not turn to suicide. Job famously said, ‘The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord’ (Job 1:21). When his wife told him to curse God and die, he held to this truth- the Lord gives life and only he has the right to take it away. Yes, Job wanted to die but he would not sin by taking his own life. A Christian woman who has suffered five suicides in her family writes, ‘Suicide not a genetic trait, nor it is a family curse. Suicide is a sinful choice made by an individual’. God is sovereign over all things, including your life. You are not your own, you are not the master of your own destiny, God is. Your life is precious to God even when you have concluded it is pointless. The sooner we teach ourselves and our children this truth, the sooner we will see a decline in the rate of suicide in our society.

Another conundrum faced by our society is that of abortion. Some years ago a driver high on drugs hit another car being driven by a pregnant woman. The mother survived but her unborn child was killed in this collision, a child she called Zoe. Knowing the gender of the unborn through an ultrasound, she had named the baby Zoe. That mother, and others who have faced the same tragedy, want the law to recognise the life of Zoe, her unborn child. A law has been drafted but after ten years is still not passed. Why? Because to recognise the life of the unborn in law has repercussions on laws that are being passed allowing late-term abortion. This is the conundrum we face when we start fiddling with the laws of God.

There is no confusion in the law given by God. Moses actually refers to a woman giving premature birth as a result of being injured in a fight (21:22-23). The Bible teaches that life begins at conception (Ps 51:5, 139:13). Medical science teaches the same thing. It is just that some women think they are god, having the right to kill an unborn child just because it is in their womb. A doctor may, on the one hand, deliver a premature baby and do everything possible to keep this baby alive, but on the other hand, murder and abort a baby of the same age. What utter confusion! What terrible murder we are seeing under laws that clearly contravene the laws of Almighty God. God will of course, defend innocent blood that is shed in the land.

**4. Sermon on the Mount**

In his Sermon on the Mount, the first commandment Jesus deals with is this commandment, ‘You shall not murder’ (Matt 5:21). Does he do this because the Jews, like us, considered themselves to have kept this commandment? Jesus goes to the root cause of this sin. We have seen that murder is premediated killing. The question is why a man plots to take the life of his neighbour; Jesus uses the term ‘brother’. The first murder in the Bible, in fact the first sin apart from Eve breaking the first commandment, is the sin of murder. Cain murdered his brother Abel. He did this out of jealousy. Jealousy towards his brother led to anger, and anger led to murder.

Jesus turns the focus from the sin itself to the cause of this sin, indeed to sin in the human heart. Jesus of course, sees into our hearts and judges our hearts. Jesus says, ‘Out of the heart proceeds evil thoughts, murders, adulteries…’ (Matt 15:19). Jealous feelings lead to angry thoughts and evil plotting that may include murder. Selfish gain or greed can also lead to evil thoughts and murder. The Bible warns us about the danger of anger (Eph 4:26), and Jesus actually calls anger sin, sin that will be judged by God (Matt 5:22). Hatred and anger can and must be overcome by love. This victory comes with strength given by the Lord.

Jesus included this command in his summary of the second table of the Decalogue, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’. Jesus did not seek revenge upon his enemies; he prayed, ‘Father forgive them for they know not what they do’ (Luke 23:34). He committed all his problems, all his detractors and enemies, and his very life, into the hands of his heavenly Father. Because Jesus did this, and went to the cross bearing your sin, you can follow in his footsteps, renouncing anger and revenge, and embracing love and forgiveness towards your brother or neighbour. You can even love your enemies and bless them (Matt 5:44). Are you ready to turn away from anger and embrace love in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord?

**Focus on the family-adultery**  Exodus 20:14

I have kept the title we had for the fifth commandment as we come now to the seventh commandment in the Decalogue: ‘You shall not commit adultery’ (20:14). We are back to a brief, but no less important commandment, and a commandment no easier to obey than any of the others; certainly not when we consider Jesus’ interpretation of it in the Sermon on the Mount. The importance of this command is twofold. Firstly, for the benefit of society and for children especially- which is why I kept the title, ‘Focus on the family’. Adultery tears at the heart of marriage, which in turn is the heart of the family, which we previously noted is the heart or basis of our society.

Secondly, since the marriage relationship symbolizes God’s relationship with his people, particularly Christ’s relationship with the church, physical adultery undermines God’s teaching about this spiritual relationship. When his people turn away from him to worship other gods, God calls them adulterous; they are guilty of spiritual adultery (cf. Matt 12:36, James 4:4). Misunderstanding and corruption of teaching regarding marriage between a man and a woman means misunderstanding and corruption of teaching regarding Christ’s relationship to the church (Eph 5:22f).

To understand adultery we must first understand marriage. We will secondly ask, what is adultery? and thirdly ask, why is adultery sin? And finally we look at what Jesus has to say about adultery.

**1. What is marriage?**

Marriage is the coming together of a man and a woman in a one-flesh relationship for life. Marriage is not defined by governments but by God. Marriage is a creation ordinance, by which we mean it was established by God when he created man in his image. We have argued that the Sabbath is a creation ordinance, and so is marriage. These institutions were established before the Fall, for all people for all time. When sin entered the world, when Satan got the upper hand as it were, and now ‘roams around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour’ (1Peter 5:8), marriage became a chief target. See what happened to Adam and Eve’s family after the Fall; one child murdered another. Satan still tempts people to murder but he is more successful at tempting us into adultery. He still tempts us with questions like, ‘Did God really say?’, and suggestions like, ‘Listen to your body not God’, and, ‘If it looks and feels good take it’.

Marriage as ordained by God is defined in Genesis 2:24: ‘A man will leave his father and mother and be joined/cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh’. God made woman when he saw the man needed a helper comparable to him. None of the animals fulfilled this role. The woman that he made from the man’s rib, on the other hand, fulfilled this role perfectly. She complemented the man; she was equal to him but not identical. Both man and woman were created in the image of God (Gen 1:27). They were blessed by God and told to be fruitful and multiply and rule over the rest of creation. The one-flesh union implies sexual union and ‘fruit’ in terms of children.

Marriage is a one-flesh, a man and a woman relationship, designed for companionship and for procreation. Nowhere in the Bible is this relationship deemed obsolete or open to change. Jesus affirms marriage saying, ‘What God has joined together let not man separate’ (Matt 19:6). Notice that Jesus goes back to the creation not to the Mosaic Law. The Pharisees responded saying, ‘Why then did Moses command…?’ They thought Moses said something different to the creation ordinance but Jesus disappointed them. We are not going into the matter of divorce but we are going to look at what Moses says about marriage, and about adultery in particular.

God regards marriage as a covenant, a bond involving vows by both parties. We have noted that the Decalogue itself is part of a covenant between God and his chosen people, and that breaking this agreement has catastrophic consequences. Marriage is a covenant between equals but any vow or oath is heard and remembered by the Lord. Through Malachi the Lord condemns men for being unfaithful to ‘the wife of your youth’. She is your companion and your ‘wife by covenant’. Moreover, the Lord ‘seeks godly offspring’ (Mal 2:14, 15).

As God designed marriage it is a blessing for the man and the woman, and it is the ideal place for the raising of children that are a product of the marriage. Jesus loves children just as God the Father loves children because godly children glorify his holy name. Hannah did not regard he first son as hers but as belonging to the Lord. Some marriages are not ‘fruitful’ as we know, but this does not alter God’s design. Some children are born out of wedlock which clearly is not God’s design. We do not conclude, as many do, that sexual intercourse makes or seals a marriage. The woman at the well was not married to the man she was living with (John 4:18). Marriage involves a covenant with vows not just sexual union. Marriage involves commitment and trust. Without this there is no security for wife, husband, or children, only fear, fear of desertion.

**2. What is adultery?**

Everyone knows what marriage is and what adultery is, so we think. Adultery, *na’af* in the Hebrew or *moichos* in the Greek, is technically ‘sexual intercourse with another man’s wife’. In Hebrew society, and all other societies, marriage was the norm; as expected with a creation ordinance. Marriages were arranged, with the girls, like Rebecca, being brought into the husband’s family (Gen 24:67). A man could take more than one wife but he could not take another man’s wife. Joseph refused to lie with Potiphar’s wife, not just because he might end up facing Potiphar’s sword but because it was a ‘sin against God’ (Gen 39:9).

Prostitution, like polygamy, is not directly condemned in the Mosaic Law, but they certainly are in the NT. Prostitution was often part of pagan worship which was, of course, forbidden in Israel. Prostitution comes under the NT term *porneia or* fornication or sexual immorality (Mat 15:19, 1Cor 6:9). The OT, like the NT, condemns sexual perversions like incest, homosexuality and bestiality (Lev 18:22, 23, Rom 1:27, 1Cor 6:9).

While not going into divorce, we note that fornication is a legitimate ground for divorce, and that divorce leads to adultery (Mat 5:32, 19:9). Marriage following divorce involves the sin of adultery. In the grace of God, adultery can, after due repentance, be forgiven by the spouse and all concerned, but let no one take this sin lightly.

**3. Why adultery is sin**

Adultery attacks the heart of human society, namely the family. It leads to divorce and family breakdown, breakdown of trust and security, as mentioned. Under Mosaic law the offending party or parties were to be put to death (Lev 20:10, John 8:5). Adulterers are warned of vengeance from a jealous husband (Prov 6:34). If you were tempted to lie with another man’s wife, you needed to be a fast runner! Some years ago, a friend of mine caught up with the man who took his wife and gave him a good beating- almost landing him jail for assault, but a reaction accepted under Mosaic Law.

Adultery involves other commands like coveting your neighbour’s wife, and stealing your neighbour’s wife. It comes in the section of the law which Jesus summarised as, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ (Mat 22:19). The so-called ‘new morality’ propagated in the church by Bishop Robinson and others last century, saw law as opposed to love. They made love the rule for morality and ethics, but not the love that Jesus spoke about. The love this bishop spoke of was superficial, ‘feel good’ love. In his morality anything goes as long as no one is hurt. If it feels good do it, as long as no one is hurt. People jumped at the idea of adultery in which no none is hurt. We hear people saying no one was hurt by their affair/adultery, or their divorce. Robinson forgot what Joseph said about adultery being sin against God, and turned the text which says, ‘God is love’ on its head. He adopted pagan philosophy which says ‘love is god’.

Many Christians and many churches are still under the influence of this ‘new morality’ ethic, this ethic that ignores the holy, just and good commands of the perfect, holy and good God whom we call Father, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We all sin and break God’s commandments but let us admit and confess our sin rather than making up our own moral laws in an effort to justify ourselves. Boice concludes, ‘There is too much guilt, too many deeply entrenched patterns of unfaithfulness… to make the New Morality a valid option’. The sin of adultery is no longer found among the laws of our society, or even among the laws of many churches, but it remains in the law code set down by Moses and by Jesus, the code written on stone by the finger of God.

Purity before marriage and fidelity afterwards is what this command demands. It is a command that promotes love, and the beauty of sexual intimacy within the confines of marriage. It is not a law to stop anyone enjoying the pleasure of sex. It is man who make laws demanding celibacy, not God. God made us sexual creatures, male and female, and God made marriage for the expression of our sexual desires. We are not made in the image of animals but in the image of God. Evolutionists look to the animals to learn about sexual behaviour- as if we don’t see enough perversions in our history books, magazines, and TV screens. They are surprised, but disappointed, when they find lifelong monogamy in parts of the animal world. The Bible is the place for us to learn about human relationships, not the animal world or the philosophies of men like Sigmund Freud or Bishop Robinson.

**4. What Jesus says**

We have already referred to things Jesus said about marriage and adultery, but let us close with a closer look at his words, and other words found in the NT, just in case you think the seventh command is no longer valid. Jesus, as we have seen, gives a positive focus to the commandments with his command, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’. He does not say, ‘love yourself as God loves you’, a popular teaching today. The Bible assumes we love ourselves; Paul tells husbands to love their wives as they love their own bodies (Eph 5:28). The command is, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’.

This command does not allow you to steal another man’s wife, or husband. It does not allow you to deliberately hurt your spouse by committing adultery, or hurt your children by causing a divorce. You do such things because you put self before all else. You make pleasure your god- yes, even the first command comes into play here. God will avenge those who are hurt by your adultery, including himself (1Thess 4:6). He will judge fornicators and adulterers (Heb 13:4).

You would be totally mistaken to think Jesus goes soft on this command, or any command. For sure, he died that we might be forgiven, but does not his death itself speak of the seriousness of sin? Jesus in fact, intensifies this and other sins, declaring not just actions but thoughts sinful. He does this because out of the heart proceeds evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness and blasphemies (Mat 15:19). In his very first sermon, Jesus intensifies the second table of the Decalogue, beginning with murder and adultery (Mat 5:21f). Anger and verbal abuse become sinful, as does lust for a woman. We can admire beauty and compliment a woman on how she looks, but beware the lust of the eyes and the lust of the flesh (1John 2:16).

Adultery, like other sins, begins in the heart and it is in the heart that it must be stopped. ‘Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are pure…, think on these things’ (Phil 4:8). As believers who have been given the Holy Spirit, we can control our thoughts as well as our actions. Paul says, ‘Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit’ so how can you even think about uniting it with a prostitute (1Cor 6:19). We are not creatures with animal instincts, men and women driven by the lusts of the flesh. We are made in the image of God. We have sexual desires and God made marriage, one man and one woman for life, for the satisfying of these desires, as well as for blessing us, and himself, with ‘godly offspring’.

**No stealing** Exodus 20:15

We thought we were free from accusations under the sixth commandment, ‘Do not murder’ until we heard what Jesus had to say about it. In his Sermon on the Mount he said that anyone who is angry with his brother is breaking this commandment. The eighth commandment, ‘You shall not steal’ may also give us a sense of satisfaction at having kept the commands of God. You have never robbed a bank or burgled someone’s home I trust! Maybe you lifted some lollies from the shop when you were young but that is all. You feel confident you are not guilty of breaking this command. Jesus does not speak of this command in the Sermon on the Mount but he does speak about covetousness and about trusting in God to provide your needs, which are at the heart of this command.

This command is among the most widely broken in our society. Instances of murder are reported in the media but instances of theft are not reported, unless the amount is in the millions. Moreover, some instances of theft are legal under the laws of our government. We will look at bribery and gambling, the charging of excessive interest, cheating on the government, and overpricing. Our first subheading is the ‘sanctity of property and persons’, our second, ‘reasons for stealing’ and our third, ‘stealing from God’.

**1. Sanctity of property and persons**

The sin that brought about the fall of mankind was that of disobedience, disobedience to the word of God. God gave one command to Adam, not to eat the fruit of a particular tree. Satan tempted Eve to take or steal fruit from that tree after seeing it looked nice and tasty; she coveted this forbidden fruit.

Jacob cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright; his name means ‘deceiver’ or ‘cheater’. He later met another cheater, his uncle Laban (Gen 29:25). Jacob’s wife Rachel stole idols from her father’s house (Gen 31:19). So we do not have to read far in the Bible to find cases of cheating and stealing. Achan stole prohibited property in the battle of Jericho. He was executed for stealing what in effect belonged to God. He admitted to coveting silver and gold and expensive clothing (Josh 7:11, 21). Further on in the Bible we read of Ahab coveting a vineyard belonging to Naboth and, with advice from his wife Jezebel, of him stealing this property by murdering Naboth.

Coveting and theft continue into the NT with John the Baptist telling tax-collectors, men like Matthew and Zacchaeus, not to collect more than the set amount -in other words, not to steal by extortion. Zacchaeus, of course, repented and gave half his goods to the poor, and repaid fourfold any money taken by extortion (Luke 19:8). But the rich young ruler could not bring himself to give all he had to the poor (Luke 18:22). This young man claimed not to have broken any of the commands listed by Jesus, but coveting was not in this list. Clearly, he was more attached to his possessions than to the heavenly treasure promised by Jesus.

In the NT church, Ananias and Sapphira tried to deceive the church regarding the proceeds of the sale of their property (Acts 7). The property was theirs, and what they did was not exactly stealing, but it was deceit for the purpose of monetary gain, and it was severely punished. As we saw with Jacob, deceit is often involved in theft.

Judas Iscariot is our last example from the Bible of a man, indeed a disciple of Jesus, who had his ‘fingers in the till’ as we say (John 12:6). Of course, he is not the last man to have his fingers in the till of the church. ‘Embezzlement’ is the legal term for this kind of stealing, and a word that too often comes up in churches today. Theft without violence is rampant in our society and churches are not immune.

When Moses received these commands from the Lord at Mt Sinai the people were wandering in the desert; they had no real estate. Their property was restricted to animals and household things. So when Moses explains this command he speaks of stealing an ox or a sheep (Exod 22:1). He speaks of restitution of stolen goods, with at least double being repaid; Zacchaeus returned four times what he had stolen (Exod 22:4, Luke 19:8).

When the Bible speaks of repentance and the forgiveness of sins there is the understanding that where possible restitution will be made. Just last year my brother returned a copy of the Shorter Catechism that had my name on it, written by the hand of a six or seven year old! He must have felt guilty at having this little book that belonged to me. I feel guilty having a book with my sister’s name in it; I must return it lest I be accused of theft! When I worked in the government it was common to take pens home for the children. As a warehouse worker you might see a fellow worker tossing a box of goods into his car boot. This is called pilfering or petty theft, but it is still theft.

When the people of God settled in Canaan each family was given a plot of land. This real estate was to remain in that family from generation to generation, as Naboth explained to King Ahab. Even so, boundary stones were often moved as a way of stealing land, especially the land of widows or poor people. ‘Encroachment’ is the legal term. This is common in India. My friend is currently trying to recover mission property stolen by Christians, and having great difficulty because of bribes being paid to judges. Bribery is, of course, another form of stealing, as detailed in the Larger Catechism Q 142: ‘What are the sins forbidden in the eighth commandment?’ The blame or the sin rests upon the person demanding and taking a bribe, but it is also wrong to give a bribe.

The Catechism also refers to ‘removing land marks’, as just mentioned, and to ‘wasteful gambling’. This is another case of State law contravening the law of God. Gambling is all about defrauding another person or persons. Where do you think your winnings come from, if you ever win? They come for the losses of other people; not their gift to. ‘Sportsbet’ and ‘Ladbrokes’, along with lotteries and raffles, all involve stealing the money of other people by deception. They all involve coveting of course, the desire to have what is not rightly yours. What is rightly yours is what you work for, or what others freely and openly give you.

Paul writes, ‘Let him who steals steal no longer but let him labour, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give to him who has need’ (Eph 4:28). If you fill out your tax return and receive a refund this is legitimate, provided you have been honest in doing so. If you receive interest on a bank deposit or a dividend from shares this is legitimate, although ‘playing’ the share market is akin to gambling.

What else does the Larger Catechism call stealing? In the Bible, and in some societies today, there is the matter of dishonest weights. When buying fruit or vegies in India, the merchant would put stamped metal weights on the balance opposite your selection. Often he used stones saying he had lost his metal weights! We have electronic balances but are these always correct? When you buy fuel, how do you know the measure is correct? Thankfully there are people who check these measures, and sometimes they find faulty weights and measures.

You may not be selling a product but you are selling your labour. Are you tempted to deceive your employer and steal some time? Employers on the other hand try to steal time from their workers. Some even enslave their workers. The Catechism refers to man-stealing. Slavery was widespread in England before 1833, and is still widespread in China and India today, and sometimes found in our society. Certainly we have seen businesses of late underpaying their workers. Receiving stolen goods is also a sin, as well as a crime. Cheating on contracts and generally ripping people off is sin.

The eight command is included in the summary of the second table, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’. You don’t like being ripped off so don’t try to defraud or deceive others, or practice extortion, a sin listed along with adultery, idolatry, drunkenness, theft and covetousness by the apostle Paul as sins precluding entrance into the kingdom of God (1Cor 6:9-10).

**2. Reasons for stealing**

A wise man called Agur said, “Remove falsehood and lies far from me; Give me neither poverty nor riches - Feed me with the food allotted to me; Lest I be full and deny you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’, or lest I be poor and steal, and profane the name of my God” (Prov 30:8-9). If you are hungry you will be tempted to steal food. Is this acceptable? Not according to this inspired writer. You might consider it terribly unjust that you sit begging at the gate of a rich man, but that does not give you the right to steal from the rich man. The UN charter of human rights might say it is okay, but not the Bible. See what Agur writes- lest I ‘profane the name of my God’. This makes clear the sanctity of property.

The laws of Israel took account of this situation, a situation foreknown by God. Farmers were told to leave some of their crop for the poor to glean. People could pick heads of grain to eat, but taking a sickle to another man’s crop was theft. God is the provider of every good and perfect gift, so we are to look to him when we have need, be it hunger, new clothes or rent money. God generally uses people or institutions to supply this need; he does not condone stealing from individuals or institutions.

Most theft is not by reason of need but by reason of greed. It is covetousness that leads to most theft. In Psalm 73 the writer admits, ‘I was envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked’ (Ps 73:2). Is this not a temptation we all face at some time? Is this not what advertising is all about? Advertising seeks to arouse feelings of envy so that you will buy the product. Advertising gurus study psychology and practice deception to arouse envy, the very thing the Bible warns against. As people turn away from the Bible so they become vulnerable to advertising, and so they end up drowning in debt. The Bible teaches us to be content with what we have, with whatever the Lord has chosen to give us, and if we have needs to ask him (Phil 4:11-13, 1Tim 6:6-9).

In saying he had learned to be content, Paul said, ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me’ and then, ‘My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus’ (Phil 4:13,19). The rich young ruler did not trust Jesus to give him treasure in heaven. If we do not steal out of greed, we may do so because we do not trust Jesus to supply our needs. Jesus explained that God feeds the birds of the air and that you are more valuable than the birds- despite what evolutionists say (Mat 6:26). He says, ‘Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things’, namely food and clothes, ‘will be given you’ (Mat 6:33).

**3. Stealing from God**

A final word of caution about stealing from God. Moses commanded the people to tithe, to give a tenth of their harvest or income to the Lord. When they failed to bring this tithe into the house of God, the prophet Malachi accused them of robbing God (Mat 3:8). ‘Robbing God?’- ‘how can we do that’ they protested. In some ways it is easier to rob God than people or the government. No one takes you to court when you rob God. But God will be disappointed and angry at such disrespect and disobedience from one who says he loves God.

When we get our pay-packet we have to buy food and clothes, and pay so many expenses. All may be legitimate expenses, but then we give to the Lord what is left over. If there is nothing we say, ‘Sorry God, I know you understand’. The tithe was the first fruits; it was the first amount taken from the pay-packet. It was given in expectation of the Lord giving sufficient for us and our family from what was left. Listen to the word of God to these people who were robbing God by failing to bring their tithes and offerings: ‘Test me’ said the Lord of hosts, ‘if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it’ (Mal 3:10).

**No false witness** Exodus 20:16

In condemning Israel for her sin, the prophet Isaiah said, ‘Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands afar off, for truth has fallen in the street and equity cannot enter’ (Isa 59:14). Truth ‘fell in the street’ when sin entered the world. In tempting Eve, the serpent suggested that God was not being honest with her. ‘You will not surely die’ he said (Gen 3:4). The devil is ‘the father of lies’, which means all his children are liars. His children are active in every human society till today. For all our laws and lawyers, and judges and juries, we still see lies being told and innocent people being condemned.

The Law of Moses stipulated two or three witnesses to establish a matter, never one (Deut 19:15). Yet a court in one of our states convicted a man because the one witnessing against him was ‘so compelling’! That man was released from prison after appeal. Increasingly we see convictions on the basis of one witness, after ‘trail by Twitter’. Increasingly we see partiality in our courts, and even bribery. Such things are common in heathen nations. ‘A bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous’ (Deut 16:19). Truth falls in the street when there is no fear of God in the land. ‘Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord’ (Prov 12:22). Truth falls in the street when self-interest is paramount and there is no love for one’s neighbours. Note that the ninth commandment introduces a concern for one’s neighbour, and this continues into the tenth commandment. When Jesus summarised the second table of the Decalogue he simply said, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’.

God hates lies because he is the God of truth (John 14:6, 17), and because he sees the harm people do to each other by telling lies. Of the seven things God hates, according to Proverbs 6:16-19, two refer to lies. Almost half of Psalm 15 is about sins of the tongue, including slander and casting a slur on other people. Of the sins that Jesus lists as arising on the heart, two of the seven refer to lies (Mat 15:19).

The direct focus of the ninth commandment is the law court, but it speaks to the matter of truth in all we say and do. In fact, the Hebrew word translated as ‘false witness’ in Exodus 20:16 is not the same as that translated as ‘false witness’ in Deuteronomy 5:20. In Exodus the word means ‘false’ or ‘fraudulent’, while in Deuteronomy it is more like ‘empty’ or ‘insincere’. In looking at the many implications of this commandment we will start with the court scene and the sin of ‘perjury’. We will then look at ‘slander’, at ‘spin’, and at ‘silence’, before concluding with, ‘speak the truth in love’.

**1. Perjury**

Perjury is defined as ‘giving false evidence under oath’. It was regarded as a serious sin under Mosaic Law, and remains a serious crime today. A false witness received the same penalty that he wanted for the accused (Deut 19:19) - has the man who accused George Pell gone to jail? Moreover, have those who falsely convicted this man been sanctioned in any way? Lying under oath is serious because it perverts the course of justice. Innocent men or women can be condemned. In referring on this commandment about swearing falsely, Jesus tells us not to swear or make oaths at all (Mat 5:34). He is not necessarily condemning court processes, but was declaring that if we all spoke the truth all the time there would be no need to be taking oaths. If this was the case, there would be no need for courts at all!

The murder of Naboth at the hands of King Ahab and his wife Jezebel is perhaps the gravest miscarriage of justice in the Bible- apart from the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ. Ahab wanted or coveted Naboth’s vineyard for a vegetable garden (1Kings 21:2). Naboth could not sell his family inheritance, as Ahab knew, but Jezebel conspired to get rid of Naboth. She did this through a gross miscarriage of justice. She got, probably bribed, two men, as required by the law, to falsely accuse Naboth of blaspheming God and King. And so Naboth was stoned to death and Ahab got his vegie garden. But not for long, because God judged both Ahab and his wife; Ahab was killed in battle and Jezebel was thrown from a tower and left for the dogs to lick her blood.

The Jews who hated Jesus, and were determined to kill him, called for witnesses at an illegally convened meeting of the Sanhedrin (Mat 26:59). Many false witness came forward but they needed two to agree. Eventually two agreed on a misrepresentation of something Jesus said, but then the high priest forced Jesus to ‘convict himself’ out of his own mouth; he put Jesus under oath to tell the truth (Mat 26:63). False witnesses were behind the death of the sinless Son of God, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (Acts 2:23). Jesus had previously accused the Jews of being children of the devil, who is a ‘liar and the father of lies’ (John 8:44). Satan cannot speak the truth, and some of his children have a similar problem.

Lying at any time results in innocent people getting hurt. They may not lose their life or their possessions, but they will lose their reputation. Their good name will be trashed, and you who told or spread the lie will be held accountable by God (Matt 12:36, 37). We are not calling for the crime of perjury to be extended beyond the courts, but Jesus effectively does this in declaring our accountability to God for ‘every idle word’ we speak.

**2. Slander**

Given that most of us spend little time in court, what does this commandment demand of us? It refers to blatant lying of course, of speaking or otherwise indicating something is true when it is not, or vice versa. From a very early age we learn to escape punishment by blaming someone else- that is, by telling a lie. Or we might tell a lie in order to get a reward. Did you hear of the school principal who, failing to get a degree, took his father’s registration number to get a job as a teacher? Only after many years was his deception discovered. Abraham was only thinking of himself when he told the Pharaoh his wife was his sister (Gen 12:12); what he said was true but only half the truth, and it put his wife in grave danger. We tell lies or try to deceive others in order to protect ourselves, or further our own interests.

Slander is defined as, ‘a false report uttered to a person’s injury’. When we knowingly say something that is not true in order to harm or gain advantage over another person, we are slandering that person. The people of Jerusalem devised plans against Jeremiah saying, ‘Come and let us attack him with the tongue’ (Jer 18:18). ‘A man who bears false witness against his neighbour is like a club, a sword, and a sharp arrow’ (Prov 25:18). James writes of the tongue being ‘full of deadly poison’ (James 3:8). Jesus called slander a sin (Mat 15:19). Slander, being linked with malice and deceit, is condemned by the apostles (Eph 4:31, Col 3:8, 1Peter 2:1).

Today we hear about mis-information and mal-information, the latter also being called hate-speech. This is a way of life for many, especially users of social media. A false report can be spread in no time, damaging the reputation of the person under attack. If, or when, the truth becomes known, the damage has already be done; indeed, the truth is of little interest to the slanderers. Remember, to facilitate the false report is as culpable as initiating it. False reports will not spread if they are ‘called out’ from the start.

You might be more familiar with the term ‘gossip’, a more acceptable term than ‘slander’; but they refer to the same thing. Do you love gossip? I know people who desperately seek out gossip; they dread not knowing the latest news about someone. In choosing a deacon, the apostle Paul refers to the wife as being ‘reverent and not given to slander or malicious gossip’ (1Tim 3:11). Knowledge is power they say; gossip, seemingly, gives people power even if, and especially if, it is not true. James speaks of the tongue as a spark that sets a whole forest on fire. But in reality, the truth is more powerful than the lie. When your lie is found out you will shamed in the community; no one will believe you again. Like Moses, and like Jesus and the apostles, I urge you to speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

**3. Spin**

Most people are careful not to be blatant liars. They distinguish between different types of lies, the ‘little white lie’ not being so serious. Some say that telling a lie was necessary to protect others, but usually it is to protect themselves- a lie within a lie! We know that one lie leads to another, and then another, and so on. ‘Spin’ is a tactic that politicians learn in order to avoid the truth. They learn to twist the facts, sometimes making them say the complete opposite of what is obvious. But it is not just politicians who twist or put a spin on the truth. We all know how to leave out certain facts and emphasise others. People twist the truths of the Bible by taking only part of a verse or by taking a verse out of context.

Our hearts, corrupted as they are by sin, give us a blinkered view of the world. We see everything from our perspective, which is that we are always correct. The apostle Paul quoted no less than eight verses to establish the truth that we are all sinners (Rom 3). He knew how difficult it would be to convince Jews in particular, that they were sinners. The rich young ruler was confident he had kept the commandment not to bear false witness, but had he heard what Jesus said about letting your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’, and your ‘no’, ‘no’? Had he heard what the apostle Paul said about ‘speaking the truth in love’? The ninth commandment, according to the Larger Catechism, includes, ‘flattery, vain-glorious boasting, thinking or speaking too highly or too meanly of ourselves or others’, something Paul refers to in Romans 12.

**4. Silence**

‘A man may wrong another as well by silence as by slander, when he knows him to be wrongfully accused yet does not speak in his behalf’- so writes Thomas Watson. Jonathan ‘spoke well of David’ to his father King Saul (1Sam 19:4); this was a risky thing to do. He convinced his father to stop trying to kill David, at least for the moment. It is easy to stay out of a dispute, and this may be wise, but when an innocent man or woman is being condemned we are obliged to speak in their defence. Some people make every excuse possible to avoid the call to jury duty. Have you been called to jury duty? The jury is at the heart of our judicial system, so we have a responsibility, like that of voting, to serve.

Jesus spoke up for anyone falsely accused. The woman caught in adultery was not exactly innocent (John 8), but Jesus spoke in her defence. He saw the injustice being perpetrated and spoke up. Sadly, when Jesus was falsely accused no one spoke in his defence, although Luke tells us that Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin, did not consent to the decision to condemn Jesus (Luke 23:51). The Larger Catechism includes among the duties required under the ninth commandment, the ‘defending of innocence’ and not ‘concealing the truth, and undue silence in a just cause’.

**5. Speaking the truth in love**

The Catechism begins answering the question about duties required under this commandment saying, ‘appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly and fully speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice, and in all other things whatsoever’. The temptation to speak anything other than the truth arises in the heart (Ps 15:2, 51:6, 7, Matt 15:19). Jesus counsels us, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ (Mat 22:39). As a new creation in Christ Jesus, believers are given a new heart, a heart that fears God, and that loves the people of God. In urging us to walk worthy of our calling, Paul writes, ‘speaking the truth in love’ (Eph 4:15). We must speak the truth, but he adds, ‘in love’. Why is this? ‘Is it true, is it kind, is it necessary’ is what we should ask before we say anything.

Some people, especially those who love gossip, blurt out ‘secrets’ without any thought as to the necessity, or the effect of doing so. ‘It is true’, they will say in their defence, and it may be true, but what was their reason for telling you, and everyone else they happen to meet? Were they motivated by love for the person about whom they were ‘sharing the truth’? Again, it is interesting how ‘the truth’ about others is usually something bad, whereas the truth about ourselves is almost always good.

Dear friends, let us be focussed on always ‘speaking the truth in love’. If you start telling lies or twisting the truth, don’t be surprised if people stop believing what you say. And most concerning of all is that people will not believe your witness to the truth of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Do not covet**  Exodus 20:17

The tenth commandment of the Decalogue stands apart, not just because of its focus on one’s neighbour- the ninth commandment has this- but because of its focus on inward motives rather than outward actions. Murder is an outward action, an action which you have not taken part in since you are not in prison. Yet Jesus turns the focus upon the heart saying that to be angry with a brother is a breach of this commandment. Similarly, you, like the rich young ruler, may claim not to have broken the seventh commandment: do not commit adultery. But Jesus again turns the focus onto the heart saying that to lust after a woman is to break this commandment. In Greek the same word is translated ‘lust’ and ‘covet’.

**1. Covet**

To covet is to ‘strongly desire’ something. It is in fact a neutral word. I was taken aback when an Indian Christian once said to me, ‘I covet your prayers’. To desire something is not sin in itself; it depends upon what you desire. I have a book entitled ‘Desiring God’. However, the commandment refers to desiring various things that belong to our neighbour, things that we cannot have. Such desire, a sinful, selfish desire, is called covetousness, and the word is mostly used in this negative way in the Bible.

Do not covet your neighbour’s wife is first on the list in this commandment as it is recorded in Deuteronomy; here in Exodus the neighbour’s wife is second. Your neighbour’s wife can never be your wife, unless her husband dies of course. To covet her is tantamount to taking her and thereby committing adultery. It is much the same with his house. We might think that if his neighbour put his house on the market he could buy it, but in Israel this was not done. We are familiar with the tragic consequences of King David coveting the wife of his neighbour, Uriah the Hittite. King Ahab coveted the vineyard of his neighbour called Naboth, again with tragic consequences (1Kings 21:2). Of course, it is not just kings that covet, yet interesting that those with the least reason to covet are often guilty of this sin. No wonder God included this command in the law code he gave Moses. Coveting leads to many other sins, so if we stop coveting we stop many others sins.

Coveting, as we said, refers to inward motives. It refers to evil thoughts that arise in the heart. Jesus said, ‘Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornication, thefts, false witness and slander’ (Mat 15:19). Jeremiah said, ‘The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked’ (Jer 17:9). He was referring to every human being born into this world since the time of Adam and Eve. They were created with pure hearts and without sin but Satan spoke to Eve suggesting that God was not good and that his command regarding the forbidden fruit was unreasonable.

Eve listened to Satan’s suggestions, and in her heart lusted after this forbidden fruit. She took and ate, and the rest is history, the tragic history of the human race. Tragic until the second Adam refused to listen to Satan’s suggestion that he could have all the kingdoms of this world. The heart of God’s Son and our Saviour was not moved to covet the kingdoms of this world. His focus was on the kingdom of heaven and on opening the way for sinful human brings like us to enter this kingdom.

As men and women descended from Adam and Eve, we are born with sinful hearts, hearts that listen to Satan and his suggestions. He is always suggesting that God is not good, that God is withholding good things from us. He whispers, ‘life is not fair’ or, ‘God has given that person, your neighbour, with more things than you’. We have all seen the child, holding a new toy in his hand, suddenly throw it down and cry- why? Because his friend got a more desirable toy that he did. We tell him to be thankful and appreciate what he was given, but it makes no difference. The child’s behaviour is just the beginning. We grow up coveting anything and everything that someone else has. If it is not our neighbour’s house or wife, it is his male or female servant, or his ox or his donkey, or ‘anything that is your neighbour’s’ (20:19).

Anything that is your neighbours could include his car or his boat. Some people rush out and buy a new car as soon as they see their neighbour driving a new car. We had a saying about ‘keeping up with the Joneses’, but I don’t hear it these days. I think it is that before anyone can say these words the person has been out to get the new car or boat or mobile phone or whatever. We live in a day when coveting is short-lived, although much more intense. We have advertising based on this sin of coveting. All the advertiser has to do is suggest that every successful has what he is selling; they usually get a sporting hero or celebrity to say you must have this product to be like them.

There was man in the Bible who coveted what his rich neighbour had- his name was Asaph. Asaph confessed, ‘I was envious of the boastful when I saw the prosperity of the wicked’ (Ps 73:3). Looking around he saw that wicked people had more than he did and he began to lust after those things. Maybe it was their beautiful wife, or their smart kids going to private schools or getting a private coach. Maybe it was their shiny new car, or flash new house. ‘How come I don’t have these things’ he said. He didn’t turn to adultery or theft but he was dissatisfied and complained to God. That was until he went into the house of God, ‘Then I understood their end’ (Ps 73:17). We will talk about the cure or antidote for coveting next, but Asaph saw that the people he envied because they seemed to have everything, in fact had nothing when they died. Their treasures were all in this world, so when the time came to leave this world they had nothing.

The apostle Paul spoke of coveting as idolatry, the sin of the first two commandments. ‘Put to death your members that are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion/lust, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry (Col 2:5). Three out of five sins are about coveting! In Ephesians 4:5 he also calls coveting idolatry, and concludes that such a person has no inheritance in the kingdom of God. The rich young ruler wanted to inherit eternal life. He had kept the commandments, so he said, until confronted by the tenth commandment. When Jesus told him to sell all he had and give to the poor he went away sad. His real love was revealed. And as Jesus said, ‘You cannot serve God and mammon’. If we desire anything more than God that thing is an idol.

Coveting is serious. It is in the heart so other people cannot see, but God can. God not only judges our actions; he judges our words and the thoughts of our hearts. So we must bring our thoughts under control (cf. Phil 4:8). The Lord has given us his word and his Spirit for this very purpose. You have just heard his word, and if you believe in Jesus you have his Spirit, so get your thoughts under control. Pray like the Psalmist: ‘Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer’ (Ps 19:14).

Asaph coveted ‘the prosperity of the wicked’ and their ‘increase in riches’ (Ps 73:3, 12), but he did repent and return to trusting in the Lord as the giver of every good and perfect gift. It was a different story however, with the rich young man, as we have seen, and with the rich fool Jesus spoke about in a parable. He spoke, this parable to the crowd saying, ‘Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions’ (Luke 12:15). We are back to the essence of covetousness, a focus upon earthly things rather than heavenly things.

**2. Contentment**

Jesus resisted the temptation to covet the kingdoms of this world saying, “It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only’” (Mat 4:10). But Jesus was not born in sin, you correctly say. But you agree that he is a great teacher! The apostle Paul was born in sin just like us. How did he deal with the tenth commandment? He uses it to teach that the whole law is good even though it produces all manner of evil desire. As Calvin said, the law reveals sin. The commandment, ‘Do not covet’ does not in itself help us to stop coveting. We do not have the strength to do so. Satan knows this, as do advertisers. So what can we do?

It is interesting that Buddhism recognises desire as the cause of all human suffering. This religion says that if we cease desiring things we will cease suffering and achieve Nirvana. It then teaches an eightfold path to achieve this state, which is useless of course, because no human being is able to control their inner desires without God’s help. God does not want us to kill all hopes and desires anyway, just evil desires.

The Psalmist writes, ‘Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart’ (Ps 37:4). When you desire something, something that is not your neighbours, then ask the Lord, the God of providence, to provide it. James writes, ‘You lust/want and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask’ (James 4:2). In bringing our desires to God we see our life in a whole new perspective, just like Asaph.

Coveting, like all sin, must be confessed to Christ and then, in his strength, we can walk in the Spirit (Gal 5:16) and in obedience to Christ’s commands. His command is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. Paul makes special mention of the grace of contentment. Contentment is the cure or antidote to covetousness. Paul said, ‘I have learned in whatever state I am in, to be content’ (Phil 4:11). This ‘learning’ was associated with ‘Christ who strengthens me’ (Phil 4:13), and also with the truth, ‘My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus’ (Phil 4:19). Take these three verses home with you today and you will know the blessing of contentment.

The apostle also said, ‘Godliness with contentment is great gain’ (1Tim 6:6). He said this in the context of warning those who ‘desire to be rich’ of the dangers that wait them, the danger of straying from the faith in their greediness and piercing themselves through with many sorrows’ (1Tim 6:10).

Covetous or greedy people are never happy. They think that getting the thing that their neighbour has will make them happy but the moment they get it they want something more. They are never satisfied but always complaining. Is this not the mark of the ungodly today? It has always been the mark of the unbeliever. Sadly it has become the mark of too many believers. Some churches actually preach a prosperity gospel, saying that God wants you to have everything your ungodly neighbour has, and more. They preach that in this way, the way of having more earthly possessions than your neighbour, you are glorifying God.

Let us flee from this false teaching. Let us give up coveting what our neighbour has, and obey this commandment. Let us walk by faith not by sight. Let us be thankful for the things God has given us and be looking for ways to share what we have with others. Let us be looking forward to the ‘treasure in heaven’ which Jesus promised the rich young ruler if he gave all he had to the poor and followed Jesus.

**Mediator**  Exodus 20:18-21

Having looked at the Ten Commandments or Ten Words which God spoke to his covenant people and wrote on tablets of stone, we continue looking into this second book of the Bible. The people whom the Lord brought out of slavery in Egypt were camped at Mt Sinai. They spent about a year in this place. It was here that Moses first met the Lord in the burning bush. Having obeyed the call of God to return to Egypt and lead his people out, Moses was back at this mountain with the people of God. God came down on this mountain to make a covenant with his people, with this new nation. He had formed this nation Egypt, and having brought them out he was in the process of bringing them into Canaan, according to his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses would be the mediator of this covenant.

While these verses describe a theophany or appearance of the Lord which links back to chapter 19, they also point forward. They are the beginning of the ‘Book of the Covenant’ referred to in 24:7, a book in which ‘Moses wrote all the words of the Lord’ (24:4). The Ten Words were written on stone tablets by God. Further instructions given by the Lord were written down by Moses. These instructions or laws explain the words given in the Decalogue and apply them to the society as it then existed in the desert; property did not include real estate because they had none.

The people whom God delivered out of Egypt and with whom he made this covenant were a special people, a holy people, a people belonging to God (Deut 7:6). They were sinners like all other people, but in giving them laws to obey they would know what sin is and what God requires of them; namely, that they ‘may not sin’ (20:20). Would they obey God’s law? Were they able to obey God’s law? Having the fear of God in their hearts was a good start. Just as the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, so also the fear of God is the beginning of obedience.

The Ten Words did not come with consequences or punishments for disobedience, although the second commandant came with the warning that God is a jealous God who punishes sin, and similarly the third (20:5, 7). The laws given through Moses and written in the Book of the Covenant come with appropriate punishments specified. Jesus, as the Son of God, modified these punishments and the principle of an ‘eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’ (21:24, Mat 5:28), but this was not to do away with the commandments. He actually demanded more by way of obedience, reminding us that God sees and judges our hearts.

A theophany at Mt Sinai served to instil fear in the people; out of fear they might obey the commandments. Moses told them not to fear, but he also said that God had come to test them, and that His fear may be before them that they may not sin (20:20). Moses himself ‘drew near’ to mediate between God and his people (20:21). Let us firstly picture this theophany, then try to understand its purpose as a test, and thirdly, look at Moses as a mediator.

**1. Theophany**

Three days after reaching Mt Sinai, God came down in fire upon the mountain (19:18). The mountain started smoking (20:18); if this was not a volcano it certainly looked like one. At the same time the people saw lightning and heard thunder. Thick darkness came over the mountain as if a huge storm suddenly engulfed the mountain (20:18, 21). To add to these natural yet frightening phenomena, there was the unnatural sound of a trumpet. The sound of the bugle startles sleeping soldiers; they rush to assembly where their captain shouts orders for the day. Soldiers don’t even think about disobeying the captain’s orders. The natural response of the people to this theophany was to tremble in fear. They had been warned not to come near or to touch the mountain or they would be put to death (19:12). What they saw and heard made them stay well back from the mountain (20:18).

Soon after crossing the Jordan into Canaan, Joshua was confronted by a man calling himself the Commander of the army of the Lord. Joshua fell down and worshipped him. He saw a theophany, or a Christophany, Christ appearing in human form before his incarnation. The prophet Isaiah ‘saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up’ (Isa 6:1). This vision became as real as the theophany at Mt Sinai when ‘a seraphim flew to me having in his hand a live coal… and touched my mouth with it’ (Isa 6:6). Not only his mouth but his whole life was touched such that he became a faithful prophet, a man who feared God rather than people (Mat 10:28).

When men or women see angels they are afraid, although angels are not to be worshipped (Luke 2:9, 24:5). When the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples they were terrified and frightened (Luke 24:37). On the road to Damascus, Paul was confronted by a light from heaven and the voice of the risen Jesus; he fell to the ground trembling (Acts 9:6); he never forgot this experience. The people of Israel trembled when they saw and heard, and indeed felt, the presence of almighty God. But in time they forgot what they saw and heard (Ps 106:13, 21). As the fear of God departed from their hearts, so they departed from the Lord.

Fear of the Lord has departed from the hearts of many in the church today. This word is not understood, often because it is never heard. Certainly, the gospel message focusses on the love of God shown in Jesus Christ, but God has not changed. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that our God is a consuming fire. He says we are to worship God with reverence and godly fear (Heb 12:28,29, Deut 4:24); instead of ‘godly fear’ the NIV has ‘awe’, which is fine, except that excessive use of the word ‘awesome’ has detracted from its true meaning.

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us of this very incident at Mt Sinai. He tells us that as believers we have not come to a mountain engulfed in darkness and burning with fire; rather we have come to Mt Zion and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant (Heb 12:18-24). Even so, he reminds us, as we have just said, that God has not changed; he is still a consuming fire who is to be worshipped with reverence and godly fear. Fire has the sense of judgment but also of purifying or testing (1Peter 1:7). We will come back to the reference to ‘Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant’ in Hebrews 12:24 when we consider Moses as a mediator here at Mt Sinai.

**2. Test**

Have you ever been in a situation where you thought you were going to die? My father rarely spoke about his time in the army but he once told me of a time when, while driving a jeep with his CO, he realized that they were behind enemy lines on Borneo. He probably thought he would be shot or taken prisoner. Augustus Toplady was caught in a fierce storm while in the country. He took shelter between some rocks till the storm passed. After that he penned the famous hymn, ‘Rock of Ages cleft for me’. Maybe you have been so terribly sick that you thought you were going to die. Did you call out to God for help? Even unbelievers have called out to God for help, and believed in the Lord after he saved them.

The people gathered at Mt Sinai were those God delivered out of Egypt; they were his covenant people. In fact, he was establishing his covenant with them at this time. When God came down upon the mountain in fire, in lightning and thunder and darkness they trembled in fear. They cried to Moses, ‘You speak to us’ because they feared they would die if God spoke with them (20:19). God is great and awesome, and will punish people who sin, but he is not capricious or unjust. He judges according to his declared covenant. Paul actually says that where there is no law sin is not imputed, although death means that sin has been around since Adam (Rom 5:13).

Moses knew God was in the storm, the darkness, and the fire. But he knew better than the people that while God is all-powerful, he is also merciful and gracious. He told the people not to fear, not to take fright at what they saw and heard, or at the voice of God. God’s people are not to live in constant fear of him striking them for no reason, such that they must keep appeasing him; that is the way the heathen live. God punishes us for our sin as a father punishes his children when they disobey. His commands are good, and in keeping them there is great reward (Ps 19:7-11, Rom 7:12). So there is no contradiction when Moses says, ‘Do not fear’ and then, ‘that His fear may be before you’ (20:20). To fear God in the latter sense is to respect and reverence God, and yes, to fear his righteous wrath if we persist in disobedience.

Moses told the people that God was testing them, that ‘His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin’ (20:20). We do not like being tested but we know that unless we are tested we will not grow in strength or in knowledge. God tests us in order to see what is in our hearts and in order to strengthen our faith in him- or as Moses says, ‘that we may not sin’. God tested Abraham to know what was in his heart; he then confirmed a wonderful blessing upon him (Gen 22:17). The Lord does not tempt anyone to sin but he does allow us to suffer, like Job (James 1:13). Yet he will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able (1Cor 10:13). James says that the testing of your faith produces patience or perseverance (James 1:3), which is much the same as what Moses says. To persevere or progress or become stronger in faith we must turn from sin; God tests us for this purpose (1Peter 1:7).

Testing draws us closer to God and into a deeper trust in him. The theophany at Mt Sinai had the effect of keeping the people away physically, but of deepening their fear of God and their resolve not to sin. When Moses told the people all the words of the Lord, as recorded in the Book of the Covenant, the people said, ‘All that the Lord has said we will do’ (24:3, 7).

**3. Moses a mediator**

The people trembled and stood afar off, ‘but Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was’ (20:21). Moses saw and heard the same frightening display of divine power when God came down on the mountain, but he had seen the wonder of the burning bush and heard the voice of God before this. He had been tested himself and had learned to trust God. He had learned that God is more powerful than any earthly ruler and that his power extends to controlling the forces of nature. The disciples would learn that Jesus has such power when he told the wind and the waves to stop, and they did (Mark 4:39). This was a testing time for them because they were in fear of drowning.

‘Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was’. What profound words! What a sublime and solemn picture! What an amazing man! While everyone else stood at a distance trembling at the voice of God, Moses drew near to hear the voice of God. Here was a man who knew the grace of God as well as the fear of God. Moses would later say to the Lord, ‘Show me your glory’ (33:18). ‘The Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend’ (33:11). The people pleaded for Moses to be their mediator (20:19). Here is the mediator of the old covenant, the man who drew near to God and the man to whom God spoke.

Just as the old covenant had a mediator, so does the new covenant established by Jesus in his own blood. Note that the old covenant was ratified by Moses sprinkling blood on the people, ‘the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made’ (24:8). The new covenant replaces the old because it is a better covenant. The new covenant has a better mediator in the Lord Jesus Christ, the only mediator between God and men (1Tim 2:5); Moses was a mediator but Jesus is the Mediator. Moses was a ‘type’, a man pointing forward to Jesus, to the fulfilment of God’s plan of salvation in his own Son. Only God’s Son was worthy and able to accomplish our salvation, which he did when he offered up himself on the cross, when he shed his own precious blood for the forgiveness of our sin (Heb 9:15).

Moses and Mary, Peter and Paul, all believed that the blood of Jesus Christ is powerful to cleanse from all sin, and that Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and men because he died and rose again, and ever lives to intercede for us.

**Idols and altars**  Exodus 20:22-26

At Mt Sinai the Lord God revealed himself to his people. They saw ‘no form’ but heard the voice of God (Deut 4:12, 15). What they saw was a display of the power and glory of almighty God. They trembled before the great and awesome God, frozen in fear, as it were. In the presence of an appearance of the Lord as the Commander of the Lord’s army, Joshua fell down in fear and worshipped (Josh 5:14).

From the time of creation, men have worshipped God our creator. Cain and Abel brought offerings to the Lord. Noah built an altar to the Lord and offered burnt offerings on it after the Lord delivered him through the flood (Gen 8:20). Abraham built an altar at Shechem after the Lord appeared to him and promised to give this land to his descendants (Gen 12:7); he probably offered a burnt offering to the Lord on this altar. At Mt Moriah he built another altar and offered a ram for a burnt offering instead of his son (Gen 22:9-13). Wherever people of God had significant interactions with the Lord their God they built an altar and sacrificed to the Lord. Inherent in the heart of man is the desire to worship. People who do not know the true and living God make their own gods to worship. Modern man is no different; his philosophy or religion is best expressed in the saying, ‘He is a self-made man who worships his creator’!

While man-made gods are worshipped in ways determined by men, the true and living God, the God who speaks from heaven, is to be worshipped in ways that he reveals to man. In making a covenant with the people whom he redeemed from slavery in Egypt, the Lord gave commandments that they were to obey if they were to be blessed in the land the Lord was giving them. These commandments covered their relationship with God and their interpersonal relationships, in that order. Details about how they were to worship God would soon be given.

For the present, they were warned not to worship any other gods and not to make any graven images. In the Book of the Covenant that we are now looking into (24:7), these commands against idolatry are reiterated, along with further details about how God is to be worshipped.

**1. Idols/images**

As the mountain was engulfed in thick darkness, in fire and smoke, with lightning and thunder crashing upon them, the people trembled in fear. They feared the voice of the Lord and cried to Moses to mediate for them. So ‘Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was’ (20:21). He did not fear the Lord as they did. He was always reverent and obedient, knowing that God is holy and just as well as gracious and compassionate.

When the Lord spoke to Moses, as he did here on the mountain, Moses was careful to convey his message exactly as it was given. The Lord talked with Moses from heaven (20:22) and Moses conveyed these words to the people. It was not his task, or the task of any prophet, to make the words of God more acceptable to the people. It was not his prerogative to leave out words or add words to what God said (Deut 5:22).

The NT comes with a warning against adding to, or taking from, the ‘words written in this book’ (Rev 22:18-19). The Bible is the inspired and infallible word of God. It is a ‘closed book’ as it were, yet a book we are to open, and read, and obey. While Moses received the words of God and delivered them to the people, under the new covenant all believers receive the Holy Spirit and are able to read and understand the Scriptures: ‘They shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest’ said Jeremiah the prophet (Jer 31:34). In order to read the Bible people must have it in their own language, and must have learned to read of course. We encourage, and pray for, those who are translating and publishing and distributing the Bible, and all who are teaching people, young and old, to read.

Moses was instructed to tell the people that the Lord had spoken to him from heaven and given this word: ‘You shall not make anything to be with Me- gods of silver or gods of gold’ (20:23). Note that the words, ‘anything to be’ are not in the Hebrew but are included for our understanding; the NIV has ‘any gods’. These words remind us of the first commandment, ‘You shall have no other gods before me’, and the second, ‘You shall not make for yourself a carved image’.

Here we have further explanation with the mention of silver and gold as the precious metals from which idols or images are usually made, at least back in Egypt. Some make idols from carved wood or stone, or from moulded clay. Hindus mould clay into idols which they paint blue or orange, then garland and worship, before taking to the river and throwing them in. Christians similarly mould clay or precious metals into images which they hang in their houses or their churches, contrary to this command. The people of Israel disobeyed this command when they made the golden calf; in his ‘hot anger’ the Lord threatened to destroy them (32:10).

**2. Altar**

We began with a brief historical survey of people like Noah and Abraham building altars on which to offer up sacrifices to God. They did so as a way of thanking God and worshipping him, ‘and the Lord smelled the sweet aroma’ (Gen 8:21). The Lord had told Abraham to go to a certain mountain and offer up his son as a burnt offering, but provided a ram instead for the offering. We are not told about worship of the Lord God in Egypt, but here at Mt Sinai worship is the first matter dealt with in the Book of the Covenant. Moses conveys to the people instructions given him by the Lord regarding the building of an altar on which to sacrifice sheep and oxen (20:24).

This altar was to be a simple structure, a structure not fashioned with any tool. It was to be a simple pile of earth or of rocks, if these were available (20:24, 25). They were not to cut or carve the rocks in any way. Any use of a tool would profane the altar (20:25). On this pile of earth or rocks, wood would be stacked. A slaughtered animal was placed on the wood for burning, as done by Abraham and by Elijah (1Kings 18:23, 30).

Such an altar could be built ‘wherever I cause my name to be honoured’ (20:24 NIV). As yet, there was no tabernacle or temple constructed. The Lord would later tell them to build a tabernacle, according to a pattern he gave, and put it in a place he commanded. When this pattern was given they would make an altar of acacia word, overlayed with bronze, about 2.3m square and 1.3m high (27:1).

Moses refers to burnt offerings and peace or fellowship offerings being made on the altar (20:24, 24:5). The altars were made for the purpose of making sacrifices to the Lord of sheep or oxen; the latter would require an altar of the size just indicated. A burnt offering was completely burnt up on the altar while the fellowship offering was later eaten by the worshippers (Deut 27:7). The animal was killed with a knife and the blood sprinkled on the altar. Here at Mt Sinai, as the covenant was being sealed, Moses sprinkled some of the blood of the sacrifice on the people (24:8).

Any altar to the Lord was to be a simple pile of earth or a pile of uncut stones. The final direction given by the Lord through Moses was that there were not to be any steps going up to this altar. People liked their altars to be in high places and might be tempted to build them high. But the Lord said there were to be no steps, ‘lest your nakedness be exposed on it’ (20:26 NIV). When Adam and Eve sinned by disobeying God’s command they, ‘knew that they were naked and sewed figs leaves together and made themselves coverings’. The Lord God later made tunics of skin and clothed them’ (Gen 3:7, 21). Two of Noah’s three sons were very careful not to see the nakedness of their father (Gen 9:23).

To see the nakedness of the one offering the burnt offering would offend God and the other worshippers. God himself covered Adam and Eve after they sinned so men and women are to be clothed, especially when worshipping the Lord. Pagan worship, be it that of the Egyptians or the Canaanites, often involved ritual nakedness, and indeed sexual acts when worshipping their fertility gods (Numb 25:1-2).

The people Moses was leading would soon be breaking both laws mentioned in this revelation about worshipping things made of gold or silver, and this law against ritual nakedness (Exod 32). Alan Cole comments, ‘This only proves such regulations were needed’. He then concludes, ‘Bad theology and bad morals usually seem to go together (Rom 1:18-32)’. We might reflect on his words as we look around at what is happening in some churches today. Why is it that some churches, their leaders at least, endorse homosexual marriage? Is it not because of ‘bad theology’, and teaching that undermines, rather than respects, the word of God?

We might also note that all worship is to be directed towards God. If the priest was ‘exposing himself’ while going up steps, would not the people have been distracted? When Aaron and his sons were set apart as priests they were required to wear a linen undergarment to ‘cover their nakedness’, so going up steps to the altar was no longer an issue (28:42, Lev 9:22).

When we come into the house of God our focus should be upon the Lord, not upon what the preacher or the singer is wearing or not wearing. Many churches today think that worship means having a band on the stage leading the people in popular songs. Reading the Bible and listening to a sermon come later- if at all. You will notice that those leading the songs or the worship are almost always young men or women dressed in the fashion of the day. Are not older women and older men just as able to sing? Please tell me when you see a person aged sixty or over on the stage!

Some years ago a talented and popular Indian preacher toured the country, and even the world, with a beautiful lady leading the singing at his conventions. Some wondered if people were coming to hear him preach the gospel, or to see and hear her sing. The inevitable happened and he was removed from his position. Some commented that he took personally her love songs to God!

The Lord gave simple but important directives to Moses concerning the offering of sacrifices to the Lord, what we might call worship. We are called to offer to God sacrifices of praise, the fruit of lips that confess his name (Heb 13:15). Such worship must focus on God, not on silver or gold images, and not on the ‘nakedness’ of men or women. God’s people failed at the first hurdle in making a golden calf, and they are still failing today. Let us come into the house of God focussed on worshipping the Lord in the beauty of holiness, not the beauty of man or his handiwork (Ps 27:4).

**Labour laws**  25/4/21 dkm

Read: Exodus 21:1-27, Matthew 18:21-35

Text: Exodus 21:1-11

Psalms: 40:1-8, 119:161-168, 82, 72old

In adopting the title ‘Labour laws’ I may be going beyond this actual passage to some extent but if I use the word ‘slave’ or ‘servant’ you will probably start thinking of the slave trade which William Wilberforce fought to abolish. People were kidnapped in Africa and transported by slave traders to Europe and America, where they were sold to work on plantations or in factories. Slavery in the Bible, or at least in Israel, was not like this. Joseph was sold by his brothers out of jealousy, to become a slave in Egypt, not Israel; and that was before the Ten Commandments were given, along with the case law that we have come to here in Exodus 21.

A law passed in the British parliament put a stop to the slave trade in 1833 but did not stop slavery as such. Poor people in Asia are often duped into selling their daughters as slaves- often in the sex industry. In India many people work as daily labourers getting paid a wage at the end of the day, but others go to work for no pay in order to pay off a debt. If you eat at a café and cannot pay for your meal, the owner will make you wash the dishes- so the story goes! In India weddings are costly and fathers often borrow money to meet this cost. If the lender runs a farm or a business he will make the family work for him to pay off their debt. It is not unusual for the next generation to be still working as ‘bonded labourers’ paying off this debt.

On the subject of weddings, in ancient Israel the man had to pay a bride-price. Jacob agreed to work for Rachel’s father for seven years without pay so he could take her as his wife. In a sense, the father was selling his daughter to Jacob. If for some reason Laban had been in debt to Jacob he could have paid this debt by giving his daughter Rachel as a wife, or even as a servant to Jacob. The society back then was very different to our Western society, but as we try to understand that society so we will better understand ours. We aim to understand our society and our social practices from a Biblical perspective.

This chapter begins with the Lord telling Moses, ‘Now these are the judgments/laws which you shall set before them’, before the people of God (21:1). ‘Laws’ is a different Hebrew word to ‘commandments’, which are actually called ‘words’ in 20:1. The Decalogue is like the words of the constitution. These ‘words’ are timeless principles; they are prescriptive rather than descriptive. When we come to the ‘Book of the Covenant’ here in chapter 21 we do not have the ‘you shall not’ prescriptions, but ‘if’ and ‘when’ descriptions. We have case law, law as it is applied to the society of that time. It was the society of God’s people so we will learn from what we read here, but under the new covenant polygamy is not permitted- it was not permitted in the beginning either.

In looking at this case law concerning Hebrew servants in this Hebrew society our first subheading will be, ‘six years’, our second, ‘servant chooses to stay’, and our third, ‘selling a daughter’.

**1. Six years**

It seems somewhat strange that laws about servants come at the beginning of the Book of the Covenant. Yet Arthur Cundall comments, ‘It is by no means incidental that, in the Book of the Covenant, immediately following the initial revelation and the commandments concerning worship (20:21-26), the primary concern is with slaves’. Israel was a nation of redeemed slaves. Moreover, the practice of employing or buying a servant may have been common. Everyone needs a job in order to provide for himself and his family. They did not have a government paying the unemployed as we do. Later on, in the land of Canaan, everyone was given a plot of land from which to earn a living or provide for their family, but still, for various reasons, a person could get into debt. He could lose his land, until the Jubilee, which came every fifty years, and be forced to sell himself into slavery.

Hired servants could be either ‘one of your brethren or one of the aliens of your land’ (Deut 24:14). Labour laws in Israel prohibited oppression or exploitation of the poor and needy (Deut 24:14,15). The case referred to here in verse 2 is that of a Hebrew servant who because of poverty/debt sells himself as a servant (Lev 25:39). The person buying this man or woman servant must let the person go free after six years of service (Deut 15:12). The person was to be set free in the seventh year, which was not necessarily the Sabbath year (Lev 25:4).

They went free, having to ‘pay nothing’ (21:2). In fact, they had to be given generous gifts from the threshing floor, from the winepress and from the flock (Deut 15:14). The master was to give to this servant from what the Lord had given him- now there is a labour law we could see more of today! Millions of bonded labourers in India have no hope of being released after six years of working off their debt. If this servant came into service with his family then he was to go out with his family after the six years. No doubt the wife would also have worked in the business alongside her husband.

**2. Servant choosing to stay**

This ‘case law’ becomes more complicated, and for us more difficult to understand, ‘if his master has given him a wife’ (21:4). Remember that getting a wife cost money; there was an up-front bride-price! The master had effectively paid this price in giving him a wife, or not so effectively paid it in this case, because the wife and her children still belonged to the master. The servant was free to go but not his wife and children. This seems harsh, even ‘inhuman’ as one commentator writes, but it was an economic reality. If the servant could somehow pay for his wife he could have taken her with him, although this is not written in the text. What is written is the possibility of staying on to work for the master after the six year period.

This servant, given a wife by his master, was given the option of staying on with his master with his family. “If the servant plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out free’, then his master will bring him to the judges”- or better ‘to God’, meaning to the sanctuary (21:5, 6, Deut 15:16). To love one’s master seems almost as strange as the matter of the wife being owned by the master, but it is still possible for a worker to like, if not love his boss.

Too many bosses think they have to be tough on their workers to get things done, and too, many workers think they have to cheat on their boss because they are not paid enough. However, it is possible for the boss and the worker to be contented in their working relationship. The apostle Paul sent a runaway slave back to his owner asking that he be forgiven and that they treat each other with respect, even love, as brothers in the Christ (Philemon). My brother worked for one boss for over forty years; unfortunately the new boss did not respect this faithful worker and put him off.

Faced with the choice of leaving his wife and children behind or staying on as a servant, this servant might decide to stay. In that case the master would bring him ‘to the judges’ or ‘to God’, presumably to swear an oath of commitment. He would then take him to the doorpost, probably at his house, and pierce his ear with an awl (21:6). Like a marriage vow and ring, this was a commitment for life; ‘he will be his servant for life’ (21:6 NIV). Some men have their wife’s name tattooed on their arm, a mark more like the pierced ear of a servant for life!

**3. Sells a daughter**

This case law gets even more complicated when a man sells his daughter as a servant or slave (21:7). Yet note that the rights of a female slave are particularly safeguarded in this case law. This matter of selling a daughter goes back to the matter of the bride-price that we discussed. He is actually selling his daughter to be a wife or concubine of the master, or the master’s son. Female domestic servants were widely abused in other societies, as they continue to be in the Middle East, India, and other places today. This law was designed to prevent such abuse; adultery was a sin anyway. Clearly this daughter was not married, and the master accepted her as payment for her father’s debt. She was his servant, but more than this, he ‘betrothed her to himself’, or to his son. If the master got fed up with her he would be guilty of deceit and treachery; but more than this, he could not sell her to a foreigner, and had to accept any redemption offered by her family (21:8).

Alan Cole refers to an ‘old Chinese custom of buying a slave-girl as a wife for the son in days to come’; if the girl grew up in the master’s house he would not have to pay a bride-price! This rarely happens in India because of the caste system, but I hear that Chinese men are travelling to other countries looking for a wife these days.

If the girl sold by her father was betrothed to the master’s son, the master was to treat her as a daughter, rather than a hired servant (21:9). The son must treat her as his lawful wife if he marries her. If he takes another wife, as was lawful in those days, he was not to mistreat this slave-girl in any way. He must continue to provide her with food, with clothing, and with her marital rights.

Years ago I visited a rich grazier in Kenya. His homestead was a circle of huts. I was told that in each hut he kept a wife. He had to be rich to keep all his wives! Polygamy is fraught with problems, problems of jealousy (1Sam 1:6), and of finances.

If the son who took the slave-girl as his wife took another wife, he must not lessen his obligations to his first wife (21:10). If he did so, if he failed to maintain this wife in any of the three ways mentioned, namely, food, clothes and marital rights, then he had to let her go free (21:11). No doubt judges or elders decided on such matters. There was to be no demand for money, or for the bride-price to be returned.

Brief reflection on our ‘advanced’ Western society will show that we are not as advanced as we might think in regard to labour laws. Besides, our ‘advances’ have come on the back of Biblical teaching, and the fear of God. Just look at other societies which do not have any basis in the Bible. Exploitation of children and of the poor is widespread. We mentioned the abuse of domestic servants in the Middle East and in India. In our increasingly pagan and immoral society we are now hearing of the abuse of female employees. Our society may not be ‘advanced’ for much longer if we continue turning away for the teaching of the Bible, from the Ten Commandments, and even from the ‘case law’ that we have been reflecting on.

**Homicide, injury and kidnapping**  Exodus 21:12-27

The policeman responsible for the death of George Floyd in Minnesota was convicted by a jury of second-degree murder, third-degree murder, and second-degree manslaughter. First-degree murder, according to US law, involves premeditation, or ‘lying in wait’ as one website puts it- and as the Bible puts it (21:12). In some states of the USA such a conviction attracts the death penalty. Second-degree murder is not premeditated but is the result of ‘reckless indifference to life’. Manslaughter is not premeditated; in the US they have two degrees of manslaughter, one being voluntary, meaning homicide in the ‘heat of the moment’, and the other being involuntary meaning death by accident, as for example in a car accident. So this policeman was found guilty of murder through reckless indifference to life, and manslaughter; a few states in the US have third-degree murder, murder with a ‘depraved heart’ and malice. Our laws here in Australia are not so detailed, but we still distinguish between premeditated murder and manslaughter. We no longer have the death penalty for murder.

Many people think it was our modern civilization, or maybe the Greeks or Romans who devised such laws. They are surprised to find a clear distinction between murder and manslaughter in the Bible and the ancient Law of Moses. The sixth commandment states, ‘Do not murder’. Here in case law written in the Book of the Covenant murder is clearly defined and the penalty specified. Manslaughter is different to murder and the penalty is different. What might surprise us in this Mosaic law code is the penalty set down for kidnapping, and especially that for ‘striking’ or ‘cursing’ one’s father or mother.

With regard to personal injury, the Law of Moses stipulates compensation, which we do understand, although the distinction between slave and free is more difficult to understand. The third matter referred to in this section is that of a pregnant woman being injured in a fight and giving birth prematurely. Our final subject will be the so-called ‘*lex talionis*’ law or the law of retribution.

**1. Punished by death**

We cannot escape the words, ‘shall surely be put to death’ as we read this passage; we find them four times- verses 12,15,16,17. Human life is precious to God because every human being is made in the image of God; we speak of the ‘sanctity of human life’. One outcome of sin entering the world was a disregard for the sanctity of human life. One of Adam’s sons led his brother to a field and murdered him. God spoke of the blood of this murdered man crying out to him from the ground. God spoke to Moses saying that ‘blood defiles the land’ (Gen 4:10, Numb 35:33). After the Flood, God spoke to Noah declaring, ‘Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God He made man’ (Gen 9:6).

While maintaining the principle of this declaration, the principle of ‘a life for a life’ (21:23), the Law of Moses made a distinction between premeditated and accidental killing of a person. In revenge killing, that was common in those days and even today, motives are not taken into account. The Law of Moses gave protection to the person who unintentionally killed another person (Deut 19:4, 5). If a person struck another person with the intention of killing that person and they died there was no question about the punishment: ‘he shall surely be put to death’ (21:12). Capital punishment is not without its faults- a person can be wrongfully convicted- but this does not mean it is not appropriate and indeed biblical.

But if the killer did not ‘lie on wait’, the Law of Moses allowed for that killer to flee to a place of refuge (21:13). The comment that ‘God delivered him into his hand’ here in verse 13 is not easy to understand. We believe in divine providence which actually rules out accidents as such, so in some way God ordained this ‘accidental’ death.

When a ‘manslayer’ killed someone, an ‘avenger of blood’, usually a relative of the murdered man, set out to administer the death penalty upon this ‘manslayer’. Revenge killing was common and appropriate but was controlled under this law God gave through Moses. A ‘manslayer’ could flee to the altar seeking mercy in the place of God (21:14). When they settled in Canaan special ‘cities of refuge’ were established, six in all. They were spaced throughout the land, six to the east of the Jordan River and six to the west (Numb 35:13). Asylum in a city of refuge did not guarantee escape from the ‘avenger of blood’ and the death penalty. The elders of the city would judge the case, based on the evidence of more than one witness, and if the person was found guilty of premeditated murder he would be handed over to the ‘avenger of blood’ to be put to death. But if it was a case of manslaughter, he could remain in the city of refuge in safety until the death of the high priest (Numb 35:25). Again, this was a huge advance in terms of justice in a society of indiscriminate revenge killings that could continue into the next generation; such practices continue in some societies today.

Kidnapping involves the theft of a person, a serious crime as judged by the punishment stipulated- the death penalty (21:16). The slave trade that John Newton was involved in meant kidnapping people in Africa and transporting them to the ‘civilized’ world for sale; hence his confession of ‘the grace of God that saved a wretch like me’. Kidnapping for ransom continues in various parts of the world today, as does human trafficking, especially of women and children. We do not impose the death penalty but we do impose lengthy prison sentences for the crime of kidnapping.

The death penalty is also prescribed for mistreatment of one’s father or mother, for breaking the fifth commandment. This commandment came with a ‘veiled’ warning of one’s life being cut short if it was disobeyed (20:12, Eph 6:2, 3). There is nothing veiled about the punishment set down here in the book of case law. One who ‘strikes his father or mother shall surely be put to death’ (21:15). ‘Strikes’ may have the sense of killing, although back in verse 12 it is ‘strikes a man so that he dies’. But before you think of this as murdering one’s parent, look down to verse 17. If even cursing one’s father or mother was to be punished by death then surely striking them in any way also attracted the death penalty (Mark 7:10).

Our society has moved a long way from this commandment about honouring or respecting your father and your mother; so far that we find it difficult to comprehend these punishments. But cursing or hitting one’s father or mother was taken very seriously in previous generations, and still in some societies today. The family was established by God, with the father reflecting God’s headship over his people. The father in some ways represents God in his family, so cursing or striking him is tantamount to doing the same to God. Imagine a society in which parents are abused and cursed by their own children - or just take a look into our society!

**2. Personal injury and compensation**

Not all ‘striking’ of a man results in death. A disagreement with someone can turn into a physical fight in which one person gets badly injured, with either a weapon or a fist (21:18). If the injured person is ‘confined to his bed’ or hospitalised, but recovers after period of time, the person who inflicted the injury had to compensate the person he injured for medical expenses and loss of pay. Did you think injury compensation laws were devised by modern man? Here is compulsory third party insurance being taught by Moses! Jesus took this law about providing for medical costs to another level in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan took care of the injured man even though he had not caused his injuries.

We understand our legal responsibility to compensate a person we have injured for the medical expenses and for the losses they incur as a result of the injury. But adjusting this law when it comes to a slave is not so easy for us to understand. ‘Are not all men created equal’ we say. The Law of Moses made better provision for slaves than the laws of other societies in that one who killed a slave was to be punished (21:20). Beating a slave or servant would be a matter of discipline rather than premediated homicide because the slave was his property; the slave cost him money so his death was a loss. When the slave recovered from injuries inflicted by his master there was no punishment or compensation because he was the master’s property. Notwithstanding, if he struck his servant and the servant lost an eye or a tooth, the master had to let the servant go free (21:26, 27). Such laws served to protect slaves from cruel mistreatment.

**3. Pregnant woman**

The last of the cases regarding personal injury and/or death is unexpectedly specific, although coming across a pregnant woman is not that unexpected. This particular case law pictures a pregnant woman being hurt in a fight between two men (21:22); maybe one of them was her husband. If this woman got hurt by one of the men as they struggled, such that she gave birth prematurely but was otherwise unharmed, the man who caused her injury was still held responsible and had to pay a fine (21:22). The role or right of the husband to impose a fine points to his responsibility to protect and provide for his wife and his child (21:22). But any attempt to make an excessive demand was thwarted by the requirement of judges or a court to ratify any such fine.

If the pregnant woman was harmed and died it became a case of ‘a life for a life’ (21:23). What about the baby? Some understand this premature birth to be a miscarriage; the Hebrew is literally ‘her children come out’. They say it is not about the baby but about the woman. Cundall even writes, ‘an unborn child is not reckoned as an individual in any sense’. Abortionists use this verse to support their agenda. But if the life of the unborn is of no relevance why is this ‘woman with child’ even mentioned? Why should the ‘no harm follows’ only refer to the woman (21:22)? Allan Harman understands both mother and child to survive this ‘hurt’ or assault and hence the punishment being a sum of money. But if the mother or her baby is injured then ‘*lex talionis*’ law became applicable, as set out in the following verses. Again we ask, what is the point of this specific law if the child that is born is of no relevance?

**4. An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth**

A basic principle behind the death penalty, as stipulated in this passage, is that of ‘a life for a life’ as set down in God’s word to Noah (Gen 9:6) and here in Exodus 21:23, and also in Deuteronomy 19:21. This so-called law of retaliation, also referred to as ‘*lex talionis*’, extends to ‘an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth’. Such law seems rather inhumane to us but it was actually far more humane than the general practice of that time in that it limited retaliation to ‘like for like’. Retaliation usually means imposing more injury than that which was inflicted upon you. ‘The intention was to ensure that the punishment fitted the crime and that no punishment exceeded the hurt that was committed’; it was not ‘two eyes for an eye’! While man is concerned about vengeance, God is concerned about justice.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus rules out personal vengeance altogether. He teaches the law of ‘turning the other cheek’ and ‘going the extra mile’ (Mat 5:38-42). Jesus said that the Law of Moses and the Prophets were fulfilled in him (Luke 24:44). He came preaching the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom in which the principle is no longer retaliation but love: ‘love one another as I have loved you’ and ‘love your neighbour as yourself’.

**Duty of care**  Exodus 21:28-36

One day while riding my motor bike in India I ran into a cow. Thankfully it was her belly that I hit so neither me nor the cow was badly injured. However, a buffalo going along the road turned its head and knocked a woman off the back of a scooter and she died. The man who told me this story was the woman’s husband. Cows and buffalos roam freely on the roads of India, even in the city. If you injure or kill one in a road accident you will be made to pay compensation, but if the animal kills a person there is no recourse under the law- at least it seemed that way to me. Our dog is like an Indian cow in that he walks in the middle of the road if we let him off the leash. But if he was hit by a car, I as the owner of the animal would be liable for any personal injury or property damage. Kangaroos crossing the road are very dangerous but since no one owns them you have no recourse under the law.

After the Flood, the Lord gave every beast of the earth into Noah’s hand- he could use them for food, along with ‘green herbs’ (Gen 9:2, 3). The people of Israel kept goats and sheep for meat and hides as well as wool. They kept cattle for milk and meat, but mainly for draft purposes. Oxen are still used for pulling plows and carts in Asia. But bulls especially can be aggressive; they can pose a threat to personal safety. The other day I was told of a man being killed by a bull at a rodeo. I was also told that a minister of a church I once attended had been thrown by a bull on a farm when he was young.

We could have included these verses in the previous section about murder and personal injury but here it is a dangerous animal rather than a human being causing death or injury. God still required an accounting of the blood of a person who was killed (Gen 9:5), but in this case law given by Moses a duty of care was also imposed.

We may not have dangerous bulls roaming the streets of Sydney, but we sometimes see dangerous dogs on the loose. The second part of these duty of care laws applies to leaving an open pit into which an animal falls, something we might call a dangerous work site- although the focus is on the risk posed to an animal. The third part returns to the dangerous ox but this time to the ox goring another ox. In the city we do not have much concern with dangerous animals, apart from dogs, as just mentioned, but in rural areas animal control and safety laws are important.

**1. Dangerous animal**

Animals were the means of livelihood in the rural economy of Israel, especially in the early years that they spent in the desert; these laws written down by Moses continued to apply when they entered Canaan of course. An ox or bull is a large male animal, usually with horns. It is especially dangerous if not castrated. This particular law refers to an ox goring someone, or ‘tending to thrust with its horns’ (21:29).

In the first case the ‘ox gores a man or woman to death’ (21:28). Because the blood of every human being is precious to God, blood is required when a person is murdered, or in this case, killed by an animal. We saw the law of ‘a life for a life’, or *lex talionis,* back in verse 23 of this chapter. So, according to Mosaic Law, ‘the animal shall be stoned, and its flesh not eaten’- it was totally destroyed (21:28). The flesh was in a sense dedicated to God. If the animal’s owner was as surprised as anyone else by the attack he was not punished, apart from the loss of his animal.

The second case raises the issue of duty of care. If the owner knew that his animal was dangerous because of a habit or ‘a tendency to thrust with its horn’ (21:29), it was his responsibility to keep the animal confined, secured in a pen or on rope. If he failed in this duty of care and his ox killed a man or a woman, the ox was to be destroyed and the owner also put to death (21:29). But in this case he could redeem his life through a payment (21:30). Such redemption was not allowed if the man himself killed or murdered a man or woman. We do not even have the death penalty for murder today, and we also hear of murderers being allowed to pay for their freedom. I heard of the Pakistan government accepting around two million dollars from the US government for the release of a man found guilty of murder in Pakistan.

The blood of the animal was required so the owner lost his ox, but his punishment for negligence could be commuted to the payment of a ransom. He could pay to redeem his own life (21:30). The redemption price is not set; it seems that either a judge or a member of the grieving family set the price for his redemption.

A distinction was made if this dangerous ox gored a male or female servant because servants were the property of a master (21:32, 21). The animal was again destroyed because a servant was also made in the image of God, and the owner still had to pay a redemption price for his negligence. But in this case the price was set at ‘thirty shekels of silver’ paid to the owner of the servant (21:32).Thirty shekels of silver was the standard price for a slave at that time. Joseph was sold to the Ishmaelite’s for twenty shekels of silver (Gen 37:28), while in Leviticus the value of a free Israelite is given as fifty shekels (Lev 27:3f).

The shekel was a weight and not a coin at this time, meaning there is no direct connection to the thirty pieces of silver Judas received for betraying Jesus, but the same number (thirty) does seem to be more than coincidence. In particular note, as Matthew does, that thirty pieces of silver was the price of a slave according to Zechariah and Jeremiah (Mat 27:9). Also note that when Judas returned the money to the priests they could not put it in the temple treasury because it was ransom money or ‘blood money’ (Mat 26:15, 27:6).

A further case dealt with in this passage is that of an ox goring another ox (21:35). Under Mosaic Law there is no requirement that this ox be put to death; rather it was to be sold and the proceeds of the sale divided between the two owners. Moreover, the dead animal could be divided for its meat. The principle of a life for life did not apply to domestic animals, but the law of compensation did.

If the owner knew his ox was dangerous but did not keep it penned, and this ox then gored another man’s ox, the negligent owner had to take full responsibility. He had to fully compensate the other owner for the value the ox that his dangerous animal killed, and the dead animal was to be his (21:36).

The blood of a human being made in the image of God is more precious than that of an animal. Mosaic Law, and even natural law, makes this clear but the theory of evolution does not make it clear. Consistent evolutionists like Peter Singer say that the life of a monkey has the same value as the life of human being, even more if that human being has a disability. If man is descended from monkeys then this is being consistent. Evolutionists are rarely clear or consistent their thinking. As I commented to my wife the other day, if you multiply zero by zero you get zero, and you keep getting zero; such is the wisdom of the theory of evolution!

**2. Dangerous site**

Employers have a duty of care to provide a safe workplace for their workers. Deaths in workplaces have greatly decreased since laws about safety in the workplace have been implemented. When we see our footpath being levelled by paring back a concrete lip, we might think this is not really necessary, but such work may stop someone tripping and injuring themselves. In Deuteronomy, Moses details a law about duty of care when you build a new house, a law about putting a parapet around your roof (Deut 22:8), but in this passage Moses is concerned with preventing injury or death to a domestic animal, to an ox or a donkey in particular (21:33). Remember again that these are not pets but the means of livelihood for their owner.

If someone digs a pit and leaves it open and an ox or donkey falls into it and dies, the man who dug the pit was held responsible for the death of the animal. He was to compensate the owner of the animal for his loss, but the dead animal was to be his (21:33, 34). Pits were dug for various reasons- to trap wild animals, to store grain, to hide from the enemy. Whatever the reason, the pit was to be made safe from unsuspecting domestic animals. They did not have SES tape to fence off the pit as we do, but the principle was the same. The man digging a pit had a duty of care to make it safe, in this case for domestic animals to pass by.

We could have skipped over these laws about an ox, but as we noted, they have relevance with regard to dangerous dogs in our city. We also understand that men were dependent on their oxen to plow their fields and pull their carts. To lose one’s ox was to lose one’s means of making living. ‘To a struggling Israelite farmer fair payment for the death of an ox might be the difference between freedom and slavery for debt’. Moreover, as Alan Cole writes, we see the concern for ‘fair dealing’. God is just and his concern for justice extends into our workplaces, as well is our homes and other institutions.

These laws about animal safety are not explaining any particular commandment, although some point to the eight commandment, ‘you shall not steal’. They are more aimed at the principle of fair dealing within society, as just mentioned. They recognise the value of a person’s means of earning a living. Land took on such a meaning when they settled in Canaan so the buying and selling of land was strictly limited. We have a similar issue with regard to workers actually getting to work; a driving offense involving loss of licence might be reconsidered if the person needs their licence for work.

**Private property**  Exodus 22:1-15

The Bible affirms the right to private property. This might seem obvious but many people, including Christians, live under political regimes which deny this right. Moreover, there are Christians who advocate communal-style living in which private ownership is deemed destructive to fellowship. The early church is sometimes held up as an example of this: ‘They had all things in common’ (Acts 2:44), and they sold their possessions and brought the proceeds to the apostles (Acts4:34). But this was all voluntary. Ananias and Sapphira were free to keep for themselves the proceeds of the sale of their property (Acts 5:4). The selling of possessions was not because of ideology but to help the poor. Property in Israel immediately after the Exodus was not real estate; it was gold and silver and animals, and to some extent slaves. Even when they settled in Canaan, land could not be amassed to the extent we see in our society because of Jubilee law.

In the Book of the Covenant, Moses ‘wrote all the words of the Lord’ (24:4). He expands on the law given in the ‘Ten Words’, the law about worship and about murder, and adds seemingly unrelated laws about servants and animals. Animals were vital to the livelihood of people in the new nation that God had formed. This nation existed in the desert for forty years before entering into Canaan, where they would start farming. Sheep and goats were kept for milk and meat, wool and hides. Oxen and donkeys were kept as beasts of burden. As such, they were the owner’s means of earning a living.

Case law, as distinct from apodictic law found in the Ten Commandments, is marked by ‘if’ or ‘when’ statements. Case law found in the passage before us today relates to property rights. Such property consisted of animals and articles of silver or gold. In village India wealth is held in gold jewellery more than in real estate. Only in cities, and only recently, has real estate become a means of building wealth. The law set down by Moses regarding property covers matters of theft, of destruction, of caretaker responsibilities and of borrowing.

**1. Theft of property**

The eighth commandment is, ‘You shall not steal’. When studying this commandment we referred to the opening verse of this chapter. With apodictic law, or we might say constitutional law, penalties are not established. But here in case law penalties are detailed. There is no death penalty in property matters and no jail terms as such either, although a person who could not pay the fine set was to be ‘sold for his theft’ (22:3). The focus is on restitution with an associated punishment. So if a man stole an animal and sold it on or slaughtered it, he was required pay restitution of four sheep for a sheep and five oxen for an ox (22:1). An ox was more valuable because of the effort put into training it as a work animal. If the stolen animal was found alive in the hands of the thief he had to ‘restore double’ (22:4). He had to return the animal he stole and, by way of punishment, give another animal.

The question arises as to how or when the animal, or maybe the piece of property, was stolen (22:2-3). Thieves generally act at night when people are asleep and darkness hides their face. These days we have security cameras to show us when a thief is breaking in, but even then we may be confronted by a hooded thief in the dark. This law says that if you disturb a thief breaking in at night and hit him and he dies, you are not guilty of murder; it is called ‘justifiable homicide’. But if you disturb a thief in the day and kill him you are guilty of murder or manslaughter. Why? In daylight you can see the situation more clearly, and there will be people around to help.

This law was applicable to a recent case in our supreme court, the ‘Samurai sword case’. The owner disturbed the burglar and chased him down a well-lit street where he killed him with a samurai sword. The owner pleaded self-defence, but this was not accepted by the jury- he was convicted and sentenced for manslaughter.

**2. Destruction of property**

When growing up I often heard my father complaining about Mitcheson’s bull; Mitcheson was our neighbour. His bull would often get through the boundary fence and onto our farm. Dad was not upset about the grass this bull was eating but about the young heifers it was getting in calf! We tried to keep our bull properly penned, unlike our neighbour. On the other hand, my father was responsible for starting a huge bushfire. While burning heaps of bulldozed timber, as they did fifty years ago, the fire got away and almost destroyed the neighbour’s house- another neighbour! Actually, Mitcheson’s old house was destroyed in the 2019 bushfire.

For graziers and farmers, coexistence is not easy. Grazing animals are attracted to lush crops of wheat or corn, so the fence must be strong or, in the case of Israel and many poorer countries today, the shepherd must be alert. Sometimes the shepherd is deliberately not alert and the farmer’s crop is destroyed. The law given by Moses stipulates full restitution to the owner of the crop. Full restitution meant payment in keeping with the best of his crop or his vineyard, not the poorest yielding portion (22:5). Restitution with rotting fruit was not permitted.

You imagine fences to be posts and wires or wire-netting, but in poor countries prickly or poisonous plants like lantana are planted as a fence. Such ‘fences’ easily catch fire. A ripe crop of wheat also burns easily. Our farmers plow a fire-break around the paddock to stop fires getting into their crop. In Israel, enemies would come and burn their crops, leaving the people hungry (cf. Jud 6:4). Within Israel, fire might get into a field or into stacked grain destroying what was the family’s food supply. If this happened the person who started the fire had to pay restitution (22:6).

Lighting a fire to deliberately destroy property is called arson. The case referred to here in verse 6 appears to be one of negligence rather than arson, but restitution is still required. Cases of negligence were dealt with in the previous chapter. The law concerning ‘fire-bugs’ in our State is being strengthened in keeping with the potential damage done by bushfires. Just imagine if such a person had to pay restitution for a row of houses destroyed in a bushfire that he deliberately lit.

**3. Caretaker responsibilities**

Two verses, verse 7 and 10, begin with the words, ‘If a man delivers to his neighbour’. This is characteristic case law; this law is still related to the eighth commandment. This is not about borrowing the silver or the animal of a neighbour because this is dealt within the next section. What is envisaged is a responsibility to take care of a neighbour’s property for some reason- maybe because he was going away for a while. This law deals with what happens if the entrusted property is stolen or lost.

If the property, be it money or other material possession, is stolen from the caretaker neighbour and the thief is found, the thief has to pay back double, as expected (22:7, cf.22:4). The caretaker is exonerated. But if no thief is found the caretaker comes under suspicion as to whether he had ‘put his hand into his neighbour’s goods’ (22:8). In this case, the caretaker is brought before the judges and questioned under oath (cf.22:11). The judges were seen as God’s representatives; the word translated ‘judges’ is actually ‘*Elohim*’. To tell a lie under oath is perjury, a very serious offence dealt with elsewhere.

Moses briefly digresses to write of any kind of trespass or illegal possession of property (22:9). One day we invited some village children to our home in India. As they left a man started accusing one boy of wearing a shirt that belonged to his son. He was about to beat this boy and take his shirt when I intervened. I invited him to come to the village and inquire of the parents as to where their boy got this shirt- it probably was stolen! The accuser refused my offer and went off in a huff. Any dispute about ownership of a garment or animal or any lost thing was to be brought before the judges and the party found guilty of theft made to ‘pay double to his neighbour’ (22:9). If the man had come with me to the village I was prepared to judge the case and demand the shirt be returned; I was not aware of this law about paying double at the time!

The second section of caretaker laws deals specially with animals. Our daughter, a lawyer, is concerned that our old dog will die when she is ‘caretaking’ him- not that he is actually worth anything. In fact, it is her dog that cost a lot so we worry when caretaking her dog! A cow is worth hundreds of dollars and a prize bull thousands. Imagine being asked to look after such an animal, and have it die while in your care! The law given by Moses deals with such a matter. It comes back to the matter of judges and ‘an oath of the Lord’ (22:11).

If the animal dies or is injured or disappears while in your keeping, then you come under suspicion. You must swear that you have not ‘put your hand into your neighbour’s property’, and all must accept this oath. You do not have to pay restitution (22:11). Nor do you have to pay restitution if you have evidence of a wild beast killing his animal (22:13). But if the animal was stolen you have to pay the owner the value of the animal, presumably because of your negligence. You will recall Joseph’s brothers bringing his torn and blood-soaked coat to their father as evidence, false evidence, of his being taken by a wild animal (Gen 37:33). Also before the giving of this law through Moses, we find Jacob telling Laban how he bore the loss of sheep and goats taken by wild animals despite having a torn and bloodied carcass as evidence (Gen 31:39).

**4. Borrow from your neighbour**

We do not see much borrowing from neighbours nowadays, at least not in the city. But in the past it was common. Farmers would borrow costly implements or machinery from one another. They would also borrow a neighbour’s bull- Mitcheson’s bull was not such a case! The final case of property law dealt with by Moses is that of ‘borrowing anything from your neighbour’- the word ‘anything’ is not in original because the focus is again on animals.

Briefly, if you borrow your neighbour’s bull and it gets injured or dies, you are held responsible and must make good your neighbour’s loss. If his bull is sick then don’t borrow it! But if the owner brings his bull over and it dies while he is present you are not responsible. If you borrow you neighbour’s lawn mower and it blows up you are responsible to replace it, but if he has come over to mow your lawn you are not responsible- presumably you are paying for its hire in some way.

Property matters can be very complicated but here in Israel’s ancient law code, a code given by God through Moses, we find principles of continuing relevance, some of which are enshrined in the laws of our land.

**Social and religious obligations** Exodus 22:16-31

When a friend of mine got his girlfriend pregnant, a wedding was quickly arranged so the child would not be born illegitimate. Now there is an interesting word- ‘illegitimate’. Teachers must go to great lengths to explain this old word, a word found in Shakespeare and other literature written before the twenty-first century! My friend had a ‘shotgun’ wedding, again a term not heard these days. These days a girl can have three or four children before the couple contemplate marriage. The children might be grown up and left home before they contemplate marriage, a concept completely foreign to the Bible. A ‘shotgun’ marriage was somewhat embarrassing, but marriage after many years of living together is a giant fizzer!

Why are we talking about shotgun marriages? Because this, in effect is what Moses writes about in the passage before us today. He writes about seemingly unrelated social and religious matters, although they are not completely unrelated. Some think the matter of a man seducing a virgin belongs in the previous action but most include it in this section. So we have the subheadings: seduction, separation, strangers, and sacrifice of first fruits.

**1. Seduction**

Payment of a bride-price to the father of the bride was common practice in the days of Moses; it is still practiced in some societies today. We dealt with this practice in the context of a father selling his daughter into slavery in the previous chapter (21:7). Here we have a case of a man seducing a virgin- although there is no mention of pregnancy. In a similar passage in Deuteronomy 22:28, the man seizes the virgin and lies with her. The outcome is similar except that in the case of ‘rape’ the man had to pay fifty shekels of silver, almost double the price of a slave. In both cases the man was to take the virgin as his wife, unless the girl’s father refused (22:17). If the young woman was married or betrothed (engaged) the situation was entirely different; the punishment for adultery was death!

If you think Mosaic Law is complicated just look at the situation we have in our society where sexual relations outside marriage are common. Rape is no longer seizing a woman; it is now taking advantage of her, as in seduction. But they are no longer using the word ‘rape’. Today it is all about ‘consent’, a word not found in the Bible, although the concept is found in Deuteronomy 22. A betrothed woman who is raped in the city was guilty of adultery because ‘she did not cry out’ (Deut 22:24). If she followed the man to a quiet place, drunk or otherwise, and he ‘raped’ her, surely she is also responsible.

The laws of the Bible are of course, predicated upon the fact of marriage. Marriage law is designed to protect women and children. Without legalised marriage, women and children suffer. Is this not what we see in our society? Without a law demanding the man marry the woman he seduced and pay the father the bride-price, he presumably could happily go on seducing vulnerable virgins.

**2. Separation**

The next three matters, namely sorcery, bestiality, and sacrifice to other gods are not as unrelated as they might appear. Baal worship, as found in Canaan, is the common thread. Moses especially warned the people not to follow the abominations of the nations they would encounter (and destroy) in Canaan. One of these abominations was sorcery or witchcraft (Deut 8:9-14). A sorcerer was not permitted to live (22:18). The prophets ridiculed astrologers, or followers of the zodiac, because their prognostications are nonsense. (Isa 47:13, 14). The apostle Paul condemned Elymas the sorcerer (Acts 13:10).

Sorcery is common in pagan societies like India. How else can they tell the future? No wedding date or election date is set without consulting an astrologer. Such practices will increase as our society turns away from the only one who knows the future, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Alan Cole writes, ‘a desire to know the future shows lack of faith, while a desire to control the future is even worse’. He wrote long before computer models became the new sorcery, and CO2 emissions became the way to control our future.

The people of God were warned not to have sexual relations with an animal; in fact the penalty was death (22:19). Bestiality, like other sexual perversions, was common among the Hittites and other Canaanites. But is it contrary to God’s design and purposes in creation; for this reason it may become more common in our God-rejecting society. In India the cow is regarded as a god, so sexual union with a cow might be deemed ‘union with the deity’. I have not heard of this, but I know that some drink the cow’s urine to get closer to their deity.

Hindus certainly sacrifice to cows as to gods. They perform ‘puja’ or worship to all sorts of things, to inanimate objects as well as living things like animals and people. The people of God were warned not to sacrifice to any God except Yahweh, the Lord. They had seen pagan worship in Egypt and they would see it again in Canaan, and they were to reject it absolutely. In fact, they were to utterly destroy all such objects of worship- the Hebrew word is ‘*Haram*’. The first occurrence of this word is here in verse 20.

You will recall how Achan took an ‘accursed thing’ and became an ‘accursed thing’ himself, he and all his family and all his possessions (Josh 7:15). The person who sacrificed to any other god was to be utterly destroyed under the terms of this law given by God through Moses (22:20). Remember Achan, remember Simon the sorcerer and Elymas (Acts 8 & 13), and remember many other unnamed people who have provoked God, only to feel his wrath.

**3. Strangers, widows, orphans and the poor**

It is of the nature of sin that everyone looks out for their own interests and not the interests of others (Phil 2:4). We have to be taught to look out for the interests of others, and we need laws demanding that we do so- ultimately we need a new heart of course. In this Book of the Covenant we find these laws, not just about others but about others who are weak and vulnerable. Selfish people are prone to exploit the weak and vulnerable as they pursue their own interests and security in their possessions.

Moses gave specific commands not to mistreat or oppress the alien, or widows and the fatherless in their society (22:21, 22). Note that the commands are not case law; case law comes in verse 23. Like the commandment regarding the Sabbath day, as given in Deuteronomy 5:15, the reason given for not oppressing servants or strangers is that they were once strangers or aliens themselves. Their forefathers suffered terrible oppression at the hands of the Egyptians. When they cried to the Lord, the Lord heard their cry, and with great power delivered them; he also punished the Egyptians for oppressing his people.

If any people knew what it was like to be oppressed it was the people of Israel, so the last people to oppress others should be the people of Israel. It follows that Christians who know the oppression of sin should be the first to help overcome this oppression. Christians are told by James that, ‘Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble’ (James 1:27). Aliens were often servants in Israel. While they did not have all the rights of Hebrew servants, they were not to be oppressed or mistreated. We note the special attention given to aliens like Rahab and Ruth in the Bible.

The stranger, the widow and the orphan had one thing in common- they had no one to defend them against exploitation. Well, this is what people might think, but they do have one who defends them, the Lord himself! Just as the Lord heard the people’s cry when they were strangers and slaves in Egypt, so the Lord ‘will surely hear their cry’ (22:23). And when the Lord hears such a cry he acts to help the helpless and defend the defenceless.

The Lord hates to see people made in his image being oppressed and mistreated. In his righteous wrath he will punish oppressors: ‘I will kill you with the sword’ (22:24). Just how God kills with the sword we are not told, but clearly the sword of an enemy army or person can be used to execute God’s judgment. Divine judgment is always just, always ‘*lex talionis*’; as you do to others so it will be done to you. Those who oppress widows and fatherless children will ‘see’ their wives become widows and their children become fatherless (22:24). ‘The society that lacks social justice will itself come under God’s judgment’.

Another category of vulnerable people was the poor. There will always be poor in any society, as Jesus said (Mat 26:11), but God desires that there be no poor (Deut 15:4), and made laws to help the poor and prevent poverty. The Sabbath is one such law. The law against charging interest on a loan is another. A person who takes a loan is obviously poor- we are not talking about a housing loan. Such a person had to go to moneylenders who were renowned for charging exorbitant interest. The Law of Moses stated, ‘you shall not charge him [a Hebrew] interest’ (22:25, Ps 15:5). Many say this means ‘excessive interest’ but this is not what we read. I do not know if they had inflation in those days, but clearly this loan was not made for the purpose of making money like our banks. It was made to help a brother who had fallen upon hard times. Besides, in the Sabbath year all debts were cancelled, and in the Jubilee all property was returned to the original owner (Deut 15:1f, Lev 25:25-38).

Although usury was not permitted, a poor person was required to pay back their loan. In India we often had people asking for a loan but rarely gave in this way because most would never be able to repay a loan. After bringing the matter to the Lord, we sometimes gave material or money to a poor person. Moses writes of a pledge being taken as security for a loan. If this pledge is a man’s only overcoat, it had to be returned at night so the poor fellow could cover himself (22:26, 27). Again God expresses concern for the poor and needy because he is gracious (22:27). Because he is gracious his people must also be gracious. Of course, giving his coat as a pledge each morning served as a reminder of his obligation to repay the loan.

**4. Sacrifice of first fruits**

The focus of the final section of this chapter is the sacrifice of first fruits and the firstborn. It begins, however, with a command not to revile God or ‘curse a ruler of your people’ (22:28). The apostle Paul knew the Scriptures so well he was convicted by this rather obscure verse when he called the high priest a whitewashed wall (Acts 23:2-5). The third commandment is about blaspheming God’s name but here the God-appointed ruler is included (Rom 13:1). We are commanded to respect our rulers, something journalists and many others fail to do. In a letter to the paper, Normie Rowe, a pop singer of the seventies who was called up and was sent to Vietnam, wrote criticising the way people call our Prime Minister ‘Scomo’ and other names, which is why he is reluctant to be interviewed by ABC journalists.

In the final plague upon Egypt all the firstborn of the land were killed. So after the Exodus the Lord demanded that all the firstborn of his people and their animals be set apart to the Lord (13:13). Firstborn animals were sacrificed and firstborn sons were redeemed. Here this command comes with a warning not to delay this sacrifice; it was to be given on the eighth day (22:30). Similarly the first fruits of the harvest, taken from the granary and the vat, was to be given to the Lord without delay (22:29).

God’s people were set apart as holy to the Lord. As such they were to reflect the gracious and compassionate nature of their covenant God. And as such they were not to eat any unclean animal or any meat from which the blood had not been properly drained. This meant not eating any animal killed by a wild beast or that had died a natural death (22:31). ‘Be holy as I am holy’, says the Lord.

**Justice and conduct without favouritism** Exodus 23:1-9

Almost every day you will find the word ‘discrimination’ in the media. It is entering into all the laws in our land. We have antidiscrimination laws that refer to race, to gender, to disability, to age, to sexual orientation, and so on. A law against religious discrimination is being drafted. With all these divisions in society we may soon have a law specifically tailored for the individual; we all feel that we are discriminated against in some way or other! Already we have culture of victimhood, with almost every one thinking they are the focus of discrimination.

We do not find the word ’discrimination’ in the Bible, but we do find the word ‘partiality’ or ‘favouritism’. It is mostly found in relation to justice and the law, but sometimes in relation to life and worship (e.g. Ja 2:4). To show partiality is a sin against the other person, and against God because we are all made in the image of God. The ‘royal law’ is the answer of Scripture to every case of partiality or discrimination: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’ (Ja 2:8). If this royal law was written into the constitution of our land we would not need this proliferation of anti-discrimination laws. It is written into the constitution of the church, but who is obeying it?

The law God gave through Moses gives us detail regarding the evil of partiality when it comes to justice within the community of God’s people. Among the people of God were strangers or aliens and there were laws against oppressing them. There were also laws concerning poor people. Some matters included in our anti-discrimination laws are dealt with in the Bible under marriage law, while other matters are prohibited under the moral law.

Laws concerning justice in Israel were based upon the character of God himself. When King Jehoshaphat set up judges in the land he demanded of them, ‘Now therefore, let the fear of the Lord be upon you; take care and do it, for there is no iniquity with the Lord our God, no partiality and no taking of bribes’ (2Chron 19:7). Moses deals with partiality and bribery here in the passage before us, and also commands us to do good to our enemy and have sympathy towards the stranger.

**1. Strict justice**

Few societies have courts in which justice is delivered without fear or favour. My friend is involved in a court case in India, and we are praying for him. A man has stolen mission land but there is no assurance that the court will have him removed because judges are open to bribery and political influence. Even in murder cases, an innocent person may be accused and found guilty while the known offender, a rich or powerful man, goes free. Our court system is good, but not without corruption. Just recently a church leader was found guilty of child sexual abuse and sent to prison, only to have a higher court find that a gross miscarriage of justice had occurred.

In the Bible, the story of Naboth and his vineyard is infamous as a gross miscarriage of justice, resulting in death (2Kings 21). The wicked queen got two wicked men to spread a false report about Naboth. They gave false witness in court and had Naboth stoned to death. The Lord of course, saw such wickedness and injustice, and saw to it that Jezebel met a violent death soon afterwards.

The laws in this section of the Book of the Covenant are primarily apodictic or ‘you shall not’ commands like the Ten Commandments. The ninth commandment is, ‘You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour’ (20:16). The laws given here remind the people how easy it is to break this commandment. The two men who gave false witness against Naboth are called ‘scoundrels’, but were also gullible men who sided with the wicked queen in her wicked plot.

The first Psalm warns against associating with the wicked. Wicked people rarely act alone (23:1). It is usually gangs that rob banks or commit violent acts. Young people can be tempted to join a gang or the crowd in doing evil (23:2). A crowd is a large group protesting and then rioting in the streets. In India we were careful not to get caught up in any protest or rallies because in their frenzy people can turn on anyone and beat them to death.

Do not pervert the course of justice. This is most important when the death penalty is involved. We mentioned the church leader who was set free after a year in prison. With the death penalty there is no setting the person free. That case contravened Mosaic Law in failing to have two witnesses (Deut 19:15-20). Moreover, the one witness was believed by the judges, not because of what he said but how he said it. Witnesses must be examined carefully. Under the Mosaic Law just mentioned, a false witness was given the penalty he wanted for the innocent person. If you are a witness, speak truthfully; if you are not a witness, remain silent.

God hates partiality (23:3). These words came to mind recently when I was the target of malice hatched by a couple of hypocrites; yes, partiality is even seen in the church. James condemns the church that shows partiality or favouritism towards the rich saying they had become ‘judges with evil thoughts’ (Ja 2:4). Partiality may be towards many things: it may be towards family members, towards clan members, or towards the rich and famous. James goes on to say, ‘if you show partiality you sin’, so partiality or favouritism is a serious matter (Ja 2:9). Justice demands that every individual be regarded as equal under the law, and treated without fear or favouritism. As we saw in the previous chapter, when the poor cry to Lord he hears, so if those treated with partiality cry to the Lord he will hear.

The poor come into focus again in the chapter. The poor are often the focus of partiality, in the sense of judgments being made against them. But verse 3 reads, ‘Do not show partiality to a poor man in his dispute’. Some try to edit this reading, but it is not unheard of for a poor person to be favoured in a court judgment- unusual, but not unheard of. In our society it is more common than in others. The case of the church leader, a rich and famous man, and the young man he was accused of abusing, is a case in point. Some Christians have the idea that all poor people are innocent- they are not! It is not uncommon for a poor person, if they somehow become rich, to turn around and mistreat poor people. Remember the parable of the unforgiving servant in which the servant begged his master for mercy, but after being shown mercy refused to show mercy to a fellow servant (Mat 18:23-35). While hearing the command about partiality, we might also hear the command, ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you’ (Mat 7:12).

Bribery perverts justice, just like false witness and partiality (23:8). We have already referred to judges in some countries accepting bribes, but thankfully not here, although this is changing as fewer men and women fear the Lord. We do have ‘systems’ in place to check on corruption but these are being tested more and more. ‘Bribery blinds the discerning and perverts the words of the righteous’ (23:8).

Throughout the OT we are warned against giving or accepting bribes. In choosing leaders, Mose’s father-in-law told him to choose men who hated a bribe (Exod 19:21). In Deuteronomy 16:19, Moses similarly warns against partiality and taking a bribe. If you want to see the effects of these evils in the justice system, or indeed on daily life, just go to a neighbouring nation. From top to bottom, from postman to prime minister, bribery is a way of life in India. Yes, we were asked for a bribe just to have a letter delivered. Students paid bribes to get a train ticket or to pass exams. Such a system works against the poor of course.

‘Cursed is the one who accepts a bribe to slay an innocent person’ (Deut 27:25). If Judas knew this command, he failed to obey it! The prophet Isaiah speaks of everyone loving a bribe and of the guilty being acquitted for a bribe (Isa 1:23, 5:23). A bribe does not have to be in the form of money. Various favours can be offered and accepted by way of perverting the course of justice. Tragically some women are ready to offer favours to their male boss in order to get promotion, and sadly some bosses are ready to accept such favours. Do not give or accept bribes. Do not show partiality. Do not pervert justice in any way. This is the law of the Lord given through Moses to the people of God.

The poor is not to be favoured or disfavoured in any judgment (23:3, 6). Be careful not to let appearances or smooth speech or bribes affect your judgment, especially if you are called upon to judge a capital matter (23:7). You may never be a judge, but you could be on a jury. The Lord declares, ‘I will not justify the wicked’ (23:7). Even if a guilty person escapes the justice of men, they will face the justice of God.

**2. Be sure to help your enemy**

It is hard to avoid laws about the ox and the donkey in this Book of the Covenant! We know the value of such animals to people’s livelihoods in this nomadic, and later rural, community. The law here demands you help a neighbour with his animal even if you hate him (23:4-5); note the return to case law. If your adversary loses his animal and you find it, what do you do? Do you think, ‘Here is my chance to get back at my enemy’? Would you harm his donkey in order to harm him? Wicked men are ready to harm not only your dog but your children if they hate you. What of you find some object that belongs to someone who hates you? Do you walk away and leave it or do you return it to him? God’s law says to return it to him without delay.

What if you see a donkey belonging to someone who hates you fall down because of its load and its owner trying to get it back on its feet? Do you walk on by like the priest and the Levite in the parable? No. You stop and help your enemy get his donkey back on its feet. You stop and help the person who hates you fix his flat tyre; you don’t drive on with a sense of delight.

Jesus may have had these verses in mind when, in his Sermon on the Mount, he commanded, ‘Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, and do well to those who hate you’ (Mat 5:44, Luke 6:27). This is not simply a good thing to do; it is the right thing to do. As just mentioned, we dare not get back at an enemy through his donkey or other possession. It is in helping someone who hates you in their time of need that they, along with you, will be blessed. As God’s people, this is what we are required to do. ‘If it is possible, as much as it depends on you, live peaceably with all men’ (Rom 12:18).

**3. Strangers in the land**

The closing verse in this section about justice for everyone is about the stranger or alien. The stranger was considered alongside the widow and the poor in the previous chapter about mistreatment and oppression. In fact, in verse 21 of the previous chapter we find the same command not to oppress the stranger, and the same reason given: ‘Because you were strangers in the land of Egypt’ (22:31, 23:9).

The people of God were to remember God’s great deliverance in the Exodus, and they were also to remember the bondage and slavery which they suffered in Egypt. Moses says, ‘For you know the heart of a stranger’ (23:9). Stop and consider how the stranger feels, having left his home and maybe his family. Consider his desires and longings because you had such desires and longings when in Egypt, the desire to be free, the desire to know the Lord and his forgiveness, and the desire to serve the Lord as he commands. As those who know the grace of God in Jesus Christ, we are to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep’ (Rom 12:15, 1Cor 12:26).

**Sabbath laws** Exodus 23:10-13

Junior doctors suing government for more rest

Truck drivers talking drugs to stay awake

Have we forgotten how to rest- sin keeps us from rest!

We all need sleep and we need rest as God made us

God made the world in six days and on the seventh he rested

All that God has made needs rest: people, animals and even the land

Years ago I conducted an experiment in which I could test the effect of fallow; I wanted to do more

Farmers practiced clear fallow but dust storms

Economic pressure means no fallow, although some leave stubble

Shifting cultivation.

Moses gave law for the land to be left fallow every seventh year- Sabbath year.

**1. Sabbath day**

Fourth commandment- because of God’s rest at creation and because you were delivered by God from slavery in Egypt

Remember your creator and your redeemer

No work but rest- only works of necessity and mercy.

God will provide- manna in desert- yet Achan not trust but greedy

**2. Sabbath year**

We saw release of slaves after six years of service (Exod21) - and Jubilee.

Remember two aspects of Sabbath: rest and release

-Land left fallow Lev 25

‘Sabbath of solemn rest for the land. A Sabbath to the Lord’ Lev 25:4

No sowing or reaping or commercial harvesting.

Take whatever grows for food- you, the poor and the animals.

Simultaneous? People say not possible as economic ruin but not necessarily. No evidence either way.

-All debts cancelled Deut 15

Hebrew to Hebrew- ‘the Lord’s release’- not just for one year!

Reason- no poor among you

God will bless you in the land- you will always have sufficient

**3. Jubilee**- Sabbath of Sabbath years Lev 25

Yobel or ram’s horn blown. All the land celebrate at same time.

-Release of slaves and of debts

Return to ancestral land- land sold because of poverty or debts returned to original (allotted by Joshua) family.

Land was the means of livelihood in this rural society.

**4. Practice**

Did the people practice these laws?

Before the exile – not really

King Ahab grabbed land that belonged to Naboth’s family

Prophets spoke of joining land to land

Zedekiah called for release of slaves as Babylonians threatened but then reneged (Jer 34)

The exile was so the land could have Sabbath rest (2Chron 36:21)

Nehemiah made them remember the Sabbath day to rest and keep it holy after the exile

Sabbath was being kept in time of Jesus although its meaning was forgotten in deluge of legalism

**5. Christ and the Sabbath**

Luke 4:16f- note words poor, liberty and acceptable year of the Lord. Sounds like a Jubilee.

But Jesus says this Scripture fulfilled today- Jesus the fulfilment of Jubilee and all Sabbath law.

Redemption found in Jesus

Rest found in Jesus but not yet in the full sense (Mat 11:28)

Sabbath remains as a reminder of the promised rest.

Do you trust the Lord to provide for you as he did his people in the desert and in the Promised Land?

Are you looking forward to the promised rest that Jesus will bring? (Heb 4:9)

**Three annual feasts in Israel** Exodus 23:14-19

Many years ago I spent a week in a village in North East India. The gospel of Jesus Christ had been brought to this village some seventy years before my visit, and almost everyone believed in Jesus Christ; they turned from their head- hunting ways to the peace and love of Jesus Christ. They had just finished constructing a large church building in the middle of their village so that on the Lord’s Day the whole village, apart from a couple of unconverted men, gathered for worship. I am sure it was like this in the Pacific Islands when the gospel came. The church became the centre of the community. The village in which I grew up had three churches but less than half the people went to church.

Life in Israel centred upon the house of God and the worship of God. God’s people were to live together as his people, sharing in the blessings of the Lord and rejoicing together before him. Rich and poor, slave and free, and even strangers, would gather for weekly worship, and three times a year would join in a feast to the Lord (23:14). They would gather at the central place of worship chosen by the Lord in the good land the Lord gave his people.

Let us look briefly at the three feasts celebrated each year by the people of God, mentioned for the first time here in Exodus 23, although the Passover had already been instituted (Exod 12). We read about these feasts in the NT, so we should try to understand them in their OT setting. Our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified at Passover. What was the significance of this? The Holy Spirit was given at Pentecost. Is there any significance in this? Because all males were commanded to attend these feasts, Jerusalem was crowded during these feasts. Jews came from far and wide to attend. This was quite strategic for the spread of the gospel.

‘Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord God’ (23:17). Can you imagine such a command being given to God’s people today! Not only have we become very individualistic, we have abandoned responsibility towards each other- not to mention a disregard for the commands of Christ (see Heb 10:25). Many Christians cannot even commit to worshipping the Lord one day a week, let alone for a whole seven days three times a year! ‘How will I provide for my family if I take so much time off work’ they say. And what does the Lord say? Do they, or do you, care what the Lord has to say about how we are to worship him?

Israel was also disobedient to this command. They started saying, ‘it is such a bother having to go up to Jerusalem - I can worship the Lord here in my own house’. They had to go up at busy times of the year, at harvest time. They soon began to say, ‘we are too busy to go up to the house of Lord this year, we will go next year’. And so it was that when King Hezekiah called for the Passover to be celebrated that it had not been celebrated since the time of Solomon, over two hundred and fifty years previously (2Chron 30:26). The feast of Tabernacles was not celebrated from the time of Joshua until after the Exile (Neh 8:9). But there was great joy in Jerusalem when they did come together for this feast. If you lack joy in your life maybe you should think about these things. Think about your attendance to the house of the Lord and the means of grace.

**1. Feast of unleavened bread-Passover**

This feast incorporated the Passover; celebration of the Passover was followed by seven days of eating unleavened bread. This was celebrated for the purpose of remembering the day on which they came out of the land of Egypt, the day of their redemption. At this feast they remembered the night in which their forefathers ate the Passover lamb, after sprinkling its blood on their doorposts, the blood that saved them from death. They were supposed to have kept this feast in the wilderness days and then on into the new land. It was to have been kept every year until its fulfilment in Jesus.

The date of the Passover was set in the first month called Abib, or later on Nisan, and in our calendar March /April. The Passover lamb was sacrificed at twilight - a one year old sheep or goat. It was eaten roasted, along with unleavened bread, in the home with family and others such that the whole lamb was consumed that night (23:18). When the tabernacle and then the temple was built the Passover sacrifice was to be made in the place ‘chosen by the Lord’ (Deut 16:6). Rather than eating the Passover in the home, now it was to be eaten at the central place of worship. Only there could animals be sacrificed.

After he turned twelve Jesus went up to Jerusalem every year with his parents to celebrate Passover (Luke 2:41, 42). As an adult he went up every year according to the law. Jesus was eating the Passover in Jerusalem when he was betrayed unto death. It was at this meal that he instituted a memorial to a redemption greater than that from Egypt- redemption from sin and death in his own precious blood. ‘Indeed, Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us’ (1Cor 5:7). The Passover has been fulfilled and we keep the feast of the Lord’s Supper. Those who want to keep the Passover today are denying its fulfilment in Jesus Christ, and the New Covenant inaugurated at his death and resurrection.

The Passover was a sacred and solemn occasion of remembrance. But still it was a time of celebration, of joy and thanksgiving. After all, they were once slaves who cried to the Lord and whom he saved. They were to joy in the God of their salvation. Worship under the old covenant was not individualistic, something people did at home. No, they came together rejoicing in the salvation of the Lord and in the blessings they received from the Lord. In recognition of all God’s blessings they joyfully brought their offerings to the Lord: ‘none shall appear before me empty handed’ (23:15). ‘Every man is to give as he is able, according to the blessing of the Lord your God which he has given you’ (Deut 16:17). Remember, the Lord delights in a cheerful giver, not a worshipper who reluctantly gives his left-overs to the Lord. Jesus was impressed by the widow putting her two small coins into the temple treasury- they were all that she had (Mark 12:44). I have seen people bring produce from their fields to the house of God, some cabbages, a watermelon, or whatever.

The Lord’s Supper is a solemn occasion of remembering that Jesus died to take away our sin. Yet we also rejoice in his amazing grace, and the freedom we have as redeemed people of God. While it is important grieve over one’s sins in God’s presence, it is also important to rejoice in all his gracious benefits. The ‘unworthiness’ spoken of by Paul in 1Corinthians 11 refers to selfishness and bitterness in their hearts, not to an over-abundance of joy as they came to partake of this memorial meal.

**2. Feast of Harvest-Pentecost**

This feast, like the others, went on for seven days so included a Sabbath day. During this week no work was to be done. Pentecost was seven weeks or fifty days after the first grain was harvested- in later times this came to be fifty days after Passover. This feast marked the giving of the law and end of the cereal harvest in the spring. The feasts had an historical as well as agricultural basis.

All males were compelled to go up to the sanctuary, with their households, taking free will offerings with them- ‘You shall give as the Lord your God blesses you’ (Deut 16:10). This was of course, tied in with the tithe. After this pilgrimage to the house of the Lord they were to eat together, sharing the bounty with their family, as well as the Levites, the servants, the poor and strangers. They were to remember the poor as they remembered how they were once poor slaves in Egypt (Deut 16:12). There was to be rejoicing but no gloating, no despising of the poor and needy in their community. Recall the apostle Paul’s condemnation of the feast associated with the Lord’s Supper in Corinth because some were being greedy and others going hungry (1Cor 11:21,22). The whole community was to rejoice together in the blessings of the Lord.

Christians associate Pentecost with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Jews were keeping this feast in Jerusalem after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth. With the outpouring of the Spirit and the preaching of the gospel by Peter, many repented of their sin and believed in Jesus Christ. They rejoicing in their redemption from sin and death. They ate together and freely shared all they owned with fellow believers and the poor among them (Acts 2:44-47). The apostle Paul was eager to get to Jerusalem for this feast at the end of his third missionary journey (Acts 20:16). Yet Paul does not tell the early church to keep the feast of Pentecost. Like Passover, it is fulfilled in Jesus Christ; Jesus is the bread of life sent down from heaven. Not that we should forget the ‘harvest blessings’ of the Lord to whom we pray, ‘Give us this day our daily bread’.

**3. Feast of Ingathering-Tabernacles-Booths**

This feast was much like the Feast of Harvest or Pentecost except it was in the autumn (September/October) when summer crops and fruits, including grapes and olives, were harvested. Again, all males were compelled to journey to the central sanctuary with offerings to the Lord. They were to rejoice before the Lord with their family and those who had no harvest to bring.

Although Moses does not mention it here, they also built tents or tabernacles to live in for the seven days of this feast. This was to remind them of their wilderness days when they had to utterly depend upon the Lord. Now, as then, all that they had was because of the Lord’s blessing, even if they worked for it (Deut 16:15). In recognition of this blessing they were not to appear before the Lord empty- handed (23:15, Deut 16:16). This had nothing to do with their redemption because they were redeemed by grace. They were the people of God by grace alone. Again we have no continuation of this feast under the new covenant, although the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) was just five days before the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev 23:27f). This feast is the basis of Thanksgiving Day celebrated in some countries. Certainly we should remember the Lord who daily supplies all our needs. We must praise the Lord and forget not all his benefits (Ps 103:2).

**4. Reminder**

In the same way as I remind you that the Lord set down a day for us to remember him in corporate worship, namely every seventh day called the Lord’s Day, so Moses reminded the people, ‘Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord God’- *adonai YHWH* (23:14, 17). This ‘double-barrelled’ name for God emphasises his sovereignty in all things. The Lord later revealed the place where they were to gather for worship and the place to which they were to bring their offerings to the Lord- no one was to come empty handed. They came with an animal to sacrifice, a blood sacrifice, and with an offering from their field.

Moses specifically told them not to offer the blood of the sacrifice with leavened bread (23:18), which probably meant no leaven was to be in the house when they killed the lamb. Yeast would later become a symbol of evil (Mat 16:6, Luke 12:1). He also told them not to keep any fat of the sacrifice till morning. This reminds us of the command concerning the manna. The fat portion was special and belonged to the Lord (Lev 3:16, 17). The idea of boiling a young goat in its mother’s milk sounds repulsive, but may have been something the Canaanites did by way of a fertility rite, and why Moses specifically prohibits this practice (23:19).

Moses told the people of God when, where, and how they were to worship him. He told them to remember the Lord, to rejoice in the Lord, and return to the Lord of the material blessings he had given them. These are the three features we find in these three annual feasts in Israel, and they should be prominent features in our life and worship. The Passover is fulfilled in the Lord’s Supper. At this we remember our redemption, not from Egypt but from sin and death. We rejoice in the Lord Jesus Christ who gave his life that we might live, free from the bondage of sin and death. The Lord’s Supper was associated with a fellowship meal in the NT; believers rejoiced as they shared a meal together. They ate with glad and sincere hearts, recognising the abundance of the Lord’s provisions (Acts 2:46). They gave of their all to the Lord, a living sacrifice wholly and acceptable to the Lord (Rom 12:1). Do you remember what the Lord has done for you? Do you rejoice in the Lord and his blessings? Do you return to the Lord portion of the material blessings you receive from his gracious hand?

**Ministering Angel**  Exodus 23:20-33

‘Angels are ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation’ (Heb 1:14). Angels are God’s messengers. ‘Angels excel in strength and do His word’ (Ps 103:20). But in this closing passage of the Book of the Covenant, Moses speaks of ‘An Angel’ and ‘My Angel’ (23:20, 23) not of angels plural. He previously spoke of ‘the Angel of the Lord’ appearing to him in the burning bush (3:2). So who is this Angel that God promises to send to bring his people into the Promised Land?

It is fitting that this Book of the Covenant concludes looking forward to the Promised Land. The people were at Mt Sinai in the desert and God was giving his redeemed people, his holy nation, laws governing their life and worship. God was making a covenant with his people. Under the terms of this covenant he would protect them and provide for them in the land he was giving to them. They were looking forward to entering this land sooner rather than later; they had no idea it would not be for another forty years. In fact it was because of their disobedience to God’s word that they did not enter in the second year. Failure to listen and obey the Lord can have disastrous affects upon your life.

The Book of the Covenant, like the Book of Deuteronomy, ends with the Lord declaring blessings upon the people when they obeyed but curses upon them when they disobeyed (Deut 28). Here in Exodus divine blessings are emphasised. Obedience or disobedience had nothing to do with their salvation of course, because the Lord had already saved them from bondage on Egypt. But their prosperity and happiness in the land would depend upon their disobedience to the commands of the Lord.

We will briefly look at this passage under the subheadings: promise of an Angel, promise of blessing, promise of victory.

**1. Promise of an Angel**

‘Behold I will send an Angel before you to keep you in the way and bring you into the place which I have prepared’ (23:20). What a wonderful promise! Up till now the Lord had been leading his people with a pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. Moreover, Moses knew the country around Mt Sinai. In leaving Mt Sinai we find him saying to his Midianite father-in-law, ‘You can act as our guide’ (Num 10:31). We are not told the exact nature of the Angel’s guidance but the people are assured they will not be left in the dark as it were.

Years ago I was out the back of Bourke rabbit shooting at night. Driving through the saltbush I had no idea of the way home. It was mile after mile of flat saltbush country in every direction. Thankfully the driver knew the way home. The Desert of Paran that the people entered after leaving Sinai was similarly country without landmarks.

The people needed a guide to make sure they reached their destination. The Lord sent them a guide as well as a guard to keep them in the way. Who was this guide? As mentioned, he was not just another angel but was ‘My Angel’ (23:23). Moreover, the Lord said, ‘My name is in him’, and he would pardon or not pardon sin (23:21). Who can forgive sin but God alone? Is this God himself come down to guide his people? Moses, of course, pleaded with the Lord, ‘If your presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here’ (33:15). I like the suggestion that this Angel is the second person of the Trinity. There is only one such person of course, and Jesus spoke in the name of God the Father. Isaiah speaks of, ‘the Angel of His presence saving his people’: He became their saviour. In all their affliction he was afflicted, and in His love and in His pity he redeemed them… But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit’ (Isa 63:8-10).

Under the new covenant, Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit guiding us into all truth (John 16:13). Yes, we need a guide just as the people needed a guide in the desert. We need the Spirit to guide us into all truth. Without the Spirit we will be lost in the lies and deceit of this dark world. We will not see the blessings God has in store for those who love him and obey his commands. And remember, God’s guide is to go before us, not to come behind, blessing us in the way we choose to go.

The Angel was sent by God to bring the people into the place God had prepared for them (23:20). While Abraham had lived in this land over four hundred years before and God had promised him this rich and fertile land, these people knew nothing about this land. They were as much in the dark as we are about the place Jesus had gone to prepare for us (John 14:2, 3). So, like us, they had to depend upon the voice of the Lord, which for them was his Angel. ‘Beware of Him and obey his voice; do not provoke Him for He will not pardon your transgressions’ (23:21).

We have One who pardons our sins but even so, if we do not listen to him and follow the path he has set before us we will not reach the place he has prepared for us. Obedience was the key to these people reaching the Promised Land, and it is the key to us who are saved by grace alone through faith alone, reaching the place the Lord has prepared for us.

**2. Promise of blessing**

Entering the Promised Land to which the Lord was leading these people would not be a case of vacant possession. The land was occupied by various Canaanite tribes, people who worshipped other gods. We know that God first promised this land to Abraham, not just by way of giving his descendants a land of their own but by way of judging the Canaanites for their sin (Gen 15:16). Worship of other gods involved immoral acts, acts that made them an abomination in the eyes of the righteous God. As enemies of God they were enemies of God’s people, and vice versa, as Moses states (23:22).

So God promises to help them in the battle and indeed, cut the enemy off or blot them out for ever (23:23). The battle would be holy war in which God would destroy the enemies of his people and his enemies. He would wipe them out by way of divine judgment upon their persistent rebellion against him. All nations and all people can see God’s hand in the creation so they should seek him (Rom 1:20). Whether people turn away to worship man-made gods or to believe in evolution, God will hold them to account on the basis of the revelation of his power and majesty in the creation. Those who seek the Lord will find him and be saved, just like Rahab. Is this your experience? The Gibeonites also displayed a fear of God in tricking Joshua into making a treaty.

In fulfilling his promise to Abraham, the Lord was judging the Canaanites and blotting them out. He insisted on their total destruction, along with the complete and utter destruction of their sacred pillars (23:24). The Canaanites worshipped Baal, and his female consort, Asherah. These were fertility gods, worshipped in sexually immoral ways. The stones probably symbolised the male god, as in Hinduism still today. The Lord commanded the complete destruction of every Canaanite place of worship and object of worship lest his own people start worshipping these gods and adopting pagan worship practices. Christians continue to compromise with pagan ways of worship, if not pagan gods, both here and in other societies.

Moses does not list any curses for disobedience to God’s commands, as he does in Deuteronomy 28, but he does list blessings that will come when they obey the voice of the Lord or his Angel. Understand that these blessings are associated with God’s people living as God’s people in God’s land. For us the ‘promised land’ is not on earth but in heaven. Even so, these promises show us that God is powerful to bless, even if he allows his people to suffer affliction a times, and that for our strengthening. It is difficult to watch believers suffering and dying from COVID in India and other places, or from cancer or other sickness. But this does not take away from the Lord’s power, and indeed his good and perfect purposes for us today. We are ‘more than conquerors’ writes the apostle Paul, who suffered greatly as a servant of the Lord. He goes onto assure us that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ our Lord’ (Rom 8:39).

The blessings Moses promised the people when they served the Lord, and him only, included ‘bread’, no sickness, no miscarriage or infertility, and long life (23:25,26). A large family, and a long life without sickness, would be a blessing to these people after years of suffering and death as slaves in Egypt. We appreciate such blessings today but know that in Jesus Christ we have eternal life. We look forward to a place in heaven; not that Abraham and the patriarchs were ignorant of heaven (Heb 11:16).

**3. Promise of victory**

The Lord promised to bring his people into the land prepared for them, the land of the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Perizzites, and the Jebusites (23:20,23). He gives some indication of how he will do this. They will have to fight but not alone; ’My Angel’ will lead you into battle, and ‘My terror’ will go before you (23:27). God would bring confusion to the minds and the military tactics of the enemy. But what are the ‘hornets’ that God says he will send to drive out the Canaanites, Hivites and Hittites? (23:28). Are they like the plagues God send among the Egyptians? The Psalmist speaks of his enemies surrounding him like bees (Ps 118:12). So it seems best to read ‘hornet’ metaphorically, as God acting in some way to demoralise or render impotent the enemy. Was the Egyptian army that raided Canaan in the years leading up to the Exodus the ‘hornet’ Moses was thinking of?

Victory over the tribes occupying Canaan was assured, but it would not be achieved within a year (23:29). The Lord had good reason for not wiping them out in a single campaign. Firstly, their numbers would not be sufficient to occupy the whole land. They could fight with limited numbers because the Lord was with them, but having land unoccupied for a long time would allow wild animals and weeds to multiply. Secondly, coming generations needed the test of continuing to destroy the Canaanites (Judge 2:20f).

So little by little the people would come to occupy the whole land- as long as they continued to obey the Lord in wiping out the Canaanites and their gods. God’s mission often proceeds at a slow pace as he calls, trains and tests men and women in the task of spreading the gospel. But success is assured; God’s word will not return void (Isa 55:11). The Lord will build his church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it (Mat 16:18).

The promised land would extend from the Red Sea, in this case the Gulf of Aqaba, to the Mediterranean Sea or Philistia, and from the Negev desert in the south to the River Euphrates in the north (23:31). It would take some years before these borders were established, for the reasons just stated. It was not until the time of David and Solomon that the land was fully conquered (2Sam 5:6-10).

They were not to be hasty in trying to occupy the whole land. They were especially warned not to compromise with the local inhabitants in any way: not politically, not socially and not religiously. They were not to take them as servants, not to intermarry with them, and not to adopt their gods (23:32). They must wipe out the Canaanites and not allow any to remain, lest they or their gods become a snare to God’s holy people living in his holy land.

To what extent has the church today been pressurised and influenced by the political, social and religious environment in which we exist? To what extent have you been ensnared by the ways of the heathen among whom you live? More than ever, we need to be associating with the people of God in order to avoid being trapped by worldly ways.

**Covenant written and sealed**  Exodus 24

I have a document written on thick paper floating around my office. It has my mother’s name on it along with a red water seal and a clear water seal in the corners. On the top is written ‘In the Supreme Court of New South Wales, probate division’. It is a certificate granting probate from the estate of my mother, who died in 1980 with an estate worth $6000.

I have another certificate, kept more securely, called a ‘certificate of marriage’. It is also an official looking document with five signatures. It states my name and the name of Elizabeth Margaret McNaught. This document does not have a copy of the words with which we declared our commitment to each other back in 1974; we spoke our vows in the presence of witnesses. Failure to keep a commitment signed and sealed in such documents incurs a judicial penalty, except in the case of a marriage covenant!

The God of creation, the true and living God, deals with his people under the terms of a covenant, a covenant that he draws up but which his people must agree to. This covenant is sealed in blood. God’s initial covenant with Adam did not involve blood because man was without sin. It was a simple covenant under which Adam could eat of every tree in the garden except one. God made a covenant with Noah after the flood when Noah sacrificed to the Lord. God made a covenant with Abraham that was sealed by them passing between the two halves of a slaughtered animal. God’s covenant with Moses and the people he delivered out of Egypt was also sealed with blood, as we will see.

Moses and the people were camped at Mt Sinai. The Lord had previously appeared to Moses on this mountain in the burning bush. Now, forty years later, the Lord again called to Moses from this mountain. We read of him going up this mountain a number of times (19:3, 20, 24:9). At times the Lord spoke to Moses from the mountain, with the people gathered at the base. The Lord’s coming down upon the mountain was marked by thunder and lightning, thick cloud and darkness, fire and smoke, and the shaking of the earth (19:16, 20:18). It is not easy for us to plot Moses’ movements on this mountain; sometimes he did not go right to the top; sometimes he went part way with others. Sometimes the Lord spoke so all the people could hear, but mostly he spoke to Moses who conveyed the Lord’s words to the people (20:19). We do not have to start dividing up the chapters and verses and assigning these to different writers or editors, as scholars did last century.

That said, we do see a link back to the end of chapter 20, or even chapter 19, as we begin chapter 24 with Moses being called up the mountain. From 20:22 to 23:33 is the Book of the Covenant. In the first part of chapter 20 we find the ten words spoken by God which may also have been written in this Book.

In chapter 24 we find the details of the sealing of the covenant God made through Moses. We note the writing of the covenant, its sealing with blood, its celebration with a meal, and then Moses going up the mountain to receive the commandments written on tablets of stone by the finger of God (31:18).

**1. Covenant written**

After verbally conveying the terms of the covenant in chapters 20 to 23, ‘Moses wrote all the words of the Lord’ (24:4). The Lord commanded Moses to ‘come up to the Lord’ with Aaron, his two oldest sons, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders- which they did in verse 9. They were not to come all the way but were to ‘worship from afar’ with only Moses coming ‘near the Lord’ (24:1, 2). Moses’ brother Aaron would become priest, and his sons after him (28:1). But these two sons would later be disgraced and die when they ‘offered profane fire before the Lord’ (Lev 10:1, 2). The status of the ‘seventy elders of Israel’ is not certain; they may be related to the seventy descendants of Jacob who went down to Egypt, or simply be a selection of elders (Numb 11:16). The later council of the Jews or Sanhedrin would comprise seventy priests and elders.

Moses went and spoke to the people, ‘all the words of the Lord and all the judgments/ordinances’ (24:3). The ‘words’ probably refer to the ‘Ten Words’, and the ‘ordinances’ to the case law outlined in the preceding chapters. Having told all the people these terms of the covenant, the people responded with one voice saying, ‘All the words which the Lord has spoken we will do’ (24:3). They accepted the terms of the covenant declared by the Lord. They had no input into this covenant made by the loving and gracious God who had just saved them. God would be their God and they would be his people. His commandments were for their good. Besides, obedience to his covenant commands would result in divine blessing (cf.23:25, 26).

We usually have the terms of an agreement written down before it is sealed with the signatures of all parties involved. But there is nothing untoward about writing the terms of the covenant down after making a verbal agreement. This is what happened at Sinai. After telling the people all the words of the Lord, Moses then wrote them down. He would then read from this Book of the Covenant in the hearing of the people, and they would again solemnly promise to obey ‘all that the Lord has said’, as written in the Book, that is the Ten Commandments and the associated case law, law which often explained the commandment. This reading of the Book of the Covenant was done in the context of a covenant-sealing ceremony.

**2. Covenant sealed with blood**

The day after writing the Book of the Covenant, Moses got up early and ‘built an altar at the foot of the mountain’ (24:4). He made this with twelve pillars, the number of the tribes of Israel. On this altar he would, with the help of some young men, sacrifice oxen to the Lord, a burnt offering and a peace/fellowship offering (24:5). Burnt offerings were totally burnt up, as the name indicates, but with fellowship offerings the fat was offered to the Lord, while the flesh was taken and eaten by those making the offering. We will see some of the people eating and drinking before the Lord (24:11).

When the animal was slaughtered for the sacrifice its blood was collected in basins. The blood represented the life of the animal. With blood sacrifices, the blood was offered in atonement for sin. In this case the blood would be used to seal the covenant God was making with his people. Having built an altar to the Lord, Moses took half the blood of the sacrifice and sprinkled it on the altar. The altar represented the Lord who initiated this covenant between himself and the people he saved out of Egypt.

Moses sprinkled the other half of the blood on the people after they listened to the terms of the covenant, as read to them by Moses, and promised to obey every word. In sprinkling the blood on the people, Moses declared, ‘This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you according to all these words’ (24:8). Do these words sound familiar to you? They are very similar to the words we hear when we come to the table of the Lord for the sacrament of Lord’s Supper’. ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood’ said Jesus (Luke 22:20, 1Cor 11:25). The writer to the Hebrews actually makes the connection between Moses and Jesus when he quotes Moses in Hebrews 9:20: ‘This is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you’. As Moses was the mediator of the old covenant so Jesus is the mediator of the new, and better, covenant.

As mediator of the new covenant Jesus offered up his own blood, the only blood having the power to cleanse our hearts of sin. The precious blood of Christ was not sprinkled on an earthly altar or tabernacle but in heaven itself, a once for all sacrifice that is ‘the propitiation for our sins… and for the whole world’ (Heb 9:23, 1John 2:2). The new covenant, which we remember at the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, is sealed by the blood of Jesus Christ. All the blessings and promises that we enjoy under the terms of this covenant are ‘sealed’ unto us in the blood of Jesus Christ: ‘Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness’ (Heb 9:22). Please do not forget this. Remember what the Lord’s Supper signifies and be serious in remembering the Lord as he has commanded us: ‘This do in remembrance of me’.

**3. Covenant celebrated with a meal**

Verse 9 picks up from verse 1 with Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu going up - presumably up the mountain, but not all the way because the Lord then called Moses up the mountain (24:12). And then we read that Joshua, his assistant, went up the mountain of God (24:13). And finally, that Moses went up into the mountain and a cloud covered the mountain (24:15). Some liken this to Jesus going to the Mount of Olives with his disciples, taking Peter, James and John further with him, and finally going on alone to pray.

Coming back to Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and the seventy elders going up, we read that they ‘saw the God of Israel’ (24:10). How can this be, you say, when we later read, ‘No man shall see me and live’ (33:20), and ‘whom no man has seen or can see’ (1Tim 6:16). Actually, in Exodus 33 it is ‘see my face ... and live’. Moses saw the back of the Lord (33:23). In what was a theophany, these men saw the feet of the Lord; their focus was on the ‘paved work of sapphire stone’ under his feet, ‘like the very heavens in clarity’ (24:10).

In a vision Ezekiel saw a throne like a sapphire stone with ‘a likeness with appearance of a man high above it’ (Ezek 1:26). John also had a vision, a vision into heaven, in which he saw a throne, before which was ‘a sea of glass, like crystal’ (Rev 4:6). These men were dazzled by the brilliance and purity of what they saw, ‘like the very heavens in clarity’. ‘No mortal man can bear to see the full splendour of God; it is only in Christ that we can see him mirrored (Heb 1:3)’ writes Cole.

They ‘saw God’ or the form of God but he did not raise his hand against them, ‘them’ being the leaders or nobles of the children of Israel. What they did was eat and drink in the presence of the Lord (24:11). At this meal they probably ate of the fellowship offering, making it a solemn celebration of the covenant that was just sealed by blood.

**4. Cloud and fire**

As just mentioned, the Lord called Moses alone to come to him on the mountain where he would give Moses tablets of stone, and the law and the commandments written by God himself (24:12). He was giving these to Moses not as objects of worship but as tools for teaching. We later read of two tablets on which were written the testimony or the commandments, written by the finger of God (31:18). In Deuteronomy these are called the ‘tablets of the covenant (Deut 9:9).

All except Joshua were sent back at this point. Moses put Aaron and Hur in charge of the community while he went up the mountain (24:14). They, or Aaron at least, was responsible for the terrible apostasy that occurred during the forty days Moses was on the mountain (chapter 32).

As Moses went up alone, a cloud came down upon the mountain. For six days Moses was caught up in this cloud, and in the *Shekinah* glory that rested on Mt Sinai. On the seventh day, probably the Sabbath, the Lord called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud (24:16). All the children of Israel saw the glory of the Lord like a consuming fire on the top of the mountain (24:17). Again in Hebrews 12:29 we are reminded that our God is ‘a consuming fire’.

Peter, James and John had a similar experience when Jesus took them with him onto the mountain. John writes of, ‘beholding His glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth’ as Jesus the Son dwelt among us (John 1:14). The glory of Jesus, especially in his resurrection, is no less awesome than what Moses saw on the mountain. Remember what Paul saw on the road to Damascus. We are likewise privileged and blessed to see the glory of the risen Lord Jesus in the words of the Bible, with eyes of faith given us by the Holy Spirit.

**An earthly sanctuary**  Exodus 25:1-9

Adam and Eve lived in a garden created by God, a garden in which God also walked in the cool of the day (Gen 3:8). But when our first parents sinned they were thrown out of this garden and removed from the presence of God. Many years later God came down and spoke to Noah, and later still to Abraham, but it was not until the time of Moses that we read of God again coming to dwell among his people. God instructed Moses to make a tabernacle or tent in which he would dwell. This would be a sanctuary or holy place in which the holy God would dwell among his holy people. We will mostly use the term ‘tent of meeting’ for this place in which God met with his people.

Within this tent of meeting God would dwell between the cherubim on the mercy seat, which was placed behind a heavy curtain. When one greater than Moses came, namely Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, God would dwell among his people in the ‘flesh’; the word ‘dwell’ in John 1:14 is the same as the word we find here in Exodus 25:9. As Jesus died on the cross the cross, the curtain Moses put in the tabernacle, later the temple, was torn in two from top to bottom, opening the way for redeemed sinners to come into God’s presence and meet with him. Jesus was God’s sanctuary on earth; he revealed the glory and grace of God.

I hope this brief introduction helps you to understand the importance of the ‘tent of meeting’ and its furnishings as described in chapters 25-31, and again in chapters 35-40. There is a lot of detail here and it is not easy reading but it has great significance for us a Christians. We live under a new covenant but there is a continuity, or rather a fulfilment of many Old Testament symbols as well as promises in the new covenant. A glance at Hebrews 8 and 9 helps us see how Jesus fulfilled the symbolism surrounding of the tent of meeting, especially in his death. A rebuilt temple was in existence in the time of Jesus. To properly understand this fulfilment we need to understand what was being fulfilled by Jesus even if the detail is at times a bit overwhelming.

The people in the desert agreed to the terms of the covenant God made with them after he brought them out of bondage in Egypt; this covenant was sealed in blood, as we saw in the previous chapter. After this, Moses went up Mt Sinai to receive the two stone tablets on which the Lord would write the core terms of the covenant, the Ten Commandments (24:12, 31:18). While Moses was on the mountain the Lord gave him directions for making a sacred dwelling place for himself, a house or tent in which the Lord would meet with his people. On the mountain the Lord spoke to Moses about ‘My offering’, ‘My sanctuary’ and ‘My design for the tabernacle’.

**1. God’s offering**

God’s dwelling place on earth would be made from earthly materials, not materials sent down from heaven. The pattern or design would be given from heaven but the materials would be of the earth. It would be an earthly dwelling place or sanctuary, made holy because of the presence of the Lord (Heb 9:1). That the holy God would come and dwell in a sanctuary on earth speaks of amazing condescension. That He would dwell in a house made by sinful men speaks of great love and grace. But this is what the Lord told Moses to tell the people to do; to ‘make me a sanctuary’ and to do it with materials brought as an offering to the Lord- ‘My offering’ (25:2,8).

The people of God were to give to the Lord with willing hearts. There was no compulsion, and no requirement to give a particular amount. It was a free-will offering to the Lord, giving from a heart touched by the grace of God. If they remembered how the Lord set his love upon them and saved them from slavery and death in Egypt they would be eager to give whatever they could to the Lord. The apostle Paul writes of the churches in Macedonia giving beyond their ability; they implored Paul to accept their gift to the Lord as they ‘first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to the ministry’ (2Cor 8:1-5). Jesus pointed to the poor widow putting all she had into the temple treasury (Luke 21:1-4).

What did these redeemed slaves have to bring to the Lord here in the desert? It is remarkable what they found when they really looked? What do you have that you can bring to the Lord? The Lord knows what you have, so do not try hiding things from the Lord as you might from the tax man! I hope you enjoy giving what is required by the tax man but delight much more in giving what you can to the Lord because ‘God loves a cheerful giver’ (2Cor 9:7). Remember, God looks on the heart; it is not so much the gift itself but the heart of the giver that is seen and noted by the Lord.

An earthly sanctuary for the Lord would necessarily be as magnificent as could be made with the materials available on earth. The Lord deserves the best does he not! Who would think of bringing a diseased or sick animal as a sacrifice to the Lord? Who would think of bringing rotten produce from their field to the Lord? The prophet Haggai condemned the people for living in ‘panelled houses’ while the house of God lay in ruins (Hag 1:4). God was condescending to dwell in a tent like his people, but let it be a tent reflecting His divine majesty.

The offering the Lord would accept included precious metals and gemstones, as well as animal and plant products. Gold, silver, and bronze or copper were rare and costly metals. They were prized because they could be easily moulded, but mostly because of their beauty. People made jewellery and utensils, as we continue to do today. These metals will be used in the furnishings of the tent of meeting. Where would the people get hold of gold and silver here in the desert? There were mines in the Sinai Peninsula, and the Midianites may well have been miners as well as herdsmen. Also remember how they plundered the Egyptians as they left (12:35-36).

Egypt was famous for linen, made with fine fibres from the flax plant. Linen is very strong and absorbent so is comfortable to wear in hot weather. Like other textiles, it could be dyed different colours. Blue, purples and red dyes were available in the time of Moses (25:4). Such dyes were obtained from shellfish, snails, and worms. Princes and priests were fond of purple coloured robes.

Goat’s hair was spun into a coarse fibre use in making curtains and tents, as well as clothes. The tanned hides of animals, as well as the dugong or dolphin, were also used in tent making. In the desert they would find strong, durable, and insect resistant wood from acacia trees. Oil from olives and other trees was mixed with fragrant spices like myrrh, cinnamon and cassia to make incense (25:6, 30:23-24). The last of the things the Lord would accept was gemstones. These would be attached to the ephod and breastplate worn by priests.

**2. My sanctuary**

The word ‘sanctuary’ means ‘holy place’ or ‘sacred place’. It was a holy place because of the Lord’s coming to dwell there (25:8). The Lord graciously humbled himself to dwell among his covenant people in an earthly sanctuary. ‘I will dwell among the children of Israel and be their God’. His people were living in tents and their God condescended to living in a tent like his people. He would come down to meet with them in this tent of meeting.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was ‘made a little lower than the angels’ that he might taste death for us; He shared in our flesh and blood ‘that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is the devil’; ‘He was made like his brothers in every way that he might be a faithful and merciful high priest in things pertaining to God’ (Heb 2:9, 14, 17).

God’s throne is in heaven and earth is his footstool (Isa 66:1, 2, Acts 7:49). To come and dwell among his people on the most beautiful throne to be found in all the earth was condescension for our mighty God. Earthly rulers are filled with pride when they sit on magnificent thrones, but for God this was an act of self-humiliation. It was an act that showed the great love he had for his chosen people.

**3. My design for a tabernacle/tent**

The word ‘sanctuary’ pointed to God dwelling among his people; God’s presence would make this a holy place, a place separated from all others. It would be made by man with earthly materials but it would be designed by God himself. Moses was on the mountain to receive the plans from God. This earthly dwelling place would be a copy of the true tabernacle and heavenly dwelling place of our God (Heb 8:5).

On Mt Sinai the Lord told Moses to make this tent in which he would come to dwell ‘according to all that I show you’ (25:9). The Lord gave Moses the plans for the tent itself and all its furnishings, and told him to make everything exactly as he planned (cf. Heb 8:5, Acts 7:44). These detailed plans are recorded in the following seven chapters, and again in chapter 35 and following when men were called to do the actual building. Nothing in this tent of meeting was left to Moses any human being to design. It would not be like anything else on earth because it was designed in heaven by God himself.

Even though almighty God was coming to dwell on earth, his dwelling place and his worship would not be like the temples of other gods designed by the men who created such gods. And worship of the God of Israel would not be like the worship designed by men for their man-made gods. The Jews, and we as Christians, have nothing to learn from people around us when it comes to worshipping God or to building a place into which we come to worship God. If we want God to accept our worship we must remember that God alone determines what is acceptable worship. When God’s people start thinking it would be good to adopt some worship practices from the heathen then know that these people will soon be worshipping other gods. It is not be accident that the incident of the golden calf comes directly after these chapters!

In addressing the council of the Jews, Stephen spoke of God instructing Moses to make the tent of meeting ‘according to the pattern he had seen’ on the mountain, but goes on to quote the prophet Isaiah saying, ‘the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands’ (Acts 7:44-48). Stephen may well have been in the precinct of the temple in Jerusalem, the same temple of which Jesus said, ‘Not one stone will be left upon another’ (Luke 21:6) - the temple replaced the tent of meeting. Stephen was condemning the Jews who thought that God’s presence in the temple was permanent. They, in fact, thought that the temple was greater than God. He was proclaiming that one greater than Moses, and greater than the temple, had come, and that God’s presence had departed from the temple.

We conclude with the clear teaching of both Old and New Testaments that the tent of meeting or tabernacle that Moses made was a copy and indeed shadow of the heavenly things (Heb 8:5). The tent of meeting is no longer in existence, and even the magnificence of its successor, the temple in Jerusalem, is no longer. This is because the heavenly reality has come in our Lord Jesus Christ. Moreover, in the penultimate chapter of the Bible we read of the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God and hear a loud voice saying, ‘The tabernacle (tent) of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people. God himself will be with them and be their God’ (Rev 21:3). Will you be among God’s people on that day? Are you looking forward to that day, even as we learn about God’s dwelling among his people under the old covenant, a shadow of the reality that is come, and is to come, in Jesus Christ our Lord?

**Ark of the Covenant**  Exodus 25:10-22

There are many beautiful old buildings in our city. Heritage orders stop anyone from demolishing such buildings. Walking down the street we admire these heritage buildings, but if you go inside you may find that the building has been guttered; what you saw was just the facade. Have I stumbled upon a symbol of our society? Our culture has a façade of Christianity and morality but inside it has been guttered by the teaching of evolution and humanism. The lives of many have been left empty by such teaching. They are like old buildings with just a facade of righteousness and respectability.

My reason for referring to these heritage buildings was their contrast to the tabernacle or tent of meeting Moses made in the desert. The outside of this ‘building’ was very plain- it was a tent made of animal hides. Its beauty or holiness was found on the inside where the Ark of the Covenant, a coffin-like box with a cover of pure gold was kept. That beauty of course, was but a reflection of the beauty of the Lord. The tent of meeting was nothing without the ark. Is this why the Lord begins with the ark, as he gives to Moses on the mountain instructions for building a house in which the Lord would dwell? It was between the cherubim on the cover of this ark that the Lord came to dwell among his covenant people (25:8, Ps 99:1).

We will try to picture this ark from what is written here and elsewhere in the Scriptures; drawings may be helpful if they are accurate. This sacred chest was made according to the design given by the Lord because it was a copy and shadow of the heavenly things (Heb 8:5). We no longer have a copy because we have the reality in Jesus Christ, but we can learn from this copy of the reality. We will look at the Ark of the Covenant under the subheadings: chest, cover, contents, communion of God with his people.

**1. Chest**

Before giving Moses his plan for the tent of meeting or tabernacle, the Lord tells Moses how to make the most important piece of furniture to be put in it, namely the Ark of the Covenant. In my Hebrew dictionary this word (*aron*) is translated ‘ark, coffin, chest, box’. It is not the same word translated as Noah’s ark or the ark in which baby Moses was put (2:3). One scholar goes into detail describing how all these arks were God’s means of salvation but the word is not the same. The word ‘chest’ seems more applicable, and more understandable to us, but I am not going to try and change the translation found in our Bibles.

What the Lord told them to make was a box of acacia wood, two and a half cubits long and a cubit and a half high and a cubit and a half wide (25:10). With a cubit being the distance from the elbow to the tip of fingers, this makes the chest 1.1m long and 0.7m square in cross section. After making this wooden chest, they were to overlay it with gold. Gold rings were to be attached to the four corners. Two poles of acacia wood, again overlaid with gold, were to be put through these rings for the purpose of carrying the ark (25:11-15). The whole tent had to be repeatedly dismantled and assembled as they made their way through the desert towards Canaan, so this chest had to be carried along using these two poles. The poles were not to be removed even when put inside the tent (25:15).

When King David captured Jerusalem, he brought the ark up to Jerusalem with great ceremony; he did so on a cart drawn by oxen rather than have men carry it. When the oxen stumbled, Uzzah reached out to steady it; he was struck dead by the Lord for touching this holy thing (2Kings 6:7). David wanted to build a permanent tabernacle or tent, but the Lord said ‘no’. It would be his son, Solomon, who built the temple in Jerusalem.

**2. Cover**

The lid of this box was a separate piece. It was more special and holy than the box itself, being made of solid gold. The moulding included two gold cherubim, one at each end of this cover for the ark. What are cherubim we might ask? Before we come to this, note that the cover of the ark is called a ‘mercy seat’ (25:17). Actually, the Hebrew word (*kapporet*) can be translated ‘cover’. It was a simple cover for the chest, yet symbolically seen as God’s covering of sin. The Greek translation of this Hebrew word is *‘hilasterion*’, which we translate as ‘propitiation’, or ‘sacrifice of atonement’. For this reason we refer to the cover on the ark as the ‘place of atonement’, ‘place of propitiation’, or ‘mercy seat’.

The term ‘mercy seat’ comes from God’s promise to meet with his people ‘between the cherubim’ (25:22). ‘Seat’ carries the idea of a throne but the Hebrew does not really convey this idea. Allan Harman prefers the term ‘place of atonement’ to ‘mercy seat’ but notes that all our English translations use ‘mercy seat’, probably because of Tyndale’s translation of 1526.

Cherubim are first mentioned in Genesis 3: ‘The Lord placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden… to guard the way to the tree of life’ (Gen 3:24). They are guards or protectors of what is holy. They are ‘representations of mysterious, angelic beings’. They are not earthly creatures but have features of such creatures, wings and faces in particular. Their wings are huge, like those of an eagle but their faces are not of an eagle- although in John’s vision one of the four living creatures was like a flying eagle (Rev 4:7). Wings are also a feature of the seraphim seen in Isaiah’s vision (Isa 6:2). On the cover of the ark two solid gold cherubim faced each other with their wings stretched out to cover/guard the mercy seat (25:20).

**3. Contents**

In other religions the central part of the temple would be occupied by a carved image of their god. They might use solid gold to make a golden calf or bull, or maybe a lion or elephant or monkey as Hindus do in India today. The ‘temple’ Moses was told to build contained no such image. All that was in the most holy place was this box and this gold cover on it. Why a box? It was what was in the box that made it holy. So what was Moses told to put into this special box? ‘In the ark you shall put the Testimony that I will give you’ (25:16, 21).

What was the Testimony’? It was something the Lord would give to Moses (25:16, 21). When Moses came down from the mountain he brought ‘two tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God’ (31:18). The Ten Commandments were written on these two tablets. Moses smashed the first two tablets in anger when the people, led by Aaron, committed apostasy (32:19), so it was the second set that were put into the ark.

A ‘testimony’ is a record of what was said or done; it is like a witness statement. These two tablets were God’s witness to his people, a statement declaring the terms of the covenant he made with his people. Moses had written down the commandments but here was the original, written by the finger of God and now kept in a sacred and secure place. The law was to be read to the people regularly, although not from these tablets kept in the Ark of the Covenant (Ezra 8). Even so, when the people started making and worshipping other gods they were reminded that they were violating the terms of the covenant the Lord, the Lord God of Moses, made with them as recorded on the two tablets in the ark.

Moses had previously told Aaron to put some of the manna in a jar as a memorial of God’s provision of ‘manna from heaven’ in the desert. The Lord commanded that this be ‘laid up before the Testimony’ (16:34). Presumably this was done at the time the ark was constructed, although it is not mentioned here in Exodus 25. In Hebrews 9:4 we read that this manna was kept in a golden pot inside the ark. We also read that Aaron’s rod that budded also went into the ark as a sign against rebels (Numb 17:10, Heb 9:4).

**4. Communion of God with his people**

The gold-covered ark was just a box. The testimony was special, being written with the finger of God, but was still just stone tablets. They were not to be worshipped. In the days of King Hezekiah, the people were worshipping the bronze snake that Moses lifted up in the desert, so Hezekiah destroyed it. What was special, and what made this box and its cover holy, was the coming down of the Lord himself to commune with his people ‘from above the mercy seat, from between the cherubim’ (25:22, Ps 80:1, 99:1). See how it is necessary to know about the Ark of the Covenant when singing or reciting the psalms!

The ark no longer exists, but God does, and he is still to be worshipped today. He has come down to dwell among us in his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Under the old covenant, with Moses as mediator, God met with his people between the cherubim on the mercy seat inside the tent of meeting (25:22). In those days God spoke to Moses and spoke to his prophets, but in these last days, in the days of the new covenant, he has spoken to us by his Son (Heb 1:1, 2). Speaking by his Son is more complete and personal, but even under the old covenant God spoke to his people; he was not like the dumb idols worshipped by the heathen.

God meeting with his people from above the mercy seat reminds us of his meeting with Adam in the garden, with one difference. The difference is that this cover on the ark was also the place of atonement. Adam had not sinned so atonement was not necessary. But after he sinned, and for all his descendants, including you and me, atonement for sin is essential. God would later specify a day of atonement, one day in the year in which the high priest took the blood of a bull and of a goat behind the curtain, in the most holy place and sprinkled it on the mercy seat. He did this to make atonement for the sins of the people (Lev 16).

The Day of Atonement and the ritual surrounding it was most solemn and moving. Animals were sacrificed and the blood sprinkled on the mercy seat, even though the people did not see this being done because of the curtain. Some Jews long for the rebuilding of the temple and the return of this ritual, as do some Christians. But their forefathers actually forgot about worshipping God according to this way that he ordained. Moreover, the blood of bulls and goats sprinkled on the mercy seat does not atone for sins anyway.

It was all symbolic for the present time (Heb 9:9). It all pointed forward to Christ and the cross. The only blood we are concerned about is the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross and sprinkled in the true tabernacle in heaven. The Ark of the Covenant disappeared with the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians in 586BC and has never been found. We have no need for such an object because we have the Lord Jesus Christ; the ark was not to be worshipped anyway. God no longer meets with his people from between the cherubim; he meets with us in his Son, and in his Holy Spirit. Jesus says that he, along with the Father, will come and make their home with the person ‘who loves me and keeps my word’ (John 14:23). Are you such a person?

**The tent of meeting**  Exodus 25:23-26:27

The back room of my house is made of floor boards. Not only the floor but the walls and the ceiling are floor boards- it is like a big box! The story is that the previous owner was a builder who specialised in timber flooring. This room is not as big as our bedroom which is just over 4m by 4m, which is not as big as the bedroom we had in India. It was about 4m by 4m, but the ceiling was also about 4m high!

The inner sanctuary of the tent of meeting, also called the most holy place, or holy of holies, was about the size of our Indian bedroom. It was a cube with ten cubit or 4.5m sides. The outer sanctuary of meeting was twice this size, making the tent of meeting a ‘box’ 13.5m long, 4.5m wide, and 4.5m high. In the Bible measurements are given in cubits which we may think is a rough measure but there was nothing ‘rough’ or haphazard about the construction of this tent in which the Lord would come to dwell, and meet with his covenant people.

The Lord told Moses to tell the people to bring offerings of various materials for the construction of this tabernacle or tent of meeting, including its furnishings (25:1-9). He then told them how the Ark of the Covenant was to be made. This was the only piece of furniture located in the holy of holies, behind the curtain that we will learn about today. Chapter 25 goes on to detail the making of the ‘table of showbread’, and the ‘golden lampstand’ or *menorah* in Hebrew. We will skip these for the moment to get to the larger picture of the tent of meeting itself, as described in chapter 26. We will look at the curtains, the frames, and then the veils that hung in the doorways.

**1. Curtains**

The tent of meeting was just that, a tent. It had a wooden frame but the walls were of fabric and hide. There were two sets of curtains consisting of two layers each. On the inside was a richly ornamented curtain of fine linen with interwoven threads of blue, purple and scarlet. Cherubim, like those in three dimensions on the ark, were embroidered on these curtains (26:1). The curtains covered three walls, and presumably the ceiling of the tent - four walls if we include the veil that hung at the entrance. On the outside of this richly ornamented curtain was a curtain of goat’s hair, a coarse, black curtain (26:7f).

A single curtain 12.5m in length and extending across some 16m would be very heavy and hard to carry about, so the curtain was made in units that could be joined together. Five curtains 1.8m wide were joined with blue yarn, and another five joined in the same way (26:2-4). These would be coupled together using gold clasps when the tent was being erected (26:6). Regarding the length of each curtain, note that it is considerably longer than the height of the walls- 12.5m compared to 4.5m (26:2, 16). It seems that the curtain was actually drawn over the whole structure from the ground on one side to the ground on the other, or maybe not quite to the ground with this finely embroidered inner curtain. This accounts for the fact that no roof is mentioned.

The goat’s hair curtains were slightly (0.8m) longer, and there was one more of these than the inner liner curtains (11 rather than 10; 26:7,8). These were stretched over the top of the inner curtains and probably came to ground level. The extra curtain was folded over at the front of the tent (26:9). These goat’s hair curtains were joined with bronze rather than gold clasps (26:11). Gold, silver and bronze were all brought by the people but gold and silver were more precious than bronze.

The second set of two curtains were ‘coverings’ of tanned hides (26:14). No measurements are given. Ram’s hides were dyed red, the colour of blood. Was this a reminder of the blood of the sacrifice that was needed to make atonement for sin? The outermost covering was of dolphin or dugong skins. These may have been pulled tight and pegged to the ground to stop the roof sagging. This covering of animal hides would have made the tent waterproof, and also very dark inside, especially when the entrance veils were closed. The tent was not beautiful from the outside but it was immaculate on the inside when the darkness was dispelled (Ps 97:2).

**2. Frames**

The frames for the tent of meeting were made of acacia wood overlaid with gold. Our Bible refers to ‘boards’ but others refer to ‘frames’ (26:15). They may have been ladder-like structures 4.5m long and 0.7m wide. Each had two tenons or fingers that went into a socket of silver under the frame. In wood-work lessons at school I learned to make mortise and tenon joints; furniture used to be made without screws or glue. These frames were fixed together to make walls for the tent, with an extra one being used to strengthen the two back corners (26:23). To make the structure even stronger, cross bars were inserted through golden rings on the frames (26:26-28). Again the people are reminded to make or raise the tent of meeting according to the specifications given to Moses on the mountain (26:30, cf. 25:9, 40).

**3. Veils**

The tent of meeting was entered on the eastern end through a ‘veil’, which was just like the curtains but not fixed. The curtains were actually the walls and this ‘veil’ a curtain across the entrance to the tent (26:31). Actually, the first veil mentioned is at the entrance to the inner chamber or most holy place where the Ark of the Covenant was placed. Cherubim, the strange looking creatures that protected the divine seat on the ark, were embroidered on all the curtains. This entrance curtain was hung between four pillars of gold-covered acacia wood with golden hooks (26:32). The ark was brought in and placed behind the veil and in the centre of the most holy place (26:33).

The table of showbread and the lampstand, which we will now describe, were placed outside the curtain in the holy place (26:35). The holy place was entered through another colourful veil or curtain at the east end of the tent of meeting. This was hung from five pillars rather than four, and the base sockets of the pillars were bronze rather than silver (26:37).

**4. The Table, the Lampstand and the Altar of Incense**

In the first chamber of the tent of meeting, the holy place, the people were to place the table on the north side and the lampstand on the south side (26:35). How were these pieces of furniture made, and what were they for? We look back to the previous chapter to find out.

The table was of acacia wood overlaid with gold. It was 0.9m by 0.5m and 0.7m high- the cubit measure was easier in that it only came down to a half fraction! (25:23); this table had a gold rim of one handbreadth all the way around. Like the ark and other furnishings, it had gold rings at the four corners for the gold-covered wooden poles used to carry it.

Various utensils of pure gold were made for this table (25:29). But the significant thing on this table was the ‘bread of presence’ or ‘showbread’; hence the name, ‘table of showbread’ (25:30). Twelve cakes, in two piles, were kept on this table at all times; replaced by fresh cakes each day (Lev 24:5-9). This bread was for the priests, for Aaron and his sons to eat inside the holy place- except when David came along desperate for something to eat (1Sam 21:6). Its significance was as a permanent offering to the Lord, an acknowledgement of his blessing upon their labours. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, ‘Give us this day our daily bread’ he, and they, may have reflected on this showbread.

The lampstand that was placed opposite the table of showbread in the holy place was made of solid gold. Its size is not indicated but it must have been of considerable size to give the light necessary inside the dark chambers of the tent. It was certainly an object of beauty, and desirable for the 34kg of gold that went into making it (25:38). We know that the Romans took a liking to this lampstand when they sacked and burned the temple in AD70 because of the Arch of Titus in Rome. On this Arch are carved images of the spoils they took at the fall of Jerusalem. Among these appear the golden lampstand and the table. It pictures a lampstand almost the height of a man, with a base, a stem, and three branches each side of the stem.

Moses was given instructions on the mountain to make this lampstand of pure gold, hammered into a central stem, with three branches on each side. These branches were made to look like the branches of a flowering almond tree. The almond tree was the first to flower in the spring. It is a member of the *Prunus* genus, which includes cherries, peaches, nectarines and apricots. We have almond orchards in Australia but the one I visited was in California; it was the orchard of a church member we visited. We love almonds and the children of Israel must have loved them also! Some, of course, love the flowers more than the fruit! The side branches of this *menorah* had bowls at the tips shaped like an almond flower; the central stem had four such bowls, but then there is reference to just seven lamps (25:34, 37). Into these bowls oil, olive oil, was poured, and a wick was placed in this oil and lit. This gave abundant light throughout the tent of meeting. The priests had to replenish the oil and trim the wicks regularly; the lamp was kept burning all the time.

The prophet Zechariah had a vision in which he saw a seven-stemmed lamp of solid gold with an olive tree on each side, presumably feeding the lamps with oil (Zech 4:2-3). This is the vision or prophecy from which we learn, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit’ says the Lord” (Zech 4:6). God, by the power of his Spirit, would encourage and empower Zerubbabel in rebuilding the temple. The number seven symbolises completeness or perfection.

The altar of incense was also located in the holy place, just outside the entrance to the most holy place- even though it is not described until chapter 30 (30:6, cf. Heb 9:3). This small altar, just one cubit or 0.5m square, was made of acacia wood overlaid with gold. It had ‘horns’ or projections of gold on each corner, and gold rings to carry it, of course. The priest was to burn fragrant incense on this altar every morning and every evening when he came in to tend the lamps (30:7, 8). Details of the special incense to be burned on this altar of incense situated before the Ark of the Covenant are given at the end of chapter 30. No other incense was to be offered on this altar, and no one was to use this special incense outside this holy place (30:9, 37). Every year, on the Day of Atonement, Aaron was to sprinkle blood on the horns of this alter to cleanse or consecrate it. The incense served to cover the smell of blood within the tent, but it also symbolised the prayers of the people.

In conclusion, we note some of the symbolism surrounding the design of the tent of meeting and its furniture. We have just referred to the symbolism associated with the smoke of burning incense. In Psalm 141:2 we sing, ‘Like incense may my prayer, before your face arise’. Lots of people were praying outside the temple when Zacharias the priest went in to burn incense (Luke 1:9,10), and in Revelation 5:8 we read of ‘golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayer of the saints’. We have also noted with the lampstand the symbolism associated with the number seven. Moreover, we have a sense of perfection in the ‘perfect’ cubical shape of the inner chamber. The New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, is similarly a cube, according the John’s vision (Rev 21:16).

The most important symbolism is the curtain which ‘hid’ the Ark of the Covenant. The writer to the Hebrews explains that only the high priest went into the most holy place, and that just once a year (Heb 9:7). Moreover, he went in ‘not without blood’, which he sprinkled on the mercy seat to make atonement for sin. This writer goes on to say, ‘But Christ came as High Priest of good things to come’ (Heb 9:11). He pictures Christ going into this most holy place with his own blood to make a once-for-all offering to bring eternal redemption- not into the tent built by Moses but the original in heaven. The blood of Christ is powerful to cleanse our hearts of sin, something the blood of animals could never do. He gives us his righteousness so that we can enter into God’s presence without the need of any priests, apart from Jesus himself. Such great redemption, and access to the throne of grace, is pictured in the tearing of the curtain in the Jerusalem temple as Jesus gave himself as a sacrifice for our sins (Mat 27:51, Mark 15:38, Luke 23:45).

**The court of the Tabernacle and its furnishings** Exodus 27

On a recent morning walk we stopped to watch a huge back-hoe demolishing a house. I am sure they will build a duplex on the block within the next year because this is happening on many sites in our suburb. Before the work of demolishing and building begins they put up a safety fence around the site. Galvanised steel frames with wire mesh centres are inserted into hard plastic ‘feet’ that link them together. The tops of the frames are clipped together with a metal bracket. The ‘fence’ around the tent of meeting that Moses made, was not unlike this safety fence. Iron was not available at that time in history so the posts were made of wood and the sockets or feet were made of bronze, and the brackets of silver (27:17).

In chapter 27 we move outside the covered tent of meeting into the surrounding court; we can still call the whole structure the ‘tent of meeting’ or ‘tabernacle’. The chapter begins with the God-given plan for the altar of burnt offering, but we will begin with the court in which this altar was placed. We will also look at the bronze laver or basin that was also located in this outer court, but not described until chapter 30:17-21.

**1. Boundary of the tabernacle**

The tent of meeting was symmetrical with the inner chambers at one end and an open court at the other. The whole compound of 100cubits by 5cubits was surrounded by ‘hangings’ or tent curtains: in metres it was 46m by 23m, about the size of four tennis courts. At the intersection of the diagonals on the western half was the Ark of the Covenant, and at the same point on the eastern half was the altar of burnt offerings. The single entrance to the compound was via a gate or curtain at the eastern end.

The ‘fence’ of this compound was made with pillars, presumably of acacia wood, spaced just over 2m apart and inserted into bronze sockets. The length of these pillars, and therefore the height of this fence, was again just over 2m. There is no mention of crossbars but with the pillars having ‘sockets’ and ‘hooks’ or brackets it seems they were frames, a bit like the safety fence I saw. A ‘hanging’ or curtain made of fine woven linen covered these frames of the fence (27:9). The mention of bronze pegs in verse 19 suggests that guy-ropes were used to secure this fence and stop it being blown over in a desert storm.

This continuous fence bordering the tent of meeting prevented animals, and indeed people, from wandering in, and from seeing in. The people could of course, enter the outer court as they came with their sacrifices to worship the Lord. The tent of meeting was located at the centre of the whole camp, with each tribe being given a designated site to set up camp around this central place of worship. We presume that when they arrived at a new campsite during their journey the tent of meeting was set up first.

The one entrance to the compound was at the eastern end. A screen or curtain just over 9m wide was set in place at the entrance. This screen was different to the rest of the fence in that it was to have threads of blue, purple and scarlet woven into the linen; but there is no mention of the cherubim patterns that were on the inner curtains (26:16). The entrance curtain was to be hung from four pillars or frames. All the utensils used in this court were made of bronze rather than gold which was used for utensils in the inner chambers (27:19). The people were not permitted to enter the inner chambers but they came into this court with their animals for sacrifice.

**2. Bronze altar**

At the centre of the outer court was the bronze altar for burnt offerings. Worship under the old covenant involved animal sacrifice. People brought sheep, goats and bulls to offer to the Lord as a sacrifice for sin because, ‘without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness’ (Heb 9:22). The penalty for sin since the time of the Fall is death, and death is marked by blood. The worshipper would bring an animal, lay his hands on its head, symbolising the transfer of sin to the animal, which was then slaughtered and its blood sprinkled on the horns of the altar. He had to do this again and again because this blood in itself did not bring forgiveness. This animal sacrifice pointed to Christ and his sacrifice that does bring forgiveness of sin to the believer (Heb 9:9).

Upon entering the place of worship the person came first to the altar of burnt offering. This altar was an imposing structure, five cubits or 2.3m square, and 1.3m in height. It was basically a box made of acacia wood covered with bronze. A distinctive feature of this box was the ‘horns’ or projections from each of its four corners (27:1, 2). An altar was built for the purpose of burning a sacrificial animal after draining its blood. In the Book of the Covenant they were instructed to make an altar of earth or uncut stone (20:24). It may be that this bronze altar was partially filled with earth because it was to have a bronze grate set midway down on the inside (27:4,5).

An open fireplace has a grate underneath in which ashes accumulate; these have to be cleaned out with a shovel. A barbeque on the other hand has a grate above the fire. Maybe this was the purpose of the grate in this bronze altar. Fat would drip through and burn up in the fire. We cannot be sure of some details about this bronze altar but we know that like other furnishings it had rings, bronze rings at each corner and poles for carrying; it must have taken a few men to carry this huge object.

The ‘horns’ of this altar feature in a number of references in the Bible. Well known to us is Psalm 118:27, where we sing of binding the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar. This may refer to sheep or goats but it would have been difficult to manage a live bull on the altar. It would even have been a challenge to get a huge carcase onto the altar! After the animal was slaughtered, its blood was collected and the carcase was completely burned up, or just roasted, on this altar.

The ‘horns’ of the altar were symbols of power, like the horns of a bull. We have read of men taking hold of these for protection from the avenger of blood in the days before cities of refuge were established (21:14). In the days when Solomon was exacting judgment on his enemies both Adonijah and Joab fled to the tabernacle to take hold of the horns of the altar; Adonijah fared better than Joab! (1Kings 1:50 cf. 2:28).

Animals were sacrificed every day, keeping Aaron and his sons busy collecting the blood and burning the sacrifice. Blood was sprinkled on the horns of the altar and also taken into the holy place. On the annual Day of Atonement, Aaron as high priest would take the blood of a young bull as a sin offering and sprinkle it seven times before the mercy seat on the Ark of the Covenant. He would do the same with the blood of a goat, a sin offering for the people. He would also sprinkle blood on the horns of the incense altar and other things inside the holy place to consecrate them. He would also sprinkle blood on the horns of the bronze altar and pour blood at its base (Lev 4:25, 30). Everything in the tent of meeting had to be ‘cleansed’ with blood.

This chapter ends with instructions for the people to bring ‘pure oil of pressed olives for the light’ so that the lamps on the *menorah*, details of which were given previously, could be kept burning continually (27:20). The people supplied olive oil of the highest quality but it was Aaron’s job, along with his sons, to refill the lamps and trim the wicks morning and evening every day (27:21).

**3. Bronze basin**

In addition to the altar of burnt offering, a basin containing water was placed in this outer court; it was placed between the bronze altar and the entrance to the holy place. Instructions for making this basin are given in chapter 30, after the two chapters of instructions regarding garments for the priests and their consecration. Instructions about making this bronze basin are brief; there is no indication of its size or shape. It was to be made of bronze, as with other things in the outer court, and possibly in two pieces, a basin and a base (30:18).

This wash basin was actually made from ‘the bronze mirrors, of serving women’ (38:8). Mirrors in those days were made of polished bronze; glass mirrors would not be used until Roman times. This wash basin must have been a thing of beauty as well as utility; it was there for Aaron and his sons to wash their hands and feet (30:19). There is no mention of any flooring within the inner chambers but it was customary for people to wash their feet when entering someone’s house, and this was the house of the Lord!

Sacrificing animals and collecting the blood to sprinkle before the Lord would have been a rather messy business. The priest had to wash his hands as well as his feet before entering the holy place. In fact, he had to wash before and after making a burnt offering to the Lord (30:20). The consequence of failing to undertake this ritual washing was severe- ‘lest they die’ (30:21).

This act of washing symbolised the need for priests to remain holy and pure in their service to the Lord. Only priests were allowed into the holy place and the most holy place, and they were not to enter unless they had performed this ritual washing. This was a permanent statute for those ministering before the Lord, although Ezekiel prophesied of a time when the Lord himself will cleanse his people from their filthiness, and give them a new heart and a new spirit (Ezek 36:25,26).

The Pharisees, who opposed Jesus, were big on ritual washing, especially cups and dishes, but only on the outside (Mat 25). One Pharisee marvelled that Jesus did not perform ritual washing before dinner (Luke 11:38). Jesus took the opportunity to condemn them for focussing on outward cleanliness when their heart was full of greed and wickedness.

The ritual washings associated with the old covenant remind us of the need to be pure and holy on the inside when we come before the most holy God whom we worship. We must have our hearts cleansed of sin, something that can only be done by, ‘Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood’ (Rev 1:5). The apostle Paul also refers to Christ giving himself for the church that he ‘might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word’ (Eph 5:26). He was aware that we in the church must be pure and holy, without spot or blemish, if we are to be made the bride of Christ.

The amazing truth of the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ is that Jesus does this cleansing for us; he had to because it is not just dirty bodies but dirty hearts that prevent us from entering into the presence of the Lord. ‘Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water’ (Heb 10:22). The washing ritual of the priests, here set down for the old covenant, is a symbol pointing forward to the reality of inner washing of our hearts that we, as believers, know under the new covenant.

**The dress of the high priest**  Exodus 28

While the people of God were camped at Mt Sinai, the Lord called Moses up the mountain. As he went up, a cloud reflecting the glory of the Lord came down on the mountain. ‘Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights’ (24:18). He was there to receive God’s plans for building their place of worship, the tent of meeting where God would come to meet with his people. God would come to dwell between the cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant.

The ark was located in the most holy place. Nothing unholy was allowed behind the curtain that separated the holy place from the people. A mediator was required, someone to stand between a holy God and a sinful people. God told Moses to take Aaron his brother and set him apart to minister before God as priest, along with his sons (28:1). Only priests were allowed into the holy place, and only the high priest was allowed into the most holy place, and that only once a year. We will discuss more of the duties of the priest after we have looked at the dress Moses was told to make for the high priest associated with this tent of meeting. The much-less elaborate dress of other priests, Aaron’s sons, is mentioned in the closing verses of the chapter.

**1. Dress**

Use of gold and other precious materials added to the holiness of the tent of meeting and its furnishings. The actual holiness came for the presence of the invisible God of course. The earthly things reflected the beauty and majesty of the Lord of heaven and earth. The word ‘holy’ means to be set apart. So even though the holy God was coming to dwell among his people, it was still necessary that there be a separation, and necessary that the mediator be made holy. Aaron was made holy by washing with water (29:4, Heb 10:22), and by wearing special garments. Gifted artisans were to make the garments according to the pattern given to Moses on the mountain.

The whole tribe of Levi was to be set apart as priests to minister before the Lord in the tent of meeting. Moses and Aaron were Levites. Aaron was chosen by the Lord to be high priest, the one to wear the ephod and special garments described in this chapter. His four sons, Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar were consecrated along with Aaron but their dress was not so elaborate: ‘For Aaron’s sons you shall make tunics’ with sashes (28:40). We were introduced to Nadab and Abihu previously (24:1); when we next hear of them it will be to learn of them being struck down by the Lord for offering ‘profane fire before the Lord’ (Lev 10:1-2).

The building of the tent of meeting was to be ‘according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain’ (25:40), and it was the same with the dress of the priests, and indeed with every aspect of worship, something Nadab and Abihu, and many Christians today, fail to a understand. Other religions had holy places and priests but only in Israel was worship commanded by the living God.

The dress that Aaron was to wear was unique in its beauty and glory (28:2). It was to set him apart as the one to minister before the Lord as priest. Moses was to gather people with skills in dress making, and whom the Lord had filled with wisdom (28:3). The dress consisted of six parts- seven if the underwear is included (28:4, 42). Fine linen was the basic cloth of the components.

a.Ephod

The first piece of the dress was the ‘ephod’, a transliteration of the Hebrew name (28:5, 6). We are not familiar with this word but it appears to be a waistcoat having a front and back panel tied together at the shoulders; some think it is more like a kilt than a waistcoat. This linen ephod was richly embroidered with gold, blue, purple and scarlet thread. It did not look out of place inside the tent of meeting where the curtains were similarly embroidered, except for the gold thread (26:1).

A sash or waistband of similarly ornate workmanship was tied around the waist to keep the ephod in place. On the shoulder pads or epaulets were two onyx stones set in gold. On these was engraved the names of the twelve tribes, six on one and six on the other. Aaron, as high priest, was to bear the names of the tribes on his two shoulders as a memorial whenever he ministered before the Lord (28:12). It was his duty to represent the people before the Lord.

2. Breastplate

The second piece of dress was the breastplate of judgment or decision (28:15). This was made from a piece of cloth embroidered in the same way as the ephod but much smaller. It was to be 22cm square, folded over to make a pocket. This breastplate was to be attached to the shoulders with a braided gold chain; gold rings were attached to the breastplate and the shoulder pads. Gold rings on the bottom of the breastplate were similarly used to attach it to the ephod under the waistband with blue cord (28:27). The objective was to stop the breastplate coming loose from the ephod (28:28). Whenever the ephod is referred to we understand it included the breastplate and the things kept in it.

Before looking inside the breastplate we need to finish looking at its adornments. Twelve stones, all different but similarly precious and beautiful, were to be set in this breastplate in four rows of three. Stones like diamond, ruby, agate, topaz, emerald and sapphire, along with others that we cannot clearly identify, were set in gold and attached to the breastplate. On each of these stones was engraved to name of one of the twelves son of Israel (28:21). This was another memorial or reminder to the priest that he represented the people before God. ‘So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel on the breastplate of judgment over his heart when he goes into the holy place’ (28:29). Our family devotion spoke of Jesus, the high priest of the new covenant, bearing my name and yours, if you believe in Him, into the presence of the Father.

What was kept in the pocket of the breastplate? My wife tells me to say KPMG whenever I leave the house meaning, keys, phone, money, glasses; now days it is keys, phone, mask and glasses! There were just two things inside the breastplate of the priests, the Urim and the Thummim (28:30). These two objects are surrounded in mystery. Where they two flat stones? How were they differentiated? How were they used? The Hebrew words refer to ‘light’ and ‘perfection’, if that is any help. They were to shed light on the perfect will of God. They were used by the priest to make decisions in accord with the will of God.

Joshua was taken before Eleazar, who became priest after Aaron, so that Eleazar could make a decision about going into battle using the Urim (Numb 27:21). David told the priest to bring the ephod so he could ask the Lord who he could trust and what he should do (1Sam 23:9-13). Exactly how the two ‘stones’ were used to make decisions is not clear. Was it as simple as drawing one out of the pocket, knowing that one was a ‘yes stone’ and the other a ‘no stone’- like flipping a coin- or was it more complicated?

c.Robe

The third piece of dress for the high priest was a robe of blue, or as some translate, violet (28:31). This was like a sleeveless caftan or poncho; it had a hemmed hole so it could be put over the head under the ephod (28:32). It must have been longer than the ephod because it had a special hem of embroidered pomegranates, alternating with small gold bells (28:33).

The bells are an interesting feature; they were not to wake up the gods of course, as in pagan temples. The high priest went into the holy place alone. The sound of the bells meant he was moving around inside. The priest’s duty in the holy place was rather risky (28:35, 43); the Lord might strike him dead if he desecrated the holy place, as Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu learnt. No specific provision is made for removing the body of a dead priest, although Jewish tradition says that a long rope was tied to the priest’s ankle when he went into the holy place.

A linen tunic was to be worn under the robe next to the skin, along with ‘underpants’ from the waist down (28:42). For the priest’s nakedness to be exposed was most offensive to the Lord, maybe because it was a common practice with pagan priests (20:26).

d.Turban

The dress of the priests was made complete with a turban of fine linen put on his head; there is no mention of footwear. A plate of gold engraved with the words, ‘HOLINESS TO THE LORD’ was tied to the front of the turban with blue cord (28:36, 37). While his body carried the names of the twelve tribes, his head carried the name of Yahweh. He represented the people before God, and represented God before the people.

The priest was the intermediary or mediator bearing the guilt attached to the sacred gifts and offerings of the people (28:38). The Lord graciously accepted these gifts and offerings when offered according to His commands. Outward obedience is an indication of inward repentance, and understanding that ‘without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness’ (Heb 9:22).

The chapter ends with a reference to the priestly garments being put on Aaron and his sons, and with them being anointed, consecrated and set apart to minister as priests before the Lord (28:41). In the next chapter their installation will be detailed in full.

**2. Duties**

We have touched on the duties of the priest while looking at his dress, but let us summarise these and briefly note how Jesus fulfils the role of high priest in the new covenant. Aaron, as high priest, ministered before the Lord (28:1, 3, 4, and 41). Only a priest could enter the holy place, and only the high priest could enter the most holy place, on the Day of Atonement with the blood of the sacrifice. Without the priest there would be no sacrifice and therefore no forgiveness of sin. Even the king was not allowed into the temple to burn incense, as King Uzziah discovered when the Lord struck him with leprosy (2Chron 26:16f). A mediator or priest was, and is, essential to the forgiveness of sin. Note that under the new covenant it is Jesus, and he alone, who has become high priest: ‘He entered the Most Holy Place with his own blood once for all having obtained eternal redemption’ (Heb 9:12). We do not have mediatorial priests in the church.

The priest was also entrusted with the duty of making decisions from the Lord by using the Urim and Thummim. He did this because he was God’s representative before the people. This method of finding out God’s will is not referred to after the time of David, probably because of the ministry of prophets like Samuel. Although, even the apostles ‘cast lots’ in order to know the Lord’s choice of a replacement apostle (Acts 1:26) - but there is no reference to them using the Urim and Thummim. This was just before the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them. Under the new covenant there is no place for such ‘mechanical’ decision making because all believers have been given the Spirit of God. Under the new covenant we celebrate the priesthood of all believers; we can all draw near to the throne of grace and obtain mercy, and ‘find grace to help in time of need’ (Heb 4:16).

Thirdly, and finally, a duty of the priest not spelled out in this chapter was that of teaching the law of God (Deut 33:10). The law, as we know, was written on tablets of stone kept in the Ark of the Covenant. It was also written by Moses in a book, a book kept in the tabernacle and later the temple. It was Ezra the scribe and priest who brought the Book of the Law of Moses and read from it to the returned exiles (Neh 8:1-3). Under the new covenant God writes his law on our hearts. Under the new covenant our great High Priest embodies the law of God. He did not bequeath a new book of law upon the church but sent the Spirit to indwell his people. The apostle Paul called himself a minister of the new covenant, ‘not of the letter but of the spirit, for the letter kills but the Spirit gives life’ (2Cor 3:6).

**Consecration of the priests**  Exodus 29

If you enter a temple or mosque you have to leave your shoes at the door. When the Lord appeared to Moses in the burning bush he told him to take off his sandals because he was on holy ground (3:5). With the building of the tent of meeting as the place where the Lord would come and meet with his people there is no mention of the priests taking off their shoes- probably because they were not wearing any. But there were heaps of other things that had to be done before the priest could enter the place of worship; common people were not allowed to enter.

We have seen in the previous chapter the richly ornamented robes the high priest had to wear while ministering to the Lord. These were objects of beauty and glory; each part had its own significance. In this chapter we will note that Aaron had to wash his body before dressing in these priestly robes, and this was just the beginning of the ritual of consecration for him and his sons! This washing was followed by anointing with oil, and then by three sacrifices, before a meal eaten within the tent to seal the consecration. The chapter concludes with instructions for a daily offering of two lambs, the morning and evening sacrifice.

**1. Preparation of the priest**

The consecration or ‘making holy’ of Aaron and his sons began with Moses bringing them to the door of the tent of meeting for a ritual washing with water (29:4). In a parallel account in Leviticus 8, we are told that all the people were gathered at the door of the tent of meeting. The people may not have washed very often as they travelled in the desert, but this was more of a ceremonial cleansing from sin (Heb 10:22). After washing, Moses was to dress Aaron in the robes of the high priest, the tunic, the robe of the ephod, the ephod, the breastplate and waistband, and finally the turban with its gold plate or holy crown (29:5,6).

Washing Aaron and his sons with water and dressing them in their special robes was followed by anointing Aaron with oil (29:7). This anointing oil was formulated according to directions given in chapter 30:22-33- spices including myrrh, cinnamon, cane, and cassia were mixed with olive oil. This oil was only to be used for anointing sacred things. Anointing signified God’s choice, and the setting apart of a thing or person for a sacred task; for making ordinary things holy. Kings were anointed as well as priests.

You will recall that the title Messiah or Christ means ‘God’s anointed’. Christ is the anointed of God, both priest and king, two offices that were separated under the old covenant. The office of priest was restricted to the tribe of Levi, and that of high priest to the line of Aaron in perpetuity, or while ever the old covenant was in place (29:9). The word ‘consecrate’ or ‘install’ or ‘ordain’ mans to ‘fill one’s hand’; maybe a reference to filling with spiritual power compared to political power given to the king at his consecration.

Washing with water was not sufficient to cleanse from sin. Reading on we see that blood was also necessary for them to be made holy, and being holy was necessary for them to enter the presence of the holy God. Moses was to bring a young bull and two rams without blemish into the tent. You may recall that there was a bronze basin just outside the entrance to the holy place, and a bronze altar. Moses was also to bring a basket containing three types of bread: bread, bread cakes mixed with oil, and wafers spread with oil, all made from unleavened wheat flour (29:2). These will all be used in the offerings made over a period of seven days.

**2. Putting hands on the head of a bull and rams**

The next step in consecrating Aaron and his sons as priests to minister to the Lord, involved the sacrifice of the bull brought by Moses. By first placing their hands on the bull’s head, Aaron and his sons identified with this animal that was about to be sacrificed; their sin was symbolically transferred to the animal. The bull was then killed and its blood put on the horns of the altar and poured at its base (29:11-12). The fat of this sacrifice was burned on the altar, while the rest of the carcase was taken outside the camp and burned as a sin offering (29:14).

The symbolism is clear- sin must be removed from the presence of the Lord. The words, ‘burn with fire outside the camp’ are familiar to readers of the Book of Hebrews. This NT book is a great help in understanding the symbolism and fulfilment of OT worship. We read that, ‘Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered outside the gate’ (Heb 13:12). Jesus was crucified outside the walls of the holy temple and holy city, but his blood is powerful to sanctify people like you and me! The prophet Isaiah speaks of Jesus as being a lamb led to the slaughter, and the prophet John as the, ‘Lamb who takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29). As a lamb without blemish, Jesus offered up himself as a sin offering for sinners like us.

After sacrificing a bull, Moses sacrificed a ram. Again the priests put their hands on its head, symbolising the transfer of sin, and then the animal was killed. The blood of this first ram was sprinkled around the altar. Its carcase was cut in pieces, washed, and placed on the altar, where it was to be completely consumed by fire, a burnt offering to the Lord (29:17, 18). The smell of burning flesh may not have been pleasant to the people, but it was a ‘restful’ or ‘pleasing aroma’ to the Lord. The Lord must have been pleased with the obedience of the people in offering this perfect, unblemished animal as a sacrifice for their sin. Let no one offer to the Lord what cost them nothing.

A second ram was sacrificed in the same consecration ceremony. Aaron and his sons put their hands on its head before it was killed (29:19). In a strange but significant ritual, some of the blood of this second ram was put on the lobe of Aaron’s right ear, and the same with his sons. Blood was also put on his right thumb and on their right big toe (29:20). What was all this about? This ritual continued with some blood and anointing oil being sprinkled on Aaron and his garments, as well as on his sons and their garments (29:21). This was to hallow or make holy the person and their garments. The ear was symbolically cleansed and dedicated to hearing God’s voice. Hands and feet were dedicated to doing the work of the Lord- thumbs and big toes are critical to our working (Judg 1:6). The apostle Paul tells us to offer ourselves to God as a ‘living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to Him, which is your reasonable service’ (Rom 12:1). Our ears, eyes, tongue, hands and feet are to be dedicated to serving the Lord in response to his immeasurable mercies.

After ‘touching’ the blood of the second ram, the ram for consecration, on the ear, thumb and big toe of the priests and sprinkling some of it on their garments, the fat portion of this ram was to be given to Aaron and his sons. They were also to take in their hands the unleavened bread products from the basket and ‘wave them as a wave offering before the Lord’ (29:24). What was a wave offering? To help make sense of this, consider the priest waving this offering forward and back rather than side to side. This symbolised giving the offering to the Lord, and the Lord giving it back. We know that whatever we give to the Lord, he is powerful to give back to us many times over (Luke 6:38).

This wave offering is also called a peace or fellowship offering. After waving the fat portion and the unleavened bread before the Lord, this offering was burnt as a burnt offering, a pleasing aroma before the Lord (29:25). But the rest of the sacrificed ram, its breast and its thigh portion, was to be given to Aaron and his sons after waving them before the Lord. As we said, one portion was given to the Lord and the other, called a heave offering or contribution, was given to Aaron and his sons to eat in a fellowship meal.

**3. Partake of a communal meal**

This was not the meal that sealed the covenant- that was the Passover. The Passover continued as a memorial meal, celebrated each year by all God’s covenant people. This meal was to seal or ratify the priests in their duties under the covenant. Only priests were to partake of this meal (29:33). After their anointing by the door of the holy place, the priests were to eat the flesh of the sacrificed ram with the unleavened bread products after these had been offered to the Lord in atonement for sin (29:32,33). These holy men were to eat holy food in the holy place as a sign and seal of the high and holy calling they had received from the Lord. Ordination vows, like marriage vows, are taken too lightly by many in the church today.

This communion meal was only for priests, and only at the time of consecration. Provision was made for the priests to take portion of the fellowship offering on a regular basis. The Levites were also provided for from the tithes of the people. There was also ransom payment or ‘temple tax’ of a half-shekel imposed on every male above 20yrs of age (30:11-16).

A new high priest was inducted when the sitting high priest died (29:30). The special dress made for, and worn by Aaron, was to be handed on to the son who became high priest after him- Eleazar as it turned out. This son was to wear the ‘holy garments’ for seven days as he ministered before the Lord in the holy place. Looking ahead, we read that seven days was the duration of the consecration of Aaron and his sons, and that a bull was offered every day as atonement for sin- lots of sin, so lots of blood? There is no mention of two rams being offered daily, or sprinkling of the holy garments with blood, although some think this was the case for each new high priest. What we read is that the blood of the bull was used to cleanse and sanctify the altar, a daily sacrifice for seven days (29:36, 37).

In this manner the altar became most holy, not unlike the ark itself. No one was to touch the altar unless they had been made holy: ‘Only those who had been consecrated to the Lord for service in the Tent (i.e. the priests) were to come near and touch any of the things appointed for worship there’.

**4. Prescribed daily sacrifices**

With the tent of meeting set up, the altar made holy with blood, and the priests consecrated to minister before the Lord, daily sacrifices were to begin. Every day a year-old lamb without blemish was sacrificed in the morning and in the evening. Some flour, oil and wine was to be offered along with the lamb as a burnt offering to the Lord (29:40-41). This meant, in effect, a continual burnt offering, with smoke going up as a pleasing aroma to the Lord (29:42). These offerings had to be in place for the Lord to come and meet with the children of Israel, a meeting mediated by the consecrated priest.

When the tent and its furnishings were all consecrated or made holy, and the priests were also consecrated, then and only then did the Lord come to dwell among his people, as promised in the words: ‘I will dwell among the children of Israel and will be their God’ (29:45). This is what the Lord declared through Moses as he finished giving him details for the building of the tent of meeting and its contents, for the making of special garments for the high priest, and directions for making holy the things and the people who were to minister in this holy place. The written law, along with specific directions regarding worship, were all part of the covenant God made with his people, his people being those he delivered out of Egypt for the purpose of making a holy nation in which he would be glorified in all the earth.

**Final instructions to Moses on the mountain** Exodus 30:22-31:18

The Lord called Moses up Mt Sinai. While there he gave him detailed plans for constructing the tent of meeting, the place where the Lord would come to meet with the people he delivered out of Egypt. The Lord told Moses how to dress and consecrate Aaron and his sons as priests. These details extended to the giving of a unique formula for making anointing oil and incense, which we will look at briefly now.

Seven chapters after calling Moses onto the mountain, the Lord ‘made an end of speaking with him on Mount Sinai’ (31:18). He gave Moses two tablets of stone on which he had written ‘the Testimony’ or the Decalogue. So it was that after forty days, Moses came down from the mountain. We will now look at the two fragrances the people were to make, the two craftsmen God called by name, the two tablets of stone, and the Sabbath as a sign of the covenant.

**1. Two fragrances: anointing oil and incense**

The fragrances have been mentioned already, the anointing oil in connection with the consecration of the priests, and the incense with the altar of incense. Both were unique, divinely-given formulations, not to be used for any but divinely prescribed purposes. Anyone who copied the formulation, or used it outside the holy place, was to be ‘cut off from his people’, as in condemned to death (30:33, 38).

The ingredients of these fragrances were among the things the people were asked to bring as an offering to the Lord, namely rare and costly aromatic spices (25:6). Specified amounts of myrrh, the sap of balsam bushes; of cinnamon, the bark of a bush; fragrant cane, the pith of the root of a reed; and cassia, dried flowers from a cassia tree, were mixed with olive oil (30:23-24). This holy anointing oil was used to consecrate Aaron and his sons as priests, and also to ‘consecrate’ or make holy the tent of meeting itself and all its furnishings (30:26-28). By anointing these articles they were set aside for religious purposes: ‘Whatever touches them must be holy’ (30:29). The anointing oil itself was holy and was not to be used for anything but prescribed religious purpose (30:32).

The incense was similarly a special formulation, a dry powder burnt on the altar of incense. The ingredients are listed as gum resin (stacte), onycha, galbanum, pure frankincense and sweet spices in equal amounts (30:34). We cannot identify all of these but frankincense was from the bark of a tree, onycha from a shellfish, and the others plant gums of some sort. Salt may have been added to make this mixture burn better. It was burnt by the priest on the incense altar at the entrance to the most holy place (30:35-36). Again, people were warned not to make this fragrant mixture for personal use (30:38).

**2. Two craftsmen**

The people were told to bring specific offerings to the Lord, while plans, patterns and formulas were given to Moses for the making of the tent and its furnishing, the garments of the priests and these holy fragrances. But who would actually make these things? The Lord completed his instructions by naming two men, two craftsmen for this task. Bezalel of the tribe of Judah was to be in charge, and Aholiab from the tribe of Dan would assist him (31:2, 6). That these two names are remembered rules out any theorising that this account was written much later than the time of Moses; this reads as an eyewitness account, which it is.

Note the qualifications of these two men- Bezalel in particular. He probably had the skills of a jeweller and maybe a wood carver but the reason for calling him by name was because the Lord had ‘filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in knowledge and in understanding’ for the assigned task (31:3). You might think he was just a jeweller doing his job, but any skill we have is a gift from the Lord. Choosing a career and learning this career is ‘of the Lord’, is it not? Even so, Bezalel was filled with the Spirit of God for the task of constructing the house of worship according to the divine design.

Shajahan selected skilled stone masons to design and build a tomb for his wife, the Taj Mahal. It is a magnificent building, worth seeing if you get the opportunity to visit India. But it is said that after the building was completed, he put out the eyes of those artisans and builders so they could never build another Taj Mahal. I am sure Bezalel was not ‘rewarded’ in such a manner!

Do you recall another man being given the Spirit of God and wisdom? The seven men chosen by the early church to serve tables were ‘full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom’ (Acts 6:3). Whatever the Lord calls us to do we must do it with all our heart and all our ability, knowing that the Lord gives us the necessary skills. It is often said that the Lord chooses men or women who are available rather than able. This is true to the extent that in giving his Spirit, God gives wisdom and knowledge and understanding. ‘Not by might nor by power but by my Spirit’ says the Lord (Zech 4:5). Can we ever say of a calling, ‘I am not able’, when the Lord is powerful to enable us? Moses himself learned not to say ‘no’ to the call of God. Bezalel, it seems, was not so foolish (see 36:2-4).

Bezalel was not called to do all the work alone. Having a call, and having the Spirit of God, does not make us indispensable. God appointed Aholiab, whose name means ‘tent of the Father’, to assist him; Bezalel means ‘in the shadow of God’. And there were other similarly gifted artisans also (31:6). Moses goes on to list all the articles these artisans were to build and the holy garments they were to stitch, or have stitched, for the priests (31:7-11).

**3. Two tablets**

The reason God called Moses up the mountain was to give him tablets of stone, and the law and commandments, ‘which I have written’; we were told this back in 24:12. Now that Moses is about to come down from the mountain, after forty days, we again hear about these ‘tablets of stone’. We now see God’s promise fulfilled: ‘He gave Moses two tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God’ (31:18). We do not speculate concerning God’s finger and how he wrote because the meaning is clear. Moreover, it was not a case of Moses finding these tablets on the mountain, a deception used by more than one sect leader; these tablets were given to him by God.

The tablets are called, ‘tablets of the Testimony’ here in verse 18. They were documents relating to the covenant God was making with his people. Because God declared this covenant, it was fitting that he write it. And it was fitting that these documents be kept in the chest called the Ark of the Covenant, with its cover as the place where God came to dwell among his people. Actually, it was a replacement set of tablets that were put into this chest because Moses smashed the first set (32:19).

When nations made treaties in those days it was the practice for each to take a copy of the document away with them. Most likely, these two tablets were duplicate copies of the Ten Commandments, both kept in the most holy place. This was the most secure place in the camp because if anyone other than the high priest entered they would be struck dead by the Lord. These tablets were written on both sides (32:15); like any legal document, there was no blank page for additions to be made.

**4. The Sabbath as a sign**

Before coming down from the mountain the Lord reminded Moses of one particular commandment, the command to keep the Sabbath day holy (31:13 cf. 20:8-11). The principle of one day rest in seven was not something new, something introduced in this Mosaic covenant. It was based on the truth that after creating everything in the universe in six days God rested on the seventh day and made it holy. The Sabbath was enshrined in the covenant but it was, and is, a creation ordinance for all people. When the Lord enshrined it in the covenant he did so on this basis, and he does so again as he gives Moses the two tablets of the Testimony (31:15).

Why is the Sabbath referred to at this time? Some think it is a reminder that even the work of building the tent of meeting was not to be done on the Sabbath. That no doubt was true, but not the whole reason. God’s Sabbaths were to be kept as a sign between God and his people, a sign of the covenant in perpetuity: ‘I am the Lord who sanctifies you’ (31:13). When we think about covenant signs we think of the rainbow God gave to Noah after the flood. This was a sign of his covenant or promise not to flood the whole world ever again. The rainbow was not new, but was designated by God as a covenant sign (Gen 9:11-13). When God made a covenant with Abraham he gave circumcision as a sign of his covenant (Gen 17:11). Now we read of God making the Sabbath a sign of the covenant he was making with the children of Israel through Moses (31:13).

Like the tent of meeting and all its furnishings, the Sabbath was holy, a holy day of rest, of ceasing from work to remember the Lord. So we should not be surprised that anyone who violated the holiness of the Sabbath was to be ‘cut off from among his people’, or in the next verse, ‘be put to death’ (31:14, 15). What happened if anyone touched the Ark of the Covenant? Remember Uzzah (2Sam 6:7). What happened if anyone disobeyed the command about burning incense before the Lord? Remember Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:1, 2). ‘Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death’ (31:15).

When Moses received the two tablets, with the Ten Commandments written on them by the finger of God, he reminded the people of the Sabbath rest. He commanded them not to kindle fire on the Sabbath day (35:1-3). Sometime later in the desert a man was found gathering sticks on the Sabbath and was stoned to death (Numb 15:32-36). Do you think this to be a very severe penalty? Indeed it is, but the command is clear; and the Lord judges justly. God’s holiness must be taken seriously. Let us worship God with reverence and godly fear, ‘for our God is a consuming fire’ (Heb 12:29).

Knowing these commands helps us understand, to some extent, the Pharisees and their Sabbath laws. They of course, went down the path of legalism instead of the path of obedience and understanding of the grace of God. Jesus, the Son of God, came ‘full of grace and truth’. He came as Lord of the Sabbath. He broke many of their Sabbath rules but not the Sabbath command itself: ‘I did not come to destroy but fulfil’ (Mat 5:17, 18).

Do we in the church today take seriously the holiness of God? If so, in what way? I note that Alan Cole, a former lecturer at Sydney’s Anglican College, wrote, “The Christian’s ‘Lord’s Day’ (Rev 1:10) is not directly related to the sabbath. It is the ‘first day of the week’ (1Cor 16:2), the day of light and creation…” ‘Creation’ sounds like a link to the Sabbath Day to me! We might ask if the downplaying of the fourth commandment that we have seen in the last century led to the widespread adoption of Darwinian evolution and other ‘origin of the universe’ theories, even in the church.

We might ask if disregard for the fourth commandment has resulted in widespread disregard for the holiness of God in our society and even in our churches. Of course, we are not saved by our works but by the grace of God and the free gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. But has the gospel changed the holiness of God taught through the tent of meeting, the high priest, and in the sign of the covenant, the Sabbath day?

**The golden calf rebellion**  Exodus 32:1-6

I recently read of the terrible effects the coronavirus is having upon the church in India. Pastors and their families are succumbing to the deadly effects of this virus. I was told that over thirty missionaries were dying in a month. But more disturbing was news that Hindu converts were turning away from the Lord because Jesus was not saving them from the virus. I am reminded of the orphan children of a Muslim convert who remained faithful to the Lord despite being told by Muslim relatives that the death of both parents meant Jesus had failed them.

The Lord called Moses up the mountain to give him two stone tablets, on which the Lord himself had written the Ten Commandments. This was the basic document of the covenant that God was making with the people he had recently redeemed from slavery in Egypt. God in his mercy, and with his outstretched arm, sent plague after plague upon their taskmasters until Pharaoh let them go. They escaped through the divided waters of the Red Sea, a deliverance they would never forget- so we might think. Moreover, the people had vowed, with the sprinkling of blood, to obey all the words the Lord spoke, as written down by Moses in the Book of the Covenant (24:3, 7). This was just before Moses went up the mountain to meet with God.

Moses was on the mountain just under six weeks; forty days and forty nights to be exact (24:18). He did not eat or drink during that time (Deut 9:9). Here in chapter 32 we learn what the people were doing while Moses was on the mountain. It is hard to believe, but while Moses was communing with God the people were calling on Aaron to make them other gods. Moses left Aaron and Hur in charge of the community while he was away (24:14); clearly Aaron at least, was not up to the task.

What brought about this rebellion, this turning away from the Lord by the people of God? This is an important question. It is a question the apostle Paul asked of the church at Corinth and other places; it is a question we continue to ask today. Paul actually used the rebellions of the Israelites in the desert as an example, and warning, to Christians in the early church, and we would do well to listen to both Moses and Paul (1Cor 10:7).

As we come down from the mountain with Moses, we hear the people making derogatory and disrespectful remarks about their leader, and calling on Aaron to make them gods, as in an idol, to go before them. Aaron agreed and made a golden calf, as well as an altar, and the people worshipped just like pagans.

**1. Blame Moses**

Why did the people come calling to Aaron to make them gods to go before them? Aaron had of course, be put in charge of the community by Moses when he went up the mountain (24:14). The immediate answer to this question is that Moses ‘delayed’ in coming down from the mountain (32:1). Moses had been away for forty days but there is no indication of any ‘delay’ as such because the Lord had not told him how long, and he had not told them how long, he would be on the mountain with the Lord. The people made their own judgment regarding the time their leader could be a way. They even came to the conclusion that he was not coming back. But they did not start mourning his disappearance.

These people had rebelled against Moses and against the Lord before (17:2). They speak of Moses as the man who brought them out of Egypt, but then speak of him in a derogatory and disrespectful manner saying, ‘We do not know what has become of him’ (32:1). They display a shallow, indeed flawed theology in saying it was Moses who brought them out of Egypt. Moses was the servant of the Lord, doing what the Lord told him to do. This flawed understanding leads to their idolatry, the need for a visible ‘god’. How often have you heard someone say they left the church because of its leaders? Some leaders of course, encourage a ‘cult following’, but not Moses.

Impatience, or failure to wait upon the Lord, famously, or infamously, led to the downfall King Saul. He did not wait for the prophet Samuel to come and offer burnt offerings at Gilgal; Saul offered them himself (1Sam 13:8f). Samuel rebuked him for breaking the commandment of the Lord, and declared that his rule over Israel would not continue. Impatience has led many a follower of Jesus to step out of the will of God, if not turn away completely from following him.

Patience is a virtue; it is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). James reminds us of the farmer who is patient in waiting for his crop to mature. He also reminds us of the prophets, who were examples of suffering and patience (James 5:10). The apostle Paul tells us to put on humility and patience (Eph 4:2, Col 3:12). The writer to the Hebrews urges us to imitate those who by faith and patience inherit the promises (Heb 6:12). Let us never forget how patient the Lord is with us. Yet we get so impatient with the Lord! Do you need to confess impatience? Let us remember that the Lord’s timing is always perfect, just as his ways are always perfect, even if beyond our understanding.

It was not only impatience that led to these people turning away from the Lord. As we just heard from the book of Hebrews, ‘by faith and patience inherit the promises’ (Heb 6:12). These people in the desert lacked faith. Impatience is the reflection of a heart that does not know the peace of God, a heart not trusting God as it should. Jesus said, ‘Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness and blasphemies’ (Mat 15:19). Jesus could have mentioned idolatry; which is actually spiritual adultery. These people were guilty of evil thoughts towards Moses, and would go on to blasphemy and idolatry.

**2. Bully Aaron**

The people came to Aaron demanding he ‘make gods that shall go before us’ (32:1). They would, as we just said, go on to commit idolatry in building an idol, and blasphemy in saying of this idol, ‘This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!’ (32:4). They were about to break the first three commandments, commandments they had vowed to keep just weeks before. They said Moses had brought them out of Egypt but he disappeared (32:1), so they made an object and said it brought them out of Egypt (32:4), when the truth was the Lord brought them out. What blindness! We see such blindness among people who fail to see God’s hand in the creation (Rom 1:19-21). Many make idols of wood, metal or stone like these Israelites, while others make ‘pseudo-science’ their idol.

Blindness is one thing; rebellion is another. They had seen the wonderful works of God but did not believe. ‘For who, having heard, rebelled? Was it not all those who came out of Egypt, led by Moses?’ (Heb 3:16). From this example we are warned, ‘Beware brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God’ (Heb 3:12).

In their unbelief these people called upon Aaron to make them gods, gods like those of other nations (32:1). Did they say ‘god’ or ‘gods’? The Hebrew is not clear, but does it matter? When people make one god they are ready to make another! Man-made gods are there to do what man wants of course, to satisfy the lusts of the flesh, as we will see here at Sinai. Men and women want gods to worship, but refuse to worship the true and living God. They want gods that they can manipulate. Some who say they are following Jesus are not actually following the Jesus of the Bible but a Jesus of their own imagination.

So what do we conclude about Aaron? Was he being bullied into making this idol? Yes he was! It was not his idea. Could he have resisted this pressure? Why not? Did he think that in telling them to break of their earrings he would stop their rebellion through their selfishness? But he should have known better than to bargain with the devil! This was not the first time the people had rebelled. When the people complained against Moses before, Moses cried to the Lord (15:25, 16:4, 17:4). Aaron was with Moses at those times but seems to have learned nothing. There is no mention of Aaron crying to the Lord when the people came demanding ‘make us gods to go before us’.

**3. Build an idol**

Aaron responded to the people’s request to make them gods saying, ‘Break off your golden earrings… and bring them to me’ (32:3). Whether this was a ploy or not does not matter. The people took him seriously and did as he said. It is ironic that Moses was about to enter the camp and call upon the people to bring their gold as an offering to the Lord (24:3), but with no intention of breaking the second commandment by making an idol. Just how much gold they brought we are not told, but there were a lot of people and their earrings were not necessarily small.

Aaron took the gold and fashioned it with a tool into the shape of a calf, or as many translate, a young bull (32:4). Scholars argue as to whether the idea of a bull came from Egypt, or from the Baals of Canaan. Bulls are popular as gods, even today in India, probably because of their strength or virility. When later confronted by Moses, Aaron said he simply threw the gold into the fire ‘and this calf came out’ (32:24). He knew he was guilty but did not admit it.

When he had finished the job of moulding a calf, Aaron gave it to the people, who took it saying, ‘This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!’ (32:4). It was not Aaron and his sons who said this, as some suggest. This was a god to replace the God of Moses who brought them out of Egypt. Aaron may have had thoughts of syncretism, as we will see, but the people were attributing to this idol the mighty works of the Lord. They were breaking the second commandment and the first. Breaking of the second commandment leads to apostasy, as well as blasphemy. As James says, if you break one commandment you break them all (James 2:10).

**4. Build an altar**

So was Aaron guilty of breaking the first commandment? Let us see his response to their declaration. Of his own volition he built an altar and said, ‘Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord’ (32:5). Was he backpedalling as we say, after hearing their declaration of apostasy? He built the altar to Yahweh, and no doubt encouraged them to make the prescribed offerings, burnt offerings and peace offerings, which they did the next day (32:6). Was he trying to stop them turning away from the Lord? If so, he was still guilty of syncretism, of worshipping other gods alongside the Lord, or of adopting heathen ways of worship. Did Aaron think he was helping these simple slave people worship the Lord by making this idol? Now there is reasoning we hear all too often! ‘Give the people something tangible to help them worship God’. Give them gold images of Jesus on the cross!

Aaron’s effort to direct worship to the Lord by building an altar and arranging ‘a feast to the Lord’ backfired badly. This always happens when we think we know better than the Lord, when we think his commandments need to be ‘tweaked’ to our particular circumstances. Hearing the word ‘feast’, the people got excited. They were up early the next morning, ready to perform the offerings Aaron had prepared, but then it became a free-for- all party.

It was right for peace offerings to be shared in a fellowship meal, or feast, as Aaron said, but not a feast like the pagans. They knew about the pagans and their golden bulls, and they knew how the pagans worshipped. Aaron’s ‘feast to the Lord’ soon became a party to the devil. ‘The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play (32:6). When Moses came along he saw them ‘dancing’ (32:19). They drank till they were drunk, and then it became a full-on orgy. The words, ‘rose up to play’ points to sexual activity like that seen in pagan worship.

In the church at Corinth, sexual immorality was being accepted in the church. Many had turned away from worshipping idols to believe in Jesus, but some were turning back because of false teaching. Like Moses, Paul had to deal with this situation. He urged them to flee prostitution and all sexual immorality (1Cor 6:18). These people also corrupted the Lord’s Supper with drunkenness. Paul reminded the church how God judged his people in the days of Moses. Surely we in the church today must heed these warnings from Moses and from the apostle Paul.

**Rebellion, wrath, mediation and mercy**  Exodus 32:7-14

The whole of the OT points forward to Jesus, and is fulfilled in Jesus (Luke 24:44), but the passage before us today shows this more clearly than most. We have seen the rebellion of the people in their making and worshipping the golden calf. If they thought Moses was gone for good, they were wrong. If they thought the Lord could not see them just because they could not see him, they were wrong. The Lord spoke to Moses of their rebelling while on the mountain. With urgency he told Moses to go down and see for himself what was happening in the camp of the Israelites.

The Lord responded to the rebellion of his people with wrath and hot anger. The first element of the gospel is, ‘the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all godlessness and wickedness of men, who suppress the truth by their wickedness’ (Rom 1:18 NIV). God’s wrath is met by pleading from Moses. Moses steps forward to intercede or mediate on behalf of the people. In the gospel we have a mediator, the only mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ (1Tim 2:5). What would have happened to these rebels if Moses had not interceded for them? What would have become of you and me if the Lord Jesus had not interceded for us before God in heaven? We will see how the Lord responded to the mediation of Moses. This will be the third of our subheadings today: ‘Wrath of God’, ‘Mediation of Moses, and ‘Mercy of God’.

**1. Wrath of God**

The people whom Moses lead out of Egypt pressured Aaron to ‘make us gods to go before us’, and Aaron made them a golden calf. The people then said this idol brought them out of Egypt (32:4). What happened to ‘the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt’, as stated in the preface to the Ten Commandments (20:2)? These were the people God had delivered out of Egypt in a mighty way. ‘All were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea… They drank of that spiritual rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ’ writes Paul (1Cor 10:2, 4). Here is a solemn reminder to the church of all ages. ‘But with most of them God was not pleased’ writes Paul. To say God was not pleased is somewhat of an understatement about his response to the rebellion and apostasy here in the camp at Mt Sinai, just days after they vowed to keep God’s covenant commands.

The Lord told Moses, ‘Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves’ (32:7). The Lord was not at all pleased with Aaron’s ‘feast to the Lord’, and the burnt offerings they made, even if some were offering them to the Lord. The Lord could not even call them ‘my people’; he said to Moses they are ‘your people’. The Lord cannot look upon sin. Sin separates people from the Lord no matter who they are.

The Lord was ready to wipe these people out and start again with Moses. Would he have been justified in doing so? Remember the Book of the Covenant and how often the penalty for disobedience was legislated as death. ‘He who sacrifices to any god, except the Lord only, he shall be utterly destroyed’ (22:20). Such destruction was ‘ordained’ for idol worshippers in Canaan, but here were God’s people, or the people of Moses, worshipping an idol. God is not partial. God is just and he announces total destruction upon the people he brought out of Egypt. He was not going to listen to any excuses- we hear none anyway.

The people had turned aside from the way of God’s holy covenant and there were penalties set down for breaking this covenant. The Lord saw that these were ‘stiff-necked people!’ (32:9). Do you like the term ‘stiff-necked’? - as long as is it not applied to you! We speak of people being as stubborn as a mule, and that is exactly what the Lord saw in the hearts of these people - stubbornness, arrogance, impatience and ultimately ignorance of God and his word. The apostle Paul used a similar term for the rebels at Corinth: he called them ‘puffed-up’ meaning proud, arrogant, and lacking in humility.

The people at Mt Sinai knew a lot about pagan worship it seems, a lot about things pleasing to the world, the flesh and the devil; but they chose not to know about the things of the Lord. Again we note that no one, including Aaron, actually enquired of the Lord regarding the ‘delay’ of Moses. They assumed their leader was lost, so took matters into their own hands. Young people often make this assumption when they leave home- I can do what I like; I answer to no one but myself. Lots of people have done this in our generation. People have listened to philosophers and scientists telling them God is dead - or ‘maybe God is dead’ as the true atheist says- and have taken control of their own lives. Such control proves to be more a dream than a reality, and so they despair. No doubt the Lord is angry at such ‘stiff-necked’ behaviour today, particularly among those who profess to be Christian.

‘Now therefore, let me alone’ (32:10). ‘Now therefore’ is very different to, ‘But now’. In Ephesians 2 we read that we ‘were by nature children of wrath’ and then, ‘But God’ (Eph 2:3, 4). A ‘But God’ will come here in Exodus, but for now it is ‘therefore’. ‘Therefore’ means, ‘the wages of sin is death’, as in Romans 6:23 where a ‘but God’ follows. But we dare not forget the ‘therefore’. Let us never forget God’s declared wrath upon sin and sinners, here expressed in his own words, ‘My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them’ (32:10).

Let us never forget the justice of God. If God is not just what hope do we have- in this world or the next? The rich and powerful who rule through corruption and violence must face divine justice. The martyrs in heaven who called for their blood to be avenged were told to wait a little while and they would see the justice of God (Rev 6:10f). Our God, dear friends, is a consuming fire (24:17, Heb 12:29). He threatened to consume these people whom he had delivered out of Egypt, and Moses at least, took this threat seriously.

The Lord knew he had promised to bring them into Canaan, but that promise could be kept by making Moses a great nation (32:10). It would have taken a long time but the Lord is ever true to his word. It had taken him over four hundred years to make the descendants of Abraham through Jacob into a nation.

**2. Mediation of Moses**

Moses was still on the mountain when he heard the Lord say he intended to destroy the rebels down at the camp. These people had complained to Moses and rebelled against him more than once. We might think Moses would be glad to see the end of them. We might think being the progenitor of a whole new nation sounded good to Moses. But no, no! Moses immediately ‘pleaded with the Lord his God’ (31:11). Moses knew God like no other man. He had been with the Lord God on the mountain for forty days, not to mention his first encounter at the burning bush. Moses had seen the power of God, the justice of God, and the mercy and love of God.

In this account we come across ‘anthropomorphisms’, the attributing of human body parts and emotions to God; when God is spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being. We have read of the ‘outstretched arm’ and the ‘mighty hand’ of God (15:16, 32:11). Now we read of the ‘hot anger’ of the Lord, and later of the Lord ‘relenting’. God’s anger is not the same as that of man because it is righteous anger, and his ‘relenting’ is not the same either. Even so, the anger of the Lord is real, and his threat to destroy these people was real. Moses did not say, ‘Oh, God is so loving he would never do such a thing’. Moses knew the Lord. He had seen the Lord fulfil his word of judgment and death upon the Egyptians.

Moses appealed to the Lord on the basis of God’s revelation of himself and his will, not on the basis of what he thought God should do. He was not telling God what to do but pleading for mercy on behalf of the people. He reminds the Lord of three things: firstly, that these were God’s people whom he had delivered out of Egypt with great power and a strong hand (32:11). They were sinning against the Lord but still they were a people whom the Lord had saved. How could he abandon such people?

Secondly, Moses reminded the Lord of the honour in which he was held among the nations, not least the Egyptians. Moses realized that the Lord’s reputation in the eyes of the world was at stake. He appealed to the Lord not to let his own name be dishonoured by the Egyptians. In a display of great power, seen by the whole world, the Lord brought these people out of bondage. He punished the Egyptians and destroyed their king, who dared to oppose the God of Israel. If the Lord now destroyed the very people whom he had rescued, what would the heathen say? They would say he was not able to bring them into the land he promised them. They would say he led them into the desert in order to kill them (32:12, Deut 9:28). Moses did not want the Egyptians to have reason to mock the Lord his God. Let God maintain his glory before the Egyptians, and all the world, by forgiving these people and bringing them into their own land as he had promised. Are you concerned for the glory of God? Do your prayers and your life reflect such a concern?

And thirdly, Moses pleaded with the Lord to remember his covenant promise to Abraham, Isaac and Israel (32:13). God promised with an oath to Abraham to multiply his descendants and give them the land of Canaan as an inheritance (Heb 6:13-18). To destroy these people, the descendants of Israel, would threaten his fulfilment of that promise, although the Lord had said he would make a great nation through Moses. So it was that ‘Moses stood before Him [God] in the breach, to turn away His wrath, lest he destroy them’ (Ps 106:23).

**3. Mercy of God**

‘So the Lord relented from the harm he said he would do to His people’ (32:14). The Hebrew word ‘*naham*’ means to turn away from an intention to do harm, and to that extent can be translated ‘repent’; but note God never does evil such that he should repent (Numb 23:19, 1Sam 15:29). The doctrine of immutability or ‘unchangeableness’ refers to God’s person and God’s will or purposes. God does not keep changing his mind; his ways are perfect so do not change, and his ways are past finding out. God knows the end from the beginning, but we don’t. We only know what God reveals to us, and he revealed to Moses his intention to justly judge his people, but he relented after the intercession of Moses.

God responded to the intercession of Moses because, unlike other gods, he hears and he has a heart, a merciful heart. He is the almighty God of creation but also a personal God who listens and responds to the cry of his people. The Lord will later reveal himself to Moses as ‘merciful and gracious… forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin’ (34:6, 7). Moses seems to already understand this as he pleads with the Lord for mercy towards these rebellious people. Cole writes, ‘We are not to think of Moses as altering God’s purposes towards Israel by this prayer, but as carrying it out: Moses was never more like God than in such moments, for he shared God’s mind and loving purpose’.

Moses was the greatest mediator Israel had known before the coming of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was not only like God, he was God. Therefore, Jesus is greater than Moses. Moses himself said God would raise up a prophet like him from among his brothers (Deut 18:15). Moses was a type of Christ. The apostle Paul declared that ‘there is only one Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus’ (1Tim 2:5). Is it on this basis that he tells the Corinthians that the Rock that followed the Israelites in the desert was Christ (1Cor 10:4)?

The people in the desert were saved from the righteous wrath of God by the mediation of Moses. Similarly, but more so, we are saved from the wrath of God by the mediation of our Lord Jesus Christ. As our mediator, Jesus paid the penalty for our sin when he offered up himself in the once-for-all sacrifice of himself upon the cross (Heb 9:15). Where would the rebels in the desert have been without Moses the mediator? Where would, you a sinner and rebel against God, be without Jesus, the only mediator between God and man?

**Covenant broken and curse implemented** Exodus 32:15-29

Moses was on the mountain when the Lord told him that the people had turned away from his commands to make an idol and worship it. The Lord was furious, telling Moses of his intention to ‘consume’ them or wipe them out, and start again with Moses. The Lord had recently made a covenant with them, and they agreed to obey ‘all the words which the Lord had said’ (24:3, 7). Any agreement includes curses or penalties upon those who break the terms of the covenant: ‘He who sacrifices to any god, except the Lord only, he shall be utterly destroyed’ (22:20). So the Lord could justly have destroyed these people. In the final judgment God will destroy all his enemies, beginning with Satan, and then all followers of Satan (Rev 20:10, 15).

This story of the golden calf reminds us that God is longsuffering or patient, and is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (Ezek 33:11, 2Peter 3:9). We have seen that in response to Moses’ intercession, ‘the Lord relented from the harm which he said he would do to His people’ (32:14). But this is not the end of the story. The people had a faithful mediator in Moses but they had not yet repented of their sin. These people were not robots; they could not blame anyone for what they did, least of all Moses or God. Blaming your parents or your DNA will not wash with God!

These were men and women created in the image of God and responsible to God, especially after God had revealed himself to them in the covenant just mentioned. They had sinned by breaking the covenant, by disobeying God’s commands, and while the Lord was being patient, merciful and gracious, they needed to repent of their sin if they were to escape judgment and death. We pick up the story with Moses coming down from the mountain to hear and see for himself the rebellion of the people. Moses got angry and smashed the two tablets of the testimony. We read of their sin being exposed, and finally of a separation and slaughter.

**1. Singing and dancing**

The Lord called Moses up the mountain to give him tablets of stone with the commandments written on them (24:12). You may recall that Aaron, his sons and seventy elders went part of the way up, Joshua went up further, but on the final part it seems, Moses went up alone. Now that Moses was coming down after forty days, it appears that he first met up with Joshua (32:17). There is no mention of Joshua being with Aaron when the golden calf was made. Moses came down carrying the two tablets of the Testimony that the Lord gave him. We are again told that it was God who wrote or engraved on these tablets (32:16, cf.31:18), but only here are we told that they were written on both sides (32:15). The tablets would have been heavy so it was wise to use all the available space, and also wise in preventing any additions to the commandments of the Lord. Not that these tablets would be around for much longer, as we will see!

Joshua had heard a lot of noise and shouting coming from the camp at the base of the mountain. He told Moses that it sounded like there was war in the camp, and the people were giving a victory shout. But Moses said it was not shouts of victory, or cries of defeat, that they were hearing, ‘But the sound of singing I hear’ (32:18). As they got closer they saw the people dancing in what is later described as an ‘unrestrained’ and shameful manner (32:19, 25). The Lord had told Moses how the people had become corrupt, engaging in perverted, pagan-style worship that probably included ritual prostitution.

**2. Smash the tablets**

Moses was as shocked as the Lord when he saw the golden calf and debauched dancing in the camp (32:19). His anger became hot, just like the anger of the Lord. Moses was carrying the two stone tablets given him by the Lord on the mountain, the tablets on which the Lord himself had written the terms of his covenant with his people. Moses threw these down and broke them, not just out of anger but in an act symbolising the breaking of the covenant - he did this in the sight of the people (Deut 9:17). The people had broken at least three commandments, not to mention the sexual immorality they were apparently engaged in.

Moses turned his attention to the golden calf that was at the centre of the corrupted worship, the wild and sexualised singing and dancing. He took the idol and burned it in the fire, ground it to powder, and scattered this powder on the water in the wadi (32:20, Deut 9:21). And just in case they started panning for the gold to make another idol he made the children of Israel drink this water. One commentator reminds us of the water of cursing that an unfaithful wife was made to drink (Numb 5:27). I am reminded of a scene from a documentary on the history of Rome. The Romans were a brutal people- they devised death by crucifixion, as we know. In this scene, when a man who loved money was caught, they held him down and poured molten gold into his mouth to satisfy his taste for riches before killing him!

**3. Sin exposed**

Moses next turned to his brother Aaron whom he had left in charge of the camp. What did Aaron have to say for himself? Aaron had stood beside Moses during previous rebellions, but clearly had learned little; there is no indication that he cried to the Lord as Moses did (17:4). Moses did not yet know that Aaron had actually made the golden calf. He simply asked what the people had done to him that he had brought this great sin upon them; he assumed they had bullied Aaron in some way (32:21). The Lord, of course, knew of Aaron’s involvement and complicity. He was angry with Aaron and ready to destroy him, but Moses interceded for his brother (Deut 9:20).

So what did Aaron have to say? He began his defence with a plea for Moses not to be angry with him. He could not deny what Moses was viewing, and he saw the anger of Moses in breaking the tablets and smashing the idol that he, Aaron, had made. Would Moses discover this truth? Aaron responded as we all tend to do when confronted by our own sin- we blame someone else. Adam and Eve did this when confronted by the Lord in the Garden of Eden, and sinners like Aaron and like us have been doing this ever since.

Aaron blamed the people, saying to Moses, ‘You know the people that they are set on evil’ (32:22). This was true, but it was not the whole truth. Aaron recites what the people said to him, and then tells of his response. But his honest witness did not extend to his making the golden calf. At this point in his defence he would have Moses believe in some sort of magic- or was he trying to blame God for making the golden calf? He told Moses he simply threw the gold the people gave him into the fire and out came the golden calf! (32:24). He could not blame another person because they would have contradicted his story. Blaming the gods, or God, was a safer, if utterly foolish option.

Parents and teachers hear very imaginative excuses from children. Officers of the law hear all manner of excuses when they catch people breaking the law. I heard that a person arrested at a recent illegal protest march in the city told police he was chasing an injured rainbow lorikeet when he ended up in the crowd! Almost as imaginative as Aaron’s excuse would you say? Can you recall an excuse you gave to someone, or to the Lord, when confronted by your sin? ‘Beware your sin will find you out’ are well-known words of wisdom. It is of course, the height of ignorance to think you can hide anything from the all-seeing and omniscient God.

**4. Separation and sword for the unrepentant**

Moses did not really respond to Aaron’s dubious accounting for his actions. We saw from Deuteronomy 9:20 that he did intercede on Aaron’s behalf when the Lord threatened to strike him. His only response here in Exodus is that Aaron failed to restrain the people. The people’s unrestrained behaviour not only offended and angered Moses, it brought shame upon them before their enemies (32:25). Allan Harman writes of this difficult to translate verse, that it means ‘potential enemies will hold them in derision because of their behaviour’. The people of Jericho heard of the crossing of the Red Sea, so maybe Balaam heard of this debauchery at Mt Sinai, giving him the idea that led to the Baal of Peor incident (Numb 25). I heard a man praising members of the church for establishing schools for poor children in Tanzania, but admitting that the shame of child sexual abuse in the church cast a shadow over such ministry.

Moses stood at the entrance of the camp and called out this terrible immorality; immorality is a consequence of idolatry (Rom 1:24, 25). He called out the sin and the sinners. He shouted, ‘Whoever is on the Lord’s side- come to me!’ (32:26). His loud, clear call was heard throughout the camp. How would the people respond to this call to ‘choose this day whom you will serve’ (Josh 24:15)? Would they repent of their sin and return to the Lord? This was what the Lord was calling them to do through his servant Moses.

Jesus said, ‘He who is not with me is against me’ (Mat 12:30). He made it clear that, ‘No one can serve two masters’ (Mat 6:24). He told the Jews who refused to come to him that they were ‘of their father the devil’ (John 8:44). Jesus spoke of separation between the sheep and the goats on the last day in Matthew 25. This day is foreshadowed by Moses’ call from the gate of the camp.

So who responded to the call to follow the Lord, to follow the Rock present with them, the Rock being Christ (1Cor 10:4)? ‘All the Levites rallied to him’ (32:26 NIV). Moses was a Levite of course, but he was not making a tribal or political call. The Levites would later be ordained as priests but were not called for this reason. The call went out to ‘whoever’. It is the same call that we hear in John 3:16, ‘Whoever believes in Him’ in Jesus, will ‘not perish’. After the call of Moses the camp was divided. Those on the Lord’s side, who happened to be Levites, and those who were not on the Lord’s side.

What happened next comes as a solemn reminder of the final judgment of God. ‘It was divine retributive justice against impenitent transgressors’. The Lord’s threat to destroy them was halted by the intercession of Moses. Moses was given time to call upon these sinners to repent. In the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ they, like you and me, were given opportunity to repent and be forgiven. Tragically, many of them did not take this opportunity and would soon face the sword of divine judgment, the sword of death.

Moses told the men who rallied to him, and to the Lord, to take up their sword and move through the camp killing ‘every man his brother, his companion and his neighbour’ (32:27). Can you imagine this? Is this simply another cruel horror story from the OT? If you think like this, read the words of Jesus more carefully (Mat 22:13, 25:30, 41, 46). Those who are against Jesus, meaning those who refuse to repent and believe in him, will be thrown into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Which is why we are told that now, today, is the day of salvation.

The Levites did as Moses commanded, and about three thousand men fell that day (32:28). When Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, similarly took up the sword, he stopped the plague that killed twenty-three thousand in the camp (Numb 23:9). The Levites and Phinehas honoured the Lord above their family and friends, which is what Jesus says we who believe must do.

It is Jesus who said: ‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple’ (Luke 14:26). Followers of Jesus must love him above all others. You may not be called to do what the Levites did but you must understand why they did what they did. They were God’s instruments for truth and justice, for divine judgment.

Moses recognised their faithful obedience, telling them to consecrate themselves that the Lord ‘may bestow on you a blessing this day’ (32:29). God’s servants are called to preach the gospel, to comfort the afflicted, and to encourage backsliders, but also to call out sin and indeed, to declare judgment upon those who refuse to repent (Acts 5:1-1, 1Cor 5:5).

**A great sin committed**  Exodus 32:30-35

‘No conviction recorded’. The sound of these words from a judge or magistrate is a great relief to anyone accused of breaking the law. A fine, or even a beating as was given in earlier days, is preferable to having a ‘black mark’ against your name. If your offense and conviction is recorded in a book it is there for ever; some go to great lengths to have such a record expunged. Records are written in ink which is difficult to erase; liquid paper only hides one side of the paper. Nowadays such records go onto the internet and up in ‘the cloud’, never to be erased.

Our creator, the God in heaven, keeps a record of everything we do and say. We don’t have to swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth before God because he knows the truth anyway. The Bible tells us of God keeping such a record in a book, a record of all our words and deeds (Dan 7:10, Rev 20:12). If such knowledge does not fill you will fear and trepidation, you do not know the holiness and holy wrath of God towards sin and sinners (Rom 1:18).

If you have turned in your Bible to read Revelation 20:12, you will note reference to another book, the Book of Life. Those whose names are written in this Book of Life will not be cast into the lake of fire (Rev 20:15). Whose name is written in the Book of Life? The apostle Paul mentions two names, Euodia and Syntyche, ‘whose names are in the Book of Life’ along with other fellow workers (Phil 4:3). In this book are the names of all believers, written there not because of works, which are recorded in other books, but because they are the elect of God, saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. It is the Book of Life, meaning eternal life.

Moses is greatly honoured by the Jews as the giver of the law. But we are learning from this incident of the golden calf that he was also a mediator, and indeed a man to whom the Lord spoke face to face (33:11). Moses is a man of ‘firsts’ when it comes to God’s revelation of himself. He is the first to write of ‘your book’, a book written by God. ‘God’s book’ is our second subheading today. Our first is ‘great sin’, and our third, ‘God’s visitation’.

**1. Great sin**

We discover a number of basic doctrines in these few verses, and the first of these in the doctrine of sin. The day after coming down from the mountain to find the people worshipping the golden calf, Moses told the people that they had committed ‘a great sin’ (32:30). Any sin is grievous to God and arouses his wrath, but the sin of apostasy, of making an image and worshipping it as another god, is a great sin arousing the ‘hot anger’ of God (32:10). Idolatry is a sin against God and a heinous sin (Shorter Catechism Q83). God is a jealous God who will not give his glory to another (20:5, Isa 48:11).

Moses did not seek to minimise the seriousness of sin, as we might be tempted to do. To see unbelievers minimising their sin is pathetic yet understandable, but for believers to minimise their sin is beyond understanding. Why minimise or try to excuse your sin when God sent his only begotten and beloved Son to die on the cross for this very purpose? Why lie and deceive yourself when you should confess your sin, knowing that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin (1John 1:8, 9)?

Moses recognised the great sin of these people in making the ‘god of gold’ (32:31). He told the people their sin and acknowledged this sin before the Lord. He knew God hated sin; he knew God was angry at these people and was ready to punish them according to the terms of his covenant, to which they had agreed. Moses had already interceded on their behalf, pleading for the Lord to stay his hand of execution on the basis of his honour and his promises. In his own righteous anger, Moses proceeded by calling for repentance, and putting to the sword about three thousand men who refused to repent. The Levites repented, and by the next day others may have also- after seeing the punishment ordered by Moses.

Repentance is one thing, and a necessary thing, but atonement and forgiveness is another. You can repent but you cannot make someone forgive you. Some people proudly say, ‘I cannot forgive’, as if they have never had to ask for forgiveness themselves! God, of course, is not a man; he has never sinned. God is holy and just, and according to his law, in which penalties are stipulated for disobedience, he must judge sin. God told Adam that the day he sinned by breaking the command, he would die. The law given through Moses reaffirmed this truth of divine holiness and justice.

But under the law, yet to be fully implemented with the building of the tent of meeting, provision was made for sins to be atoned for. There was an annual day of atonement when the blood of an animal was sprinkled on the cover of the Ark of the Covenant. Moses had seen the principle of ‘covering in blood’ in the Passover. But just how he thought he could make atonement for this ‘great sin’ of apostasy is not clear (32:30). What is clear is that he was going up to the Lord and not running away. He was going, knowing that atonement is necessary, although there is no mention of him taking the blood of an animal.

**2. God’s book**

Moses went back up the mountain to make intercession before the Lord for the people. ‘Perhaps I can make atonement for your sin’ he told the people (32:30). He confessed the great sin of the people and then made his plea, ‘If now you will forgive their sin’ (32:32). This is the first occurrence of a man pleading with the Lord for forgiveness, and it was not for his own sin. Such pleading is heard from the lips of Jesus when he was on the cross: ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do’ (Luke 23:34). Jesus made his plea with confidence because he was at that very moment shedding his own blood as a sacrifice of atonement, or propitiation, for sin (Rom 3:25). Moses does not demonstrate the same confidence when he pleads; ‘if you will forgive their sin’ (32:32).

Moses goes on to say something amazing, amazing not simply because it shows great unselfishness on his part but because it points to the act of supreme unselfishness in the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus took the punishment that was coming to us because of our sin. Moses offered to have his name blotted out of God’s book, the ‘book of the living’ (Ps 69:28) or ‘book of life’. Moses offered himself as a substitute for the people, but the Lord said ‘no’.

Was this simply a book listing people who were alive? Some take this view: “The OT ‘book of the living’ (Ps 69:28) is different from the ‘book of life’ of the NT’ writes Hyatt. Was Moses request to ‘blot me out of your book’ simply an offer to die for the people? What about the intercession of the apostle Paul for his countrymen in Romans 9:2: ‘I could wish’ writes Paul, ‘that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren’. Being cut off from Christ means more than physical death; it means eternal death.

Moses refers to God’s book in which his name is written. And note that God confirms the existence of ‘My book’, anthropomorphic language notwithstanding (32:33). Moses was making a similar plea to the apostle Paul, a huge and unthinkable decision to have the Lord ‘blot me out of your book in which you have written’. ‘Perhaps’ he could make atonement for their sin he said, as he went up the mountain. Clearly this was not the way to do so because no man can give his life to redeem another (Ps 49:7).

We may die rescuing someone we love from a fire or from the water, but this is not possible when it comes to eternal life. God made it clear to Moses, as he did through his prophet Ezekiel, ‘the soul that sins shall die’ (32:33, Ezek 18:4, 20). Besides, it is God’s prerogative to write the names in the book of life, and his prerogative to blot them out.

The unselfish plea of Moses for the Lord to punish him for the sins of others is commendable, but it is not the lesson of this passage. The Lord did not accept his unselfish offer. Why? Because, as we just learned from Psalm 49, no man, no human being, can redeem the life of another, because they cannot pay God the ransom. Why not, you ask? Because the lifeblood must be without sin. All human flesh and blood is contaminated by sin. Only one man, the Son of God, is without sin, so only Jesus could offer himself as our substitute. Jesus is the lamb without blemish, the only sacrifice that God accepts to make atonement for sin (1Peter 1:19,20). Abraham saw the day of Jesus (John 8:56) and so did Moses. Do we not get a sense of this as we read these verses?

**3. God’s visitation**

This might be sufficient glorious truth for one day, but let us look at one more solemn truth before we conclude. The Lord again dismissed Moses, telling him to go and lead the people to the place he had spoken about, namely Canaan. He assured him that his covenant with his people would continue and ‘My Angel’ would go before him (32:34, cf.23:20). But there was something else Moses needed to know. The Lord told him of a day when, ‘I will visit punishment upon them for their sin’ (32:34).

A visitation from the Lord is not always something to be feared (Luke 1:68), but in this case it will be a visitation for punishment. Jesus spoke of the coming destruction of Jerusalem as the time of ‘your visitation’ (cf. Luke 19:44, 1Peter 2:12). Jerusalem would be destroyed by the Romans, with Jews being slaughtered and scattered. The Lord visited his people prior to this in the days of the exile. These visitations, like the visitation referred to by Moses, point to ‘the day’, the ‘day of the Lord’ spoke of by the prophets. This will be the Day of Judgment, spoken of in Revelation 20:11 that we referred to in our introduction.

Although God in his grace and ‘forbearance’ does ‘pass over’ sins previously committed (Rom 3:25), a divine reckoning is certain. Moreover, divine punishment is not necessarily delayed until the day of the Lord. God can and does punish sin immediately, as we have seen here at Mt Sinai, and later in the desert wanderings. The making of the golden calf was one act of rebellion among many by the people. God ‘plagued’ them or sent them sickness a number of times as warnings and signs to keep them from going astray.

If God plagued the people for making the golden calf, how much more might he plague our generation, including those in the church, who have devised all sorts of idols to worship, and the wider world that has turned away from worshipping the living and true God. What is a plague? Just look around our city, our country and our world today! A plague means death, death to the unborn by abortion, death the elderly by euthanasia, and death by disease. Why should we be horrified at daily death counts from the coronavirus plague?

God commands us all to turn from our wicked ways and live. ‘Repent, and turn from your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin’. “’For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies’, says the Lord God. ‘Therefore turn and live’” (Ezek 18:30, 32).

**Face to face plea for God’s presence**  Exodus 33:1-17

The people Moses led out of bondage in Egypt were unfaithful to the covenant the Lord made with them at Mt Sinai; but God remained faithful. The Lord relented from destroying them in his righteous anger (32:14), and reaffirmed his covenant promise to bring them into Canaan. The Lord rejected Moses offering of himself as a substitute to bear the penalty for their sin. Their great sin of making a god of gold would be dealt with at some future time (32:34). In the meantime, Moses was told to lead the people up to the Promised Land and, ‘Behold, My Angel shall go before you’ (32:34).

It was the intercession of Moses that led to the Lord relenting from his plan to destroy these sinners. In a second intercession, Moses pleaded with the Lord to forgive their sin, but his offer was rejected. Here in chapter 33 we find Moses interceding again, this time because the Lord said, ‘I will not go up in your midst, lest I consume you on the way’ (33:3). This intercession came after penitence from the people. Moses pitched a tent outside the camp, a place where he could meet with the Lord. His face to face intercession led to the Lord promising, ‘My presence will go with you’ (33:14).

No one else in the history of Israel was like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face (Deut 34:10). In this chapter and the next, we learn so much of the character of our Lord as he reveals himself to Moses. It would not be until the coming of God’s only begotten Son that God would reveal himself more fully (John 1:18).

**1. Penitence of the people**

This chapter begins with the Lord telling Moses to get the people together and move up from Mt Sinai towards the land he promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Abraham had no land of his own when the Lord promised to give him the land where he was living as a nomad. The Lord promised to give this land to Abraham’s offspring as an inheritance. It was the land of the Canaanite, the Amorite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, people whom the Lord had determined to judge because of their sin (33:2, Gen 15:16-21). The people of God had sinned just like these pagan nations but the Lord had chosen them and delivered them out of Egypt. He chose to be gracious towards them despite their rebellion (33:19).

But things were not the same in the relationship between God and his people after their golden bull rebellion. They were told to go up and possess the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey, but God’s presence would no longer go with them (33:3). The Lord again described them a ‘stiff-necked’ people, people who did not like to bend their necks or turn into the way of the Lord. They remained arrogant and stubborn, and the Lord was afraid he might destroy them in an instant if he was in their midst (33:3). These rebels had just seen three thousand of their number put to death because of their sin, but still they are called ‘stiff-necked’. What does it take to break a person from their stubborn ways? This is a question we might ask of ourselves!

When the Lord first promised to send an angel to guide and keep the people on their journey, he spoke of ‘My name’ being in him. We concluded that this angel was the Lord himself, probably the second person of the Trinity (23:20-23). That conclusion is confirmed by the understanding of Moses and the people expressed here in this chapter. When they heard the Lord say he would not go up with them they became sad and distressed, and began to mourn (33:4). Note that the word, ‘Angel’ in verse 2 is not actually ‘My Angel’ as it was back in 23:23.

The people’s sadness at hearing this terrible news led them to penitence, to an outward show of sorrow. No one put on any ornaments (33:4). Sorrow and mourning is often shown by dressing in a dull manner, often in black. People back then put on sackcloth. In this instance they dressed without their ornaments. Also note that their sorrow was not because someone had died or because of some loss; it was sorrow and mourning over their sin.

In writing of those whose hands and hearts need cleansing, James says, ‘Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom’ (James 4:9). Preachers of previous generations called for people to weep over their sins, but such preaching is not heard so much today. The call, ‘come to Christ’ is heard but not a call to ‘weep over your sins’. Along with weeping, the Lord calls for penitence lest the sinner be found weeping that their sin was exposed. Weeping over your sin is not the same as weeping for yourself!

Every sin makes us guilty before God, so we must weep before God. If our sin is against another person let us weep as we ask forgiveness from them. We live in a world that seems to have forgotten how to be sorrow. We hear people saying ‘sorry’ but usually it is, ‘I am sorry you did not like what I said or did’. Such sorrow does not come with weeping or mourning, and of course, no penitence is shown and no change of behaviour takes place.

Casting off their ornaments had special significance for these people. It was not just a matter of ‘dressing down’. They were, in fact, given a ‘dressing down’ by the Lord, who told them to take of their ornaments as he decided what to do to them (33:5). It was ornaments, namely gold earrings that led to their great sin, to them making the golden bull. Moses had ground that gold to powder and scattered it on the water. They had other ornaments which they took off by way of penitence and obedience to the Lord. It seems they never wore these ornaments again, at least not for a long time (33:6).

It is amazing how people cling to things that led them into sin, be it riches, drink, adultery, pornography, or some other thing. I knew an alcoholic lady who gave up drinking, except on Fridays! This reminds me of another lady, a Roman Catholic, who observed Lent, a time of penitence, by giving up chocolate; I am not sure if it was just on Fridays! We must flee from evil. Paul warns us to, ‘Flee sexual immorality’, ‘Flee from idolatry’, and ‘Flee youthful lusts’ (1Cor 6:18, 10:14, 2Tim 2:22).

**2. Place of meeting**

The Lord could not ‘go up among them’ and Moses also withdrew from the camp to meet with the Lord. He pitched a tent outside the camp and called it the tent of meeting- the tent of meeting described in chapter 26 had not yet been constructed (33:7). The Lord approved of this move by Moses, indicating his presence through the pillar of cloud that came down on this tent and stood at the door. This happened whenever Moses entered this tent (33:9).

Inside this tent the Lord talked with Moses; he ‘spoke to Moses face to face, as man speaks to his friend’ (33:11). We said this chapter is most revealing of the relationship between Moses and God. Here we see the Lord coming from heaven to earth to commune with someone he created on a regular, at-call basis. This reminds us of the situation in the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve sinned (Gen 3:8), and of the central wonder of the NT: ‘The word became flesh and dwelt among us’ (John 1:14).

Can you imagine what it would be like to talk with the Lord as Moses did- to have the Lord come down to meet with you whenever you went to him? Can you imagine what it would be like to talk with Jesus on a daily basis as the apostles did? I hope so, because as a believer who has been given the Holy Spirit you have ‘fellowship with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ (1John 1:3). Jesus said, ‘If you ask anything in my name, I will do it’ (John 14:14)

In the tent of meeting Moses had access to the Lord, access to the throne of grace (Heb 4:12). He could go to the Lord any time on behalf of the people seeking to know the will of God. Whenever he went out the people stood at the door of their tent watching him go, and worshipping the Lord (33:8-10). Are these the same people that mocked Moses shortly before this (32:1)! They seem to be changed people, but who can tell? Who can tell when a person’s heart is truly changed, such that they become a new creation in Christ Jesus? Only God knows a person’s heart, apart from the person themselves. True repentance leads to forgiveness and the gift of a new heart. It leads to being born again of the Spirit of God, the Spirit being God’s seal and guarantee (2Cor 1:22, 5:5). Moses was certainly a man who knew God and was known by God. Joshua was a young man who similarly knew the Lord. He was on the mountain waiting for Moses when the rebellion broke out in the camp. Now we find him watching over the tent of meeting as a faithful servant of Moses, and of the Lord (33:11).

**3. Promise of God’s presence**

The Lord told Moses to lead the people from Mt Sinai towards Canaan. But hearing that the Lord was not going up with them disturbed him greatly. The people went into mourning while Moses went to the Lord, his third intercession. He wanted to know who the Lord was sending with him now that the ‘Angel of the Lord’ was not going with them.

Again Moses pleads on the basis of what the Lord had said to him. The Lord had told him, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found grace in my sight’ (33:12). Such words were no doubt comforting and reassuring to Moses, whose task of leading these rebellious people was not easy. And such words were helpful when it came to seeking and knowing God’s ways, in particular just who God was sending to shepherd them to the Promised Land (33:13)

Do you know the word of God, the Bible, such that you can quote it in your prayers? We know to quote Scripture against enemies like Satan, but you can also remind the Lord of promises he has made when you pray. I am sure the Lord loves to hear you quoting his words back to him! You will have heard me quote 1John 1:9 because this word assures me that God forgives my sin if I truly confess- yes, I have had to remind the Lord of this promise many times!

Based on what God had told him, Moses asked to know God and his grace, and that the Lord show him the way to go- and for God to remember his people (33:13). Moses found grace in the eyes of the Lord and received a very gracious answer. The Lord said, ‘My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest’ (33:14). Moses did not ask for rest but the Lord gave more than he asked (Eph 3:20). Moses wanted God’s assurance that his presence (lit. ‘His face’) was with him before he moved out, and God gave him that assurance.

The Lord also promised Moses rest. Rest was associated with living in the Promised Land. Rest from enemies all around. Rest is also what Jesus promises those who come to him and take his yoke upon them and learn from him (Mat 11:28, 29). Do you know that rest, rest for your weary soul? Rest is promised by Jesus; what you have to do is come to him in repentance and belief that he is the Son of God who made propitiation for your sins.

As the faithful mediator of the old covenant, Moses was not content with God’s blessing upon himself; he pressed on interceding for the people. The Lord’s answer was a promise to Moses, but what about the people? Moses pleads with the Lord to ‘bring **us** up from here’ (33: 15). He then reasons as he did in his first intercession, that God consider his glory as the God of a special people, a people ‘separate… from all the people who are on the face of the earth’ (33:16). God must go with them and lead them in to the Promised Land to glorify his holy name in all the earth.

How often do you pray that God glorify his holy name in all the earth? Such words are in the Lord’s Prayer of course: ‘Hallowed be your name’, but do we really pray this? Such words are in the answer to the first question of the Shorter Catechism: ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him for ever’, but do we really believe this? Jesus prayed, ‘I have glorified your name on earth, I have finished the work which you have given me to do’ (John 17:4).

**Sovereign grace**  Exodus 33:18-23

If God chose Israel to be his special people why didn’t all the Jews believe in Jesus and get saved? The apostle Paul had to answer this question, and we have to answer the same question today. Paul was a Jew who did believe in Jesus but many of his countrymen didn’t, and this troubled him greatly. They were the chosen people, blessed with the giving of the law, the covenants, and the promises, including and especially being the nation into which Christ was born (Rom 9:4). But clearly, not all Jews accepted the gospel preached by the apostle Paul. So clearly not all ethnic Jews will be saved.

In defending the sovereign grace of God in election, the apostle Paul stood squarely on the words God spoke to Moses as recorded here in Exodus 33:19- ‘I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion’. This declaration of God’s sovereign grace in election allowed Paul to understand God’s choice of Jacob and his rejection of his twin brother Esau. God made this choice even before these men were born; note that both were descendants of Abraham (Rom 9:11). Many Christians do not understand this doctrine; they think that we choose God, when Jesus himself said, ‘I chose you’ (John 15:16).

The closing words of Exodus 33 follow on from the ‘great sin’ of the golden bull- as does the next chapter. Seeing the apostasy of the Israelites whom he delivered from bondage in Egypt, the Lord was angry enough to destroy them and start again with Moses. Moses interceded and the Lord relented. When Moses came down from the mountain, and saw the idol and the pagan-like worship of the people, he was angry also. He called for repentance, with limited success, and so had three thousand men killed. Moses interceded again, asking the Lord to forgive their sin. Moses learned that God’s book was not for man to tinker with.

The Lord told Moses to get on with leading the people to the Promised Land but without God’s presence. The people’s sin had put a barrier between them and the Lord. Moses again interceded and the Lord graciously answered his prayer; he did so because he knew Moses ‘by name’ and because of divine grace (33:17). This was the man whom the Lord spoke with ‘face to face’ (33:11). Moses walked closer to the Lord than any other man, but still he knew next to nothing about the supreme and sovereign Lord of all. He wanted to know more about the Lord, who first appeared to him in the burning bush declaring his name Yahweh. Moses rather boldly asked the Lord, ‘Please show me your glory’ (33:18). It is not easy to comprehend the question let alone the answer but let us try, under two subheadings: ‘goodness/grace’ and glory’.

**1. Goodness and grace**

‘I know you by name, and you have also found grace in my sight’ (33:12, 17). The Lord knew Moses, having chosen him to be the deliverer of his chosen people. From the burning bush on Mt Sinai, the Lord spoke to Moses telling him he was standing on holy ground, and then calling him to go to Egypt. Moses initially hid his face, afraid to look upon God (3:6). While looking for an excuse not to go, Moses asked for a name, a more personal name than ‘the God of your fathers’. And so God revealed himself in the name Yahweh, I AM WHO I AM’ (3:14). Yahweh means the eternal, self-existent one. This would be God’s covenantal name.

Yet this name hid as much as it revealed. Moses was always wanting to know more about this God who spoke to him from the burning bush, and again on this mountain after forty years. Moses had been on the mountain, where the Lord appeared in a cloud and spoke to him, for forty days. The Lord also spoke to Moses in the tent that he set up outside the camp. When the cloud came down, ‘the Lord spoke to Moses face to face’ (33:11), although Moses never saw the face of God (33:20).

At one family camp all husbands were told to remove their shoes and socks, and then line up behind a curtain, with just their feet sticking out below the curtain. The women were told to walk along the line and identify their husband by just looking at their feet. As I remember, it was quite a challenge. It was obvious they had not chosen their husband based on their feet! God had chosen Moses based on knowing him by much more than his feet; he knew him by name and of course, knew him by sight and by heart. Yet Moses knew God by little more than his feet -although even that sight was glorious (24:10). He also knew his voice of course, but he wanted to know more.

In the passage before us, Moses asks the Lord, ‘Please show me your glory’. He felt the Lord knew all about him but he knew little about the Lord. In particular, he could not see Him. He pleaded with the Lord to go with them as he led the people to the Promised Land, and the Lord granted this request despite their sin. Moses found himself interceding before the Lord again and again. As leader of this rebellious people he was totally dependent on the Lord. Moses wanted an even closer relationship with the Lord. He wanted assurance of God’s presence.

How would Moses have responded if he had heard John say, ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth’ (John 1:14)? Did the apostles comprehend the wonder of God’s revelation of himself in his Son, Jesus Christ? John maybe, but what about Philip who asked, ‘Lord show us the Father and it is sufficient for us’ (John 14:8). What did Jesus answer? ‘He who has seen me has seen the Father’. We live in the post-apostolic age when Jesus has returned to heaven. Maybe we share in the plea of Moses, ‘Show me your glory’? But in all this, we must remember God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

How did the Lord respond to Moses request to ‘show me your glory’? He did so with reference to his ‘goodness’ and to his ‘name’, Yahweh (33:19). Jesus said, ‘no one is good except God alone’ (Luke 18:19). Goodness means perfection. When God made man in his own image he made him good; He made everything good, very good (Gen 1:31). But sin took away that goodness. Now only God is good, and his Son of course. The Lord was assuring Moses that when he speaks he speaks the truth, and he never fails to keep his promise.

But more than this, God’s essential nature and character is goodness. He is gracious and compassionate. He knows that sin holds every human heart in bondage, which is why he was working out his great plan of salvation in Jesus Christ. He was doing this even as he spoke to Moses here at Mt Sinai. Characteristics like grace and truth went out the door when sin came in. Only in Jesus Christ were grace and truth again revealed to the world. God himself is the God of truth, and also the God of grace, of course. God is love, ‘*agape*’ love, unmerited love or grace (1John 4:8). He is the God of steadfast covenant love. The covenant name ‘Yahweh’ implies covenant love.

We speak of grace as unmerited love. It is love for the unlovely, love for your husband no matter what his feet look like! ‘The Lord did not set his love on you, nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people’ Moses told the people (Deut 7:7). The Lord chose these people because in his sovereign grace he elected to do so. ‘While we were yet sinners Christ died for us’; ‘when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son’ (Rom 5:8, 10). Moses was listening to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He has always been gracious and compassionate, even if it is only in his Son, Jesus Christ, that grace and truth are fully revealed.

Unmerited love or grace means that no one deserves it. It means that whenever the Lord sets his love upon someone it is by sovereign grace. If he has set his love upon you, calling you and enabling you to believe in Jesus Christ, be sure it was not because of your good looks, your great riches, or your good works. It was all because of his grace. The Lord wanted Moses to know this when it came to his choice of Israel, and he wants us to know the same thing with regard to Israel or anyone else. ‘I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious’.

The doctrine of sovereign election is the basis of our assurance of salvation. ‘No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him’ said Jesus, and then comes the assurance, ‘I give them eternal life and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone pluck them out my hand’ (John 6:44, 10:28).

**2. Glory**

We have noted and commented on Moses’ request, ‘Please show me your glory’ (33:18). The Lord’s answer was firstly positive- he would make his goodness pass before Moses and proclaim his name. Moses had seen the grace of God, his saving grace towards his chosen people. We will learn more of God’s character in verses 6 and 7 of the next chapter, and in the Psalms: ‘He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the children of Israel. The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in mercy’ (Ps 103:7,8).

But the Lord answers with a ‘no’ when it came to seeing his face, which it seems was what Moses was asking. The Lord makes it clear that Moses did not really know what he was asking. God of course is Spirit so cannot be seen; although he revealed himself to us in his Son, Jesus Christ. But more than this, God knew that if Moses saw his face it would mean death (33:20). Moses had an earthly body corrupted by sin. He had been granted to see the Shekinah glory of God in the cloud and in the fire, and to see God’s feet (24:10), but not to see God’s face. Not that God was hiding anything from him; it was because he is gracious, not wanting Moses to die (33:20).

Moses lived in the era before the incarnation and revelation of God’s glory in his Son. John, the last of the OT prophets, said of Jesus, ‘we beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father’ (John 1:14). Even so, in the upper room Jesus prayed, ‘Now, O Father, glorify me together with yourself, with the glory which I had with you before the world was’ (John 17:5). We have not yet seen him in his heavenly glory because for this we will need heavenly bodies.

The Lord could not allow Moses to see his face but he graciously allowed him to see his ‘back’. The language of face, hands, and back is anthropomorphic language because it is all we can understand. To see the Lord’s ‘back’ could mean to see the effects of his glory in his works, spoken of as his glory passing by (33:22). The Lord told Moses to stand on a rock. He put him in the cleft of the rock and covered him with his hand as he passed by in all his glory (33:21, 22).

What a majestic and wonderful experience was granted this servant of the Lord. Elijah was granted a similar revelation in what was probably the same place (1Kings 19:11f). Elijah witnessed a strong wind, an earthquake, a fire, and finally, a still small voice. Under the new covenant, the apostle Paul was granted a vision of the risen Jesus in all his glory. He declared that the glory of the new covenant was far greater than that of the old covenant (2Cor 3:9), which is saying a lot in the light of what we read here with Moses and the glory of the Lord.

Do we appreciate the grace and glory of the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus Christ in his own precious blood? Do we look forward to the day when we will see Jesus in all his glory, without fear of dying! We will need new bodies of course, heavenly bodies that will be given to us a believers at that moment (1Cor 15:52). Jesus’ return in heavenly glory is near at hand. Are you ready to behold his glory?

**New tablets and new revelation**  Exodus 34:1-9

How well do you know your wife or husband, your life partner as our Indian friends would say? Even though they had arranged marriages and knew little about their ‘life partner’ at the time of marriage, they have less divorce than in our society. They accept that marriage is for life so work at their marriage. There is a lot of learning to do about the other person in the beginning of a marriage, and that learning continues for the life of the marriage. This learning leads to deepening of the relationship, such that the two become one in mind, as well as flesh (Gen 2:24).

Our relationship with the Lord is likened to a marriage relationship by the prophet Hosea, and also by the apostle Paul who writes, ‘Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church’ (Eph 5:25). It is also likened to a father-son relationship. We call God our ‘Father in heaven’. We are told that God disciplines us as children he loves (Prov 3:12, Heb 12:6).

God’s revelation of himself progresses as we read through the Scriptures, which are largely chronological. There is a quantum leap in this self-revelation when we come to the NT, but we are seeing a progressive revelation occurring here under the old covenant which God established with his chosen people, Israel. In particular, we see God revealing himself to Moses as gracious and compassionate, and indeed as a God who forgives (33:19, 34:7).

Forgiveness was not in the nature of man-made gods because it is not in the nature of sinful man. But grace and forgiveness are aspects of God’s character that Moses and the children of Israel would come to learn as God revealed himself to them. In doing so they were not to forget God’s wrath directed towards sin. We who know grace and forgiveness in the cross of Jesus must not forget God’s wrath either. God’s wrath is upon sin wherever sin is found.

After the people rebelled and sinned in making the golden bull, Moses went to the Lord pleading for forgiveness on their behalf. He thought he could achieve this by offering to have his name removed from God’s book, but the Lord said this was not possible (33:32, 33). Forgiveness was the prerogative of the Lord, not Moses (34:7). How can God be just in condemning and punishing sin, yet forgive sin? This is the essence of the new covenant of course, but God’s self- revelation under the old covenant comes as preparation for the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ.

The Lord’s words to Moses in verses 6 and 7 are at the heart of his revelation of himself under the old covenant. They are referred to throughout the OT, especially in the Psalms (e.g. Numb 14:18, 2Chron 30:9, Neh 9:17, Jonah 4:2, Ps 86:5, 103:8-10, 145:8,9). The context of this proclamation is Mt Sinai, where Moses went up with ‘new stone tablets’; this is our first subheading. Our second is, ‘New revelation’ and our third, ‘New understanding’.

**1. New stone tablets**

The Lord told Moses to ‘cut two tablets of stone like the first ones’ (34:1). Do you remember what happened to the first ones? The Lord called Moses up the mountain where he gave him two tablets of stone on which ‘the finger of God’ wrote the Ten Words (31:18). When Moses he came down and saw the golden bull, and the people worshipping in a pagan way, he was so shocked and angry that he smashed these tablets at the foot of the mountain (32:19, 34:1).

Now the Lord was calling Moses to go back up the mountain, ‘for at least the seventh time’, with these two tablets, and stand before the Lord. The Lord said he would write on these tablets what he wrote on the first set. We later read that the Lord told Moses to ‘write these words’ (34:27), but there is no confusion or contradiction about who wrote these words; they were the words of God even if Moses wrote them. All Scripture is God-breathed or inspired; ‘men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2Peter 1:21 NIV). We do not need to be putting the words of Christ in red as many Bibles do these days. To be consistent, should they not put the Ten Commandments in red also!

Moses was told to present himself before the Lord on the top of the mountain the next morning (34:2). He was to go up alone; there is no mention of Aaron going part way, or Joshua going a bit further, as on the previous occasion (24:9, 13). In fact, a ban was placed on anyone being seen on the mountain, and all animals were to be kept away from the mountain as previously (19:13, 34:3). As usual, Moses obeyed the Lord’s instructions. He cut two tablets of stone and got up early the next morning to head back up the mountain.

The Lord came down upon the mountain in the cloud (34:5). The cloud had become the mark the Lord’s presence, be it on the mountain or over the tent of meeting (33:9). We read, in anthropomorphic terms, that the Lord stood there with Moses on top of the mountain (34:5). The Lord had told Moses that he could not see his face because, ‘No man shall see my face and live’ (33:20).

The language of the Lord passing before Moses and proclaiming his name is similar to what we read in the previous chapter, but it seems to be a separate revelation (34:5,6, cf.33:19). Notwithstanding, this revelation is an expansion of what the Lord said previously, namely, ‘I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion’ (33:19). In this new revelation the Lord proclaims himself to be ‘merciful and gracious’ (34:6).

**2. New revelation**

In the words of verses 6 and 7 we come to a milestone in the Lord’s revelation of his person and character under the old covenant. Cundall writes, ‘The opening of God’s address (6, 7) forms the greatest theological statement of his nature in the OT’. We can say this because of the numerous references to this revelation throughout the OT, as mentioned in the introduction; Psalm 103 probably being the most well-known. At the centre of this new revelation are two Hebrew words: ‘*chesed*’ or covenant love, and ‘*salah*’ or forgiveness.

‘Steadfast love’, ‘unfailing love’, ‘covenant love’, ‘loving kindness’, ‘mercy’ and ‘goodness’, as we have in the NKJV, are all translations of the word ‘*chesed*’. This word is one of the most important in the vocabulary of OT theology and ethics’. It occurs 240 times and is especially frequent in the Psalms; in every verse of Psalm 136. Until, this point Scripture this word has not been used by the Lord himself. But here on the mountain, the Lord came down and stood with Moses to again declare his name, ‘Yahweh, Yahweh’, and his nature as ‘merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness’ (34:6 ESV).

The Lord made a covenant with these people after delivering them out of bondage in Egypt, but no sooner had he done so than they broke this covenant. The Lord was angry and threatened to destroy them, but relented. He did so because of Moses’ intercession, but also, as we now learn, because of love, unfailing love towards his chosen people. The Lord also had cause to be angry with David after he sinned, but the Lord forgave David. David had learned through Moses that, ‘the Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in mercy’ (Ps 103:7, 8).

What about you- do you accept that God has not punished you according to your sins? If so, you are greatly blessed, because many fail to acknowledge their sin, or God’s anger at sin. Many think they are basically good people and that God should accept them as such. They object to the idea of God punishing people for their sin; this is today in a so-called Christian society. In pagan societies today, and back in the day of Moses, the gods are vindictive and not at all loving. So this self-revelation by the Lord was indeed a new revelation for Moses and the people to take hold of in their relationship with God. The Lord is gracious and compassionate, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Along with steadfast love, forgiveness is at the heart of God’s new revelation to Moses (34:7). Iniquity, transgression and sin are basically synonyms, as in Psalm 32:1, 2. Sin is wilful wickedness, rebellion, and the breaking of God’s commands, as well as missing the mark. In his covenant love, God forgives sin, sin that makes him angry and separates us from God. Thankfully, he is slow to anger, desiring that we turn from our sin and seek forgiveness.

The Lord actually declared his steadfast love back in his giving of the second commandment, where we read, ‘but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments’ (20:6). He said this after warning that anyone who worships another god will incur divine wrath. Here in chapter 34, after announcing forgiveness of sin, the Lord declares that he will ‘by no means clear the guilty’ but will visit or punish the sins of the fathers ‘upon the children to the third and fourth generation’ (34:7). This expression refers to the continuity of God’s character in covenant terms, be it mercy towards those who love him or punishment towards those who hate him. God’s covenant love extends to children and children’s children.

God is sovereign, and he is a jealous God; he is not one god among many. He keeps steadfast love to thousands, but those who fail to accept his love and repent of their sin remain under his wrath (34:7, John 3:36). It is not a case of those who love God, and those who don’t doing their own thing and being free to worship idols. One day every knee shall bow before the sovereign God of heaven and earth.

**3. New understanding**

Moses listened carefully to the Lord revealing himself as merciful and gracious and loving, as slow to anger and ready to forgive. And knowing how much God hates sin, Moses was overcome with gratitude. He bowed his head and worshipped God. How else was he to express his thankfulness? How else do we express gratitude towards God when we realize the depth of his love for us, love for us while we were yet sinners? Moses now understood better what the Lord meant when he said, ‘I know you by name, and you have found grace in my sight’ (34:9, 33:12, 17).

With deeper understanding of the grace of God, and indeed of his own sin, Moses humbly prayed for the Lord to pardon or forgive the iniquity and sin of the stiff-necked people he was leading. But note that Moses now says, ‘our iniquity’ and ‘our sin’ (34:9). Here in his fourth intercession for the people, Moses identifies with them. He had previously asked the Lord to ‘forgive **their** sin’ (32:32), but with God’s further revelation of himself Moses is more humble and asks forgiveness for ‘**our** sin’.

God’s forgiveness would overcome the separation that had occurred because of sin and allow the Lord to ‘go among us’, to dwell once more among his chosen people. God’s forgiveness would restore the relationship broken by the sin of these arrogant and stubborn people, Moses included. Moreover, under the terms of the covenant, God regarded these people as his inheritance (34:9, Ps 33:12). The Lord had previously told his covenant people that they would be his special treasure above all people if they kept his covenant; ‘for all the earth is mine’ (19:5). With new understanding of the God whom he worshipped, this is what Moses prayed while on the mountain with the Lord (34:9). ‘For the Lord will not cast off his people, nor will he forsake his inheritance’ (Ps 94:14).

**Renewal of the covenant**  Exodus 34:10-28

When covenants are broken they are very difficult to mend. Our government is trying to mend relationships with another government because a huge contract to build submarines was broken. No doubt there were penalty clauses that will be enforced but still the whole matter of trust has been undermined. The marriage covenant involves seemingly less penalties but much deeper trust, so a breach of this covenant is very difficult to mend. Trust must be restored, and for this to be done there must be forgiveness, which requires a lot of grace.

The Lord’s relationship with the people of Israel was a covenant relationship, not unlike that of marriage. The Lord declared, ‘I will be your God and you will be my people’. Scholars liken it to a Suzerain-vassal treaty, or a conqueror-conquered treaty, but with the Lord it was a relationship of love. God set his love upon these people (Deut 7:7). In making or ‘cutting’ the covenant, the Lord set the terms; he gave commands and promised blessings if the people obeyed these commands.

Despite God’s great deliverance of these people, and his ongoing provisions, the people failed to keep his commands. They broke the command not make and worship a carved image even before they left Mt Sinai. The Lord was angry, and so was Moses, when he saw the golden bull and the people worshipping like pagans. Moses smashed the tablets of the testimony or covenant which the Lord had just given him, symbolising the breaking of the covenant. The Lord did not destroy these covenant-breakers but he did separate himself from them. Moses interceded for the people such that the Lord told him to cut two replacement tablets on which he would again write the terms of his covenant. He was able to do this because of his steadfast love and abundant grace by which he forgave their sin.

The Lord revealed all this to Moses, who responded by humbly worshipping the Lord (34:8). The Lord in his grace declared, ‘Behold, I will make/cut a new covenant’ (34:10). This renewed covenant was the same as the first. It included the Ten Commandments written on stone (34:28), and similar details to what Moses recorded in the Book of the Covenant (see Chapters 21-23, especially chapter 23). Some commentators think this page contains ten different commandments which they call a ‘ritual’ rather than ‘ethical Decalogue’. The NIV Bible tries to indicate this with its paragraphing, but this is not at all convincing. We will divide the passage up according to different commands but see no reason to end up with ten!

**1. Commands re. The Canaanites**

In the preface to the Ten Commandments the Lord declares that he is the one who brought them out of bondage in Egypt. In doing so, he displayed his mighty power in the plagues and the marvel of the Red Sea crossing. In the renewal of the covenant, marvels or wonders are again noted but with reference to the future: ‘It is an awesome thing that I will do with you’ (34:10). The Lord promises that his wonders will be more amazing than ever before seen, and will impact the nations the Israelites will encounter. Those nations included the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jubusite (34:11).

After the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River, Joshua led the army of Israel against these nations. Despite fortified cities like Jericho, and the combined forces of these nations, the Lord gave Joshua victory after victory. The Lord drove out these nations according to his promise to Moses (34:11), and indeed given generations earlier to Abraham (Gen 15:18-21). Importantly, the Lord told Abraham he would drive these nations out because of their sin. While God was saving Israel from slavery he was judging the Egyptians, and while he was bringing his chosen people into their inheritance he would be judging the Canaanites or Amorites. Salvation and judgment also went together at the cross, and will go together when Jesus returns.

If the Lord was judging the Canaanites because of their sin then his covenant people must also abhor their sin, the sin of idolatry and adultery. These two sins go together. Idol worshippers are usually lacking in morality. Man-made gods do not give commandments like these we have in the Decalogue. In fact, man-made gods are often seen as corrupt and immoral. ‘Those who make them are like them’ says the psalmist (Ps 115:8). The Lord solemnly warns Moses and his people not to make any covenant or treaty with the inhabitants of Canaan, ‘lest it be a snare in your midst’ (34:12). They must keep themselves separate from these pagan people and their objects of worship. Syncretism is dangerous. In fact, God commanded them to destroy the people and their objects of worship as things accursed or devoted to the Lord.

In giving the second commandment about making carved images, the Lord told the people he was a jealous God (20:5). He reminds them of this same truth as he renews the covenant (34:14). Yet this truth is rarely consider in our day. I remember telling a Hindu convert that God is a jealous God as she threw all the idols out of her house. Are there any things in your house to make God jealous? Any and every object of pagan worship including altars, sacred pillars and Asherah poles had to be destroyed, ‘lest they become a snare to you’ (34:13).

It is always tempting to have something tangible as part of worship, and men are clever at making attractive objects- and indeed of devising ‘desirable’ ways of worship. The Lord knew the weakness of these people, as already demonstrated with the golden bull. There must be no repeat of this incident, no making of ‘molded gods for yourselves’ (34:17). If any Canaanite invited some Israelites to one of his sacrifices they would be tempted to attend, either out of curiosity, a desire to please man, or simply out of lust. The apostle Paul warned the Corinthians against partaking of the table of demons (1Cor 10:21); flee from idolatry and flee sexual immorality, he warned. We should pray for indigenous believers as smoking ceremonies are revived in our land. We should pray for ourselves as we daily face temptations to prostitute ourselves before the things of this world.

The Lord specifically warned against marriage with the Canaanites. They would have no problem giving their daughters to an Israelite son but the outcome would be disastrous for the holy nation. These daughters would be idolaters and would ‘make your sons play the harlot with their gods’ (34:16). We do not have to look far to see such unholy alliances, and the apostasy that follows. King Ahab and his marriage to Jezebel is one of many examples. The apostle Paul, again in writing to the Corinthians, warns against being ‘unequally yoked to unbelievers’ (2Cor 6:14); ‘What accord has Christ with Belial’ or the devil, he said, or, ‘What agreement has the temple of God with idols?’ The answer is clear- none! So let us be as clear about this teaching today as Moses and the apostle Paul were.

**2. Commands re. feasts**

In the Book of the Covenant, the Lord told the Israelites to keep three feasts each year: the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering (23:14f). Apart from the Feast of Harvest being called the Feast of Weeks, the same three feasts are listed at this time of covenant renewal. The Feast of Unleavened Bread went for seven days in the month of the Exodus; it was associated with Passover. Also associated with the institution of Passover, but not included in the Book of the Covenant, was the command for all firstborn to be dedicated to the Lord (13:12, 13). Every firstborn from the livestock was to be sacrificed to the Lord, while firstborn donkeys and sons were to be redeemed with a lamb (34:19, 20).

The Feast of Weeks celebrated the wheat harvest in spring, and the Feast of Ingathering celebrated the fruit harvest towards the end of the year. At each of these times, all the men were to ‘appear before the Lord, the Lord God of Israel’ (34:23, 23:17). Women went along with men- in fact, whole families went up to Jerusalem when the temple was built. The Lord assured the people that he would protect their property while they were away at the feast. All the Canaanites would be cast out, but still they might fear encroachment upon their land in their absence (34:24).

**3. Command re. Sabbath rest**

The year was ruled by seasons, and by the crops that grew in the winter and the fruits in the summer. Seasonal feasts helped this agricultural people to remember the Lord and his blessings upon. Days were also marked off by weeks, a period of seven days with a day of rest set down for the seventh day (34:21). This day of rest was ordained by God at the time of creation, and written into the covenant he made with his people, the covenant being renewed at this time. Rest was commanded for every person, including servants and strangers, as well as for working animals. Moreover, the Lord allowed no exemptions for seedtime or harvest (34:21). Sabbath rest was a test for the people to see if they really trusted the Lord for their harvest.

Few farmers are ready to stop sowing or harvesting when conditions are right, although I have worked with some who refused to start their tractors on the Lord’s Day. But what if rain is forecast for the next day and the crop needs harvesting? Well, that is the test they faced- were they in control of the weather and the harvest, or was the Lord? Our Confession speaks of acts of necessity and mercy on the Lord’s Day, but clearly planting and harvesting belong to neither. Yet some think mowing the lawn, or a game of football, or a party somehow qualify as an act of mercy or necessity!

**4. Commands re. other things**

This renewal of the covenant is much less detailed than the Book of the Covenant, but it details a couple of matters additional to those already considered. Firstly, there was the matter of sacrifices, which must not be offered with leavened bread. The Passover was a case in point. Leaven took time to work and the Passover was eaten in haste; moreover, leaven became a symbol of evil. Also with the Passover, nothing must be kept till the next day, in keeping with its significance as a memorial meal (34:25).

Secondly, the first-fruits of the land were to be brought to the house of the Lord. We could have considered this command with that of the firstborn. Such thank-offerings reminded the people that, ‘every good and perfect gift is from above’ or from the Lord (James 1:17). It is encouraging to see Christians giving their first pay-check to the Lord, giving a tithe of their tax return or inheritance to the Lord. Thirdly, the command not to cook a kid goat in its mother’s milk is repeated (34:27, cf. 23:19). This command seems strange to us, but it is the basis for Orthodox Jews not eating meat and milk at the same time. In the context of God’s commands to his people soon to enter Canaan, it is thought it may have something to do a Canaanite fertility rite.

**5. Commands written down**

The renewal of the covenant, like the first, ends with the Lord instructing Moses to write down the words he had just heard. We concluded that Moses wrote the Book of the Covenant because the Decalogue was written on stone by the finger of God (31:18). The procedure is repeated here in the renewal of the covenant, with the Lord writing the Ten Words of the covenant on the tablets, presumably the two tablets Moses carried up the mountain (34:1). While the ‘book’ that Moses wrote was much shorter than the Book of the Covenant he previously wrote, the time he spent on the mountain was the same, another forty days and forty nights. Again, he neither ate bread nor drank water, so the Lord must have miraculously sustained him (34:28).

Importantly, what the Lord wrote on the second set of tablets was the same Ten Words. In the meantime the people had rebelled, breaking the first two commandments and probably others. But the Lord did not change his commandments in response to their rebellion. He did not say that because these people were unable to keep his commands he would water them down, maybe drop a couple out! The Lord knew they were not able to keep his commands, but his commands were perfect so could not be altered. Do we want a set of rules that conform to man’s sin, or to God’s sovereign perfection? While most religions say ‘yes’ to the former, the Bible says ‘yes’ to the latter. It does so on the basis of the new covenant in Jesus Christ in which God makes it possible for you to be born again of the Spirit of God, and hence able to keep God’s perfect rules (Mat 5:48).

**Moses in a mask**  Exodus 34:29-35:3

How the world has changed since the outbreak of coronavirus last year! Before this time, anyone wearing a face mask was regarded as unusual, even suspicious - except in parts of Asia. Nowadays we are compelled to wear a face mask in every public place. Anyone wearing a face mask along with sunglasses is very difficult to identify. I have not asked women if they are still wearing makeup, but it hardly seems necessary when wearing a face mask!

Here in the Book of Exodus we read that Moses, ‘put a veil on his face’- in other words, he wore a face mask (34:33). He did so to hide his face, which shone brightly after he spent forty days on the mountain in the presence of the Lord. Let us try to understand this strange phenomenon and its effects on other people. As we do so we will look at the apostle Paul’s understanding of this passage, and the allegorical way in which he uses it to teach the much greater glory of the new covenant in Jesus Christ.

**1. Face shining**

It is important to remember the context in which this strange phenomenon occurred. In the first place, it comes after the incident of the golden bull, when the people turned away from the Lord to make and worship this idol. In doing so, they were obviously breaking the commandment just given to them by the Lord under the terms of the covenant he made with them. These terms were spelled out to them at the time, and they had agreed to, or ratified, the covenant. The Lord referred to them as stiff-necked people, people with hard hearts, hearts not yet touched by the Spirit of God.

Their sin meant separation from God, the God who is holy and cannot look upon sin. But after intercession by Moses, the Lord agreed to the renewal of his covenant and restoration of his presence among them. God’s presence among his people was marked by the Shekinah glory, glory that appeared on the mountain and in the tent of meeting.

The second thing to remember is how Moses asked the Lord to show him his glory (33:18). He could not let Moses see his face lest he die. Moses had gone back up the mountain with two stone tablets, and then came down with the Ten Commandments written on these replacement tablets (34:28). Moreover, unknown to him, ‘the skin on his face shone’ (34:22). The LXX translates, ‘the colour of his face was glorified’. The apostle Paul was probably reading this Greek translation of the OT when he developed his allegory from this incident in chapter 3 of 2Corinthians.

Moses was not aware that his face was shining- it may have looked like sunburn but it wasn’t painful. It was only when Aaron and the people saw him, and responded as they did, that he realized the skin on his face was radiating a supernatural, divine glory. Aaron and the people were afraid to come close to Moses (34:30).

When the angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds at the time of Jesus’ birth, ‘the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were greatly afraid’ (Luke 2:9). When Jesus was on the mountain praying, the appearance of his face changed (Luke 9:28). When Jesus appeared to Paul on the Damascus road, ‘a light shone around him from heaven and he fell to the ground’ (Acts 9:3, 4). But here with Moses, it was a man whose face shone, making the people stay at a distance in fear.

Moses told Aaron and the rulers not to be afraid but to come near so he could talk with them (34:31). They did as Moses said, and he told them all that the Lord commanded him while he was on Mt Sinai. He had the two tablets on which the Lord had written the Ten Commandments, and also had other commands which Moses probably wrote down as he did the first time. The commands focussed on how they were to interact, or not interact, with the Canaanites and their idols, and how they were to worship the jealous God who delivered them out of Egypt.

**2. Face veiled**

‘And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face’ (34:33). He did this so the people would not be dazzled by his shining face. Seeing the divine glory reflected in his face filled them with fear. In the allegory he developed from this phenomenon, the apostle Paul says that, ‘the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance’ (2Cor 3:7). In his allegory, the glorious face of Moses represents the glory of the old covenant or the law. In a ‘how much more’ statement, Paul declares that the glory of the new covenant, the covenant inaugurated by Jesus, and the covenant in which the Holy Spirit is poured out, the glory of this covenant is much greater than that of the old covenant.

‘The Israelites were unable to look at the glory that beamed from the face of Moses because of their guilty consciences accusing them’ writes Kistemaker. It is true that concerning the glory of Moses’ face the problem lay with the people; they were not able to look at his face because of their stiff-necks and hard hearts, or because of their sin. The problem was not the covenant but the people. Even so, the law could not save anyone because of the weakness of sinful flesh. The law only had power to condemn. So the glory of the old covenant was eclipsed by the glory of the new covenant, the covenant which provides forgiveness of sin in the blood of Jesus Christ. Paul pictures this truth in the fading glory of Moses’ face (2Cor 3:7, 11, 13).

What we read in here in Exodus is that, ‘whenever Moses went in to speak with Him [the Lord], he would take off his veil until he came out’ (34:34). He certainly didn’t need his face veiled when in the presence of the Lord, but does this not point to Moses’ face again becoming radiant in the presence of the Lord, a recharging of his radiance, if you will?

If we spend an extended period of time in prayer or worship, do we not emerge with hearts and lives radiating the grace and truth of our Lord Jesus Christ? It is written that Christ himself is the radiance of God’s glory- but not a fading radiance (Heb 1:3). Paul certainly saw the greater glory of the new covenant in Jesus Christ. In fact, he says that the veil that covered the face of Moses, or in his allegory was over the whole old covenant, was ‘taken away in Christ’ (2Cor 3:14).

With the veil being lifted in Christ we can, in effect, go in like Moses, go in to the presence of the Lord where we will find mercy and grace to help in time of need (Heb 4:12). With confidence we can come to the throne of grace. Such access to the throne of grace was not yet revealed under the old covenant, although God had just revealed himself as merciful and gracious (34:6). God’s grace and forgiveness would be revealed in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ; remember the veil in the temple being torn when Jesus died (Mat 27:51). Moreover, with the outpouring of the Spirit of God, we would have God’s law written on our hearts and would be enabled to keep his holy law (Jer 31:33).

When we love the Lord with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind, we will keep his commands, and in keeping his commands will reflect the glory of the Lord. Our lives, like the face of Moses, will radiate the glory of God such that people around us will either be attracted to, or repelled by, the gospel of Jesus Christ. ‘When God spoke to the people, either directly from Mt Sinai or indirectly through Moses, he revealed his glory. God’s glory and God’s word go together’.

**3. Forget not the Sabbath**

Having renewed the covenant that the people broke by making the golden bull, the Lord exalted Moses in their midst by making the skin on his face shine, reflecting the glory of God. After the rebellion, Moses was reaffirmed as their divinely appointed leader. They had been commanded to move from Mt Sinai and go up to possess the Promised Land. But, as the first giving of the covenant ended with a specific reference to the Sabbath command, the command to rest and keep this day holy unto the Lord, so the renewal of the covenant ends with a reminder of the Sabbath command- although it comes after Moses came down from the mountain with the new tablets.

This reminder of the Sabbath rest seems to be the initiative of Moses, although the command would have been written on the second set of tablets he carried down. The making of the golden bull was not a direct breach of the Sabbath command, but Moses knew that this command would be a continual test for the people. The Sabbath was a sign of the covenant, a reminder that in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh he rested, declaring this day to be for holy rest.

The people had already been tested regarding the Sabbath rest during the giving of the manna in the desert. They would be tested when they settled in the Promised Land with regard to sowing and harvesting on their farms (34:21). They would also be tested while building the tent of meeting.

The command to rest is from all work, except for acts of necessity and mercy. Moses commanded the people not to kindle a fire in their dwelling on the Sabbath (35:3). For reasons not clear to us, he considered this work. When the Lord sent manna from heaven he told them not to collect this on the Sabbath- there would be none to collect anyway- but to bake or boil the extra they collected on the day before the Sabbath (16:25). For this reason Orthodox Jews do not cook food on the Sabbath- some do not even turn on a light switch on the Sabbath. But to keep warm, a fire might be needed.

While reaffirming the commandments, including the Sabbath command, Jesus did point out that picking some grain to satisfy hunger was not breaking the Sabbath (Mat 12:1f). While the Pharisees were totally focused on matters of law, Jesus pointed them to other words in the OT, namely the Lord’s desire for mercy rather than sacrifice because he is a gracious and merciful God (Mat 21:7, Ex 34:6). Jesus concluded, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath’ (Mark 2:27).

**Tent of meeting-materials**  Exodus 35:4-36:7

When the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain to give him the first set of tablets, he gave him instructions for building a ‘church’ or tent of meeting as it was called. The people were living in tents as they travelled through the desert, so their ‘church’ had to be easily transported. These instructions were recorded from chapter 25 through to the end of chapter 31. They are very detailed instructions about materials, plans and procedures for the construction of this place of worship, which would be set up in the centre of their ‘tent city’.

In the village where I grew up, the church was on a hill in the centre of town; actually there were three churches but only one remains open. What a contrast to today when it is rare to even find a small block of land set aside for the building of a Christian place of worship in new suburbs or towns.

When Moses came down from the mountain after forty days with these God-given instructions for building the tent of meeting, he was confronted by a golden bull built by Aaron and the people. The Lord relented from his intention to wipe out these covenant breakers after Moses interceded for them. The Lord revealed to Moses that he was gracious and compassionate, a God who ‘forgives iniquity and transgression and sin’, yet still punishes the wicked (34:6, 7). In his grace, the Lord renewed his covenant with the Israelites, writing his covenant commandments on a new set of stone tablets.

Moses was called back up the mountain for another forty days to receive these replacement tablets. It was only after the renewal of the covenant that Moses gathered the people together and gave them the Lord’s instructions for building the tent of meeting or tabernacle. As he gave these divine instructions the people got to work building a place of worship for their desert community.

As we begin reading these instructions we soon notice that we have read most of this previously. While this may be a bit boring, it should not be surprising because plans are drawn up for the purpose of being read and followed. If you go to a building site you will find plans laid out and the workers consulting these plans as they do their work. Or if you get something from IKEA you will find a book of instructions on how to put the piece of furniture together. This book will list all the materials inside the package, before detailing how to put the thing together. So in these chapters we have a list of the materials needed and how these were to be obtained or fabricated. Then we find detailed instructions for making the tent of meeting and its furnishings, including garments for the priest.

So it was that exactly one year after leaving Egypt this tent of meeting was set up (40:17). That will bring us to the end of this book of the Bible, but for now let us start with the gathering of materials according to the instructions the Lord gave Moses on the mountain. Our subheadings will be, ‘Materials and craftsmen needed’, ‘Material offered’, and ‘More than enough’.

**1. Materials offered and craftsmen needed**

On the mountain the Lord told Moses of the various materials required for constructing the tent of meeting and its furnishings. The people were to bring these materials as a freewill offering to the Lord, the emphasis being on the ‘willing’ aspect (25:1). This is exactly what Moses told the people (35:5). He asked them to bring gold, silver and bronze, coloured yarns and fine linen, as well as dyed animal skins and acacia wood. Oils and spices, along with the precious stones required for the ephod and breastplate of the priests, were also included on the list of things to be willingly offered to the Lord (35:4-9).

Along with these raw materials, ‘gifted artisans’ were called for, men and women with the skill to fabricate the various articles that were required for the work- things like coverings, curtains, and clasps, boards, bars, pillars and sockets (35:10-19). The actual furnishings are mentioned here in verses 11-16 by way of introduction -the details of their construction will come later. Pegs and ropes were needed to erect the tent (35:1). You may recall that, while pegs were listed back in chapter 29:19, we assumed that these were for tie-ropes.

**2. Materials and services offered**

The congregation listened as Moses conveyed the instructions given to him by the Lord. As they went to their homes, their spirits were made willing to give to the work of the Lord. Offerings were only to be accepted by those giving of their own free will, but the Lord is able to move the hearts of men and women to give. Have you not felt the Lord moving your heart to give to the work of the Lord? I hope you never feel forced to give, or that you give expecting something in return.

You have already been given a gift that no amount of money can buy if you have received the gift of eternal life through believing in Jesus Christ. ‘They first gave themselves to the Lord and then to us by the will of God’ is what the apostle Paul wrote, as he reminds us that though Jesus ‘was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor’ (2Cor 8:5, 9).

Two things stand out with the offerings brought by the people. Firstly, that they were done willing, as we just said, and secondly, that both men and women came forward with the materials that Moses called for. They brought gold earrings, nose rings, necklaces and other jewellery (35:22). Apparently not all their gold earrings we given to Aaron to make the golden bull! Some brought acacia wood and others brought blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen, and still others goat’s hair and animal skins (35:23, 24). Did they feel that they were returning to the Lord what he had already given them? It is called the Lord’s offering (35:21, 24). Is it not true that everything you have is a gift from the Lord?

Moses notes that women with the necessary skills and wisdom, spun the goat’s hair into yarn and brought this to the Lord. He also notes that the rulers, rich people most probably, brought the precious stones to go into the ephod and the breastplate of the priest, as well as the special oil and spices for the incense and for anointing oil (35:25-27).

Special mention is made of Bezalel, from the tribe of Judah, being filled with the Spirit of God such that he had wisdom, understanding, knowledge and skills. This man was called to be chief craftsman, overseeing the work of constructing the tent of meeting (35:30-32). You will recall that Bezalel was named by the Lord when he was giving instructions to Moses back in chapter 31. Moses’ commands follow word for word the instructions given to him by the Lord- which is not surprising (35:30-35 cf. 31:1-5), although Moses now adds that the Lord has given Bezalel and Oholiab the ability to teach (35:34). Other gifted craftsmen, and probably women, joined these two in engraving, stitching and weaving, moulding and carving the materials and furnishings for the sanctuary.

These workers followed in every detail the plans given to Moses by the Lord (36:1). The wisdom and understanding given by the Lord included that of obedience. These were not just naturally gifted people but people using their gifts to the glory of God. All sorts of gifts are needed in the ministry of the church but these gifts must be used for the common purpose of glorifying God. I remember a candidate for missionary service who was a policeman- as I recall he was found a suitable field of service. An undertaker also applied for missionary service- I am not sure if a place was found for him! The Lord wants people of ability, but above all of availability, people to willingly offer themselves to the Lord in the ministry of the church.

**3. More than enough**

The Lord had given Moses the names of Bezalel and Oholiab as the men to head up the team of artisans required to make the tent of meeting and its furnishings. Moses called them to come and start the work. He gave them everything the people had donated so they could start the work (36:3). Still the people continued bringing their freewill offerings every morning. The morning and evening sacrifice would not have begun at this point in time (29:39f), but still the people came with their offerings every morning.

I am reminded of a Christian village in India where the woman of the house set apart a tithe for the Lord of everything she cooked for the family every day- a tithe is not exactly the same as an offering but the principles are the similar. For every ten handfuls of rice she cooked, she put one handful into a jar for the Lord. When do you set apart your tithe for the Lord? You probably take it out of your weekly or fortnightly pay-check. This is good, but imagine how much more you would remember the Lord if you gave to Him every day, or even at every meal! I hope that at every meal you at least remember to thank the Lord for the food he has provided for you and your family, even if you don’t take a tithe of the actual food for the Lord.

Something amazing happened in the congregation in the desert as the people responded to the call to bring their offerings to the Lord. The craftsmen came to Moses complaining that the people were bringing ‘much more than enough’ (36:5). Imagine having to tell people not to give so much to the work of the Lord! Imagine having to discourage people from bringing anymore! Moses would have been pleasantly surprised after what he had seen happening in the camp when he came down from the mountain.

The people were no longer giving to the work of the devil but to the work of the Lord. Have you had people ring up asking you to buy a raffle ticket? What do you say? I have people ring up asking for money to support their anti-bullying campaign in schools. They are shocked when I say ‘no’ and tell them I know a better way to stop bullying- teach children the Bible!

Moses did not want any materials going to waste of course, so he asked men and women to stop bringing materials for the building of the place of worship. He was not like some pastors who are tempted to take the extra for themselves. The Lord, through his people, provided sufficient for all the work to be done (36:7). Sufficiency is all that he needed, and all that we need in the ministry to which the Lord has called us. Do note that the work was not governed by the amount of material provided but by the command of the Lord. When the Lord commands a ministry, he provides the materials and the workers for the task, and His blessing flows to all who give of themselves and their things to the Lord.

One commentator points out that those who came late with their offerings would have been disappointed to find that their offering was not received, ‘disappointed that they had been excluded from the work of the Lord’. ‘God deliver us from any such disappointment’ he concluded. We should give according to what the Lord has given us, and do so promptly, not because our gift may not be needed but because we may well forget to give as we intended. Giving to the Lord and attending the worship of the Lord go together. Let us do both with willing hearts, and rejoice together in the blessings the Lord bestows upon us.

**Tabernacle- making of components and furnishings** Exodus 36:8-39:31

Moses went to the top of Mt Sinai to receive the first set of stone tablets on which the Lord had written the Ten Words. During the forty days that he was there, the Lord gave him detailed plans for building a place of worship for this nation of God’s people. It was a new nation, a holy nation of people the Lord had recently saved out of slavery in Egypt. As God’s people they were to worship God alone, and to do so in a manner determined by God.

They had seen that worshipping in a way they thought was okay was not okay with the Lord; He got angry and was going to wipe them out. This nation must worship in the way that God told them - and so must we in the church today. As our Confession says: ‘The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men’ (WCF XX1.1).

God’s plans for building a place of worship in the desert, called the tabernacle or tent of meeting, are recorded in chapters 25-31 of Exodus. From the very beginning, God told Moses to make everything, ‘according to the pattern you were shown on the mountain’ (25:9, 40, 26:30). Nowhere do we read of Moses being told he could make this place according to his own imagination, or worship the Lord in a way that pleased the people.

It is amazing that this tent of meeting could be made with the limited materials available in the desert, but the Lord knew what was available. The question was whether the people would freely give of the things they were wearing and carrying.

When Moses came down from the mountain with the second set of stone tablets, and renewed the covenant between God and these people, he called for the work of building the tent of meeting to begin. The people responded and started bringing the required materials; gold, silver, and bronze, acacia wood, coloured yarns, and animal skins, as well as precious oils and spices. Their free-will offerings were so generous that Moses soon had sufficient- indeed too much- for the building of the tent of meeting (36:7). Two craftsmen, Bezalel and Oholiab, men filled with the Spirit of God, were appointed to oversee the work. They were gifted with the necessary skills, and with hearts to obey the commands of the Lord (36:1).

The verses we are looking at today detail the building of the tent of meeting and its furnishings. Most of these four chapters repeat what is written in the six chapters from chapter 25 onwards. The difference is that the command to ‘make’ is now, he or they ‘made it’. Bezalel was in charge but obviously did not make everything himself. Details about actual worship are not repeated until the tent of meeting is assembled and the furnishings put in their set places- this is recorded in chapter 40.

The main difference between the ‘make’ and the ‘made’ record is the order in which the various components and furnishings are recorded. This ‘made’ record is more systematic in terms of first making the tent, then the ark that went into the ‘heart’ of this tent. After this we are told of the table of shewbread, the lampstand and the altar of incense that went into the inner court. Finally, we read of the altar of burnt offerings and the bronze water basin that went into the outer court. We will briefly review the construction of the tabernacle and its furnishings as we move through these four chapters.

**1. Tabernacle curtains and covering, and Ark of the Covenant**

The tent of meeting, made according to the plans given by the Lord, would have impressed any interior designer. It had wooden panels overlaid with gold, and colourful embroidered curtains linked together with gold clasps. The outer curtain was of goat’s hair, more functional than beautiful. The cover of animal skins gave protection from the weather. The matter of the outer curtains hanging over the back of the tent is not mentioned here, maybe because the overhang would be obvious after making the curtains according to the pattern (see 26:12, 13). The procedure for hanging the veil or curtain for the entrance, and for installing the furniture, comes in the closing chapter (40:3-15, 20-21 cf.26:33-35).

No expense was spared in the making of the inner room of the tent. It was to be fit for a king, the King. The earthly throne of God, the Ark of the Covenant, would be placed in this room. The making of the Ark of the Covenant is recorded in chapter 37. It was a box 1.1x0.7m made of acacia wood and overlaid with pure gold. The golden cherubim were beaten into shape to make the lid or ‘mercy seat’ of the ‘box’. The detail of the Lord actually coming to dwell between the cherubim comes as the climax and end of the book (40:34-38 cf.25:22).

**2. The table of shewbread, lampstand, and altar of incense**

Moving out from the inner room or ‘most holy place’ of the tent of meeting, we come to the inner court or ‘holy place’. Three pieces of furniture were located in this court: the table of shewbread, the six- branched lampstand or ‘mennorah’ opposite this table, and the altar of incense immediately outside the veil of the most holy place.

All these pieces of furniture were made of acacia wood overlaid with gold, or, in the case of the lampstand, of pure gold, one talent of pure gold (37:24 cf.25:39). We will see shortly that twenty-nine talents of gold went into the making of this place of worship. Details about Aaron burning incense on the altar of incense are not repeated here in chapter 37 (cf.30:6-10). Moreover, details about the holy anointing oil and incense are very brief, with no reference to the ingredients to be used (37:29 cf. 30:22-38).

**3. The altar of burnt offerings and bronze water basin**

Moving out from the inner court through the second curtain, we come to the outer court. This was much larger at 100x50 cubits or 46x23m, and it had no covering. The perimeter was fenced with sections, a bit like the temporary fence put around construction sites today.

The bronze altar for burnt offerings was placed in the centre of this courtyard, and the bronze laver or basin closer towards the entrance to the holy place. The bronze altar was made according to the plan given to Moses- the words of chapter 38:1-7 are almost identical to those of chapter 27:1-8 if we change ‘shall make’ to ‘made’. The procedure for sacrificing animals is not actually laid out until the Book of Leviticus.

The bronze water basin was for the priests to wash their hands and feet before entering the holy place. An interesting detail not referred to previously is the source of the bronze used in making this water basin (38:8 cf.30:17-21). Long before glass mirrors were invented, polished metal such a bronze, was used as a mirror, especially by women it seems. The nature of the service of these ‘women who assembled at the door of the tabernacle of meeting’ is not revealed.

**4. Totals for gold, silver and bronze**

Moses records the actual amounts of gold, silver and bronze that went into making the tent of meeting and its furnishings- actually, he told Ithamar, the youngest son of Aaron, and the Levites to count and record the precise amounts of these precious metals (38:21). Bezalel and Oholiab were in charge of the actual work, while Ithamar was given charge of the stores department.

Huge amounts of these metals were given and used for the construction of the place of worship. Gold, the most precious of metals, was used for the most holy things, like the Ark of the Covenant and the lampstand. The equivalent of one talent of gold went into the lampstand itself- 30-35kg by today’s standards. Approximately one ton of gold was used, but some four tons of silver. Silver was used for the base sockets which joined the sections of the tent wall or curtains. There were one hundred of these sockets, each made from one talent of silver (38:25).

The silver was collected by way of a poll tax, referred to in chapter 30:12-13. Every man in the community above twenty years of age was required to pay a ransom of half a shekel as an offering to the Lord. So this inventory of silver could be cross-checked with the census. The number of men aged twenty and above was six hundred and three thousand, five hundred and fifty (38:26). With each of these giving half a shekel, this amounted to three hundred and one thousand, seven hundred and seventy-five shekels, which is exactly what one hundred talents plus one thousand, seven hundred and seventy-five shekels of silver amounts to (1 talent =3000 shekels). Scholars have questioned the population of this desert community, but this cross-checking of details makes it difficult to question the census (cf. Num 1:46).

The amount of bronze collected was slightly less than that of silver even though it was a less valuable metal. Bronze was used in the outer court for the altar of burnt offerings and for the tent pegs (38:29-31).

**5. The ephod, breastplate and robe of the priest**

A minister in our sister church in India recently sent a photo of himself dressed in a white robe with a red scarf. He thought I might be shocked, so explained that he dressed like this for a meeting with the district magistrate. It is not unusual for religious leaders to wear special clothes. But we do not have priests today so there is no requirement to wear special clothes, as was the case under the old covenant.

In Israel, the Levites were set apart as priests, with Aaron being the high priest. He ministered in the tent of meeting when it was set up, sprinkling the blood of the sacrifice in the holy place, and once a year in the most holy place. His highly ornate garments consisted of an ephod of gold, blue, purple and scarlet thread; only here are we told that gold was beaten into thin sheets and cut into threads (39:3).

To this ephod was attached a square breastplate decorated with gemstones representing the twelve tribes of Israel. There is no mention of the Urim and Thummim here in the account of the making of these garments. But other than this, the account of the making of garments for the priest follows the instructions given to Moses as recorded in chapter 28. The account here in chapter 39 ends with reference to the turban and its plate bearing the inscription, ‘Holiness to the Lord’, rather than a reference to linen trousers found in chapter 28.

Nothing was spared in the making of this tent of meeting in the desert. One commentator writes, ‘Although the tabernacle was a tent, it was not a makeshift dwelling. It was a glorious shrine that symbolized the presence of the living God in the midst of his people’. The people willingly gave of their precious possessions, and of their labours, in constructing a place to worship the Lord, the true and living God whom they worshipped. Only the true and living God could give instructions as to the building of a place of worship, and the manner in which he was to be worshipped. As the special people of God, they were not to worship their God in the way the pagans worshipped their man-made gods. Should we in the church be adopting ways of worship from our pagan neighbours?

In conclusion, let us learn and remember two things. Firstly, we have seen the most precious of earthly materials being crafted into a beautiful house, and indeed throne, for the Lord of heaven and earth. Yet the glory of this earthly throne was but a faint reflection of the glory of his heavenly throne. Secondly, we have learnt that everything was made according to the instructions the Lord gave Moses on the mountain. Note how the words, ‘As the Lord had commanded Moses’ are repeated seven times here in chapter 39 (39:1, 5, 7, 21, 26, 29, 31). The first ‘church’ or place of worship was designed by the Lord, not by men or women. More importantly, the manner of worship was also set down by the Lord, not left for men or women to do as they please. The great sin of the golden bull was forgiven, but must never be forgotten.

**The Lord dwells among his people** Exodus 39:32-40:38

When God created the heavens and the earth, and everything in them, he saw that everything he made was very good. God blessed the man and woman he had made in his own image and put them in a good garden. God walked in this garden and spoke to them. But they sinned by disobeying God, and God separated them from himself; he no longer walked in the world because of sin.

God judged the world with a flood, but saved Noah and his family through this flood in the ark that he built according to divine specifications. God made a covenant with Noah not to flood the whole earth again. God later made a covenant with Abraham, saying that he would make him a great nation, a nation through which he would bless all the nations of the world. After some five hundred years, God called Moses and made a covenant with him and the children of Israel, the new nation that he brought out of Egypt. God was inexorably working out his great plan of salvation after the fall of Adam and Eve.

God made a covenant with Moses and his chosen people, the terms of the covenant being written in the Testimony or Ten Commandments. As descendants of Adam and Eve, and thus sinners, the people were still cut off from God. Their sinful, disobedient hearts were displayed in the making of the golden bull. But God did not judge them as he could have. Moses found grace in God’s sight, and God revealed himself to Moses as a gracious and forgiving God.

Known to Moses as ‘Yahweh’ or the Lord, God gave Moses plans for building a place of worship, a house in which the Lord would come and dwell among his people. The curse of sin, and consequent separation from God, was moving closer to being overcome through the grace of God. The Lord was coming to dwell among his chosen people as preparation for the revelation of himself and his glory through Jesus Christ, ‘the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth’ (John 1:14).

We have come to the end, and to the climax, of this exciting book called Exodus. It began with the children of Israel as slaves in Egypt, and threatened with extinction. But God heard their cries and sent Moses to save them. Were they grateful to Moses or to the Lord? No! They complained and rebelled, but Moses patiently led them as he himself walked close to the Lord. They were still in the desert, one year after escaping Egypt, when they erected the tent of meeting and the Lord came to dwell among his covenant people.

The Lord gave Moses plans for this house of worship during his first forty of days meeting with the Lord on the mountain (Ch. 25-31). After his second stay of forty days on Mt Sinai receiving the second set of stone tablets, Moses gave these plans to the people, and they started making the components and furnishings according to the plans passed on by Moses (Ch. 35-39). Here at the end of chapter 39 we find Moses giving his stamp of approval on all the components and furnishings that the people had finished and brought to him. The closing chapter details the anointing of the tabernacle and its furnishings, as well as the priests, and then the assembly of the tent with it curtains and coverings. Our fourth and final subheading is ‘approval and ongoing presence of God’.

**1. Approval of Moses**

The closing section of chapter 39 begins and ends by telling us that ‘all the work’ of making the furnishings was finished. The people made everything exactly as the Lord had commanded Moses (39:32, 43). The various pieces of furniture, which we have become familiar with by this time, are brought to Moses for him to ‘look over’ and approve (39:43). The people had made all the components for constructing the wall of the inner tent, as well as its covering and entrance curtain. The ark was brought, along with the table of shewbread, the gold lampstand and its utensils and oil, and the ‘gold altar’, the altar of incense with its oil and incense. The bronze altar and wash basin or laver were also brought to Moses, along with the ‘hangings’ to make the wall of the outer tent. Finally, the ‘garments of ministry’, the ‘holy garments’ for Aaron and his sons were brought to Moses. (39:41).

Before going on to read of these items being anointed or consecrated, note how Moses ‘blessed them’, presumably blessed the people who completed the work exactly as commanded by the Lord (39:43). Many readers see a parallel between Moses looking over all the work and giving his blessing, to the account of God creating all things, as recorded in Genesis 1. Moses did not make these things out of nothing as the Lord made everything in this world, but he did see these things being made according to the command of the Lord.

Things made by the Lord, or made according to his command, are always good and perfect in the eyes of God. God made everything perfect because everything was made for his glory and made to serve him. The Lord blessed everything he made because it was good and because everything, including men and women, would honour and glorify his holy name (Gen 1:22, 28). God’s plan and purpose for his creation has not changed, despite the ignorance being shown by men and women around the world at this present time.

Sin turned the divine blessing into a curse, but here with the tent of meeting the Lord was beginning his plan of turning the curse back into a blessing. The Lord, who is holy, pure and perfect, was coming to dwell among his people. He was answering the prayer of his faithful servant Moses (cf. 33:15). As God’s faithful servant, the blessing of Moses represented the blessing of God.

**2. Anointing**

The Lord told Moses to go ahead and set up the tent of meeting (40:1-2). He was to do this on the first day of the first month in the second year (40:1, 17). The first month was the month they came out of Egypt. It took them three months to reach Mt Sinai, and Moses spent almost three months on the mountain, so within just six months they made everything for the tent of meeting. Moses gave instructions as to how the tent was to be assembled, but before this was done the various components and furnishings were anointed or consecrated or set apart as holy to the Lord.

The assembly of the tent would begin with the ‘Ark of the Testimony’ or Ark of the Covenant being put behind the veil in the inner chamber, and move on to the furnishings in the holy place, and then to the outer court (40:3-8). Everything was to be anointed with special oil while setting up the tent of meeting, ‘and it shall be holy’ (40:9). The covered portion of the tent is referred to as ‘the tabernacle and all that is in it’ (40:9), while the anointing of the bronze altar and wash basin is referred to separately (40:10, 11).

With water from the consecrated wash basin, Aaron and his sons were to be washed and themselves anointed with special oil, after putting on the holy garments of the high priest- ‘that he may minister to Me [the Lord] as priest’ (40:13). His sons were also to be anointed as priests. This anointing would be for all their days, and indeed for generations to come as an everlasting priesthood (40:15). This anointing for the priesthood would, in the fullness of time, pass on to our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is our high priest forever; his ministry of intercession would indeed be everlasting, as well as effective in saving us from sin (Heb 7:24, 25).

**3. Assembling of the tent of meeting**

‘So Moses raised up the tabernacle’ (40:18). Moses continues to obey the Lord’s commands, erecting the tent of meeting on the day the Lord told him to do so- the first day of the first month of the second year. Moses would not have done all the work himself of course. The components were all made and anointed according to divine specifications and were now put together and put in place here in the desert at Mt Sinai.

These verses (40:18-33) are marked by a seven-fold repetition of the words, ‘as the Lord had commanded Moses’ (40:19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 29, and 32). After the structure was set up and the furniture put in place, it is declared that, ‘Moses finished the work’ (40:33). He started by setting up the inner tent itself; the wall panels were erected and the coverings drawn over the top. He then put the ark containing ‘the Testimony’ or the stone tablets, the mercy seat and its two poles into the inner chamber and hung the veil across the entrance. Inside the next chamber, or ‘outside the veil’ as is written (40:22), he put the table with the bread on it, the gold lampstand with the lamps lit, and the ‘gold altar’ with burning incense, in front of the veil.

Each of these furnishings was set in place, ‘as the Lord had commanded Moses’. Just as anointing symbolised setting apart for holy purposes, the divine plan itself represented divine perfection; hence the need for complete obedience to this plan. Worship of the holy and perfect God was marked by holiness and obedience.

The sixth ‘as the Lord commanded Moses’ goes with the hanging of the veil into the holy place and installation of the bronze basin, filling this water and then having Aaron and his sons wash their hands and feet with this water. They had to wash whenever they went into the holy place or came near the altar. Presumably this washing was followed by dressing in the holy garments.

The final task was to erect the perimeter fence of the tent of meeting and to hang the curtain across the entrance to this outer court. The place of worship was set up and ready for worship to begin. But one thing remained, the thing Moses prayed for as most necessary for this community to continue on their journey to the holy land.

**4. Approval and ongoing presence of God**

Jesus said, ‘Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them’ (Matt 18:20). Men can build an ornate building and dress in fancy robes, but if the Lord is not present in their midst they are not worshipping the Lord. People must be gathered in God or in Jesus’ name. They must acknowledge Jesus as Saviour and Lord for their worship to be acceptable, and they must worship in the way the Lord himself has commanded. Does the Lord approve of our worship? He does if we worship him in spirit and truth (John 4:24). He does when we come with sincere hearts and full assurance of faith (Heb 10:22).

When Moses ‘finished the work’, ‘the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle’ (40:34). The Lord came down in his Shekinah glory to dwell in this house built by Moses; the word ‘Shekinah’ is a transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning ‘dwelling’, and refers to the presence of the Lord God. The presence of God was indicated in the cloud above the tent of meeting, which became fire by night (40:38).

God’s presence was first indicated when he was leading the people out of Egypt. His presence would now remain with them as they journeyed to the holy land. The people only packed up their tents and belongings, including the tent of meeting and its furnishings, when the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle (40:36, 37). Moses’ prayer for God’s presence to go with them was answered in a wonderful way (33:15). There was no avoiding God’s presence among his people with this cloud by day and fire by night above the tent of meeting, ‘in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys’ (40:38).

How do we see the Lord’s presence among us today? There is no cloud hovering over our church! God has come down and revealed himself to us in his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. He has given us the Scriptures, the Holy Bible. Worship without the word of God is not acceptable worship. And Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in the hearts of his people. When Jesus speaks of dwelling in the midst of his people it is by his word and by his Spirit. ‘True worshippers’ said Jesus, ‘will worship the Father in spirit and truth’ (John 4:23), Jesus and his gospel being the truth.

One concluding note: ‘Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting’ when it was filled with the glory of the Lord (40:35). Moses was a prophet and the leader of this community but Aaron was now the anointed high priest. Such was the holiness and the glory of God’s presence that no one could enter the most holy place except the high priest, and that only once a year, and not without blood.

All this changed as it was superseded in the new covenant. Jesus is now high priest for ever. Jesus is our mediator for ever. Jesus is now our king for ever. Moses and the people were on their way to the holy land of Canaan, but we are on our way to the holy land in heaven, to the heavenly Jerusalem in which there is no temple because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb will be its temple (Rev 21:22).

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