

5. The Provision of the Tabernacle and Priesthood (24:12-31:18)

Immediately following Israel's fellowship meal with its new covenant Father, Yahweh called Moses to again ascend Mount Sinai after he and the men with him had returned to the waiting nation below. His stated intention was to provide Moses with stone tablets containing His covenant "law and commandment" (24:12). Moses had written for Israel the words of the covenant in a book; Yahweh would provide them with tablets of stone etched with His own finger.

It is noteworthy that, while the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain to give him the two tables of the covenant, His entire interaction with Moses during his forty days in His presence was devoted to the provision of a priestly system for mediating Israel's relationship with Him. The stone tablets aren't mentioned again in the text until Moses was ready to return to the people (ref. 31:18). God spent forty days instructing Moses about a sanctuary and its ministering priesthood, but none of that content was inscribed on the tablets; they were specifically for recording the covenant itself as it was epitomized in the Ten Words (cf. Deuteronomy 4:10-13, 5:1-22, 10:1-4).

Yahweh's call to Moses to receive the tables of the covenant and His provision of them form the bookends for chapters 25-31, which deal exclusively with the Lord's detailed instruction regarding His sanctuary and the men who were to minister before Him in connection with it. This has led some to regard these chapters as a digression from the covenant narrative surrounding them (chapters 19-34) – and possibly even a later addition to the text, particularly since this instruction wasn't recorded on the tablets. Nevertheless, two key observations show the relation of this section to the larger narrative.

- 1) First of all, it's important to emphasize that *the priestly system with all its particulars wasn't part of the Sinai Covenant*. The Hebrews writer took note of this fact, observing that the Law (that is, Israel's covenant) had its **basis** in the priesthood (7:11). This being the case, it follows that the priesthood was separate from the covenant. But it also implies that the Levitical system preceded the Sinai Covenant in some sense, which the Exodus narrative seems to contradict. The answer to this apparent difficulty is found in the second observation below.
- 2) The way that Yahweh introduced His instruction regarding the tabernacle and priesthood indicates that *He was providing this religious institution to mediate His relationship with His covenant "son."* In fulfillment of His promise to Abraham, Yahweh intended to dwell among the patriarch's descendents (25:1-8; also cf. 15:17 with Genesis 17:7, 26:1-3, 28:13-15), and that goal was to be realized in connection with a physical sanctuary and an appointed priesthood.

Yahweh was to be King in Israel, but His rule would not be that of a detached, self-serving despot; He would rule over His people as their covenant Father, lovingly serving their good by His immediate presence among them, protecting them and providing for their every need. Canaan – chosen by Yahweh to be Israel's kingdom land – was first and foremost His *sanctuary*.

The Lord had redeemed Israel not simply to deliver them from their bondage in Egypt, but to bring them to Himself. At issue was not redemption *from* something as much as *for* something. God ransomed Abraham's descendents in order to make them His unique son by covenant and then bring them into His sanctuary land. Yahweh would exercise His rule over His son (and through that image-son, over the whole earth) in the context of their communion – not according to the “procedure of the king” (1 Samuel 8:1-17), but as Israel's Father-Lord.

At the time of the Exodus, the Lord had designated the whole of Canaan as His dwelling place, but it was necessary that there should be a particular, tangible place where He could meet with His covenant son. The tabernacle was to serve that central function of the covenant; Israel would interact with its Father-God at His sanctuary, and the Lord's priests would facilitate that interaction. And so, when the author of Hebrews declared that the Law was founded on the priesthood, he wasn't speaking of chronological priority. As Exodus records, the Law of Moses did indeed come first, but the priesthood was primary in that the Law – which specified and governed Israel's covenant relationship with God – was to be administered and mediated through the priesthood. In that sense the Law presupposed the priesthood; it had its basis in the Levitical system.

When the nature and function of the Sinai Covenant are correctly discerned, God's parallel instruction regarding His sanctuary is no longer seen as a deviation and/or distraction from the narrative's central concern. God called Moses before Him to give him the tables of the covenant, *but Moses was to bring them to Israel together with a comprehensive system for administering the covenantal Torah they contained.*

- a. Like all covenants, the covenant at Sinai acted to define and establish a relationship between the covenanting parties. Specifically, it bound Israel and Yahweh together as Father and son, and the intimacy of this relationship was to be expressed tangibly by means of a physical sanctuary wherein Yahweh could dwell in the midst of His people.

God's goal in the covenant was communion with Abraham's offspring, but from the very outset the narrative makes it clear that there was a limit to the intimacy that could exist between Father and son. In the terror of their encounter with Yahweh the people had pled with Moses to mediate between them and Him, and he did so first in communicating God's ordinances to them (ref. 20:18-21:1).

The necessity of separation was demonstrated next in the fellowship meal that followed immediately after the ratification of the covenant. Yahweh informed Moses that he was allowed to draw near to Him, but the others were to worship at a distance (ref. again 24:1-2). *Even in its covenant blamelessness, Israel was obligated to keep an appropriate distance from its Father-God.* So it would be in connection with the physical sanctuary as it represented the Lord's presence among His people: as He promised, Yahweh would dwell in their midst, but they would encounter Him only through an elaborate system of mediation.

That God provided Moses with the priestly system in the context of Israel's innocence is vitally important, for it shows that the principle of mediation wasn't bound to the nation's covenant-breaking. Even in its covenant righteousness Israel couldn't approach its Father-God directly, *highlighting the fact that the divine-human reconciliation embodied in the Sinai Covenant was only symbolic*. The Father-son relationship Yahweh formed with Israel portrayed His goal of recovering sacred space, but it didn't effect it. Nothing had really changed from that fateful day in Eden: God's image-son remained estranged from Him; as it had been since the Fall, worship continued to be a matter of mediated distance.

- b. Though at that moment Israel was faultless under the covenant, God intended that the priestly system would also mediate His relationship with them in the context of their covenant-breaking. While Moses was unaware of what was brewing in the minds of the sons of Israel, Yahweh knew. Even as He was giving to Moses the details for the sanctuary and the mediating priesthood, Israel was on its way to breaking the covenant. Before long the relationship between Father and son would be shattered, and with the covenant broken, how could Israel continue to be Israel? And by implication, what would become of God's promise to Abraham?

Yahweh's answer to Israel's future failure was the mediation of *vicarious righteousness*. Throughout its generations, unfaithfulness would be the legacy of the covenant son, making the work of substitutionary atonement the very heart of the priestly ministration. Thus God's instruction to Moses included the basics of the sacrificial system that would provide atonement for the nation and its priests, thereby securing the continuance of the covenant (cf. 29:1-14, 29-37, and 30:10).

Israel's impending disobedience only highlighted what had always been true: Abraham's covenant offspring were yet sons of Adam; they existed as he did, in a state of fundamental estrangement. *No matter how serious and conscientious their commitment to live as the Lord's devoted covenant son, there was no hope of their doing so.*

- Though the sons of Israel had not yet formally violated the covenant, in their hearts they had been unfaithful from the time the Lord revealed Himself to them in Egypt. In spite of their repeated oath, Israel would not and could not be Israel.
- Even in its covenant innocence, Israel's communion with God was a matter of mediated distance. The implication was unmistakable, even to that first generation that camped at Sinai: Despite its unique calling and covenant privilege, Israel continued under the curse inaugurated by its progenitor; Yahweh had not yet restored men to the true intimacy of image-sons.

However it might appear, the coming episode involving the golden calf would bring no fundamental change to the nation; it would merely externalize the reality that had existed long before God's call to Israel – the reality He had already attested by maintaining His distance from His son. Soon, with the covenant openly violated and Israel estranged from its Father, the necessity of mediated distance would no longer be a matter of question.