

God's House of

Shadows

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God's House of Shadows

by Brian Johnston

Father. But it is used to describe the collective service or worship of the people of God in Romans chapter 9, verse 4. The collective worship of God's New Testament people is the theme of the Bible letter to the Hebrews, as we said earlier. The Hebrews' letter explains why the worship of God's people is to be addressed to the God and Father of the Lord Jesus. Peter wrote: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ* (1 Peter 1:3; Cp. Ephesians 1:3). It's because the people of God draw near to God through the ministry of the Lord Jesus in his office as High Priest. The Lord Jesus takes the spiritual sacrifices of God's worshipping people (1 Peter 2:5) and presents them to his Father (Hebrews 8:3). They are not directed to him, but through him to the Father - the Father who longs for the worship of his people.

In concluding this booklet, I'd just like to mention that it's impressive how the letter to the Hebrews keeps

drawing on Old Testament picture language to make its points. The Holy Spirit is making it very clear in our Bibles that the worship of God's people today is the spiritual answer to all that happened in Jewish worship long ago, with its animal sacrifices, physically impressive robes, and as centred on the Tabernacle which was then God's house on earth. Imagine someone walking towards you with the sun behind them. You first encounter their shadow as it projects out in front of them. Then you meet the person whose shadow it is. The Bible itself describes these Old Testament rituals as 'shadows' that were cast ahead of the coming of Christ. Jesus Christ, God's Son is the substance. We meet him personally in the New Testament, and the reality of Christian worship contrasts with the shadows of the Old Testament. I do hope our study of these ancient shadows has in some way enriched our present experience of serving God.

1. Overcoming sin's barrier

I will remember a feeling beyond disappointment when at a young age I learned that I wasn't good enough for God and that there was no likelihood that I ever would be. That memory comes flooding back now as we begin to explore the Tabernacle - which is the Bible name for the special tent God lived in at the time of Moses. It was pitched in the middle of all his people's tents as they travelled through the desert on the way to their promised land.

Although the tents in which the people of Israel lived were all around God's tent, the Bible describes the Twelve Tribes as being 'at a distance'. That's what reminded me of what I'd heard from the missionary to Africa about not being good enough for God.

It's a basic teaching of the Bible that sin separates: it separates God and man. This is graphically seen in the space left between the Tabernacle and the people's tents. We're not told exactly (Numbers 2:2), but from other biblical indications (Joshua 3:4), the gap might have been as much as 1 km.

It wasn't only distance that separated the people from God, but there was also a boundary: "*You shall also make the court of the*

tabernacle ... there shall be hangings for the court made of fine woven linen, one hundred cubits ... [by] fifty cubits" was God's instruction through Moses (Exodus 27:9-13). As well as distance, there was a barrier. It was a courtyard hanging - like a huge wind-break - made of 'fine woven linen'. The fact that it's described as 'fine' means it was bleached. Picture it: bleached material of two-stranded thread, doubtless of flax. I think it must have been blindingly white in the strong desert sun ... while the people, whose tents might have been as shabby as their personal lives, were kept at a distance. Boundaries like this, set by God, show us what God is like. The first boundary we ever read about in the Bible was at the Garden of Eden where God our Maker became our Judge, when:

He drove the man out ... [and] stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword ... to guard the way ... (Genesis 3:24). There was no going back into that wonderful paradise on earth, for our first parents had corrupted themselves that day away from God's own likeness in which they'd been originally created.

There was also a boundary at the

Mountain of Sinai where God gave the Law, the Ten Commandments, which declare to us what God the holy Lawgiver is like. Moses was told "You shall set bounds for the people all around ... warn the people ... do not break through to the LORD to gaze" (Exodus 19:12-21). The reason for barriers like these becomes ever more clear: it's the difference between us and God that causes the distance which keeps us apart - in the same way that it kept the people 'at a distance' from the tent where God lived on earth in the time of Moses.

So the court of the Tabernacle was yet another barrier in the series we've recalled. The inside of the enclosure created by the linen hangings would have measured about a quarter the size of a soccer pitch. As mentioned, these court hangings were white and they were made of fine linen (compare Revelation 19:8). What's more, they were tall: (5 cubits) at more than two and a half metres. This is taller than a man, which illustrates the point the Bible makes elsewhere: that God's standards are higher than we can ever measure up to on our own. We read in the book of Psalms, *Your righteousness, O God, is very high* (Psalm 71:19).

These high standards were perfectly demonstrated in the life of the person the Bible repeatedly refers to as 'The Righteous One' (Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14). When Peter, the

disciple, preached the first Christian sermon recorded in Acts chapter 2, he powerfully reminded his audience of the life of Jesus Christ the Righteous One. He spoke of his wonderful life as being that of "a man attested to ... by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in [their] midst" (Acts 2:22). The same preacher also gave compelling testimony to the life of Jesus a few chapters later. To a different audience he announced, "God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good ... for God was with Him" (Acts 10:38).

When people heard of the righteous life of Jesus, their reaction tended to be, "What must we do?" because the righteousness of his life convicted them of how different their own lives were (John 16:10). The perfect life of Jesus Christ - about which we can reliably read in the four Gospels - shows us how far we fall short of the glory of God which is the standard by which God must judge us all (Romans 3:23; 1 Corinthians 11:7).

No-one could measure up in stature to that standard reflected in the height of the court hangings which screened from view the Tabernacle where God lived. But there was a gate which was of equal height to the court hangings. Just as the height of the gate matched perfectly the height of the court hangings; I'd like you to think of how the apostles

who, in resurrection, has entered within the true Holy place in heaven - and has done so in order to bring us in! The letter to the Hebrews tells us that all God's people are invited to 'draw near' in prayer and 'enter in' in worship. This is talking about a spiritual experience linked to our earthly service now, as it says:

... we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:15,16)

Remember again how David in the psalms linked the incense with prayer. We've just had before us the picture of the high priest taking the incense right into the Holiest of All. The high priest acted for the people of God, and not on behalf of an individual. Although individual exercise in prayer is a precious privilege, is there not an indication here that the people of God, when together in prayer, in some sense 'penetrate further'? Isn't this a reason in itself not to forsake the church prayer meeting (Heb.10:25; Acts 2:42)?

The Hebrews letter is not about individuals, but about the service of the people of God. That becomes even clearer the further we read through it (8:2; 9:1; 10:19). I believe we can safely conclude the high

theme of the letter is the collective worship of the people of God - those who were then expressed in New Testament times throughout the various local churches of God.

On this topic of worship, it's surely significant that God the Father was singled out by the Lord Jesus when talking to the woman at the well. The Father, he says, is seeking worshippers (John 4). Perhaps that seems to indicate worship that's specially directed to the Father. Of course, the Lord Jesus himself can very appropriately be worshipped. In the Gospels we find people worshipping the Lord Jesus, like the blind man Jesus healed in John chapter nine.

There are, in fact, three main words used for 'worship' in the New Testament. One is concerned with God-fearing attitude of mind; another is descriptive of bowing down; while the third emphasizes the actions by means of which our worship is expressed. This last idea seems to be the high watermark of worship as presented in the Bible. It was this kind of serving God with our actions that the Lord Jesus spoke about when he replied to Satan's temptation by saying:

... to him, "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.'" (Luke 4:8)

Notice that: 'serve Him [the Father] only'. We never read in the Bible of this particular (word for) worship being directed to anyone but God the

incense on this altar, or burnt offering or meal offering; and you shall not pour out a drink offering on its horns once a year; he shall make atonement on it with the blood of the sin offering of atonement once a year throughout your generations. It is most holy to the LORD." (Exodus 30:1-10).

So this inside altar was for incense and not sacrifice. Later, when writing his psalms, King David could say: *May my prayer be counted as incense before You* (Psalm 141:2). That's a reference back to the incense that was used in connection with the altar of incense within the Holy Place of the Tabernacle. David very much wanted his prayer to have the same acceptability to God as that incense (Exodus 30:34-38).

The Bible link between incense and prayer continues beyond David. In fact, in Revelation, the very last book of the Bible, we read in chapters 5 and 8 about a heavenly scene with: *Golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints...* (Revelation 5:8; see also 8:3-5).

Sometimes we may doubt if our prayers are being answered, but we should remember that the answer may be simply, "Not yet". What we have depicted for us in the symbolism of the Book of Revelation are prayers lying in golden bowls. How long had they lain there? How many of those who had prayed those

prayers had abandoned their requests as unanswered? But they weren't forgotten! They had not gone unheeded.

As we return to the connection between the censer with its incense and the Holiest of All, or Holy of Holies, we read in Leviticus chapter 16:

"[Aaron] shall take a firepan full of coals of fire from upon the altar before the LORD and two handfuls of finely ground sweet incense, and bring it inside the veil. He shall put the incense on the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of incense may cover the mercy seat that is on the ark of the testimony, otherwise he will die." (v.12,13)

So the censer went in year after year on this special day into the Holiest of All, which would justify the way Hebrews 9 appears to associate the censer with the Holiest of All. Only the high priest of Israel went through the veil on that Day of Atonement. He did so with two handfuls of incense. When in the Holiest place, he put the incense on the censer to create a fragrant cloud there. The coals that set the fragrance free had been taken from the great copper altar outside. This was the altar of sacrifice which tends to draw our mind to the sufferings and the passion of the Christ of the cross. It's only because of Calvary that our prayers and worship can be acceptably fragrant for God. And the Lord Jesus who died is the same

in the Bible witnessed to the fact that the righteous life of Jesus Christ matched (that is, equalled) the righteousness of God. As the hymn-writer says:

There was no other good enough
To pay the price of sin;
He only could unlock the gate
Of heaven, to let us in.

We've been picturing the court hangings all around the Tabernacle. But how were they made secure? The Bible tells us there were pillars, sockets, hooks and rods to perform that task. God gave the design for everything to do with his house, and of these things he said: *Its ... pillars and ... sockets shall be bronze. The hooks of the pillars and their bands shall be silver* (Exodus 27:10).

The pillars would be like fence-posts, doubtless of acacia wood, probably round; with their foot held in position by fitting into a socket ('base', Exodus 27:10-18). No doubt each socket had a hole to receive a corresponding bronze or copper peg ('tenon') attached to the end of the pillar; and the pillars were further secured in the upright position by means of cords (Exodus 35:18) fastened to copper pins (27:19) driven into the ground. There were 60 pillars in total (Exodus 38:17,19) and all were capped with silver, probably a curved plate to protect the top; and each pillar had silver 'hooks' over which the eyes at the ends of the rigid 'bands' would be placed. The bands were the poles or

rods spanning the gap between the pillars. The linen hangings were either hung from the pillar hooks directly or from these rods which acted like curtain poles. The guide ropes on either side would be secured by a noose arrangement over the tops of the pillars which the hooks would prevent from slipping all the way down.

The fact there were silver tops on the pillars is interesting since silver has a Bible association with redemption. Remember how Peter writes, *you were not redeemed with ... silver* (Exodus 30:13; 1 Peter 1:18)? By reading in Ex.30, we can discover the origin of the silver for the Tabernacle pillars:

"When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each one must pay the LORD a ransom for his life at the time he is counted... Each one who crosses over to those already counted is to give a half shekel ... an offering to the LORD. All who cross over, those twenty years old or more, are to give an offering to the LORD... to atone for your lives. Receive the atonement money from the Israelites and use it for the service of the Tent of Meeting" (Exodus 30:12-16 NIV).

When we compare this with Exodus 38(:25-28), we see that the payment was in silver and it was used, among other things, for the hooks and rods of the courtyard pillars.

Notice we read about the people

'crossing over' or 'passing under' when the silver offering was made. That's the shepherd's word for counting out his sheep by having them each pass under his rod (Ezekiel 20:37). The sheep were all penned; and the shepherd stood at the door of the fold, where only one sheep could come out at a time. He had in his hand a rod dipped in a red dye; and as they came out, he counted one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine; and as the tenth came out, he marked it with the rod, and said, "This is the tenth"; and that was set apart for the Lord. (Clarke)

To know redemption and to pass over from death to life we need to come to the *good shepherd* who *lays down his life for the sheep* (John 10:9-14 NIV). He's Jesus Christ who laid down his life by being lifted up on the cross. We find another reminder in the fact that the silver is described as an 'offering'. And the word 'offering' can mean 'something lifted up'. Jesus said: "*I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.*" *He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die*

(John 12:32-33 NIV). Jesus died as an 'atonement' or 'covering', which brings us back again to the description of the silver offering as being 'the atonement money'. Believers today *are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood* (Romans 3:24-26 NIV). *So it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that [we] were redeemed ... but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect* (1 Peter 1:18-19 NIV). By receiving Christ - the righteous one who sacrificed himself for us - we can overcome sin's barrier, and come from a distance back to God - to know a close relationship with him as our shepherd and guide - by experiencing the redemption hinted at in the silver items belonging to the courtyard boundary of the Tabernacle.

13. Worshipping in spirit and truth

In the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 9, we read a description of the Old Testament Tabernacle which has been our focus in this booklet. The treatment it's given there, makes clear that it's appropriate to deal with it in the general way we've been handling the subject. We have seen in it a foreshadowing of the good things, the better things, which we enjoy as we serve God now according to the pattern of New Testament teaching. The Tabernacle is, after all, in verse 9, called a 'parable' for this present time.

Now, after exploring the first section of the Tabernacle proper (containing the lamp stand and table) the Bible text in Hebrews 9 goes on to say: *And behind the second veil, the part of the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of All, which had the golden censer* (Hebrews 9:3,4).

That last word 'censer' is interesting, and some Bible versions show a difference at this point. The word may mean either censer or altar of incense. In fact, it was the censer which belonged to, or was associated with, the Holiest (compartment) of All - but the altar itself was positioned in front of the

veil; that is, on the other side of the veil, in the adjoining holy place. Let's take first the Bible details of this altar of incense, before we think further of the link through into the Holiest place beyond the veil. The instruction was:

"Make an altar as a place for burning incense ... of acacia wood. Its length a cubit, and its width a cubit, it shall be square, and its height two cubits; its horns shall be of one piece with it. You shall overlay it with pure gold, its top and its sides all around, and its horns; and you shall make a gold molding all around for it. You shall make two gold rings for it under its molding; you shall make them on its two side walls - on opposite sides - and they shall be holders for poles with which to carry it. You shall make the poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. You shall put this altar in front of the veil that is near the ark of the testimony ... Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it ... every morning when he trims the lamps. When Aaron trims the lamps at twilight, he shall burn incense. There shall be perpetual incense before the LORD throughout your generations ..."

"... You shall not offer any strange

comparison with Balaam's donkey, which tried to arrest the madness of the prophet by trying to prevent his onward journey (Numbers 22).

Uzzah's action showed contempt for the sacred chest, which is what the ark of the Testimony was. Perhaps he was trying to get things moving again after the oxen stopped. That was when God struck Uzzah down. The prophet Isaiah (66:2) tells us that God esteems the person who 'shakes' or 'trembles' at his Word. So maybe these 'shaking' oxen have a lesson to teach us! In any case, we should certainly discontinue any practices that are not according to the ordinance of God's Word.

David learned his lesson that day, and later said, *"No one is to carry the*

ark of God but the Levites; for the LORD chose them to carry the ark of God ...

"Because you did not carry it at the first, the LORD our God made an outburst on us, for we did not seek Him according to the ordinance" (1 Chronicles 15:1-28; see Exodus 25:15; Numbers 4:15).

The ark of the Testimony was to be carried on the shoulder of the Levites, not on a cart pulled by oxen. The ark of the Testimony was a sacred trust, for it was a picture of Christ. They had to learn that there's a wrong way to uphold a tottering testimony. The way of the world is not the way for us to bear the testimony of Christ!

2. A sure foundation

At times strong desert winds must have whipped across the sands, making for testing times for the Tabernacle! But, on shifting desert sands, pegs and cords ensured security for God's house on earth.

It's easy to miss them, but there are quite a few references to the pegs that held the Tabernacle and its courtyard screen in place even on the windiest of days. For example, we're told in the Bible that *all the pegs of the court, shall be of bronze* (Exodus 27:19). It wasn't only the court, but the Tabernacle as well, as Exodus chapter 38 makes plain, telling us: *all the pegs of the tabernacle and of the court all around were of bronze* (Exodus 38:20,31). Of course, the pegs would have been no good without their cords, and these get a mention in the thirty-fifth chapter where it talks about *the pegs of the tabernacle and the pegs of the court and their cords* (Exodus 35:18). It's clear the gate of the court received the same treatment as the rest of the surrounding court, for Exodus 39 makes specific mention of *it: the gate of the court ... its cords and its pegs* (Exodus 39:40; see also Numbers 3:37; 4:32). So there are quite a few references to pegs when we read about the Tabernacle.

In the Old Testament, the word for 'peg' is in other places translated as

'nail', for example, when we're told, *David prepared large quantities of iron to make the nails for the doors of the gates* (1 Chronicles 22:3).

King David was at that time preparing for the Temple which his son Solomon would build at Jerusalem. This Temple was to replace the Tabernacle as God's house on earth, and a thousand years later it would be on this same site, just outside the city walls of Jerusalem, that Jesus Christ would be crucified. So the Calvary nails which held the Lord Jesus to the cross were not the first iron nails to be used on that hill: those mentioned by David for the Temple were there a thousand years earlier. But, having mentioned that, let's think of how the Son of God, as man, was pitched full-length there on a rough Roman cross and pegged to it by human hands. Jesus' disciple, Peter, later described it like this: *"this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed (Gk. 'prospegnumi') to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death"* (Acts 2:23).

When Peter used the word 'nailed' in that verse, in the language of the New Testament he was using a word meaning 'to peg, or to set up a tent;

to pitch'. That's why we described Jesus as having been pitched full-length on that rough Roman cross and pegged to it by human hands.

As a result of the Lord Jesus subjecting himself to that ordeal, we read in our Bibles that, in resurrection, he *has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched* (Gk. 'pegnumi'), *not man* (Hebrews 8:1,2).

Did you notice that word 'pitched'? It's basically the same as the word for Jesus being 'pitched out' or 'nailed' to the cross; it's the idea of pegs again. But the link is much more than a reference to pegs on earth and in heaven. For the service of the Son of God on earth was to become the basis of his service now in heaven. He served God on earth as a man, and died and rose again in the will of God, so that he might be qualified to be the high priest of men and women today who gather faithfully on earth that they might worship God the Father in heaven. Hebrews chapter 10 verse 22 is so inviting when it says:

Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. That's drawing near to God in worship. The qualification for a right approach to God in worship is stated using the picture

language of the Old Testament, for things connected with the service of God's earthly house long ago, the Tabernacle, we're told (Hebrews 9:9), form a parable for God's people today.

The priests in the days of Moses were sprinkled with sacrificial blood and washed with water before they could ever draw near to God in priestly service associated with the Tabernacle. That's the exact imagery used in our Hebrews' text. For those New Testament believers had the awesome privilege of being in a spiritual priesthood which corresponded to that of Aaron and his sons long ago. The spiritual priesthood, described in the New Testament, is actually capable of approaching God in the heavenly sanctuary! That holy place in heaven answers to the second section of the Tabernacle long ago where the ark of the covenant was located.

Long ago, the high priest who had exclusive access surely entered the second section of the physical sanctuary with some fear, for he was entering God's immediate presence when he passed through the veil to go into the innermost part of the Tabernacle. But the New Testament people of God can, with boldness, pass through the courts of heaven! That's the great difference the life, death and resurrection of Jesus has made!

In the days of Moses, when God descended upon Mount Sinai to

altar and the incense upon the hot coals produced a cloud. As he went through the veil into the holy of holies where the mercy-seat was above the ark, he couldn't see because of the covering of the incense cloud. Nowadays the whole priesthood of God's spiritual house come (again not by sight but by faith) each Sunday morning in a cloud of fragrant worship: worship that exudes the fragrance of Christ set ablaze by the fire of Calvary (seen in the copper altar).

It's all unspeakably precious, as we see the Old Testament filling out the revelation of the New Testament, especially in this matter of a true spiritual appreciation of worship; and of how the Lord of glory came out from the heavenly temple in order that he might lead us back in there as worshippers.

We've commented on how, in the Old Testament picture, it was God's intention that the ark and its mercy-seat remained hidden. There was one time, however, against the will of God, when the people of God took the ark out of the Tabernacle and set it forth in their company as they went to war against the enemy. First Samuel records:

So the people sent to Shiloh, and from there they carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts who sits above the cherubim; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God (1Samuel 4:4).

This proved to be a tragic and costly error, typical of times when people work out their own solutions without looking to God and his Word for guidance and help. The Philistine enemy captured the ark, but soon discovered they couldn't live with its presence, so they returned it on a cart back into Israelite territory.

The Second Book of Samuel records how David, when he'd become king of Israel, at once set about restoring the ark to its proper place. *David arose ... to Baale-judah* (Canaanitish name for Kiriath Jearim, see 1 Chronicles 13:6), *to bring up ... the ark of God ... when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon ... the oxen nearly upset it* (2 Samuel 6:2-6).

There can be no doubting that David's desire was perfectly good and sincere. But why was he now transporting the ark in the same way that the godless Philistines had done? David began to realize the error of this when they came to the threshing floor of Nachon, which might be translated as the threshing floor of the stroke or disaster, as if it had been named after this very incident. When the procession with the oxen pulling the ark of God on the cart got to this threshing-floor, the oxen nearly upset the ark, and one man, Uzzah, put out his hand to make sure that it didn't fall. It's possible to read the Bible text as saying that the oxen 'shook', or that they 'discontinued' their progress. So it might be possible to draw some

short of the glory of God: being justified freely by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God has set forth [as] a mercy-seat, through faith in his blood (Romans 3:23-25 JND)

That's a striking use in Romans 3 by Paul of the word 'mercy-seat'. In the New Testament, we only find it here and in Hebrews 9:5 where it's listed among the items that belonged to the Tabernacle. There may be some debate about the Romans 3 translation, but in Hebrews 9 the same word is definitely used to mean the mercy-seat of the ark. So I'd like to assume that's the way it's intended to be read in Romans 3 as well. The reason we've described its use there as striking is because it's talking of God setting Jesus forth as a mercy-seat. In the Old Testament, the ark with its mercy-seat was hidden away from view within the inner compartment of the Tabernacle. It wasn't something which was visibly 'set forth', which is why there are those who doubt that the word can really mean mercy-seat here. They prefer to translate it as 'atoning sacrifice', or words to that effect. But I wonder if we are not rather meant to be struck by the contrast. After all, the Son of God leaving the throne of heaven to come and die on a cross on earth is infinitely more shocking than if the ark and its mercy-seat should have been exposed.

So the mercy-seat - the place where

God told Moses he would meet with him - that which previously was normally hidden in the depths of the Tabernacle (but see Joshua 3:3,6) is now spoken of as being exposed! Yet it's not the shadow, but the substance that's exposed, for it's Jesus being described as in the guise of the mercy-seat. The preaching of the Christ of the cross is to be an encounter with God: we come in our sins, but we come repenting, and we meet God in the person of his Son who died on the cross for us to bring us to himself! Having met him, we're then invited to enter into his presence through the veil in worship. That's the full extent of the good news; the gospel message doesn't stop at the cross. It's intended to instruct us and bring us as a worshipping people of saved sinners into the presence of God where Christ the Ark now is and where he truly belongs. Those angels also see the blood of Christ as cleansing the heavenly things themselves (Hebrews 9:23) so that a redeemed, but failing, people might enter into the true Hobbies in heaven in worship. This is the biblical revelation of what happens in the case of God's people today.

Every first day of the week at the breaking of the bread, they enter the veil by faith. The high priest (alone) long ago didn't walk by sight when he, once a year, approached within the veil. He took a censer full of hot coals from the outside altar, and placed on it incense from the inside

prepare a people for service in his earthly sanctuary, the Bible explicitly tells us that the people were afraid. And why not? We read that:

The mountain ... burned with fire ... blackness and darkness and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words ... those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore ... so terrifying was the sight (Hebrews 12:18-21).

God came to meet them at Mount Sinai to advance the purpose that would eventually lead to the establishing of a national centre for worship at Jerusalem, the place known as Zion. Reading the Bible letter of Hebrews, we have to say that if Israel's meeting with God at Sinai was an awesome experience, then our birthright as Christians is to experience its even more breath-taking counterpart!

For, contrasting it with Israel's approach before Mount Sinai, the writer goes on to explain to those Hebrew Christians in New Testament times:

You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels ... to God the Judge of all ... to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant (Hebrews 12:22-24).

Isn't that wonderful! What a revelation this is in our Bibles! A spiritual journey that brings the

people of God, each week, into heaven itself - to the original Zion above, the centre of true Christian worship. Earthly Zion was only ever a copy designed to reflect characteristics of the true Zion in the presence of God above.

We began by thinking of how the Tabernacle in Moses' day was pitched and pegged to the desert floor. The idea of pitching a tent with pegs brought us right through our Bible to the Hebrews' letter which speaks of a tent or a tabernacle which the Lord himself has pitched in heaven. That's the true sanctuary, not a copy of it like the one on the desert floor in the time of Moses (Hebrews 8:1 ff). We've moved on in the Bible from a tent pitched in the desert, to a tent pitched in heaven: the first connected with the Old Covenant, and the other with the New. Access to God was limited in the time of Moses, only the high priest could go right through the Tabernacle and into God's presence in the holy place. And he could only do that once a year, and only then with the blood of animal sacrifices. But the whole New Testament people of God are now encouraged to have *boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus* (Hebrews 10:19-22).

When does this experience take place? When does a spiritual priesthood today enter the heavenly holy place? There's a definite clue in Hebrews 10:

... we have confidence to enter the

holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water ... not forsaking our own assembling together (Hebrews 10:19-25 NAS).

In the New Testament churches we're told they 'assembled together' for the 'breaking of the bread'. That's when God's New Testament people came together to worship. They had before them the bread which focused their minds by symbolising Christ's flesh and the wine that symbolised his blood or death. Here it's stated that 'through the veil of his flesh' and 'by the blood of Jesus' they entered the holy place above where Christ serves as high priest. There's no doubt that this experience of entering the holy place in heaven is linked in Hebrews with the theme of the people's worship. The worship

we see in the New Testament takes place when the churches of God gather to break bread each week.

Who would want to forsake such an opportunity when, by the symbols of the bread, signifying the veil that is to say his flesh, and the wine signifying his blood, we enter into the collective worship experience of the people of God today? Surely it's the Lord's intention that it takes place each week with the same simplicity as when the Lord broke bread with his disciples before going out to be pegged or nailed to the cross. It's not designed to be a physically impressive performance. There are no biblical instructions about wearing special clothes or meeting in special styles of buildings, but as we realize from this Hebrews' letter something of the spiritual reality that's taking place, we would have to say that in these terms nothing else comes close to this in spiritual experience this side of heaven!

12. The Lord came out to lead us in!

The subject of this chapter is the Mercy-seat of the Ark. It's described in Exodus 25 like this:

"You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold; two and a half cubits shall be its length and a cubit and a half its width. And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work you shall make them at the two ends of the mercy seat ... of one piece with the mercy seat. And the cherubim shall stretch out their wings above, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and they shall face one another; the faces of the cherubim shall be toward the mercy seat. You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the Testimony that I will give you. And there I will meet with you ..." (Exodus 25:10-22 NKJ)

You may have noticed from that Bible reading that the mercy-seat had no specified depth. What it did do, however, was to cover over the law (called the Testimony) which was broken daily in the camp of Israel. The two tablets of stone which Moses had received from God, with the ten commandments written on them, were contained in this sacred chest known as the ark of the covenant under the lid of the mercy-seat. Each year, the mercy-seat lid was stained with the sprinkled blood

of a bull and goat. These were both sin offerings and part of a ritual known as the Day of Atonement. On that day once every year the high priest of Israel brought the blood of those sacrifices and sprinkled it before and on the mercy-seat. The angels which were an integral part of this lid were set in the position of always looking down on the mercy-seat proper. That reminds us of what Peter tells us when he says that angels desire to look into the things concerning the sufferings and the glories of the Christ (1 Peter 1:11). The sufferings of Christ on the cross were represented in that blood sprinkled on the mercy-seat each year. Perhaps this is one of the most wonderful pictures from among all the shadows of this Tabernacle house. The reality corresponding to this shadow is the fact that angels looked down on the death of Christ. At the cross they saw his blood shed to provide a covering for the law that was broken in our hearts, and all this was according to a divine mercy that knows no depths!

Since we've now moved on to New Testament history, I'd like to share with you a verse from the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. It's found in chapter 3 and verse 23 and it says, *For all have sinned, and come*

ones.

That leaves only self-control, which can only relate to ourselves. As we spend time with God and remain in his shadow, a character resembling that of Christ will be formed in us. This will be the Holy Spirit's doing, for we can only bear the fruit; we're powerless to produce it. This is the same as it was with Bezalel and the ark: it was the Spirit of God who enabled him to produce workmanship of such a high order.

As the Holy Spirit works in us, any outbursts of temper will become less frequent as the fruit of self-control gradually materializes. It's the same with the other qualities as well, so that our attitude to other people, and to things that happen to us, as well as our attitude to ourselves will slowly come to resemble these same attitudes we see displayed in Christ's perfect character. That's God's plan for us personally: that we come to resemble his Son, Jesus.

3. A view of Christ's cross-work

Do you remember ever being chosen to perform some duty. Perhaps it wasn't anything much, but it was the fact that you'd been chosen by someone you really admired that made it special for you. Imagine then the sense of 'special-ness' which comes as a result of the place for the Tabernacle being God's choice of place. The Bible makes it very plain that the Tabernacle, the place of God's altar, was sited at *the place which the LORD your God shall choose from all your tribes ...* (Deuteronomy 12:5).

Whatever God selects and chooses becomes incomparably precious simply because he's chosen it! What a tremendous privilege then, not to mention responsibility, for those who were identified with that place of God's choice! Wouldn't it be worth knowing if a comparable opportunity existed today? In actual fact, the whole point of this booklet is to point out that the Bible says this is the case!

But let's take it step by step. Why did God choose the place he did? The same verse in Deuteronomy chapter 12 tells us God chose this place *to establish His name there for His dwelling* (Deuteronomy 12:5).

Recently, I attended a dinner where,

as often happens, each guest's presence was requested at the space on the particular table at which their name had been placed. It's where your name has been set that your presence is requested. We can compare that with our featured verse which says:

"Seek the LORD at the place which the LORD your God shall choose from all your tribes, to establish His name there for His dwelling ... there you shall bring your burnt offerings, your sacrifices ... Be careful that you do not offer your burnt offerings in every cultic place you see, but in the place which the LORD chooses" (Deuteronomy 12:5-13)

So the establishing of God's name there meant the manifestation of the divine presence at that place. But now having also read the second part of the verse, we immediately see that God's presence there meant it was a centralized location for worship - chosen by God in the midst of all the territory that the people of Israel occupied. No matter where they lived, they had to come here to sacrifice. Jewish sources have recognized this plain meaning by saying, 'it is evident that the designation of a place as 'chosen by God' is associated with the restriction of offering sacrifices in other

locations.'
 So the place where God placed his name, the designated place of his presence, was also the unique place of sacrifice. This was the place of the altar being in the courtyard of the Tabernacle tent, sited at the place of God's choice, the place where he had established his name and his presence. In the Tabernacle courtyard stood the great copper altar that's described in the book of Exodus chapter 27:

"You shall make an altar of acacia wood ... overlay it with bronze ... poles ... in the rings ... shall be on the two sides of the altar to bear it ... make it hollow with boards" (Exodus 27:1-8)

I think we can understand it as, basically, a hollow tube of slabs which doubtless sat directly on the earth or ground, with no covering at the top and no base on the floor: a square wooden tube that was sheathed with copper inside and out so that the heat couldn't affect it. We read about a network which was probably a grate which could be withdrawn - the same kind of idea we might come across with a modern barbecue.

Those who have thought about how it might have operated (e.g. Strong) think that a draught of air entered by the slot for the grate which was halfway up the altar and inside the flame was concentrated by being confined to the upper half of the altar

box, having an ample air supply which came in over the side.

The height of the altar, standing at approximately 5 foot might seem to have required an earth mound or slope to facilitate access, but we note that access by steps was forbidden.

This hollow tube of slabs sheathed with copper provides us with a picture of the Christ of the Cross (Hebrews 13:10). Perhaps in these features we're reminded of how the Lord emptied himself (Philippians 2:7) and, in incorruptible humanity, was made strong (as Psalm 80:15 tells us) to endure all that was within God's will for him: made strong to endure the cross. We can give thanks to God, that when he gave himself for us as a sacrifice to God, the fire did not consume the sacrifice, but the sacrifice consumed the fire of God's judgement, so that, as the hymn says, there's 'nothing left for us but love'.

This great copper altar would dominate the view of anyone coming in through the gate into the courtyard of the Tabernacle, the place of God's presence, the house of God on earth. Psalm 36 verse 8 says: *They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of [your] house* (KJV/ASV). Another version simply says: *They feast on the abundance of your house* (NIV).

That's a great expression: the abundance of God's house! It's worth asking: "What is the abundance of God's house on earth?" Surely, it's

his self-sacrificing service, his love and humility, his non-retaliation and forgiveness and his faith and obedience, surely we want to be more like him?

We've seen how God used a man called Bezalel whom he filled with his Spirit, and equipped for the task of forming the ark which symbolises Christ. We've also drawn the lesson that in every Spirit-filled life, lived out in the shadow of God, there will be the formation of a resemblance to Christ. But how will this be seen by others, dating back to the time of our conversion?

The fruits of repentance which John the Baptist demanded from his generation (Matthew 3:8) show the kind of evidence of changed thinking which ought to begin to emerge as soon as we place ourselves under the rule of Christ. John made it plain that nothing less than social compassion, honest dealings and financial contentment (Luke 3:11,13,14) would be enough to demonstrate that their thinking had changed.

That still stands true two thousand years later. Christianity is about beliefs impacting behaviours. The end product is our character becoming conformed to Christ (not only getting a grasp of his teaching). We could sum up the message of Romans chapter 6 as: we're not to live as we did before we met Christ because we're no longer the same person as we were before.

At times the apostle Paul seems to belittle the dangers and difficulties he experienced because he realized that what transcended them all was the thrilling possibility of *the life of Jesus* being *manifested in [his] mortal flesh* - or body (2 Corinthians 4:11). Paul realized that this development was assisted in his own life whenever he went through dark and discouraging times.

So there really can be the formation of something resembling the character of Christ in us: of our being like him in terms of a changed attitude to others; a changed attitude to circumstances, and a changed attitude to ourselves. Paul makes it quite plain in the New Testament that he expects the life of the Christian believer to evidence the fact that he or she has received the Holy Spirit (e.g. Acts 19:2). It's by his fruit he'll be shown to be active in our lives. This fruit is described in Galatians 5:22 ... *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control* ...

Among that listing of the fruit of the Spirit are to be found love, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness. These are all qualities that we should come to express as we interact with other people.

But among the Spirit's fruit there's also joy, peace and patience. These attitudes are to begin to characterize us in all circumstances, especially as we encounter difficult and trying

considered as being represented here in the gold which overlaid, or covered, the incorruptible wood of the ark, both inside and out. This gold-covered wooden chest kept the stone tablets on which the ten commandments were written. This further illustrates the point we're making, for it was the Lord Jesus Christ alone who kept God's Law perfectly during all his earthly life here. Psalm 40 verse 8 had prophesied that he would - when it said: *Your law is within My heart*. So what a striking picture of Christ the sacred ark of the covenant became. Complete with its lid of pure gold over which was a representation of angels, it became the place of communion between God and his people - or at least between God and the people's representative.

So, we return to our thoughts of the construction of the ark. Being in the shadow of God, as the workman Bezalel's name would imply, led to the formation of something resembling Christ, namely the ark. That's very instructive for us, because Psalm 91:1 says, *He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty*; in other words the shadow of God.

So if the condition for being found in the shadow of God is being found dwelling in the secret place with God, then the next question is: how are we to dwell in the secret place? What did the Lord teach us in Matthew? He

said, *"Pray to your Father who is in the secret place"* (Matthew 6:6). We access the secret place when we spend time alone with God in prayer. Where does that lead to? If, in daily prayer and Bible reading we come close to God - even beneath his shadow as it were - what will be the result? I'm sure there's a hint in Galatians 4:19 where Paul says that his longing for these believers was *until Christ is formed in you*. So there it is again, just as we pictured it with Bezalel and the ark: being ourselves habitually in the presence of God, under the shadow of Almighty God, will bring about the formation of something resembling Christ. Not a sacred chest like the ark, but a life and character - our life and character - transformed to be like his!

This is something very precious and practical; it's a glorious possibility in our lives as believers. When we talk about Christ-likeness we're not thinking about something that's skin deep; no mere superficial change in behaviour patterns so that we conform to the standard and expectations of a Christian subculture. No, not at all. It's something far deeper; it's an inward, radical character change by one glorious degree after another, just like we read about at the end of 2 Corinthians chapter 3, where it says, *[we] are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit*.

As we think of the Lord's earthly life:

Christ and his finished work. To see that let's go back to the first and older Bible translation, where it's worded as 'abundantly satisfied with the fatness' of God's house. If we explore the word 'fatness' with a Bible dictionary, we discover that this fatness really is 'fatty ashes': in other words, what was left as the remains of sacrifice at the altar. The operation of the altar was basic to the function of God's house long ago; and Christ's work on the cross is the basis of all service in God's spiritual house today.

'None but Christ can satisfy', the old hymn says. There's only one kind of complacency acceptable in the house of God and that's a Christ-complacency - when those in God's house express to God, and to one another, their abundant satisfaction with the Christ of the Cross.

A sister spoke to a brother after the Breaking of the Bread service of a church of God, expressing her enjoyment of what the Holy Spirit said through him in worship. That's good: let's share our sense of satisfaction with the Christ of the Cross - after all, that's what the 'fatness' of God's house in every age is all about!

It was the east side of the altar that was the place of the ashes (Leviticus 1:16), signifying satisfaction with the finished work of Christ. But each of the four sides of the great copper altar give us a view of the work of Christ on the cross, and what it has

produced for us. Long ago, at God's altar, the families of Israel found acceptance with God as they brought their burnt offerings to be slaughtered on the north side of the altar (Leviticus 1:11). With the west side we can associate the blessing of fellowship; fellowship restored with God and each other through Christ's death - for there on the west side, before the tent of meeting, the fellowship offerings were slaughtered (Leviticus 3:8). The prophet Ezekiel (47:1) hints at a link between the south side of the altar and the idea of cleansing. Our enjoyment of the blessings of cleansing, of fellowship, of acceptance and of satisfaction centre on our appreciation of Christ and his work on the cross. That's why we have entitled our study of the place of the altar as being a view of Christ's cross-work.

There's a hymn which says:

Here are God's house and altar,
The place of His great name.

The place of God's great name, the place of his manifest presence, the place of the altar - *there you shall bring ... your sacrifices*, God commanded. That was long ago, of course, but in principle, it still applies.

One day in the tropics I sheltered under the roof of a village home as a storm broke. My presence was a source of amusement to the children belonging to the house. The next week there was a visitor at the

church service. Later, he introduced himself as the man of the house in which I'd sheltered. His children had told him of the white missionary. Two months later he presented himself for interview to apply for church fellowship. "What convinces you that you (a baptized believer) should be added to this church fellowship?" I asked him. "It is the Church of God, brother!" was his instant reply. In his mind the biblical label 'of God' marked out the association of believers on which God

had placed his name, meaning where God himself was dwelling! - just as in the Old Testament when we have considered how God caused his name to dwell in a particular place! So this man was intent on bringing his service and his sacrifices of praise to the place of God's choice.

11. Something resembling Christ

A lot of people are aware of the Ark of the Testimony which belonged to the Tabernacle. They know about it as an ancient Jewish relic, if for no other reason than from a movie like 'Raiders of the Lost Ark' with its hero Indiana Jones.

But what was it, and how did it come into existence? How was it made? This is what ... *Moses said to the children of Israel, "See, the LORD has called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; and He has filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom and understanding, in knowledge and all manner of workmanship, to design artistic works, to work in gold and silver and bronze, in cutting jewels for setting, in carving wood, and to work in all manner of artistic workmanship (Exodus 35:30-33 NKJ).*

The name of this man who was used in its construction, Bezalel, means 'in the shadow of God'. I believe he was a man who lived up to his name, for why else was he chosen for such an honour as this: to be the craftsman for the ark which was a symbolic representation of Christ?

Perhaps at this point we need to pause and outline how it was that this sacred chest, known as the ark,

did, in fact, picture or bear 'resemblance' to Jesus Christ. It's in Exodus 25 that we find this description of it:

"An ark of acacia wood; two and a half cubits shall be its length, a cubit and a half its width, and a cubit and a half its height ... overlay it with pure gold, inside and out ... make on it a molding of gold all around. You shall cast four rings of gold for it; and put them in its four corners; two rings shall be on one side, and two rings on the other side. And you shall make poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold. You shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark, that the ark may be carried by them ... they shall not be taken from it. And you shall put into the ark the Testimony which I will give you ..." (Exodus 25:10-22 NKJ)

In the incorruptible acacia wood, its overlay of gold, and the fact that in it the Law was unbroken, we can view the ark as a very clear picture of Christ. The wood may bring to our mind an association with Christ's human nature in as much as it, too, was incorruptible. But while God the Son became man, he was always more than man - he never ceased to be fully God. This clear teaching from the New Testament can be

privileges, like the breaking of the bread. This breaking of the bread was always a corporate act of persons biblically constituted as a Church of God in any given locality (1 Corinthians 11:25,18).

The fellowship was also something in which they 'continued steadfastly'. The actual word fellowship implies commitment: a commitment to the Lord and to those others with whom we're in fellowship. The idea of a business commitment is in the similar word in Luke 5:7 where Simon Peter's fishing associates were described as 'fellows' in the sense of being his business partners. You can't run a business on the lines of not knowing if someone's going to be working on one of your boats one week or in someone else's boat the next week. It's the same in church life.

This committed type of biblical fellowship was something broader than purely a local vision of biblical

unity, as we've seen. It brought those early believers into not only a church fellowship locally, but at the same time into a developing fellowship or network of churches. This network maintained the privilege of breaking bread as a united 'holy priesthood' throughout the New Testament churches of God. That was a real privilege, for it actually involved a collective spiritual experience of entering heaven each week according to Hebrews 10:19. Because of the invitation found there about entering the holy place in heaven, God's holiness demanded that they remained separated to God in their spiritual service, as well as separated from all that's contrary to his will (e.g. 2 Timothy 2:18,21). These, then, are the protective arrangements for the Lord's table in New Testament teaching which were foreshadowed in the care taken with the bread on the table in the days of the Tabernacle.

4. Cleansing by the Word

It must have shone in the desert sun. The copper basin at which the priests were to wash during their service in God's house had been made according to the instruction: "*You shall also make a laver of bronze, with its base of bronze, for washing; and you shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it*" (Exodus 30:18-21).

The reference to bronze probably means 'copper', and the laver, or copper basin, was made from mirrors of polished copper donated by women who served in connection with God's house (Exodus 38:8). The Bible says: *They made the bronze basin and its bronze stand from the mirrors of the women who served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting* (NIV).

That's rather touching, isn't it? These women were prepared to give up what they were using to beautify themselves, in order that they might adorn instead the service of God's house and the teaching of the Word of God. We're to do the same by the attractiveness of our Christian lives (Titus 2:10).

The women gave their mirrors. In a spiritual sense, 2 Corinthians 3:18 says we're all to give ourselves to

God as mirrors so that in service for God we reflect the Lord's glory in this world. That's the verse in 2 Corinthians 3 which says:

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding - or reflecting - as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit. (v.18)

The contrast Paul was making when he wrote this was a contrast with Moses whose face shone with a reflected glory when he emerged from the presence of God after one of his mountain-top experiences.

Whenever Moses went into the presence of God he removed a veil covering his face, and his face was again illumined, and so later it shone when he delivered God's message to the people. Then, after the delivery of the message, and during his

ordinary association with the people, he kept his face covered. His face for a while mirrored God's glory. Notice that after speaking to the people with a radiant face, Moses put on the veil (Exodus 34:29-35) which hid the fact that the reflected glory was fading away. Paul makes the point that

many Jews are also in reality blind to the end of the Old Covenant in God's dealings with the world, just as long

ago they would have been blind to the end of the glory in Moses' face. But the particular point we're making is in relation to the mirror effect.

Moses mirrored God's glory; we, too, are to mirror or reflect the glory of the Lord. But Moses, or at least the skin of his face, lost that glory, until it was 'recharged' by the next visit. The main contrast is that it's not to be like that with us. Rather than losing the glory, we're to be continuously changed from glory to glory, from one glorious degree to another. It's to be an ever increasing glory!

Paul thinks of us as being mirrors, but James also compares God's Word, the Bible, to a mirror - one which is able to reflect back to us not our outward appearance, but rather, the state of our heart. What James actually says in his first chapter is:

... if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. (v.23)

We need to act upon anything the Bible shows up as requiring attention in our lives. Paul wrote to Timothy saying that God's Word is useful for our reproof and correction (2 Timothy 3:16). Perhaps the mention of correction is also consistent with the idea of copper and its frequent biblical association with judgement.

It's significant that this wash basin, or laver, made from copper, made

from mirrors, has turned our thoughts to God's Word. For this wash basin, which we take to have been round from the meaning of its name, was for the washing of the priests. Its link with the Word of God today is made clear for us in Paul's language to the Church of God at Ephesus when he says in chapter 5 and verse 26 that we've been cleansed by the laver of water with the word. It's the water of God's Word that cleanses us today; just as it was the water of the laver that cleansed the priests long ago.

Let's explore further then, the washing of priests at the laver. Leviticus chapter 8 tells us a lot about what happened when Aaron and his sons were consecrated for service as priests. Among other things, we read that Moses washed them with water. This complete washing was a once for all thing before they could ever serve as priests, and it was done for them. We also read about the once for all washing in Exodus 29:

"Consecrate them to minister as priests to Me ... you shall bring Aaron and his sons to the doorway of the tent of meeting and wash them with water" (Exodus 29:1-4). We've drawn a parallel between this and Paul's words in Ephesians 5:

... that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word (v.26).

Just as Moses washed the priests at the beginning of their service, so we

still acknowledge this had been, strictly, an unlawful act. All this would lead us to anticipate a careful arrangement for the bread - and wine - of the Lord's table as we step into the teaching of the New Testament.

It seems as though Acts 2:41,42 sets the scene at the dawn of New Testament church history. The Biblical setting there has the breaking of the bread set within the protective arrangement of an ordered sequence of events. Those verses tell us:

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

First comes the requirement of salvation, then baptism (or dipping, which is what the word means). Before they broke bread, that second step of discipleship was followed by a third: the Lord's own precondition of 'addition' (Acts 2:41, cp. 47; 5:14; 11:24).

This is entirely consistent with Paul's teaching to the Church of God in Corinth. There, in chapter 11, Paul sets the instruction, *"This do ... in remembrance of Me"* (v.25) in the context of *when you come together in church ...* (11:18). Those believers who were added as step 3 in Acts 2:41,42 were added to those already gathered together to form the

Church of God in Jerusalem, something which had come into existence on that very same day. As an added-together church fellowship, they came together as a church to break the bread as they experienced communion around the Lord's table.

So in this biblical teaching of addition, the Lord adds believers to himself by adding them to those who are already called out and gathered together to his Name. We should also note that addition to church of God fellowship is not irreversible, for at the end of chapter 5 of First Corinthians, we read of a believer being disciplined by being put away at Corinth (v.13).

So addition is the formal step which brings a baptized believer into local church of God fellowship, and that fellowship is itself within a wider fellowship of all such churches belonging to the Lord (1 Corinthians 1:9). In the early days there were the churches of God in Judea and the churches of God in Macedonia, for example, and there was real practical fellowship between them (e.g. Acts 11:29), as well as the fact that they were all unitedly continuing steadfastly in the apostles' teaching. Which brings us to the fourth step of Acts 2:41,42: continuing steadfastly in the apostles' teaching. The apostolic Faith was not to be departed from, but if this happened, it led to 'subtraction' from local church of God fellowship with all its

table. The word for bread here is actually presence-bread or 'bread of the face', because it was continually before the face of God. We read again:

"Then you shall take fine flour and bake twelve cakes with it; two-tenths of an ephah shall be in each cake ... set them in two rows, six to a row, on the pure gold table before the LORD ... put pure frankincense on each row, that it may be a memorial portion for the bread, even an offering by fire to the LORD ... Every sabbath day he shall set it in order before the LORD continually; it is an everlasting covenant for the sons of Israel ... it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place: for it is most holy to him from the LORD'S offerings by fire, his portion forever" (Leviticus 24:5-9).

It says they were in rows, but rows could just as easily mean piles (the original word has either meaning), and the bread was probably in piles due to the amount of wheat flour (about 7.5 pints or 4.5 litres) that went into each of the twelve cakes, which would result in each cake being twelve inches in diameter and four inches thick by some estimates.

This weekly grain offering set within God's house was a national offering, in that the bread was in twelve cakes (see Leviticus 24:8). These matched the twelve tribes, for it was the people's offering before the face of God. The incense on each would go

to the altar every weekend whenever the bread was replaced with fresh supplies. The picture that emerges is that of a 'pure table before the LORD', ensuring weekly communion by a priesthood which, like the table of the Lord, was associated with God's house.

That must surely be reminding us of what we meet again in the New Testament in, for example, 1 Corinthians 10:16 and 21 which says: *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? ... [as we] partake of the Lord's table* (NKJ)

Thinking back to the design of the table that was situated in the Tabernacle, it wasn't a table that was open or exposed on all sides. It was edged with a frame, as described in Exodus 25: *"You shall make for it a frame of a handbreadth all around, and you shall make a gold molding for the frame all around"* (Exodus 25:25).

That frame acted as a sort of protective arrangement for the bread on the Lord's table. What's more, we read that the week-old bread which was being replaced was only to be eaten by those who belonged to the priestly house of Aaron and his sons. Perhaps you'll recall the Lord in the gospels referring to the exceptional occasion when David ate the bread in one of his escapes from Saul. The Lord (without condemning David) did

read in the New Testament that Christ has cleansed His Church - that is, all believers of this age - cleansed them with the laver of water with the Word. As those whose hearts are cleansed by faith in God's Word, and so made clean in God's sight, we are able to offer spiritual service to God as priests.

Just as Israel upon their obedience at Mount Sinai became a kingdom of priests (in other words a kingdom that was priestly in character, for they weren't all priests) so Peter writes of something answering to that in New Testament times when he addresses believers in churches of God, calling them a royal priesthood whose role was to display the excellencies of the One who'd called them out of darkness into light. In the same second chapter of his first letter, Peter also describes them as a holy priesthood having the privilege of offering up spiritual sacrifices to God. We should, however, take care to note that there's a difference between being able to offer priestly service to God on the basis of the new birth, and actually being part of the collective priesthood of 1 Peter 2 on the basis of obedience to the apostles' teaching. This difference must be one of the most important lessons taught us in the parable of the Tabernacle.

Saving faith in Christ, which cleanses us and fits us for service, and which answers to the initial washing of the

Old Testament priests at the laver, has to be followed by our own responsibility to keep ourselves clean during our service. The Old Testament priests had daily cleansing rituals too:

"Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet from [the laver]; when they enter the tent of meeting, they shall wash with water, so that they will not die; or when they approach the altar to minister ... they shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they will not die" (Exodus 30:18-21)

That is not describing preparation for priestly service; but we've moved on to cleansing in service. It applies to us in our spiritual service. We live, as believers, in a defiling world. It's impossible for our lives not to be affected and God has made provision for this. In Psalm 119 the question is asked: *How can a young man cleanse his way?* - and the answer is also supplied - *By taking heed according to Your word* (NKJ).

Here's an important practical aspect of daily Bible reading. As we apply it to our lives, it cleanses our way in this defiling world. The Lord Jesus himself made the point to Peter in the upper room when he washed the disciples' feet. You may remember how Peter would have resisted. Jesus then patiently explained that unless he submitted he could have no part, or fellowship, with him. Peter then, impetuous as ever, exclaimed that he didn't simply want his feet washed

but all of him as well! But Jesus responded that this wasn't necessary, since those who were already bathed only needed to have their feet washed; they were already clean. As believers, in Jesus' words, we are 'clean already', but to maintain daily fellowship with the Lord, we need to clean our feet, that is the way we live. This is vital for our service in the same way as long ago those priests, already washed, had to return daily to the laver to wash their hands and feet in the course of their service.

Praise God, there's no water shortage for our cleansing in his

Word! That the laver is one of very few Tabernacle items without specified measurements is perhaps significant as it depicts the inexhaustible resources for our cleansing that's found in God's Word.

So let's recap on the two main points in this chapter: there's a cleansing related to our salvation, and a cleansing related to our service. This great Old Testament parable of the Tabernacle helps to illustrate the difference between them.

10. Shedding light on holy communion

1 Corinthians 10:16,21 says: *The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? ... [as we] partake of the Lord's table* (NKG)

It would be good if we could throw some light on this reference to 'the table of the Lord'. In context, in the very next chapter, the 11th of First Corinthians, Paul goes on to talk about the breaking of the bread which churches like that at Corinth were observing - by following the Lord's own instruction and example in the night on which he was betrayed (as Matthew records in chapter 26 of his gospel).

But before we return to that, we should venture yet again into God's house of shadows - which is how we've been referring to the Tabernacle. It's there we find foreshadowings of important New Testament teachings, especially as they relate to the ongoing Bible-wide theme of God's house on earth.

Long ago, in the Tabernacle, the lampstand threw its light on a small table. If we can think through the principles illustrated there, we will find some helpful illumination on the functioning of such a table in God's house: the table of the Lord in any age.

Let's find out more about this table as it was long ago. Here were the instructions for its making:

"Make a table of acacia wood, two cubits long and one cubit wide and one and a half cubits high ... overlay it with pure gold and make a gold border around it. And you shall make for it a rim of a handbreadth around it; and you shall make a gold border for the rim around it. And you shall make four gold rings for it and put rings on the four corners which are on its four feet. The rings shall be close to the rim as holders for the poles to carry the table. And you shall make the poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold, so that with them the table may be carried. And you shall make its dishes and its pans and its jars and its bowls, with which to pour libations; you shall make them of pure gold ... set the bread of the Presence on the table before Me at all times" (Exodus 25:23-30)

It's interesting to notice the reference to the various dishes and jars and bowls for libations that has slipped in there along with the table. It leads some commentators to talk about the wine being stored beside the table. But, although there's a mention, the emphasis is definitely on bread in association with this Old Testament

there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

There are no counter-examples to that in the New Testament. If we read this statement in the light of Old Testament principles and also in the light of the further teaching of the New Testament letters, we begin to see these seven points as a 7-point pattern for local church witness. Is there not a reference back to this when Paul later wrote to Timothy: *What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with*

faith and love in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 1:13 NIV)?

At least it's clear that the New Testament churches of God witnessed and served according to a pattern.

It will delight the heart of God if our Christian witness is purified through testing, bears evidence of the impact of his Word, is open to the working of God's Spirit through us, while we remain watchful through prayer that it might be fruitful after the pattern for church testimony God has shown us in his Word. How this dark world needs us to let God shine his light through us!

5. Standing together for God

We return again to the Tabernacle; the tent in which God came to live among his people, surrounded by all their tents. God's tent, or Tabernacle, was the centre of his people's service and worship. It was to the altar in the courtyard of the Tabernacle that they brought their various sacrifices. Rising above the back part of this special tent was the cloud of glory that signalled God's presence there. This was a tent made of sets of curtains covered over with animal skins - and these things needed a firm, supporting structure for them to be anchored to. That's what the boards were for. Exodus 26 describes them:

"And for the tabernacle you shall make the boards of acacia wood, standing upright. Ten cubits shall be the length of a board, and a cubit and a half shall be the width of each board ... you shall overlay the boards with gold" (Exodus 26:15,16,29)

"You shall make the boards for the tabernacle, twenty boards for the south side ... forty sockets of silver under the twenty boards: two sockets under each of the boards for its two tenons ... and for the second side of the tabernacle ... for the far side of the tabernacle, westward, you shall make six boards. And you

shall also make two boards for the two back corners of the tabernacle." (Exodus 26:18-23 NKJ)

Picture these boards with me, as they stood on the desert sand. Made out of wood from the acacia tree, they each stood at least fifteen feet tall and measured a little over two feet across in breadth. Board was added to board to make three sides of an oblong building, then a screen was suspended on the side that was left open, and over it all the curtains and skins formed the Tabernacle and tent.

Our minds go away to the New Testament days of the early Christian disciples. The cradle of Christianity was not a comfortable one. From among (possibly hostile) Jewish families at Jerusalem, there were thousands who believed the early apostolic preaching of Jesus as the Messiah. They responded in faith, and took their stand for the Lord in the early community of believers. Taking their stand, just like those Tabernacle boards.

Indeed, those taking their stand for Christ within the fellowship of the early Christian community were just like those Tabernacle boards, for they weren't standing for their faith as individuals. Have you noticed how

often we read of the fact that those early Christian disciples were added together - just like how the Tabernacle boards were added to each other, board to board? Let's note it now, first from Acts chapter 2:

Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. (v.41)

and verse 47 of that same chapter tells us they were ... *praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.*

Moving forward to chapter 5, we read that ... *none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly. And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women. (v.13,14)*

Then as Christianity began to spread outwards from Jerusalem, we read of them sending ... out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. (v.22-24 NKJ)

The teaching is repeated for emphasis, isn't it? Standing in testimony for God is not something we're meant to have to do as individuals, but in the company of

other faithful disciples of Christ. Those early believers were added by the Lord - and to the Lord, in that the Lord added them to a company of disciples owning his Lordship. This is the Bible framework for all our standing for the Lord Jesus as his disciples. And it was all pictured so long before in the days of Moses. The boards of the Tabernacle, it says, were boards 'standing upright'. But they weren't alone, for board was added to board for the strength of the whole structure of what became then God's house, his dwelling on earth.

It's worth mentioning that some commentators don't see the boards as being solid boards but only frames. That would mean they were still strong, but not as heavy. Remember, all this had to be dismantled and transported again and again. But there would not have been a problem in any one board getting out of line with the rest, because on them were golden rings through which long bars passed and kept the rows of the boards together as one rigid structure. It would be appropriate to say they were 'fitly framed together', and that kind of wording once again sets New Testament bells ringing. Do you remember Paul's words in his letter to the Church of God at Ephesus? He spoke of the Church of God in Ephesus being 'fitly framed together' with other churches of God (Ordinary Greek idiom here calls for 'every building', not for 'all the building'

Next, we've already thought of how the lampstand, as well as the oil, is linked to God's Spirit and his power which we need for our effective testimony. In the message to Zechariah which we've referred to, two men are spoken of as 'sons of oil' in that they *empty the golden oil out of themselves*. We, too, need to ask that we may be channels through whom the Spirit can flow and work with others. Then our service really will be powerful. Zechariah (4:2) saw *a solid gold lampstand with a bowl at the top and seven lights on it, with seven channels to the lights ... "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty" (NIV)*. Let's be encouraged to simply be a channel. It's not what we do for God; but what we allow him to do through us.

Moving on yet again to another design feature of the lampstand, let's turn our attention now to the almond blossoms. In the delicate almond blossoms that decorated the shaft and branches of the Tabernacle lampstand we're reminded of two more vital qualities in our service: fruitfulness and watchfulness. If I can just repeat the relevant part of the lampstand's description, it says this:

"Its shaft, its branches, its bowls, its ornamental knobs, and flowers shall be of one piece and six branches shall come out of its sides ... three bowls shall be made like almond

blossoms on one branch, with an ornamental knob and a flower ... on the lampstand itself four bowls ..."

The mention of 'almond blossoms' is interesting, for in the Hebrew language, the word for 'almond' and the word for 'to watch' sound very like each other. The Lord used that play on words in his message to Jeremiah, who said, *"I see the branch of an almond tree, " ... [Yes, the Lord replied] "You have seen correctly, for I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled" (Jeremiah 1:11,12 NIV)*. "Watch and pray," is still his message to disciples today, as we seek to bear the fruit of his Spirit (Matthew 26:41).

Surely our witness is intended to be fruitful. The apostle Paul's prayer for the Church of God at Colosse was: *that you may have a walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God (1:10 NKJ)*.

Last, but not least, there's a pattern for our service and church testimony, just as there was one to which the lampstand was fashioned (Exodus 25:40). Remember we read:

"Make a lampstand of pure gold ... of a talent of pure gold ... according to the pattern."

The early Christians found God's pattern for their service as we see from Acts 2:41,42:

So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day

and eyes in each place would seem to indicate the Holy Spirit through whom encouragement and true power for service come. In the pure gold lampstand with its branches going out from the central shaft, we're given a delightful picture of the divine Spirit proceeding from the Father, and making our understanding of God's Word fruitful, as indicated by the almond blossom shapes on each branch. Again in the book of Revelation, the corporate witness of local churches of God in chapters 2 and 3, as well as the witness of individual prophets in chapter 11, is described in terms of them being lampstands. The overall significance of the use of the term 'lampstand' in our Bibles would then seem to be the idea of Spirit-given light for witness. (See also Matthew 5: "Let your light shine ...").

The power for witnessing comes from the Spirit of God, and the whole subject is tremendously practical. First of all, the way the lampstand was made can teach us about the importance of preparation for service. Two processes were used in making the lampstand ready for service. The gold would first of all be refined to remove impurities, for we read it was made of pure gold. The Bible speaks of the trials which God allows to come into our lives as having a refining purpose:

These [trials] have come so that your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though

refined by fire - may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed (1 Peter 1:7 NIV).

Trials which we have to endure 'for a little while' Peter says, and only 'if necessary', but are designed by God 'so that the genuineness of our faith may bring glory to God'. Job said that after God had tried him, he would *come forth as gold* (Job 23:10). What's more, the Word of God, is said to be like a hammer in Jeremiah 23 and verse 29.

"Is not My word like a fire?" says the LORD, "And like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?" (NKJ)

We need to feel the impact of God's Word in our lives if our service is to be shaped according to God's will. Like me, I'm sure you've had the experience of a particular verse coming to you with great force. The hammer descends and leaves its mark. Let's make sure we allow ourselves to be impressionable to the Bible's hard and soft hammer blows. Just as the *lampstand of pure gold... [was] of hammered work*. It was beaten into shape, all in one piece. Its intricate pattern was the work of a hammer, not the result of being cast into any mould. God uses those same two processes of refining and hammering to purify and shape our service and witness today. We need to remember the Word is stronger than we are, and allow ourselves to feel its impact on our lives, at times softer than at others.

(Robertson, Grammar, p. 772)). Just as God's pattern or plan was not in terms of isolated Christian disciples, neither was it about independent local churches being a law to themselves.

So, according to Paul's words, the local Church of God at Ephesus was built together in the Lord - together with all the other New Testament churches of God we read about at places like Jerusalem, Corinth and Philippi. These local churches - and the believers who comprised them - were standing together for the whole truth of the Gospel of Christ. And their witness wasn't uneven as it would've been had they been out of line with one another in the convictions and teachings they held. No, they were fitly framed together as they stood unitedly together in God's house for Paul speaks of his ways which were in Christ, which he taught everywhere in every church (1 Corinthians 4:17).

God's plan for Christian unity provides for elders in each and every church of God (Acts 14:23) - and when they work in fellowship with each other as an inter-church elderhood - then the whole fellowship of churches of God is fitly framed together, answering to the illustration of God's Tabernacle house of long ago. Take the first Bible letter the apostle Peter wrote. He addressed it to a wide grouping of believers - a wide grouping of churches throughout five Roman provinces (1

Peter 1:1) - and he appeals to those among them whom he calls his fellow-elders (5:1). We thank God for those who help us to stand shoulder to shoulder with other disciples of Christ so that God is glorified.

But how did those boards obtain a firm standing long ago? The place to find the answer is in the Bible book of Exodus chapter 26 - and again we'll be looking for a lesson that we can apply to the business of our standing up in testimony for the Lord Jesus today. So let's notice what it says in verses 17 and 19 of Exodus 26:

"Two tenons shall be in each board ... two sockets under each of the boards for its two tenons." (NKJ)

We might well wonder what 'tenons' are, so it's worth referring to another version where we read in the same place not of 'tenons' but of *"two projections set parallel to each other. Make all the frames of the tabernacle in this way ... two bases for each frame, one under each projection."* (NIV)

So there were bases or sockets on the ground underneath each of the boards: and in each board there were two projections which plugged into the sockets. That gives us, I think, a fair idea of how it was that these boards could make a stand as part of God's house on the desert floor.

At first it might seem as though there's not an obvious lesson there for us today in our standing up for

the Lord, but I'd like to suggest that there is. First, we need to explore the Bible word for these 'projections' - you remember: the bits that plugged into sockets at the base of each board. The idea in the word is that of a hand. I'm reminded as I think of this of the words the apostle Paul wrote to his friends in the Church of God in Thessalonica:

Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle. (2 Thessalonians 2:15)

They were to stand bravely for the Lord - standing as Christians through holding onto the teaching of the apostles. It was with their hands full of the biblical traditions that they were to take their stand. Only by handling God's truth would they be enabled to stand fast and to stand firm.

On another occasion Paul could write to Timothy in order to strengthen

him in his standing for truth. This was what he had to say, as you can check it out from 2 Timothy and the first chapter:

Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. (v.13 NKJ)

Sadly, it was a day of departure. All the believers in Asia had turned away from Paul. They hadn't been able to stand fast by holding onto God's truth. Paul's concern now was for Timothy - that he would stand secure with a grip of the truth.

Paul says to Timothy, "Hold" - "Hold fast! Timothy, you'll stand while others around you are falling only if you hold onto truth; only if you hold fully the pattern of true Christian teaching." May God help us to stand for him by getting a real grip on the truth of the Bible - and so to stand in the company of others as the Bible directs us.

9. Power to witness

From the time of the power-cuts of the 1970s in the U.K., I have vivid memories of doing school homework by the light of various lamps and candles. For many people the power-cuts must have caused great hardship, but for children they were novel - even exciting - experiences. Of course, without sunlight life itself would be impossible. God, who in the very beginning had said, "Let there be light," was careful to ensure that inside the Tabernacle there was light to enable the priests to serve him. In Exodus chapter 25 we're told how Moses was commanded to make a golden lampstand with seven branches and seven oil-burning lamps:

"Make a lampstand of pure gold ... of hammered work. Its shaft, its branches, its bowls, its ornamental knobs, and flowers shall be of one piece and six branches shall come out of its sides ... three bowls shall be made like almond blossoms on one branch, with an ornamental knob and a flower ... on the lampstand itself four bowls ... make seven lamps for it ... of a talent of pure gold ... according to the pattern" (Exodus 25:31-40).

It was all of 137 pounds of pure gold, and it was necessary because priestly work in God's Tabernacle house was not confined to daylight hours. Access into the Tabernacle

proper was through a screen which I suppose, during the hours of bright sunlight would let a fair amount of light through into the first compartment. But for the hours of darkness, Aaron, the high priest, was to light the lamps (Exodus 30:8). This was one of six continual things we read about in regard to Tabernacle service. It's interesting to compare this with the facts in Acts 2 where we read of the early Christians who formed God's spiritual house on earth. They continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching, in the fellowship, in the breaking of the bread and the prayers. Our God puts a high value on consistency, doesn't he? So, the Israelites long ago were to bring pure olive oil for the light "to cause a lamp to burn continually" (Exodus 27:20).

In days of discouragement during the rebuilding of the subsequent Temple which had been destroyed by Neduchadnezzar, the prophet Zechariah was given a vision of a lampstand similar to this, and with it he was given the interpretation of the message it was meant to convey: "Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the LORD" (4:6). In this 4th chapter of Zechariah as well as in chapters 4 and 5 of the book of Revelation we read of seven lamps and seven eyes; for the eye is the lamp of the body. Those seven lamps

But what happens if we fail the test and we find we've left our first love? Revelation chapter 2 tells us that the Church of God in Ephesus had done just that, and the Lord held it against them. But in verse 5 he calls them back to him and asks that they do again what they had done at the beginning. In other words, the chance of a fresh start! If we feel we can in any way relate to the need for a fresh start, then when better than right now? The same need for a fresh start happened in the Old Testament with Israel. In Jeremiah chapter 2, the Lord looked back longingly on the love of their

espousals from which they had moved away. Just as a newly-wed couple only have eyes for each other, we should jealously guard that special quality of relationship with the Lord.

In the little letter to the Colossians, the word 'all' occurs some 32 times. Why? False teaching was on their doorstep, and they needed to learn that Christ is all in all; they needed to be captivated anew by him, to only have eyes for him. Let's make sure that's true of us.

6. An object lesson in church unity

The Bible describes the Tabernacle curtains and veil as being 'artistically worked' (Exodus 26:1) - the idea behind that expression being that of plaiting, with strands of material interpenetrating each other. Perhaps in a different context, the same word can also mean 'plotting' - like when we figuratively talk about a 'cunningly woven plan'. When we remember it was the Spirit of God who equipped the workmen for their task, we can begin to see here the outline of a plan of the Holy Spirit's own devising (Exodus 31:3,4).

Surely, today, we recognize among all the fractures and divisions of Christendom that we've lost the plot somewhere. This is not just a play on the word 'plot', for I hope to show that these plaited curtains for the Tabernacle really were intended by God to give us an object lesson in church unity.

I pray that our hearts will be stirred to rediscover a unity of the Holy Spirit's own devising - a design which when adhered to will give Christ the place he truly deserves. Just as the Spirit of God equipped those artistic workmen long ago with both the design to work to and the skill with which to do it; so the Holy Spirit today can work through us to give

effect to exactly the kind of church unity which God himself has planned. Of all the different terms we meet for woven work as we explore the Tabernacle fabrics and the clothes of the priests, this one for 'skilful or cunning work' is the highest of the terms we encounter - one which seems to put the stress on the thinking activity of the mind.

The material with which the Holy Spirit had to work in the New Testament was not strands of linen dyed in different colours, but redeemed, baptized believers who were faithful to the Lord in keeping his Word. As we look at the pages on the New Testament we can see from the original way in which they were organized God's own, and intended, way of church unity at the beginning of Christianity.

Let's make the sea-port of Corinth the centre of our investigation. The apostle Paul wrote a couple of his Bible letters to the disciples found there. He addressed the first to *the church of God which is at Corinth* (1 Corinthians 1:2 NKJ). And to that church of God at Corinth he wrote: *you are God's building* (1 Corinthians 3:9 NKJ). To describe that singular, local church as God's building is very significant. Of course,

we know the word 'building' is used in a spiritual sense here to refer to that local group of disciples of Christ who constituted the church of God there in Corinth. It didn't refer to the physical structure - of whatever type it may have been - which was the regular venue for their gatherings. It rather described the church as those disciples who were called out and gathered together in that place.

It's interesting that the local church at Corinth - which was acknowledged by God as being the Church of God in that place - is referred to as a building, because the apostle Paul appears to develop this picture further when writing to another local New Testament church of God, this time at Ephesus. At the end of Ephesians chapter 2 he wrote: *in whom each several building, fitly framed together, grow[s] into a holy temple in the Lord* (Ephesians 2:21 ASV).

That seems to be the best translation. One expert (Robertson, Word Pictures) acknowledges this as being the case, but then explains why most translations regard it as one whole building rather than 'each several building'. It's because they are nearly all interpreting this expression in terms of 'the church universal', usually defined as all believers. So many commentators seem to think there's no alternative, but surely there is! The local New Testament churches of God are the obvious candidates! Especially, when

we have one of these local churches (at Corinth) actually being addressed as being an individual building by the apostle Paul himself!

If it's conceded that 'each several building' is the most accurate way to translate Ephesians 2 verse 21, then there's no need to paraphrase it, for it makes perfect sense as a reference to each of the local churches of God that then existed in New Testament times. They are certainly mentioned in the plural as when Paul wrote to those in the Church of God at Thessalonica, saying:

you ... became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea (1 Thessalonians 2:14 NKJ).

All these local churches in biblical times were identically constituted - Paul says in 1 Cor. 4:17 that he taught the same things in every place, so they were all identically constituted on the standardized apostles' teaching (2 Timothy 1:13) - and they were closely networked together so that they could be described by many different collective terms like 'holy nation' and 'holy priesthood' and a 'spiritual house' (see 1 Peter 2:5-9).

Was this not the plan of the Spirit's devising for church unity? It was one which answered to the longing of the Lord Jesus when he prayed for his disciples to his Father, asking, "... *that they may be one as We are*" (John 17:11 NKJ). I suggest that it's hard not to compare those words of Jesus with the object in view when

that rivals his place in our heart's affections.

Along these lines, the language of the Bible is at its most direct in the book of James. To worldly believers James directs the following strong words:

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred towards God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? But he gives us more grace. (James 4:4-6 NIV)

Notice how God is again presented here as a jealous lover. The behaviour of these pleasure-seeking Christians in flirting with the world was deeply wounding to God. That much is clear, but the remainder of the verse is difficult to translate. Some Bible commentators understand it as saying that the indwelling Spirit of God is jealous with a godly jealousy. He can brook no rival for our heart's affections.

But James appears to be referring to the general teaching of the Old Testament that our own human spirit is by nature inclined to envy. The Preacher of the Bible book of Ecclesiastes (4:4) said: *I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbor.* In each of us there's a strong inclination to look with dissatisfaction on the superior happiness and prosperity of others. This draws our heart away from God

as we allow ourselves to be obsessed with worldly things.

The apostle John underlines the point that the love of the world is diametrically opposed to love for God. He describes the world's main ways of seducing us in 1 John 2:15-17 like this:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world - the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions - is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

It's there that worldliness is defined for us. We need to check out our appetites, attractions and ambitions. Do we allow ourselves to be dominated by physical appetites? Are our lives governed by the love of beautiful things? Are we infected with the desire for personal advancement? In these ways the world would seduce us and draw us away from God.

How sad if we fail to understand that our God is a jealous God! May the reminder of that ancient procedure which involved the dust from the floor of the Tabernacle serve to remind us that the Lord wants to prove our faithfulness as those who are promised to him, as a pure virgin is to one husband. Perhaps we should say to him like the psalmist (139:23): *Search me, O God ...*

would become her curse if she really had been unfaithful. He would then also blot that writing of the curse into the dusty water before giving it to her to drink. It was known as the water of bitterness and, if she was indeed guilty, the woman would discover its bitterness at the same time as she began to develop physical symptoms.

It all seems a far cry from today's moral standards, but those actions for which God legislated at that time reveal what remains his attitude today.

What else can Numbers 5 teach us today? The issue of unfaithfulness is applied in a spiritual sense to Christian believers in the apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians chapter 11, where he said to the Church of God at Corinth:

I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached ... you put up with it easily enough (vv. 2-4 NIV).

The terms Paul uses remind us of what we have read from the Old Testament, don't they? The context is again of someone promised to, or espoused to, a husband; but also

the curtains were made for the Tabernacle - which was, of course, God's house or dwelling on earth long ago. In Exodus 26:6, we read that the individual curtains were to be coupled and clasped together *so that the tabernacle will be a unit*, or so that the Tabernacle may be one. Individual curtains brought together by God's own arrangement led to there being one material house for God's presence on earth in Moses' day; and in the time of the apostles, corresponding to the curtains, it was individual, local churches of God, networked together by God's own arrangement, that rose to form the spiritual house for God on earth in those New Testament days.

Of course, the prayer of the Lord Jesus was answered. The New Testament record shows the answer quite plainly in terms of companies of disciples, all baptized by immersion in water, all added locally to church of God fellowship, all within an overall community of interdependent churches serving everywhere according to the one original pattern of teaching, maintained under a fellowship of elders and separated to God. In short, here was God's plan for Christian unity.

In case someone should say, "Wait a minute, that's not a plan as such. What you've outlined is a fair summary of New Testament practice in churches of God, but it's only a description of what they did then. Surely you don't have to take it as a

prescription for every generation?" That's a fair question, and part of my answer at least would be to get right back to where we started this talk, which was with the Tabernacle curtains way back in the time of Moses. He was told: *"Make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine woven linen, and blue, purple, and scarlet thread; with artistic designs of cherubim you shall weave them ... length ... twenty-eight cubits ... width ... four cubits ... every one ... shall have the same measurements"* (Exodus 26:1,2).

As we said earlier, these curtains, each of identical pattern and measurement, but brought together to form the one Tabernacle house of God, model for us the same design principle that we find among the New Testament churches of God. Each of these, likewise, formed all together a set of identical units comprising overall God's house on earth, as described by Peter, or God's temple, as Paul called it.

In God's design for Christianity, local churches, built to the biblical pattern, are to be a unity in the one fellowship: a fellowship of churches. That this is God's way is shown in the parable of the Tabernacle as it was made up from curtains, as Exodus 26 says:

"Five curtains shall be coupled to one another, and the other five curtains shall be coupled to one another. And you shall make loops of blue yarn on the edge ... of one set, and likewise

... on the outer edge ... of the second set. Fifty loops ... and you shall make fifty clasps of gold, and couple the curtains together with the clasps, so that it may be one tabernacle" (Exodus 26:3-6).

So the curtains - all identical - were coupled and clasped together. The ten identical curtains, all of one measure and pattern, were first coupled into two sets of five; and then the two sets of coupled curtains were clasped together to form one Tabernacle house for God on earth. Can we really doubt that this was meant to prefigure the linkage of the churches we read about in the New Testament? It's this degree of prefiguring running through the Bible that convinces me that what we read of in the Acts of the Apostles expresses an exact pattern which was intended to become the mould for Christianity for all the generations

following. All the churches were of one measure or pattern; as they were coupled together in the fellowship of their districts corresponding to the Roman Provinces in those days; then overall clasped into one interdependent Fellowship. For all this there was a precedent. God's house on this earth would again be one as it was back in Moses' day.

There we have to leave this object lesson on the theme of fellowship as pictured in the coupled together curtains of the Old Testament Tabernacle. God's house then was 'a fellowship of curtains'; while, later in New Testament times, it became a 'fellowship of churches' based on the same principle of unity in God's very own, unchanging design by the Spirit.

8. Pure devotion

There's only one mention of the Tabernacle floor. It's found in the book of Numbers chapter 5, verse 17. But this single mention is important and not to be overlooked. We read there of the dust on the floor of the Tabernacle. Now that might seem to be a rather dry subject, but really it introduces us to a very practical line of teaching, one which touches on the nature of God himself. So let's see what we can learn from this reference to the Tabernacle floor.

From Numbers 5 we discover that the dust from the floor of the Tabernacle was to be used in a God-given procedure whereby a husband in Israel, with the help of the priest, could test any suspicion he might have had that his wife had been unfaithful to him. As the text of Numbers chapter 5 says:

"Then the man shall bring his wife to the priest and bring the offering required of her, a tenth of an ephah of barley flour ... it is a grain offering of jealousy ...

"And the priest shall bring her near and set her before the LORD. And the priest shall take holy water in an earthenware vessel and take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put it into the water. And the priest shall set the woman before the LORD and unbind the hair

of the woman's head and place in her hands the grain offering of remembrance, which is the grain offering of jealousy. And in his hand the priest shall have the water of bitterness that brings the curse. Then the priest shall make her take an oath, saying, '... if you have gone astray ... then ... the LORD make you a curse and an oath among your people ...'

"Then the priest shall write these curses in a book and wash them off into the water of bitterness. And he shall make the woman drink the water of bitterness that brings the curse, and the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain. And the priest shall take the grain offering of jealousy ... and bring it to the altar ... And when he has made her drink the water, then, if she has defiled herself and has broken faith with her husband, the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain ... But if the woman has not defiled herself and is clean, then she shall be free and shall conceive children.

"This is the law in cases of jealousy ..." (Numbers 5:15-29 ESV)

So it was the duty of the priest to add some of the dust from the floor of the Tabernacle to some water and, after the woman had made a solemn declaration, presumably of her innocence, he would write out what

call to Christ is the call to discipleship and is the call to service. As we'll see, the gate of the courtyard was the first of three successive entrances as we move into the Tabernacle proper. If we continue as we begin - in humility, subjection and obedience - we'll make progress in the things of God.

7. The way to God

One of my favourite stories about inventions is the story told about Thomas Edison, the inventor of the light bulb. He demonstrated great persistence in making his breakthrough discovery. He persevered through eleven hundred failed attempts before eventually succeeding. Later, people commented sympathetically on the amount of time he'd wasted on those eleven hundred failures. Edison's reply is a lesson in patience. He said that, in his view, they had not been a waste of time. He said, "I found out eleven hundred ways how not to do things." He had discovered eleven hundred ways how not to invent the light bulb before discovering the one way to do it!

I'm reminded of that as we're studying the Tabernacle which had an enclosure all around it, because there weren't many different ways to approach the Tabernacle tent proper. In fact, there was only one way to approach the Tabernacle that stood on the desert floor in the time of Moses.

Earlier in this booklet, we have noted that the tents of the Israelites were some distance away from the Tabernacle, and there was around the Tabernacle tent a surrounding courtyard inside an enclosure that was screened from outside view by

tall linen hangings. There was only one break in this boundary, and that was on the side which faced to the east. The whole Tabernacle was, in fact, aligned facing eastwards.

There's a saying that all roads lead to Rome, and there's a rumour that there are many ways to God, provided through the many religions of the world. But one of the simplest and clearest things the Tabernacle demonstrated is that there is but one way to come to God and, in fact, one way to serve him.

As Jesus himself said: *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6). That's a very exclusive claim! Jesus declared that all religions do not lead to God, but that he was the only way. Now some object to that. It's not 'politically correct', they say. But, I wonder whether these objectors have the same difficulty about saying two plus two is four? Is it presumptuous of the number four? A little arrogant, perhaps? What's wrong with the number three or the number five? Of course, that's silly. It's a simple matter of fact that two plus two is four. And indeed, it's an absolute fact that Jesus Christ is the only way to God. If Jesus Christ made this astounding claim, Christianity cannot in any way modify it without ceasing

to be authentic Christianity.

Two thousand years ago, those who came to saving knowledge of God through Jesus Christ, and followed him among the company of first century disciples, were referred to by others in a very striking way. At the beginning of Acts chapter 9 we read,

Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. (Acts 9:1,2).

Did you notice? The Lord Jesus' disciples were said to have 'belonged to the Way'. They were the people of the Way. These were people who were running their lives in the way of the Lord's commandments. Because of that they were living with a real sense of meaning and purpose, and happiness flowed out of that sense of meaning.

Paul, the very one who as Saul had been threatening to eliminate Christians, later discovered for himself that this was the way to live. He said:

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord (Philippians 3:4-8)

Let's think of the only gate which

allowed access into the Tabernacle enclosure and thereby access to God. As such it pictures for us the person of Jesus Christ as the way to God today. It will be worth reading a description of that gate from Exodus 27:

"For the gate of the court there shall be a screen twenty cubits long, woven of blue, purple, and scarlet thread, and fine woven linen, made by a weaver (embroiderer). It shall have four pillars and four sockets" (Exodus 27:16)

The first thing to pick up on about the gate is that it was wide: 'twenty cubits long', which would equate with an entrance of about thirty feet wide. This illustrates that the Way to God isn't limited to a few: the invitation is for 'whoever will'.

The next feature of the gate that we came across was its colours. It would seem these colours have teaching associated with them in the Bible. As we find them on the gate they can teach us something about how we come to God.

The word for 'scarlet' is in other places translated as 'worm', the reason being that the red colouring of the dye was obtained from the crushing of the so-called 'scarlet worm' (coccus ilicis). Perhaps, as we approach the gate and see this colour, it's a necessary and humbling reminder to us of what we are in God's sight. The Bible says as much: *The stars are not pure in his sight:*

how much less man, that is a worm!
(Job 25:5-6).

We are compared with these lowly creatures of the soil. Sin soils our lives. We're all contaminated; impure in God's sight and, as we are, unfit for heaven.

But the colour scarlet, with its connection with scarlet worms, also takes us to the Psalm of the Cross, Psalm 22, where verse 6 reads, *But I am a worm, and no man.* Amazingly, that text is a prophetic self-description of Jesus Christ hanging on the cross, an object of contempt and mockery, as he hung there despised and rejected.

Why should this be? The background of the scarlet colour fills out the picture for us. For in nature, as the mother scarlet worm is about to give birth, she attaches her body to a tree. There the mother dies, staining the wood with her scarlet body fluid.

What a picture of Jesus in this one word for 'scarlet' alone! Jesus allowed himself to be fixed to the tree, staining it with his precious lifeblood, but all in God's design, that he might be the source of new life to all who trust in him for forgiveness of their sins.

Next we come to the colour 'purple'. Purple, in the Bible, is a kingly colour; a royal colour. Typically, we read in Judges 8 verse 26 about the ... *purple robes which were on the kings of Midian.*

This serves as a reminder that, as we come to God through Jesus Christ, we need to be prepared to accept the kingship of Jesus in our lives. By that I mean we need to change our way of thinking: no longer am I to rule over my own life, but I am to bow to Christ's rule over my life: putting the claims of Jesus before my own will, before my own ambitions; and before my own popularity.

Finally, there's the colour blue. In Numbers chapter 15 we have a very definite association with the need to obey. The Lord said to Moses, *"Tell them ... to put a blue thread in the tassels of the corners [of their garments] ... and remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them"* (Numbers 15:38,39).

It couldn't be clearer: blue was the Bible code for obedience. Little wonder then that it's a prominent colour throughout the Tabernacle, for in God's house things have to done God's way. The way of serving God is the way of obedience. It begins when we first come to God through his Son for salvation. John's Gospel says: *"He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him"* (John 3:36). Jesus is not only the Saviour, he is Lord, and the blue of the gate reminds us of that.

To humble and subject ourselves and obey Jesus who is himself 'the Way' to God is the only way to enter into a life of serving God in his house. The