



HOME

By Dr Yee Chin Hong

As Singapore celebrates 56 years of independence this month, we thank God for providing a home for us in Singapore and for preserving this home during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, we are shocked and saddened by the grim toll the pandemic has exacted. For multitudes all over the world, the safety, sustenance and stability of home have been all but wiped out. Even in Singapore, no home has gone untouched by the scourge.

In these fearful, uncertain times, the picture of 'home' in the book of Exodus offers comfort and hope. We seldom associate Exodus with 'home', and for good reason. As the book begins, the descendants of Jacob have been far from home for centuries. When it ends, though out of Egypt, the Israelites are living in tents on inhospitable grounds. What of 'home'?

Exodus 25-40 provides a clue. These sixteen chapters are largely about the tabernacle. In a book named for Israel's exit from Egypt, it is easy to overlook the fact that some two-fifths of the book are devoted to the tabernacle. The tabernacle is, moreover, described twice in these chapters. If these literary features imply theological importance, what might the significance of the tabernacle be?

To begin with, the Hebrew word translated 'tabernacle' (*mishkán*) comes from the root *shkn*, which means 'to dwell'. So, a tabernacle is literally a 'dwelling place'. It is where God's presence dwells, the

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place he chooses to be his earthly home. The picture of 'home' in Exodus, then, has to do with the tent-home of the Lord. Exodus 25-40 highlights three aspects of the design of this home.

First, the Lord sets up home on earth in order to live with his people. This is clear from Exod 25:8, where the Lord tells Moses, "And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst." This sanctuary refers to the tabernacle (v. 9).

When the Lord calls Moses to deliver the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, he promises to bring them home to a land flowing with milk and honey, in keeping with his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But home is more than a place of plenty. The placement (as the book's conclusion), prominence (16 chapters) and purpose (Exod 25:8) of the tabernacle in Exodus suggest that the Lord delivers his people to bring them home to himself.

Today, the homeless still find their home in God. Jesus Christ literally 'tabernacled' among men (John 1:14), as did God's presence amongst the Israelites. For God's people, then, home is found first in a person, not a place. As the Lord told Israel, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Exod 33:14), so Jesus invites us, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28).

Second, God's home shows his people how they are to worship him. The detailed description of the tabernacle is given twice in Exodus 25-40, first as instructions for building the tabernacle (chs. 25-31), then in the report of its construction (chs. 35-40). Except for some variation in order, the two descriptions are essentially the same. One important difference, however, is the recurrence of the phrase, "as the Lord commanded" in Exodus 39-40. This phrase is especially meaningful in the wake of the golden calf incident, which is recounted in Exodus 32-34, between the instructions and the report.

The Israelites are to make the tabernacle exactly as the Lord instructs them (Exod 25:9). By doing so, they will learn how to approach and worship a holy God who lives among them. But they fail colossally, choosing instead to secure God's presence on their terms. Following the account of apostasy, the repetition of the tabernacle description serves to contrast true worship (chs. 35-40), which honours God, with false worship (chs. 32-34), which promotes self.

The pandemic has changed how Christians worship. For many, the changes are unsettling and overwhelming. Amidst change, let us take heart that today we need no tabernacle to show us how we are to worship God truly. The presence of God no longer accompanies us in a tent but lives in us to instruct and enable us.

Third, God's home directs his people home. The tabernacle recalls the perfect home God created for man. Like Eden, the tabernacle is where God dwells and meets with man. Its furnishings, such as the tree-shaped lampstand and the cherubim woven into the curtain, are also reminiscent of Eden.

By recalling Eden, God's tent-home stirs in the Israelites a longing for their true home, where humanity freely communes with God. Our Lord also directs his disciples home: "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:3).

In sum, 'home' in Exodus is where God lives with his people.

In the wilderness or Promised Land, true rest, relationship and reorientation can only be found in coming home to God and living with him. So, too, today.

As we play our part in building the nation we call home, let us serve wholeheartedly, for Christ has entered the greater and more perfect tabernacle by his blood so that we may serve the living God. And as we work at recovering the normalcy of home post-pandemic, let us do so hopefully, for one day, the dwelling of God will forever be with men. "He will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Rev 21:3).

Home, at last. ❖



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