A large outdoor festival or church event. The foreground is filled with numerous colorful tents, mostly in shades of blue, green, and purple. In the background, a large purple canopy structure is visible, along with other festival elements and a grassy field. The sky is blue with some clouds.

Living Under Canvass

Tabernacle Baptist Church, Penarth

Contents

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	Page
Introduction to 'Living Under Canvass.'	3
1. "Go to the land I will show you."	5
2. Wanderings in the desert	7
God's dwelling place	9
4. The Tent of Meeting	12
5. Dance with all your might!	14
6. "Enlarge the place of your tent."	16
Some welcome activity ideas	18



Introduction to 'Living Under Canvass.'

"Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes."

Isaiah 54:2

Towards the end of 2008 a number of members of Tabernacle were praying for the Church and thinking about the future of the 24/7 Prayer initiative at Tabs. As they waited on God they felt that they were being led to this verse from Isaiah 54. As I prayed about it further and read a little more about the context of this promise from God I felt that that it was an appropriate word to use as our 'verse for the year' in 2009. The more time I have spent thinking about, the more convinced I have become that God wants to prepare us for growth both spiritually and numerically as a congregation.

As I have studied I have also become aware of what a rich symbol the tent is throughout the Bible. The word 'tent' makes its first appearance early on in the book of Genesis (Genesis 9:21) and a final appearance late in the book of Revelation (Revelation 15:5). The word 'tent' appears 263 times in the NIV Bible, whilst the word 'tabernacle' can be found a further 109 times. If we also include the words 'encamp' or 'camp' then the total comes to over 550 occurrences. Tents appear pragmatically as a place to live, spiritually as the dwelling place of God, and symbolically as a picture of our pilgrimage with God. Camping is clearly an important part of the Bible story!

Each of the studies in this series will begin with a passage of scripture to be read together by your small group, followed by a short commentary and then some 'discussion starter' style of question. The purpose of these questions is to act as a springboard to your group discussion. As with the last series (The Church Survival Kit) this series will try to follow a pattern of inductive reasoning. Having read, thought about, and discussed the passage or passages, we will then try to draw some conclusions together as a group about how these scriptures apply to our everyday life in the 21st century. Instead of trying to get you to give a particular answer these studies are designed to provoke discussion and the sharing of knowledge, experience and belief. As with the last series of Bible

studies, my prayer is that as the Holy Spirit moves amongst us and leads our conversation we might discover afresh Biblical truths for ourselves.

Roger Grafton

Pastor, Tabernacle Baptist Church, January 2009

Here are some ‘Top Tips’ for using this style of Bible study:

- These studies are designed as a starter for your discussion. The list of scriptures and the introductory remarks are not meant to be exhaustive, but just a starting place for your thinking.
- Everyone in your group has a contribution to make. If **you** do not join in the discussion then the group will suffer, so be bold and jump in with your thoughts and answers! Don’ t let others do all the work.
- Sometimes questions need deep, well thought out, theological answers - and there may be people in your group that can give them. Sometimes, the answer is more simple and straightforward. Sometimes the simple answer is too simple for some people to see it! Again, be bold. In a group where there is an atmosphere of love, no question is ever too stupid and no answer is too simple.
- Discussion and debate is good and to be encouraged. But more importantly you should be willing to let the Word of God change your life and your actions. Let your group hold you accountable for living out the challenges of the Scriptures in your everyday life. If we end the study as exactly the same people we were when it started then we have, in a way, wasted our time together.
- Don’t forget to try and follow the ‘Four W’s’ of Welcome, Worship, Word and Witnessing in your group. If you have been following the studies for the last couple of years you will be quite adept at this by now!

1. "Go to the land I will show you."

Genesis Chapter 12

¹ The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you." ² "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." ⁴ So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. ⁵ He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. ⁶ Abram travelled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him. ⁸ From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD. ⁹ Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev. ¹⁰ Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe.

Commentary

The story of Abraham (still called Abram at this point in the story) begins with him living a settled, urban lifestyle. Chapter 11:31 tells us that he lived with his family in the city of Ur of the Chaldeans. From there he sets out (at his father's instigation) to travel to Canaan, but when they come to Harran they settle there instead. Harran was a city on the main route between Nineveh and the Mediterranean coast, and was a centre of worship to the moon God, called 'Sin' by the locals. Abram's father spends the rest of his life in Haran, and died there at the age of 205. At this point, God speaks to Abram and calls him to leave his home and take up a nomadic lifestyle (Genesis 12:1)

This passage recounting God's call and promise to Abraham, and Abraham's response, is the pivotal event in the book of Genesis. It is actually the opening scene of the central event of the entire Old Testament, the exodus, since that event is remembered by Jews as the outworking of God's commitment to Abraham. To understand the significance of this text, we have to see it against the background of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Chapter 11 is the climax and conclusion of the creation narratives or "Primeval History" that began in chapter one. Creation had begun with such promise as God breathed into all

living things the breath of life and pronounced all of creation good. But chapters 3 to 11 go on to describe the unfolding drama of sin in the world beginning with the failure of the couple in Eden in chapter 3 and the first murder in chapter 4. God's creation began to deteriorate as humanity attempted to exert sovereignty over God and tried to become like God. Chapter 11 is a dead end. The human family was scattered. There was no unity among people. They could not even understand each other. Even though Abraham had been introduced into the narrative at 11:27, there were not many prospects for anything positive happening. We are told matter-of-factly in verse 30 that Abraham's wife Sarah was barren and that she had no children. In the cultural context of the ancient world, that was an ending, a symbol for hopelessness. When there are no children, there is no future. Into this setting of hopelessness, darkness and worldwide sin steps God who speaks to Abraham and says, "Get out your tent. You are going camping!"

Discussion Starters

- Some people love camping, whilst others abhor the very idea. What is your experience/attitude towards living under canvas?
- To the modern day reader a settled lifestyle means civilisation and culture, whilst nomadic lifestyles have an altogether more negative connotation. The word 'traveller' is often used to describe rootless unsettled people who are a drain on the resources of 'normal' society. Sometimes it is seen as a polite alternative to the word 'tramp.' No-one would want a group of 'travellers' setting up camp in their street! In the same way Gypsies have often been viewed with suspicion and hostility in western culture. What kind of images or words would you use to describe nomads and travellers?
- This passage describes seven promises that God will make to Abraham. What are they, and what promises can we apply to ourselves as "spiritual descendents of Abraham?" (See Galatians 3:6-9) Which are the most important of these promises to Abraham and to us?
- This passage describes the beginning of the momentous journey that Abraham will make: Ur to Harran, to Canaan, to Shechem, Bethel, Negev and Egypt. Why might God want Abraham and his family to be travellers, moving from place to place? What spiritual benefits might there be to him in this lifestyle? Does this have any application to us today?

2. Wanderings in the desert

Exodus Chapter 13 & 14

¹⁷ When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt."¹⁸ So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt armed for battle.¹⁹ Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the sons of Israel swear an oath. He had said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place."²⁰ After leaving Succoth they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert.²¹ By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night.²² Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

Exodus 14 ¹ Then the LORD said to Moses, ² "Tell the Israelites to turn back and camp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. They are to encamp by the sea, directly opposite Baal Zephon. ³ Pharaoh will think, 'The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert.'⁴ And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD." So the Israelites did this.

Commentary

In this passage we are told geographically how God led the Israelites out of Egypt. If London was Egypt and Cardiff was the Promised Land then the most obvious way to the Promised Land would be to take the M4 west towards Wales. Such a direct road existed between Egypt and Canaan, but rather than having the Israelites go that way God decided to lead them to Cardiff via Manchester! We are told that He led the people a very unconventional route southeast out into the desert rather than north along the main highway.

God then had the people turning this way and that in the desert, even turning back towards Egypt and camping with their backs up against the Red Sea at Etham. They also carried the bones of Joseph with them, for Joseph had made Israel swear to bury him in the Promised Land. God's purpose in this confused desert wandering was to deceive Pharaoh. He knew that Pharaoh would think the Israelites were lost and helpless, dazed and confused in the Egyptian sun and sand. God also knew that the Egyptians would pursue the Israelites in their hapless wandering. In commanding the Israelites to follow this confusing, long and arduous desert journey, his ultimate aim is to bring glory to himself. He

says, “I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am God, the One Who Is.”

The word ‘camp’ (or encamp) is used three times in these verses. The original Hebrew word is *chânâh* (pronounced *khaw-naw*) which literally means ‘to decline’ (as in the slanting rays of sunset). As the sun ‘declined’ towards evening, so nomadic people would pitch their tents and set up camp. Over time the words for the setting sun and setting up camp became synonymous.

Discussion Starters

- Can you describe an experience of being lost, or being misdirected by someone. Was the situation frustrating, frightening, amusing? How did you find your way back onto the right path?
- Verses 10 to 12 of chapter 14 tell us of how the people became ‘terrified.’ The winding path that they have been led on by God seems to have brought them to a place of certain destruction. What can we learn about the nature of faith, trusting in God and fear from this story?
- There are three elements to the wanderings of the people in this passage: the apparent confusion of the route, the detailed leading of God and the ultimate glory that God draws from it. What elements of confusion, leading and glory have you been aware of in your personal journey of faith with the Lord? How do these three elements fit together?
- God tells the Israelites to retrace their steps and to pitch their tents in a strange place at Pi Hahiroth (‘The house of the goddess Hrt’) opposite Baal Zephon (‘The waters of the god Baal’). These are unexpected pagan locations to find God’s people! How can we apply this to the way God calls us to serve Him today? Where are the strange places and who are the unexpected people that God calls us to go to today?
- If we read on to verse 15 of chapter 14 we see the Lord say to Moses “Why are you crying out to me?” This seems an odd rebuke in the dangerous and frightening circumstances. Maybe it is because God had already told the people what to do. Do we sometimes call out to God for direction and leading when actually He has already spoken to us through his Word and by His Spirit? Can you think of specific examples?

3. God's dwelling place

Exodus 25 and 31

¹ The LORD said to Moses, ² "Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from each man whose heart prompts him to give. ³ These are the offerings you are to receive from them: gold, silver and bronze; ⁴ blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen; goat hair; ⁵ ram skins dyed red and hides of sea cows; acacia wood; ⁶ olive oil for the light; spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense; ⁷ and onyx stones and other gems to be mounted on the ephod and breastpiece. ⁸ "Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.

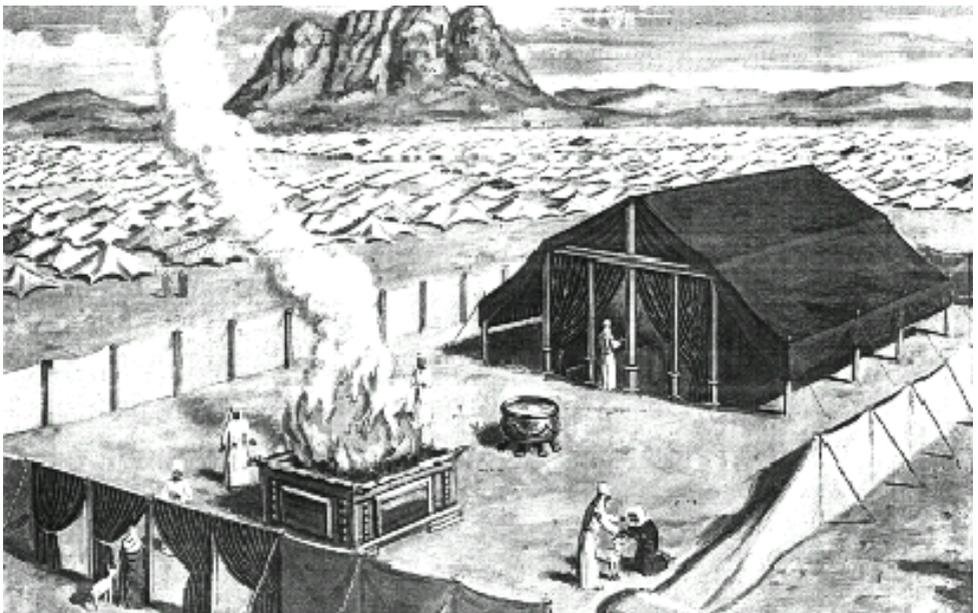
Exodus 31 ¹ Then the LORD said to Moses, ² "See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, ³ and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts—⁴ to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, ⁵ to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship. ⁶ Moreover, I have appointed Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, to help him. Also I have given skill to all the craftsmen to make everything I have commanded you: ⁷ the Tent of Meeting, the ark of the Testimony with the atonement cover on it, and all the other furnishings of the tent—⁸ the table and its articles, the pure gold lampstand and all its accessories, the altar of incense, ⁹ the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, the basin with its stand—¹⁰ and also the woven garments, both the sacred garments for Aaron the priest and the garments for his sons when they serve as priests, ¹¹ and the anointing oil and fragrant incense for the Holy Place. They are to make them just as I commanded you."

Commentary

The tent that God commands Moses to build is no ordinary tent. It is made from the very best of everything - finely twisted linen, the most expensive coloured yarns and cloths, gold, silver and bronze, the best woods, animal skins and gems. Added to this only the very best craftsmen and artisan were called to work on the construction. Moses directed Bezalel and Oholiab and other skilful people to work on the Tabernacle because the Lord had "given them skill and ability to know how to carry out all the work of constructing the sanctuary." All the people of Israel were invited to contribute to the work of building the Tabernacle (Exodus 35:4-9), but only the skilled individuals were invited to do the work on the sanctuary. Why? Simply because they could do a better job. God was interested in more than just the willing heart that could get the job done—He also wanted the job done with skill to the highest standard. Everyone was important in getting the job completed, but only a few carried out the actual work.

Discussion Starters

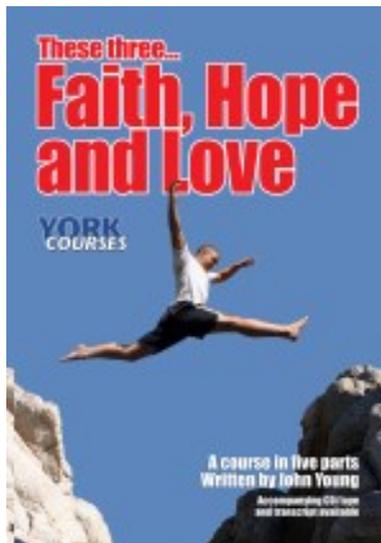
- When Moses told the people to make their offering for the construction of the tabernacle, he said that each should give only what they were willing to freely give (Ex 35:5). The Israelite people brought so many gifts for the making of God’s Sanctuary that they had to be restrained from bringing more (Ex 36:6). As a giver of gifts to God, what do you do: give extra, give the exact amount, give just enough, or try to get away with giving a little less?
- One of the key features of the tabernacle was that it was portable. It could be taken to pieces and transported from place to place as the people were led. As a church with a long history and a wonderful building, how easy do we find it to move in new directions?
- The purpose of the tabernacle was to be the dwelling place of God. The idea was not that God exclusively lived in that place, but that it was the specific place where men would come and meet God. The pattern of the tabernacle was according to a heavenly reality. It was a copy and shadow of the heavenly things (Hebrews 8:5). What do we learn about the nature of heaven from this ‘scale model’ on earth?
- “God has filled Bezalel and Oholiab with the spirit of God, with wisdom, insight, knowledge and talent for all manner of craftsmanship and the ability to teach.” What has God filled you with? How do you use it?



ADVANCE NOTICE

This series of Bible Studies is timed to end at the beginning of Lent. Each year the Penarth and District CYTUN group run an inter-church Lent Bible Study series. For these Lent groups people from different churches are 'mixed up' to provide ecumenical, inter-church and inter-denominational groups. Can I ask you to set some time aside as a group to discuss your involvement with the CYTUN Lent groups this year? In recent years Tabs has provided a large portion of the people involved in the Lent groups, and it would be good to continue that tradition.

The course for this year is based on 1 Corinthians 13 and is called "Faith, Hope and Love." Further details about the CYTUN Lent Groups can be obtained from Graham Niblett.



- Session 1. Believing and Trusting
- Session 2. The Peace of God
- Session 3. Faith into Love
- Session 4. The Greatest of these
- Session 5. All shall be well

See www.yorkcourses.co.uk and follow the link to the Lent course for more details of the 2009 material.

4. The Tent of Meeting

Exodus 33

⁷ Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the "tent of meeting." Anyone inquiring of the LORD would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp. ⁸ And whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose and stood at the entrances to their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent. ⁹ As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the LORD spoke with Moses. ¹⁰ Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to his tent. ¹¹ The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent. ¹² Moses said to the LORD, "You have been telling me, 'Lead these people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, 'I know you by name and you have found favour with me.' ¹³ If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favour with you. Remember that this nation is your people." ¹⁴ The LORD replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." ¹⁵ Then Moses said to him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here.

Commentary

In commentaries and theological books there is a lot of confusion about the terms 'the tent of meeting' and 'the tabernacle' My personal feeling is that these were two separate tents which fulfilled different functions, were set up in different places, and existed at different times. The 'tent of meeting' that Moses would set up outside the camp is not the tabernacle which we looked at in the last session. This other tent is where 'anyone enquiring of the Lord' would go to meet with him before the Tabernacle was completed. When Moses was meeting with the Lord, a pillar of cloud would settle upon it.

We read that the tabernacle was completed in Exodus 39 and when it was set up it occupied a central location within the Israelite camp. Once the work was completed the cloud of the Lord settled over the tabernacle, and his glory filled it. Before this event the phrase 'tabernacle' is used exclusively to describe the plans and construction work according to God's specification, but once God inhabits the tabernacle the terms 'tent of meeting' and 'tabernacle' seem to become more interchangeable. (see Ex 40:1-2). So to be clear, the 'tent of meeting' we are thinking about this week is not the 'tabernacle' we looked at last week... I think!

Although all the people could go to the tent of meeting to enquire of the Lord (verse 7), when the presence of God himself settled on the tent the people remained at a distance close to their own tents (verse 10). Moses was the only man who could meet with God in person. (see also Ex 33:1-6 for the danger the

people would have been in if God came close to them.) Whilst Moses acted as a mediator for the people, they could not approach God themselves. This was a situation that was to remain until a new and living way was opened for us by Jesus (see Hebrews 10:19-23).

Discussion Starters

- As I said, there is some confusion and disagreement in the literature about the terms 'tent of meeting' and 'tabernacle.' To add to the confusion in Hebrew in Exodus 40:29, the term "the tabernacle of the tent of meeting" appears! Some commentators think that the two phrases represent the same tent, whilst other think they are different tents which fulfilled different functions at different times. In the Jewish *Etz Hayim* commentary, the two holy places in the Israelite camp are said to co-exist and are likened to the two types of God encounters we experience in our lives: the intense and the ever present. It says that "We can think of them as representing a theology of encounter and a theology of presence." What do you think sounds most plausible?
- The Bible talks frequently of life-changing, dramatic encounters with God. What is your experience of encountering God and what is your expectation?
- Do you feel more like Moses or more like the people with regard to approaching God? Do you feel able to 'approach boldly' or do you find yourself 'standing at a distance' during worship.
- At the end of the passage God promises "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Moses replied, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here." From then on the people would only move when God moved, and only go where God led them. Where do you believe God is leading Tabernacle, Penarth at this time? What should we be doing that we are not currently doing, and in which direction is God taking us?

5. Dance with all your might!

2Samuel 6

¹ David again brought together out of Israel chosen men, thirty thousand in all. ² He & all his men set out from Baalah of Judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the Name, the name of the LORD Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim that are on the ark. ³ They set the ark of God on a new cart and brought it from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, sons of Abinadab, were guiding the new cart ⁴ with the ark of God on it, and Ahio was walking in front of it. ⁵ David and the whole house of Israel were celebrating with all their might before the LORD, with songs and with harps, lyres, tambourines, sistrums and cymbals. ⁶ When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark of God, because the oxen stumbled. ⁷ The LORD's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down and he died there beside the ark of God. ⁸ Then David was angry because the LORD's wrath had broken out against Uzzah, and to this day that place is called Perez Uzzah. ⁹ David was afraid of the LORD that day and said, "How can the ark of the LORD ever come to me?" ¹⁰ He was not willing to take the ark of the LORD to be with him in the City of David. Instead, he took it aside to the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite. ¹¹ The ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite for three months, and the LORD blessed him and his entire household. ¹² Now King David was told, "The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-Edom and everything he has, because of the ark of God." So David went down and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing. ¹³ When those who were carrying the ark of the LORD had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf. ¹⁴ David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the LORD with all his might, ¹⁵ while he and the entire house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sound of trumpets. ¹⁶ As the ark of the LORD was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul watched from a window. And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD, she despised him in her heart. ¹⁷ They brought the ark of the LORD and set it in its place inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and David sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before the LORD.

Commentary

After David has defeated the Philistines he decides to move the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. However, things do not go according to plan. It appears that David is paying great reverence to God in the transportation of the Ark: he commissions a brand new cart to carry the Ark and the whole of the house of Israel walk in front of it celebrating with all their might. Disaster strikes when they reach the threshing floor of Nacon. On what should be the smoothest and most level patch of ground the oxen stumble, and in trying to prevent the Ark

from falling Uzzah reaches out and touches it. It seems that everyone is trying to do their best, but it all goes wrong.

There are a number of mistakes that are made in the transportation of the Ark. First of all, in placing the Ark on a cart David follows the examples of the Philistines (see 1 Sam 6:7) rather than the instructions of the Lord ((Exodus 25:12-14). Secondly, there were strict instructions about not touching the Holy objects which Uzzah breaks (Numbers 4:15). Finally, it appears that the wrong people were delegated to carry the Ark to Jerusalem (see the parallel explanation in 1 Chronicles 15:13). The conclusion we reach is that although the motives of everyone involved were right, they did not enquire of the Lord as to how they were to carry out the transportation of the Ark, and as a result it all went horribly wrong. It is not until God's instructions are carefully followed that the Ark is eventually brought to its resting place in the tent which David pitches for it.

Discussion Starters

- At the end of this part of the story the Ark (the symbol of God's presence) is still being housed in a humble tent. David is aware that whilst he is living in the splendour of a palace, the worship of God is still happening in in a temporary structure. Does it matter where we worship? If the answer is 'no', then why do we put so much resource into the maintenance of places of worship today?
- In what areas of modern life do we find the (wider) church trying to do the 'right thing' but not following the Lord's instructions? For example, are there areas where the church has tried to show love and accommodate modern morality or expectations, but in doing so walked away from God's expectations on us? What might we expect God's reaction to such behaviour be?
- We are told that Michal despised David for his un-inhibited worship. Later on when she challenges David about his behaviour he tells her ""In GOD's presence I'll dance all I want! He chose me over your father and the rest of our family and made me prince over GOD's people, over Israel. Oh yes, I'll dance to GOD's glory more recklessly even than this. And as far as I'm concerned , I'll gladly look like a fool. (1 Samuel 6:21 in The Message) Are you willing to look like a fool in worship? Do you? How do you feel about people around you who act in 'foolish' ways?

6. "Enlarge the place of your tent."

Isaiah 54

¹ "Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband," says the LORD. ² "Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes. ³ For you will spread out to the right and to the left; your descendants will dispossess nations and settle in their desolate cities. ⁴ "Do not be afraid; you will not suffer shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated. You will forget the shame of your youth and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood. ⁵ For your Maker is your husband— the LORD Almighty is his name— the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth. ⁶ The LORD will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit— a wife who married young, only to be rejected," says your God. ⁷ "For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. ⁸ In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you," says the LORD your Redeemer. ⁹ "To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again. ¹⁰ Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion on you.

Commentary

This call to 'sing' and 'shout for joy' was given in the final declining years of Judah, leading to the Babylonian captivity. The nation could well be considered barren. It was a small and weak nation in an area dominated by the likes of Assyria, Egypt and Babylon. But here we see the call made by God to rejoice. As we have already noted in study 1, barrenness was a symbol for hopelessness. When there are no children, there is no future. But in this bleak, seemingly hopeless situation God offers Israel a promise of hope.

With the image of the tent the Jews are being reminded of their old nomadic lives. Jeremiah uses this same symbol when speaking of Judah and Jerusalem, but in a negative way. (See Jeremiah 10:20) In Jeremiah the prophet is lamenting the fact that Jerusalem has been destroyed and that the people are gone. Here in Isaiah the Jews are told that they will need to make a bigger "tent", which means getting longer cords and stronger stakes, because God is going to add so many children to their number that their old tent will not be big enough. Indeed, there will be so many children that there will be an overflow and a spilling over into nations and "desolate" cities.

If the first image that is used in this passage is that of the tent, then the second is that of marriage. Israel is told that their maker is their husband. This is another rich and frequently used symbol in the scriptures, and for the Christian it finds its fulfilment in the Church's bridegroom, Jesus. For Jews the marriage covenant is sealed with a cup of wine (after which the glass is smashed). For Christians the marriage covenant is also sealed with a cup of wine - "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this in remembrance of me." This section of Isaiah finishes with the image of the mountains being shaken. This is similar to what Jesus says when he speaks of the end times. (See Matthew 24:32-35) Both Isaiah and Jesus are saying that everything material/physical may fail, depart, and perish, but God's promises remain secure for ever. God has made a covenant with His Church; that covenant will never be broken.

As Pastor of Tabernacle I believe God has told me to prepare the church for growth, both numerical and spiritual. On a number of occasions recently the church has been caught unprepared by the number of people turning up for worship - not enough communion cups prepared, not enough coffee, not enough chairs for families to be able to sit together, not enough welcome booklets or notice sheets. Please pray for wisdom for the whole church that we might be ready for what God wants to do amongst us.

Discussion Starters

- In what ways has the Church in the UK been like a 'barren woman' or a 'desolate city' in recent years? Why do you think the Church has been in decline for the last century or more? What must we do in order to see this barrenness turned into blessing?
- In this passage God says "For a brief moment I abandoned you." That 'brief moment' was, in fact, seventy years - a whole lifetime for some Jews. Have you had an experience of God's timing being different to what you would like? How did you feel/cope?
- Do you find the image of marriage with Christ as the groom and God's people as the bride an easy one to relate to? If you are single, divorced or widowed is it particularly a helpful or unhelpful image to you?
- What practical things do we need to do to prepare for the next few years at Tabernacle? What can your small group do? What can you do as an individual?

SOME WELCOME IDEAS

(With thanks to Clare Humphreys who found them for us!)

1. Ask each member, 'If you were a car (plant / animal / whatever) what would you be and why?' (Especially suitable for a group with car mad folk in it!)
2. If you could be anywhere else in the world, where would you be and why?
3. Tell us one good thing and one bad thing about last week.
4. What music did you listen to in your teens?
5. Who in history is a hero for you?
6. Whom (apart from Jesus) have you looked up to as a role model?
7. Can you think of a time when someone 'made a stand' about an issue, in a way that impressed you?
8. Is there any occasion that you remember because you were not ready for it?
9. Has anything happened or been said to you recently which has been a real blessing to you?
10. What was the gift at Christmas that gave you most pleasure in giving, and what gave you most pleasure receiving?
11. If you had to suddenly flee to another country, what would one thing would you most want to take with you, and what would you be most glad to leave behind?
12. Describe a situation when you felt affirmed.
13. If there was one gift or talent that you would like to have, what would it be and why?
14. Describe a recent situation when you felt affirmed or loved.
15. If there was one gift or talent that you would like to have, what would it be and why?
16. Describe (very briefly) a time when you have had to change direction in your life.

