

Sunday School Notes: 27 August 2017 God explains his law (Exodus ch 19 - 40)

Imagine what it must have been like to leave Egypt with that huge crowd of Hebrew people. Some would be fit and able to hike. They were probably at the front. The old people and the families with small children probably moved more slowly. Then there were the animals, bleating along. Soon Pharaoh and the leaders realised they wanted their workers back!

But that wasn't part of God's plan! Instead God protected his people. He showed them which way to walk, leading them through the pillar of smoke in daytime and the pillar of fire at night. Then, when the Egyptians started to chase after them and the people began to panic, God's pillar of cloud went between them and the Egyptians so the Egyptians couldn't find his people! Then God took them across the sea – opening a pathway for them by sending a strong east wind to blow.

All the time he was reminding them that they were his chosen people, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They were his huge special family on their way to the land God had promised to give them. They were part of God's special plan to rescue the whole world from evil. I think the people were thrilled – especially since the Egyptians had treated them as foreigners and slaves!

But they couldn't be a blessing to others, unless they learnt to trust God. The time had come for God to teach them how to live. When they saw God's power again as he came down to meet Moses on the mountain, they were impressed by their great God.

Enthusiastically, they agreed to keep God's rules – and then almost immediately forgot about them!

Tired of waiting for Moses to finish his conversations with God, they went to their second leader, Aaron – Moses' brother - saying "Come make gods for us who will lead us!" Although he should have known better, Aaron made a golden calf for them out of their golden earrings. They forgot that they had been told not to make idols! They forgot that it was God who had told them to ask the Egyptians for jewellery before they left Egypt and that God had made the Egyptians incredibly generous.

Instead they rejoiced when Aaron called out to the people, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." That was rubbish – and they knew it! But the people sang and danced and prayed to the calf which had been made in front of their very eyes!

God was furious, but Moses pleaded with him to forgive them. But when he saw what they had done, Moses himself was so angry that he threw down and broke the stone tablets with God's laws. This must have stunned the people! Then he burned the golden calf to ash and made the people drink the ashy water. They probably had a bitter taste in their mouths for days and that made them remember that they had done wrong.

Sadly we have to admit that we would probably have been just like them. Even today, we hear the stories about God, realise he is wonderful and then forget about him. We also focus on what we can make or do (like money and hobbies and sport) rather than on God.

God knew that the people were always going to be quick to forget him. The smoke and the fire were still there – but they had got used to them. The people needed something near them to remind them of their God every day. And so, God told them to make a special place where they would

worship him. Because they were travelling each day, this couldn't be a building. It had to be portable! It was to be a magnificent tent or 'tabernacle', as they called it.

God gave them detailed plans. He told them how big to make it, how many curtains they needed, how many loops on each curtain and how they were to be designed and carried. The people brought jewellery and cloth and used their skills to make it just the way God told them.

Only one family was to touch the tabernacle or to carry it or to perform any duties in it. This family had been the first to recognise that they had done wrong when they made the golden calf. When the Israelites were still 'running wild' (see Exodus 32:25), Moses called out, saying: "Who is on the Lord's side? Come to me!" The descendants of Jacob's son, Levi, were the first to gather around Moses and to help him restore order. That family was then appointed to be the servants of the tabernacle. Even though they had also worshipped the calf, they admitted they had been wrong so God could forgive them and grant them this special privilege.

The 3rd book in the Bible, Leviticus, outlines all their duties. They were to carry the tabernacle and erect the tent each time the Israelites set up camp. They were also told to look after all the precious things their – the lamps, the furniture and the dishes.

Some of them were to be the priests. Part of their job was to look after God's family. So they were the ones who had to make decisions when people fell ill. They had to decide when a disease was so 'catchy' that the person must be isolated (eg lepers) so others wouldn't get sick. They also had to make sure that the poor people weren't cheated and didn't suffer unfairly.

But the priest's most important job was to lead the worship. In those days, this meant they had to offer God the sacrifices which the people brought. Leviticus outlines exactly what sacrifice had to be offered for what sin and how it was to be done. There was to be nothing sloppy about their work because they were linking the people with the very perfect and holy God.

Nowadays we don't make sacrifices like this, so some people wonder why we have this book in the Bible. But Leviticus is still important, even though we don't need to know all the details about how to offer sacrifices. Leviticus reminds us that, right from the beginning, God made a plan so that his people could know they were forgiven, when they admitted they had done wrong.

This helps us to understand that Jesus' death wasn't a random act of cruelty, but part of God's plan. Jesus was the last and perfect sacrifice – almost like the last chapter of Leviticus. God was keeping his promises: we are all blessed through Abraham's descendants.