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## **Exodus 25:1-9, ESV**

*The LORD said to Moses, <sup>2</sup> “Tell the people of Israel to bring me their sacred offerings. Accept the contributions from all whose hearts are moved to offer them. <sup>3</sup> Here is a list of sacred offerings you may accept from them:*

*gold, silver, and bronze;*

*<sup>4</sup> blue, purple, and scarlet thread; fine linen and goat hair for cloth;*

*<sup>5</sup> tanned ram skins and fine goatskin leather; acacia wood;*

*<sup>6</sup> olive oil for the lamps;*

*spices for the anointing oil and the fragrant incense;*

*<sup>7</sup> onyx stones, and other gemstones to be set in the ephod and the priest’s chestpiece.*

*<sup>8</sup> “Have the people of Israel build me a holy sanctuary so I can live among them.*

*<sup>9</sup> You must build this Tabernacle and its furnishings exactly according to the pattern I will show you.*

## **The Meeting Place: *Riding on three tires and a rim.***

When I was a young man in southern California, I was driving along one Sunday morning – not going to church, by the way. I don’t remember where I was going. I was on a long, east-west road, called Venice Boulevard, that runs all the way from the ocean to downtown L.A. I found myself driving behind a man whose car was making a loud clunk-clunk sound, and it was throwing up sparks from the right rear wheel. And that’s all it was – a wheel; there was no tire on the rim. In fact, the rim wasn’t even intact. He had already abused it enough that a chunk had fallen off. Periodically, the wheel would

stop turning and would just scrape along for a while; it seemed to depend on how fast he was going. The slower he went, the more likely the wheel was to just slide. He was also leaving a nice two-inch-wide gouge behind him in the pavement. My initial reaction to him was *What a jerk*. (Except that I was thinking a ruder word than jerk.). He was in a small car, a front wheel drive Japanese subcompact, I believe, back in the day when subcompacts really were, well, subcompact. I could easily have passed him. We were moving well below the speed limit and normally I did not have the patience for anything less than five or ten miles an hour over the speed limit. Yes, I was young, and I came from a car family. There was no way that I was going to let someone slow me down like that, at least not normally. But for some reason, as cars whooshed around both of us, at least one of them honking its horn, I just mellowed out and studied this man. He was clearly very short, with only the top of his gray-haired head showing above the seatback. The car itself was in good shape - fairly new with nice paint. I wondered if a cop would come along and pull him over. Several more blocks went by, with sparks flying, another piece of the rim breaking off, and that older man being bounced up and down as he rode on his broken rim. Did he not have enough money to buy a new tire? Perhaps his car payments were too much for him. Had he just had a flat and didn't know that you can't drive on a rim? Was he drunk at 8 A.M. on a Sunday? I will get back to this man, but first consider Psalm 31, verses 19 and 20:

<sup>19</sup> *How great is the goodness  
you have stored up for those who fear you.  
You lavish it on those who come to you for protection, blessing  
them before the watching world.*

<sup>20</sup> *You hide them in the shelter of your presence, safe  
from those who conspire against them.  
You shelter them in your presence, far  
from accusing tongues.*

The Psalms are poetry. It's believed that they were sung during services offered by the ancient Israelites and then the Jews. It's thought that they were gathered over a very extended period, starting with the times of Kings Saul, David, and Solomon, and then formed into its current form a couple of hundred years before Jesus was born. Many of the Psalms, including 31, are attributed to King David. It is about protection from God, with the Psalmist telling the Lord that he needs help, that he is surrounded by enemies and begging God to disgrace the wicked. The Psalm ends with a joyful declaration that God has indeed come to the aid of the Psalmist. This tells us that God will not only give us sanctuary from those who conspire to attack us, but God will also shelter us from those who speak badly of us. The Psalm acknowledges that evil comes in the form of physical harm as well as verbal defamation. Things haven't changed much in a couple thousand years: we, too, live in fear of what people will say about us and the harm it will cause us.

Notice, though, that this Psalm talks about sheltering us in the presence of God. How does God shelter us? Where do we find that shelter? It's widely believed

that the ancient Israelites and the Jews of Jesus' time thought that God lived in the Temple, that you had to go there to find him. It's believed that the People of God would have had to go to the Temple to see themselves in the presence of God, and only there could they appeal to him. Yes, the Israelites held the Temple up high as the dwelling place of God, and many scriptural passages would make you think this was a literal belief. But they did not believe that they had to go to the Temple to find God's shelter, to approach God. I will get back to this.

I followed the man in the three-legged car until he turned off Venice Boulevard. On impulse, I turned with him, abandoning whatever errand I was on. It got to the point where his right rear wheel stopped rotating altogether. It began to make an extremely loud scraping sound, and I imagined the road repair crew that would be following his tracks, laying down a squiggly line of tar to fill in the many- blocks-long crevice. Then, something in his right rear suspension snapped. It was extremely loud, and a chunk of metal shot out and flew across the roadway and onto the sidewalk. With a final metallic crunch, he made it to the curb and stopped. I pulled off behind him. He went to the right rear of his vehicle and just stood there, his arms folded, looking frustrated. I got out of my car and walked up to him. I told him that I couldn't help but notice that he had been driving on a rim. I kept my distance from him at first, just in case he was stoned. But in a clear, soft voice he explained that he had to be somewhere, and he

wasn't going to let a flat tire stop him. I asked him where he was going. He said to his church. There was a special service that morning, where everyone was going to pray for people in the congregation who needed to be lifted up, and he needed prayers. I am doing my best to recreate our conversation, and I admit that I do not remember much of it. I asked where his church was, and he gave me a location not far away. I told him I could give him a ride. He broke into a broad grin and thanked me. He said that someone from his church would help him with his car afterwards. They are good people, he told me, and they are always willing to help. They're my family, he said.

Once we got underway, I asked him why he didn't just call a cab when he discovered that he had a flat tire. He said that he had tried to, but it was going to take them too long to get to his house and that would make him late for the service. He had asked one neighbor for help, but that person coldly said that he didn't have time. The man asked me if I was a Christian and I said yes. The only other thing I remember about our brief trip to his church is that he told me that his wife had died a few years before, that as a young guy it would be hard for me to understand, but after being married for over forty years, it is extremely hard to accept that someone who has been the center of your life is gone. A few years is a long time he said, but not when you have lost your wife. Many years later, as a man who has also been married for several decades, I can now fully appreciate what he said. I do wish I had been more empathetic, that I had offered kind words. I wish that I had asked him about his wife and the things they did together, instead of just nodding and

dropping him off in front of his church – which turned out to be an old, converted warehouse of some sort. It was ugly, but the parking lot was close to full.

Exodus is the story of the Israelites making their way to the Promised Land. Here is the beginning of Chapter 25:

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*<sup>8</sup> “Have the people of Israel build me a holy sanctuary so I can live among them.*

*<sup>9</sup> You must build this Tabernacle and its furnishings exactly according to the pattern I will show you.*

Moses has climbed the mountain and is talking to God. God is giving Moses instructions on how to have his people build a sanctuary in which God can reside. The people are to donate gold, silver, bronze, fine cloth and linen, animal hides, lamp oil, spices, incense, and precious stones. The Ark of the Covenant will reside in this sanctuary, called a Tabernacle. Then, God says: *“Have the people of Israel build me a holy sanctuary so I can live among them.”* A beautiful structure is going to be constructed, and it does seem like they are building a home for God. But the real goal, as stated in this passage, is to

invite God to live among God's people, to make their society a home for God. The same is true for us. We are not always in the church building, and God's Sanctuary isn't limited to any physical location. God is available for us anywhere that we welcome God. We build beautiful churches simply to honor God and to give us a relaxing, contemplative environment in which to worship God. Let's look at this more closely.

The Tabernacle that is referred to in this passage is a portable tent that served as a sanctuary, a place of worship while the Israelites were in the wilderness. During the hundreds of years between the entry of the Chosen People into Canaan and the building of the first Temple by King Solomon, who was the third king of Israel and King David's son, a portable tent-based structure was the place where the Israelites went to worship God. It was in some sense thought of as a "home" for God, for Yahweh. It was a very elaborate tent, with expensive furnishings provided by the people. But it could be collapsed and relocated as the Israelites moved through the desert for many years after God spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Then, after the Israelites made it to Canaan, the Tabernacle was moved to Shiloh (which is now in the West Bank of modern Israel) for most of the period of the Judges, the military leaders who ran Israel before the Kings. Later, it was moved to nearby Gibeon. The Ark of the Covenant, which was said to contain the stone tablets engraved with the Ten Commandments, as given by God to Moses, was in the Tabernacle. After Solomon had the First

Temple built, the Ark was moved there.

We see a continuous attempt by the Israelites and then the Jews to maintain an elaborate, single “home” for God, first the Tabernacle, then the Temple. But there is another term we see in the Old Testament, the Tent of Meeting. There is some ambiguity about the relationship between the Tabernacle and the Tent of Meeting. The Tent of Meeting might have been a precursor to the Tabernacle, or it might have been the same thing. But regardless, we see that term “Meeting”. This is the point I am trying to make. The point is that the Tabernacle and then the First Temple, and then the Second Temple, which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. (and never to be replaced) were not viewed by the Israelites and the Jews to be literal homes for God. To the Israelites and the Jews these were symbolic homes for God, meeting places where, as a congregation, they could focus solely on God. They were places where God’s People could collectively appeal to God. In many ways, their beliefs were much like ours. We come to church, to a sanctuary, to meet with each other and with God, but we know that God is everywhere. Although history doesn’t fully credit them, God’s ancient people felt the same way.

Indeed, there is no place on earth that God’s sanctuary does not encompass. That older man – who might have been younger than I am today – wasn’t looking for a



beautiful, physical sanctuary. He was looking for God's people, because that is the true location of God's sanctuary. He found God's people and he met with God in a beat-up, abandoned warehouse that had been converted to a church.

We know that we bring a sanctuary within us wherever we go. That's what the Holy Spirit is – our way of acknowledging that don't have to go somewhere to find God, that God lives within us. However, the world is a tough place, and even though bad things frequently happen in life, that sanctuary within us may seem elusive. Further, we are constantly told by society that our beliefs are ridiculous, that there is no God. We can easily become broken in spirit. We come together in this physical sanctuary, a church, to support each other and to meet with God, but we must never forget that the true sanctuary is within us. That is the home of God. I see the man whom I helped get to church so long ago as a symbol of our struggle to find God's sanctuary within us no matter how this world tries to separate us from God. We must have the determination that that man with the three-legged car had. To connect with the Holy Spirit, we must be willing to ride on three tires and a broken rim. We must leave a crease down the road and throw sparks and parts of our rear suspension up into the air. If you are having trouble finding safety, feeling secure, knowing that you are watched over and protected, remember that you are in control. It is critical to remember that God will without a doubt give you shelter – because the Holy Spirit

is within you. God's shelter comes from within you.

Of course, we do get an accumulated spiritual support from being together, and that is a powerful reason to come to this church each Sunday. Here is some advice from Paul to the church he had founded in Corinth. He is trying to end divisions within the church. This is from the third chapter of 1 Corinthians:

*<sup>16</sup> Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? <sup>17</sup> If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.*

Each of us individually and all of us collectively are the Tent of Meeting, the Tabernacle, the Temple, the Church. When we meet, each of us brings the presence of God with us. Together, we provide a way for us to meet with God, to reinforce our collective determination to live the way Christ told us to - and that is to abide by Jesus' two great commandments, 1) to love God and 2) to love other people.

I don't know the name of the man who was trying to get to that broken down warehouse church. I don't think I ever asked him. But I hope his faith family lifted him up. I hope that he got a new rim, and that whatever broke in his rear suspension wasn't too expensive to fix. I marvel now at his determination to get to church, to meet with God among other believers and to let them lift him up. I think that God prevented a cop from pulling him over and interrupting his important journey. He was seeking sanctuary under the God living within him and within his fellow believers.