**Ro 0916**

The Shekinah and You

How many of you have heard of the Shekinah? Do you know what it is?

The word doesn’t appear in the Bible, but the principle or concept does. “Shekinah” is a word the Jews use to refer to the glorious visible Presence of God on earth. The word literally means “dwelling” or “tabernacle”, and of course the tabernacle was the place where God dwelt on earth.

Exodus 25:8 “Then have them make a sanctuary for Me, and I will dwell among them.”

So God dwelt in the tabernacle, and actually in one particular place there, as we see in:

Ex 25: 22 There, above the cover between the two cherubim (KJV: the mercy seat) that are over the ark of the covenant law, I will meet with you (KJV: commune with thee) and give you all my commands for the Israelites.

So God met Moses at the mercy seat of the Ark in the Holy of Holies. But how did He appear there. Could He be seen?

Leviticus 16:2 …”I will appear in the cloud over the atonement cover (mercy seat)”.

No one could look at God and live, so He appeared in a cloud, and the Jews called this cloud the Shekinah: the place where the glorious visible presence of God was.

Sometimes the cloud moved and expanded.

Exodus 40:34Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

This amazing cloud, the “Shekinah”, is also referred to as “the Glory of the Lord.” God’s glory was in the cloud.

When Israel was on the move, the Shekinah presence of God moved in a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, showing that God was still dwelling with them, and guiding them on their way.

Exodus 13:21 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.

The Shekinah showed that God was in the community of Israel. You could say the Shekinah represented “God in Community”, which brings to mind our Festival theme.

Earlier, when Moses saw the burning bush, God’s presence was in that fire. It was holy ground, so he had to take off his sandals. The Talmud says “the Holy One caused His Shekinah to alight upon a bush.” Later, when the 10 commandments were given:

Exodus 24:15-17 15“When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, 16and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud. 17To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain.”

Exodus 34:29 “When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord.”

The glory of God was reflected in the face of Moses. You could say the Shekinah can be seen in the face of a person who dwells with God.

Numbers 6:24-26 24“The Lord bless you and keep you; 25the Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you; 26the Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace.”

The “Priestly Blessing” is rendered by the Rabbis as “May He give you the light of Shekinah.” God’s ‘Presence’ and God’s ‘Face’ are the same word in Hebrew.

When the permanent temple replaced the temporary tabernacle, the cloud and the Glory of the Lord (the Shekinah) filled it as well.

1 Kings 8:10-11 10“When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the Lord. 11And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled His temple.”

Well, that’s all ancient history, so now let’s move forward to the New Testament, and see what the Shekinah means for us today.

Luke 2:8-9 8“And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.”

What the shepherds saw in the fields announcing Jesus’ birth was the Shekinah. And they were terrified – just as Israel was at Mt Sinai!

It happened again at the Transfiguration:

Luke 9:29, 34-35 “As He was praying, the appearance of His face changed, and His clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. 34“While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. 35A voice came from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to Him.”

Once again the presence of God is shown by a cloud. At Christ’s transfiguration, the bright cloud of glory, the Shekinah of God’s presence, was there. Maybe that’s why Peter asked if he could build tabernacles there – the presence and dwelling of God, the Shekinah, was associated with the tabernacle.

Writing later about this experience, Peter described it as “the Majestic Glory.”

2 Peter 1:17 “He received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to Him from the Majestic Glory, (a wonderful description of the Shekinah Presence of God!) saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased.”

The Talmud teaches that “When 10 assemble for prayer the Shekinah is in their midst; when 3 sit and judge the Shekinah is in their midst; when 2 sit with the Torah, the Shekinah is with them.”

Surely Jesus was thinking of this saying when He said:

Matthew 18:20 “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”

If it’s true that where 2 or 3 gather to read God’s Word the Shekinah is with them, then this would mean that Jesus Christ is the Shekinah. And that is indeed true: Jesus Christ is the Shekinah of the New Testament.

John 1:14 “The Word became flesh and made His dwelling (Greek: “tabernacled”) among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (The Hebrew word “shakan” and the Greek “skene” have the same meaning, “to dwell or tabernacle with”).

Jesus was the Shekinah—the visible Presence of God on earth.

Colossians 1:9 “For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him.”

All the fullness of the Glory of God dwelt in Jesus Christ, the Shekinah glory of God. Just as the divine presence, the glory of God, dwelt in a relatively plain tent called “the tabernacle” in the Old Testament, so did the Presence of God dwell in a relatively plain man who was Jesus Christ in the NT.

In the future when Jesus returns, the Shekinah will return:

Matt. 24:30 “And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory.”

When Jesus went up into heaven, He went in a cloud, and when He returns, it will be in the clouds, with great Shekinah glory.

Rev. 21:3 “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God.” The presence of God (the Shekinah) will be with men.

The Shekinah will be there. There won't even need to be a temple, because the presence of God will permeate the whole of the New Jerusalem. God and the Lamb are the Shekinah.

Rev. 21:22-23 “I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.”

The prophet Isaiah pictured it in this way:

Isa. 4:5 “Then the Lord will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over everything the glory will be a canopy.” (A tabernacle. Showing God is our refuge and shelter.)

Right from the beginning of time, from Adam and Eve (when He came down and walked with them in the garden), God has wanted to dwell with the human beings He has created. He has wanted to build a relationship with us, to live within and among us, and to transform us and make us holy as He is.

When I was looking for pictures to illustrate this sermon, the nearest picture to the Shekinah that I could think of is the one on page 4 of the latest "Inside Life". That got me to thinking that if the universe did begin with a Big Bang (an explosion of light), this was in fact the very first revelation of the Shekinah glory of God—showing the presence of God from the very beginning!

We’ve seen how the Bible begins and ends with the desire of God to be with man. We’ve looked at the Shekinah in the Old and New Testaments and on into the future.

But what about this time, right now?

Now that Jesus has ascended to heaven, where is the Shekinah?

2 Cor. 3:18 “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into His image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

Note the words “contemplate the Lord’s glory”. In other words considering the Shekinah is a good thing to do.

Remember when Moses saw the Shekinah glory and it was reflected in his face? The same thing happens to us! As we look at Jesus Christ, we more and more reflect His Shekinah glory, which comes from the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the Presence of God dwelling in us – dwelling in the tabernacle which is our body (1 Cor 3:16). So you could say the Holy Spirit is the New Testament modern equivalent of the Shekinah, the presence of God dwelling in the tabernacle.

We already saw that Jesus is the New Testament Shekinah, but it makes sense that the Holy Spirit is also the Shekinah because we read that “the Lord is the Spirit”.

No wonder when the Holy Spirit came in Acts 2, He came with flames of fire, reminiscent of the pillar of fire that was the Shekinah. The Holy Spirit is compared to a fire, and a cloud. The Holy Spirit guides us into all truth, just as the cloud of fire guided Israel in the wilderness.

Earlier we read in 1 Kings 8 that when the Shekinah came into the temple, the glory of God filled the temple. The NT equivalent of this is the Holy Spirit filling the spiritual temple of God’s people.

The apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit, and so should we be! The Shekinah glory of God, the Presence of God through the Holy Spirit should be dwelling in us powerfully, so we can say we are filled with the Holy Spirit! (Ephesians 5:18)

The glory of God dwelt in a relatively plain tabernacle in the Old Testament, in a relatively plain man who was Jesus Christ, and amazingly, the glorious Presence of God now dwells in the relatively plain people of God – you and me!

We looked before at John 1:14, “The Word became flesh and made His dwelling (“tabernacled”) among us. *The Message* version famously translates this: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood.”

And Jesus is still in the neighbourhood today. Jesus is in the community, our neighbourhood, because He is dwelling in us. The modern day Shekinah glory of God, the visible presence of God, dwelling in the community where we live is none other than you and me.

The word ‘Shekinah’ means the visible presence of God on earth. Another way of saying this is “God in our community”, or “Being Christ in the Community”, which happens to be the theme of the Festival.

We are responsible for being Christ in the community of the church, and bringing Him to the community beyond our doors. We are the physical legs and arms that He uses to do that now.

What can we do in order to be the Shekinah or to be Christ in our communities? One way to approach it is to look at what Jesus did, how he acted and reacted when He was in the neighbourhood, so we can follow that example.

The best way to find that is to dig into the gospels, to see what Jesus did in the community where he walked, and then try to translate it into our lives in today’s world.

When you do this, something you see over and over again is that Jesus met lots of people, and interacted with folk wherever He went. He was always doing what He could to help and serve people. At one stage he sent out 72 people to go 2 by 2 into the community, help people, and then report back to Him. Other times He sent out His disciples 2 by 2.

We are a network of small churches and small groups spread thinly throughout NZ, so it’s quite hard for us to be really visible in the community as an organisation or institution. It is difficult for us to do a combined project when we come from all corners of a big city, or we are scattered as single members in a rural part of the country, as so many of us are. However we can go out individually into the neighbourhoods where we live, interact with people, just as Jesus did, and then come back each week to discuss and gain strength together.

We are the salt of the earth, sprinkled around to give it flavour. And this is what so many of you are doing!

Last week Jennie Smith showed me this book, “God Next Door--Spirituality and Mission in the Neighbourhood”, by Simon Carey Holt. It talks about the value of neighbourhoods and is based on the foundational Bible principle “Love your neighbour as yourself”.

We all have neighbours, but how well do we know them? Do we know them at all? It’s sad if the Shekinah glory of God is at your house and no one knows it! Is the light of the world hiding under a bushel?

This book encourages Christians to walk around our neighbourhoods just getting a feel of what is happening, how people are doing. We can pray for them as we go. We can drop an "Inside Life" magazine in their letterbox! We should notice the local places of interaction, local parks, cafes, sports fields, shopping malls. We might get the opportunity to talk with people, we might see areas that need fixing and do something to help.

How about putting on a neighbourhood street BBQ? That would be a Christian thing to do. The Shekinah glory would be seen, especially if you turn the heat up too high and the BBQ explodes into fire!

Example of Peggy on p. 141.

The book encourages us to look at our neighbourhood not just as the place where we live, but as a place for mission, where we can seek opportunities to spread the love of God, to show others the glory of God.

But we do need to be doing this if we possibly can. It is important that we meet with others and interact with them, rather than staying at home or even spending time with other church members. It might mean joining a club, or going to a class, or sitting on a bench in a shopping centre leaving a space for someone else to sit down beside us so we can have a chat to them.

I recently read about example of a Christian who became an expert on the lives of a few famous people so that he could use that knowledge to share the gospel.

*Quote from Harry Reeder, “From Embers to a Flame” pp 196-7.*

So there are a few things to think about. And very much I’m preaching to myself here. I need to find or make opportunities to meet other people because that’s the only way I’m going to be able to help them and show the Shekinah glory of God to the outside community.

We need to spend time with people in the neighbourhood, and help them in whatever ways we can. Jesus Christ the Shekinah glory of God moved into the neighbourhood, and so we as the bearers of the Holy Spirit need to be helping in our neighbourhoods because unbelievably, each one of us is the modern day Shekinah, the presence of God on earth!

So that is the story of the Shekinah and you.