

## **Bezalel the Builder (with apologies to Bob)**

**Exodus 31:1-18**

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

*December 8, 2002*

Let's look to our passage in Exodus 31:1-18, where we get God's instructions regarding the builders of the tabernacle. Now, the Lord spoke to Moses, saying,

Now the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "See, I have called by name Bezalel, the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. "I have filled him with the Spirit of God in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all kinds of craftsmanship, to make artistic designs for work in gold, in silver, and in bronze, and in the cutting of stones for settings, and in the carving of wood, that he may work in all kinds of craftsmanship. "And behold, I Myself have appointed with him Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan; and in the hearts of all who are skillful I have put skill, that they may make all that I have commanded you: the tent of meeting, and the ark of testimony, and the mercy seat upon it, and all the furniture of the tent, the table also and its utensils, and the pure gold lampstand with all its utensils, and the altar of incense, the altar of burnt offering also with all its utensils, and the laver and its stand, the woven garments as well, and the holy garments for Aaron the priest, and the garments of his sons, with which to carry on their priesthood; the anointing oil also, and the fragrant incense for the holy place, they are to make them according to all that I have commanded you." The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "But as for you, speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'You shall surely observe My Sabbaths; for this is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you. 'Therefore you are to observe the Sabbath, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. 'For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a Sabbath of complete rest, holy to the LORD; whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall surely be put to death. 'So the sons of Israel shall observe the Sabbath, to celebrate the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant.' "It is a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He ceased from labor, and was refreshed." When He had finished speaking

with him upon Mount Sinai, He gave Moses the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written by the finger of God.

Amen, this is God's Word may He add His blessing to it. Let's Pray.

*“Our Lord we thank You for Your Word. We ask that You again would teach us from it. We thank You for these intricate details that remind us of how much You care about Your worship. And we pray that You would teach us new covenant truths from these old covenant scriptures. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”*

Well, with these words, we come to the final instructions, spoken by God, to Moses, on Mount Sinai, regarding the tabernacle and its worship. Remember that Moses is right where he was, when we left him, when the narrative ended in Exodus 24. He's up on the mountain alone with God. And everybody else is down in the plain waiting for him to come back. And among all the things that God said to him, we have recorded for us not only those laws from Exodus 20 - Exodus 23, but, we have these commands about the tabernacle from Exodus 25–31. And we find here that God is not satisfied with simply saying how the tabernacle ought to be built; He is concerned that the right chosen craftsman will be appointed to the work. God is in control of this entire operation. He is at source. He is the architect. He is the designer. And as the chief architect he will choose the construction managers and the craftsman who will bring about the implementation of this building of the tabernacle.

And there are 2 or 3 things I want you to see in the passage before us tonight. The first, is something about God's calling of us. And you see that in verses 1-11. Where we see that God is not only commanded the building of the tabernacle but he is called and equipped the builders of the tabernacle. And we learn something here about vocation, that is, God's calling of us into service. We learn something here about election, God choosing us and setting His heart on us. We learn something here about equipping for service, because we're told explicitly that God equips these men with skill, who had skill. And we learn something of the presence of God.

### **I. We see here the vocation, election, equipping and presence of God.**

Look with me first then in verses 1-11. I want you to note, first of all, the connection between creation and the tabernacle. There are verbal and thematic ties between Moses' account of creation in Genesis 1 and 2, and the tabernacle instructions here. Let me just point out a few examples of the connections. One is, notice the role of the Spirit in creation and at the tabernacle. Derek has already hinted at that this very morning, when he was telling you about the Spirit over shadowing Mary. He pointed you back to, what? Genesis chapter 1, verse 2, which speaks of the Spirit, hovering or brooding over this formless void, over the waters, before God began His creative activity. Well there is linkage between

that work and the tabernacle.

Look at Exodus 31, verse 3. "I have filled him with Spirit of God in wisdom." And so not only is the Spirit present at creation, but the Spirit is called here the force behind the completion of the tabernacle project. As God brings the world into being through His Spirit, He also brings the tabernacle into being through His Spirit. In fact, we see here that the tabernacle is something like a mini representation of the universe that God has made. God orders all its design, all its components, and brings it into being through His own instrumentality just like He does the grand cosmos and universe, which is recorded as being brought into being in Genesis 1 and 2. And that theme of the Spirit in creating the tabernacle of God does not end at Exodus 31.

In Exodus 40 verse 34, God Himself does what? He covers the tabernacle. The Shekinah Glory of God comes down and covers the tabernacle so much that Moses cannot enter in. But, God is still not done with this theme of the Spirit. Not only do you have passages like Luke 1:35, where we're told that the shadow of the Almighty overshadowed Mary, the power of the Most high will overshadow you. But you have passages like Acts 2:1-4, that indicate that when God is building His tabernacle, actually His new covenant people, how does He do it? Through the Spirit. The Spirit is poured out. And we're told in Acts chapter 2, that "when the day of Pentecost had come, they were all filled by the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues as the Spirit was giving them utterance." And Paul says in Ephesians 2:20 & 21, that you are all being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. And in Revelation 21:22, when John is describing for you what heaven is like, one of the things that he tells you is, guys I looked around and there's no temple there. And there's no temple there, because God and the Lamb are the temple for God's people. But it's the Spirit's work that's uniting us to God and to the Lamb and making us into the tabernacle, the temple of the Lord.

We see that connection between the Spirit's work in creation, and the Spirit's work in the tabernacle, as we look at Exodus 31:3. But here's another. Have you noticed yet that there are seven divine speeches from Exodus 25-Exodus 31? And those divine speeches correspond to, yes you guessed it, the seven days of creation. And both accounts end with the discussion of the Sabbath. The last section of the tabernacle instructions from verses 12-17 of Exodus chapter 31 is about the Sabbath. Genesis 2:1-3 is about the Sabbath, the end of the creation account.

And so we see again a connection between the Spirit in creation and the tabernacle and between creation and tabernacle in general. Also, if you were to cheat and turn forward to Exodus chapter 40, verses 2 & 17, you would find out that the tabernacle is dedicated on New Year's Day, which was itself liturgically and ritually a celebration of the beginning of God's creation, the beginning of creation, the first day of creation. And finally, Exodus 31 itself ends on a note of harmony and rest and preparedness. It is a paradise theme. It's like Genesis 2,

revisited. And so in all these ways we see a connection between creation and the tabernacle. The tabernacle is a little mini universe created by God to remind us of something greater and something larger.

Now look at verses 2 and 3, because here we have some interesting language. “I have called by name and I have filled him with the Spirit of God.” I have called by name indicates a distinct act of the divine will. God Himself is making a choice for a particular purpose of this craftsman, Bezalel. And we're told in verse 3, ‘that I have filled him with the Spirit of God,’ which again indicates that God Himself is the source of the wisdom and the skill necessary to build the tabernacle. It is God the Creator's own power that enables the craftsman to construct a creation with in which the creator is going to be fittingly worshiped.

Now, think with me very briefly about the meaning of the names of these men. Bezalel, Uri and Oholiab. Bezalel means *in the shadow of God*. That is, under the protection of God. And we've already said that is one of the things that the tabernacle itself symbolized. The tabernacle was going to dwell mostly where? In a desert. The tabernacle was covered with multiple layers so that it would be the one place in a hot desert that was shaded, dark, covered and this man who is given the job of crafting it, is named appropriately *in the shadow of God, under the protection of God*. Uri is probably short for Uriah or Urell, which means *God* or *Yahweh is my light*. And again we see the appropriateness to this. Oholiab on the other hand, may mean the tent of the Father or even the Father is my tent, hence *the father is my protection*, just as we saw the idea of protection in Bezalel's name. And again that's very appropriate for the person who has the job of constructing the tent of meeting, which is to be a protecting place for the people of God. A place where they can meet with him safely.

In verses 7-11, we have a summary of the tabernacle and its furnishings. The ark of the covenant, which will house the two tablets that symbolize the covenant between God and Israel is described there as well. Now the New Testament, especially in the book of Hebrews in chapters 9 and 8, makes it clear that the old covenant tabernacle is made with hands, but that Christ did not enter into a tabernacle made with human hands, but into a heavenly one. Both John and Paul will emphasize that we are the tabernacle or temple, the living temple that God is building. Matthew Henry says this, “When Christ sent the apostles to rear the gospel tabernacle, He poured out His Spirit upon them, to enable them to speak with tongues the wonderful works of God, not to work upon metal, but to work upon men, so much more excellent were the gifts as the tabernacle to be pitched was a *greater tabernacle*.”

So here we see in Exodus 31:1-11, an emphasis that God's tabernacle, just like His creation, is His own work. He brings it into being. He is the source of its design. He is the source of its completion and so also is He the source of bringing into being His living temple the church.

Now there's something very encouraging about that, because when we look at ourselves, and when we look at the Church, we sometimes wonder if this thing really is going to be able to resist the prevailing of the gates of hell. And we often feel like the Lord is having to work more in spite of us, rather than through us. Well that may be true, but it doesn't matter. Just as God built His tabernacle, so, also He builds His church. He calls the people to build it. He chooses the people to build it. He equips the people to build it. And He draws near to them in this tabernacle. And He does the same with His new covenant people. He calls the people. He chooses the people. He equips the people. He draws near to the people, who become His living temple, His tabernacle. There's the first thing we see in Exodus 31:1-11.

## **II. The Sabbath is to serve as the pledge and outward marker of the covenant relationship between God and Israel.**

But, there's a second thing and you'll see it in verses 12-17. Here we see an emphasis, a final emphasis on the Sabbath day. The Sabbath is reiterated here. It's not the first time that Moses has talked about the Sabbath and it won't be the last. But it's reiterated here as a perpetual sign, and also as an instrument of our knowledge of God and it's enjoined on Israel as a Holy observation. And we learn in verses 12-17, that the Sabbath is to serve as the pledge and the outward marker of the covenant relationship that exists between God and Israel. The Sabbath is emphasized in various ways in this passage. And it's in fact, made clear that even the tabernacle is commanded by God. Even the tabernacle does not take precedence over the Sabbath.

Look at some of the ways that the Sabbath is emphasized in this passage. First of all, the concluding section, the climatic section, the final section of the tabernacle instructions is devoted to what? The Sabbath. And it's appropriately the seventh literary unit within the chapters of Exodus 25-31. When we come back to the tabernacle after the golden calf incident in Exodus 32-34, we get to Exodus 35, and guess what we start out with? We start out with the Sabbath. And this shows again the centrality and the importance of the Sabbath.

Thirdly, though the tabernacle is sacred space, it's space that God has appointed for His worship. And the Sabbath is sacred time appointed by God for His worship. Moses is showing us here in Exodus 31 that sacred time takes priority over sacred space. In other words, He's saying, "Look" I've just given you the commandments for the building of the tabernacle. You can't work on the Sabbath day, even to build God's tabernacle. You are to take God's time of rest even in the building of His house." So that God's sacred time takes priority over the sacred space of the tabernacle. In verse 17, in Exodus 31, we see the Sabbath connected with creation, just like Moses does in Exodus 20:8-11, as opposed to what he says in Deuteronomy 5. He connects the Sabbath to the liberation and the redemption of the Exodus in Deuteronomy. But it's in creation that we first

find the idea of the Sabbath and it's in creation that we first meet the idea of the Holy that which is set apart to God. And there too, we see the concept of sacred time, the divine Sabbath.

And so even though the tabernacle is a divine command, it doesn't supersede the observance of the Sabbath. The Sabbath has been emphasized before, but now here in this passage, it's called two further things. It's called a sign and it's called a sign of the relationship between God and Israel. We don't have time to go into detail looking at the various components of verses 13 and 14 and 15 and 16 and 17. There are probably 10 or 12 discreet components describing the observance of the Sabbath in those passages. But notice 3 times, Moses emphasized in verses 13, 14 and 16, observe the Sabbath. Because, and here it's emphasized that it's to be observed because it's a sign and because it's perpetual and by it you know that I am the Lord, who made you Holy.

Now, let me just make a couple of observations about it. First of all, notice in verses 14 and 15 that the death penalty is to be given in Israel for those who profane the Sabbath. That is, as those who treat it as it is not different, as it is not Holy. And it's given in the form of a categorical desert law, not unlike some of the laws that we met when we studying Exodus 21 through 23. And Numbers chapter 15:32-36 shows us this law being applied, so we know that this wasn't theoretical, that there were cases in which people literally were put to death, because of their profaning of the Sabbath. But, that seems to be relatively rare in Israel's history. However, towards the end of the Old Testament, the Sabbath again became very, very important to the people of God, especially, in the time of the Maccabean rulers. It was one of the ways that Israel showed herself to be different from the Gentiles around her. She kept the seventh day. And it became a mark of orthodoxy and Jesus constantly ran into trouble with the religious teachers of His day, because He seemed not to be orthodox in His teaching on the Sabbath.

And in fact, in John chapter 5:16-18, Jesus faced death on a charge of breaking the Sabbath. And He spent a good deal of His ministry explaining the misunderstood Sabbath principle. But it's clear here however, it was also misunderstood in the Old Testament. The Sabbath principle is a vitally important principle else God would not have attached the death penalty to it.

Secondly, I want you to notice this very interesting language in verse 17, "It's a sign between me and the sons of Israel forever. For in six days the Lord made the heaven and the earth, but on the seventh day He ceased from labor and was refreshed." God ceased and was refreshed. Now refreshment is language that indicates a fresh infusion of vigor. A reinvigoration of one's being. Obviously, if God is infinite and eternal and unchangeable, He can't need to be reinvigorated. So when the language of refreshment is applied to God it is language that is designed to explain something that is for our benefit. It's didactic, it's teaching language. In other words, the language serves to stress the value to us of

Sabbath observance. That's why Jesus in Mark 2 could say "Man was not made for the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for man." In other words, the Sabbath was made to be a moment, a slot of space of sacred time, which would reinvigorate you, which would refresh you, which would revive you spiritually and bless you.

In other words, this is a way that Moses can stress that the Sabbath is good for you. It's a way that Moses can show you that this thing is not an inconvenience. But, to keep the Sabbath is to be in tune with the fundamental rhythm of life. And the Sabbath itself is a gift of God to mark His people off as His chosen people, as well as an obligation that we undertake as part of the covenant. But it's designed for our good, for our refreshment.

Now, the old covenant Sabbath day was the distinguishing mark of the covenant between God and Israel, of God having chosen the people of Israel and of the holiness that He had appointed them too. But, it was also an occasion of blessing for them. This is one of the things that Jesus kept saying to the religious leaders of His day, that they had failed to appreciate that the Sabbath was a blessing for His people. They had made it, He said, burdensome. They had weighed it down with many human traditions and they had failed to convey to the people of God. The Sabbath is not merely obligation. It is blessing.

Now is that's true of the old covenant Sabbath day. If that's true of the seventh day Sabbath, how much more should this be true of the Lords Day? We could call it an *obligatory blessing*. God is mandating that you not miss out on this blessing. He is determined to spiritually reinvigorate you and this idea of the Sabbath reiterated in verse 17 is a declaration of faith, an affirmation that we are a holy people, not inherently just by God's gracious, divine choosing. That the relationship between God and His people is regulated by the covenant, and that the universe is the purposeful product of a divine intelligent, a transient being outside of nature over space and time, but working space and time for our benefit as we trust in him. No wonder Matthew Henry could call the Sabbath as "The hem and the hedge of the whole law." The point is the Sabbath serves as a pledge and a marker and a blessing to God's people.

### **III. God is the source of the law and His own worship.**

One last thing, look at verse 18. Here we come to the final words of this whole section. When He had finished speaking with him upon Mount Sinai, He gave Moses the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written by the finger of God. This is the epilogue. This is the final word before we get into the story that we are going to read from Exodus 32-34. After verbally conveying the whole book of the covenant and the instructions about the tabernacle to Moses, God gives Moses the stone tablets written with His own finger. And this again emphasizes that God Himself is the source of the law, and God Himself is the

source of the right way to worship Him.

This verse concludes the whole section of the tabernacle instructions from Exodus 25-31. And it picks up right where Exodus 24:18 leaves off. It's the same narrative going on. The phrase *written by the finger of God* is a strong statement to show that God is the cause and the source of this law. The stone used in giving the tablets reminds us of the permanency, indeed, the eternity of that law. It's not written on paper. It's written on stone, in stone to speak of it's permanency. And these last words make clear that God Himself, and no other, has authorized the ritual and the order of worship set forth to approach Him in the tabernacle.

Now what is the story going to be about in Exodus 32, 33 & 34? It's going to be about the people of God deciding that they can approach God in worship the way they want to. The final word of the instructions emphasizes that you approach God in God's way. That you approach Him according to His word, that it's His finger that has produced these commands. And so we need to bear this passage in mind in light of what's coming in the story of the golden calf in Exodus 32 -34. Once again we see here the divine origins of Israel's worship, and the divine origins of Israel's law stressed. True worship is according to God's word. The law is God's law. It's not something that Moses made up. It's not something that evolved out of social contract. It's something that is transcendently given from the transcendent God.

And so here we come to the end of the instructions of the tabernacle, and we are prepared for entering into the very disappointing response of the people of God to all the things that He had done for them in bringing them out of Egypt. But the glory of it is that even as we see the people of God violate the very heart of the covenant - What were they made for? For worship. How were they to worship? In accordance with God's word. What did they do? They followed after other God's. And they worshiped in their own ways. Did God cut them off? No.- so here in Exodus in the midst of the giving of the law, we see a glorious manifestation of God's grace. Don't tell me that Moses is all about law and none about grace, because you couldn't find a more stark contrast between the broken law and the sovereign grace of Exodus 32-34. Let's look to the Lord in prayer.

*“Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your law and we praise You for Your grace. And by Your grace we pray that we would say with the psalmist how we love Your law. And by Your grace we pray, O God, that You would enable us walk by that law and by Your grace. We pray that You would forgive us when we break that law. And that we would long to be conformed to the image of Your Son, who said that it was His meat to do Your will. We ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.”*

*This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.*

*Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the [First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement](#).*

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

#### **Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine***

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).