

Prayer

The beauty of Your presence, Lord Jesus, illuminates our lives. All praise to You, Lord God, Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. You are the King who acts justly, the friend who stands by those He loves, the servant who does what is right for all, and the Master who cares for His household. Thank You, Lord God, Thank You. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: 'New beginnings'

Pray today for people and situations you know in need of a fresh start; the past must be dealt with and what is new must be embraced. Ask the Lord to bless this ministry of grace.

On-going prayers

- *Praise God for His mercy in keeping you safe as you travel*
 - *Continue to pray about the tensions over Iran and its elections*
 - *Pray about waste disposal, and your own attitude to this issue*
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Meditation

Dear Jesus, You are our help and our comfort,
Assist us again, as we need You.

When suffering and distress enwrap our souls,
Cover us over with love and care.

When worry and anxiety eat at our hearts,
Robe us with the comforts of peace.

When fear and dread fill our stumbling emotions,
Surround us by Your guardian angels.

When panic and horror take a grip on our minds,
Wrap us around with Your mercy.

When misery and pain engulf our spirits,
Clothe us with the righteousness of Christ.

Dear Jesus, You are our help and our comfort,
Your power is sufficient for our needs!

Bible Study - Exodus 31

¹ The LORD said to Moses, ² 'Look, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. ³ I have filled him with the Spirit of God in skill, in intelligence, in knowledge and all craftsmanship, ⁴ to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, ⁵ to cut and set stones, to carve wood, and to work in every craft. ⁶ And look, I have also appointed Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach of the tribe of Dan to assist him; and I have given skill to all who have ability so that they can make everything I have commanded you: ⁷ the tent of meeting, the ark of the testimony, the mercy seat that is on it, all the furnishings of the tent, ⁸ the table and its utensils, the pure lampstand with all its utensils, the altar of incense, ⁹ the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils, the basin and its stand, ¹⁰ the finely worked garments, the holy garments for Aaron the priest, the garments of his sons for their service as priests, ¹¹ the anointing oil and the fragrant incense for the Holy Place. According to all that I have commanded you, they shall do.'

¹² Then the LORD said to Moses, ¹³ 'You must speak to the people of Israel and say, "Above all you must keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy. ¹⁴ You must keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it must be put to death; the

one who does any work on it, whoever it is, must be cut off from among his people. ¹⁵ Work may be done for six days, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, it is holy to the LORD; whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death. ¹⁶ The Israelites must keep the Sabbath, and observe it throughout their generations as a covenant forever; ¹⁷ it is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was restored.”

¹⁸ When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, He gave Moses the two Tablets of the Covenant; they were tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

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Review

This remarkable passage completes the great speech containing what God said to Moses while he was on top of Mount Sinai. We have traced the progress of this speech through its complexities to the point where no more items remain to be made, and all that is required is the commissioning of the workmen to do the job and the emphatic reinforcement of the Sabbath, even during work to be done for the Lord on building His Tabernacle.

If everything described in God's speech to Moses was to be made, then those with the necessary gifts had to be found to do the work (31:1-11). In our passage, God established a clear line of authority for the workmen chosen for the work. The senior man was Bezalel (31:2), and his assistant was 'Oholiab' (31:6). Under them, other unnamed Israelites worked (31:6) on the many projects necessary for the work to be completed. Carpenters were required for the many parts of the Tabernacle tent made from acacia wood, especially the Ark of the Covenant itself and the mercy seat (ch. 26,27). Those capable of working with gold and silver where needed for a significant amount of gilding and decorative work on these objects, and also the decorations (28:33) on the priestly vestments. Other metal working skills were necessary for the smelting of bronze from copper and tin, and the women were almost certainly employed in the significant work of sewing and embroidery required for the Tabernacle and its curtains, and also the priestly vestments.

All this work would have involved a significant number of people, and God had already given His gifts to various people, so that everything was ready for the work to be done. The text does not imply that Bezalel and Oholiab possessed all the relevant skills personally, but they had sufficient knowledge, wisdom and understanding of what was involved to be suitable project leaders. Moses would convey the vision to Bezalel, and Bezalel and Oholiab would commission the skilled people of Israel to do the work.

In some fascinating comments within verses 3 and 6, we are told that God's Spirit was responsible for the craft skills of the people, and if you delve into the meaning of the Hebrew words (see the 'translation notes' for these verses), you will find that Hebrew did not distinguish between intelligence, skill and wisdom. The Israelites of old had not made a distinction between the 'thinker' and the 'doer', between the scientist and the engineer of today, for example. They did not believe that an idea was valuable unless it had some practical use, and neither was a skill valuable unless it served a purpose in the community.

The whole speech of God is rounded off by an extraordinary passage about the Sabbath (31:12-17), setting out the plain truth that unless the people honoured the God they worshipped through keeping the Sabbath day, then everything was at risk, even the entire community of Israel (31:14,15). What God said was unequivocal; to keep the Sabbath was to honour God and to honour God was to keep the Sabbath. If any did not, then they would be 'cut off' from the Covenant people of God (we will explore the meaning of the threat of death later on in the study). The Sabbath day is an important issue for us today, though Jesus said 'the Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath' (Mark 2:27) to make sure people realise that copying God by resting is intended as a benefit not an imposition. Jesus made the entire sacrificial system void by fulfilling it in His death for the salvation of all, but He did not make the Sabbath void, and it remains a basic test of our faith in God.

After God finished His speech, He gave Moses two symbolic 'tablets of Covenant' (31:18). We will find out much more about these in the coming days, though it is unclear what they contained! Nevertheless, God had prepared a great project for the people of Israel that would occupy them fully for some time.

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- Why did God need to specify particular people for the oversight of making the Tabernacle?
- How much leeway did the builders have in executing their task?
- Why was it necessary for God to emphasise the Sabbath here in Exodus?
- What were the 'two tablets of the Covenant' mentioned in verse 18?

Notes on the text and translation

- V3** ***'I have filled him with the Spirit of God in skill'** There is a difference of opinion between the Bible versions about how this passage is translated. Some say that Bezalel has been filled firstly with the Spirit of God along with skill and the other traits as listed; others say that Bezalel has been filled with the Spirit of God as found in skill etc. There is a subtle difference between these two, and my reading of the Hebrew suggests that the skills etc. are indeed linked grammatically to the words for 'Spirit of God' (for a further discussion of the meaning of this, see the study).*
- Note also that the word is used for 'skill' as for 'wisdom'. There was no difference in Hebrew thought between what was wise and intelligent and putting this into practice. Wisdom, skill and intelligence were all regarded as different expressions of the same innate ability within a person.*
- V4** ***'to devise artistic designs'** The Hebrew word translated 'devise' comes from a word meaning 'to think', or 'to account', or 'show value'. For this reason, I feel that the Hebrew supports the idea that Bezalel has to be creative and use his mind to 'devise' artistic work to give glory to God.*
- V6** ***'and look, I have also appointed Oholiab ... to assist him'** The Hebrew says 'I have set him with him', a phrase that seems to signify an assisting role to the first named, Bezalel; hence my translation.*
- V6** ***'I have given skill to all who have ability'** The Hebrew here is difficult, for it reads, 'In the minds of those who have gifts I have given the gifting to do ...'. I interpret this as God giving the inner qualities necessary not just for making things, but for doing this in a manner that reflects the will of God. In other words, because God gives the skill, and it is best expressed to His praise and glory.*
- V13** ***'I am the Lord who makes you holy'** Most translations have 'I, the Lord, sanctify you'. However, the Hebrew word for 'sanctify' means quite simply 'to make holy'. It is therefore simpler to use the word 'holy' rather than 'sanctify' because today, many people struggle to know what 'sanctify' means.*
- V14** ***'the one who does any work on it, whoever it is, shall be cut off ...'** The Hebrew has an emphasis on the one who works on the Sabbath, and this is hard to translate. However, I suspect that it is trying to make the point that whoever is the culprit shall be cut off from the people of Israel.*
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Going Deeper

Why did God need to specify particular people for the oversight of making the Tabernacle?

The appointment of the two leading 'project managers' for the task of building of the Tabernacle was essential. God has always needed the right people to do His will, and He already knew who He wanted to supervise the task, and God had already enabled him by His Spirit. This passage is a rare example of an Old Testament text illustrating the work of God's Spirit in equipping people for service, and we should add to this the work of God's Spirit through Hiram of Tyre in the construction of the Jerusalem Temple, under Solomon (1 Kings 7:13f.). There are plenty of examples of God's Spirit working through prophets and Kings in the Old Testament, but very few examples of His working through ordinary people.

It is worth recalling the later incident in Israel's wilderness journey, when the young Joshua pleaded with Moses to stop some ordinary Israelites prophesying when some of God's Spirit accidentally fell on them! Moses' famous response was this; 'would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and the Lord would put His Spirit on them!' This is an astounding prophecy for a time roughly one and a half thousand years before Christ! It shows that God always has more gifts than we anticipate, and the fact that Pentecost has now come means that we should be open to more of the work of God's Spirit, and not limit our understanding of His work to the sample lists of gifts given in the New Testament, however useful they are.

The mention of the names of Bezalel and Oholiab are interesting. Few people apart from leaders, kings and prophets are named in Scripture, and although Bezalel is only mentioned here, it is still important. Such a detail can only come from a desire amongst scribes to retain real information and the heritage within Israel of this man. Bezalel means 'in the shadow of "El"' (where 'El' is one of the names of God). The connection can be seen in a psalm that uses a word like 'Bezalel' for the word 'shadow'; 'he who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, who dwells in the shadow of the Almighty ...' (Psalm 91:1). The connection between name and purpose in life was something very important to Israelites, and this man's name symbolised the fact that obedience to God's will would be of prime importance in making the Tabernacle.

How much leeway did the builders have in executing their task?

It may appear impossible to answer such a question. However, there are the beginnings of an answer if we look closely at the words here. We already know that God gave specific instructions about many features of the Tabernacle tent, its furnishings and the accompanying vestments and products. However, many of the details we would like to know are simply not mentioned. To begin with, we must assume that what was not

mentioned was known generally. For example, we do not know some of the details about how an altar was made (see 27:1f.). We have to assume that people of that day knew what they were doing, and what God said in His words to Moses made sense.

If we look at the words of verses 3 and 4, however, another possibility emerges, which will be more apparent if you read the translation notes provided for these verses above. In particular, the word for 'devise' in verse 4 makes us feel that God expected the artisans to use their intelligence and skill in the interpretation of the designs and recreation of the vision conveyed to Moses. They were given a certain degree of artistic freedom! What was defined by God was sacrosanct, but what was not was open to their imaginations! The women responsible for the woven curtain between the holy place and the most holy place (26:31f.) knew that it had to contain cherubim (whatever they thought of their appearance), but were free to elaborate on the design as much as they liked. Perhaps they created intricate traditional nomadic designs to honour Abraham their ancestor; we just do not know. In addition, the range of colours used was no limitation; in those days, it was a luxury to have and use what was specified. The dyes were expensive and in some cases, rare.

Our conclusion must be that the Tabernacle was built as an exact replica of the detail conveyed by God to Moses, but with as much artistic license and flair as the people possessed. In my opinion, the Spirit of God was given to these workers, for in order to produce a godly final design, their guide had to be God's Spirit, and not the influences of Egyptian or Mesopotamian art!

Why was it necessary for God to emphasise the Sabbath at this point in Exodus?

The passage about the Sabbath was important for the people of Israel because it would have been easy to say that when doing the Lord's work, this did not count as 'ordinary work' and could therefore be done at any time. However, there is no place in scripture where there is a hint of revoking the principle of the Sabbath as a day of rest, either for people's own good (due to the need for rest) and as a testimony to belief in the One true God who made the World.

The one aspect of this passage that is a little disturbing is the punishment given to those who do not observe the Sabbath. Even if it was not carried out, the threat was disturbing; it was the threat of death (see 31:14,15). What does this mean? Does God really intend to kill those who do not obey His laws? We must remember, however, that Hebrew literature often makes points by way of exaggeration, so these words were not intended to deceive, but to express the gravity of the issue. Also, in Hebrew literature, we need to keep our eyes out for certain literary structures, particularly at the heart of important points and especially where we see repetition. The structure of this passage is typically 'chiastic' (see dictionary) and I have set out verses 14 to 16 below to illustrate:

1 You must keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you.

2 Everyone who profanes it must be put to death;

*3 the one who does any work on it, whoever it is, must be cut off from among his people.
Work may be done for six days, but the seventh day is a Sabbath, it is holy to the LORD;*

2 Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death.

1 The Israelites must keep the Sabbath, and observe it as a covenant forever;

If you have read other studies in this series you will now be used to determining how to read such literary structures, for the main point is not the threat of death (number 2), but the item in the middle, number 3. The most serious threat about not keeping the Sabbath is that the one who fails to do this will be 'cut off' from the people of Israel whilst they were travelling through the desert!

What were the 'two tablets of the Covenant' mentioned in verse 18?

At this stage, we know little about the two tablets of stone. This is the first time they have been mentioned in Scripture, and it is worth noting that they did not appear after the giving of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20)! Other passages of scripture suggest a connection with the Ten Commandments (34:1f. Deut 4:13), but at this point in the Exodus story we must regard them as a mystery. Nevertheless, the very words 'written with the finger of God' is enough to stir our hearts. Surely, such a thing was of immense value; and it was God's intent to have this placed in the Ark (25:21) as a sign of His presence with His people.

The sheer drama of this moment was incredibly powerful, which makes what happened next all the more staggering, but for this, we will have to wait until tomorrow!

Application

This passage has a few points worthy of our consideration, and the first concerns the spiritual gifts and the gifts of the Spirit. Some would say that the Gifts of the Spirit given in New Testament times are different from the gifts of artistry given by God's Spirit as recorded here in the Old Testament. Whilst I accept that there are different kinds of spiritual gifts, and indeed, those in the different New Testament passages are unlike

each other for many reasons, I think it unwise to try and say that the gifts and abilities mentioned here are some how 'not' spiritual. The fact that the Hebrew emphasises them as given by the Holy Spirit, using the rare term 'the Spirit of God' that is found only 11 times in the Old Testament, means that they must be given consideration. To argue that they are not spiritual but practical is rather unhelpful, for some of the items mentioned by Paul in his list of so-called 'service' gifts in Romans are no less practical; hospitality and administration, for example. One can almost feel that some people would like to keep anything that smacks of art or engineering out of the things of the Spirit, as if they were somehow unworthy of spiritual acclaim. The suggestion is unworthy, and certainly not tenable from Scripture.

There is no doubt that this passage is special, and it deserves to be placed alongside the other famous New Testament texts about the giving of gifts by the Spirit of God (in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4). Along with Isaiah 11:2, this is an important reference to the work of the Spirit, and it expands our understanding of God's gifts to the benefit of all. They are a helpful indication that God uses more means than we are often aware both to bless His people with gifts and also to accomplish His work.

The issue of the Sabbath is more difficult. Now, my personal belief is that we are free from the domination of regulations about what we should or should not do on the Sabbath, because God's Sabbath is an expression of His love and care. He is not a slave-driver! However, I find it impossible to find a passage in scripture that releases us from the call to honour the Lord through keeping the Sabbath as a day of rest. This passage about the Sabbath is hard, but people today slip away from the discipline of rest too easily, and many pay the price. I, for one, see this all the time in the lives of others and my own life when I fail to take a proper Sabbath day of rest. It is still too easy for people to say that being involved in worship and the work of the church on Sundays is God's work, and it therefore does not 'count' as work to be avoided on the Sabbath, and subsequently, many Christian ministers and leaders burn out with stress. It is best of those who work on Sundays, specifically in the life of the church, find alternative days of the week for a regular 'Sabbath' of one day's rest in seven. After all, this is the basic principle of Sabbath.

If you wish to explore the subject of the Sabbath any further, please look at the articles on this website under this heading available on recent Sundays. By making a stand for the Sabbath, we not only take the advantage of allowing ourselves the rest that we need, just as we need a night's sleep, we also tell others that the God who made the world is the God spoken about in Genesis 1, and He is the same God we find in Jesus Christ His Son. Even today, this is relatively clear to most people, even those of other religions!

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss whether any skills or crafts can be described as spiritual 'gifts' given what this passage says about the work of craftsmen and women.
2. Share in your group any experience you may have had of following what God has asked you to do when you do not know all the details in advance.
3. How do we 'keep the Sabbath' today? Discuss whether there are any good reasons for us to abandon the principle of the Sabbath.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I find it fascinating to read this passage about the instructions for gathering the people to do the work of making the Tabernacle. Personally, I have no difficulty with the idea that craft skills are indeed 'spiritual gifts', and I have no difficulty that musicians, artists and others can be as important for the worship of God as those who exhibit the traditional spiritual gifts. The one qualifying factor remains, however, in all spiritual gifts. They must be used for the glory of God, and not for whatever purpose the one who uses them wishes.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Make a list of the practical skills you possess; for example, making music, housework, cookery, DIY, gardening, bricklaying or ballet and dance. Offer these all to God, especially those skills you have not thought are spiritual in any way. God can and will use all your gifts if you will see them as firstly His, and as His spiritual gift.*
 - *Pray for those commissioned to great work within the church, whether it is in physical buildings or in evangelism or other forms of mission. Pray that all the necessary gifts will be used to God's glory.*
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Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, help us understand your life and work with such clarity, that we may have no fear of speaking to others about You or explaining the Gospel of Salvation. May we always treat Your Word with respect, and use it with dignity and care, all our lives. AMEN