

## **THERFIELD CHAPEL**

Sunday 3 June 2004 6:30pm

### **EXODUS 31 vv 1 - 18**

*Exodus 31:1-18*

*Then the Lord said to Moses, [2] "See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, [3] and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts-- [4] to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, [5] to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship. [6] Moreover, I have appointed Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, to help him. Also I have given skill to all the craftsmen to make everything I have commanded you: [7] the Tent of Meeting, the ark of the Testimony with the atonement cover on it, and all the other furnishings of the tent-- [8] the table and its articles, the pure gold lampstand and all its accessories, the altar of incense, [9] the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, the basin with its stand-- [10] and also the woven garments, both the sacred garments for Aaron the priest and the garments for his sons when they serve as priests, [11] and the anointing oil and fragrant incense for the Holy Place. They are to make them just as I commanded you."*

*[12] Then the Lord said to Moses, [13] "Say to the Israelites, 'You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the Lord, who makes you holy.*

*[14] " 'Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death; whoever does any work on that day must be cut off from his people. [15] For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death. [16] The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. [17] It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested.' "*

*[18] When the Lord finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the Testimony, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God.*

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I've had my head down marking student assignments, dissertations and exams now for what seems like an eternity. It's the time of year when students- whether school students or university students - suddenly realise that the Day of Reckoning has arrived. The academic year, which was so happily spent in drinking beer and demonstrating against Top-Up Fees, and just about everything else, has suddenly reached that point where they have to demonstrate to their examiners that they did attend more than two lectures and did more than half an hour's revision before the exam. Often, it's a time of regret and panic - a time when they truly wished that they had followed the advice of teaching staff. There's almost a sense of repentance in the air!

No-one likes exams. So if you're about to take some, or if you have children who are currently revising, then you have my sympathy. The best way of showing sympathy, of course is to be able to identify with those in hardship. So, Therfield, your 10-question exam on the book of Exodus starts now:

Q1. What was the seventh plague that God sent upon Egypt as punishment for the slavery of Israel? [Hail .... Ex 9:25]

Q2. When the Israelites arrived at Marah, they could not drink the water because it was bitter. What did Moses throw into the water to make it sweet? [Piece of wood .... Ex 15:25]

Q3. How many months after leaving Egypt did the Israelites arrive at Sinai? [3 months ..... Ex 19:1]

Q4. How many commandments did God give to Moses on Mount Sinai? [ Ten, of course ... there's always an easy one!]

Q5. What was to be done with the meat from an animal that was killed by wild beasts? [It had to be thrown to the dogs .. Ex 22:31]

Q6. God instituted three annual festivals. The first was the Feast of Unleavened Bread. What were the other two? [Feast of Harvest or First Fruits and feast of Ingathering ... Ex 23:14-16]

Q7. Which type of wood was to be used to make the poles for carrying the Ark of the Covenant? [Acacia ... Ex 25:28]

Q8. At the ordination of Aaron and his sons as priests, blood from the second ram was daubed onto which three parts of Aaron's body? [Lobe of right ear, thumb of right hand and big toes of right foot .. Ex 29:20]

Q9. If anyone took advantage of a widow or orphan, they were to be killed. By what method would they die? [By the sword ... Ex 22:24]

Q10. The Ark of the Covenant was to be topped by two figures of which type of angelic being? [Cherubim .. Ex 25:18]

At the end of that round, Therfield, your score was ...

It's a humbling thing for a teacher to realise that students do not hang on their every word. When you mark an exam, you often find that if one student is weak at answering a question, then most of the others are weak on the same question. The teacher then has to realise that the message might not have got through clearly. Good teachers learn from that and make a note to cover that subject a bit more clearly next year. Is it any wonder that God had to repeat himself so often to the Israelites?

Here we are, some 11 chapters after the Ten Commandments were first given, and God is still repeating the commandment about the Sabbath from verse 12.

Anyway, last week with Paul, you looked at the last few details that God gave to Moses about the construction and furniture of the Tabernacle. You looked at the instructions regarding oils and incense and fragrances that were to be used exclusively in the tabernacle. In this week's passage, God announces the identity of the workmen whom he has chosen to carry out the construction and furnishing.

*Then the Lord said to Moses, [2] "See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, [3] and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts-- [4] to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, [5] to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship. [6] Moreover, I have appointed Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, to help him. Also I have given skill to all the craftsmen to make everything I have commanded you:*

So Bezalel is chosen to lead the construction, and Oholiab is chosen to be his second-in-command. They are the foremen of works, so to speak. This is their first mention in the Bible - so as far as we know, they weren't, until this point, anyone in particular. Tradition has it that Bezalel was related to Moses and Aaron through Miriam - but I don't think there's any particular significance in that. What we do know is that both Bezalel and Oholiab are mentioned again later in the OT and given honour in much the same way that we would remember the great architects and builders of a previous age - like Christopher Wren and Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

But the most fascinating part is in verse 3:

*See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, [3] **and I have filled him with the Spirit of God**, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts.*

It's easy for us to glide over expressions like "so-and-so was filled with the Spirit of God" because we're so used to hearing it in the Bible. But this is Old Testament! People being filled with the spirit is a common occurrence in the NT, especially after Pentecost, but in the OT, it is almost unheard of. Several times in the OT we read of the spirit "resting on" or being with someone ... but not filling them.

In fact, as far as I can find, Bezalel is the ONLY character in the whole of the OT who is described as being filled with the Spirit.

Pharaoh described Moses as having the Spirit of God in him - but that isn't necessarily the same as being filled with the spirit, and, anyway, that was just Pharaoh's description. I'm not suggesting that other prominent figures in the OT were not filled with the Spirit, but I am saying that Bezalel is the only one ever to be described as being filled with the Spirit. And that has to have some significance. From Bezalel onwards, we do not hear of it again until the New Testament when Elizabeth and Zechariah, the parents of John the Baptist, are filled with the Holy Spirit. After them and Jesus, the next group to be filled with the spirit were the Apostles themselves in the book of Acts. And it may be interesting to think of the Apostles as church-builders too, although of a different kind from Bezalel and Oholiab.

For a church-builder, it seems, the infilling by the spirit is one essential quality. And as you are getting closer to choosing a new pastor here - a church-builder in the NT sense - that is one of the qualities of which you should be looking for evidence in the new man.

But back to Bezalel. God proclaims that he has filled Bezalel with the Spirit of God. How fascinating that Noah, the builder of the Ark which saved mankind from extinction in the flood was not described that way. How fascinating that Abraham, the father of the Israelites was not described that way. How fascinating that Moses, who delivered the Israelites was not described that way. How fascinating that none of the priests, prophets and kings to follow

were described as being filled with the spirit ..... and yet Bezalel was. And he wasn't filled with the spirit because he'd been chosen to be a ruler, a high priest or a prophet - he was filled with the spirit, by God, in order to be a builder. The builder of the tabernacle.

With the filling of the spirit came gifts: *the skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts-- [4] to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, [5] to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship* - including embroidery!

Presumably Bezalel had no such previous skills - after all, men don't do embroidery, do we fellas? So here is this ordinary man, suddenly possessed by the spirit of God and given extraordinary skills and abilities he had never experienced before. Would that all of us who attempt DIY could be similarly blessed!!

Bezalel's filling with the spirit was, of course, for a reason. He would need extraordinary skills in constructing the tabernacle. Not only was there the intricate work with wood, gold, precious stones and linen - there was the sheer size of the tabernacle - probably about half the size of a football pitch! Not only that - but it had to be portable as well! The Israelites were to carry this huge frame-tent - this portable temple - with them all through their journey, for decades, and into the Promised Land. This was to be no easy task.

But it was a supremely important task. Over the last few weeks, it might have been easy for us to have got so bogged-down with all the fine detail about the tabernacle and its furniture, that we might have lost sight of the purpose of the tabernacle. The tabernacle was to be the place in which God was to reside with his people. It was to be the place where he could be found.

Until that point, when God and man needed to talk, it was always on God's terms, in God's time and at God's choosing. But now, God is saying that he is going to make his dwelling with man, and that he can be found in the tabernacle. So, from this time on, God would be there, ready and waiting, whenever man - through the priests - wanted to talk to him. This is God making himself available to man whenever man wanted. This was a major change in the relationship between God and his people.

More than that, the tabernacle was to be at the centre of the lives of his people - spiritually as well as physically. The tabernacle was the sign to the Israelites, and to any other people with whom they came in contact, that they were God's people and that he himself dwelt among them. The Israelite religion was no longer to be something at the periphery of their society - it was to be central to it. Their very identity as a nation was to be based solely on the fact that God dwelt among them.

The tabernacle, therefore, was of supreme importance. So much so that its chief builder had to be equipped for the task to the point where only the filling of the Holy Spirit would equip him sufficiently.

And that brings me back to an earlier point about church-builders. Before the apostles could be sent out to build God's church in the world - they needed to be equipped with the filling of the Holy Spirit. And doesn't that apply equally to you and to me? Church-building is not just about bricklaying. Church-building is about bringing people into a relationship with Jesus; it's about entering into a covenant relationship with him; it's about God's people being joined together and being built into a church where God is at the centre and where God is the

defining reason for people to call themselves part of his church. Church-building is about raising up a witness, a testimony, to God's power and love, so that all around will see.

And if Bezalel needed the filling of the spirit to make the physical tabernacle; and if the apostles needed the filling of the spirit in order to go out into the world to bring the gospel to men ..... do you and I need the filling of the spirit any less? Are we not also engaged in church-building? Are we not also building a church where God is known to his people and where people can find him?

It's not just for ministers and pastors - we are all builders of God's church, and we all need to be filled with the spirit of our God in order to do that work.

*Ephes. 2:19-22 tells us this: you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, [20] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. [21] In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. [22] And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

So, the plans for the tabernacle are given to Moses, the details finalised and the workmen appointed. But before work starts, God reminds Moses to remind the people about the Sabbath law:

*[12] Then the Lord said to Moses, [13] "Say to the Israelites, 'You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the Lord, who makes you holy.*

*[14] " 'Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death; whoever does any work on that day must be cut off from his people. [15] For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death. [16] The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. [17] It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested.' "*

The fact that God chose to put the reminder about Sabbath observance here, immediately after the appointment of the builders, suggests very strongly that work on the tabernacle - important though it was - should also stop on the Sabbath.

Maybe that comes as a bit of a surprise to us. Church building, whether physical or spiritual, is surely the most important task given to man ... and yet work is to cease on the Sabbath. God is being self-consistent here though. Even he rested from the task of the creation of the world on the seventh day. So it is consistent that his workers should also rest from their labours - no matter how vital - for one day in the week.

No-one is suggesting that God needed the rest after six days of creating because he was tired .... if that were true, he wouldn't be God at all. God rested after six days of work in order to admire what he had done thus far. He took time, as it were, to enjoy the fruits of his labour, to ponder them, maybe to look forward to the next stage.

We've looked at Sabbath observance before in Exodus so we won't dwell on it for too long. But the fact that this reminder is placed here does, I think, remind us that we too need a day to

lay down our tools and ponder on what we've done so far and maybe consider what the next stage is. I'm sure that those of you doing DIY at home have reached the stage where you've been beavering away at some job only to find, after a few days, that you're achieving less and less despite more and more effort. A day off to let your mind clear can result in the most amazing progress the following day. And perhaps God was here reminding Moses about the Sabbath for that very reason. Even spirit-filled people are human and need recreation time. And I'm sure your new minister will appreciate a day off once a week!! Apart from being a necessity, it is also an act of obedience.

And God reminds Moses that obedience, as well as constructing a tabernacle, is also a religious duty. The Sabbath was the sign of the covenant that made Israel a nation of God - a theocracy. It was a test of the nation's commitment to God; failure to keep it a holy day would result in death - separation from the community which would probably result in death. This command, as stated in the Ten Commandments, was based on God's resting after His work of Creation in six days. Because the nation was in a covenant relationship with him, the people were to do as he had done. The Sabbath marked Israel out as God's people. Observing the Sabbath showed that the Israelites were set apart - holy to God.

Now we have to remember that the last several chapters of Exodus have all described the commands given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai. It was just the two of them there for 40 days and 40 nights. All that we've been reading over the last couple of months are God's words to Moses. None of the things that God was talking about have happened yet. The priests haven't yet been ordained, their robes haven't yet been made, the tabernacle hasn't been started ... these are all still plans in the mind of God relayed to Moses. As you'll see next week, while Moses was up the mountain, the people were getting up to all sorts of mischief. So this passage brings us to the end of this long period that Moses spent with God on Sinai, receiving all the commandments and ordinances. The final verse in our passage tonight - verse 18 - marks this transition from the giving of the Law to the return of Moses to the Israelites at the foot of the mountain:

*[18] When the Lord finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the Testimony, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God.*

The Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, also called the Testimony because they testify of God's standards, were inscribed by God's own finger on two tablets of stone. Later in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses gives his account of that last stage of the 40 days and nights spent with God:

*Deut. 9:10-12*

*The Lord gave me two stone tablets inscribed by the finger of God. On them were all the commandments the Lord proclaimed to you on the mountain out of the fire, on the day of the assembly. [11] At the end of the forty days and forty nights, the Lord gave me the two stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant. [12] Then the Lord told me, "Go down from here at once, because your people whom you brought out of Egypt have become corrupt. They have turned away quickly from what I commanded them and have made a cast idol for themselves."*

The Golden Calf - the bit you've all been waiting for! But, as with all good stories, you'll have to wait till next week!