

Bible Study # 56 Exodus 31.1–18 04–12–2021

Not only was direction given concerning the products needed to construct the Tent of Meeting and all associated with it, but God also chose the workmen to oversee the whole task. Special skills, divinely imparted, were necessary.

The LORD drew attention to the special appointment of Bezalel by his opening word ('see' instead of 'behold' as in v. 6), and by the way in which he refers to his favor resting on Bezalel. He 'called him by name', indicating a very personal and deliberate action. The choice of the main artisan was Bezalel, from the tribe of Judah. His name means 'in the shadow of God'.

In the Old Testament he is only mentioned in Exodus and Chronicles (Exod. 31:1–11; 35:30–35; 1 Chron. 2:20; 2 Chron. 1:5). The references to him in Chronicles appear to be making the point that there was a close connection between the Tent of Meeting and the temple in Jerusalem. He received a special gift of the Spirit, so that he possessed wisdom, understanding, and knowledge to complete the complex task ahead of him.

God uses those with special skills and gifts in His service, but He further endowed Bezalel to completely fit him for the work. Being 'filled with the Spirit' meant being given the necessary ability to do God-given tasks. No evidence is provided that this endowment was permanent.

It related to 'all kinds of craft' (v. 3; the NIV translates the same Hebrew phrase by 'in all kinds of craftsmanship' in v. 5). His role was particularly in relation to the use of gems, stone, and wood.

The appointment of Oholiab (the name means 'the father [God] is my tent') is stated in different terms from that of Bezalel: 'And I, behold, I have appointed with him Oholiab'. This seems to indicate that Oholiab had a subordinate role to fulfill, and that he was a helper to Bezalel. Others were appointed and equipped as well.

Vs. 7–11 specify all the objects that have been mentioned in detail in chapters 25–30 in connection with the Tent of Meeting, and also the garments needed by Aaron and his sons for their priestly duties. The final command (v. 11) specifies that there could not be any deviation from the LORD's plan for the Tent of Meeting. Just as God commanded, so Moses was to do.

The Sabbath law has already been dealt with in 16:22–31, 20:8–11, and 23:10–13. It is introduced again at this point because of the link between observing the Sabbath and worship at the Tent of Meeting. Weekly worship that was acceptable to God could only take place if the people kept the Sabbath as laid down by Him.

Two aspects are added here to the earlier laws—the perpetuity of the requirement to observe the Sabbath and the punishment for failure to keep it correctly. While it is not stated, it could be an implication that even during the period of the construction of the Tent of Meeting the Sabbath had to be kept meticulously. It is also significant that the law of the Sabbath is reasserted here at the conclusion of the instructions for building the Tent of Meeting, and then again in 35:1–3 before detailing its actual construction.

The LORD continued to speak to Moses about further instructions to be transmitted to the entire community, the children of Israel. The Sabbath command is introduced by an emphatic adverb that means 'surely' or 'certainly', and it needs to be brought out in translation: 'Indeed you shall keep my Sabbaths.'

The plural 'sabbaths' appears quite regularly in the Old Testament (see, e.g., Lev. 19:3, 30; 26:2; Isa. 56:4; Ezek. 20:12–13), and this usage fits in with the requirement that the Sabbath be observed throughout the generations to come. The Sabbath was a sign (as was the rainbow and circumcision) of God's covenantal relationship with His people, a statement repeated in verse 17.

A further word of explanation follows in that God indicates that keeping the sign of the Sabbath would confirm the knowledge that he was indeed the LORD who sets His people apart as holy. The observance of the Sabbath is enjoined in the same way as it is in Deuteronomy 5:12 (using the verb 'keep' or 'guard'), whereas Exodus 20:8 employs 'remember'.

Keeping the Sabbath was a sign of being 'holy', being set apart for God, and displaying in this way loyalty to him and his requirements. The penalty for disobedience was severe, as 'to be cut off' is synonymous in this context with the expression being 'put to death' in the next verse.

This verse repeats the demand stated in 20:9–10 that six days of work were to be followed by the seventh day being a Sabbath of rest. No work was permissible on the Sabbath, since it was to be a Sabbath festival, using the same word that was already used in 16:23.

Any breach of this requirement made an offender liable to capital punishment. While there is one case of application of this law in the Pentateuch (Num. 15:32–36), no indication exists of how often the punishment was applied.

The divine pattern of six days of work and then rest was to be followed by the people of Israel. The covenantal people had to imitate their covenantal LORD, and the fact that it would be a sign of a lasting covenant between the two is reiterated (see v. 12). Life was to have a rhythm of work followed by cessation of labor, and then rest and refreshment.

The perpetuity of this is made even stronger than in the earlier reference in verse 12 ('a sign between you and me for the generations to come') by calling it 'a lasting covenant' and one that was a sign lasting 'forever'.

The completion of God's oral communication to Moses was followed by the presentation to him of the two stone tablets. These have already been referred to in 24:12 as being 'the tablets of stone, with the law and commands' that God wrote for the people's instruction.

Here it is said that there were two tablets, and they are described as being the tablets of the Testimony, written by the finger of God. 'The Testimony' refers to the Ten Words that were written on it, utilizing both sides (see 32:15–16). In keeping with contemporary Near Eastern practice, these were most probably duplicate copies.

Whereas in extra-biblical treaties these tablets were placed in the temples of the respective parties to the treaty, in Israel's case they were both put in the ark of the covenant. Stone tablets were doubtless chosen because of their durability, and though no measurements are given, they had to fit into the ark that measured 110 cm x 66 cm x 66 cm.

The description that the tablets were 'inscribed by the finger of God' is an anthropomorphic expression denoting that by his power he produced this written and permanent copy of his law. God gave the law, and by his divine power it was produced in written form. This is not difficult for a God who in creation could simply say, "Let there be and it was," sun, moon, stars, earth, water, and living plants and animals appeared.

Our study will continue with Exodus 32:1–14.