



Exodus - Chapter Thirty One

II. Exodus 19:1-40:38 - The Covenant at Sinai (continues)

II.d Exodus 25:1-31:17 - Instructions for the tabernacle (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Thirty One

God informs Moses that the spirit-filled Bezalel and his equally gifted assistant, Oholiab, are to lead the people in making all the items that have just been described according to the designs, as the Lord has commanded.

Before the work begins, God instructs Moses to remind the people that they must keep the Sabbath Law and warns of the dire consequences for not doing so. This is a law that is to be observed by the Israelites throughout their generations. In keeping this law, they are reminded of God's creative work.

It was after Moses had received all these instructions in the presence of God on Mount Sinai that he was given the two tablets of the Covenant, that is, the Ten Commandments written by God's own hand.

II.d.xvi Exodus 31:1-11 - Bezalel and Oholiab

This section names Bezalel and Oholiab as those whom the Lord had prepared to lead the work in every craft that he had prescribed for the construction of the tabernacle and all its elements.

¹ The Lord spoke to Moses: ² See, I have called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah: ³ and I have filled him with divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, ⁴ to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, ⁵ in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft.

Exodus 31:1-5

Bezalel is described as being filled with divine spirit, which means here that he has been equipped to fulfil the particular task to which he was called: with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work. It is God, through his Holy Spirit, who gives all good things. Paul sums this up: <<*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit*>> (1 Corinthians 12:4)

This principle is seen in the man called to lead the work on the Temple that was to replace the tabernacle: <<*Now King Solomon invited and received Hiram from Tyre. He was the son of a widow of the tribe of Naphtali, whose father, a man of Tyre, had been an artisan in bronze; he was full of skill, intelligence, and knowledge in working bronze. He came to King Solomon, and did all his work*>> (1 Kings 7:13-14).

The expression filled with divine spirit or similar appears in Exodus 35:31, Deuteronomy 34:9, and Micah 3:8, each time with the idea of God fitting the person for a task that serves the well-being of God's people; this is the likely background for a similar NT expression such as that found in Luke 1:15 and 1:41, Acts 2:4, and Ephesians 5:18.

⁶ Moreover, I have appointed with him Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan; and I have given skill to all the skilful, so that they may make all that I have commanded you: ⁷ the tent of meeting, and the ark of the covenant, and the mercy-seat that is on it, and all the furnishings of the tent, ⁸ the table and its utensils, and the pure lampstand with all its utensils, and the altar of incense, ⁹ and the altar of burnt-offering with all its utensils, and the basin with its stand, ¹⁰ and the finely worked vestments, the holy vestments for the priest Aaron and the vestments of his sons, for their service as priests, ¹¹ and the anointing-oil and the fragrant incense for the holy place. They shall do just as I have commanded you.

Exodus 31:7-11

I have appointed with him Oholiab. Bezalel was to be the main designer and the most gifted of all the artisans, with Oholiab as his able lieutenant. However, God would ensure that there were sufficient gifted people to make up the required workforce: I have given skill to all the skilful, so that they may make all that I have commanded you.

The tent of meeting, and the ark of the covenant, and the mercy-seat that is on it. The list seems to be given because God wanted the work organised and attentive to each detail. Nothing should be forgotten or neglected.

They shall do just as I have commanded you. This is a reminder that God wanted the tabernacle and its furnishings built according to a specific pattern. It was a deliberate model of a heavenly reality.

II.d.xvii Exodus 31:12-17 - The Sabbath Law

These verses explicitly remind Israel of what the instructions about the tabernacle signify: remembering the Sabbath by keeping it holy is integral to Israel's life as the people who are sanctified or made holy, by the Lord; refer also to 20:8-11 and 35:1-3. This passage grounds Israel's Sabbath observance both in creation, as confirmed by 20:11, which Israel shares with all mankind, and in God's special choice of Israel, as signified by sanctify (v.13), and covenant forever (v.16). The form of the fourth commandment in Exodus (20:8-11) stresses the first, while that in Deuteronomy 5:12-15 stresses the second. This section shows that there is no tension between the two emphases.

¹² The Lord said to Moses: ¹³ You yourself are to speak to the Israelites: 'You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. ¹⁴ You shall keep the sabbath, because it is holy for you; everyone who profanes it shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people. ¹⁵ For six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be put to death. ¹⁶ Therefore the Israelites shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. ¹⁷ It is a sign for ever 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 refreshed.'

Exodus 31:12-17

You shall keep my sabbaths. This command was strategically placed at the very end of all the commands to build the tabernacle. Although God gave Israel a work to do in building the tabernacle he did not want them to do that work on the Sabbath. God's rest still had to be respected.

For this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations. Although in the New Covenant believers are not bound by the Sabbath, as Paul clearly believed: <<*Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge*

all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds>> (Romans 14:5), and: <<*Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ*>> (Colossians 2:16-17), the principle is still important. Rest in the finished work of Jesus is never to be eclipsed by a believer's work for God. When workers for God are burnt-out, they have almost always allowed their work for God to be bigger in their minds than his work for them. The difference between what Jesus has done for his people and what they do for him is like the difference between the sun and the moon, and the sun is almost unbelievably larger than the moon. Yet if the moon is in the exactly right, or indeed the wrong place, it is possible for the moon to eclipse the sun. Some Christians live in a constant state of total eclipse, allowing what they do for Jesus to seem more important than what Jesus did for them.

The prophets kept alive the principle of the Sabbath Law as being a sign of the covenant between God and Israel: <<*For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off*>> (Isaiah 56:4-5), <<*Moreover, I gave them my sabbaths, as a sign between me and them, so that they might know that I the Lord sanctify them*>> (Ezekiel 20:12), and: <<*I the Lord am your God; follow my statutes, and be careful to observe my ordinances, and hallow my sabbaths that they may be a sign between me and you, so that you may know that I the Lord am your God*>> (Ezekiel 20:19-20).

The parallel statements regarding whoever does any work on the Sabbath day indicates that putting a person to death is to signify the reality of that soul being cut off from among the people. The judgement that a person shall be cut off from among his people occurs a number of times in the law without indicating precisely what is meant, refer to 12:15 and the comment made there. This theme is confirmed by Leviticus 17:10 and Numbers 9:13. Although the judgement at times appears to include death at the hand of the congregation when the offender is known to them, as prescribed here, it also indicates at times that the person would be killed directly by the Lord, or suffer some other kind of separation from covenant benefits.

II.e Exodus 31:18 - The Two Tablets of the Covenant

This brief statement declares that the Lord gave Moses the Ten Commandments, which was the purpose for which he had called him up onto the mountain.

¹⁸ When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

Exodus 31:18

He gave him the two tablets of the covenant. These tablets of stone were placed in the Ark of the Covenant. They were kept in the ark, later joined by Aaron's staff that budded and a jar of manna.

Tablets of stone, written with the finger of God. It is often said that something can be changed because 'it is not written in stone.' These commandments were written in stone. Their principles remain in force many of them form the basis of legal systems today. However, as indicated in the comments on the Sabbath Law, it is for the individual Christian to decide how they keep the principle of the law and bring glory to God by their lifestyle, rather than keeping the letter of the law that is now required. Ultimately, the law is written in a believer's heart: <<***You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts***>> (2 Corinthians 3:2-3).