

# Sermon 105, The Temple-Building Team, Exodus 31:1-11

**Proposition:** God not only provided the design for the tabernacle, but the team to build it as well, endowing them by His Spirit with skillful wisdom for constructing a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

- I. Kings Build Temples, 2 Sam. 7:12-13
- II. God Called Bezalel & Oholiab to Build the Tabernacle, vv. 2, 6
  - A. Bezalel, “In the Shadow of God,” a Judahite
  - B. Oholiab, “Tent of my Father,” a Danite
- III. God Provided His Spirit to Give the Temple-Builders Skill, vv. 3-6
  - A. Artistic Skill Is a Spiritual Gift
    1. The Spirit Grows Ethical-Spiritual Fruits
    2. The Spirit Also Endows with Natural Gifts
    3. Artistic Skill Is a Form of Wisdom
  - B. If You Have Artistic Skill, Thank the Holy Spirit
- IV. God Has Given His Spirit to His Son to Be the Ultimate Temple-Builder, Eph. 2:20-22
  - A. Jesus, “In the Shadow of God,” a Judahite
  - B. Jesus, building the Tent of His Father, judged and delivered from death, Gen. 30:6
- V. Artistic Skill Must Be Used Strictly According to God’s Instructions, vv. 7-11
  - A. God Listed the Items to Be Made for the Tabernacle, vv. 7-11
  - B. God Insisted on Full Creative Control, v. 11c
  - C. Art Has a Legitimate Place in Building the Church
  - D. Art’s Place Is Defined by God’s Design and Commands, v. 11c

## **Introduction**

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this evening to Exodus 31 and its notable description of Bezalel and Oholiab. What is there to say about these men? They aren’t furniture in God’s house. But they are the builders of God’s house. And in that respect, they definitely have something to teach us. Every house is built by somebody, as the Hebrew writer reminds us — but the builder of all things is God. So what can we learn about God the builder by looking at these builders? We will see that Jesus as temple-builder resembles Oholiab and Bezalel as temple-builders. At last the Spirit is mentioned as having a role in the building of the tabernacle, just as He worked in the life of Jesus, the ultimate temple-builder. Finally, this passage teaches us important truths about artistic skill in the life of the church. Let’s dig in.

### **I. Kings Build Temples, 2 Sam. 7:12-13**

The first point I want to make, the background idea that you must have in your head, is that kings build temples. It is a son of King David, one who is also a king himself, who will build the temple. That is God’s promise in the Davidic covenant of 2 Sam 7. Now, in the ANE, it was an established truth: Kings build temples. Rather than freedom of religion, as we enjoy in today’s

America, the ancients believed in state religion. Local religious leaders didn't do capital campaigns and purchase land on the open market so that they could erect a building in which to worship their gods. Such an idea would have seemed nutty to just about everyone prior to the sixteenth century AD. Oh no. It was taken for granted: Any god our people serves will be served by our whole people from the king on down. And therefore, any temple that is built to our god will be a state-led effort, supported by tax money and built by the political authorities on the most prominent and valuable piece of land the state can get its hands on.

That was just common sense to everyone until the Renaissance. We don't have time to talk this evening about the shift in mindset that drove out this way of thinking. Instead, I simply want you to go back mentally to this way of thinking so that you can understand this chapter about the personnel who built the tabernacle. If you notice what the text says, it's clear that God is speaking to Moses all through this second half of Exodus. Though Moses has no formal title as king, he is clearly the de facto political leader of the children of Israel. And thus he is the one responsible overall for the construction of the tabernacle. He is like the king of Israel, and therefore it is his job to build the tabernacle.

## **II. God Called Bezalel & Oholiab to Build the Tabernacle, vv. 2, 6**

Now, that said, Moses is obviously incredibly skilled at writing and not too bad at political and military leadership. It would be too much to ask him to also do the hands-on construction of the temple. Instead, the Lord calls out from Israel two men who will serve as project manager and foreman on the tabernacle. Who are these men?

### **A. Bezalel, "In the Shadow of God," a Judahite**

The first of them is named Bezalel. He is overall project manager, Moses' chief deputy in building the tabernacle. His name means "In the shadow of God," as if to highlight the reality that building the temple is no simple feat achievable merely with natural skills in project management and craftsmanship. Only when overshadowed by the Almighty is Bezalel capable of this tremendous work of constructing a tent in which God Himself will dwell. One is reminded of Gabriel's message to Mary: "The power of the Highest will overshadow you." The parallel is only too obvious. Mary alone was not able to give birth to the Son of God; Bezalel alone was not able to build the tabernacle. Both people were totally dependent on the divine power to accomplish their God-given task.

The other thing to note about Bezalel is that he is of the tribe of Judah. This is the royal tribe, the tribe from which would come David, Solomon, and Jesus. The original tabernacle-builder hailed from the same tribe as the ultimate temple-builder. We will speak more of this in just a moment.

### **B. Oholiab, "Tent of my Father," a Danite**

Bezalel's deputy, the one who functioned as the foreman who reported directly to the project manager who reported directly to Moses, is a Danite named Oholiab. This name Oholiab means "tent of my father." How interesting that someone with this name would be set to the task of building a tent for the Heavenly Father. Clearly these names are not accidental. They may not be

quite as obvious as Bunyan's names ("Faithful," "Mr. Love-lust," etc.), but their relevance to the matter in hand is unquestionable.

What is the significance of the tribe of Dan? The word sounds like the Hebrew word for "judge." The one judged and delivered from death is the builder of the tabernacle. Again, sounds rather like Christ. We will explore this theme further in a moment.

### **III. God Provided His Spirit to Give the Temple-Builders Skill, vv. 3-6**

But before we talk more about the Son of God as the ultimate temple-builder, I want you to notice the role of the Spirit of God. This description, which is repeated near-verbatim in 35:31, is the only mention of the Spirit in all of Exodus.

What is that supposed to mean? Well, as others have noticed, the people consistently fail throughout the book of Exodus. They don't believe Moses when he announces deliverance. They do go after the tenth plague, when Pharaoh drives them out, but within a couple of chapters they are freaking out with fear at the Red Sea. They have a brief moment of praise to God in ch. 15, but in ch. 16-17 they're complaining and breaking the sabbath. They get to Sinai and are afraid of the voice of God. And of course, while Moses is up on the mountain getting these instructions on how to build the tabernacle, the people are down below worshiping the golden calf and living an altogether godless life.

The one thing the people do right (as opposed to God doing it for them) is to build the tabernacle. As the end of Exodus will emphasize for five chapters in a row, "As God commanded Moses, so they did." The text repeats that over and over and over. Why? Because it's a novel thing! Israel keeps messing up, and the one time they get it right is the time that the Spirit is present in the craftsmen who are leading them. God tells Moses, "I have filled Bezalel with the Spirit of God." And that, my friends, is literally the secret to the successful Christian life. To be truly spiritual, to be truly obedient to God, to be and to build a fitting dwelling place for God, can only be done by the Spirit who works in us to will and to do.

This is why I pray for the Spirit all the time, and why I encourage you to do so as well. The law was good, but the law could not and did not keep Israel on the straight and narrow. Only the Spirit's presence and work was sufficient to accomplish the purpose for which they left Egypt. What was that purpose, you ask? "Let my people go, that they may serve me!" Israel left Egypt to serve God. That service covers all of life, both what we would consider the everyday work of building homes, working, playing, and relaxing, and also our special work of worshiping God in His presence. And as this passage shows (many others show it too) — that work of serving God with our entire life can only be accomplished by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit of God.

#### **A. Artistic Skill Is a Spiritual Gift**

Let's look at the particular gifts which the Spirit imparts in the life of Bezalel here. They are said to be wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and all kinds of craftsmanship.

##### **1. The Spirit Grows Ethical-Spiritual Fruits**

Now, the first three gifts that the Spirit gives to Bezalel are crossover gifts, as it were. They are natural qualities of the human person. God created us in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness.

He gave us an understanding with which to mentally conceptualize the world around us. “Reason in man may be compared to God in the world,” as Thomas Aquinas said. And so the spiritual gifts of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding are an enhancement of the knowledge, the intellect, and the religious capacity with which we were created. But they are an enhancement to such an extent that they produce ethico-spiritual fruits in the life of the one who receives them. To be given the gift of wisdom is an enhancement of one’s intellect and religious gifting, but it is not merely that. To be given the gift of wisdom is also to be converted, to be saved, to be transformed from a fool into a God-fearer.

This is a tremendous gift, brothers and sisters. The gift of repentance unto life, having the fear of God implanted in your heart so that you can be wise, knowing God and understanding His world in a way that will bring good success, is the greatest gift that God gives to a fallen human being. And it is a gift that He gave to Bezalel.

## **2. The Spirit Also Endows with Natural Gifts**

But God does not simply say “Moses, here is a God-fearing Judahite.” He adds “I have given him artistic skill in all kinds of craftsmanship.” We rightly celebrate the gifting of Michaelangelo, who was almost uniquely able to work in painting and marble. The ability to excel in craftsmanship in multiple artistic media is extremely rare. I can’t say I’ve ever heard of an artist equal to Bezalel, who was gifted in large metalworking, in jewelry making, and wood-carving. It also seems that he was gifted in fashion and the skill of cutting and sewing clothing. These skills are all undeniably artistic. But if you know a fashion designer who can also cut precious stones and carve in wood, I would like to meet him. Brothers and sisters, the natural gifts God gave to Bezalel are off the charts. Imagine rolling Bach and Shakespeare into one, or taking Levi Strauss (the man who invented blue jeans, which have got to be the most popular form of clothing ever made, second only to the simple robe) and crossing him with Thomas Edison.

Well, the text specifically tells us that the Holy Spirit filled Bezalel to give him this massive artistic ability so that he could lead the team in doing everything requisite to get the tabernacle completed.

## **3. Artistic Skill Is a Form of Wisdom**

This artistic skill is consistently termed “wisdom” by the text. God says that He has put wisdom in everyone who is wise of heart. What do we make of this? Essentially, I would argue that artistic skill is a form of wisdom. You have to have the fear of God in the area in which you are a craftsman, or you will be a total failure. Yes, wicked and depraved individuals can be highly artistically gifted. Look at Picasso. But to be skilled in some area requires you to work with the grain of reality in that area, to submit to God’s design in that area. Artistic skill is not the same thing as faith, hope, and love. It is not an act of righteousness that pleases God in and of itself. But it is a spiritual gift comparable to the gift of the gab, or the gift of being a charismatic leader who can gather people.

## **B. If You Have Artistic Skill, Thank the Holy Spirit**

The application I want to make from this truth is simple: If you are artistically skilled, thank the Holy Spirit. He is the one who endowed you with that artistic gifting.

### **IV. God Has Given His Spirit to His Son to Be the Ultimate Temple-Builder, Eph. 2:20-22**

Once again, this is most clear in the life of Jesus. He received the Spirit from His Father without measure. He had the infinite fullness of the Spirit so that He could be the foundation of the new temple, made without hands, eternal in the heavens. In Christ, the end-time temple is being fitted together and growing into a holy temple in the Lord.

Now, what does Paul mean by using this passive language? He does not say directly, “Christ is fitting the temple together. The Lord is building a holy temple.”

One reason is that the language here is organic rather than mechanical. When we human beings build things, we make them piece by piece. The hallmark of the mechanical is this: it is an assembly of pre-existing parts.

God almost never works that way. Notice that Paul uses the word “grows.” Organic things grow. *Living things grow*. The church is alive, and it is growing into the perfect temple, the perfect dwelling place for God. That is why the NT, though it continues to use the words “temple” and “builder,” does not speak directly of Jesus as the temple-builder. That’s because the church is already a perfectly formed temple. It’s not half-built, though it is half-grown.

What’s the difference? When a baby is born, he is a perfect human being, fully formed and having all the parts that an adult man has. He then proceeds to grow over the next 21 years or so until he reaches full adulthood.

In the same way, Jesus is building His church, or growing His temple. The church is fully formed and has all the parts that the mature body of Christ will have. The church grows in Christ — that is, in union with Him, drawing nourishment and grace and life from Him. It is “being fitted together,” though, too — a mechanical rather than an organic metaphor. Who is fitting it together? Who is building the church together into a dwelling place of God?

#### **A. Jesus, “In the Shadow of God,” a Judahite**

The answer, of course, is that Jesus is doing it. Why else does Paul insist twice that this being built and being fitted together is only happening “in the Lord”? Jesus is like Bezalel. He is in the shadow of God in the sense that the power of God overshadows and protects Him everywhere He goes.

#### **B. Jesus, building the Tent of His Father, judged and delivered from death, Gen. 30:6**

Jesus is also like Oholiab, for He is building the tent of His Father. Now, we know that our Lord was from the tribe of Judah. So what does the tribe of Dan have to do with it? Well, if you return to the origin of the tribe of Dan, you see that Rachel is barren. She cannot have children, and that is just psychologically destroying her. Then she has a brain wave and creates this proxy wife by giving her maidservant to her husband. “And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. Then

Rachel said, ‘God has vindicated me, and has indeed heard my voice and has given me a son.’ Therefore she named him Dan” (Gen 30:5-6 NAS). Hmm. Does any of that sound like our Lord?

“God has judged/vindicated me.” Yes, that was supremely fulfilled at the resurrection of the Son of God. “God has heard my voice.” Yes, God always listens to His Son. And finally, through giving Himself a Son God also gives Himself a temple, for it is His Son who builds the temple. Furthermore, to make the speaker consistently refer to Jesus, we can posit that we are sons in the Son. God has become our Father through Christ. No wonder Oholiab the temple-builder is from the tribe of Dan!

#### **V. Artistic Skill Must Be Used Strictly According to God’s Instructions, vv. 7-11**

Well, the artistic skill that God granted to Oholiab and Bezalel was to be used strictly according to God’s instructions. God gave the spiritual gift of craftsmanship in fine art materials. But He did not say “All right, artists! I’ve given you artistic gifts. Now get out there and express yourself with these gifts.” There is absolutely nothing in here about how Bezalel and Oholiab expressed themselves. They were set a particular task.

Now, this does not mean that God forbids artists to express themselves. But it does mean that when it comes to art and the worship of God, God’s instructions are to be followed to the letter.

#### **A. God Listed the Items to Be Made for the Tabernacle, vv. 7-11**

Note first that God listed the items to be made. Oholiab and Bezalel didn’t come up with a list of furniture that they wanted to see in God’s house. They took the list that God gave them and then executed it in gold, silver, acacia wood, bronze, fine linen, and more. They were not to make anything that wasn’t on the list, and they weren’t at liberty to redesign something that was on the list.

#### **B. God Insisted on Full Creative Control, v. 11c**

In fact, the Almighty insisted on full creative control. He said “You are to make them according to all that I have commanded you.” The artists had a job, which was to execute the Lord’s commands.

#### **C. Art Has a Legitimate Place in Building the Church**

From this we can take away two truths. The first is that art does indeed have a legitimate place in building the church. A church with no art and no artists is not the church that God envisions. His dwelling place was beautiful, the people inside it were gloriously clothed, and the furniture was crafted with the highest level of excellence and skill.

Can we say the same today? Do we make the dwelling place of God artistic and beautiful? Again, I am not primarily talking about the church building. That is the dwelling place of the dwelling place. The church is the institution that inhabits and uses the building, but the church is not the building any more than the hospital is its building or a college its campus. The institution is separable from its shell, even if actually being separated from its shell tends to kill the institution.

Well, anyway, the main area in which we need to be creating and executing artistic craftsmanship when it comes to the worship of God is in our individual lives and our group life.

We need to be morally upright and pure. We need to craft the institutional and personal aspect of our church with the highest level of skill and beauty.

#### **D. Art's Place Is Defined by God's Design and Commands, v. 11c**

But we can further posit that art's place in the church is defined by God's design and God's commands. If a painter comes forward and says "I think this church needs some icons;" if a sculptor comes forward and says "I think this church needs a crucifix;" we say "Who has required these things at your hand?" The Lord never asked to be worshiped with visual art. In fact, He asked not to be, in no uncertain terms.

At the same time, He did ask for His dwelling place to be beautiful and beautifully decorated. I believe that that holds true for the dwelling place today. Our lives need to be adorned with mercy and good works, with the adornment of a meek and quiet spirit that in the sight of God is of great price. This is how the holy women of old used to adorn themselves, and this is how the holy bride of Christ is still called to adorn herself.

The most prominent art in the life of the church is music, with architecture a close second. Architecture is a sort of crystallized shell that says something about the institution. Over the centuries, a glorious ecclesiastical style has been developed, and I firmly believe that where the resources are present we should worship God in a building that has "church" written all over it. Architecture is not an art that I know much about or can comment on at length. Certainly any ANE resident would have recognized the tabernacle right away as a portable dwelling for a god — and if we get to build or buy an outer shell for our own local church, we should make sure that the shell says "church" and not "Rite Aid."

But to return to music. Music, brothers and sisters, is not like architecture. Monumental architecture can be produced only by the resources of the state. The private sector doesn't do monumental architecture, certainly not for a single institution. But the private sector can do music. It takes millions of dollars and decades to erect a monumental building in stone. But it only takes a few people singing beautifully to make profoundly moving and delightful music.

Architecture is a side thing. So is visual art. The church can be blessed by both of these arts. But they are not part of our core mission. Music is different. Aside from the one-time construction of the tabernacle and the building and rebuilding of the temple, God never said "Build me a worthy building." But He says "Sing, making melody with grace in your heart to the Lord." Play skillfully, "make sweet music for your cry of victory" (Psa 33:3 NJB).

Honestly, this is one of our church's biggest failings. We get a D at best on church music. Is God not worth learning to sing better?

So pray for the Spirit to give you the desire to sing better. And then get some voice lessons. Get some practice. I hope to get a choral teacher to come and whip us into shape so that we can sing beautifully. God no longer asks for gold-plated cherubim and embroidered robes and precisely-cut precious stones in His worship. Now He asks for song. If we think that Bezalel and Oholiab's calling was worthy, that it was something that genuinely needed to be done, then we will pursue excellence in music by the Spirit's grace. Amen.