

Studies in Exodus No. 36

Exodus 31:1-18

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We have completed the lengthy section of liturgical regulations, instructions for the manufacture of the tabernacle and its furnishings as well as some instructions for the divine worship to be carried on there, a section that began immediately after the account of the covenant renewal ceremony in chapter 24. At the end of that chapter we learned that Moses was on the top of the mountain for 40 days receiving the law from God and these elaborate liturgical regulations were part of what God gave to Moses there on the top of the mountain. In the context that is clear enough, but it is a point that will be made explicitly at the end of the chapter we read this evening. In v. 18 we will read: “When the Lord finished speaking to Moses on Mt. Sinai...”

Text Comment

- v.1 This section on the craftsmen is virtually identical to 35:30-36:2. So, we have this section devoted to the craftsmen placed at the end of the instructions concerning those things they will build or manufacture and another like section placed at the beginning of the section that narrates the implementation of these instructions (36:1ff). [Durham, 410]
- v.2 The NIV’s “I have chosen” is literally “I have called by name.” It is a way of speaking that suggests predestination – God’s special choice for a special purpose – and the NIV’s translation captures that meaning. We are probably to understand that Bezalel’s grandfather was the Hur mentioned in 17:10 and 24:14, one of Moses’ closer colleagues. Remember, while there is no present evidence for this, later Jewish tradition made Hur Miriam’s husband and so Moses’ brother-in-law.
- v.3 “Inborn artistic genius and skill is something that defies all logical explanation.” [Ellison, 166] Why can’t I do on a canvas what Rembrandt or Andrew Wyeth did? It is clear that hard work at one’s craft is only a part of the answer and not the largest part. But here is more of the answer. God gives this as a gift through the Holy Spirit. It is interesting and important to note that the word the NIV translates “skill,” is the Hebrew word *hokmah*, “wisdom,” that figures so largely in Proverbs. Its use here helps us to grasp its meaning there. The artist’s “skill” is his ability to see the finished product in his mind’s eye or hear it in his head and bring it into existence with his hands, whether as a painter, carver, sculptor, or composer. Well, it is a similar wisdom or skill that Proverbs envisions: a man or woman who can *see* the godly life in his or her mind’s eye, and then bring it into existence, not matter all the difficulties involved. At one point Michelangelo’s great sculpture, *David*, was a giant block of marble. The great artist could see the statue in that block and, with his hands and tools was able to bring it into being just as he saw it. And so the godly man and the godly life. That is wisdom. Or, that is the skill of living rightly and well.

In any case, as we often saw, the materials from which the Tabernacle, its furniture, the

priestly clothing, and the oil and incense were to be made were the very best. Now, in keeping with that aim, the craftsmen who were to create these things must be the very best as well.

- v.5 It used to be said by skeptical scholarship that the sophisticated manufactures required in the instructions of chapter 25-30 would have been beyond the ability of Israelites in the 15th century B.C. Now it is known that such abilities were widely distributed across the ANE.
- v.6 Oholiab seems to have been Bezalel's assistant. Bezalel was from Judah, one of the largest tribes; Oholiab was from Dan, one of the smallest. The Lord spreads his gifts around; a point Paul will ring the changes on in 1 Corinthians and Romans. Like the names of the two Hebrew midwives, preserved in chapter 1, these two names were preserved. They are archaic in form and are recollected because of the immensely important role these two men played.

As the second half of the verse makes clear, these men were to be over a large number of craftsmen who also were gifted for the work.

- v.11 The list of things that these craftsmen are to create amounts to a summing up of the material in the previous six chapters. Everything is to be done according to the Lord's plan; no creative license is permitted.
- v.13 Words derived from the verb *shabat* ("to rest", "to cease from work") occur 7 times in the following paragraph. That is no accident.
- v.15 The death penalty must be understood in context. As will be made clear in Leviticus, we are not talking here about the sins of frailty to which all believers are prone, but about high-handed sins, sins made in full recognition of God's demand and in willful repudiation of that demand. The Sabbath is a sign of the covenant between God and Israel and the sin of Sabbath-breaking envisaged here is the sin of repudiating that covenant; a form of apostasy.
- v.17 The reason given for keeping the Sabbath is the same given in the ten commandments (20:11), viz. God's rest as a pattern for ours. The verb the NIV translates "rested" is cognate with *nephesh*, breath or spirit, and is related to the verb *nashaf* to pant or breathe hard. [Alter, 450, 492] A translation that catches the vivid anthropomorphism might be "caught his breath." The Lord created for six days and caught his breath on the seventh.
- v.18 It seems very unlikely that these tablets contained the entirety of the covenant, certainly not the detailed regulations of the last five chapters. They probably contained, as Christian tradition has assumed, only the epitome of the covenant found in the Ten Words or Ten Commandments.

We have encountered the phrase "finger of God" already in Exodus 8:19 in regard to the

plagues. (The Egyptian magicians, commenting on the plagues that had so far befallen Egypt, said, “this is the finger of God.”) It is a metaphor for divine causation.

Now we might wonder why a repetition of the Sabbath commandment, just one out of the ten commandments, an emphatic reminder that Israel is not to work on the 7th day, but that she is to keep that day holy, should be placed here. But there are two very good reasons.

First, a work order has just been issued. The work has been assigned to craftsman and is soon to begin. Very soon the work sites will be busy with laborers and craftsmen producing the Tabernacle, its furniture, and the rest. *But, no matter the sacred nature of the things that are to be made, no work is to be done on the Sabbath.* The Sabbath rest is to be observed even for the work of building and making the materials that will provide the context and means of Israel’s worship of Yahweh. The connection between the two paragraphs of chapter 31 is actually made very explicitly in the Hebrew text. The word “work” that appears in vv. 14 and 15, when Israel is told not to do any *work* on the Lord’s holy day, is the same word the NIV translates as “crafts” in v. 3. It is, in other words, precisely the work that these craftsmen are to do that is not to be done on the Sabbath. The Sabbath command follows the work order to ensure that no one thinks that this work may be done on the Sabbath day.

As an aside, it is interesting that “The Talmudic sages...[derived] the thirty-nine primary categories of labor...forbidden on the Sabbath from the sundry activities necessary for the assemblage of the Tabernacle and its furnishings.” [Alter, 491] It was rightly understood at least that there was a direct connection between the instructions for the manufacture of Israel’s holy things and this commandment to keep the Sabbath day. The very best work, the most sacred work, even the work that makes the right worship of God possible for Israel, is not to be done on the Sabbath day. That is the first reason why we find this reiteration of the Sabbath commandment placed here.

The second reason is that the Sabbath day will be a day to contemplate the meaning of the Lord’s presence and of his covenant, it will be a day to practice that worship that has been described in the previous chapters, it will be a time to assemble at the Tabernacle and there worship the Lord. Ceasing from work is not an end entirely in itself. It is what makes possible the more positive uses of the Lord’s holy day.

It is interesting that we have very little information given us in the Bible about how Israel was to celebrate the Sabbath day. In Leviticus 23:3 we read that “the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, *a day of sacred assembly.*” In that context other holidays (e.g. Passover, Weeks, Tabernacles) are also called assemblies and they were times of worship and of the gathering of the people for worship. The Sabbath, once every seven days, in other words, is like that. But we are never told precisely how or where they assembled or what they did when they assembled. That it was a day for public worship seems to be the clear implication of such a text but it is not spelled out. In 2 Kgs. 4:23 we learn that it was characteristic to hear a sermon from a priest or prophet on the Sabbath day, which makes perfect sense, but such a service is never described either in the law or in the historical narrative of the Old Testament.

Nevertheless, this text in Ex. 31, seems also to confirm the impression that the Sabbath was a day of worship simply because this injunction to keep the Sabbath is placed here, at the end of all the regulations and instructions concerning the worship of the Tabernacle. Sabbath and Tabernacle go together, as do Sabbath and priests and Sabbath and sacrifice and Sabbath and prayer (which, we said, was the special symbolic reference of the burning of incense). These acts of worship continued throughout the week – indeed a point is made in the instructions of the previous chapters that many things happen every day, every day and every night – but, nevertheless there is a special connection being drawn between the Sabbath and all of this worship. The whole body of Israel was to assemble in some way for worship on the Sabbath day.

Taking the Bible together, that seems uncontroversial. The Sabbath came into post-exilic Jewish life as a day of worship and there is no suggestion that such was an innovation and, as we know, the Sabbath is carried over – with changes of form – into the new epoch of the life of the Church and there too it is a day of assembly and a day of worship. Remember, the NT name for the Sabbath is “the Lord’s Day,” but that is simply another OT way of referring to the Sabbath (Isa. 58:13), as we are reminded here in v. 15. We have been saying all through the previous material that the worship being there described is, in its substance, the same as our worship today. Well, in this respect as well. There is a day appointed for that worship, a day of the assembly of God’s people to worship him.

As one scholar puts it:

“The keeping holy of the seventh day forms an emphatic reminder that God is the Lord of time, and that no business, however pressing, must be allowed to keep men from regularly seeking his fellowship; but the joyful character of that day of rest also brings home to the worshipper that his God is a kindly Master, who does not lay on men a yoke too heavy to bear.” [Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, i, 133]

Now, perhaps you are thinking it providential that we should fall upon a text dealing with the Sabbath day on Super Bowl Sunday, and, what is more, when the Seahawks are in the Super Bowl! How many times will that happen? No doubt, across our land today, in evangelical churches of every stripe, there have been sermons in which passing reference has been made to the Super Bowl, there have been sermons in which an effort has been made to trade on the fact of Super Bowl Sunday in some positive fashion – you read this last week in the newspaper of the many churches that were hosting Super Bowl parties and so on – a great many sermons in which some positive reference will have been made about watching the Super Bowl later in the day – I’m sure some churches that still have an evening service cancelled it precisely so as to allow folk to watch the game – and, no doubt, there have been a comparatively few services in which the minister railed against watching TV on the Lord’s Day, or entertaining ourselves by watching others profane the day, or, more generally, giving in to the worship of sports.

But the burden of our text lies elsewhere, especially given its position, its place immediately after this lengthy account of how Israel is to worship God. Turning too quickly to questions of application – that is, to the casuistry of the Sabbath, questions of what may and may not be done on the Sabbath day, the articulating of a principle by which we might answer the thousand and

one questions that people ask was the mistake that the Jews would later make in Jesus' day. The first questions to ask about the Lord's Day are not:

1. May I go out to eat in a restaurant on the Lord's Day?
2. May I watch a TV football game?
3. May I take a walk in the woods?
4. May I play a game or participate in a sport?
5. May I mow my lawn?

The first question to ask is what is the Lord's Day for? Why has God given me this gift of a holiday once a week? What is the blessing that I am to seek in the use of this day? Why is this day different from other days? *Only when one has a clear answer to that question and is convinced of that answer in his heart can he and will he go on to ask the right questions concerning the proper keeping of the day and get the right answers to his questions.*

Now, we could go to other texts to begin to fashion an answer to that question, but we have a text before us and we should pay attention to the answer given here. And the answer given here is that the Sabbath is *a sign between God and us*. Later, in v. 16, the Lord says that the Sabbath is to be observed "as a lasting covenant." And again, in v. 17, "It will be a sign between me and the Israelites." Now what does that mean? Well it seems that sign and covenant go together. It is a sign and a covenant or, as we would say, it is a *sign of the covenant* between the Lord and his people. That is an easy conclusion to reach because there are other things that are *signs of the Lord's covenant with his people*. You remember that this is the way that the rainbow is described in Gen. 9: it is a sign of the covenant that God made with Noah. And in a similar way circumcision is described as a sign of the covenant that God made with Abraham and his seed. But what then is a sign of the covenant?

Well, interestingly, the Hebrew word for sign (*אוֹת*) English word *sign*. It can refer to a signboard or standard; it can refer to some visible mark, as that the Lord placed on Cain. Or the word can be used to refer to miracles, which, as you remember, John also calls "signs" in his Gospel. In all of these uses and others, a sign is something *that stands for something, that represents something*. A sign communicates something. A stop sign at a street corner stands for a very particular set of instructions about what drivers must do at that spot. It communicates those instructions in a visible way. A miracle is a sign precisely because it makes visible God's power and faithfulness. It communicates something very important about God or about Christ or about his apostles. One thing stands for another thing. One thing reveals another. The mark on Cain's forehead stood for the Lord's protection. Anyone who saw that mark knew that if he harmed Cain he would have to answer to God. The mark communicated a promise God had made.

And it did so in the way of reminder. A sign in its biblical use is often a means to prevent something from being forgotten. For example, in Exodus 13, in the context of instructions for the celebration of the Passover, we read:

"On that day tell your son, I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out

of Egypt. This observance will be for you like a sign on your hand and a reminder on your forehead that the law of the Lord is to be on your lips. For the Lord brought you out of Egypt with his mighty hand. You must keep this ordinance at the appointed time year after year.”

The Passover was a sign designed to preserve in the active memory of succeeding generations of Israelites what the Lord had done to redeem them from bondage and the debt they owed to him that could be repaid in no other way but in a faithful, obedient life of service.

Or take another example. Remember how when Israel crossed the Jordan river on dry ground, each of twelve men appointed for the purpose, one for each tribe of Israel, was to take a large stone from the riverbed and carry it to the other side where a cairn, a monument would be erected to preserve the memory of what God had done bringing his people finally into the Promised Land. Joshua explained:

“Go over before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord.... These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever.” [Josh. 4:5-7]

The purpose of the sign was to keep fresh in Israel’s mind the power and faithfulness of the Lord – truth that they were inclined to forget as her history provided dismal proof often enough. The purpose of the sign was to keep certain knowledge real, living, and powerful in Israel’s heart and life. All the signs of the covenant have this function of bringing to remembrance the Lord’s making a covenant with his people, keeping that covenant, and the meaning of that covenant. They also all serve to confirm the reality of that covenant to a new generation of God’s people. You will have noticed the emphasis on that here in Exodus 31. We read once of the lasting covenant and twice of the generations to come.

So, in saying that the Sabbath will be a *sign* the Lord is saying that it will serve as an important demonstration, pledge, reminder of Israel’s special relationship with Yahweh but, *even more, it will serve as a way of keeping that knowledge, that relationship a living thing in Israel’s heart and life.*

All of these chapters we have been considering lately had to do – as the entire book of Exodus does – with the *presence of God*. How that presence is to be practiced; how it is to be preserved. Nothing matters more than that Yahweh should remain with Israel and that his presence should be her blessing and her salvation. That is the meaning, the blessing, and the privilege of being in Covenant with the Lord. And the Sabbath is a sign of that presence, of that relationship that Yahweh has forged with his people.

Well, it is no different today. You know and I know that the thing we are always forgetting to our great loss and to our shame is precisely the presence of the Lord with us. We live our lives

and day after day, for hours on end sometimes, we virtually forget altogether that the Lord is with us and that our relationship with him is the only supremely and eternally important fact about us. *That is what we must remember.* To the extent that our sense of God's presence, our conviction that we belong to him, our assurance that he loves us as his children and his people, to the extent that our understanding that the meaning of our lives is to be found in our relationship to the Lord, to *that* extent anything and everything that keeps such knowledge and such conviction and such understanding alive in our hearts is supremely important.

And the Sabbath does that, as every serious Christian can and will attest. Where would we be, how forgetful would we become of everything important if we did not have the Lord's Day, if we were not reminded of so much that is precious and important when we are at worship on the Sabbath day? Here we remember that we have a Creator to whom we owe our life! We are not our own. That point is emphasized here as we are reminded that our Sabbath rest is patterned after the Lord's following his creation of the world in six days. Elsewhere the Sabbath will also be a reminder of our redemption. The rationale for Sabbath-keeping given in Deut. 5, in the second giving of the ten commandments, is not God's resting after creation but his having redeemed Israel from bondage in Egypt. We are not our own in that way either; we were bought with a price.

But you get the point. As Cotton Mather put it, "If you look through the world, you shall see that men's religion is as their Sabbath is. The Sabbath is the engine by which, by the Bible, the remembrance of God is kept alive." [*Several Sermons*, 80]

The great tragedy of the modern American evangelical Sabbath is not that Christian people go out for dinner on Sunday or to a football game but that, in losing the day, they are losing their sense of who they are, of how fundamental to everything they are and can ever be is the covenant that God has made with his people. It is because we desperately need such a sign and because the Sabbath is a sign of God's covenant with us that Thomas Shepard, the pilgrim father, could write:

"It is easie to demonstrate by Scripture and argument as well as by experience that religion is just as the Sabbath is, and decayes and growes as the Sabbath is esteemed; the immediate honor and worship of God which is brought forth and swaddled in the first three commandments, is nurst up and suckled in the bosome of the Sabbath." [*These Sabbaticae*, 13]

In the same way, Spurgeon tells this story. In the house of a friend in Newcastle, his host remarked:

"There is a fine view from the top window, sir, if you could but see it; we can see Durham Cathedral from here on a Sunday." "On a Sunday," I said, "how is that?" "Well, you see all that smoke down there, all those furnaces, and so on; they are all stopped on a Sunday, and then, when the air is clear, we can see Durham Cathedral." [*Faith in all its Splendor*, 22]

Well, so for all of us. We can lose sight of God and his presence and of the cross and of heaven through all the smoke bellowing up from the distractions of this world and then Sunday comes and we gather for worship and the air clears and we see, not Durham Cathedral, but our lives in relationship to God and the heavenly country. We forgot sometimes for hours or days without end that nothing matters but the presence of the Lord with us and we remember that fact on the day of assembly. This is what Samuel Johnson called “wear[ing] off...the worldly soil contracted in the week.” [In Whyte, *Walk, Character, and Conversation*, 274]

It is precisely this *real* effect that the Sabbath has on the faith of Christian people, when rightly used, that led Voltaire to say, “If you wish to destroy the Christian religion you must first destroy the Christian Sunday.” [Cited in Solberg, *Redeem the Time*, 301] And that is precisely what they sought to do at the time of the French Revolution. The believing Thomas Shepard was more pithy: “keep this, keep all; lose this, lose all.” [300; citing *Theses Sabbaticae*, pref.]