

## ***God Is Building His Tabernacle***

God called the Israelites out of Egypt under Moses' leadership, and led them through the Sea of deliverance from the Egyptian's tyranny, and into the desert at Sinai to make them his distinct people and to settle among them in his dwelling place with them—his tabernacle. As we noted last Sunday from the 33<sup>rd</sup> Chapter, God's presence with his people was absolutely essential.

On the holy mountain God gave to Moses the instructions for building a tabernacle, a portable version of the temple, which would be constructed much later under King Solomon's rule. The tabernacle "was not very large," approximately 15 by 45 feet, containing the most holy place with the Ark of the Covenant. God gave the plans to Moses (26-27), and the people built the tabernacle, as we see in **Exodus 36:1-7**:

*Bezalel and Oholiab and every skillful one to whom the LORD has given skill and understanding to know how to do any work in the construction of the sanctuary shall work in accordance with all that the LORD has commanded. Moses then called Bezalel and Oholiab and every skillful one to whom the LORD had given skill, everyone whose heart was stirred to come to do the work; <sup>3</sup>and they received from Moses all the freewill offerings that the Israelites had brought for doing the work on the sanctuary. They still kept bringing him freewill offerings every morning, <sup>4</sup>so that all the artisans who were doing every sort of task on the sanctuary came, each from the task being performed, <sup>5</sup>and said to Moses, "The people are bringing much more than enough for doing the work that the LORD has commanded us to do."<sup>6</sup> So Moses gave command, and word was proclaimed throughout the camp: "No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary." So the people were restrained from bringing; <sup>7</sup>for what they had already brought was more than enough to do all the work. This is the word of the Lord.*

Last week we noted the relief that Moses and the Israelites felt when God, who had threatened to not accompany them in further on their journey to Canaan, relented and promised to go with them. It's no wonder the people were eager to obey the instructions of the Lord to build a dwelling place for him, the portable tabernacle, that they could take with them on their journey to assure them of his presence!

A church doesn't have to meet in any particular type of building. Our daughter and her family in Chicago are currently seeking a new church home, and were deeply impressed by the worship service last Sunday that was held in a nearby public school building. Our church in Brussels met in a renovated laboratory, and we enjoyed worship occasionally with a new congregation of young adults meeting in a downtown bar.

Whatever the structure, God is building his church, his tabernacle, to be a place for his dwelling. Although buildings have an important role, the focus in the New Testament is upon the people of God being his real dwelling place, his tabernacle

and temple (1 Peter 2:5; 1 Corinthians 3:9-17; Ephesians 2:21; Revelation 3:12). Just as God directed the building of the tabernacle in the wilderness, he continues to build his dwelling place with his people, where he reveals his glory and makes his word known. The church is God's people gathered, which is the meaning of the Greek word for church, "ecclesia."

Dale Heights meets in a lovely building, well-suited for worship, fellowship and service. It's also an important building for other churches, and community service organizations that meet here. The building becomes a sacred place when it's inhabited by God's people, where his presence resides. Although "church" at times refers to the universal body of believers, most commonly in the New Testament the word "church" refers to a local assembly. The local church is the only venue for functioning as God intends, where regular worship, the ordinances, the preaching and teaching of the word, the equipping of God's people for ministry, fellowship and discipline can take place. It's a dynamic place where God and people meet.

Although I came from a very Baptist family, my older brother took a different direction and entered the Episcopal priesthood. My parents, other siblings and Nancy and I were invited to his ordination in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I recall the bishop's sermon charge to my brother to faithfully do the ministry of a priest.

The bishop told the story of a newly hired district school superintendent who moved with his family into their new community and who began to visit different churches for the purpose of finding their spiritual home. Learning that the superintendent was an Episcopalian, the local vicar came to his home to welcome them to the community but especially to interest the new school system head and his family in joining the priest's church. After the priest extolled all the virtues of his church and all the programs and ministries his church could provide for the family, the superintendent asked the zealous priest only one question. "I want to know only one thing, Father. Tell me, when I come to your church, will I be able to meet God?"

The tabernacle, the church, is to be above all a place where we can meet God, and is always under construction, regardless of the condition of the building. Moses and the people obediently did the work exactly according to God's plan. God today is still building his tabernacle, his dwelling with his people, the church, the same way—according to his instructions. God builds his church with us imperfect but willing people. We've all been in buildings undergoing renovation and have seen signs that say, "Please pardon our dust. We're remodeling to serve you better." We need to remind ourselves to be loving and patient with each other because we're all under construction. God isn't through with us yet. No church is perfect.

Everyone who so desired had a part in the building of God's tabernacle. Some are mentioned by name but each one was important, just as is true in God's building his church today, using us as his "living stones," being built into, not a physical building, but as Peter says, "a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:5). God's building with his people.

God called and gifted people for particular tasks and contributions in building the tabernacle, but all had one thing in common—they answered the call and were willing to give of themselves, their time and their possessions.

When God calls his people he gifts them to fulfill the task he has for them. Bezalel and Oholiab were particularly gifted artists and artisans, who had skills for elaborate designs for the tabernacle and its furnishings. Also, there were women who had special artistic skills for spinning yarn and linen (25). Every child of God has at least one spiritual gift, and that gift is useful, even indispensable, in the building and strengthening of his church (1 Corinthians 12:7ff). Your gift may not be prominent in the eyes of others, but it's as important in God's eyes as leadership, preaching, and administrative gifts.

What's truly remarkable about God's building his tabernacle is that he did it with his abundant resources. The people brought generous offerings of gold, jewelry and other valuable items. The materials for the tabernacle were an expression of God's abundance. God has more than enough for the building of his tabernacle and his church.

God's abundant provision comes through the grace giving of his people. Something had happened to the hearts of many of these Israelites, who were prompted to give generously. The Apostle Paul writes about this grace giving which characterizes God's children who have truly experienced his generosity to us through Christ Jesus:

"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

When we receive God's unmerited favor, realizing what he has done for us through Christ Jesus, our hearts should be stirred with gratitude and filled with joy. Thus we regard our giving as simply a thanksgiving offering, an opportunity to return to God something of what he has given us. We become cheerful givers, the kind God loves (2 Corinthians 9:7), because we see giving as a privilege and an opportunity to receive even more of God's blessing and faithful provision. We realize that God has provided for and even prospered us in order that we might participate in his kingdom work through giving to those who have need and to the causes of the Kingdom. God gives us an opportunity to participate in his kingdom work by using our time and talents—including our money—to serve him. Those who have the most money should give the most. This is why God has entrusted some with wealth; they have more money to use for ministry!

There was something contagious about this abundant giving to the work of the tabernacle. Probably the people were sharing with one another the joy and blessings they were receiving from their giving and their friends and family didn't want to miss out on the blessing. This seems to be the same spirit of joyful

generosity that pervaded the earliest church and enabled them to share and provide for one another (Acts 4:32-37).

When we give, not under compulsion, or even with an eye on God's material blessings in return (or for a tax break), but simply out of gratitude and for the pure joy of giving, we receive a blessing. So, the best way to motivate you to give to Dale Heights' yearly operations budget is not simply to enlist support for the staff, church programs and missions causes. Our giving will never be abundant or even adequate unless our hearts are stirred to give out of gratitude to the Lord of the cross and the Lord of the harvest.

As we see in our text (36:4-7), God's plenty is grace giving that's more than enough. Our text is the only place in Scripture where God's people were told to stop their giving because they were bringing too much. As Chuck Swindoll says, God had stirred the people's hearts to an amazing level of generosity and "true joy had invaded the camp." He continues:

"Moses had to issue a command: 'No more offerings. Please don't give any more!' How would that come across on a Sunday morning at your church?" asks Swindoll. "Folks, we're not going to take an offering today because you people have unloaded the truck on us for the last two Sundays, so we're going to pass it up today! Do not give any more! Don't get your hopes up!" Swindoll adds. "But the truth is this: When there is such a spirit of hilarity, when genuine joy overflows, people do have to be *stopped* from giving! Because our ability so outstrips the need, we can't keep handling all the funds that would pour into the treasury. What a wonderful change of scenery: 'The people were restrained from bringing any more'" (Swindoll).

We've fallen so far short of the biblical ideal that we've grown accustomed to financial shortfalls in kingdom work and skeptical when we read of such an overflow of generosity. The truth is, the Lord God "owns the cattle on a thousand hills" (Psalm 50:10), and there's no reason, when he leads his people in ministry endeavors and kingdom work, to not expect that he will amply supply every need through his obedient people. The Lord promises to supply every need of ours, not *out of* his riches, but "*according to* his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). This is true, not only for the individual, but also for the church involved in his work of tabernacle building. God doesn't need or depend on any one of us or our gifts or giving, but he will use us and give us the joy of participating in his tabernacle building.

God is building his tabernacle here at Dale Heights. He's provided a building, which is symbolic of his presence, his real tabernacle with us. He's building his church as God's people, chosen called and transformed into his "building material," his living stones (1 Peter 2:5). It's our glorious privilege to be a part of his plan, to be one of his people, and to be used in supplying his resources, including our time, spiritual and financial gifts.

It's instructive to note that the statement "everyone whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing" participated in the giving and creating (35:21), which clearly implies there were some who were unwilling. They may have been fearful of the future and lacked the faith to trust God to bless their giving. Whatever the reason, they missed out on the joy of participation.

One of my challenges as a pastor has always been to somehow convince the people that my encouraging you in faithful giving is motivated by a desire to see God's blessings in your life as well as my desire to see the strengthening of the church's financial position. However my words are received, I have a responsibility to preach and teach the kind of giving that God requires and blesses.

When we come to the end of our lives, I doubt if we'll regret we didn't spend more on ourselves. We're likely to regret, however, if we were unfaithful to give God his tithe and our offerings of gratitude, we'll not be able to give a good account of our stewardship. Participating in God's tabernacle building is the way to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19), people whose lives are eternally blessed through our serving and giving (Luke 16:9).

God is building his tabernacle here at Dale Heights and he's calling you and me to join him. This building is a special place, made so by the presence of his people who've come today as on every Sunday to meet the living God. God has provided the building, but he's at work building his tabernacle; and you're a vital part.