

Sermon September 27, 2007

If We Build It, He Will Come

Giving gifts, it's one of those fun things in life, but it also can be an anxiety producing situation because you want to give a good gift, one that is appreciated: I'd like to have you take a second to think about the best gift you ever gave, and then maybe the best one you ever received. Now can you think of the worst one you gave and the worst one you have received? If you are at all like me you want to try to accomplish one of two things in giving a gift: You either want to give somebody something that is useful - or give them something they will enjoy. Now when I posed the question this way I am sure that many of your minds set along the path to thinking of gifts for friends or a spouse. Let's think now in terms of giving gifts to children. Yes, we'd like them to be useful and have the kids enjoy them, but we also think about giving gifts that will be good for them and that will last more than just a day or two. Let's park that thought away for a bit as we make a little sojourn into God's word together.

This morning we are going to try to dig into the subject of spiritual gifts that God the Father gives us. And I think it would be a normal reaction for those of you who have been church goers and sermon listeners for many years to think that you have heard your fair share of preaching on this subject from Ephesians chapter 4 (v 11) or perhaps the often discussed verses in 1Corinthians chapter 12 (v 4) on Spiritual Gifts. And if you haven't been a church goer and sermon listener for years I wouldn't worry about it at this moment as I would love it much more if you would track with me to a passage from the book of Exodus in the Old Testament. And with that I invite you to open a Bible from the pew in front of you or one that you have carried along with you to Church just for this occasion – and privilege I might add – that privilege being able to search scripture for what God would have us learn and grow from seeking His will. And if we are to take this

as the Word of God we need to understand that everything, absolutely everything in it is of significance to having us understand God's will in our lives.

- PRAY -

One general point I'd like to make about the Bible before we jump into Exodus is that we need to always be mindful of what God has given us in His Word. The Bible is certainly not a text book. It uses various forms of literature to teach us about God and His plan both for our lives and his plan for all of creation. He uses inspired authors writing in various styles whether it be the historical form, poetical, prophetic or proverbial types of writings. But in each of these formats it is, in reality, as the influential Pastor Ray Stedman said: it is a picture book. It tells us how God worked during Bible times, but each and every vignette in the Bible points to a greater spiritual reality. Paul sums this up best when he assures us in 2 Corinthians that "What is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." (2 Cor 4:18). So when we look at Exodus, we are going to be looking at the historical record of Israel's wanderings in the desert, but each part of the story points to transcendent truths that are eternal. And that is but one of many proofs that, what we sometimes blithely handle as the Bible, really is the Word of God and that there is power in His Word.

OK, so we are going to be trotting about in the Book of Exodus and then we are going to be zooming in to Exodus Chapter 31. Before we land there we want to glide over the passages just before it to put it into proper context. Put your finger for a moment in Chapter 17 and let's get our bearings. We have the Israelites escaping to the Sinai desert from their bondage in Egypt. At this point they have crossed the Red Sea, they already had manna provided to them, they had water from the rock provided to them and God had let them prevail over the Amalekites in their first battle. In Ex 17:10 we are introduced for the first time to Joshua and we see him out fighting the Amalekites whilst Moses is holding up his hands to lead the Israelites in victory. And we have Aaron and a man

named Hur holding up Moses' arms when he got tired. Next I'd like to look at a passage that starts in Ex Ch24 vv13,14 READ. We are 3 months into the Exodus and we have Moses going up on Mt. Sinai with Joshua, leaving behind his brother Aaron and this same man named Hur to be in charge. While on Mt. Sinai for forty days and forty nights, what are the first two things God instructs Moses to do? Look at the beginning of Chapter 25: READ Chapt 25 1-9. So the first instruction on Mt. Sinai is to take an offering of precious materials and the second is to build God a place where He may dwell with them. And then God gives Moses lengthy instructions for really the next 6 chapters on all of the intricate details of the tabernacle – which is the tent-like structure that served as the desert temple – the Ark and all the furnishings for the sacrificial worship system. And then one of the last things that he tells Moses, this is before giving him the two stone tablets with the 10 commandments on them and this is before he sends Moses down the mountain to find them worshipping the golden calf, this is the passage we will dwell on for a bit in Ex Ch 31. Please follow the text along with me: READ EX 31:1-11.

Whether we are ready to surrender this fact or not, God gives us all of our abilities. Whether our skills are musical, whether they are athletic, whether they are artistic, whether they are mechanical or whether they are intellectual, God gives us those abilities. And something that is given with no remuneration in return is, by definition, a gift. And for those of you who are still thriving in some of these serious economic times God even gives you the ability to make money READ Deut 8:17,18 “You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me. But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth.’” But that is a whole other sermon entirely.

So we have God appointing this man named Bezalel to lead all of this creative skilled activity. Think about where Bezalel just came from: they were only 3 months into the desert after having lived for years – and even multiple generations – as slaves in Egypt making bricks for Pharaoh's building projects. I don't think there might have been too

much time or resources to develop some of these higher order skilled craftsmen gifts under those heavily yoked conditions. So Bezalel, one might argue, may have had the aptitude for these things from birth. But pushing these things back to the pretense that someone was born with gifts does not make them any less of a gift from God. We are assured from the very beginning of scripture that we are made in the image of God. And what is that image? What is unique about mankind that is marked by God's image? Well it is actually not, as some might assume, the ability to feel and to think and to choose because these qualities are actually present in parts of the animal kingdom, though to a far lesser degree than man. But these do not differentiate man from beast and point to the image of God. That special ingredient that God endowed to Man is one's spirit. And what the Spirit of God gives to us that are completely unique from the animal kingdom are: the ability to communicate concepts, the ability to know good from bad and thirdly the spirit gives us the ability to create.

And God has already built into you skills and gifts that, very likely, you have not even used or exercised, even if you are in your 50's or 60's or even older. And these are things that God is calling for you to use and he may do so at interesting junctures in your life without any sense or notion that it was coming about.

Now some of you who are really tracking with me may cleverly ask: "I get the skills part that those come from God, but if the Israelites are out in the barren desert where in the world did they get all of the raw materials here: the gold, silver and bronze, where did they get the gems and onyx and fine threads? Well if you take a quick look back at EX 12:33-36 you see what happened after Pharaoh threw in the towel and really let the people go. READ EX 12:33-36. And what is one of those details that I find fascinating in the study of the Bible, and I certainly did not know, is that this was prophesied by God all the way back to Abraham in Genesis 15:13,14 So God gave them the materials, as he does to you as well, but note that the people of Israel had to willingly offer them. And

the text tells us that the response was so overwhelming that they had to ask them to stop coming forward to give.

Wouldn't that be an interesting announcement from the pulpit? 'We are so far over budget for both the general and the missions ministries that you need to stop giving.'

So back to Exodus, we have the raw materials and the skilled laborers to do all the work, and we have the specifications coming right from God, so let's turn now and look at this incredible structure the Israelites have been commanded to build. What is it with all of this detail associated with the tabernacle? The specific dimensions, the explicit materials and patterns and designs of everything? Now God clearly does not expect us to build a tabernacle and articles like this today. This had a specific purpose at that specific time to be a dwelling place for God in the very midst of the people of Israel. That was what was SEEN. But what is the UNSEEN part that points to the eternal? In addition to that explicit purpose of the tabernacle as the dwelling place of God in the desert, all of these things that Moses was commanded to have crafted are physical pictures of a much greater spiritual, eternal reality: So what are the unseen, eternal things that the artifacts of the desert tabernacle represent?

Well the imagery is so rich and varied and multifaceted time does not permit to go too deep at this point. But the best way to summarize what the tabernacle points to is Christ. And specifically Jesus' sacrificial death that would pay for our sins which allows us to be justified – made right – so that we might be restored to a proper relationship with God and dwell with him in Heaven forever.

So the entire sacrificial system of worship using the basin, lampstand and articles of the tabernacle point to Christ being the perfect sacrifice for our sins.

Another fact that was SEEN was that this desert tabernacle was actually portable. When the pillar of the cloud of God lifted the Israelites would pack it up, carry it, follow the cloud of God and then re-pitch the tabernacle. But when they crossed over to the Promised Land, after many years God led Solomon to build the fixed temple building. This is an UNSEEN picture of our life on earth wending our way through the barren land of material sin with the Lord Jesus living within us. We cross our symbolic Jordan when we experience physical death. Our home or permanent rest at that point will be with the Lord in heaven.

Also it is clear that Christ's death on the cross allows us access to God directly. Even in our earthly sin we have been made right and have been justified so that we can be in God's holy presence. This is exactly why the curtain separating the Holy of the Holies in the temple, this curtain was torn at the moment of Christ's death on the cross. That ultimate payment for our sins – that blocked our access to God – had been paid.

For those of you interested in this extensive imagery of the tabernacle I invite you to look at Hebrews Chapters 9-10 for your own further study where there is a wonderful description of these “copies” and “shadows” of what is eternally true. But one thing is clear, the dwelling place of God is as real today, this morning even, as it was in the Sinai desert. It is no longer over the Ark of the Covenant, it is not over the Atonement Cover between the golden Cherubim wings in the Holy of Holies. God's dwelling place today is the church – and by that we do not mean a yet another building like this with more modern architecture and plumbing and air conditioning –as much as the Israelites probably would have liked those amenities in the desert. The church is you, the body of believers. And more specifically it is Christ in you, which is our hope of glory. To have Jesus in your heart is not only some cutesy little VBS type of thing. It is the most remarkable truth in the entire universe.

And herein lies the rub of this entire passage in Exodus: we need to use our God-given spiritual skills and abilities to build up the body of believers so that others can come to know the saving work of Christ. God did not miraculously build a golden temple in the desert. He could have but he chooses to work through us to build His church and through us to bring about His will. In His plan for this world and for you individually he has given it unto us to work through us to further His kingdom on earth and that is where these gifts come in. So the entire building of the tabernacle was done through men and women skilled in all of these creative areas of craftsmanship but I believe it is a picture of what we are to do with the spiritual gifts God has given to each of us. He gives us the raw materials to build his dwelling place on earth, we just need to be moved in our hearts to offer it back to him.

Serving God is not necessarily easy. Think about the process by which we polish stones and gems and precious woods: it requires abrasion. Any type of polishing process really is a means of removing layers from the surface of a material until it is uniformly smooth. As we serve God, especially when we take those initial steps outside our comfort zone, it may feel a bit rough. But the more you do it, the smoother it gets until the true beauty of your spiritual material is revealed. Our service of the Lord is not easy, we get skinned knees and scrapes with this world in our service to God, but the result is a continuing refinement of our spiritual lives until it is a perfectly polished surface, and only then can we be one of the precious building stones of heaven referred to by Peter.

Individually we are the dwelling place of Christ. We need to use our God given spiritual gifts to prepare ourselves to be worthy vessels to carry the God of the universe within our hearts! We are the tabernacle! John 1:14 gives us yet another insight into Jesus being in our midst: "The Word became Flesh and made his dwelling among us." The term 'made his dwelling' literally means to spread his tent or to "Tabernacle" with us.

So we are made in God's image, we have been given Jesus who died for our sins and we have each been given spiritual gifts and a purpose wherein to use them.

What better gifts than these can you have for a teenager struggling with their self image and self confidence?

What better gifts can you have for the mom with young toddlers who is dead tired each and every day for years in a row?

What better gifts can you have for the 40 or 50 year old who is out of work for months and is unable to support their family?

What better gifts can you have for parents who see their young adult child stray from the faith while being lured by the world?

What better gifts can you have for the elderly man or woman whose health is not all there and whose partner of many years has passed on?

The world cannot come alongside these people with any assurances. Only God's wonderful plan can give you peace.

At the start I asserted that if we are to take this as the Word of God we need to understand that everything, absolutely everything in it is of significance to having us understand God's will in our lives. One of God's little gifts are the subtleties in scripture that are gems for those who dig below the surface. If we go back to Exodus Chapter 31 and look at the person God put in charge of the building of his tabernacle it not only gives us his name but it also gives us his father's name and his grandfather's name. "Bezalel, son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah." This grandfather of Bezalel is the same Hur who held up Moses' arms in the battle against the Amalekites. This is also the same Hur who was put in charge with Aaron while Moses was on Mt. Sinai receiving the Law. His name signifies freedom or liberty. His son Uri's name signifies "my light." And his son's name Bezalel, the one who most beautifully executed upon his God-given skills, his name means "in the shadow of God." So we have in this a generational message that our

freedom comes from the light of the world being Jesus under whom we dwell in his shadow of protection using our gifts to build His house and dwelling place.

So let's go back and check on this gift giving thing. A proper gift needs to be enjoyed, a proper gift needs to be useful, a proper gift for a child of God needs to be good for them and a proper gift for a child of God needs to last.

I think one of the best ways I have heard to sum up this relationship with God and how we are to respond to the gifts He has blessed us with is from the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

Q. 1. What is the chief end of man?

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

We glorify God by using the gifts he has freely given to each of us. And once we do, he has promised to dwell with us forever, and that is a gift we will be able to enjoy for eternity. If we build it, He will come.

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