

Building the Church

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, church. Would you turn with me to Exodus, chapter 35? That's page 75 in the Pew Bible. If you've been with us this summer, you'll remember that a few weeks ago we studied the plans that God gave Moses for what's called the tabernacle.

The tabernacle was meant to be a portable tent, a portable worship site, really, where God would dwell in the midst of his people. And after the detour of the golden calf episode in chapters 32 through 34, we finally come in the story of Exodus to the construction of those plans, to the building of the tabernacle.

So we're going to pick up that story in Exodus, chapter 35, verse 4. Let me read this for us. Moses said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, This is the thing that the Lord has commanded. Take from among you a contribution to the Lord. Whoever is of a generous heart, let him bring the Lord's contribution. Gold, silver, and bronze. Blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twisted linen.

Goat's hair, tanned ram skins and goat skins. Acacia wood, oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense. And onyx stones and stones for setting, for the ephod, for the breastpiece.

[1 : 25] Let every skillful craftsman among you come and make all that the Lord has commanded. The tabernacle, its tent and its covering, its hooks and its frames, its bars, its pillars and its bases.

The ark with its poles, the mercy seat and the veil of the screen. The table with its poles and all its utensils and the bread of the presence. The lamp stand also for the light with its utensils and its lamps and the oil for the light.

And the altar of incense with its poles and the anointing oil and the fragrant incense and the screen for the door at the door of the tabernacle. The altar of burnt offering with its grating of bronze, its poles and all its utensils.

The basin and its stand. The hangings of the court, its pillars and its bases and the screen for the gate of the court. The pegs of the tabernacle and the pegs of the court and their cords. the finely worked garments for ministering in the holy place, the holy garments for Aaron the priest, and the garments of his sons for their service as priests.

Well, we'll stop there. It must have seemed like a daunting task. In July of 1669, the architect Christopher Wren was commissioned to rebuild St. Paul's Cathedral in London, and the challenges before Wren were many. Much of London had been destroyed three years earlier in the Great Fire of 1666, which included destroying the old St. Paul's Cathedral.

[2 : 52] Also, the weak clay soil of London made building a large cathedral especially difficult. How do you build something that weighs hundreds of tons on sand? That's a challenge.

But on top of all that, the expectations for Wren were sky high. The archbishop wrote and told Wren that this new St. Paul's had to be, quote, handsome and noble to all the ends of it and to the reputation of the city and the nation. So, in short, in the middle of a crumbling, burned-out city, Christopher Wren was supposed to build a cathedral that would epitomize the reputation of the entire country and still actually function as a church. It was a pretty daunting task.

But after five rounds of architectural design and roughly 40 years of construction, and what I've read today would be over \$150 million, Wren actually did it. He built not just one of the most impressive buildings in England, but probably one of the most impressive churches in the world, St. Paul's Cathedral in London. And it must have seemed like a daunting task for the Israelites, too, here in Exodus. Here they were, a band of liberated slaves, a group of refugees in the wilderness.

All that they really knew for generations was the back-breaking work of brick making under the harsh whip of Pharaoh. And now, the Lord was asking them to make a beautiful, intricate, portable

sanctuary for the living God. How were they going to come up with all of the fine materials that they needed, which is what we read in verses 4 through 9? And where would they get the skill to actually take those materials and make all the things that God lists in verses 10 through 19? I mean, you and I struggle to put together our IKEA furniture that comes in the box, even with those fancy wordless instructions and that odd amorphous guy who holds up the screwdriver, you know? Imagine being asked to construct a worship center in the middle of the desert for the living God when all you've known for generations is manual labor and slavery. It was a daunting task. And I think, too, for us, for the church today, our task seems just as daunting at times. Because what God is calling us to build isn't actually a physical building, a tabernacle or a temple. No, now that Christ has come, now that the new covenant is here, now that the Spirit has been poured out in fullness, the dwelling place of God isn't a building. The dwelling place of God is His people, the church. And God is calling us to build the church. In our reading from earlier in the service, the Apostle Paul put it this way. He said, so then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but your fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In Him, you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

So, the dwelling place of God is no longer a building, but a people, a people united to Christ by faith, united to one another in love and looking ahead to the future in hope.

[6 : 52] If it was a daunting task for the Israelites to build the tabernacle in the wilderness, it's perhaps an even more daunting task for us, the new covenant people of God, to be about building the church today. Where are we going to find the resources and the skills for such a construction project?

And yet, in these chapters of Exodus, we see something beautiful. In response to God's grace, the people give generously, and they build exactly, and they complete the work. And then we'll see next week in chapter 40, the glory of God comes down in their midst. So, let's actually pick up the story in verse 20. We're going to read through the rest of this section, and then we're going to look at four things that we learn.

So, picking up chapter 35, verse 20, we're going to move through the rest of this narrative. Then, having heard the command that the Lord just gave through Moses, then all the congregation of the people of Israel departed from the presence of Moses, and they came, everyone whose heart stirred him and everyone whose spirit moved him and brought the Lord's contribution to be used for the tent of meeting and for all its service and for the holy garments. So, they came, both men and women, all who were of a willing heart, brought brooches and earrings and signet rings and armlets, all sorts of gold objects, every man dedicating an offering of gold to the Lord. And everyone who possessed blue or purple or scarlet yarns or fine linen or goat's hair or tanned ram skins or goat skins brought them. Everyone who could make a contribution of silver or bronze brought it as the Lord's contribution, and everyone who possessed acacia wood of any use in the work brought it. And every skillful woman spun with her hands, and they all brought what they had spun in blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twisted linen. All the women whose hearts stirred them to use their skill spun the goat's hair, and the leaders brought onyx stones and stones to be set for the ephod and for the breast piece and spices and oil for the light and for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense. All the men and women, the people of Israel, whose heart moved them to bring anything for the work that the Lord had commanded by Moses to be done, brought it as a free will offering to the Lord. Then Moses said to the people of Israel, see, the Lord has called by name Bezalel, the son of Uri, son of Hur of the tribe of Judah. And he has filled him with the spirit of God, with skill, with intelligence, with knowledge, and with all craftsmanship to devise artistic designs, to work in gold and silver and bronze, and cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood for work in every skilled craft. And he has inspired him to teach. Both him and Aholiab, the son of Ahissamach, of the tribe of Dan, he has filled them with skill to do every sort of work done by an engraver, or by a designer, or by an embroiderer in blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twisted linen, or by a weaver, by any sort of workman or skilled designer. Bezalel and Aholiab and every craftsman in whom the

Lord has put skill and intelligence to know how to do any work in the construction of the sanctuary, shall work in accordance with all that the Lord has commanded. And Moses called Bezalel and Aholiab, and every craftsman in whose mind the Lord had put skill, everyone whose heart stirred

him up to come to do the work. And they received from Moses all the contribution that the people of Israel had brought for doing the work of the sanctuary. They still kept bringing him freewill offerings every morning, so that all the craftsmen who were doing every sort of task on the sanctuary came, each from the task that he was doing, and said to Moses, the people bring much more than enough for doing the work that the Lord has commanded us to do. So Moses gave a command, and word was proclaimed throughout the camp, let no man or woman do anything more for the contribution of the sanctuary.

[10:52] So the people were restrained from bringing, for the material they had was sufficient to do all the work and more. And at this point in the narrative, the narrative recounts their construction of all the things, and we can just sort of fly high at 50,000 feet. In the rest of chapter 36, they build the tabernacle proper, the tent of meeting. In chapter 37, they build everything that goes inside the tabernacle, the ark, the table, the lampstand, the incense altar. Chapter 38, they build everything that goes outside the tent of meeting, the altar of burnt offering, the basin, the court. There's a summary of some materials there. And then in chapter 39, if you glance over that, they make all the priestly garments. But let's read how the story ends in chapter 39, verse 32 through 43.

Thus all the work of the tabernacle at tent of meeting was finished, and the people of Israel did according to all that the Lord had commanded Moses. So they did. And then in that same order, God lists all the things that they built, the tabernacle, the ark of the testimony, the table, the lampstand, the golden altar, the bronze altar, the basin, the hangings of the court, the garments for the priests. And then in verse 42, according to all that the Lord had commanded Moses, so the people of Israel had done all the work. And Moses saw all the work, and behold, they had done it. As the Lord had commanded, so had they done it. Then Moses blessed them.

So I want to point out four things that we learned from this passage as we today face our daunting task that God has placed before us of not building the tabernacle but building the church. The first thing is this. God gives what we need to do what he's calling us to do. God gives what we need to do what he's calling us to do. We see that first in chapter 35, if you turn back there, verses 20 through 29. God commanded them to bring all sorts of valuable materials to bring the tabernacle. And then in these verses, in verses 20 through 29, we find that the people are able to bring exactly what's needed and more. Now, where did all this stuff come from? How did a community of liberated slaves get all of this rich resource? Well, ultimately, we know from the story of Exodus that God had provided it for them. Back in chapter 12 of Exodus, when God had liberated them from Pharaoh, God granted the Israelites favor in the eyes of the Egyptians, and the text says they let them have what they asked.

God didn't just bring the people of Israel into freedom, but he provided richly for them as well from the Egyptians. And now we know why God did that. Why did God allow the Israelites to receive all these precious materials from the Egyptians? It was because he had a task for them to fulfill. They were going to build a beautiful structure for the Lord so that the Lord could dwell in their midst and God provided what they needed. But we see in these chapters, it's not just the materials that they need. God also provides the skill that they need. In chapter 35, verses 30 and following, God calls these two men with these awesome names, Bezalel and Aholiab. Any parents looking for names? There you go.

[14:27] You can give a Bezalel, give them Aholiab. You call them Oho for short. But God gives these two men the skill and the craftsmanship that they need through his own spirit to accomplish the work and so that they can teach others. They're not just appointed to do all the work, but to empower the people to do the work. But I think the highlight there is that God gives them not just the materials, the resources that they need, but he gives them the skill that they need. God gives us what we need to do what he calls us to do. And friends, I can't tell you how many times I've seen this at Trinity. You know, I've joked sometimes that these verses about Bezalel and Aholiab are going to become like my life verse for ministry because God always provides the right people at the right time to accomplish the work that he's called us to do. And the reality is, is that many of you are sitting in this room right now. And I don't want to name your names because then you'll get embarrassed, but there are some great stories. Seven years ago, we realized as a church, as we were praying as a leadership, that our mission in New Haven entailed not just reaching the university communities in New Haven, but also the international population of New Haven and the urban poor.

And of course, at that time, we had no idea how God was going to do that. We had some ideas, but, you know, none of them were really highly formed. But we had no idea that God was going to bring along a godly Ethiopian pastor to shepherd and launch a ministry to Ethiopian Eritrean immigrants and refugees in Connecticut. But now, every Sunday afternoon, there's a growing church right here in our congregation doing just that. God provided what we needed to do what he called us to do. And little did we know seven years ago that as we started to feel an increased burden for those in our city who were poor and who were in need, that God was placing a similar burden for urban outreach on the hearts of other like-minded churches that eventually led to the formation of Bridges of Hope.

And as Charmaine shared, it's a partnership of churches that reaches out in the name of Christ to meet real needs in our city together in the name of Jesus. So here we are, seven years later, seeing God providing what we need to do what he's calling us to do. And like I've said, I've seen this happen again and again, not just on these big-scale initiatives, but also on a smaller scale. Ministry leaders, God bringing just when we need them in youth ministry or music ministry or urban outreach or children's ministry, small group leading, and God bringing people with very specific skills, legal, financial, practical, to help the church navigate unforeseen changes or new opportunities.

[17:30] Friends, I look out at this congregation and I see a room full of Bezalels and Aholiobs. So if I forget your name and I call you that, it's a compliment.

God, here's the truth, God has given you skill and wisdom to advance his kingdom and to build his church. And it is no accident that you are here now.

And I think this reality that God gives what we need to do what he calls us to do should give us confidence as a church as we face the future. No matter how daunting the task might seem, no matter how uncharted the waters might feel, friends, we don't need to be afraid.

We can move ahead with dependence on the Lord who provides, confident that he'll do so.

So whether it's the construction happening around us, did you notice that? Did you notice they're building something around our church? See that when you came in? And all the opportunities that that's going to present for us, for outreach and ministry and evangelism, whether it's needs of our city that crop up. I mean, haven't we learned from the news this week that there are deep, painful needs in our city that need to be met with the hope and love of Christ? Or whether it's figuring out what to do with our physical space so we can maybe expand and grow and renovate to make it a little more useful for our ministry to be a little better stewards of the building that God's given us?

[19:16] Or maybe it's as we pray for wisdom to make decisions about how we expand as a church, how we grow as people keep coming to know the Lord here in our midst, in our congregation.

No matter what challenges that are ahead for us, seen or unseen, friends, we can go ahead with confidence because God's going to give us what we need to do what he's calling us to do.

But that brings us to the second thing we learn here in Exodus 35 through 39. Not only does God give us what we need to do what he calls us to do, but we see here that everyone has a part to play. Everybody has a part to play. You see this when the people are bringing in their contributions in 35 verses 20 through 29. It's a pretty comprehensive description of who comes. It's men and women. It's leaders. It's lay people. It's everyone whose heart is stirred. Everybody contributes out of the freedom of their hearts. And also among the craftsmen, as we said, it's not just a holy ab and Bezalel. Verse 36, 1, chapter 36, verse 1 refers to every craftsman in the Lord in whom the Lord has put skill and intelligence to know how to do any work in the construction of the sanctuary. There's a whole variety of tasks that need to be done, and it's not just a select few who have a part to play.

And that gets re-emphasized at the end of this section if you kind of jump ahead to chapter 39. In verse 32, it says, the people of Israel did according to all that the Lord had commanded Moses. You see who's being pointed out there? Not just Bezalel and Aholiab. They're not the ones who get all the credit. Not just their team of particular craftsmen who worked on the tabernacle. No, the text says the people of Israel did it. They all were responsible for it. Everyone has a part to play.

[21:17] So what's yours? We often say that in Christ, believing is belonging. That is, to come into a relationship with Christ through faith, entails belonging to His people. And that is a beautiful truth.

But belonging to His people, membership in the family of the church, membership, friends, is mission. We are all in this together, and everyone has a part to play. Imagine if all of us, even just

those of us who were formal, committed members here at Trinity, committed to serving on just one ministry team on Sunday.

What if we contributed to the work of the ministry just in that simple way, whether it was children's ministry, or welcome ministry, or hospitality, or music and AV, or rides ministry? What if all of us who were just members committed to one team on a Sunday? You wouldn't even serve every Sunday.

You'd serve like once or twice a month. What would that be like? I think the result would be what we see here in Exodus 36. Wasn't that a great moment in the story when the craftsmen come to Moses and say, Moses, we have more than enough for doing the work that the Lord has commanded us to do?

Tell the people to stop bringing stuff. Can you imagine a capital campaign that's run like that? Stop giving. We have too much.

[22 : 40] Give it somewhere else. So Moses does that. He has to command the people to stop giving because they've exceeded the amount that's needed. I mean, friends, what if Mona had to get up on Sunday and say, okay, church, you need to stop filling out children's ministry volunteer applications because we have volunteers just coming out of our ears. I can't squeeze you all into the rotations. I know you're clawing to get next door into the air conditioning to teach the kids, but stop. Go do something else.

What if the next time Charmaine was here, she said, look, we love you, Trinity. You're great, but we don't need 400 more volunteers at the mentoring ministry. Wait until we start a new site, okay? Like settle down.

And we laugh because it's funny, but why does that seem so incredible to us? It doesn't actually need to be that incredible. If believing is belonging and if membership is mission, we have more than enough.

You know the old rule that 20% of the people do 80% of the work? It doesn't have to be that way. We were joking earlier this week in our pastor's meeting that maybe that's a sign of our fallen condition, that 80-20 rule, 20-80 rule, you know? But friends, it doesn't need to be that way. Everyone's got a part to play. What's your part to play? And do you need help finding it? That's okay. Talk to me. Talk to one of the other ministry leaders after the service. Talk to Charmaine. We'll help you figure it out.

[24 : 27] And sometimes finding your place takes some trial and error. You know, I imagine these guys among whom like God had sent his spirit and they'd been given this skill, you know, maybe some of the guys like hit the loom and they're like, man, this is not my thing. I don't think this was like what the spirit was giving me to do. They're like, okay, come over here and like hit this with a hammer.

They're like, oh, that's it. I love it. You know? Sometimes that's what ministry in the church looks like. You get next door and we've had this happen. Great, brilliant people get next door in children's ministry and they're like, they give it a try for six months and then they come to us and say, this is not me. I can't do this. That's okay. We find something else for you to do where your gifts meet the need and there's joy. It's worth it to be a part of building the church and finding your part to play is really worth it because of what we see next in our passage. The third thing that we see here is not just that God gives what we need and that everyone has a part, but third, we see that there's blessing in obedience. We see this in that very last paragraph of the section in chapter 39 verses 32 through 43. Five times in that concluding paragraph, it says that the people did exactly what God told them to do. In verse 32, the people of Israel did according to all that the Lord had commanded Moses. So the people of Israel had done all the work and Moses saw all the work and behold, they had done it as the Lord had commanded. So they had done it. Then Moses blessed them.

The people don't just give generously here in these chapters, but one of the themes is they obey exactly. They follow the plans for the tabernacle to a T. They don't cut any corners. They don't reinterpret the plans and make improvements. They do just what God says. And that complete willing submission to what God says, that exact obedience brings at the end of this section blessing. Moses sees what they've done and he speaks a word of well done over them. Now it's important to know, and hear me loud and clear on this, that our obedience, our good works are never the thing that are going to earn God's ultimate approval. We can't be made right with our holy loving God on the basis of our moral performance. That right relationship with God, that acceptance with God only comes as a gift through trusting in Jesus and what he's done for us.

That's how we get right with God. That's how we get the ultimate blessing of God. But as children of God, through faith in Jesus, when we obey God our Father, it does bring us joy.

[27 : 28] When we do things God's way as opposed to our own way, there's blessing, there's joy, there's peace there. Have you been trying to do things your own way?

Or God's way? And what this section of Exodus is telling us is that even though God's way might be hard, even though it might require more of us than we thought we could give, even though God's way might be costly, we will never ultimately regret it. After all, the people tried doing things their own way when they built the golden calf, right? And what was the result? It was sorrow.

But now, instead, they do things God's way, and the result is joy. It's a searching question to ask, but it's worth asking. Is there some area of your life that you've been knowingly holding back from God at home, at work, in private? Why not this morning confess that to God, and maybe to a good Christian friend or mentor or elder, and commit in the power of His Spirit to do things His way from now on, and to get people around you who are going to encourage you to run the race that way? It may be costly, it may be hard at first, but none of that will compare ultimately to the joy that you'll have in knowing that you're living in the way of your Heavenly Father who loves you and who provides for you.

And that brings us to the last thing we see here in these chapters. God gives what we need. God gives us to the last thing. Everyone has a part to play. There's blessing and obedience. And fourth and last, it comes from the heart. Did you notice how often it says they did all this willingly in these chapters? In chapter 35, when people are giving, it says everyone whose heart stirred them, whose spirit stirred them to give, those are the ones who gave. And then in chapter 36, describing the craftsmen who did the building. Again, they're described not just as those in whom God put the Spirit, but those whose heart stirred them to come and to do the work. Their lavish, generous giving, their exact, precise obedience, all of it flowed from willing hearts. They wanted to do it. It was voluntary.

Now, you've got to ask, what in the world would give them that kind of heart? To give generously, to obey exactly, where does that sort of heart come from? And how do we get it in our own lives today?

[30 : 31] It is strange, isn't it? It's a bit paradoxical. On the one hand, they're so liberal and so free and so lavish with their money. And on the other hand, they're so submissive and so exact and so complete in their obedience. We tend to sort of flip that, don't we? We want to be very sort of careful with what we give, and we want to be very sort of loose and sort of laissez-faire with how we obey.

And yet, something's happened here in the Israelites where they have this wonderful mixture of lavish generosity and just complete obedience and submission to God. How did that happen? Well, I think the answer, as we look at the story of Exodus, becomes pretty clear. The people's hearts are stirred to this generous giving and this glad obedience because God had renewed His covenant with them. In other words, the people have just tasted firsthand, like never before, the grace of God.

You remember the story. God brings His people out of slavery and brings them to Mount Sinai. And at Sinai, He makes them His own special people in a binding covenant the way a husband takes a wife.

But then, while God is telling Moses about the house that He wants to build in order to dwell with His people, with His spouse, His people are at the bottom of the mountain building a golden calf, committing spiritual adultery, and breaking the covenant. And it seems like things are over before they've even begun. But then, in chapters 33 and 34, something wonderful happens.

[32 : 19] Through the mediation of Moses, rather than leave His wayward people, the Lord renews His covenant with them. He forgives them and He takes them back to Himself. And He shows His glory to Moses as a sign that He's not going to leave them. He's going to stay. And that glory is so brilliant that it makes the face of Moses shine when He comes back to tell the people. And you see, that's what melts the hearts of the people. That's what makes them give generously and obey completely with willing hearts, freely.

It's the forgiving, renewing love and grace of God. Though they had broken their end of the covenant, God did not break His.

And if that changed the hearts of the Israelites back then, how much more ought our hearts be changed now? Because the Israelites back then, they couldn't really see fully, fully, how much it would really cost for God to keep His covenant with us.

What would it take for God to make a new covenant with sinners like us, outsiders and strangers? What would it require for God to take away our sin and bind us to Himself forever in an unbreakable, shakable commitment?

As the New Testament opens and unfolds, we see that it would take nothing short of the giving of His own Son for us, which is exactly what the Father did. And Jesus, the Son of God, willingly comes.

[34 : 13] He obeys the Father exactly. And He gives Himself fully on the cross to take our sins away. And on the third day, God raised Him from the dead in power to show that now there was a new covenant between God and humanity. Christ had fulfilled the law's demands for us.

Christ had taken away the curse of the law when He died on the cross for us, so that now everyone who turns and trusts in Him, they're forgiven. And they're given the Spirit, and they're given new hearts, out of which will flow this life of generosity and joyful obedience.

As we see how greatly we've been loved. So we give and we serve in love because we've first been loved by God.

And so friends, as we face this daunting task before us, this task of building the church, we can face it with confidence. And we can face it with joyfulness. Because ultimately, God's the one who's building His church. The risen Christ has done all that's necessary.

And now He invites you and me to take our part in His great work. The story is told that when St. Paul's Cathedral was under construction, Christopher Wren, the architect, was touring the construction site to talk to the various artisans working there about how things were progressing.

[35 : 50] And he talked to the masons and the carpenters and the sculptors and the stained glass artists, you know, the people who were very skilled and probably had years and decades of training.

But as he was finishing his tour, Wren came upon an old man whose job it was to just stir cement with his shovel to keep the cement from hardening. And the great architect asked the man, What are you doing?

And this old man, not knowing that it was Christopher Wren who was asking, answered, Why, sir? I'm building a great cathedral to the glory of God. What a beautiful story.

And brothers and sisters, if you are in Christ, that is true of you as well. No matter how humble your role may seem in the world's eyes, you are building a great cathedral, the church of Jesus Christ, to the glory of God.

And God will go on giving us what we need in Christ until the work is done. Amen? Let's pray. Our Father, we pray that you would continue to pour out your Spirit upon us.

[36 : 59] Lord, just as you did all those years ago, we know that you promise now in the fullness of the new covenant to continue to pour out your Spirit upon your people so that we might go forth with the confidence and the joy and the glad submission to your will so that your church might be built and much glory might resound to your name.

God, we ask that that would be the case for us here at Trinity. Lord, would you continue to grow your church here? And Lord, we pray that for the other cities and our... other churches in our city. God, we pray for those churches that preach the gospel and declare your word, that you would continue to grow them in joyful generosity and in glad obedience.

Lord, we acknowledge that your church in this city is so much bigger than our congregation. Thank you for all the churches that you've raised up. Lord, would you give unity among us?

Would you continue to bless the work that you've begun? And we pray this, God, in the confidence that you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus when you come and make all things new.

[38 : 11] We ask this in his name, Father. Amen.