

Lessons from the Courtyard: The Bronze Altar and the Laver for Washing (Exodus 27)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Exodus

I. Review from the Three Previous Lessons on the Tabernacle

- a. The Lord gives Moses detailed instructions regarding the tabernacle, a portable structure that the Israelites are to build, which will be at the center of their community as they travel through the Wilderness. During the time of Solomon, this portable tent-like structure will be replaced by a permanent structure: the temple, in Jerusalem.
- b. **Hebrews 8-10** explains the significance of the tabernacle and its ministry. The tabernacle is a type or model of things in the heavenly realm. Its details are all very purposeful, reflecting things regarding heaven, the church, and the saving sacrifice of Jesus.
- c. We learned from **Hebrews**, as discussed in the prior lesson:
 - i. The High Priest foreshadowed Christ, our High Priest.
 - ii. The Most Holy Place, which had the ark of the covenant in it (covered by the “mercy seat”) foreshadowed heaven.
 1. “For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into *heaven itself*, now to appear in the presence of God for us;” (**Hebrews 9:24**, NKJV)
 2. As the Jewish High Priest was the only one allowed to enter the Most Holy Place, and only once a year (on the Day of Atonement), with blood; Jesus entered heaven itself with His own blood, once for all time.
 - iii. The veil of the temple, between the Holy Place (the sanctuary) and the Most Holy Place, represented the flesh (body) of Christ. (**Hebrews 10:19-20**, NKJV).
 1. Recall that this is the veil that was “torn in two, from top to bottom” when Jesus died on the cross.
 - iv. The priests who ministered in the Holy Place represent Christians. In **Hebrews, 1 Peter** and some of the writings of Paul, in various ways we Christians are referred to as *members of a priesthood*, who are offering spiritual sacrifices.

1. Therefore the Holy Place, which had the three articles in it (lampstand, table of showbread and golden altar of incense) represents the church and our ministry.
- d. The Lord was VERY specific regarding specifications for the temple, since it was a detailed pattern of things in the spiritual realm, including prophecies of things that would come 1400 years later. It pointed to heaven, Jesus, the church and our salvation.
- e. Review of the tabernacle layout.
 - i. The tabernacle had two rooms: the Most Holy Place and the Holy Place. All the main items to be located within it were made of gold (and incorruptible wood).
 - ii. The Most Holy Place:
 1. Ark of the covenant was kept there.
 2. Only the High Priest could enter, only once a year (on the Day of Atonement), and only with blood from an animal sacrifice.
 - iii. The Holy Place:
 1. The priests would minister in this room.
 2. Three items in there:
 - a. Golden altar of incense, located in front of the veil leading to the Most Holy Place.
 - b. Table of showbread, located on the north side, where twelve loaves of bread are laid out each week.
 - c. Lampstand with seven lights, located on the south side.
 3. The cloth fabric seen from inside the Holy Place, where the priests ministered, had the image of cherubim (a class of angels) woven into the fabric.
- f. In the courtyard, outside and in front of the tabernacle were two things:
 - i. Laver for priests to wash in (before being anointed as priests, and when they would minister in the tabernacle).
 - ii. Bronze altar for animal sacrifices.

II. The Courtyard (Area of the Tent Outside the Tabernacle Itself)

- a. Read **Exodus 27:9-19**

- b. The tabernacle was located within a large courtyard.
 - i. The area was 50 cubits x 100 cubits (approx. 75 feet x 150 feet, or roughly 25 meters x 50 meters).
 - ii. It was separated from the rest of the camp of Israel by curtains. The curtains were hung on a series of long curtains hung from bars, which were supported by vertical posts mounted in bronze bases. The curtains surrounding the courtyard were 5 cubits in height (about 7.5 feet, or well over 2 meters), so a person standing on the ground outside could not see over it.
 - iii. The courtyard was oriented according to North-South and East-West axes [plural of *axis*] whenever it was set up. The only means of entrance was via a “gate”, a wide curtain on one end that was 20 cubits long (about 30 feet, or 10 meters).
 - 1. Note that there are differences in the text (Masoretic Text and some versions of the LXX versus other versions of the LXX) regarding the orientation of the long axis of the courtyard area.
 - a. In most versions of the LXX, and in the MT, **Exodus 27:9** discusses the *south side* first, being 100 cubits long.
 - i. “And thou shalt make a court for the tabernacle, curtains of the court of fine linen spun on the south side, the length of a hundred cubits for one side.” (**Exodus 27:9**, Brenton LXX En)
 - ii. “And you will construct the court area for the tabernacle on the side toward the south, the curtains of the court area a hundred cubits in length for the one side.” (**Exodus 27:9**, LES)
 - iii. However, the OSB translation from which I read rendered it *west side* here! Note that in the ancient Greek world, directions were commonly described by major geographic elements, such as: “the direction of the sunrise” or “the direction of the sea” or “where the hot wind comes from”. This can cause some confusion for those of us who are accustomed to satellite GPS-type coordinate accuracy!
 - 1. The Greek word *λίψ* (*lips*) used in the **Exodus 27:9** in the LXX can mean either *west* or *south*.

- a. (Reference: *Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, 3rd ed., J. Lust et al.)
2. Also, note that there is some variation between manuscripts of the LXX regarding the other references in Exodus to the orientation of the tabernacle.
 - b. Based on the MT and most versions (and translations) of the LXX, I assume that the structure was laid out on an east-west axis, with longer sides being on the north and south, and entrance on the east side.
- iv. All the implements in the courtyard (outside of the tabernacle) were made of *brass or bronze*, an alloy of copper, in contrast with the gold construction materials inside the tabernacle.
- c. **Question:** If the Most Holy Place represents heaven and the throne of God; the High Priest represents Jesus; the Holy Place represents the ministry of the church and the priests represent Christians, what do you think the courtyard (outside the tabernacle) might represent?
 - i. Note that while only the priests could enter the tabernacle, you did not need to be a priest to enter the courtyard.
 - ii. **Possible Answer:** Those who are approaching God but not (yet) a part of the church. This would be *the world*, those who are not Christians.
 1. Note that the construction is of bronze here, rather than gold (which is what everything in the tabernacle is made of).
- d. **Question:** What is in the courtyard, and what is the significance of those things?
 - i. **Answer:** Two things are in the courtyard: the bronze altar of incense and the bronze laver (for the priests to wash in).
- e. The bronze altar. (Read **Exodus 27:1-8**.)
 - i. This was a bronze altar with a grating or grill, for sacrificing animals and burning their bodies to ashes.
 - ii. There is an extraordinary story behind the bronze used to cover this altar.
 1. Read **Exodus 38:22-24**.

- a. The bronze altar was covered with material made from *the censers used by the people in Korah's rebellion*.
2. Read **Numbers 16:1-17:5** (the story of Korah's rebellion).
- a. This is a memorable and graphic story that could cause nightmares for children!
 - b. The storyline:
 - i. Korah and the Levites with him, as well as prominent men from other tribes, go up against Aaron (and Moses).
 - ii. Korah is a Levite closely related to Moses and Aaron (Korah's father is cousin of Moses and Aaron). Korah is a Kohathite, of the family within Levi entrusted with handing the most sacred articles of the temple. However, they are not priests, who *must be descended from Aaron*.
 - iii. Moses and Aaron are completely outnumbered by prominent men from Levi and other tribes who oppose them: 250 versus two.
 - iv. The showdown between the two opposing groups: the 250 with Korah, versus Aaron (who is allied with Moses), all offering incense to the Lord.
 1. Bear in mind that offering incense is the function of a priest.
 - v. The opponents of Moses and Aaron are decimated in a spectacular way.
 1. The earth opens up and swallows Korah and his family alive "into Hades".
 2. Fire falls from the Lord and incinerates the rest of the 250 insurrectionists.
 3. Their censers are beaten into a covering for the bronze altar, to serve as a reminder to future generations that *only descendants of Aaron* can serve as priests.
 4. We can think of many other similar "memorials" in the Scriptures:

- a. Lot's wife turning into a pillar of salt (**Genesis 19**);
 - b. the 23,000 who died in the desert in one day due to sexual immorality (**Numbers 25** and **1 Corinthians 10**); and
 - c. the 14,000 who are killed for grumbling against Moses and Aaron (**Numbers 17**).
- c. There is at least one lesson in this story for us: ***Do not rebel against what God has established*** (in this case, the priesthood which He established as solely descending from Aaron).
- i. Jude uses this example as a warning to Christians, also. Read **Jude vv. 3-4, 11-13** and **16-21**.
 - 1. We should not be surprised to see religious leaders rising up, with rebellious hearts, *to set aside the commands of Jesus and replace them with their own ideas*. They will tell people what they want to hear and may gain a large and influential following.
 - ii. The New Testament is filled with warnings of false teaching and false teachers that will come into the church later on. Jesus, Peter, Jude and Paul all warn us about this.
 - 1. However, Jude admonishes us to contend earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints" (**Jude 3**).
 - 2. People will come into the church who will want to explain away hard or unpopular kingdom teachings (for example, teachings on permanence of marriage, role of women in the church and family, sexual purity, homosexual relations, nonresistance, head covering...).
 - 3. This was the case in the past (in the Old Testament times), and we are warned we

should expect to see more of this in our own day.

4. However, do not be swayed by the large crowd of prominent leaders who may oppose what the Lord has clearly laid out.
5. Let us always *remember the lesson enshrined in the covering of the bronze altar!*

iii. Let us remember *our* sacrifices and *our* altar.

1. Read **Hebrews 13:7-16**.

- a. Don't be carried off by strange doctrines (= *teachings*). Stay on track with the word of God and the faith as originally handed down from Jesus and the apostles.
- b. Remember that we are priests who eat from a greater altar.
 - i. Our "sacrifices" include:
 1. bearing reproach for the sake of Christ (being willing to speak out for the gospel);
 2. praising God, thanking God; and
 3. sharing with our brothers and sisters who are in need.
 - ii. We know that *God is pleased* with such sacrifices.

f. The laver for priests to wash in. (Read **Exodus 30:17-21**.)

- i. The laver was to be located in the courtyard, in front of the entrance to the tabernacle.
 1. Read **Exodus 38:26-27**. The story behind the bronze used to make the laver: the bronze was contributed by spiritual women, who fasted.
- ii. All the priests, even Aaron, are to wash in it before they go into the tabernacle (representing the church for us today, the body of believers).
 1. God will *strike them dead* if the priests do not observe this requirement to wash before entering the tabernacle.

2. Aaron and his sons (continuing in the future) must wash themselves with water at the entrance to the tabernacle when they are first consecrated as priests, then be anointed with the special anointing oil. Then they are provided with special robes to wear. (Read **Exodus 29:1-9**.)

iii. **Question:** What do you think this *laver* represents?

1. **Comment:** Recently I saw a Protestant explanation of the typology of the tabernacle, which claimed that the laver represented (only) *confessing sins*. Is there a more direct and obvious connection? What do you think? Does anything else come to mind, *perhaps also involving water*?
2. Tertullian, a Christian writer from Carthage in North Africa, writing c. 198 AD in his work *On Baptism* discussed many examples from the Old Testament that foreshadowed Christian baptism.
 - a. The early Christian practice was to baptize someone in water for the remission of their sins, which prepared them to receive the Holy Spirit. Then the person was anointed with oil, and hands were laid on them to receive the Holy Spirit.
 - b. Tertullian makes the connection to the instructions (in **Exodus 29**) for the priests being washed and anointed with oil when they entered the priesthood.
 - i. "After this [*being baptized in water, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit*], when we have issued from the font, we are thoroughly anointed with a blessed unction, - [a practice derived] from the old discipline, wherein on entering the priesthood, men were wont to be anointed with oil from a horn, ever since Aaron was anointed by Moses. Whence Aaron is called 'Christ', [= *the anointed one*; see **Leviticus 4:5, 4:16** in the LXX] from the 'chrism,' which is 'the unction;' which, when made spiritual, furnished an appropriate name to the Lord, because He was 'anointed' with the Spirit by God the Father; as written in the **Acts**: 'For truly they were gathered together in this city against Your Holy Son whom You have anointed.' [**Acts 4:23-28**, where **Psalm 2** is quoted]

- ii. “Thus, too, in our case, the unction runs carnally, (i.e., on the body,) but profits spiritually; in the same way as the act of baptism itself too is carnal, in that we are plunged in water, but the effect spiritual, in that we are freed from sins.”
- iii. (Source: Tertullian, *On Baptism*, chapter 9; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 672)
- c. After explaining several Old Testament foreshadowings of baptism, including
 - i. Noah’s ark (which Peter discusses in **1 Peter 3:19-21**).
 - ii. Two examples from **Exodus**: crossing the Red Sea (as discussed by Paul in **1 Corinthians 10:1-2**), and the bitter waters turned sweet (drinkable) by the wood (**Exodus 15:22-26**).
 1. “How many, therefore, are the pleas of nature, how many the privileges of grace, how many the solemnities of discipline, the figures, the preparations, the prayers, which have ordained the sanctity of water?”
 2. “First, indeed, when the people, set unconditionally free, escaped the violence of the Egyptian king by crossing over through water, it was water that extinguished the king himself, with his entire forces. What figure more manifestly fulfilled in the sacrament of baptism? The nations are set free from the world by means of water, to wit: and the devil, their old tyrant, they leave quite behind, overwhelmed in the water.
 3. “Again, water is restored from its defect of ‘bitterness’ to its native grace of ‘sweetness’ by the tree of Moses. That tree was Christ...” (**Exodus 15**)
 4. (Source: Tertullian, *On Baptism*, chapter 9; found in ANF vol. 3, p. 673)

- d. Tertullian then turns to the importance of *water* throughout the ministry of Jesus:
- i. “How mighty is the grace of water, in the sight of God and His Christ, for the confirmation of baptism! Never is Christ without water: if, that is, He is Himself baptized in water (**Matthew 3, Mark 1**); inaugurates in water the first rudimentary displays of His power, when invited to the nuptials (**John 2:1-11**); invites the thirsty, when He makes a discourse, to His own sempiternal water (**John 7:37-38**); approves, when teaching concerning love, among works of charity, the cup of water offered to a poor (child) (**Matthew 10:42**); recruits His strength at a well [**John 4**]; walks over the water (**Matthew 14:22-33**); willingly crosses the sea (**Mark 5:21**); ministers water to His disciples (**John 13:1-17**). Onward even to the passion does the witness of baptism last: while He is being surrendered to the cross, water intervenes; witness Pilate’s hands (**Matthew 27:24**); when He is wounded, forth from His side bursts water; witness the soldier’s lance!” (**John 19:33-34**)
 - ii. Tertullian. (1885). *On Baptism*, chapter 9; found in ANF Vol. 3, p. 673)
 1. **Personal Observation:** My own professional training is as a water engineer (drinking water and water pollution) In my training, I studied all aspects of water (including water chemistry, microbiology, fluid mechanics). However, until Tertullian pointed this out, I did not realize *how significant water is* throughout the entire ministry of Jesus!
 2. **Tertullian’s point from all these examples:** we should not be surprised that God would use *water* for our salvation, in baptism.
 - iv. There are many references to baptism as a spiritual washing in the New Testament.

1. "But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit," (**Titus 3:4-5**, NKJV)
 2. "let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water." (**Hebrews 10:22**, NKJV)
 3. "But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: 'A dog returns to his own vomit,' and, 'a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire.'" (**2 Peter 2:22**, NKJV)
 4. "And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord." (**Acts 22:16**, NKJV)
- v. Read what Jesus said in **John 13:2-10**
1. Jesus says we must be washed by Him; otherwise "you have no part with Me" (**John 13:8**)
 2. He also said, he who has bathed needs only to wash his feet.
 - a. This leads me to think of the priests *washing each time* they went into the tabernacle, after their initial washing.
 - b. After our initial washing, we need to continue to be spiritually cleansed.
- vi. **Question:** What does it say in the New Testament regarding the ongoing washing we need *after we have been baptized*?
1. Read **1 John 1:3-10**.
 - a. We need to be continually cleansed, like the priests, who needed to wash their hands and feet every time they entered the tabernacle.
 - b. We need the blood of Christ to cleanse us in an ongoing way.
 - c. *If we walk in the light...*
 - d. And *if we confess our sins* when we sin (and everyone sins), He will forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

- vii. Let us, as priests of God, enter with water and the spirit, and continually cleanse ourselves. Examine your conscience, and confess your sins to God and to one another.
1. **Question:** When was the last time you washed your hands (or feet)?
 2. **Follow-up Question:** When was the last time you washed yourself *spiritually*?
 - a. *When was the last time you “washed your hands and/or feet” spiritually, confessing your sins to a trusted brother or sister?*
 - b. Recall also how James admonishes the Christians:
 - i. “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months.” **(James 5:16-17, NKJV)**