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A Look at the Holy Place

Exodus 25:23-40; 30:1-10

The tabernacle: a pattern of heavenly things

When we look at the tabernacle as made and set up by Moses according to the pattern shown to him on Mount Sinai, it is also interesting to study the furniture of the Holy Place: the lampstand, the table for the showbread, and the altar of incense (Ex. 25 and 30). When we read Scriptures such as these, we must always remember that we are not Old Testament saints, neither are we the children of Israel. Christianity brings us into something much better than what was given to the children of Israel. The letter to the Hebrews makes this clear. We must therefore always read the Old Testament in the light of the New, otherwise we shall make many mistakes. The tabernacle was on earth; the Christian's way of approach into the presence of God is heavenly. The tabernacle was something that you could see and touch, the Bible refers to it as "made with hands" (Heb. 9:24); we today have that which is spiritual, something that is "not made with hands" (2 Cor. 5:1).

However, we have authority in the New Testament to apply the teaching of the Old Testament to ourselves. In Romans we read: "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning" (Rom. 15:4), and again in 1 Corinthians: "Now all these things happened unto them for our ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come" (1 Cor. 10:11). Another scripture that actually refers to our subject is Hebrews 9:23-24, where we read: "It was therefore necessary that the patterns of things in the

heavens should be purified with these; but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us". These verses make clear that what God told Moses to make was just a pattern of the spiritual things that would be formed after the Lord Jesus had died, been raised again and taken up into heaven. Then the Holy Spirit was sent down into the hearts of those who had believed and so the House of God, the Church of the living God, has been built today.

Let us look then at the subject before us now which is the Holy Place. The tent of meeting had two rooms. There was the Most Holy Place, in which was just the ark of the covenant and where the high priest went in only once a year. But the other room was called the Holy Place, in which were three items of furniture: the candlestick, the table of showbread and the altar of incense. Here the priests served every day, carrying out a number of services, all of which have a spiritual meaning that helps us to understand the service of God that we have been brought into today.

We read in Exodus 40: "And he (that is, Moses) put the table in the tent of the congregation, upon the side of the tabernacle northward, without the veil. And he set the bread in order upon it before the LORD; as the LORD had commanded Moses. And he put the candlestick in the tent of the congregation, over against the table, on the side of the tabernacle southward. And he lighted the lamps before the LORD; as the LORD commanded Moses. And he put the golden altar in the tent of the congregation before the veil: and he burnt sweet incense thereon; as the LORD commanded Moses" (Ex. 40:22-27). The veil separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place; these three items of furniture were in front of the veil.

I am going to try and explain the significance of this room and the furniture that was in it, as it has a great deal to teach us today.

The lampstand

Firstly, we shall consider the candlestick. We read the instructions for making this in Exodus 25:31-40. We shall read a little of this section: "And thou shalt make a candlestick of pure gold: of beaten work shall the candlestick be made". It had a central shaft with three branches coming out of each side, decorated with knobs and flowers, and on the end of each branch a bowl to hold the oil. It was to be beaten out of one piece of pure gold weighing one talent. Verse 37 says: "And thou

shalt make the seven lamps thereof: and they shall light the lamps thereof, that they may give light over against it".

The materials used in the tabernacle and the temple have special significance. Pure gold brings to our minds God Himself. Gold is indicative of God's righteousness. This candlestick was made completely of pure gold: there was no shittim wood in it like the ark. So what does this tell us? The candlestick speaks of the Lord Jesus Himself, One who is God, not as a man in this world but as alive in the presence of God. This is why there was no wood in it. He is the One who has fully made God known. John says: "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him" (John 1:18).

The type here is not a picture of the Lord Jesus as the Light of the world, because this lamp illuminates the Holy Place during the night. Its light did not shine in the world. Primarily the light of the lamps was to illuminate the candlestick itself. The oil that the people had to bring to the priests was the fuel put into the bowls so that they should be kept burning. This oil refers to the Holy Spirit. So we have a figure of the Lord Jesus in the midst of His people, gathered to His name out from the world. The Holy Spirit works in our hearts to tell us of His glory. In John 16 the Lord Jesus said to His disciples: "When He, the Spirit of truth is come, He will guide you into all truth: for He shall not speak of Himself; but whatsoever He shall hear, that shall He speak: and He will show you things to come. He shall glorify me: for He shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you" (John 16:13-14).

This candlestick must have been very beautiful, with all the ornate decorations of flowers and discs like wreaths on its branches. The light from the lamps would be brilliantly reflected in the pure gold it was all made from. If we could have gone into that room, it would have been the object that our eyes would be first attracted to. When Christians are gathered together in a proper Bible-based way, if the Holy Spirit is not grieved, or quenched by anything in us or what we may do, then He will direct our hearts to the person of the Lord Jesus. We shall understand more of His glory and we shall be lead out in worship and praise to Him. But let us remember that the light was dependent on the oil which the people had to bring. When Samuel was a little boy the lamp of God was nearly out (1 Sam. 3:3). That was followed by the Ark being taken captive by the Philistines (1 Sam. 4). If we do not allow the Holy Spirit to control our lives then we will not be able to contribute anything in a spiritual way when we come together.

Every morning the priest had to use the snuffers to remove anything that would hinder the flame burning brightly. In the same way, we daily need to pray that we

may be kept pure and clean for the Lord, so that the Holy Spirit can use us in His service.

The table of showbread

The next item of furniture in the Holy Place was the table of showbread. We read about this in Exodus 25:23-30. We will read part of this section: "Thou shalt make a table of shittim wood: two cubits shall be the length thereof, and a cubit the breadth thereof, and a cubit and a half the height thereof. And thou shalt overlay it with pure gold, and make thereto a crown of gold round about". And in verse 30 Moses was told: "And thou shalt set upon the table showbread before Me always". The table was positioned opposite to the candlestick, so the light of the candlestick would shine on it.

This table was made of shittim wood which was covered with pure gold. We noticed that the candlestick was made of one piece of pure gold weighing one talent. But the table was made of wood and pure gold and we are told the sizes of it. All these specifications have a meaning and we must try to understand the teaching of them. The wood represents the perfect manhood of the Lord Jesus. As we saw with the candlestick, the pure gold would tell us that He is God. The loaves of showbread represented the twelve tribes of Israel, complete with no one missing. They had frankincense put on them, so they would be pleasing to God. This presents the Lord Jesus, as a man alive in the presence of God: One who is equal with God, but here seen as able to support and maintain believers in a manner pleasing to God.

The only dimension I would comment on is the height. It was the same as the mercy seat on the top of the ark, upon which was placed the blood on the day of atonement. It was also the height of the grate that was in the middle of the brazen altar in the court, where all the sacrifices were burnt. We must understand that the fellowship which believers enjoy today, is not less than their acceptance in the presence of God, based upon the perfect work of the Lord Jesus on the cross. I believe the Lord Jesus refers to this fellowship in John 17: "That they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us: that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me" (John 17:21). This fellowship is sustained by the Lord Jesus, and nothing can break it; we are all in it. Paul refers to it in 1 Corinthians 1 as follows: "God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1:9). God sees every believer on earth as being part of that wonderful fellowship that will last for ever, and will be eternally to His praise and glory.

But there is a responsibility upon us to maintain this in a practical way. Paul had this in mind when he exhorted the Ephesians to "endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). If we behave in a way that destroys unity amongst Christians, then we are not carrying this out. Also if we introduce things that are not a result of the death of the Lord Jesus and the acceptance of His work and blood in the presence of God, then we shall not know the blessing of the Holy Spirit being present. Likewise, if we try to add to the fellowship anything that is not based upon the death of His Son on the cross, then we will spoil the fellowship. We can so easily do this by introducing things that appeal to us naturally, that are not spiritual things but carnal. They did this at Corinth and Paul had to write two letters to them correcting their wrong behaviour. This unity is a very powerful testimony to the world. The Lord Jesus said, "that the world may believe" (John 17:21). How successful the devil has been in dividing Christians! He knows full well that division and difference amongst Christians weakens their testimony.

The altar of incense

The third piece of furniture in the Holy Place was the altar of incense. The details of this are in Exodus 30:1-10. We will read some of these verses: "And thou shalt make an altar to burn incense upon: of shittim wood shalt thou make it. A cubit shall be the length thereof, and a cubit the breadth thereof; foursquare shall it be: and two cubits shall be the height thereof and thou shall overlay it with pure gold". Then in verse 6 Moses was told: "And thou shalt put it before the veil that is by the ark of the testimony, before the mercy seat that is over the testimony, where I will meet with thee. And Aaron shall burn thereon sweet incense every morning". This altar would have been central in the Holy Place immediately in front of the veil. It was between the candlestick and the table of showbread.

This altar seems to bring before us the person of the Son of God as a man ascended up into heaven as our great High Priest. The great theme of the letter to the Hebrews is that Jesus has "not entered into the holy places made with hands ... but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us". He is there constantly engaged in intercession for us, so that we may be kept walking through this world, pure and clean, in order that we may serve God. The apostle John refers to Him as the Advocate, One who takes up our cause. John writes in his first letter: "My little children, these things I write unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and He is the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 2:1-2).

Aaron had to burn incense on this altar every morning and evening when he lit the lamps on the candlestick. The fire on that altar was taken from the brazen altar in the court. There are two words in Hebrew, used in our Bible for 'to burn'. One means to consume, like the sin offering. The other word means 'to cause to ascend'. It is this latter word that is used here. There would have been all the time a smell of sweet perfume in the Holy Place. So putting the three items of furniture together we have a picture of a service going on that was pleasing to God. Let us ask ourselves the question, when we meet up with other Christians, either for prayer and reading the word of God, or for praise and worship, is there always a sweet fragrance of Christ characterising all that we say and do?

Incense in the Bible is often used as a type of prayer and intercession. This is a very important part of the Christian life. Paul wrote to Timothy: "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men" (1 Tim. 2:1). While the golden altar speaks of the person and work of the Lord Jesus, we also have a responsibility to do our part in carrying on the service of God today.

Looking at the Holy Place as a whole, we can learn that if the light of the truth of God is to be maintained for the people of God today, and if they are to be kept in a unity of fellowship which is based on the word of God, then this will only be as the result of prayer and intercession. We cannot pray too much! It is that link of faith between ourselves and God which will daily keep us in contact with Him and give us the strength to walk here pleasing to Him.

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