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The ongoing service in the sanctuary

Exodus 25 - 30

Introduction

The word 'continually' or 'always' occurs eight times in the book of Exodus in connection with the tabernacle in the wilderness, God's sanctuary in the midst of His redeemed people. It is linked to the holy vessels in the tabernacle and to the garments of the high priest:

1. the bread that was set weekly on the table for the showbread in the holy place (25:30);
2. the light that had to shine on the lampstand or candlestick from evening until morning (27:20);
3. the breastplate of judgment over Aaron's heart (28:29-30);
4. the plate on the front of the turban on his forehead (28:38);
5. the continual burnt offering on the bronze altar (29:38, 42);
6. the sweet incense that was to be burnt twice a day on the altar of incense before the veil (30:8). In this specific case the word 'perpetual' is used.

The main purpose of these commandments is, of course, that the service of God in the sanctuary is a holy obligation to His priestly people and a privilege that has to be continued in His presence perpetually.

1. The food on the table for the showbread

‘And you shall set the showbread on the table before Me always’.

Exodus 25:30

The tabernacle in the wilderness was set up for the specific purpose that God might dwell among His people and be glorified in their midst. Of all God’s instructions, one point is striking in particular, as indicated already in the introduction: the term *continually* or *always* occurs eight times in God’s directives given to Moses in Exodus 25-30.

Many things in the tabernacle-system illustrate various aspects of Christ’s person and work. This helps us understand God’s desire that the things which speak of Christ should continue. As to the table of showbread of the above verse, the loaves or cakes placed on it were baked from fine flour and covered with pure frankincense (Lev. 24:5, 7). This flour symbolizes Christ’s human perfections as the fruit of the earth. The twelve cakes represent the entire people of God, as He sees them, reflecting Christ. These cakes were placed in two rows of six on a pure table made according to God’s instructions and set there before the Lord, continually (Lev. 24:8).

Let’s apply these things to us today. All true born-again Christians belong to the people of God. God is pleased to see Christ in heaven reflected in and through His people who have received a new nature and have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them. The table (another type of Christ, as the Sustainer of God’s people) upholds the cakes. Placed in God’s presence, as a memorial before Him, the cakes remind Him of the beauties of Christ as He was on earth, which are now reflected in His people. God desires this to continue until the Lord will come again. Furthermore, every Sabbath these cakes were replaced by fresh ones, while those which had stood there during the week that just had passed became food for the priests. What is food for God Himself, for His satisfaction, becomes food for His priestly sons as well – a marvellous privilege!

2. The care of the lampstand

'And you shall command the children of Israel that they bring you pure oil of pressed olives for the light, to cause the lamp to burn continually'.

Exodus 27:20

On the wilderness journey the tabernacle service needed to continue, even during the night. The whole tabernacle system represented heavenly things, as God had shown Moses when he was with Him on the mountain. During the night of Christ's rejection, God's people are on a journey through this world, a wilderness that has nothing to offer to a believing heart. Yet, God expects His people to contribute essential resources so that His service can function and be maintained. Thus, the children of Israel were ordered to bring pure olive oil.

Applying this to us today, we learn that God expects all true believers to make available what He has given us. The Holy Spirit has been given to us to present to and reproduce in us the things of Christ, the Anointed One (John 14:17; 16:13-15; Rom. 5:5). The Spirit maintains the light of the truth in His own. What had passed the oil-press had to be kept pure without any contamination, and this oil could then be used for the light (the word 'light' occurs seven times in the Hebrew text in Exodus). The term *to cause to burn* is the same verb as is used for the burnt offering, *to cause to ascend*. It reminds us of the Lord Jesus who ascended to heaven on the basis of His work on the cross. He was the true burnt offering altar, as well as the sacrifice presented on it, and causing a sweet aroma to *ascend* to God.

The burning of the lamp, the candlestick with its seven lamps, was first of all for God's delight. This light was also needed for the priests who served during the night (Lev. 24:2-4). The last 'song of degrees' or psalm of ascents begins with the words, 'Behold, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who by night stand in the house of the Lord!' (Ps. 134:1). This service is what God commanded to continue, also in the house of God today, which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15).

3. The breastplate of judgment over Aaron's heart

'So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel on the breastplate of judgment over his heart, when he goes into the holy place, as a memorial before the Lord continually'.

Exodus 28:29

God had said to Pharaoh, 'Let My son go that he may serve Me' (Ex. 4:23). After the ten plagues, Israel had been delivered from Egyptian bondage so that they might serve the Lord. However, once they had been delivered from bondage and were going through the wilderness, it became clear that they were not able to serve Him. Even though they had said three times, 'All that the Lord has said we will do,' they utterly failed. The history of the Church shows even greater failure. We believers received the Spirit of God enabling us to serve God. Yet, the message to Laodicea shows the Lord outside and rejected, in the day in which we live (Rev. 3:14-21).

But when we consider the above verse, we learn a wonderful truth. Whatever the condition of God's people, whatever their failures, their names were continually before God, engraved on the two memorial stones *on the shoulders* of the high priest (Ex. 28:12). Their names were also written on twelve precious stones kept in the breastplate *on his heart*. Can there be a safer and more intimate place?

God wanted to be reminded of those names, despite the people's failures, although never at the expense of His rights: they were kept on the breastplate *of judgment*. Yes, the people often failed; even Moses, the meekest man on earth, transgressed God's commandment. But when the high priest entered the sanctuary, these names were carried into God's presence, as a continual memorial. Thus the Lord Jesus, our great High Priest, is seated at God's right hand and represents us there. From there, He strengthens us and provides us with the needed resources so that we may go on our wilderness journey. He is able to save us to the uttermost, since He ever lives to make intercession for us (Heb. 7:25).

'And you shall put in the breastplate of judgment the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be over Aaron's heart when he goes in before the Lord. So Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel over his heart before the Lord continually'.

Exodus 28:30

This is the fourth instruction in Exodus which the Lord said was to be a continual practice, closely linked to the third command. Both concerned the breastplate of judgment, a part of the priestly ephod. It was through the Urim ('lights') and Thummim ('perfections') – possibly precious stones that were kept in a pouch or pocket of the breastplate – that the Lord made known His thoughts. Exactly how, we do not know, but it was the high priest who used these stones to receive an answer from God.

A negative example of this is learned from the story of King Saul, who did not receive an answer even though the priest used the ephod (1 Sam. 14). The word

Urim starts with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, whereas the word Thummim starts with its last letter. This may indicate that, whatever the situation, God was able to give an answer through the priest whom He had ordained. The Urim and Thummim were linked with 'the judgment', that is the declaration of what is right, 'of the children of Israel'. They were in the breastplate, 'upon the high priest's heart,' for this judgment cannot be detached from the heart.

This reminds us that 'God is light', maintaining what is right and also that 'God is love', the breastplate of judgment was carried on Aaron's *heart*. This was 'before the Lord', in the presence of the God who had a special relationship with the people He had redeemed. The New Testament teaches that our Lord Jesus is now in God's immediate presence from where He sustains us as the High Priest of our confession. He intercedes for us, and takes care of God's supreme rights in relation to His people (Heb. 3:1; 4:14-16).

4. The plate on the front of the turban on Aaron's forehead

'So it shall be on Aaron's forehead, that Aaron may bear the iniquity of the holy things which the children of Israel hallow in all their holy gifts; and it shall always be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the Lord'.

Exodus 28:38

When Moses stayed for forty days on the mountain, God instructed him about many things concerning the tabernacle and its service, including the high priest's duties. The above verse contains the fifth instruction in Exodus of something that needed to be continual. It concerns the golden plate or holy crown attached to Aaron's turban on which were engraved the words 'Holiness to the Lord'. This had to remain on the high priest's forehead when he served, and it was fastened with a lace of blue, reminding us of heavenly things.

What is the significance of these instructions? All the things the Israelites did in obedience to God's directions nevertheless were done by failing people. But because of the golden plate God did not look at any of their shortcomings as long as they served Him in obedience, with devoted hearts. The Lord cannot pass by any willful sin, but He can be lenient with respect to shortcomings. This is not because He does not care. Far be the thought! But He can be merciful as to our shortcomings while we serve Him, because He sees the things we overlook. Through the golden plate, Aaron took away whatever failure (iniquity) there was in the service of the holy things and in the gifts offered according to God's desires.

The inherent failures of those who gave and ministered were covered by the golden plate. This needed to be there continually, so that God could accept His people in their gifts and service. Today, He has accepted us in the Beloved (Eph. 1:6), the Minister of the sanctuary (Heb. 8:2), always wearing His holy crown, covering any failure in our service.

5. The continual burnt offering on the bronze altar

'Now this is what you shall offer upon the altar: two lambs of the first year, day by day continually (...) This shall be a continual burnt offering throughout your generations at the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the Lord, where I will meet you to speak with you'.

Exodus 29:38, 42

The morning and evening burnt offering was a sacrifice presented day by day, and was never to be interrupted. This is the next instruction in Exodus where the Lord specified that it had to be continual, in this case repeated twice. This sacrifice represented the moral and legal foundation on which God could dwell among His redeemed people. Both the morning sacrifice (at nine o'clock) and the one 'between the two evenings' (three o'clock in the afternoon) were burnt offerings. They were to be without blemish and provided a way of entrance, for they were clearly linked to the door of the tent of meeting.

In all the details God's rights were fully met: all was done 'before the Lord'. On this basis God said to Moses that He would meet him there and speak to him. Later, this took place more often and He spoke to him from above the mercy seat (Num. 7:89; cf. Ex. 25:22), and we learn also that Moses spoke to the Lord. This is a beautiful illustration of the liberty believers have as accepted in the Beloved, in a two-way communication with God. The above verse shows that such privileges can never be detached from the marvellous work of atonement once accomplished on the cross.

Moreover, this sacrifice came with a meal offering of fine wheaten flour, reminding us of the Lord's perfect humanity. It was mingled with oil, for Jesus' coming was predicted by the Holy Spirit, as illustrated by the olive oil. Besides, Christ was conceived, preserved, led, and anointed by Him. His sacrifice, resurrection, and exaltation were done in the power of the Holy Spirit. All this was accompanied by wine (joy) and provided full satisfaction to God (sweet fragrance), a basis always to be remembered.

6. The sweet incense that was to be burnt daily on the golden altar

'And when Aaron lights the lamps at twilight, he shall burn incense on it, a perpetual incense before the Lord throughout your generations'.

Exodus 30:8

Inside the sanctuary stood the golden altar on which incense was to be burned. Aaron, the high priest, was instructed to do so every morning and evening, at the time that the continual burnt offering was presented. The evening sacrifice, 'between the two evenings,' was at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. This was also when the lights on the candlestick were kindled after they had been 'dressed' in the morning. Later, this service was done by a priest who was appointed by lot, like Zacharias (Luke 1:9), the father of John the Baptist. The time of the evening sacrifice was also linked with prayer – the people stood praying outside (Luke 1:9-10). In Scripture, prayer is particularly linked to incense (Ps. 141:2; Rev. 5:8; 8:3ff).

The above verse contains the last instruction in Exodus where the Lord specifically said that something had to be 'continual' – things of special value to the Lord. This instruction shows that, at the time of the evening sacrifice and the lighting of the lamps, the incense was burned. The verb used for burning incense is the same as for the burning of sacrifices as a sweet aroma that ascended to God, as a fragrance of rest. Moreover, the fire for the burning of incense was to be taken from the burnt offering altar. When two of Aaron's sons used 'strange fire' during the inaugural period of the tabernacle, they were killed as a result of their disobedience (Lev. 10).

The continual service of burning incense was 'before the Lord' – it was in His presence, for His pleasure, and according to His instructions. May we do so today, not through types and shadows, but by entering through the new and living way, and worshipping the Father in spirit and truth through Christ (Heb. 10:19ff; 13:15).