

## Exodus 27:20–21

### Introduction

- Exodus 25:8 — [The Lord said to Moses,] let [the people] make me a sanctuary [a sacred space], that I may dwell in their midst.

It's in the light of *this* awesome purpose that we read in chapters 25-31 of “The Plan of the Tabernacle Described in Detail, and then after an interlude of three chapters we read in chapters 35-39 about “The Plan of the Tabernacle Followed Exactly.” [See Chart on Page 8] We might remember that for all the detailed and exact repetition in these two sections, the order (or the arrangement) of these two sections is completely different. The second section follows a very simple, “logical” order. But the logic of the order in the first section is totally different. [See Chart] So, what *is* the logic in this order?

Well, to this point we've seen that everything has been described in the order of how close it is, physically, to the center. So the logic of the order so far has been to take us on a journey *outward*, from the center of this sacred space to the very edge and perimeter of all sacred space. But now, this morning, we seem to be backtracking. Back in chapter 25 we learned about the Table and the Lampstand; and now, two chapters later, we find God giving more instructions about the Lamp.

- Exodus 27:20–21 — You shall command the people of Israel that they bring to you pure beaten olive oil for the light, that a lamp may regularly be set up to burn. In the tent of meeting, outside the veil that is before the testimony, Aaron and his sons [the priests] shall tend it from evening to morning before the LORD. It shall be a statute forever to be observed throughout their generations by the people of Israel.

Aren't these verses out of place? Why weren't they included back in chapter twenty-five when God was first giving the instructions about the Lampstand? The answer seems to be that we've come to a new section with a brand new emphasis. The new theme, here, is the role of the **priests** in Israel's worship.<sup>1</sup> [See Chart] Notice, especially, the “bookends” of this section – how it begins and ends.

- Exodus 27:20–21 — In the tent of meeting, outside the veil that is before the testimony, **Aaron and his sons shall tend [the lamp] from evening to morning before the LORD.** It shall be a statute forever to be observed throughout their generations by the people of Israel.
- Exodus 30:6–8 — And you shall put [the altar of incense] in front of the veil that is above the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is above the testimony, where I will meet with you. And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it. **Every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall burn it, and when Aaron sets up the lamps at twilight, he shall burn it,** a regular incense offering before the LORD throughout your generations.

So the point, here, is that these verses on the oil for the lamps are not at all “out of place.” Yes, we're *going back* to the lampstand, but now we'll be looking at it in a different light (no pun

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 27:21 represents the first reference to Aaron in all the instructions concerning the tabernacle.

intended). Now, we'll be looking at it specifically in light of the **priests'** responsibility to keep the lamps burning.

**I. Exodus 27:20–21** — You shall command the people of Israel that they bring to you pure beaten olive oil for the light, that a lamp may regularly be set up to burn. In the tent of meeting, outside the veil that is before the testimony, Aaron and his sons [the priests] shall tend it from evening to morning before the LORD. It shall be a statute forever to be observed throughout their generations by the people of Israel.

On the one hand, it's simple: How are the lamps going to be kept burning, and who's going to turn them on and off? But I do think there's something more, here, that we need to see. Notice the specific reminder of *where* the lamp is: “**outside the veil that is before the testimony**” (the Ark of the Covenant). In other words, the light of the seven lamps represents the life-giving light of God's presence – the God who is enthroned above the Ark of the Covenant. And yet, for all this, who's responsibility is it to keep the lamps burning? It's the priests', and not only the priests', but also the responsibility of **all** the people.

“You shall command the people of Israel that **they bring** to you pure beaten olive oil for the light, that a lamp may regularly be set up to burn.” So the people of Israel, as a whole, were all to have a part in bringing the oil as fuel for the lamp. And not just any olive oil would do. There were different methods of extracting and refining oil, and this oil was to be extracted and refined in such a way that it would be (for all practical purposes) 100% pure. It was to be the kind of oil that burns the *cleanest* (giving off basically no smoke at all) and so also the kind of oil that burns the **brightest**. And who is to bring this oil? The people of Israel are! Even though God isn't *dependent* on Israel to bring oil for the lights in His “front room,” He still chooses to involve Israel in the work of keeping His light burning. But, of course, the common people of Israel aren't allowed to go into the tabernacle to light the lamps, and so after they've brought the oil to the priests, the priests then take over **as the representatives** of the people.

“In the tent of meeting, outside the veil that is before the testimony, Aaron and his sons [the priests] shall tend it from evening to morning before the LORD.” It was the priests who were responsible to keep the lamps supplied with oil, to trim the wicks, and to light the lamps in the evening, and then put them out in the morning. God isn't *dependent* on the priests to tend the lamp in His front room. After all, this is the God who appears in a pillar of fire. He could easily keep the lamp in His guestroom burning **without** any help from us, but He chooses to involve the priests—as representatives of His people—in this *most important* work of keeping His light burning. Notice the emphasis at the end of verse twenty-one:

“It shall be a statute **forever** to be observed **throughout their generations** by the people of Israel.” So why is this such a big deal? What is this meant to tell us about the calling of the priesthood, and, ultimately, about the calling and responsibility of all God's people? (Exod. 19:5-6) Almost 350 years later, we read in 1 Samuel:

**II. 1 Samuel 3:1–3** — Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD in the presence of Eli [the priest]. And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to darken so that he could not see, was lying down in his

own place. **The lamp of God had not yet been extinguished**, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

On the one hand, the point here *seems* to be that the time was early morning, just before dawn, because the lamp in the guestroom had not yet been extinguished. On the other hand, this is a pretty indirect and subtle way to tell us what time it was. And why does it even matter what time it was? There seems to be something else at work here.

Eli's growing blindness (lit. the "darkening" of his eyes) is used in Scripture as a metaphor for his growing spiritual insensitivity and his failure to guard the God-given role of the priesthood. (cf. 1 Sam. 4:15) The "darkening" of Eli's **eyes** matches the fact that "the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent **vision**." And yet, in spite of this sad state of affairs and this gradual **darkening** of Eli's eyes, "**the lamp of God had not yet been extinguished**." Can you see the contrast? The point seems to be not primarily the *time* of night, but the fact that the priesthood had not yet completely failed to fulfill its role. (cf. Currid; Tsumura; Ref. Study Bible) The burning **light** of the lamp had come to be a symbol of the calling of the priesthood – and by extension, even the **calling** and the responsibility of all God's people. So listen to this vision that the prophet Zechariah describes 580 years after Samuel:

**III. Zechariah 4:1–3, 11–14** — The angel... said to me, "What do you see?" I said, "I see, and behold, a lampstand all of gold, with a bowl on the top of it, and seven lamps on it, with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on the top of it. And there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left." ... Then I said to him, "What are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand?" And a second time I answered and said to him, "What are these two branches of the olive trees, which are beside the two golden pipes [channels] from which the golden oil is poured out?" He said to me, "Do you not know what these are?" I said, "No, my lord." Then he said, "These are the two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth."

The main point, here, seems to be that this lamp is going to shine **brightly** and **continuously**. We see that it's going to shine **brightly** because each of the seven lamps has seven lips (either seven channels providing it with oil, or seven lips for seven separate wicks). We also see that it's going to shine **continuously** because of the never-ending supply of oil that flows straight from the two olive trees standing right beside it – one on the right, and the other on the left.

And yet how is it that the olive oil is conducted from the trees to the lamps? What is the channel through which the oil flows? It's through the two anointed leaders of Israel – Joshua, the high priest, and Zerubbabel, the son of David. It was through the Spirit-empowered labors of Joshua and Zerubbabel that the temple would be rebuilt (cf. Zech. 4:4-10), so that the light of God's presence would shine once more — not only *upon* the people of Israel, but also **in and through** the people of Israel to all around them.<sup>2</sup> The restoring of the temple represents the spiritual restoring of God's people; and so the lamp shining brightly and continuously symbolizes the renewed **light** of God's people. The lampstand has become a symbol of the nation of Israel as it

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<sup>2</sup> A significant emphasis in the postexilic prophets, Zechariah and Haggai, is the spread of God's saving blessings to all the nations of the earth. (cf. Zech. 2:10-11; 9:9-10; Hag. 2:6-9)

shines with the light of God's presence in its midst. About 600 years after Zechariah, the Lord communicates His message to the Apostle John using much of this same imagery.

**IV. Revelation 11:3-4** — I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth. These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth.

Who are these two witnesses? For many reasons, I believe they're a symbol of the Church in its role as a light and a witness to the world. But whether or not one agrees with this identification, here's the main point: Whoever these witnesses are, *their* "testimony" (cf. Rev. 11:7) is **symbolized by the light of the lampstands**, and the Holy Spirit's empowerment of these two witnesses for their task is **symbolized by the oil from the two olive trees that provides the fuel for the light**.

Finally, we read in Revelation chapter one:

**V. Revelation 1:12-13, 17, 20** — **Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands**, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest... When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last... **As for the mystery of the... seven golden lampstands... the seven lampstands are the seven churches.**

### **Conclusion**

So, now, here's the important question: "Where does all this lampstand imagery come from? Where do we trace it all back to?" Obviously it all goes back to Exodus, and to the lampstand that stood in the tabernacle.<sup>3</sup> And yet, from the very beginning, the primary point of this lampstand was not the light that **we** give, but rather the light of **God's** presence that *He* shines upon us. (Remember how the lampstand is situated immediately "*outside* the veil" that is "*before* the testimony.")

We saw a couple of weeks ago that light is a symbol of life, and joy, and all the blessings of God's presence. But it's important to remember that you can't separate life and joy from holiness and righteousness. And so in the Bible, light is a symbol not only of life and joy and blessing, but also of **purity**, and **holiness**, and **righteousness**. Light is the radiance of God's holiness; light is what's given off by the sum total of all God's moral perfections.

➤ 1 John 1:5 — God is **light**, and in him is no darkness at all.

And so, in the book of Psalms, it's the light of God's presence that exposes and lays bare all our secret sins:

➤ Psalm 90:8 (cf. Jn. 3:19-21) — You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the **light** of your presence.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. The ten lampstands that stood in Solomon's temple (2 Chron. 4:7)

If light is the radiance of God's holy character, it makes sense to read in Isaiah chapter five:

- Isaiah 5:20 (cf. 2 Cor. 6:14) — Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for **light** and **light** for darkness!

So what does all this mean for us? The answer is this: It's impossible for us to truly enjoy *this* light of God's presence without also becoming a light, ourselves, to all those around us. It's impossible for us to bask in the light of God's holy presence without also becoming reflections of that light, and channels for that light to shine through. As we live in the light from the lampstand (the light of God's presence), we become, as it were, **lampstands** ourselves – shining, ourselves, with the *same* **light** that God shines upon us. And it seems to me that all this is in keeping with the simple fact that though God could easily have kept the lamp burning without any help from Israel or the priests, He still chose to involve *His people* in this sacred task of *keeping the light burning*.

What does all of this mean? The first thing I want to point out is that the light is always, and in every way, the polar **opposite** of the darkness. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians:

- 2 Corinthians 6:14 & 6:17–7:1 (cf. 1 Thess. 5:4-8) — Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or **what fellowship has light with darkness?**... “Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.” Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

As Christians, there is always the danger of legalism, but we must not use the danger of legalism to excuse the **dimming**, or the **hiding** of our light. The nature of light is that it has nothing in common with the darkness. It requires that we “go out” and “be separate” and “touch no unclean thing.” The nature of the light is that there is no darkness in it (not even the **hint** of darkness [this is not legalism!]), and it's this light that is to shine brightly and continuously from every last part of who we are and how we live. We are in every way, and at all times to be **light**; Why? Because He has shined the light of His holy presence upon us. So we read in Ephesians:

- Ephesians 5:8–11 — At one time you were darkness, but now **you are light in the Lord**. **Walk** as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in **all** that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.

And then in Philippians:

- Philippians 2:14–15 — Do **all things** without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you **shine as lights in the world**.

Our light is our witness and testimony by word and deed to **all** the moral perfections of God. In other words, what we're talking about is the *full spectrum* of God's light, and not just one part. We're to be witnesses in word and deed to His love and kindness, *and* to His righteousness and justice; to His mercy and grace, *and* to His holy wrath and anger; to His wisdom and sovereignty; to His truth; to His power; and to His coming in Christ (both past and future). We are to shine with all the *fullness* of His light that *He* shines upon us. What does this mean? It means that the goal of our light is so that people will see not us, but God, and in the end, give **glory** to *Him*.

- Matthew 5:14–16 (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9–12) — You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.
- 1 Peter 2:9–12 — You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him **who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light**... Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, **they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation**.

Is every part of *our lives* providing a **reason** for others to give glory to God for *who He is*?

The goal of our light shining is so that people will give glory to God. And yet in God's sovereignty, this isn't always the effect that the light has. In fact, it often results in the very opposite: rejection and mockery, and even hatred and persecution. We read about the two lampstands in Revelation chapter eleven:

- Revelation 11:7, 10 — And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that rises from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them... and those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to those who dwell on the earth.

The light is not just the polar opposite of darkness, it's also a **torment** to the darkness.

- Ephesians 5:8–11 — At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light... Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, **but instead expose them**.

Does the darkness love coming to the light so that its unfruitful works will be exposed? Of course not! *If* we truly are *lights*, we *will be* a torment to the world. So Jesus says:

- John 3:19–21 — This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.

I think of those ominous words in 1 Samuel: “The lamp of God had **not yet** been extinguished.” And then I think of the words of Jesus to the Church in Ephesus:

- Revelation 2:1, 3-5 — The words of him... who walks among the seven golden lampstands... I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. **But** I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first [shine brightly with the light you had at first]. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

As individuals, and as a Church, may we never give reason for our lampstand to be removed from its place by our failure to truly shine **brightly** and **continuously** with His light (compromise, hypocrisy, apathy, complacency, lack of zeal and commitment)

I was reminded by one commentator of a song I used to sing as a child, and that I should be able to sing today with more conviction than ever. It goes like this: “Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning. Give me oil in my lamp, I pray. Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning. Keep me burning till the break of day.” What a wonderful prayer for us to pray! We ask God to keep our lamp burning *till the day breaks* **not** because at that point our lamps will *stop* burning. The exciting, wonderful reality is that just the *opposite* is true. So we read in Daniel chapter twelve:

- Daniel 12:2-3 — Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall **shine like the brightness of the sky above**; and those who turn many to righteousness, **like the stars forever and ever**.

The lampstand in the Tabernacle is ultimately a wonderful symbol of our calling as God’s people to live in this world as lights – lights that shine *brightly* and *continuously* with the light that *He* has *first of all* shed upon us.